

The New York Times

Uprooted in the Attacks, Now Planted in Bronze

By RANDY KENNEDY

QUAKERTOWN, Pa. — As the fourth anniversary of the World Trade Center attack approaches and concrete plans for ground zero seem to come and go like tourist buses, it can often seem as if the void there will never be filled.

But over the last several months, far from the political battles, an artist and a team of assistants have been working in a hangarlike studio here, creating an unusual, sprawling sculpture that will be installed and dedicated near ground zero on Sept. 11, becoming the first substantial permanent memorial in the area.

The bronze sculpture will be an eerily lifelike re-creation of the stump and roots of a sycamore tree that grew for more than 70 years in the churchyard of St. Paul's Chapel. The tree became a potent symbol of sacrifice after 9/11, when it was broken by the blast from the collapsing towers and helped to shield the church from damage. The work will sit at the head of Wall Street on Broadway, in a courtyard of Trinity Church, the Episcopal parish that operates St. Paul's. It will soar 18 feet into the air and spread more than 25 feet across the courtyard, and the tens of thousands of people who visit the ground zero area every week will be able to walk through its undulating root branches.

"This sculpture is not intended as a memorial, just as an artwork," said Steve Tobin, the artist, who came up with the idea for the project in the weeks after the attack, when he read about the sycamore. "But I think this work is going to embody 9/11 for a lot of people."

Mr. Tobin, whose sculptures have been shown at the American Museum of Natural History and the American Craft Museum, first approached Trinity Church officials with the idea soon after 9/11. But he and his partner, Kathleen Rogers, who promotes his work and helps arrange his exhibitions, met with little



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Steve Tobin is working on a re-creation of a tree that fell on 9/11.

enthusiasm, in part because St. Paul's Chapel, which is across the street from the World Trade Center site on Church Street, had become a de facto dormitory and relief center for rescue workers. The chapel and its parent church were both overwhelmed with the new role they had been thrust into.

"At one point they actually said, 'Don't ever call here again,'" Ms. Rogers recalled, laughing. "And I'm a very polite person." She is also a persistent person, but over the subsequent two years, unsure what had become of the tree and its excavated roots and with no word from the church, she and Mr. Tobin "had pretty much given up," she said. In the spring of 2004, the church named a new rector, the Rev. Dr. James H. Cooper. He gave the project another

Continued on Page 5



Librado Romero/The New York Times

"This sculpture is not intended as a memorial, just as an artwork," said the artist Steve Tobin, at work outside his studio in Quakertown, Pa.

Uprooted in the Attacks, Now Memorialized in Bronze

Continued From First Arts Page

look and quickly embraced it, largely, he said, because he believed the sculpture would be a powerful cynosure, embodying religious sentiment without being an overtly religious symbol.

"There was a universal appeal to us in the nature of the work," he said. "Our hope was that it would let people look in both directions — back, to honor those who died, but then as a root that it would also be an encouragement that something is going to grow from it."

Dr. Cooper allowed Mr. Tobin to borrow the 600-plus-pound stump and its remaining roots last July and truck them to his Bucks County studio to begin casting.

In an interview in the cavernous studio, stocked with years of his work, Mr. Tobin, 48, with intense eyes and long hair tied back in a ponytail, described himself as a kind of art-world outlier, who never takes commissions and has little to do with the contemporary gallery scene. He said he also saw himself as a traditionalist, who looks more to Michelangelo and Rodin than to contemporary sculptors for inspiration.

Mr. Tobin is paying for the entire project. He first considered trying to raise the money, he said, but decided that it would take too long. So he took out a home equity loan to pay for everything: bronze, foundry costs, salaries for 10 assistants, transportation for the stump. He estimates that the project will cost \$330,000 and almost 20,000 hours of labor before the piece, weighing in at 8,000 pounds, is done.

"The function for me of roots is to show the power of the unseen," he said. "And on 9/11 we found out about the power of all of our unseen con-



John Marshall Mantel for The New York Times

The sculpture will sit in a courtyard of Trinity Church near Ground Zero.

nections, the things that nurture us that are hidden below the surface."

Mr. Tobin is probably best known for his root sculptures, which are cast in bronze and then given a wood-like patina. But he has made many works that try to imitate nature with an almost photorealist dedication: sculptures from casts of the monumental termite hills found in Ghana; life-size immobile waterfalls made of glass; replicas of hidden patches of forest floor.

"My objective is to redirect our attention back to the life of nature," he

said. "This project really lines up with my work, trying to blend art and artifact."

In the case of the sycamore, Mr. Tobin had to use a more intricate casting process to avoid damaging the original stump and its remaining roots, which he later had treated for preservation and sent back to New York. It is now on display at the site at Trinity Church where the sculpture is to sit, but will be returned to the churchyard at St. Paul's, the oldest public building in continuous use in Manhattan. George Washington

worshiped there after his inauguration in 1789.

On a recent stormy day, the largest part of the project — the cast-bronze stump, with the main divisions of the root sticking out below — sat in a field outside his studio, awaiting the hundreds of branches that are still to be added, some tapering down to tendrils as thin as an inch. The faithfulness to the original stump will extend even to a rendering of a chainsaw gash, and will include cast pieces of rock, brick and pipe that were entwined in the roots when it was pulled up. When the casting and welding are complete, a life-like patina composed of dirt from the site and from the stump's roots will be added, he said. The final effect will be slightly red and bloodlike, not to signify bloodshed but rather to remind viewers that the sculpture represents what was once a living thing.

The finished piece will be so heavy and sprawling that Mr. Tobin has not yet figured out how he will transport it into the city. "I may have to take it apart, or maybe we're going to have to use a helicopter," he said.

Linda Hanick, the vice president of communications for Trinity and St. Paul's, said that last year alone 1.8 million people visited the two churches, many on pilgrimages to ground zero. St. Paul's has created two exhibitions that recount its role in the aftermath of the attacks and that have become very popular with visitors.

But Ms. Hanick said that St. Paul's was looking forward to having a kind of visual anchor that would not only tie the two churches together but also help tell visitors the story of 9/11 through art.

"They're looking for a way to put the event into context," she said. "And they get here and all they find mostly is chain-link fences."