The New York Times

Ten Years After Katrina, New Orleans Museums Reckon With Recovery

By CAMERON SHAWAUG. 19, 2015

NEW ORLEANS — How well do you remember the last days of August 10 years ago? Asked that question, a 23-year-old New Orleanian writes of seeing a dead alligator on the highway, having nowhere to sleep and crying every night. This anonymous recollection, printed neatly on a card, is part of a growing number pinned to the basement walls of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art here.

As the 10-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and the federal levee failures draws near, the city of New Orleans will again make room to process its collective trauma, resilience and the work of rebuilding that continues. Some will turn to family, neighbors, friends; still others bars, churches and restaurant tables. How, too, can museums and contemporary art help people think critically and constructively about the post-Katrina decade?

Having lived in the city only five and a half years, I don't have these searing memories of my own, but their individual heat still burns the ears of anyone willing to listen. I came to the city as an arts writer, someone who wanted to hear and to look closely at the vibrant and vital art making happening among artist collectives, in museums, galleries and community centers, and on the streets every day. I ended up an editor, curator and organizer — as much a participant as an observer of art's function to help people draw meaning.

The three major visual arts venues in the city — the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art and the Contemporary Arts Center — have all timed exhibitions of living artists to coincide with the anniversary. Each show is distinct in its approach, its tone, and its way of visualizing the role of art and the idea of memorialization itself.

The New Orleans Museum of Art's exhibition "Ten Years Gone," is by far the most conceptual and the only one not to limit itself to artists from the region. Its power lies in its sense of abstraction, its unlikely pairings, its insistent underscoring of universal themes. A nuanced and emotionally sensitive show, it was nevertheless panned in The New Orleans Times-Picayune, in which the critic Doug MacCash lamented the absence of Katrina-specific imagery and called it "too orderly, dry and off target." His review inadvertently raises the question, whose target?

Organized by Russell Lord, the museum's curator of photographs, prints and drawings, the exhibition features in-depth bodies of work by six artists, three of whom have significant ties to New Orleans. "I wanted to ask the question, What do smart, visually engaged artists have to say, not about Hurricane Katrina, not about Sept. 11, not about any specific tragedy, but about the act of memorialization in general?" Mr. Lord said in an interview. Each successive body of work in "Ten Years Gone" complicates this question, perhaps none more so than a series of video vignettes by the Toronto artist **Spring Hurlbut.**

A detail from Spring Hurlbut's video piece "Airborne" (2008). Credit William Widmer for The New York Times

In "Airborne" (2008), Ms. **Hurlbut** wears a respirator mask as she releases cremated human remains, including those of her deceased father, into a blackened room. The only visual clues that these dancing particles are in fact ashes are the names that flash on screen before the opening of each new container. "Mary" is a big boisterous cloud that expands in every direction. "Trudy" is quick to rise and dissipate, but then lingers, kicking up in sporadic bursts. It's hard not to ascribe personalities to these improvisational performances, and in doing so the viewer is caught in an act of psychological projection, an inherently human vulnerability, like watching inkblots float into the ether.

This weightlessness is mirrored and multiplied by Christopher Saucedo's 10 works on paper, which each use milky linen pulp to outline the former World Trade Center towers like clouds against a cerulean sky. Mr. Saucedo lost his younger brother, a New York City firefighter, on Sept. 11, and the artist and his family later would lose their home to Hurricane Katrina.

Almost every work in "Ten Years Gone" straddles two worlds, whether that of the living and dead, as in Ms. **Hurlbut's** and Mr. Saucedo's pieces, or the equally precarious division of water and dry land in works by Isabelle Hayeur, Willie Birch and Dawn DeDeaux.

Ms. Hayeur's large-scale photographs, which line the museum's Great Hall, were shot with her camera partly submerged in waterways around Louisiana, Florida, New York and New Jersey.

Mr. Birch turned his eye to his own backyard in New Orleans's Seventh Ward after Katrina to observe the mounds of mud that crawfish made with their burrowing, ultimately casting the animals' conduits between worlds as bronze sculptures that gleam like fool's gold.

