

# SPONTANEOUS MEMORIAL

An Installation Commemorating the  
Tenth Anniversary of 9/11

by Frank McEntire



*Fence, interior detail*

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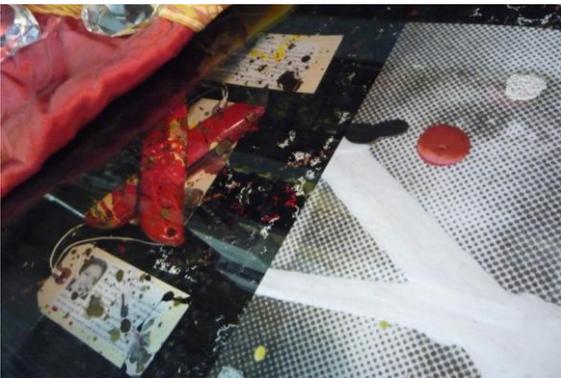


YEARS AGO, I MANAGED DISASTER RECOVERY PLANNING for a large nonprofit organization. My job was to help make sure that critical headquarters functions would keep operating if a major crisis hit—an earthquake, a fire, or a terrorist attack.

## The morning of September 11, 2001

On the emergency situation room television, our stunned and sobered executive response team watched the horrors of the attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and Flight 93 unfold. One of our team leaders had spent years in the New York City Twin Towers for a Fortune 500 company, and many of his friends and associates still worked there. His expression showed the heartbreak of facing both national and personal disasters.

In an instant, his quickly concealed tears triggered in me recollections and feelings about the senseless acts we humans inflict upon one another. A collage of imagery raced through my mind—the Vietnam War, an era that helped mold my political worldview, even my approach to art making considering the performance nature of some of the anti-war demonstrations I participated in while a theater major at the University of Texas at Austin. I envisioned piles of human skulls from Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge killing fields; Hitler and the Holocaust; newscasts of tribal wars and famine in Africa—so many human atrocities, so few noble causes it seemed at the time. Now 9/11 was added to the list; so many heinous, human-initiated horrors in my own lifetime, made vivid to me in a provocative instant that morning on the 18th floor of another office tower 2,200 miles from where these new nightmarish events were unfolding.



*Material Evidence, detail*

Two months after the attacks, my wife, Marjorie, and I visited New York City. Altar-like memorials abutted the city sidewalks wherever we found a fire station or a fence. One such memorial was covered in flowers, lit by candles, and highlighted with photographs of fallen first responders—more than half of the station's crew died when the Twin Towers collapsed.

New Yorkers and visitors continually replenished the altars throughout the city offering flowers, notes, prayers, even their silence—tokens of remembrance, admiration, and grief. I've retained a visual and emotional memory of those street altars—memorials to lost loved ones and fallen heroes. They motivated the beginning of "Spontaneous Memorial" in 2004. It evolved into a continuing installation exhibited every year since then,\* including this final, tenth anniversary edition at the Springville Museum of Art.

The installation's title came from a radio interview with a 9/11 widow. She said she was soothed after the attack by the "spontaneous memorials" that suddenly appeared throughout the city. These well-wishers—local citizens and visitors alike—left notes, flowers, stuffed animals, candles, and photos by fences, trees, and buildings.



*Material Evidence, detail*

Aesthetics and formal considerations on which a work motivated by tragedy is judged by peers and critics are tempered by issues of political correctness, sensitivity to victims and their families, and accusations of capitalizing on the calamity. These issues are not limited to 9/11. Many vile events are ripe with invitation for artistic exploration. Conflict, after all, prompted some of our greatest artworks, from Picasso's unforgettable anti-war mural "Guernica" to Maya Ying Lin's simple yet powerful Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall in Washington, D.C.

When we returned from New York, I didn't yet have the idea to make a 9/11 memorial. I was, however, compelled to compose some 3,000 remembrances of a yet-to-be-defined representation of each of the victims. To me, it would be a meditation on the purpose and value of life. I eventually came across *Portraits 9/11/01: The Collected "Portraits of Grief" from The New York Times* (Edited by Howell Raines, 2002), a compilation of photographs and short biographical sketches of the September 11th victims. I thought of using clippings from the book to make collages. And the image of a shrine or commemorative altar began to emerge, no doubt echoing those we saw on New York City streets.

I envisioned a cube in the middle of a darkened space, conjured by an image of the Ka'aba (a cube-shaped structure in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the most sacred site in Islam), perhaps because all but one of the 9/11 terrorists were from Saudi Arabia. My visualized Ka'aba, however, was not draped in black silk fabric with gold-embroidered quotes from the Qur'an, but clad with thin layers of amber, illuminated by an internal blaze.

Common price tags came to mind as the base for the *Portraits* collages with their beige, or amber, color. Tags also carry symbolic or imaginative value—the price of an item for sale, the cost of a life, the identity of a corpse in a morgue.

