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NEWS

Realistic new sculptures of hooded men outside Laguna Beach City Hall draw mixed responses


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Realistic life-size characters, including this guy vacuuming the grass, are on display in front of Laguna Beach City Hall as part of a temporary installation by artist Mark Jenkins. (John Legan / Staff Photographer)

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Five men wearing gray hoodies with drawstrings pulled tightly to obscure their faces were gathered in front of Laguna Beach City Hall on Tuesday.

One took up a game of horseshoes. Another rolled out a vacuum to clean the lawn. A third raised a hot dog on a long fork to sizzle under the sun. One aimed a bow fitted with a toilet plunger at an apple perched atop another's hooded head.

"The Caretakers," a public artwork created by artist Mark Jenkins and collaborator Sandra Fernandez, has elicited mixed responses from passersby and the local online community since its installation Friday. Among the descriptions: "weird," "cool," "creepy," "dramatic," "bizarre," "adventurous."

"When you first see them, you think they're real," said Pam Langsam of Laguna Beach.

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"It's kind of really scary, because how many people have time to come by and investigate?" said Laguna resident Laura Luo.

"I was going to go tackle him," joked Jeremiah Hillearyof Huntington Beach.

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Linda Humes gets a look at a character with a hot dog on a stick in artist Mark Jenkins' display in front of Laguna Beach City Hall. (Don Leach / Staff Photographer)

Some people crossed the street to avoid the spectacle. Others crossed over to peer at it more closely.

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Friends Linda Humes and Maggie Siegel purposely met for breakfast at Anastasia Cafe on Ocean Avenue so they could walk over afterward to see the sculptures and take pictures with them. They found the characters "creepy" because of their hidden faces.

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More than 160 people commented on the city's Facebook page about the artwork. Some thought it was inappropriate to allocate $25,000 of taxpayer money toward the installation, while others praised the city's openness to "edgy, provocative" work.

The temporary display will be up through Oct. 18.

Jenkins, who lives in West Virginia, described the characters as "shy," "pretty docile" and "a little bit lost."

"I call them moles because they can't really see and they always seem to be kind of like doing something aimless," Jenkins said. "But I don't ever see them as some people were saying, 'Oh, these are alarming.' I'm like, 'Well, what's alarming?' They're like, 'Well, he can't see.'

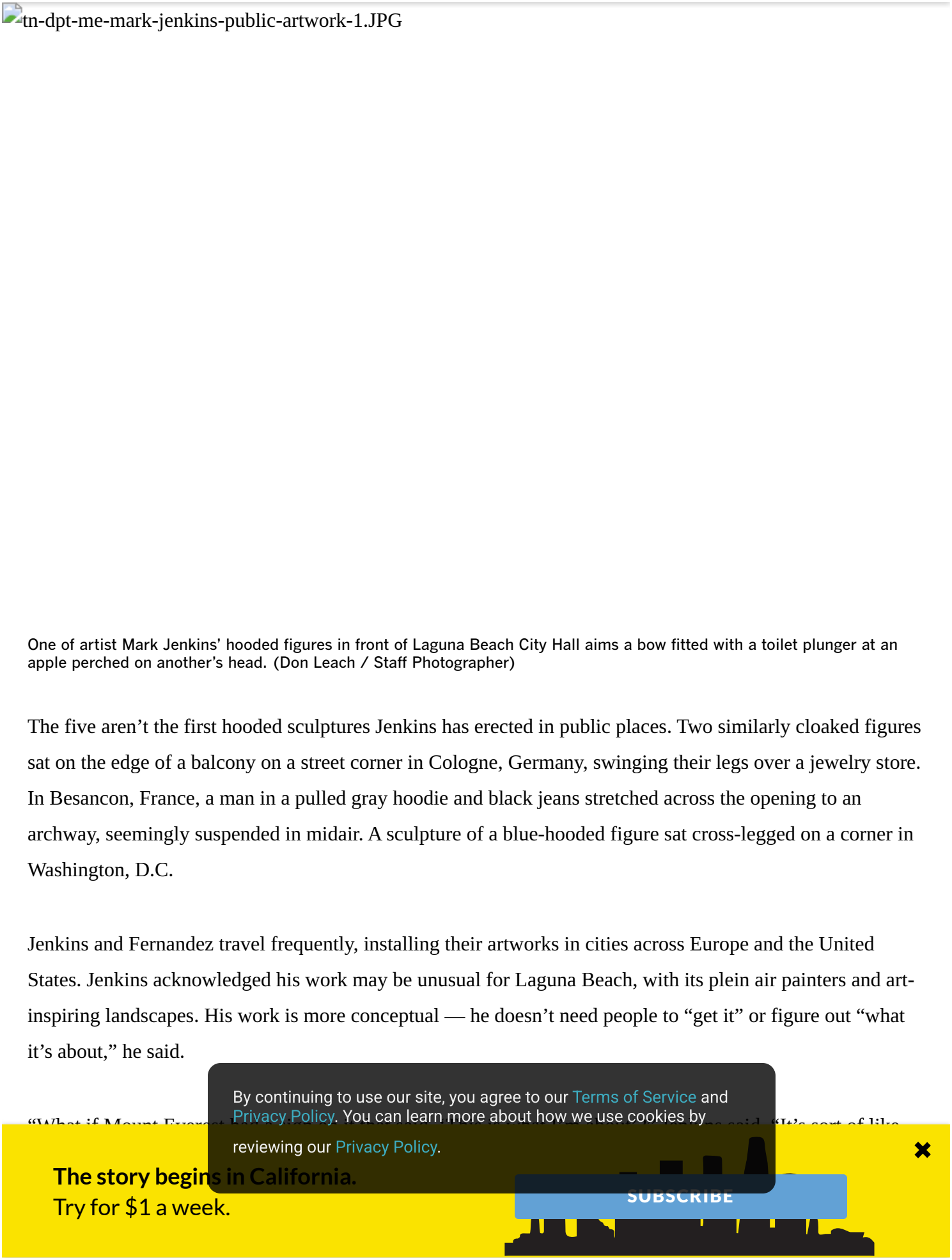
"Why is that alarming for you? That should be alarming for him!" Jenkins said with a laugh. "You poke at [people] with those kinds of questions and they let go of that and ultimately they have fun."