Ms. DeDeaux's "Water Markers," acrylic planks reflecting post-breach flood levels, are scattered throughout the museum's permanent collection, to toss their tall, rippling shadows on walls and floors. They are the only works in Mr. Lord's show to make direct visual reference to the floodwaters that cost the city thousands of lives and even more livelihoods, but they bear no resemblance to the images of a city underwater that inundated news reports and television screens 10 years ago.

Some observers have suggested that the lack of waterlines and wreckage in these exhibitions is evidence that New Orleans has "moved on"; but frankly, many haven't had that privilege, and thousands of others who arrived after 2005 have had altogether different entry points. Veiled in the polarizing criticisms of what type of imagery this anniversary warrants are urgent questions for the city. Who has the right to speak for New Orleans now? Whose vision defines its uneven and inequitable progress? And most fundamentally, in a city where the dead are propped up to observe their own funerals and loved ones dance along their caskets, can there possibly be a single, legitimate way to mourn the deaths or even celebrate the rebirths?

Questions like these greatly enrich the presentation of "Reverb: Past, Present, Future" at the Contemporary Arts Center, where the New York guest curator, Isolde Brielmaier, makes elegant visual sense of works by 38 artists selected from an open call — a dramatic contrast to Mr. Lord's tightly edited six. Between 2012 and 2015, the Contemporary Arts Center was without a staff curator, and in years past the reliance on open calls for local artists too often read as a fail-safe in a vacuum of curatorial vision. But here it's an effective and engrossing mechanism for summoning the collective conscience of the region.

The exhibition is anchored by monumental pieces such as Stephanie Patton's puffy warning, "It will happen when you least expect it," written in mattress quilting and upholstery foam. "The work is meant to be sad and funny," said Ms. Patton, who was born in New Orleans and now lives in Lafayette, La. "I didn't make it for the show or in response to Katrina," she continued. "I was thinking of all those moments when you don't know how to react and the sayings that are supposed to comfort just don't."

Many works, like Ms. Patton's, gain new significance in the anniversary context. Several have been shown previously in other venues in the city but here feel reborn. Sidonie Villere's "Bind" (2014), minimal porcelain globes wrapped in cord, gain the weightlessness of objects bobbing in water.

Carl Joe Williams's "70s Thug gets bitch slapped by his Mama" (2014), in which a painted television set plays a remixed episode of "Good Times," retained the sitcom's sense of levity when seen previously. Now, placed alongside second-line-parade photographs by Charles Lovell — and the invisible backdrop of a nationwide war on black bodies — Mr. Williams's once-funny appropriation of a matriarch "slapping some sense" into a young man reads as a do-or-die reality check and bitter reflection of the limited choices the "new New Orleans" provides too many of its native sons.

"Reverb" is not a particularly hopeful exhibition, but it is a serious survey of local art. Through it Ms. Brielmaier communicates just how considerably the events of the last 10 years have shaped the city's artists, and in doing so showcases many at their absolute best.

Across the street at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, tucked away in the museum's regular photography galleries, far from the important and agonizing young memories of dead alligators and nights spent crying, there's a fitting coda. Organized by the curator Richard McCabe, "The Rising" is the smallest and most humble of the three shows in its simple assertion that photographers in the last decade have both reinforced and shifted the visual lexicon of New Orleans through keen eyes. It feels honest, present and true. New Orleans doesn't look one way, live one way or remember one way. No place does.

In their aggregate these shows, and many others throughout the city, suggest there will be multiple visions, as there must be, and multiple ways of visualizing disaster, recovery and the current state of the city. There's one photograph in "The Rising" that counters any nagging feeling of finality in these visions, which reminds the viewer that history is continually being rewritten, and that's a good thing.

L. Kasimu Harris's "The Road Ahead" (2013) is a staged close-up of a dapper couple behind the wheel of a vintage car; their beautiful brown-skinned faces point straight ahead, slight smiles on their lips, eyes intentionally fixed on what's to come. The road of history is long, and while some memories may mark us forever, 10 years is but a brief beginning.

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A version of this article appears in print on August 23, 2015, on page AR1 of the New York edition with the headline: Rendering Hell and High Water