



Pictured is a model of "Mother of Humanity," a 16-foot tall, two-ton bronze statue and monument to peace, to be unveiled at 2 p.m. May 11 at Watts Labor Community Action Committee headquarters.

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## ART

### Artist Creates Peace Monument

By JOE NAZEL  
Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES — Inspired by the death of a young girl and a riot, a local artist has created a monument to peace, a 16-foot sculpture that will stand in front of the Watts Labor Community Action Committee's new cultural center.

The 1991 shooting death of an African-American teen-ager, Latasha Harlins, by a Korean-American liquor store owner, Soon Ja Du, and the Los Angeles riots of 1992 exposed the racial animosities among the city's ethnic groups and provided the inspiration for "Mother of Hu-

manity" by a black artist from England transplanted to Los Angeles.

"I had to do something to let people know that deep down inside we really are one people," said Nijel Binns, 39, who was born in Battersea, England, but now lives in South-Central Los Angeles.

#### Largest project

Sculptor, painter, writer, actor and martial artist, he took on the creation of the two-ton bronze statue, the largest project of his career, which will grace the new 35,000 square-foot cultural center at 10950 S. Central Ave. The statue, created at a cost

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# Artist Draws Inspiration From L.A.'s Tragedy of Ethnic Strife

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of \$2 million will be unveiled at 2 p.m. May 11.

"We suffered a \$4 million loss when our headquarters was burned down during the 1992 riots," said Teryl Watkins, president of the committee and the daughter of the late founder, Ted Watkins.

"We are using that \$4 million in insurance money to create a cultural center which will be an entree" to the billion dollar tourism industry in Southern California.

## None evident

She said artwork and culture are important to a community. There is none evident in Watts, except for the Watts Towers built by Italian Simon Rodia.

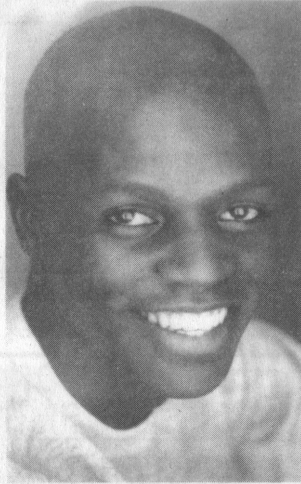
"For us the monument, with her open palm, means a welcoming to Los Angeles via Watts, one of the most well known cities in the world," Watkins said. "People come here from all over the world to see Charcoal Alley No. One."

The sculptor prefers the name Nijel — with no last name — given him by his Jamaican mother and West African father. A combination of English and old Hebrew, his name translates as "Black Prince of God," Nijel said.

## Common ancestry

The completed bronze suggests a common ancestry, Nijel said, a major change from his initial plans.

He said his first thought was to create a monument featuring two women, a Korean and an African-American, as a memorial to Harlins



Nijel

and a means of easing "the tensions between the African-American and Korean-American communities."

The monument was initially designated "The Greater Los Angeles Goodwill Monument." But Nijel said that, realizing that the community was more ethnically diverse, he "revised the idea so that the statue would represent all of humanity through one towering image — the Mother of Humanity."

"All life originates in Africa," Nijel said. "For me, it is an honor to pay tribute to women of the world and to the mother of all nations of man, the African mother of humanity."

In creating this monument to a

common ancestry, Nijel avoided stereotypes in fashioning the statue's face and features, which represent the major races of the world.

"I used those features with which people were most familiar, not stereotypes," Nijel said.

"Nijel has done a masterful job in creating the features," Watkins said. "You can look at her lips and know she is a black woman, with braids. But when you look at her other features, she could be anybody. She's got it all."

He said the original idea for the monument quickly gained support from top city officials and community leaders, including former Mayor Tom Bradley, retired Los Angeles County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn, Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke and the Rev. Cecil "Chip" Murray, pastor of First AME Church.

Though well-supported, the idea soon bogged down in the red tape of local government, Nijel said. "The wheels were turning slowly."

## Quickly embraced

Nijel, the sculptor with a mission, then met a woman with a vision, Watkins, who quickly embraced the idea, he said.

"Teryl is a woman who has vision," Nijel said. "She saw the potential, not only as a tourist attraction," but as a tribute to women worldwide.

A deal was struck and Nijel was commissioned to create the statue for permanent display at the committee's headquarters site. Though the original version was to be 36 feet

tall, site conditions have dictated the installation of the smaller 16-foot statue.

Nijel began sculpting the statue in September 1995 and completed the pre-bronzing stages of the work by November 1995. He said the Watts-based monument is the first of seven proposed identical statues to be installed at as yet undetermined locations in Africa, Australia, Brazil, China, India and Spain.

"I do believe the Mother of Humanity is the symbol of our times," Nijel said. "This is what we should be all about," celebrating those things which are common to us all, while recognizing differences in features are superficial."

"We are embracing art, technology and cultural awareness as a means of healing our community," Watkins said.

Nijel's other work includes a

redesign of the Los Angeles Urban League's Whitney M. Young Jr. Award; the "Artist of the Decade Award," a miniature bronze presented to singer Michael Jackson by Sony Records; and the "Maasi Princess," created for Stevie Wonder's birthday and used in his video, "Keep Our Love Alive."

"Nijel is a very gentle human being and is definitely a renaissance man," Watkins said.