

Delta Force

They call themselves the League of Jewish Carpenters, a tongue-in-cheek name for two guys who are making art, and deriving hope, out of something that New Orleans has a surplus of these days — debris

Laura Silver New Orleans

STILL SWADDLED IN BLUE tarps, and with FEMA emergency aid trailers dotting the landscape, New Orleans is a series of construction zones, where the devastation is undergoing perpetual repair. Nonetheless, a month after the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, with 2006's storm season nearing its official end, the Big Easy was tinged with a certain sense of hope.

Art plays a significant part in this rebirth. And in a city with a Jewish population of 6,200 (down from 10,000, pre-Katrina) and a proud history, it's not surprising that the movement to create art from debris has Jews in its avant-garde. The League of Jewish Carpenters isn't affiliated with any of the Crescent City's nine synagogues, hasn't been visited by the local mezuzah doctor, and doesn't go out of its way to eat at the re-opened and fully functioning Kosher Cajun New York Deli and Grocery, but it does embrace the spirit of hope and perseverance that characterizes this town, and one might say the Jewish people, too.

If it's a good deed to rebuild the diminished city and uplift its inhabitants, the League is beautifying the mitzvah by making lamps and wall sculptures that provide aesthetic satisfaction (and home décor) for the public. The artists aren't particularly knowledgeable in Torah or Gemara, and they don't incorporate the Star of David or Lion of Judah into their work, but at the heart of reconstituting trash from storm-destroyed neighborhoods is a commitment to honor the dead, represent communities that have been washed away and reflect on social injustice in a climate of rebirth.

"It feels like we're all breathing a sigh of relief," says local artist Skylar Fein. For a few days at the end of August, the forecast didn't look so rosy. "The five-day projection had Hurricane Gordon going right through Slidell, Louisiana — ground zero for



A SOFT SPOT FOR REJECTED THINGS: Adoptive New Orleans craftsmen Skylar Fein (left) and Adam Dowis have turned refuse from Katrina into art. Inset, Fein's design for the 'League's' flyer

Katrina. We had a half a day where everyone was looking at the National Weather Service website. We just lost it. Me included. 'It's the one-year anniversary, and we're going to be evacuated,' we thought. Then, eight hours later, the map changed completely."

Devastation still reigns — on both the physical and emotional planes. And while life has not returned to its pre-Katrina self and may never do so, New Orleans will always be fertile ground for artistic expression. That's where the League enters — a

casual partnership of two craftsmen, Fein and Adam Dowis, New York and Santa Fe natives, respectively, each of whom settled in New Orleans before Katrina. Today, they

pay homage to their adopted town with sculpture and other artworks made of found objects and storm debris, which they display and sell.

Fein, 37 and a graphic designer by profession, and his partner, Bryant Wilms, moved to New Orleans from Philadelphia six weeks before Katrina hit. They had intended to stay in their house in the Faubourg Marigny section of the city despite the warnings. Other locals feared lawlessness in a deserted post-storm environment. "Our neighbor came over with his handgun, saying we'd need it if we were planning to stay," he recalls. The pair evacuated by car at midnight,

just on the cusp of the storm, to a gay commune in rural Tennessee, where they lived for several months without in-door plumbing or heat, and returned to find their home destroyed. By this time last year, a distressed Fein, who with Wilms, had

managed to rent a shotgun apartment several streets away from their house, began creating collage-like compositions from discarded wooden planks as a coping mechanism, taking care to consider the juxtaposition of colors and textures. He scoured debris-laden streets for shingles, shutters and pieces of doorframes, and for "painted, exterior wood that was exposed to the weather for years."

The hunt yielded results that were





therapeutic as well as aesthetic. “I felt better when I was doing it than when I wasn’t,” says Fein, who spent the rest of his time getting resettled in the new apartment, and building new furniture to replace lost tables and shelves. Nonetheless, he didn’t rush the process. “I try to let the pieces of wood tell me who their neighbors should be,” he says. “When the pieces are done, there’s a synergy to them that wasn’t there before.”

