

## THE ADVOCATE

Baton Rouge, LA

Sunday, September 11, 2011



**Paintings show artist's view of New York City before and after 9/11**

## Art from tragedy

The words are just that - words that add up to a conversation built on memory.

Until she presents the key.

The key that once unlocked the heavy doors on the 91st floor of the World Trade Center's North Tower behind which were housed paintings signed "Karin Batten." There Batten looked out over the city, transferring what she saw to canvas. The proximity offered a different view of Manhattan's skyline.

Which was what Batten was there to paint - the skyline.

The floor was open, forming a giant room. She and 13 other artists were given free rein to create for six months.

She was late getting there on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

“I had moved, and I went to change my address at the voter’s registration office that morning,” she said. “That kind of thing always takes a long time.”

As frustrated as she may have been when leaving the government office, her mood quickly changed when she realized something wasn’t right.

Something had happened to make New Yorkers pause. The pause quickly turned into chaos. People were running opposite Batten’s direction.

They were scared, running for their lives as smoke billowed from what she would soon learn was the North Tower’s 92nd floor. That’s where the first plane hit.

Batten would have been working on the floor just below it had she not stopped along the way. But she did stop, and there she stood, looking upward, key in hand.

Just as it’s in her hand at this moment in the West Baton Rouge Museum’s education room. She’ll later show it to an audience gathered to hear her talk about her experiences, but she places it on a table for now.

Funny how a single, small object can have such a big impact. Looking at this key is like being punched in the stomach.

You know what it once unlocked. Now you realize what it represents. You stare at it, heart pounding, as if looking at a ghost.

“Only one of the artists in our group died that day,” Batten said, her voice jarring her listener back to the present. “He was a sculptor, and he had been doing some work there the night before. A video artist was also working that night, and he tried to get the sculptor to go home, but the sculptor said no. So, the video artist went home, and the sculptor spent the night there.”

When the plane hit the floor above him, there was no time to escape. There was no time for anything. The sculptor was gone in an instant.

As was Batten’s work. Her 17 New York skyline paintings now hanging in the West Baton Rouge Museum’s gallery were created after the attacks that are now simply called 9/11.

The paintings are part of the museum’s exhibit Cathartic Art: Remembering September 11, commemorating the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on New York and Arlington, Va., and the plane that crashed into a field near Shanksville, Pa.

The museum put out a nationwide call for art entries to this show in the spring. Artists submitted pieces of art expressing their personal reflections on the tragic events that unfolded on Sept. 11, 2001.

The museum is also hosting a program honoring first responders at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 11. The reception coincides with the exhibit and also commemorates the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. A screening of the 2006 film *World Trade Center* will follow the reception.

Though Batten's paintings also hang in the gallery, her work is a separate exhibit within the exhibit. Visitors can see New York through her eyes, how it appeared before 9/11, then after.

They see Batten's view of the city from the 91st floor in the World Trade Center's North Tower. They look through the windows in that vast room unlocked by the key quietly placed on the table in front of her.

True, her paintings were destroyed that day, but Batten also works from photographs. She'd taken plenty from the 91st floor, and many of those photos were in her home.

So, she began painting a second set, those depicting the city as seen from the North Tower followed by those depicting the skyline without the Twin Towers.

Batten was among 14 artists awarded grants by The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council for a six-month residency in the North Tower. Silverstein Real Estate of New York had recently purchased the 91st and 92nd floors but not yet started moving in its offices.

The floor was wide open, the space unused at the time, and Silverstein agreed to let the artists use the space. There was plenty of room to produce work, along with panoramic views for inspiration.

"It was amazing," Batten said. "Sometimes, you were in the clouds, and you would feel like a bird. The space had incredible views on the east, north and west. We had to go to the 92nd floor to see the south view."

There also were times when working conditions weren't so ideal.

"I also went there at night," she said. "The space was a little scary at night with only two light bulbs hanging down, but there was another artist working there at night, so we were always happy to see each other. The building also swayed in storms, and that was scary."

Batten remembers having to show her World Trade Center identification card each time she entered the building, a card she now places on the table next to the key.

She also remembers having to take two elevators to reach her perch on the 91st floor. The first elevator stopped at the 71st. The second shot up the rest of the way.

Still, it's an opportunity Batten treasures, one that perfectly matched her work.

Batten is a native of Hamburg, Germany. She moved from the San Francisco area to New York in the 1970s, where she attended the Parsons School of Design. Her interest in aerial landscapes began while residing in California.

"The intersecting fields were interesting when looking at them from above," she said.

Her series of aerial paintings began when she took photos of the city from an airplane in 1993 on a trip to visit her family in Germany. Batten considered the aerial views a challenge. Her work in the World Trade Center plays on the light and how it falls on the city.

Just as the key now unlocks a door that is nonexistent, Batten's paintings present a cityscape that will never again be seen from that particular viewpoint.

