

Artist creates beauty from pruned limbs



“A lot of my work is about the environment and the loss of American prairie,” says artist Sherry Owens. This is her sculpture *Drought*. (Pete Lacker)

I wince when I see stately crape myrtles butchered into leafless, barren sticks. This is the season for crape murder, a phrase long used by arborists and horticulturists to describe the uneducated desecration of the ornamental tree that has been a part of the North Texas landscape for more than a century.

On the other hand, when Sherry Owens sees severed limbs piled high on the sidewalks of residential avenues, she smiles. And stops. The discarded branches and trunks, with their smooth, cinnamon-mottled bark, is the sculptor’s medium.

SMU-educated, Owens began her profession as a weaver, but she has been creating sculptures with crape myrtle wood for 25 years. “I’m really still a weaver,” she says, “only now I’m weaving with sticks.”



LEFT: Dallas artist Sherry Owens poses outside her studio in an industrial neighborhood that abuts the east side of the Trinity River levee. Behind her is only a portion of the crape myrtle trunks and limbs she has collected off Dallas' residential streets. (Jim Tuttle - Staff Photographer)

RIGHT: Sherry Owens reaps the benefits of landscapers and homeowners who wrongly top crape myrtle trees, a practice that arborists abhor. (Jim Tuttle - Staff Photographer)

Owens' nondescript studio in an industrial district that abuts the Trinity River levee is stacked almost to the ceiling with limbs.

Although the artist uses a chainsaw to cut down tree trunks to fit into the bed of her old pickup, she employs small pocket knives to remove the outer bark from every limb and twig before she begins to put together the form she envisions.

"It's all about the line. I look for sticks that are moving and turning. My pieces get really dense and chaotic."

Outside the studio is another tall pile of carefully stacked limbs. They are awaiting fumigation in a refrigerated trailer, a "reefer," adjacent to the pile. Every stick is

frozen to kill borers that might be present. It wouldn't do for a sculpture mounted above the fireplace in a patron's living room to start producing powdery dunes of sawdust as borers did their work.

Owens' pieces are sometimes left with the bark intact; for others, she uses a pneumatic die grinder to remove the outer layer of bark. The subsequent prep work is even more laborious. Owens carves away layers of bark until the sticks are the color of bones. The material might remain its natural tone or Owens might dye it red, black or any other color.

Her experience as a weaver and dyeing her raw materials informs how she colors wood. "The dye is transparent, so it reads as real wood. Paint is too opaque."

If a sculpture is to be cast in bronze, Owens still constructs the form with pieces of crape myrtle. She forms the sculpture in wood first, using tiny, hand-whittled pegs — also of crape myrtle — to hold the pieces together. "I want the viewer to see how the piece is constructed and held together," she says. "No two sticks are the same.

"It really is quite complicated and extremely time-consuming. But the end product lasts centuries. It's all very worth the effort."

Properly pruning crape myrtles

Although artist Sherry Owens relies on crape murderers for her art supplies, she has plenty of raw materials. The ornamental trees could use a hiatus from the disfiguring practice.

Garden author and radio personality Neil Sperry of McKinney was instrumental in creating the Crape Myrtle Trails in his hometown. About 15 miles of medians in McKinney have been planted with more than 4,000 crape myrtles. The 7-acre World Collection Park near Highway 121 and Stacy Road in southwest McKinney is planted with all known species and varieties of crape myrtles.

On the Crape Myrtle Trails of McKinney Foundation website (crapemyrtletrails.org), Sperry writes plainly: “A great percentage of the pruning done to crape myrtles annually is either unneeded or done incorrectly. What has taken nature years to produce, we can ruin in mere minutes through improper pruning.”

The website details how to choose, plant and grow crape myrtles in the landscape. It states seven ways to Sunday that topping is a mistake.

“It is singly the worst and most threatening practice in routine crape myrtle maintenance,” it reads.