

The Big Picture: Galleries, Artists, Etc.

'Floodwall' Is About What's Not There

BY [Steven Rosen](#) | Posted 09/10/2008

A former colleague, an arts critic at *The Denver Post*, once voiced his concern about the legacy of Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. He worried the impact of the names on the minimalist dark wall would be lost on future generations -- once the veterans who visit it die off -- because its meaning was too abstracted and metaphoric. It needed too much explanation, he thought.

He was arguing in favor of more traditionally figurative, representational sculpture for memorials, such as the bronze heroic "The Three Soldiers" statue by Frederick Hart that was added to Lin's memorial.

I felt, on the other hand, that the melancholy power of Lin's wall was so powerful and so appropriate a response to tragedy -- which the Vietnam War was for this nation -- that it changed the way we respond to memorials. It made the traditional "heroic sculpture" approach seem old-fashioned and irrelevant.

That came back to me when visiting *Floodwall*, the Hurricane Katrina Memorial by Jana Napoli (a New Orleans resident) on display at Clifton Cultural Arts Center through Sunday. It's timed to the third anniversary of the hurricane, and the resultant collapsed levees, that flooded and devastated much of New Orleans. This is the fourth city for the sculptural installation to be exhibited; New York City, Baton Rouge and Austin, Tex., preceded it.

Floodwall has the power to befuddle those looking for the traditional in a visual art experience. Some 350 household dresser drawers, all found in the aftermath of Katrina, have been slotted into a long, portable wall.

At first, it seems more mundane than artful. While these pulled-out drawers do vary in color, material and decorative detail, the first impression is of a long expanse of brown wood.

But the story behind *Floodwall* gives it a meaning that enriches the visual impact. You might have to read or listen to the exhibit's supporting material to get that, but it's worth the effort.

Napoli asks a simple question: Where in your house do you keep your most personal items? Not necessarily the most valuable monetarily, but those that "flood" your consciousness with memories and loving thoughts? Your softest clothes and linens. Baby clothes. Jewelry. Old letters and photographs. Scrapbooks and diaries. Many of you -- most, I'd wager -- would say "dresser."

Now imagine all of this torn asunder by disaster on a massive scale. Homes damaged or washed away, furniture carried off or torn apart by floodwaters, neighborhoods reduced to debris -- like a seaweed-strewn beach -- that includes hundreds of these drawers.

Yes, maybe that debris also includes kitchen utensils, television sets, chairs, mattresses, etc. But with these drawers, you think about what's *not* there as much as what is. All the small items carried away, damaged or lost.

It's an apt metaphor for heartbreaking loss. The fact it happened on such a cataclysmic scale, in a city so old and with as many memories as New Orleans, gives it all the more power.

Will *Floodwall* have the same impact in generations to come, when Katrina fades from memory? My betting is it will, because the artistic tenets are sound. And its historic importance -- of how we have soberly learned a new, post-Maya Lin language to memorialize loss -- can only grow.

Find details about the *Floodwall* exhibit [here](#).

CONTACT STEVEN ROSEN: srosen@citybeat.com