

Art:Design:Culture

# Glass

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**Lucy Lyon**

**"Sandy Hook Memorial"**  
**LewAllen Galleries**  
**Santa Fe**

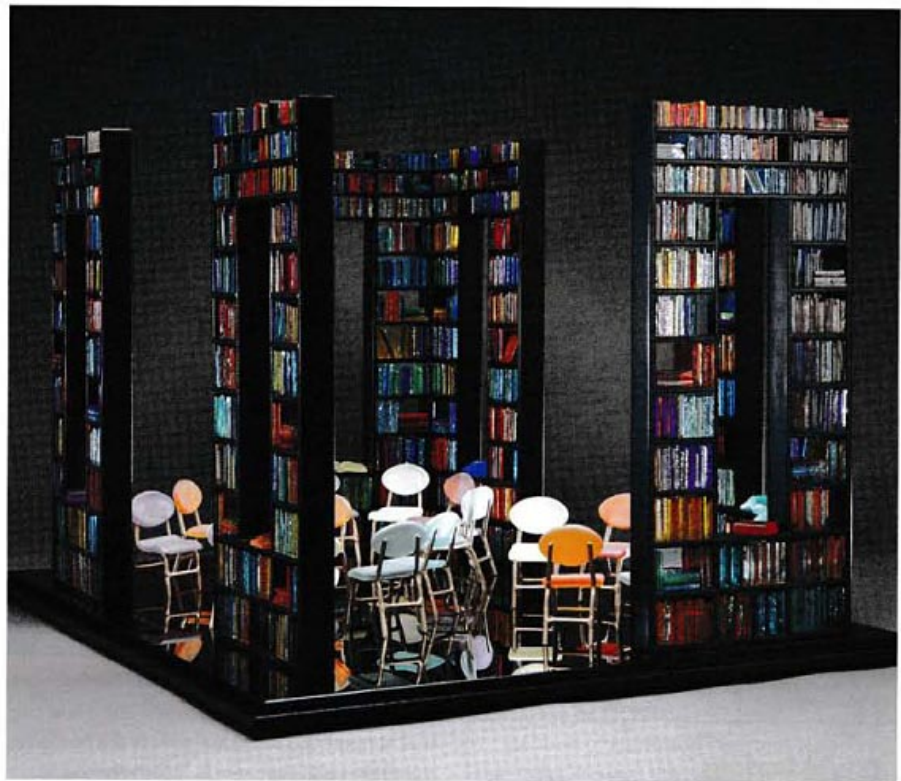
Do an image search for Lucy Lyon, and you'll find cast glass figures, often solitary. Even when they're not solitary, they often seem alone, such as when they're reading in the presence of another person. On her website, Lyon writes, "Much of my work has involved reading or libraries. These are places where one can be in a private space and in public simultaneously."

Do an image search for Sandy Hook Elementary School memorials, and you are overwhelmed. Beyond the well-known wooden angels on the hillside, there are memorial playgrounds, quilts, and scout projects. Maine sculptor Richard Gray's "Rock of Angels," commissioned by the owner of a granite company in Maine, is installed on church property near the now-razed school. The names of the children are inscribed in hearts, the teachers' names on the form of an angel. The Connecticut Education Association commissioned a memorial from Marilyn Parkinson Thrall, whose very literal bronze sculpture depicting a teacher reading to three children stands in the CEA lobby.

Like others, Donald Droppo, the longtime owner of a business based in Sandy Hook since 1845, felt strongly moved to do "something," and commissioned glass artist Lucy Lyon to create a Sandy Hook memorial. The resulting sculpture, displayed in March in Santa Fe, is small, quiet, inward, thoughtful, and is apt to last long enough to engage people who never knew the victims or their families.

Given the depth of the tragedy and the damage to both individuals and the community, a critical discussion of the memorial art seems irrelevant, but we know that it's not. One of the great lessons of the Vietnam Memorial was that what seemed at first to many as an outrageously cold abstraction wound up deeply moving the hearts of thousands. How memorial art is designed and made affects the way we mourn and the way we remember.

Approaching this commission, Lyon built on her past concerns and at the same time made a drastic break with her usual practice. Long accustomed to considering the intersection of public and private space, Lyon began with a subtle understanding of the nature of a memorial that addresses both personal and



communal heartbreak. Developing themes from her previous works—she has pieces installed in a public library and a university library—she began with a school library, a place where story, history, language, and knowledge are stored. Then, searching for a way to represent absence, Lyons set aside her decades-long commitment to figurative sculpture, rejecting figures, descriptions, and even names, adding only the date.

Six tall shelves full of small, book-like glass panels stand for the teachers. Twenty empty chairs, the backs and seats made of pastel-colored cast glass, fill the library floor. It's as if the children had disappeared and were now absorbed into the hundreds of brightly colored books on the shelves, contained and preserved in our collective memory.

The scale of the work is important. When I first saw it, it seemed like a maquette, a model of something that might later be constructed at a larger scale, but now I think it works best as it is. At roughly 33 by 26 by 20 inches, it's the size of a dollhouse, a familiar small structure that invites free imagination and play, and also suggests the age of the 20 children, all either 6 or 7 years old. The scale is intimate; you have to stoop over it, peer into it; you can think yourself into it, but you'll never actually be in it. You can't even be around it with more than a few people.

**Lucy Lyon, *Sandy Hook Memorial*, 2014. Cast glass, stained glass, bronze- and powder-coated aluminum. H 33 ½, W 26 ½, D 20 ½ in.**

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The medium turns out to be important, too. Lyon has made no attempt to quote ecclesiastical models, but stained glass has been used as a medium for memorials for centuries, and the colorful glass "books" together hint at reverence, like a slight fragrance of incense.

Lyon's work is successful because it doesn't describe the people and events or prescribe the viewer's response. Rather, it invites the viewer into the space to imagine what is absent, what is lost, to fill in the tragic blanks.

This work is not the grand public memorial that the community will need and that will eventually be installed. It's one of many smaller efforts that people feel compelled to contribute, in a wide range of individual responses, and it's a particularly effective one. For Lyon, this bold step may lead her in new directions.

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