



Every Breath You Take, 2009, crepe myrtle, steel, wood, mixed fibers, corn soda ceramic, paint, thread, 146 x 93 x 104 in. detail by artist Sherry Owens. Owens' exhibit, 'Fabric of Life,' will be on display at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas June 10 through Sept. 10, 2017.

Photo provided by Sherry Owens

## **Artist Sherry Owens' work tells the stories of nature**

By Tim Collins

In early April, the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies announced two-thirds of Australia's Great Coral Reef had been bleached because of rising ocean temperatures, which killed off the coral.

The rising temperatures have been widely attributed to the burning of fossil fuels — oil, coal and natural. If we don't act now, a former director of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority told the Guardian in April, the Great Barrier Reef may be lost.

That is why Dallas-based artist Sherry Owens' work, which will be on display at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas from Saturday through Sept. 10, is focused

on telling environmentally focused stories, she said. The goal is to spread awareness.

“Really the whole show is all about the environment,” she said. “It’s not like I have all the answers, I’m just trying to make people more aware of the environment, how it’s changing and what’s going on. (The goal is to) just to get people to think about it more, maybe think of ways that we can help, because we want to take care of our planet. It’s the only one we have.”



A Little Time in the Shade, 2017, crepe myrtle, 46-1/2 x 18-1/2 x 9-3/8 in. by Sherry Owens. Owens' exhibit, 'Fabric of Life,' will be on display at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas June 10 through Sept. 10, 2017.

Photo provided by Sherry Owens

AMSET will host an opening reception, June 16, 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., featuring a gallery talk by Sherry Owens, hors d'oeuvres by Two Magnolias and an open bar.

Also on display Saturday through Sept. 10 will be “FRESH: Recent Acquisitions,” an exhibition focusing on works recently acquired by AMSET from more than 15 different artists.

Owens said her exhibition, “Fabric of Life,” is about how our environment touches every aspect of our lives, like fabric. Her work employs two primary materials — crepe myrtle, a deciduous tree known for its bright red flowers and smooth wood, and bronze. She said she often gets tips on where to find the best crepe myrtle wood from friends in Dallas.

“I have friends that will call me and say, ‘Sherry, there’s a pile of crepe myrtle at the corner and such-and-such,’ and if I can get there before the city does, then I can rummage through and select what I want,” she said. “A lot of times, too, people will have landscape companies come in. They’ll cut down trees and then they’ll bring a chipper with them, and they’ll throw them in the chipper before I can even get to them, so I will lose a lot of material that way.”



Drought, 2010, bronze (unique), 52 x 84-1/2 x 45 in. detail by artist Sherry Owens. Owens' exhibit, 'Fabric of Life,' will be on display at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas June 10 through Sept. 10, 2017.

Photo provided by Sherry Owens



Not all of her wood is found, however. Some of it is cut by the artist herself. Owens said amateur landscapers often prune the trees, butchering the plant, resulting in what is referred to as “Crepe Murder.” For this reason, Owens said she prefers to cut the wood with a chainsaw.



An Ocean Between Us, 2008, crepe myrtle, dye, wax, steel, paint, 113-1/2 x 129 x 27 in. by artist Sherry Owens. Owens' exhibit, 'Fabric of Life,' will be on display at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas June 10 through Sept. 10, 2017. Photo provided by Sherry Owens

“Sometimes people will call me and say, ‘Hey, I’m building this deck outside and I’ve got these two big crepe myrtles, do you want them?’ and I’m like, ‘Well, can’t you just build the deck around them? Do you have to cut the trees down?’” she said. “So I’ll go with my chainsaw and I’ll cut them down, and that’s when I get to decide where I want to cut them rather than them getting chopped up into little small pieces.”

One aspect of wood-collecting involves the identification and extermination of vermin — wood ticks and wood lice that eat away at wood from the inside. For this reason, and to preserve the wood, Owens has a 20-foot by 8-foot by 8-foot

freezer on her property, in which she freezes crepe myrtle. Otherwise the wood develops little holes, she said.

“They’re just little bore worms,” she said. “A lot of African masks and pieces from Indonesia will have this, or anywhere there’s a lot of humidity, those perfect little round holes in wood. What that is, that’s an exit hole where that little bug left. What those worms and those bugs and beetles are doing on the inside, they’re eating — they’re chewing that wood up. I used to have a studio several years ago and I had wood everywhere, and when it was really quiet, you could hear those bugs in there eating.”

Owens often mixes crepe myrtle wood with bronze, as in “Twirling Like a Seed in the Wind,” a piece that was on display as part of AMSET’s 2013 self-portrait group exhibition. It consisted of bronze molds of Owens’ feet connected to a life-sized crepe myrtle body.

Owens also will build crepe myrtle structures and burn the wood while in a mold, which she then fills with bronze, creating bronze duplicates of her work. One exhibition, a public arts work at Love Field Airport in Dallas, consisted of seven 12-foot bronze trees. Models of these trees will be on display in AMSET’s educational gallery.



Hilmsen Walk, 2017, crepe myrtle, dye, wax, 24-3/8 x 24-1/8 x 5-1/8 in. by artist Sherry Owens. Owens' exhibit, 'Fabric of Life,' will be on display at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas June 10 through Sept. 10, 2017.

Photo provided by Sherry Owens

Owens said she hopes viewers of her exhibit are inspired to act on preserving the environment, including supporting conservation measures, reading environmental studies and donating to environment-focused organizations.

“Fabric touches us everywhere, just like nature does,” she said. “We wear fabric and fabric covers our furniture. I thought that title, “Fabric of Life,” would really cover everything.”

Sherry Owens, 'Fabric of Life'

When: Opening reception 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. June 16

Where: Art Museum of Southeast Texas, 500 Main St., Beaumont

Price: Free

Tim Collins is a freelance writer.