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Empty bank gives rise to financial art

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Before a Washington Mutual branch was demolished in Dallas, two local curators put up a financially-themed art show in the building. Christina Rees, one of the curators, talks with Kai Ryssdal about how it all came together.

TEXT OF INTERVIEW

Kai Ryssdal: Hundreds of banks have been closed by the government the past couple of years. One Washington Mutual branch office in Dallas, Texas, though, never even made it open. It's standing empty and being demolished this week. But this past weekend, before the bulldozers, two local art curators -- Christina Rees and Thomas Feulmer -- put together a show of financially-themed pieces. About 650 people showed up to check it out.

DEE NICHOLS: I was here last night for the opening. It was a turnout like you just don't expect to see, or I haven't seen in a long time for anything.

KATE HOLIDAY: There are so many buildings that are abandoned in the city landscapes, so this is part of a larger landscape.

DAVID DIBBLE: This doesn't do a whole lot for security, you know, that's what the bank is supposed to stand for, so obviously that was subverted.

That was Dee Nichols, Kate Holiday and David Dibble in Dallas this past weekend. Christina Rees joins me now to talk about the project. Christina, welcome to the program.

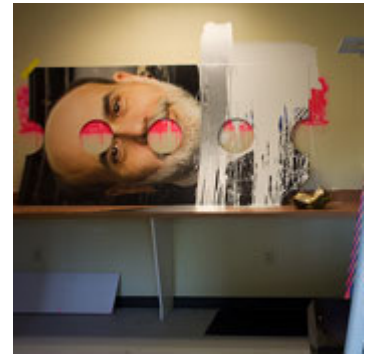
Christina Rees: Oh, thank you for having me.

Ryssdal: What is the story behind this building? It was supposed to be a bank, but that never happened.

REES: Washington Mutual was leasing the land from a friend of ours Leland Burk. They built the building, it was completed finished. The ATM machines were in, the furniture, the stations, everything. It was ready to go. The government seized WaMu. JPMorgan Chase who took on WaMU didn't want the building, so the building I think was just defaulted back to Leland Burk.

Ryssdal: Tell me about the art. Was it always going to be a financial art thing that you guys had in mind?

REES: We chose artists who we knew could really deal with that space in an interesting way and a sophisticated way. We didn't want things to be so literal. There were pieces that were more about cycles, or ownership, or responsibility, and some of them were a little bit more aggressive. But we just wanted them to have fun.



An artwork by Kevin Todora titled "Get Bent" uses the image of Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke. (Kevin Todora)



Washington Mutual signs are covered up at the building where the "Modern Ruin" art exhibition took place in Dallas.

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Ryssdal: We sent some folks out this weekend to get sound from this exhibition. We're going to play it for you, and I want you to walk us through it. It is, as everybody will hear, water dripping through into a bucket. So, drip, drip, drip the financial cycle, I don't know, help me out with that one.

REES: The show is called "Modern Ruin," and one of the artists Cam Schoepp, he put an irrigation system throughout the ceiling. There were seven buckets set throughout the bank itself, some even back into sort of back bathroom areas. And he basically created a leaky roof. He made it a ruin before it actually accrued that kind of damage.

Ryssdal: Not the ceiling leaking, it's just the banking system leaking, right?

REES: Well, you know, you can read that way, if you so choose. Yeah, absolutely.

Ryssdal: Obviously the tangible stuff is preserved but what about something like a leaky irrigation system? Is it gone out there into the great art diaspora along with this building that is about to be demolished?

REES: Yeah, I think most of the artists are hoping that the artwork will just go with the building. Some of the artwork is so site specific and installed in the building, using the building's materials that when the building is torn down, the art goes with it.

Ryssdal: Do you have a favorite?

REES: There was a really intense room that was a collaboration between two artists Jeff Zilm and Kevin Todora, and we called it the angry room. Somebody had come in prior to us and ripped the ATM machines out. And so if you walked into the lobby of the building, you could look through these big holes into this little room. I'm not saying that there was a lot of hostility toward the policies that led to the recession, but in this room there was. But there was a huge portrait of Ben Bernanke that had been completely desecrated, and there was a video of fire, and there was a big durian fruit that had been sliced opened, and it was stinking up the entire room. It's really anxious-making and kind of crazy.

Ryssdal: Now that you've dipped your toe into financial art, so to speak, any thoughts of it for the future for you?

REES: I'm a curator at Texas Christian University, and that's my full-time gig, but you know, one thing that is great about a recession -- one of the only things that's great about a recession -- is that it causes artists to become more resourceful, start to find new and interesting and creative ways to get their work out there. And there's a really good feeling in the air right now in this area. Some great work has come out of recessionary times. New York in the 1970s, that's still some of my favorite work that's ever been made. So maybe there is a silver lining here somewhere.

Ryssdal: Christina Rees. The exhibition this weekend in an abandoned Washington Mutual branch office in Dallas, Texas, was called "Modern Ruin." Christina, thanks a lot.

REES: Oh, thank you so much, I enjoyed it.



Art exhibit co-organizer Thomas Feulmer performs as a NASA astronaut in a borrowed Porsche.



This room in the bank was turned into an art piece by Kevin Todora and Jeff Zilm. Sound, video, film projection, sculpture, text and scents were all part of the installation.



Christina Rees