

## Calamitrees

BY SALLY HELLER

It was Sunday morning, before the storm. I woke by 6, clicked on the TV, and there it was: a perfect compact mass, a category 5 hurricane, hovering above our coastline. I make it a rule never to evacuate, but I was feeling ambivalent. By 9 A.M., though, leaving was mandatory, and within the hour, my 14-year-old daughter, Isabelle, and our large orange tabby, JonTom, were in the car with two days' worth of clothes and our cell phones. We were heading for Athens, Ga., where my sister's sister-in-law had invited us to stay.

It took three hours to reach a town that is usually 45 minutes away. All the gas stations were closed, and I thought of *War of the Worlds* . . . the emptying of a city, the panic at being starved of any amenities—and then necessities. I needed to use the restroom, so we stopped at a gas station. A lot of cars were there, but everything was closed. I walked out back to use the vacant lot, and there were a hundred people relieving themselves behind the tallest weeds they could find. Then I sensed how bad this storm could be.

I began to think about a show I had scheduled in three weeks at Montserrat College in Beverly, Mass. As the car crept along, I kept my mind occupied with ideas of how I would pack, sort and ship the work, and how the students would help me install. Coincidentally, last May I had titled the show "Calamitrees."

By 10 P.M., weary and hungry, we arrived in Tuscaloosa, Ala. Every motel was filled with evacuees; they lounged by the kidney-shaped pools with ice chests full of beer, barbecuing on little grills. I felt envious. We continued further north to Birmingham. The cell phone had died, and my credit card didn't work, so we turned over our last \$85 for a mildewy room at the Fairfield Inn, sneaking JonTom in in the suitcase.

On Monday morning, after another five hours on the road, we reached Athens and pulled into the driveway in a lush green subdivision. The pristine grounds reminded me of a nursing home. I welcomed that. Huge platters of food were dropped off daily for the refugees, and as we drank wine, ate, swam and slept, we waited for the signal to return home. New Orleans, we were told, did not suffer a direct hit. But early Tuesday the levees broke, and as we watched the news, the vastness of the disaster became real. Isabelle was picked up by her father and taken to live with him in North Carolina. The cat hid under the pillows. My parents were nowhere to be found. They turned up three days later, having spent one night on the concrete floor of a Baton Rouge shelter. It had been their 52nd wedding anniversary.

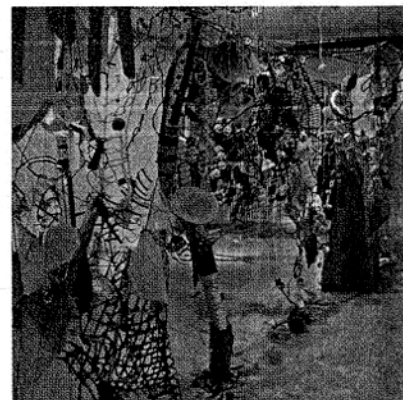
I thought again about my exhibition. I no longer had my daughter, my home or my job. I couldn't get back to ship the work. Overwhelmed, I didn't see how I could put the show together. After waiting my turn to use my little nephew's computer (the screensaver showed half-nude models), I found an e-mail from the curator at Montserrat College, Leonie Bradbury, who wrote, "How are you and your family? We are concerned." Doubts suddenly gone, I wrote back, "We are OK and I'm still planning to do the show." (She told me later she had been

hugely relieved). I realized that this exhibition had become the only certainty in a world of unknowns.

After a week in Athens, it was on to Dallas, where apartments had been found for my extended family. The seaside town of Beverly was looking better and better. I wanted out of the tragedy-laden and sweltering South. Leonie and I had agreed that since I couldn't ship any work, I would do a new installation with the Montserrat students, and we would organize the materials on-site. I had several boxes of materials left over from an ongoing installation at DePauw University, and those were shipped east from Indiana. I began to consider how the new piece might convey the psychological aspects of the storm as well as the physical ones. Words like "dislocation," "displacement" and "entrapment" kept surfacing in my brain. "Calamitrees" suggested a topsy-turvy landscape about to combust. I envisioned a curtain of detritus whose broad weblike fabric would be penetrated by fallen trees, the curtain to act as a fragile filter that traps debris, the netting to entangle us in its expanding presence.

Beverly felt like Nirvana after Dallas. I was given a lovely apartment in an old Victorian house three blocks from the ocean. After we purchased materials (pipes, wires, chains, plastic orange webbing) from Home Depot, we laid out everything on long tables in the gallery. The students became absorbed in fashioning vines, flowers and the curtainlike structure from the hardware. DePauw had sent colorful feathers, yarn, chenille stems and jars of little plastic musclemen (shaped to perch on the edge of cocktail glasses) found at the "girls' night out" counter in an Indiana thrift store.

I look back and realize that the radically scattered aspect of "Calamitrees" was intended to capture the violent disorganization inflicted by the storm. The tenuous quality of the suspended trees and webbed curtain evokes the vulnerability of the landscape. But amid the chaos of the installation we "planted" trees made of plastic drainage pipe covered in shiny contact paper—a sign of hope that despite this choked entanglement, new growth will prevail.



Sally Heller's installation "Calamitrees," 2005; at the 301 Gallery, Montserrat College, Beverly, Mass.

Author: Sally Heller is an artist based in New Orleans. Her installation "Calamitrees" is on view Sept. 23-Nov. 5 in the 301 Gallery at Montserrat College in Beverly, Mass. "Sally Heller: Material Minutiae" is at the Peeler Center of DePauw University in Greencastle, Ind., through Dec. 4.