In the months following Katrina, he churned out some three-dozen wooden wall compositions, each named for the streets where the parts were found. (All but one have since sold, mostly to local collectors, for \$200 to \$600 apiece.) Fein was working on his own, in a shed in his backyard, but not in total isolation. Unbeknownst to him, two blocks away, on St. Ferdinand Street, corner of Dauphine, Adam Dowis, a filmmaker, artist, mechanic and self-proclaimed fix-it guy, was making lamps out of bowling balls, cornbread pans, fan blades and other

objects culled from the curbsides of some of New Orleans’ hardest-hit areas.

Dowis, 41, moved to Faubourg Marigny six years ago, from Portland, Oregon, and spent half that time installing beams, joists, plumbing and walls in the two-story 1830s corner-store style house he bought, which now includes a loft apartment, a street-level restaurant he leases to someone else, workshop space for himself, and an attached one-room cottage known in local parlance as a “mother-in-law,” for the familial appendage who traditionally resided there. Before the storm, an older woman was renting the latter; she has since relocated to Houston.

On the eve of Katrina’s landfall, Dowis caught a ride in a friend’s car and evacuated to Baton Rouge, wearing only a tank top, shorts and flip-flops. He snuck back home

last October, although the National Guard was enforcing a curfew, to find his compound, as friends jokingly call it, intact except for a broken bedroom window. Later that fall, a new neighbor — none other than Bryant Wilms, Fein’s companion — inquired about renting the mother-in-law to start a gift shop and gallery. Dowis painted the little house tangerine and kiwi and rented it to Wilms, who opened his fair-trade boutique, Bazaar, last January.

For Dowis, whose artistic eye and pragmatic fix-it streak combine to often draw him to dumpsters and trash piles, the mass-scale debris was overwhelming and humbling. But it also presented an opportunity. Wilms first noticed Dowis’s lamps on display at a nearby café, and thought they would go well with Fein’s wooden compositions.

WHILE PREPARING FOR A JOINT exhibit of the two artists’ work last spring, Wilms caught sight of a “My boss is a Jewish carpenter” sticker (a Jesus reference not uncommon on the rear bumpers of cars in a city where neighborhoods are known as parishes). “I thought, ‘My landlord is a Jewish carpenter,’” remembers Wilms, a graphic designer-turned-entrepreneur whose keen sense of humor claims no Jewish lineage. He proposed “League of Jewish Carpenters” as a title for the joint art show, and the artists agreed. No special handshake, tasseled fez, code word or indoctrination ceremony were employed, but there was a smattering of fanfare all the same. The two-man “league” has a logo — an upside-down pair of pliers (like a Masons’ compass) beneath a hand in the split-finger mode of the Priestly Benediction — and a flyer rife with Ouija-board imagery and fanciful

typography, all designed by Fein, and used to promote the art show, which Wilms says was his most successful to date. What began largely as a vehicle for self-healing became a way to channel hopelessness and come to terms with the expansive wreckage.

Dowis is a whiz with blowtorches and power tools, but sets them aside when it comes to making lamps. “I like things to fit together — it’s sexier,” he says, motioning to a lamp in progress, whose shade is fashioned from tightly nested metal rings. He calls it a “*mensch*,” thanks to its rusty non-veneered surface and the fact that it was built without glue, nails or heavy machinery. “It’s just luck that makes it fit together. It

‘FITTING THINGS TOGETHER IS SEXIER’: ‘Daisy’ and ‘Pear’ (this page and opposite, respectively), two of the lamps Dowis has assembled from debris he collected

could easily *not* work, but it does. So you have to love it for working.” The lamps, he says, choose to go toward the light rather than the rubbish.

Neither member of the League is affiliated with a synagogue or any other formal Jewish community, though Fein did collect a one-time emergency assistance grant from the United Jewish Communities, through the local Federation, to Jewish residents in the wake of Katrina (Dowis didn’t know such a thing existed). Nonetheless, they both feel there are Biblical aspects to their work. “Jews don’t dismiss the uncontrollable parts of life,” says Dowis, alluding to a history of exile, persecution and perseverance, all themes brought to bear in his recycled lamp constructions.

