

BACK STORY

A Public Art Project



Deborah Aschheim

BACK STORY

A public art project by
Deborah Aschheim

commissioned by
Santa Monica Cultural Affairs
in partnership with
the Santa Monica Fire Department

This book is a selection of drawings based on real life observation
of the Santa Monica Fire Department from 2015-2019.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Deborah Aschheim would like to thank:

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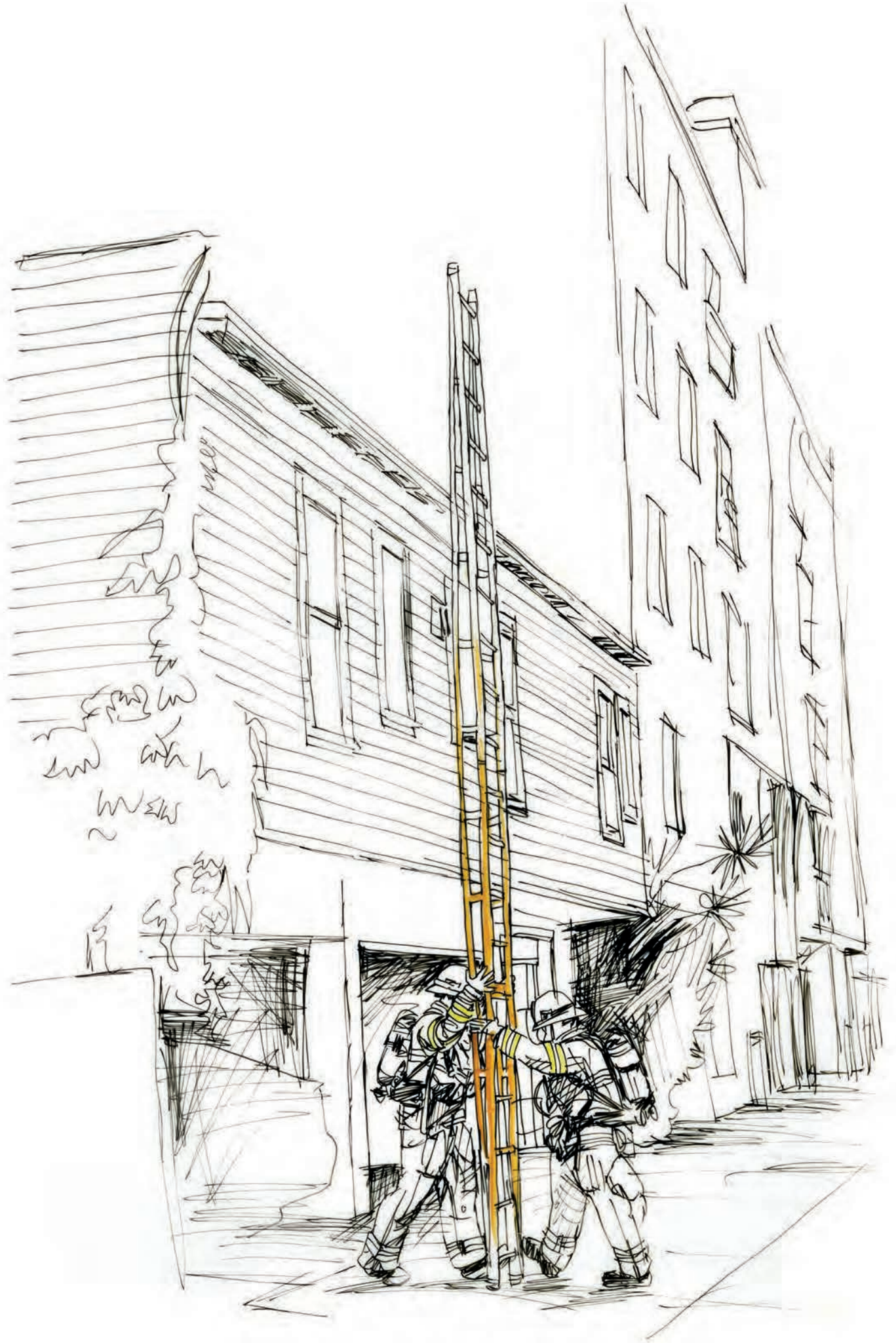
Maryanne Weldon

Bob Dickens

And Kenny Lee, Ace Contreras, Debbie Suh, Michael Cochran, Barbara Aschheim, Laura Becker, Shannon Daut, Naomi Okuyama, Jody Zellen, Fabian Lewkowicz, Jason Abraham and Firefighter Dominic Smith.

