

Watts Towers Arts Center Campus director has been suspended, her supporters say

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By Deborah Vankin



Ever since Rosie Lee Hooks became director of the Watts Towers Arts Center Campus in 2010, she has helped to grow the number of visitors to Simon Rodia's landmark artwork and greatly expanded the exhibition and education programs there.

But this week, Hooks' supporters said, the director has been suspended by the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, which manages the Watts Towers center. The suspension began Monday and will last three weeks, Hooks' supporters said.

The Department of Cultural Affairs would not provide details on Hooks' case because it's a personnel issue, said Bruce Whidden, public information director for the city's personnel department.

"There was a discipline," he said, "and she has the right, under the city charter, to appeal that discipline. And she hasn't done that. She has not afforded herself that opportunity."

Hooks, in an email passed through one of her supporters, also declined to comment.

The suspension, those supporters say, is related to the mural that local artist Jacori Perry had started to paint depicting jazz musician and Watts hero Charles Mingus on the side of the campus' Charles Mingus Youth Arts Center building. Hooks may have failed to go through

proper channels to get permission for the mural, supporters said. But they said the punishment outweighed the offense.

“We feel it was unjust,” said longtime Watts Towers supporter Edward Landler, citing Hooks’ work for the Department of Cultural Affairs since 2001. “In her 16 years there, she’s been there for the community and followed her calling as a true arts educator. We just feel that given issues in the news currently, issues of rich and poor and immigration and race relations, we feel to suspend her in this manner, the Cultural Affairs Department is very shortsighted regarding the community it serves.”

Production on the mural, titled “Charles Mingus,” started in September, in preparation for the Watts Towers Day of the Drum Festival and for the Simon Rodia Watts Towers Jazz Festival that month. Perry spent one day on the mural. It was less than halfway completed when Leslie Thomas, director of the Department of Cultural Affairs’ Community Arts Division, told Hooks and the artist to stop, and they did, Perry said.

Hooks didn’t receive notice of her suspension, Landler said, until months later.

The suspension comes as planning for the next drum festival and jazz festival are getting under way.

“It’s especially bad timing,” said Chioma Agbahiwe, vice president of the Watts Towers Community Action Council, one of the organizations that supports and promotes the arts center. “For all she does, with the limited resources given to her by DCA, it’s very small-minded for DCA to suspend her for putting up a mural of Charles Mingus on the Charles Mingus building.”

On Tuesday, the mayor’s office’s Watts Towers Arts Center Interdepartmental Task Force will hold its monthly meeting, at which the suspension is expected to be addressed.

“We want a clear explanation,” Landler said.

Watts Towers, he added, provokes deep feelings in locals and tourists alike. That the city responded so harshly to Hooks, he said, feels tone deaf given what the artwork stands for.

“The towers are an expression of the aspiration of humanity,” he said. “It’s a symbol of initiative and freedom and the aspirations we have in a country like the U.S., the values we are supposed to stand for — these towers rising from the mud towards the sky and the sun. And it cannot be separated from the history of Watts. The city isn’t reflecting the community it serves.”

Perry said his mural didn’t get finished, but it didn’t get erased either. “It’s just not done, that’s all,” he said.

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