Retooling trash as art is also a social statement, according to Fein. “Like all outsiders, we have a soft spot for things that have been rejected and taken to the curb,” he says, remembering the months after Katrina, when it was impossible to walk a straight line on his street because of the huge piles of detritus. The feeling of being overlooked has helped him hone his vision, and redefine his focus.

“First I thought that stuff was so ugly,” says Dowis of the debris he collected, “but I ended up loving it.” His inanimate constructions ooze humor and sexuality. For instance, in “Pear,” a voluptuous rubber sump pump float works as a switch, illuminating two light bulbs when it is raised between the arms of a Y-shaped piece of rusted piping. Dowis and Fein work independently, but their creations are often exhibited in tandem. In August, their works were seen at the “Art Is Garbage” show, “alongside goyim,” Fein jokes, at the Green Project, a local warehouse for recycled and salvaged building supplies, and in mid-October, their work went on display at the commercial Farrington-Smith gallery, which recently relocated to Saint Claude Avenue, in the Marigny, from the French Quarter. “As the city became fixed up, it became clear that that wasn’t the place to be,” says the gallery’s co-owner Scott Smith, who estimates that 200-300 people showed up for the recent Saturday night artists’ reception.

The League’s works have been finding their way into homes in the city and well beyond. Dowis has pieces on display in a show in Vicksburg, Mississippi, where he sought refuge with a friend during Hurricane Rita, and for sale at a Brooklyn shop called Cog & Pearl, which features artist-made accessories, housewares and art. But storm-ravaged artwork resonates most closest to home. Robert Herndon, a real estate developer, art collector and resident of the French Quarter, thought some of Dowis’s pieces were worthy of Julia Street, the city’s commercial-gallery district. He purchased “flowerking,” a floor lamp with a fan blade perched on top of a wiry metal stem, and also bought several of Fein’s compositions, which, he says, “evoke some sort of reaction in

everyone who sees them.”

It’s a gesture of encouragement for a town that’s all but devoid of its lifeblood. “We’ve lost almost everything, but the spirit, really,” says Herndon. “I think that’s going to carry us through. I see that in both these people’s work, even from the death and destruction inflicted upon us, they’re making new and wonderful things.” Scott Smith, who oversees the Marigny gallery with co-owners Adam and Amy Farrington, says Julia Street is intact, packed and back to normal, but “old school and high end,” and so not the most logical starting place for artists working in storm debris.

All the same, New Orleans is a city of divides. People find their bearings based on the river and the lake, making the traditional points of the compass somewhat moot. Racial divisions and physical boundaries run deep and the Jewish community, whose institutions and congregants are concentrated largely in the manicured parts of town and the suburb of Metairie, is not immune. All bus lines terminate at Canal Street, which separates the seedier neighborhoods of the French Quarter from the greener, tailored Garden District and Uptown neighborhoods near Tulane University and Audubon Park. The distinction isn’t lost on Dowis. “Uptown is where the professors and fancy people live; downtown is for service workers, artists and ne’er do wells,” he says, smiling approvingly. “Everything is in flux; everyone is egging each other on.”

Indeed, this fall marks a time of growth and flux for the League — not in increased membership, but in changes in focus and locale. Fein now makes silhouettes of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and George W. Bush from wooden slabs painted to look like signs advertising po-boys (French bread sandwiches stuffed with roast beef or other fillings); Dowis, who wanted a bigger workshop and more outdoor space, has spent the last six months renovating a flooded house with an expansive yard in the Bywater neighborhood, closer to the Lower Ninth. He recently moved in, and celebrated this and his 41st birthday with a housewarming party, featuring archery, badminton, two turkeys and heaps of mashed potatoes. “I was thankful to be alive another year and have friends left,” he says.

As for the League of Jewish Carpenters, “It will never die,” says Fein. T-shirts are in the works, but first he’s got to “finish all the presidents.”

