

LIVING

Empty vessels

A DISPLAY OF 350 FLOODED-OUT DRESSER DRAWERS FROM KATRINA, SET UP BY A NEW ORLEANS ARTIST NEAR THE FORMER WORLD TRADE CENTER SITE, IS A POIGNANT SYMBOL OF THE SUSTAINED POWER OF DISASTER.



PHOTO BY FLOODEDWALL

An exhibit of drawers collected from trash piles all over New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina is on display in a pedestrian bridge that once connected the World Trade Center to the World Financial Center.



New Orleans artist Jena Napoli, creator of the "Floodwall," says it is her attempt to convey the magnitude of the loss in New Orleans.

NEW YORK CITY — A young man and woman were waiting at a fast clip through the Liberty Street Bridge beside ground zero in Lower Manhattan when the man stopped short.

Near a New Yorker, Nicholas Forde grew up in Houma. He had glanced at the "Floodwall" sign at one end of the enclosed, elevated pedestrian walkway, then at the seemingly endless array of empty dresser drawers on a platform a few inches above the floor.

"Are these from New Orleans?" he asked no one in particular.

Someone said yes. Forde, 26, studied the 350 dresser drawers arranged in loose rows three or four deep under windows with views of the former site of the World Trade Center twin towers.

"This is awesome," he said. His grandfather and great aunt live in Jefferson Parish. "I think it's good life here in New York. I'm going to tell everyone in my office to come see this."

It's exactly the kind of reaction New Orleans artist Jena Napoli had hoped for when working on the project. She found the drawers in trash piles across New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. And saved them. And turned them into the

artist she calls "Floodwall." It opened early this month in New York City, where it will remain through Feb. 6.

Remains of one heartbreaking American tragedy in a space adjacent to another.

Those who pause to look at the installation can hear growling plus drivers wailing on the recorded to the victims of Sept. 11 as they read comments from victims of Katrina who once owned those drawers.

Their words in red move slowly across a long, narrow electronic display, similar to the news alerts that crawl across the bottom of the screen on CNN. Among them are parts of an interview with Norma Johnson, a name whose "youngest son was murdered near the park at Saratoga and Napoleon.... That drawer still had some of his possessions." She and another son were separated during the storm's aftermath and weren't reunited for two months, she says.

And words from Henricia Wicks: "This drawer is where I kept my love letters from my husband before we were married."

Empty drawers, life stories.

"It's the kind of thing to get you to start thinking about what happened.

I see the drawers, and I start thinking about the people.

The drawers represent their lives."

MARCO VICENTINI, visitor to Floodwall exhibit

Empty dresser drawers each tell a story

FLOODWALL, from C-1

And naturally, there is a story about how this 230-foot long platform with dresser drawers ended up in the Liberty Street Bridge that once connected the World Trade Center to the World Financial Center.

One end of the bridge still opens to the WFC, the other to stairs leading down to Liberty Street and the New York Fire Department's station house for Ladder 10 and Engine 10, called Ten House. It reopened as a working station three years ago; a bronze memorial to all firefighters killed Sept. 11, 2001, was installed on a side wall last summer and attracts its own crowds.

Most of the visitors walk across the street to look through the fence at the former World Trade Center site where workers are building the memorial.

A broken bridge, a gaping pit, empty drawers — all testaments to unexpected death and loss. All being resurrected in one way or another.

When Hurricane Katrina hit Aug. 29, 2005, Jena Napoli was working on an art installation about "rubber bands my mother saved for me." She laughs now when she talks about it. "Every time a newspaper came, it had a rubber band around it, and my mother kept them around fold-over matchbooks like you get in a restaurant, and she stuck them in drawers, where the rubber bands just solidified," Napoli said. A few weeks after the storm, she returned from a friend's Baton Rouge garage apartment where she'd escaped with her mother, who's now 93, and looked for drawers in which to set up her rubber band project.

