



Stephen Paul Day: Untitled, 2005-06. Apothecary bottle, transparency, two-way mirror, Katrina rain water.

Artists and the Storm

BY MARIAN MCLELLAN

A RESPONSE TO KATRINA
Academy Gallery
SURVIVING THE STORM
The Contemporary Arts Center
New Orleans, LA
~

THE NEED TO remember and cherish has been very noticeable in New Orleans 2006. Since Katrina, people have awakened to the importance of life's every moment. In the days just after the storm, we were weighted down by a very huge question mark: how long before we'd return to our place in life and who would be in that life? Life was somewhere below sea level.

"Below sea level" are three words all New Orleans children learn by the time they are one. "Baby, you may only be one day old, but you are below sea level." Mama announces this not derogatorily but as a warning to the wise. The words, however, never hold as much water as a Pampers. Then, Katrina strikes, Pampers bursts, and every baby past voting age wishes he'd listened to Mama, at least once.

Who on earth or in heaven were our officials listening to when an entire city was allowed to go under? Why were the poor, the young, the old, the weak, the sick, allowed to perish? We call Katrina the largest natural disaster in a century, but it was a human disaster. The weapon of mass destruction was right here in America, in plain view, the weapon of ignorance. It is harsh to say such a thing, but we were ignorant, living under the belief that our government really was for the people.

Oddly, perhaps, is the fact that most New Orleanians are not chomping at the bit. Rather, most live each day kinder, treating one another with respect. So, what impact has Katrina had on the cultural side of town? Thankfully, sentimental filler has not been a side effect. On the contrary, even the most vapid of folk have risen to the need for lofty expression during a prolonged era of empty rhetoric. It's almost as though ordinary people needed a catastrophic jolt to shake them from the complacency of neglect brought on by the servitude of self. For sure, Katrina swept aside personal reverie and made public silent nightmare, forcing compassion out of hiding.



Auseklis Ozols: *Benedictine at Waveland*. O/C.

Factual circles have been the most obvious benefactors of this rebirth of brotherly/sisterly love. The local newspaper even became a better place. But what were galleries going to do with few folks around to make or buy Art? And besides, how much Art could a FEMA trailer hold? None of this really mattered, galleries did reopen with shows that were matter-of-fact, business-as-usual. Now, however, two exhibits have Katrina written all over them: Academy Gallery's "A Response to Katrina" and the Contemporary Arts Center's "Surviving the Hurricane: Katrina's Impact on New Orleans."

Academy's grouping of work is the cleaner of the two, crisp and sleek to a fault, while the CAC's could use a feather duster. Perhaps the Academy show appears so clean since most of the works are on loan from other local galleries. Also, many of the paintings, prints, drawings and sculpture are either abstract or of solitary figures that initially could relate to any time and place. But, I suppose the crouched and solitary female nudes in both Carol Preebles small charcoals and Saskia Ozols tiny etchings could be construed as representing

people's inability to face what had happened in Katrina's aftermath. Kim Bernadas' "Reverance" is another kneeling figure, made of fired clay.

Several photographers are included to give "A Response to Katrina" its documentary stance. Richard Sexton's austere "New Orleans Skyline" allows us a safe distance with a relatively unscathed view of the city. Mike Smith's "Remnants" is a color photograph of a damaged neighborhood with smiling skeleton duck-taped to a tree in the foreground. One of the more emotional photographs is Jonathan Traviesa's color "Untitled 2005 (Rescue)" that portrays some of the samaritans of Katrina as they carry the elderly and young through deep waters. In the foreground is a strong black man carrying a frail white woman, showing that it wasn't color that killed so many. It was misplaced trust.

Zack Smith's photographic series "Chalmette, LA" is bathed in orange while Victoria Ryan's black and white "Ben Franklin High School Bandroom" is a detail of flooded instruments. More telling it like it is can be seen in the paintings

of Billy Solatorio and Rolland Golden, though a few of the painters on view step outside the expected. Auseklis Ozols' "Benedictine at Waveland" is memorable for its ethereal illumination of a rustic beach following the nearly total devastation of the Gulf Coast. In Ozols' oil on canvas, Katrina emulated Christo by draping a white cloth from a broken treetop. Finally, Phil Sandusky captures moving daylight as it separates the viewer from the scene in "Houses Smashed into Each Other."

