

Hidden in Plain Site

Life-like sculptures at Los Angeles' Almar Building give a new definition to signage — and reality.

Louis M. Brill

While giving directions to the Almar Building in Los Angeles, its tenants try to maintain a straight face: "After you turn onto Ventura Blvd., look for two guys working on the front of the building, putting up a sign."

After visitors arrive, they see signmakers, who are supposedly working, and a woman selling brightly colored bouquets. Walking towards the building's entrance, they notice that the workers seem to be moving extraordinarily slowly — in fact, they never move.

At the base of a ladder, a male worker, with a tool belt at his side, is pointing upwards, giving directions to the second worker, perched on top of a ladder leaning against the building. The second worker holds the address he's about to place on the building. Watching the sign installers, and also looking for her next customer, a "Flower Woman" stands inside the entrance.

Quickly, visitors realize that this trio actually forms a sculpture of workers "frozen in time," in effect, becoming the building's front signage. Inevitably, unsuspecting visitors quickly spread the word about the remarkable, trompe l'oeil effect.

Known as *Work-in-Progress*, the sculpture was created by Ron Pekar, a Los Angeles-based sculptor and painter of public and corporate art. Pekar has taught art at such institutions as the California



Is it real or latex? Sculptor Ron Pekar (inset) knows.

State University at Northridge, Otis College of Art and Design and Glendale College. He also serves as a consultant for Disney Imagineering, Dreamworks and Disney Feature Animation. Represented in more than 15 museums, he has held at least 26 solo shows in galleries and museums. Even though he's a master of many media, his first love is sculpture, which he has practiced for at least 35 years.

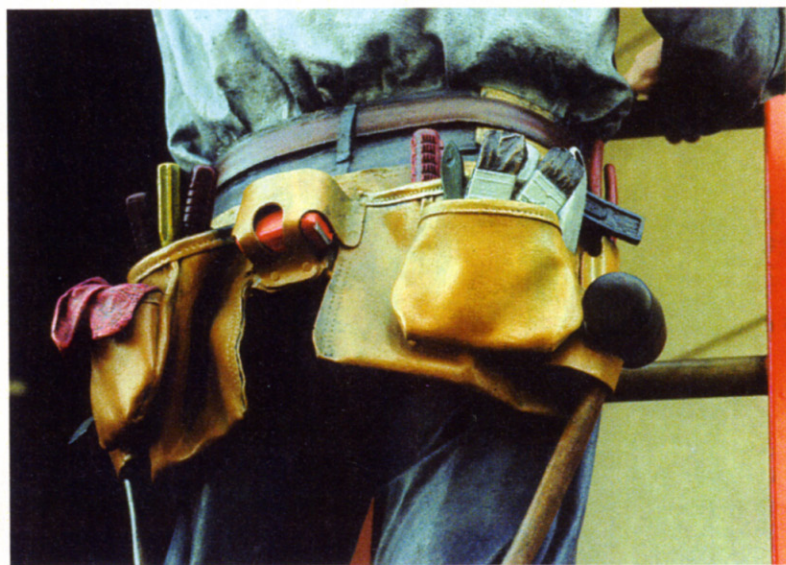
A life of art

Pekar's life has been centered around art. "My earliest experience with real art was taking art classes on Saturdays in the Cleveland Museum of Art," Pekar recalled. "In front of the museum was Rodin's *The Thinker*. As a kid, I climbed all



over that sculpture, wondering how anybody could possibly make anything like that out of metal and stone. It wasn't until high school that I began to actually make them myself."

As an undergraduate art student, Pekar studied at the Cleveland Institute of Art, and he earned his bachelor's and master's degrees at Washington University in St. Louis. He points to several sculptors, in addition to Rodin and Michaelangelo, who influenced him: Frank Gallo, a figurative sculptor who was an instructor at the University of Illinois; Duane Hanson, who created ultrarealistic life castings; and J. Seward Johnson Jr., a Princeton, NJ-based bronze sculptor (see *ST*, December 2002, page 10).



