

Remembering pain of 9/11 through art

In the days after 9/11, The Educational Alliance asked artist and School of Visual Arts instructor Tobi Kahn to lead a workshop for children dealing with the disaster.

The murals the teens produced under Kahn's direction went on to tour several college campuses.

"The workshop was very powerful," said Alliance art curator Walter O'Neil. "So when we thought of doing an exhibit in commemoration for the 10th anniversary, Tobi was the only person we thought of."

The result is "Embodied Light: 9-11 in 2011," a multilayered exhibit that will be on display from Sept. 9 through Nov. 23 in the Ernest Rubenstein Gallery at Educational Alliance offices, 197 E. Broadway on the lower East Side.

Kahn said he remembers watching from his Long Island City studio as the Twin Towers fell. In the midst of that calamity, he said, he most recalls that "any time you met anyone after that, you felt like a tiny community. No one cared if you were Democrat or Republican, if you were gay or straight. It was like everyone conceptually hugged everyone else.

"I wanted to create a meditative space that is not a downer, but which lets people connect in many different ways."

Kahn created a multilayered installation evoking not only that infamous day in



Artist Tobi Kahn with part of an installation he's creating for the exhibit "Embodied Light: 9-11 in 2011." Photo by Christie M. Farriella

the city but also our fragile present, the community in which we live in the aftermath of the attack.

Each piece could be a standalone artistic statement. A 12-panel, off-white floor composition puts the viewer back in the Twin Towers, starting at the city skyline below.

"I wanted it to be like the city beckons you and says you're one of us, you're one community,"

Kahn said.

Seven memorial candles – one for each day of the week – in cast bronze stand over various designs that are collectively

about "communal mourning."

"After Sept. 11, some families who lost a loved one knew I made memorial lights and asked me to make one for them," Kahn said. "There are candles in every faith-based religion, so I didn't want [just] one, but seven, so it is not just faith-based because every religion uses seven days in the week."

Kahn created seven shrines for another wall, each an imaginative take on the building collapse, with abstract figures among the straight and then precariously angled monuments towering overhead.

He measured brass commemorative plaques around the city and then used the sizes to create 4-foot-tall "charity boxes" of blank plaques to memorialize the un-

found dead.

For his final element, Kahn handed out 220 palm-sized, painted wooden blocks – one for each floor in the two collapsed buildings – to as many people. He asked each to use the "memory block" to create art reflecting the event.

The results are spectacular.

The group – most were not artists, Kahn said – subjected the blocks to drills and fire, paint and ink, transforming them into little squares of pain and anguish, love, redemption and hope.

The exhibit is co-sponsored by the UJA Federation of New York. For more information, see www.edalliance.org/artgallery, www.tobikahn.com.

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