

Memoria: In Progress **Interactive Art Memorializes Victims of Lynching**

"A generation which ignores history has no past and no future."-- Robert A. Heinlein

There are not very many subjects of conversation that can make someone as uncomfortable as "lynching."

Many of us probably haven't experienced just how uncomfortable this subject can be because, as Americans, we don't really like to talk about this horrific part of our history.

Try it some time. Ask someone you know-- say, a co-worker or a family member-- what they know, think, or feel about lynchings in America. My guess is your conversation won't last very long.

Memoria: In Progress, an interactive traveling art project, was recently introduced to Vernonia during the St. Mary's Quilt Fair and was presented and on display during the October First Friday and Salmon Festival on October 1st and 2nd. The exhibit is a memorial project to actual, documented victims of lynching and racial violence in the United States.

The exhibit was created by LaShawnda Crowe Storm, and was presented in Vernonia by former resident and artist Marilyn Michele Kunkel. It is scheduled to run for one year.

The project is interactive in that it asks participants to recognize individuals who were murdered through acts of racial violence and acknowledge this part of our history in an effort to help heal the wounds that have been caused. Participants are helping to construct a series of quilts by writing the names, dates and locations of an individual on a cloth board at the installation. The board will then be digitally photographed and turned into cloth quilt squares. There will be other opportunities for people to participate in the project in other ways throughout the coming year.

The names come from what is called "The Book of the Dead" which is regional in nature and is a collection of hundreds of names-- the book that was in Vernonia included names from Oklahoma, Kansas and other western states, including Oregon.

Paging through "The Book of the Dead" is itself a powerful experience. Just reading the names of, or often unnamed, victims of racial violence make very real the horror and the revulsion that each of us as Americans must face as part of our collective past. Which is the point of the project.

"It's a history that we often ignore and a history that we often feel only happened in the south," said Kunkel, explaining the project to a visitor during Salmon Festival. "And yet the KKK was throughout the nation and the only place lynchings didn't occur in this country was in the northeast. But what we have the opportunity to do is take that injustice and participate in healing it."

The finished quilts will become part of a traveling art exhibit that will include a curriculum that will help provide a community engagement and conversation. "That is the key," says Kunkel, "that we remember and have dialog around social justice issues. And this is one way to do it."

You may now be asking yourself, "What exactly is lynching?" Although most often associated with hanging, lynching is actually described as the practice of taking the law into one's own hands and killing someone in punishment for a real or presumed crime. The murder can take almost any form. It occurred in the United States chiefly from the late 18th century through the 1960s. Only rarely were lynchers punished, or even arrested, for their crimes.

"Everyone engages in this so differently," said Kunkel about the project. Kunkel says

the response that she has received in Vernonia with the project has been mixed. "That's to be expected. Because it's a social proactive conversation that is really difficult," says Kunkel. "It's something that physically impacts people. Some people have gotten extremely upset, wondering who this is coming into the community and who is suggesting these kinds of conversations. But there has been a real warm reception as well. It's a very personal issue."

I observed Kunkel as she spent almost ten minutes with a visitor explaining the concept behind the project and how and why people might choose to participate. The person asked numerous questions and then ended up walking away without writing anything on the fabric. "A good amount of folks do participate in that way, just observing or asking questions--and everyone is completely welcome," says Kunkel. "It's not about suggesting that everyone must write a name. But there are many people who are pleased to go up and write on it."

Kunkel is unsure how the Vernonia community will engage with the project. She would like to be able to take it into the schools here. "It is part of our history," says Kunkel, who is caucasian. "It's my people who have done these things, so I feel that I need to participate."

Kunkel says that part of the motivation for a project like this is to look deep within ourselves and our history and own up to what has occurred and to take responsibility. "It's easy sometimes to decipher what is going on somewhere else than it is to talk about what has gone on here. This project suggests that maybe we aren't acknowledging what we've done, not even creating an environment for that conversation to happen. In school curriculums they are much more willing to deal with the social injustice that happened in Nazi Germany as opposed to bringing this subject into the curriculum. But this subject, I believe, is much more relevant for us here in America."

For more information about Memoria: In Progress, you can contact Marilyn Michele Kunkel at marilynmichelek@gmail.com.