Her painting, "St. Paul," is probably one of the most haunting, taking in the city not from an aerial viewpoint but one that peers directly into the streets and on rooftops of neighboring skyscrapers.

It's here where you're standing next to Batten, peering at daily New York life from the 91st floor - a life that was changed in a matter of minutes.

For Batten, those minutes began at 7:40 a.m. on Sept. 11, 2001, when she sent her 13-year-old son to school. This is a significant fact in itself, because the school was located in a building that stood diagonally across from the World Trade Center.

Batten and her son had just moved to Westbeth, a housing complex for artists in The Village, about a mile from the Twin Towers. Lower Manhattan could be confusing at times, especially for a kid, so Batten always told her son to use the towers as a compass when going downtown.

Primaries for the New York mayoral election, meantime, were on the horizon, and Batten knew she would have to fill out change of address forms at the registrar's office to be eligible to vote. A Tuesday morning seemed as good a time as any.

That's the day on which Sept. 11 fell in 2001. Batten walked to the governmental office with no illusions of getting out quickly. She knew people would be standing in line. The task would take a while.

Frustrating, right?

Batten's son was barely a block away from the towers. Batten was probably less than a mile away.

They, like most Americans, were going through their daily routines when 19 al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four passenger jets for a suicide mission that would crash two of the planes into the Twin Towers in New York City and one into the Pentagon in Arlington, Va.

The fourth plane, United Airlines Flight 93, went down in a field near Shanksville, Pa., when passengers overpowered the terrorists. That flight also was intended for a target in Washington, D.C.

The first plane crashed into the 92nd floor of the North Tower at 8:46 a.m., just before Batten left the registrar's office. Gray smoke filled the sky.

People didn't seem to register exactly what was happening at first.

"I asked a man what was happening, and he said, 'Oh, the terrorists are at it again,'" she said. "After the 1993 bomb at the Twin Towers, people just weren't alarmed."

But the scene quickly changed. A plane crashed into the South Tower, and crowds had begun pouring out of the buildings. People began running in the street, and sirens were sounding from every direction.

Batten was supposed to meet one of her fellow Westbeth resident artists in the studio that morning. The artist was from Scotland, and she had already begun her ascent to the 91st floor when the first plane struck.

"It took her 45 minutes, but she made it down the stairs and out of the building," Batten said. "She could not talk. She was not the same after that."

Batten now pushes the key aside to make room for a photo album. She opens the cover to reveal the photographs she took that day.

Brown smoke billows into the streets. Her nose crinkles as she recalls the chemical odor.

People are running, and figures emerge from the towers' upper floors in the distance.

"Those are the people," she said, pointing to the figures. "They were the ones jumping."

Batten had made it to her son's school by that time. She had no time to think, no time to be grateful for the detour she took to the registrar's office that morning. No, the only thought was of her son's proximity to the World Trade Center. She had to find him.

“I was worried about him,” she said. “I made it to the school, and I stood with the students. When I got my son, we ran with the students to Battery Park, because we thought the Twin Towers would topple.”

But they crumbled instead, and some of the students couldn't help but wonder if their parents were inside.

“One boy's mother had flown to Boston that morning, and he didn't know it,” Batten said. “She would have been working in the Twin Towers that morning if she hadn't made that trip.”

Some of the school children were able to locate their parents that day. Others simply were stranded. Those were the ones Batten took into her home for the afternoon until family members could be contacted.

Roadways in the stretch between the Empire State Building and Battery Park were closed after that. Batten had to show her identification when going to and from her home.

The chemical smell only compounded with the passing days.

Batten glances at the key. Unlocking the doors was easy enough, but pushing them open was a different matter.

“They were big, heavy, metal doors,” she said. “I couldn't get them open unless I had another person to help me. We were told afterward that if the doors weren't so heavy and that people could have gotten out, a lot more would have been saved. But the fire from the crashes sealed them shut.”

Batten looks back now and counts her blessings. But she also looks back and sees how 9/11 changed her, too.

Months passed before she stepped into a studio. Most of the paintings hanging in the West Baton Rouge Museum were painted between 2002 and 2005, the post-9/11 views from the vantage point of a Brooklyn studio overlooking the city.

Skies are filled with brilliant color in these scenes, but the cityscapes, though filled with life, are barren. The Twin Towers' absence generates a sense of trauma mixed with gradual recovery.

This was the biggest lesson Batten had to learn - to recover.

“I learned that life goes on, and you really have to focus on the moment and live in the moment, because you can't predict the future,” she said. “I just tried to get my emotions out in the paintings.”

Those paintings have since shown throughout the nation and have been hanging in the West Baton Rouge Museum since July.

Meanwhile, Batten has followed her own advice - she's moved, painting new aerial views, approaching them in a different style by using color blocks.

The new paintings are bright, happy, hopeful. Batten doesn't take her good fortune for granted.

And she clutches the key to her memories so she'll never forget it.