

Thinking big

Sculptor Deborah Masters talks about her 'Angel' in the Brooklyn Public Library

By Lisa J. Curtis

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To call Deborah Masters' artwork heavy would be a gross understatement.

The daughter of a bridge engineer, Masters likes to work on a large scale, with cranes and concrete.

The Brooklyn Public Library will host a talk on Jan. 11 by the accomplished Brooklyn sculptor in conjunction with the installation of her latest work, "Angel in Crown Heights," at the Central Library.

Her installation in the library's Lobby Gallery is a larger-than-life-sized representation of her assistant Angel Mohammed, surrounded by pencil drawings of the street where he grew up.

"He's a kid I worked with for six years because he had an interest in art, but there was no art taught in the high school that he went to," Masters told GO Brooklyn. "I was asked if I would do drawing with him."

"He learns very quickly, and it was no trouble and now he just got into Pratt [Institute], which is exciting. He's a terrific artist, and he's the most talented I've ever taught."

Masters said the installation, which she created with Mohammed in her Brooklyn Navy Yard studio, is about the subject and the house he grew up in. The figure of the young black man is seated on a box, and his pencil is

poised over a tablet resting on his knee. The sculpture is cast in Ultracal, which Masters describes as akin to concrete.

"This was the first time I worked with Ultracal and it was very hard to work with," said Masters, 51. The piece's surface, given an earthy, terracotta-colored wash, has a rough-hewn quality, yet the sculpture's lines are fluid and round. In fact, the massive head is reminiscent of serene representations of Buddha.

The three large pencil drawings that cover each of the three walls surrounding the figure were done by Mohammed with Masters' assistance.

"He had keys to my studio, and he totally did them on his own," said Masters. "I anticipated working on them much more, but he did such a great job." The drawings are of the street on which Mohammed grew up,

populated with classic Brooklyn brownstones and trees.

"The main panel, which sits directly behind the figure, is a drawing of his house and the stairs," said Masters.

The drawings surrounding the sketching figure give the viewer the feeling that they are seeing inside the figure's mind — that this Crown Heights street is a state of mind as much as being the environment that surrounds him. Viewers can enter the installation and walk around the sculpture taking in its Herculean proportions and its sense of quiet power.



"Angel in Crown Heights" is part of a series of three installations called "Crossing Brooklyn," curated by Marian Griffiths of Smack Mellon gallery, that will be displayed at the Central Library.

"It's a strange sculpture," said Masters. "[Angel's] gigantic ... he's 6-foot, 3-inches. He's big and strong, and he has a gentle, introspective aspect to him. The huge and strong compared to

Earth 'Angel': Sculptor Deborah Masters at work in her Kent Avenue studio. At left, the completed "Angel in Crown Heights" installation at the Brooklyn Public Library in Grand Army Plaza. The Brooklyn Papers / Greg Mango

the quite gentlemanly characteristic of him — going from large to small — I think I was successful in getting that."

On the second-floor balcony, six of Masters' colored pencil drawings are on display. These six sketches were part of her plans for her 28-panel mural, "Walking New York," which Masters was commissioned to install at JFK International Airport in 2001.

The sketches on display are Brooklyn scenes — "Wedding under the Brooklyn Bridge," "Dinner in the Artist's Studio" (in Masters' studio), "Botanica" from Flatbush, "York Street subway station," "Garment Workers" from DUMBO, and "Manhattan Bridge" — but the "Walking New York" murals contain scenes from all over the five boroughs.

The installation of Masters' "Walking New York" was part of the opening of JFK's Terminal 4. For the project, Masters created 28 narrative reliefs out of fiberglass, each 8-and-a-half feet high by 10 feet wide, covering a 350-foot-wide span above the immigration booths of the terminal. Her sculpted murals, with reliefs up to 6-inches deep and 800-pounds each, now greet passengers with vibrant scenes of New

York life. The JFK wall relief was cited as the best public art project of 2001 by the Municipal Art Society.

On Jan. 11 at 2 pm, Masters will show a short film and give a talk about the "complicated" process of making the "Walking New York" murals.

"We had to take a window out of my studio," said Masters. "A crane came and we took all 28 pieces out of the seventh-floor window. I love doing things with cranes. My dad built bridges, so I love the construction thing, but I usually don't have that kind of budget. But in this case that was the cheapest way to get them out. We got them all out in four hours."

Masters' huge, pink relief of Coney Island in front of Long Island University's Brooklyn campus is 16 feet tall. She has created not one but dozens of concrete reliefs for a piece commissioned by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to one day adorn the Ocean Parkway Viaduct, the last stop on the D-line.

"I like knowing how to use hoists and cranes," she said. "It gets beyond physical ability and into the cleverness of using lifting tools."

"Big pieces are my natural scale."