But as she drove around devastated New Orleans neighborhoods, she found herself "trapped in the grief on the street." In trash piles everywhere, she saw loose drawers and chests of drawers. She looked inside drawers filled with

everything from junk to soaked handmade linens and napkins that were covered with mold.

The absence of people and pets got to her. "You'd hear the sound of a screen door shutting, and turn around and hope someone was there. But there was nobody. It was the wind. It was deathly. It was the one thing journalists, writers and TV couldn't do, show that silence. I hoped to find a way to let Americans see that silence."

Napoli, 60, is high-energy. She calls almost everyone "honey," and touches their arms when she speaks in her low, intense voice — sometimes laughing, sometimes serious. She finds opportunities in challenges.

In the late 1980s, she realized she didn't know the teenagers hanging around the Central Business District near her Baronne Street studio. So she opened part of the building to them, mostly students from Rabouin, a vocational school in the area, and taught them to paint imaginatively, murals and brightly colored chairs and armchairs. The YA/YA: Young Aspirations-Young Artists, as they were called, earned international fame and traveled all over Europe; young artists now run the group themselves.

After Katrina, Napoli said she felt the need to show "the people who thought God sent the storm to us to look at what the loss was really like."

As she gathered more than 700 drawers from every devastated neighborhood, she noted the address on each drawer. She collected them from October 2006 to March 2006. If there was anything inside, she dumped it out, but if things were stuck to the drawers, they stayed. She gassed them with chemicals to kill the mold and stored them in an Oreck vacuum warehouse in New Orleans.

Wanting to show the drawers in the Northeast, she eventually reached Tom Healy, president of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, and Anne Preternak, executive director of Creative Time Inc., a nonprofit public arts organization. They signed on and even joined Napoli one day in New Orleans, collecting more drawers.

As usual with Napoli, it became a team effort. Rondell Crier, 32, a onetime student who was part of YA/YA before being named its executive director of programs, became a partner in Floodwall, focusing on the technical work.

Monica Stevenson, a New York photographer, flew to New Orleans to photograph the drawers. Rontherin Ratiiff, a New Orleans graphic artist, helped with the photography and measurements. Donn

Young, a local photographer, shared his equipment.

Tatiana Clay still goes to community groups to try to find the original owners of the drawers, and has interviewed 13 people so far; theirs are the stories on the electronic crawl. The T. Harry Williams Oral History Center in Baton Rouge is interested in preserving them.

And, back in New York, David Lackey, owner of Whirlwind Creative, designed the installation so it would fit in Liberty Bridge. Major funding came from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and the World Financial Center.

Finally, right after Christmas, Napoli and her gang piled the drawers into a rented truck and drove to New York.

When it opened Jan. 4, the signage wasn't all up yet. A Croatian woman asked Napoli, "Is this from Katrina?" Napoli said yes and apologized about the lack of signs. The woman nodded, and said they weren't needed. "After you walk the length of it, you understand."

Others seemed to get it too. Marco Vicentini, a radiologist from San Paulo, Brazil, and Lisbon, Portugal, was taking photographs another day. Asked why, he said "It's the kind of thing to get you to start thinking about what happened." Vicentini, 34, said, "I see the drawers, and I start thinking about the people. The drawers represent their lives."

The "wall" is horizontal in New York because of space limits on the bridge, but Napoli hopes eventually to assemble all 700 or so drawers into a vertical "walling wall," sort of a "long piece of furniture with drawers pulled out so you could look into it." She's in talks now with other exhibit spaces in the Northeast.

Like many people, Napoli worries about New Orleans. She struggles to express her thoughts. The wall is her way of conveying the magnitude of loss in the city. It's also a model for what a united city can be like that's composed of different people with different ideas who work together.

"I wish that all those houses and neighborhoods that barely exist now would put their hands together and not be politically separated." She said she wishes we could "develop common goals and connect with one another and the outside world."

Her voice sounded wistful, even over the phone from Birmingham, Ala., where her mother now lives. "This may not be what is happening in New Orleans. I cannot control that. All I can do is make an image. ... I hope it is of some service."