And then we proceed to the Contemporary Arts Center where Alan Gerson, town crier, has gathered the works of 32 New Orleans artists in "Surviving the Hurricane: Katrina's Impact on New Orleans Art." The intent is to call attention to the need for art restoration following Katrina. Gerson is included in the show since his own studio was partially submerged. Fittingly, his entry is "Deep Sea," a large oil on panel of brightly rendered sea creatures floating against a shallow backdrop of darkness. The painting looks unharmed though it does have the feel of an outmoded relic. Gerson is never at a loss for irony.

Each artwork in "Surviving the Hurricane" includes a placard with the artist's sentiments on the effect Katrina had on self and work. Some are more hopeful than others, while many express feelings of despair and uncertainty, sentiments experienced by all whose lives were disrupted. No matter if the reader is artist or window washer, some aspect must be restored. Leave it to Gerson to make such a pitch so subtly.

Some of the works at the CAC look not so much affected by Katrina as by time. It is out of gratitude for their unscathed appearance one imagines that the artists show these efforts while simultaneously expressing chagrin over their own exiles. Robert Warrens, Jeremy Jernegan, Audra Kahout, Mitchell Gaudet and Evert Witte offer pieces from years past, with statements of return or future accomplishments. Gaudet's cast and blown glass "Gator Bowl" resembles a fish bowl with two opposing gator heads inside as though the water is outside rather than in. More timely is Stephen Paul Day's conceptual "Untitled." It is simply a small apothecary bottle containing a transparency, two-way mirror, and Katrina rain water.

Jeffrey Cook's "Two Dolls, from Twelve Dolls from Buchenwald" is a pair of his rag dolls circa 1989. His entry is in tandem with his statement of a personal need to return to working smaller. The dolls still evoke sadness, loss, and homelessness. Seven years after being painted, Robin Pelligren's stark oil on canvas "Self Portrait with Gun" seems appropriate for its relationship to the many suicides due to Katrina. Here, subject matter surpasses implementation.

Sybylle Peretti's mixed media on glass "Silent Child" suggests the sadness and loss so many children feel since Katrina, while Jesscia Goldfinch's title "Heal X" carries more weight than its original cleverness. The chandelier spiral of pink-filled vials mimics the turning movement of the storm. Sandra Russell Clark's Katrina account is especially dramatic due to her studio/home being destroyed in Bay St. Louis. Only two photographs remained, those from her 2004 "In Search of Eden" series. Both soft focus, one shows a meandering

spillway. It's a peaceful view that contrasts with present conditions. Clark temporarily lives in New York and despite her great loss, the artist asserts that she will start anew with a series entitled "Set Adrift."

Aided and abetted by Katrina's wrathful hand, a few of the inclusions have actually improved in content. The night blue "Sky Chart" was the only artwork of Mary Jane Parker's to have been damaged since it was the only painting propped on the ground floor. No longer just a pretty diptych of solitary nudes, it is historical. Likewise, Dona Simons oil on canvas "Sea Nettles Drift to Sydney Bechet's Petite Fleur, Dr. Michael White, and Lara" was apparently a light blue Romantic whim featuring Bechet floating as in heaven above muses. Now, Katrina has peeled some of the paint to reveal physical proof of time and memory.

Other artists have acted as conduits for Katrina's reign. A traditional interpretation is found in Joseph Pearson's "Vacant Lot Full of Hope." Recalling an early William Eggleston, the oil on canvas painting depicts a little girl holding a small American flag before a sunlit wall bearing the words "Peace" and "Love." Less sentimental and looking like a Peter Max gone rustic is Herbert Kearney's "Treading Water," a crude charcoal on stiff brown paper of a face surrounded by strands of swirling hair. Perhaps the paper and charcoal were the only materials available to Kearney.

Bringing Katrina into our waking space has been accomplished best by Dawn Dedeaux in her installation "Open and Close: Four Elemental Guests." Dedeaux's home and studio were initially wrecked by Katrina and then finished-off after homeless drug-dependents set fire to her place near the Fairgrounds. Dedeaux has taken the mediums left by Katrina and arranged them into an altar of posterity. The wall of charred-black totems stand tall and foreboding over remnants of the artist's studio placed on the floor like boundaries of then and now.

The margin that defines haven and hell is as limited as the physical space of "Open and Close: Four Elemental Guests." America became a community overnight when New Orleans' tropical cover of lush trees and trailing vines opened-up to the world in exchange for the salvation of the misbegotten and the mainstream. New Orleans has always been a place to find one's soul. Most Americans have been at a loss long before Katrina, but it took the fury of Katrina to force us to realize that the loss was our communal soul. What better place to help the people find that soul than in New Orleans and in the art of New Orleans. □