

Opening speech by Rebecca Zilenziger, photographer of

New Orleans - City of Hope

When a decision was made to exhibit my work from New Orleans, I received my share of,

What are you, nuts? You're going to edit thousands of images down to 30, spend energy and time, personal funds on a tragic photographic essay, during a sad chapter in American history, that occurred almost 4 years ago, a time during which our president showed not one iota of real care or diplomatic tact, an exhibition of work on an island that can't even take care of its own people during an economic-almost-depression? Who needs that?

In short, yes and who needs that? We all do, especially now.

During the revisiting process I did ask myself what I hoped to achieve with the more than 3000 photographs taken on two separate trips to Louisiana in 2006 and 2007. One of the first questions was, what can I do differently with my visual data stash? What can I possibly bring home with me that countless and gifted photographers didn't already pillage and store on their Lexar cards? Books on the Katrina disaster have been published, beautiful books that sold within the careful structures of highly publicized gallery exhibitions. Making captivating photographs in New Orleans, post-Katrina was easy. There was enough color and twisted texture, messed up disaster wreckage everywhere we looked, enough to go around.

A car hovered over a swimming pool, a 16 wheeler lay dead on its side in the middle of a desolate and destroyed landscape, the residual stockpile from private lives were stacked before abandoned homes that often contained within them a horizontal line 11 feet from the floor where the water level had settled for weeks. The stench, still heavy and clinging to dripping clusters of peeling paint, as one moved from room to room the setting pretended the disguise of a contemporary architectural dig. The calendars, all open to August 2005, some still hanging on the walls, begged verification of this particular disaster; paper thin witnesses to a flooding, an evacuation and death. The sludge slowly receded and made room for various forms of mold. Wheelbarrows and windows taped and broken, traffic lights and signage pushed flat against the earth or missing altogether, fell under the notebook category of Visual Everyday and Normal. Everything was out the window, the baby, the bathwater and the kitchen sink.

This type of photojournalism only becomes interesting if it is organized and displayed to raise consciousness and funds for people who gave their lives, lost their lives and continue to live and give despite and in spite of devastating circumstances. Trying like hell every day on top of it all, New Orleanians worked very hard to get their children to school and keep their families safe, healthy and together; a full days labor, day after day. How many of us are blessed with good fortune and even that small, aforementioned and basic list of family fundamentals can be challenging on an average and good day? Many families could not bear the weight. They had been relocated all over the country. Mothers and fathers split, many elderly died from the stressful circumstances. Throw in a little treacherous hurricane, breaking levee system, massive flooding, a public humiliation as the nation watched the carpet and the curtain pulled simultaneously and ask yourself, how far would your spirits have taken you, for how long would your optimism and proud resiliency have kicked in and held? Or do you think you may have just emotionally tanked and moved on, never to return to your roots?

But they did come home. New Orleanians are back on their turf. Music filled rooms and crawfish boils are all over town. New Orleans is all about water. Water under the bridge. Like water off a ducks back, let it roll, wash, let it slide. I think they will always remember the floods, but maybe it's a lesson to go on living in a place even when it's hard, near impossible for some. Maybe that drive homeward, even if Home is flooding, happens when the place where you've lived for so long is worth it. There is an emotional and creative investment this town has made in its place, right where it is. I understand the passion for place, but now the question has to be asked:

Do we have the right to live below the water line?

Can the citizens of a city or state and the local and national governing bodies afford to protect lives in areas that will certainly flood again and again? Does the United States, the Netherlands or any coastal community in the world have the funds to adequately protect the citizens that continue to live in the wet and future flooded lands? Is there a way to live differently in areas where the water level is rising? Is eco-friendly construction enough? Are floating homes the only viable solution? How will design work? Will we congest our lakes and rivers with single-family homes and one day awake to the vanished beauty of a once and past tranquil oasis? Can we exchange acquired and used water space for an equal measurement of land returned to near Garden of Eden condition? What type of solutions can we afford to maintain?

It was recently brought to my attention that beyond the dramatic and biblical magnitude of floods there are obviously other kinds of danger zones all over the world related to fires and earthquakes, etc. This photo essay is but ONE story, one I chose. It was delivered to me as I sat at a table with a dear friend from New Orleans and he made alive the reality of Katrina in his city, his home. During that meal, the devastation was made real, effectively resounded in my desire to give beyond the confines of my everyday life, and I announced then and there, I was going to gut houses, I was going to take photos, I was going to make those photos serve a purpose. And I did. And I'm going back for follow through on my third trip this April. The intent of this exhibition is not to highlight an exceptional moment or disaster "type" or special efforts made by one person. The purpose of this exhibition is two fold. First, this work is asking you, how we will live and build in accordance to nature's REALITY, nature's shift and change and adaptation, nature's response to our former, tired and boring ways of living wastefully. What will be the new dream home? Gone are the days of personal wealth- fantasy manifestations of pomp and extreme ego driven waste and construction. I hope our new ideal has a little more to do with - get real, get elegant, get smart, get green, get reusable, get going.

The second driving question behind this project is wanting to know what cause you will choose to support and give your time and energy to beyond your children, your aging parents, your job. Will you pick up a shovel, a camera, a pen and check, will you help doctors or relief workers, will you paint a house? If you are able bodied and minded, watching the news with a degree of passion and heartfelt concern for your fellow individual is not enough. If you are volunteering already, thank you. If you are a college student wondering what to do with your spring break, consider volunteer work as an option, an interesting alternative to the very passé tradition of drinking in Miami and getting a tan. It feels good to volunteer and looks great on your bio.

Solid photojournalism inspires dialogue of the round table sort. So I invite you to let it begin this evening. Discuss your concerns for your island. Inform yourselves, find out the facts and see if there is room for your opinion in the newspapers, on the radio, in your classrooms. The problems borne from rising water levels aren't packing a suitcase and moving on. They will stay right where you live and they will make themselves known more audibly, more visually as time unfailingly progresses. What will your community's response to the inevitable environmental changes look like? How will we manifest our concerns and proactive solutions? How will your children feel if you don't get involved?

Let me see an exhibition on:

green/considerate/considered/eco-intelligent and cost-effective, user friendly home designs for Puerto Rico and the specific conditions found on this island

by the art, architectural, design programs from all over Puerto Rico and maybe from some of the other nearby islands. I want to see solar panels and wind harnesses and salt resistant, durable but light materials that let in the air and the light. And a personal request, please show me a very cool and integrated way to hang my laundry outside to dry in the sun and air so that it looks like a painting and less like a mistake.

Thank you for taking the time to come to this exhibition. It is a delight to share my work and receive feedback. It is a pleasure to see Casa Aboy alive and full of light and idea exchange. Casa Aboy and the Galería PL 900 have a long and interesting, elegant history. I am very honored to be a part of it. Thank you Lisa Ladner for making these upcoming exhibitions a reality.

Un abrazo fuerte para todos,

Rebecca Zilenziger

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