Design by Jody Zellen, jodyzellen.com

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BACK STORY

“Back Story” is a collection of drawings and watercolors created across the four years I spent as Artist-in-Residence for the Santa Monica Fire Department. This artist’s book is part of a larger art project that includes 17 art glass panels that are integrated into the new Santa Monica Fire Station #1.

I became SMFD’s unofficial Artist-in-Residence in 2015, going on ride-alongs and having conversations with firefighters as I visited the (old) Station #1 to develop ideas for paintings that would animate the interior windows of the new building. I had a Hollywood-influenced view of firefighting as nonstop heroic adventure. As I spent time getting to know the men and women of SMFD, I became interested in parts of the Fire Service I hadn’t thought about before: What makes someone choose this dangerous career? Could I have been a firefighter? How hard is it to get hired? How does it impact your family to work this demanding schedule? How do firefighters deal with sleep being interrupted all night? Is it scary to do such dangerous work? How do people cope with the traumatic things they see and experience on the job?

I started recording conversations over meals at the station, frequently interrupted by the chimes alerting a company to suit up and head out on a call. Firefighters famously do not like to complain, and they really love the job. I conducted interviews anonymously, often round-table style, to encourage people to answer my questions candidly.

In this book, where a quote accompanies a portrait of a specific person, the individual depicted in the drawing is not necessarily the same person who shared their story or insight.

I accompanied firefighters on paramedic calls at the beach and downtown, in cramped apartments, at Metro stations, at senior care facilities. We responded to car accidents, bike accidents, elevator rescues, and sometimes small fires. I spent a day with the Fire Inspector, entering Santa Monica businesses to make sure signs, exits and extinguishers complied with the fire code. I visited the Fire Academy, watching recruits set fires in the training structures and practice putting them out.

As you read, I hope you can imagine yourself in my place, drinking coffee, listening to stories, jumping up to ride along on a call in a borrowed “turnout” jacket, and trying to understand a life so different from mine.

Deborah Aschheim
March 2020
Pasadena, California



INTRODUCTION

The Santa Monica Hose and Ladder Company was founded on March 22, 1889. For the past 131 years, the Santa Monica Fire Department has served the community with dedication, integrity and pride. In that spirit, we are honored to host Deborah Aschheim as our Commissioned Artist for a state-of-the-art fire station located in the heart of downtown Santa Monica.

Station #1 serves the core of the City. It was built with three key concepts in mind: Transparency, Community and Pride. At first glance, from the front apron of the station, you will notice these values. To the left, the glass encased Community Meeting Room and lobby are filled with a collection of historical firefighting memorabilia. Directly in front of you are six apparatus bays of impeccably maintained equipment. We care for this equipment as if it were our own. Finally, the entire building is made of glass, allowing our community to see who we are and what we do. A fire station is our home and we welcome you to visit.

It was critical to the fire department membership that any artwork placed within the building represented our values and the pride we take in service. Deborah's artwork beautifully captured these values. The transparent glass artwork in and around the Community Meeting Room illuminates what we value most: our people. There are brilliantly captured images of our firefighters in action, transformed into panes of glass, that demonstrate the pride we all have in serving this great community. In the hallways of the second floor, Deborah donated the sketches she drew as an Artist-in-Residence during nearly four years she spent in our fire stations, our administrative facilities and on ride alongs with our firefighters. The investment Deborah made in getting to know our mission, our commitment and our people resulted in a remarkable artistic display.

We hope you enjoy *Back Story* as much as you enjoy the artwork in Fire Station #1. It is our honor and privilege to serve you from such a spectacular new Community Fire Station.

Respectfully,

Tom Clemo
Deputy Fire Chief
Santa Monica Fire Department

I love coming to work. I love it.
It doesn't feel like a job sometimes.

I wanted a small department,
I wanted to know everyone.





That's my favorite thing: every day is completely different. You come to work and you have no idea what's going to happen or what you're going to have to do or how the day's going to play out.





I think we all have that drive to run into a building that everyone else is running out of.