One viewer of *Work-in-Progress* thought he saw the sculpture move. Pekar (top right) studied sign installers' postures as they worked to capture the significant details, plus an attitude.

Combining his output as a painter and sculptor, Pekar has created more than 600 artworks installed in various corporate offices and boardrooms, buildings, universities, hospitals and private collections all over the world. While much of his sculptural work has been created in a realistic style, he also leans towards an "abstract style," depending on the commission and how he chooses to express his vision.

Regardless of style, Pekar "takes risks to push the envelope of creativity." Sometimes a certain material inspires him. "I allow a material to help me define the artwork's final look or style. I like to work in steel, but I also like to work in clay as a precursor to making cast-bronze sculptures."

Art imitates life

Pekar's current sculptural style emphasizes realism. "I like to capture a moment in time as a feeling of a situation, right then and now, and bring it to life as a sculpture," Pekar said. "To do this, I look at a variety of people to study their positions, their postures, their jobs and their attitudes. Thus, communicating an attitude and freezing it as a sculpture is part of my style."

Pekar considers *Work-in-Progress* his best work to date, which is a sculpture/sign that pays homage to sign professionals. The sculptural tableau honors two types of working situations. The two sign installers signify the employer-employee relationship, in which one person gives directions, and the

other person follows them.

Pekar said, "The sign installer on top of the ladder is so close to the building that he's uncertain of where to place the final number. At this moment, he's relying on instructions from his partner in the street, who points up to direct the placement of the final sign element."

The Flower Woman represents the self-employed," Pekar said. "She's obviously been doing this awhile, and she knows her job. She waits, and when someone approaches her, she sells them flowers. They go away, and she waits for her next customer."

Pekar has observed various reactions. "Some people get a kick out of it. They first think real people are putting up a sign, and when they



Work-in-Progress is installed in front of its new home, the Almar Building in Los Angeles. The life-size figures comprise polychrome bronze, and the ladder is stainless steel.

realize they're fooled by sculptures 'frozen in time,' they think it's funny. Others immediately realize they're sculptures, and they appreciate the tongue-in-cheek approach. Some viewers touch the flowers [they can't, because they're solid bronze], and others carefully examine the sidewalk worker's utility belt to study his tool collection. And then there are always the few who can't appre-

ciate them and think they're silly."

Allison Mohabir, Almar's building manager, recalled the reaction of a signmaker, whom she had contacted about creating a building directory. Perplexed, he asked, "Why do you need us to create signage when you already have some people working for you?"

When Mohabir asked him what he meant, he replied, "I saw two signmakers out front, putting up



The Flower Lady commemorates the "Ultimate Worker." The sculpture is so life-like that some people touch the flowers to see if they can bend the leaves.

your new building sign." She chuckled and replied, "That's just a sculpture, an artwork." He kept insisting the figures were workers — in fact, he saw them moving. So Mohabir walked with him to the front of the building to affirm how art imitates life, not the other way around, as he thought.

The work was commissioned when new owners decided to spruce up the building to expand occupancy. The building's management eventually discovered Pekar, who discussed artistic possibilities. Someone suggested a figure of a sign installer in action, which prompted the idea of a second figure pointing at the building. The tableau would cause passersby to notice, and remember, the building.

Before the sculpture could be installed, Pekar submitted a stamped, architectural/engineering drawing to the City of Los Angeles Building and Safety Div. for a plan check and a building permit. Additional approvals were also required from the Ventura Corridor Design Commission, which governs which signs meet county codes in order to be placed within the area.

When the commission saw *Work-In-Progress*, "they clearly saw it as a sculpture, but also recognized it as a sign," Pekar said.

