

South-Central Artist Offers a Monument to Intercultural Harmony

By **ELSTON CARR**
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Twelve years ago, Nigel Binns started working toward a simple yet ambitious goal: to establish himself as an artist whose works would inspire and educate the citizens of Los Angeles.

Not only did he achieve his goal, he quietly became one of the city's premier artists. His work has been

commissioned by Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder, the Lula Washington Dance Company and by the Great Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore, among other prominent celebrities and institutions.

Firmly established in the art and entertainment worlds, Binns now has a new focus. In the aftermath of the April-May riots, he says he hopes to use his art to signal a new direction for a multicultural Los

Angeles that he sees emerging from "360 degrees of sheer devastation."

"When I walk out the door each day, I see the world. There are African-Americans, Latinos and Asians," he said. "It bothers me that these communities are ignorant of each other. I hope that my work will help to neutralize that ignorance."

In June, he took a step toward

that goal. He created a scale model of what he calls the Greater Los Angeles Goodwill Monument, a 36-foot bronze, marble and granite sculpture depicting an African-American woman holding a feather to symbolize peace and justice.

He hopes the monument, which he estimates would take a year to complete, will permanently represent intercultural harmony among Los Angeles' ethnic communities.

"After the rebellion, I attended a lot of community meetings and realized that 90% of the solutions that the community leadership has proposed would only solve the temporary needs for reconciliation," Binns said. "I felt, however, that Los Angeles needed a stronger and more durable symbol.

"Softball games and concerts after the riots are nice, but they are
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like putting a Band-Aid on a wound. And Band-Aid surgery ain't going to work here. I wanted to put something in the community that is going to be here for years."

Getting it into the community, however, will be most of the battle.

Binns had originally planned to erect the monument in Leimert Park, at Crenshaw Boulevard and Vernon Avenue. But when state Sen. Diane Watson (D-Los Angel-

es) saw the scale model last month, she was so impressed that she felt it needed a different venue. "It is such a magnificent monument, it would overwhelm Leimert Park," Watson said.

At Watson's suggestion, Binns is now investigating the possibility of Exposition Park as a site. Mayor Tom Bradley and Aldolfo Nodal, director of the city Cultural Affairs Department, have written letters supporting the \$2.3-million project.

And a representative from the Getty Foundation is looking into the possibility of funding it.

"Once people become aware of what this stands for, he will have no trouble funding it," Watson said.

Binns, 35, came to Los Angeles in 1980 from San Antonio after performing as a stuntman in a martial-arts movie, "The Big Brawl." In 1983, he moved to South-Central to manage the

apartment building that he lives in to give himself more time to work on his art.

The many sides of Binns include martial artist, writer, painter, sculptor, movie stunt coordinator and comic-book artist.

A walk through his one-bedroom apartment in South-Central Los Angeles illustrated his eclectic interests and accomplishments. The far wall of his living room showcased busts of Bruce

Lee and Muhammad Ali. A black-on-white acrylic painting of his signature, NIGEL, hung above an Egyptian mask cast in gold. On the opposite wall, an oil portrait of his mother in a blue-and-white nurse's uniform hung to the right of a clay bust of a Maasai princess.

The Maasai princess is one of Binns' more recognizable works. He presented Stevie Wonder with a bronze Maasai princess for Won-
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JEFF SHARE / For The Times

Nigel Binns at home with one of his 1990 artworks, "Heritage."

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der's 40th birthday in 1990, and Wonder used the sculpture in his "Keep Our Hope Alive" video dedicated to Nelson Mandela.

Wearing black pants, a gray, open-collar shirt and black shoes, he sat on a brown couch under his mother's portrait. His shaved head accentuated his smooth and chiseled features.

In the center of the room, a square, wooden table holds one of his latest projects: The NIJART Wax Museum.

As he pointed to each section of the proposed wax museum on a scale model, his eyes widened with excitement and his arms and hands stabbed the air to emphasize each point.

Wax figures in the museum will represent an array of cultures and interests. He hopes to include exhibits on the late Miles Davis, the

African origins of Jesus Christ, Buddha and the Olmec civilization in Mexico. More than 60 figures by sculptor Henry Alvarez have been collected for the proposed \$20-million facility.

Beyond educating and entertaining, Binns said he wants his dream museum and monument to bestow a sense of empowerment to African-Americans and other ethnic groups.

"People can sit back and complain about the government and the police department. They can sit back and wait for someone to do something for them, or they can do it themselves," he said.

"Some people might call this a pie-in-the-sky dream. I'm not saying that this monument is going to change anything. I'm not going to say that it is going prevent the next Los Angeles uprisings. But as an artist, my job is to help inspire everyone to bring out the best in who they are as a diverse group of people."