

Art in Life and Death

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WHEN THE BOMB EXPLODED AT THE Murrah Federal Building on April 19, 1995, in downtown Oklahoma City, I was in our usual Wednesday meeting in the Chambers Library Director's office. I always tried to sit in a south-facing chair to look out the window where, in an old mulberry tree, cedar waxwings often gathered in the spring. Some things you don't want to miss.

At 9:02 that tree shook. We all felt it from twenty miles away. What was that?



Twenty-seven years later, I visit the renovated University of Central Oklahoma Library where I finished my career and later retired, and where memories abound. So much has changed. Where the State and Federal Statutes were shelved, now we have a recording studio. Where I fielded a jillion questions, no reference desk exists. New model. New means.

It's more beautifully open now and student centered. A twenty-first century vibe echoes up the atrium stairway. What remains the same, besides the ever-welcoming staff, is the [Murrah Art Collection](#)—nineteen pieces of survivor art rescued from the Federal Building after the bombing.

Like all survivors, they are more than what hit them. They all have an origin story tied to the genius of their makers. Each speaks to the past, the present, and perhaps to the future. They all dwell in a forward-thinking university, after all.

Walking the first floor, I remember these images that for ten years greeted me coming and going. Dena Madole's *Sun Form* was my personal morning rise and shine as I rounded the corner to my office.

The glorious thing about public art is that we begin to feel it belongs to us. In our workplaces, all that creative energy truly does redound to us. We work better in companionship with, say, the complexity of a weaving called *Double Layers*.

Jane Knight wrapped wool and jute into perfect symmetry. Every thread counts.

Many institutions these days offer yoga or a meditation room. I used to have the bracing privilege of witnessing James Strickland's *Fallen Oak Tree*, assembled with the wood of a tree that fell and killed his uncle. I'm sure the craftsman had no idea his piece would also be an offertory for 168 people he never knew. Even three minutes gazing at this tribute elevates a day of routine duties.

Nearby I see again *The Storm*, by sculptor Richard Davis. These bronze clouds and chime-like raindrops seem to say that calm is not something we can always count on. In this way, art does not pull punches. Today when I reconnect with this bright, shapely abstract, I see something new: no matter where I stand, my reflection shines back, strangely aging, buffeted about, still witnessing.

I often miss my work at Chambers Library. I miss the team, the shared mission to meet the students where they are: high performers, struggling moms, multitaskers, procrastinators. I loved seeing them stop to consider a clay image of someone's Sioux ancestor walking into the wind. Thank you, Carol Whitney, for finding a way in *Loyal Creek* to say to everyone who looks: *Move forward in the elements*.

Though most of my colleagues have moved on, that other team of mine behind pristine glass is still at work, providing a conduit for wonder and questions. What lasts? Who is responsible? What rests in the double knots? Where do we come in? What can we make today? What happens to the broken?

Let me just say, if you don't have art in your work environment, lobby for it. Gather the kind that will hold your grief and open your heart or shake you up a bit with mystery. Make it your job to increase consciousness and community this way. Remember. Make art, not bombs. Weave a better future. ✎

MAKE ART, NOT BOMBS. WEAVE A BETTER FUTURE.



The Oklahoma City National Memorial in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Designed by Hans and Torrey Butzer, of Butzer Design Partnership.