Complete production of the figures required 10 months. First,

Lost-Wax Bronze Casting Process

Used at least 6,000 years ago, the principles behind the lost-wax method of bronze casting remain fundamentally the same. The earliest bronze works were solid until, 2,000 years later, artists learned how to cast hollow interiors. This made it possible to create larger works. The lost-wax bronze method connects the development of prehistoric metalwork to today's artistic version. Here's how the lost-wax process works:

1. Bronze castings are created from master molds made from original clay sculptures. The initial sculpture comprises synthetic model, non-drying clay applied over, and under, a steel-and-fiberglass armature.
2. The sculpture must be shipped (usually by truck) from the studio to a bronze foundry.
3. At the foundry, the first step is to create a latex/plaster cocoon around the clay sculpture. Cover the entire sculpture with latex, then a plaster (or cement) outer shell to provide rigidity. Note that, because of the complexity of the original clay sculpture, many sectional molds are made, and each section is rejoined in later steps.
4. Extract the original clay, sculpted section from the mold to provide a hollow cavity in the form.
5. Next, create a wax duplicate from the clay/plaster cocoon. Pour molten casting wax into each of the mold sections of the sculpture's molds. The wax flows into every detail.
6. After the wax cools, extract the wax form, which exactly replicates the original sculpted section. Repeated wax duplicates (editions) can be made by pouring and extracting additional wax sections.
7. Use the wax replica to create a second mold, a ceramic shell. Submerge (dunk) the wax section into a large vat of slurry (a semi-liquid, ceramic-based solution with the consistency of sour cream).
8. Remove the wax section from the slurry, roll it around in fine sand and hang it up to dry thoroughly (usually, at least overnight).
9. Repeat the "dunk and roll" process approximately 18 or more times until a thick, multi-layered, ceramic shell, or "cocoon," is built up around the wax. Each

section of the original sculpture is similarly handled.

10. The cocoon is fired in a "burn-out" kiln, and the wax is burned out (hence, the "lost-wax" process) of the ceramic mold. This forms the second mold in the overall process.

11. Place the cocoon into a sand pit so that it's held upright, and pour molten bronze into the cavity provided by the burned out, "lost wax."

12. After the bronze cools and solidifies, break the ceramic shell, which fractures away from the solidified bronze. Thus, the bronze duplicate is released from the ceramic mold.

13. Sandblast each bronze section to remove any ceramic residue or rough edges. Separate parts are welded back to the other sections to create the final sculpture. Each piece must be welded into the exact position of the original clay sculpture.

14. Grind away (the process is called "chasing") the welded seams to replicate the surface of the original sculpture.

15. The entire bronze form is again sandblasted to create a uniform surface.

16. The patina finish is created by brushing or spraying a combination of acid and wax onto the bronze surface. Different combinations create different colors. The acid and wax are heated with a torch. When worked into the metal's surface, they create a lustrous, bronze finish.

17. Most bronzes are complete when the patina cools. However, some sculptures contain several patina colors, or are painted or stained (over the patina), for creative expression.

— By Ron Pekar



Pekar created the bronze table top sculpture of Will Rogers using the lost-wax bronze casting process.

Pekar formed maquettes (clay models). Once he finalized the design, Adonis Bronze Foundry (Alpine, UT, near Salt Lake City) used the lost-wax process (*see sidebar*) to transform the figures into bronze statues. Pekar's studio assistants — Gene Wiskerson, Frank Williams and Jessica Hoy (who helped paint the figures) — helped complete the final details.

Not only in California

Once completed and installed, the sculpture became a status

symbol for the Almar Building and increased its rental desirability. After the installation, occupancy jumped from approximately 80% to 100%. Additionally, other area building owners have called the Almar Building to inquire about commissioning their own sculptural pieces.

Work-In-Progress isn't Pekar's first sculptural trompe l'oeil. He recalled his college days at Washington University in St. Louis with a smile. "Parking in front of my apartment building, and generally

around St. Louis, was a lot of trouble," Pekar said. "So, I made a papier-mache tree stump that was just a little bigger than the fire hydrants. I kept the tree stump in the trunk of my car, and any time I needed to park, I looked for a hydrant, parked and placed the tree stump directly over it." ■

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