*Portraits 9/11/01* has a simple white dust jacket, belying its tragic contents. I purchased two more copies and started cutting out images and pasting them onto the price tags. With each image, I included a fragment of the victim's biography. One thousand people who died were not included in the first edition of the book, so I used blank tags to represent these people. I also included 50 blank tags in an ash-filled crystal vase to represent the victims of other atrocities across time and place.

I spread the tags on my studio floor and covered them with splatters and drips of red, yellow, gold, silver, and black enamel paint, a technique I developed as a theater scenic artist during college. The drips and splats made the tags abstract in order to create emotional distance.



*Portrait, one of eight*

Fences or other structural frameworks are common backdrops for memorials created when someone of note or innocence dies. I began looking for something that was fence-like that could be configured into a square (as in my meditative visualization), and could allow the public to enter and exit. While attending a charity art auction, I noticed the racks being used to hang paintings. I later purchased enough of them to make an 8-foot-square enclosure—just what I needed.

The installation started to fall into place. I quickly found:



- Particle board for the floor.
- A triangular mirror to go inside the Ka'abaesque cube, just right to set on its top the triangular vase I found earlier and filled with ashes and the fifty blank tags.
- Three hand-made music stands on which I placed the two cut-up copies of *The New York Times* publication and a third complete copy for reference.
- Christmas ornament hooks for hanging the tags onto the "fence."

Other elements started to surface.

*Fence*

I wanted viewers to participate by writing their thoughts about 9/11 on the back of the tags. Because the tags were small, I thought I could elicit more in-depth comments by including a larger element. I found an old oak desk in an antique shop, built to accommodate tracking ledgers for automotive parts, and pasted a tag on each page to invite written comments. I also made a wall reliquary into which I placed a commemorative tag.



*Message Table*



*Ledger detail*

An LDS bishop called to tell me his chapel was being renovated, and invited me to prowl through the materials that were to be thrown away. I retrieved a wall-mounted tithing table and a chapel hymn board and immediately absorbed them into the installation.

The tithing table evolved into "Message Table." Instead of housing tithing donation envelopes, the slots were filled with tags, pens for patrons to write comments, and hooks to hang them onto the "Fence."



The hymn board became “331.” In the slots where the one-digit number cards are stored for identifying hymns. I placed cards from the 2003 U.S. military-developed “Most-wanted Iraqi” playing cards that used photos of Saddam Hussein’s regime. I shuffled 9/11 tags in with the most-wanted cards and added a wooden music stand that holds an old Mormon hymnal, opened to song number 331 titled, “Oh, Say What Is Truth?” Like other elements in the installation, this piece questions justification for war, terror, and destruction. “331” asks us to ponder the assertions by political leaders about the 9/11 attacks being linked to Hussein and their claim that he was an imminent threat to the American “homeland.” This moniker was embedded into the “war on terror” lexicon, along with “shock and awe.”



These elements were joined by a piece made from a priest’s vestments—a stole. It hangs on a wardrobe stand discovered decades ago in a defunct department store. This part of the installation was named “Fly With the Angels,” taken from a participant’s inscription on the back of a tag, also hanging on the wardrobe as a reminder of Flight 93.

My plan, if I could muster funds and psychic and physical energy—and storage space—was to install “Spontaneous Memorial” each September in different locations, adding new elements each time.\* Several times, people have asked me why I persisted in this project. It’s as mysterious to me as the mental visions that lead me down the path of an artist in the first place: it’s more emotion than intellect, more spiritual than material, more question than answer.

\* *Utah Valley University, 2004; Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial, Boise, Idaho, 2005; Salt Lake City Downtown Library Gallery, 2006; Rio Gallery, Utah Arts Council, 2007; Auditorium Gallery, Brigham Young University, 2008; Gallery 208, Provo, Utah, 2009; Gallery 54, Kearns, Utah, 2010; and Springville Museum of Art, 2011.*

*Fly With the Angels*



Detail of “Portrait Lattice,” one of two 84” x 156” grids, each with photographic prints taken from the tags



One of over 200 prints mounted in grids

Frank McEntire, born 1946 in Wichita Falls, Texas, is well known as a sculptor and independent curator, arts administrator, and writer, including exhibition catalogs and regular reviews as the former art critic of *The Salt Lake Tribune* and *Salt Lake Magazine*. His sculptural works have been featured in several publications and shown in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Texas, and Utah. As a curator, McEntire has organized exhibitions for Access/VSA Utah, Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Salt Lake Art Center, Springville Museum of Art, Sundance, Utah Museum of Fine Arts, and for the Utah Capitol Rotunda. He has served in many leadership capacities, such as the executive director of the Utah Arts Council. For more information, go to: [www.frankmcentire.com](http://www.frankmcentire.com).