In some ways, Jenkins said, the sculptures are replicas of himself. He cast them in tape in the form of his own body and filled the legs with concrete. The upper body has lighter materials. The clothes — real gray hoodies and tan pants, hardened with resin — are the type he typically wears.

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One of artist Mark Jenkins' hooded figures in front of Laguna Beach City Hall aims a bow fitted with a toilet plunger at an apple perched on another's head. (Don Leach / Staff Photographer)

The five aren't the first hooded sculptures Jenkins has erected in public places. Two similarly cloaked figures sat on the edge of a balcony on a street corner in Cologne, Germany, swinging their legs over a jewelry store. In Besancon, France, a man in a pulled gray hoodie and black jeans stretched across the opening to an archway, seemingly suspended in midair. A sculpture of a blue-hooded figure sat cross-legged on a corner in Washington, D.C.

Jenkins and Fernandez travel frequently, installing their artworks in cities across Europe and the United States. Jenkins acknowledged his work may be unusual for Laguna Beach, with its plein air painters and art-inspiring landscapes. His work is more conceptual — he doesn't need people to "get it" or figure out "what it's about," he said.

"What if Mount Everest [illegible] said. "It's sort of like

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Art should prompt critical thinking, Jenkins said. He called it “healthy” to make people question their surroundings.

“Art is successful when it creates a dialogue,” according to Laguna Beach’s cultural arts manager, Siân Poeschl, who said she has received negative and positive emails about Jenkins’ installation.

The matching men — covered head to toe, including black gloves and sneakers — speak to the age of global warming, according to Poeschl.

James Madden, an architect based in South Laguna, pondered the hoodies closed around the sculptures’ faces.

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“Why would he not want to see what he’s performing?” Madden said. “The sculptures show that they are intently looking at something, but it’s hidden.”


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A hooded figure vacuuming the grass gets the attention of a passerby in front of Laguna Beach City Hall. It's part of a temporary public sculpture installation by artist Mark Jenkins. (Don Leach / Staff Photographer)

Laguna Beach artist Joan Gladstone said it's healthy to have the influence of other creative minds in town.

"I love seeing local artists represented in Laguna Beach. However, we are a community that's known worldwide for its arts heritage ... we have to evolve," Gladstone said.

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Updates:

12:16 PM, Aug. 28, 2019: *This article was originally published at 5:41 p.m. Aug. 27 and has been updated with additional information.*

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Faith E. Pinho covers Costa Mesa for the Daily Pilot. She came to the newspaper in 2018 after finishing the Pulliam Journalism Fellowship with the Indianapolis Star. Before that, she reported for Virginia public radio station WMRA and The Washington Times, and interned for WBUR public radio in Boston. She studied journalism and politics at Washington and Lee University and King's College London. (714) 966-4627

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