

Jonathan Traviesa
"New Portraits in New Orleans"

Since the late 1990's, I have worked on an ongoing portrait project within the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. Using B&W square-formatted film, I photograph people in the outside areas around their homes. The subjects are usually captured full figure and around them, filling in the rest of the frame are fragments of the New Orleans residential landscape. A collection of 100 of these images will be published in book form in October 2009.

These portraits - like any good environmental portrait - attempt to marry a person and his/her immediate environment. There is nothing overtly New Orleanian about these images made from all over New Orleans. And yet, a subtle, more abstracted tone is present in the images because of the city. It emerges because of these people and where they live. I believe that who these people are is shaped in part by the spaces they know and live around. Conversely, a space, especially a localized or private one comes alive when inhabited by someone who knows it intimately. It is this intimacy that makes these photographs special. The backyards, front porches, and side alleys of New Orleans then – serve as detailed backdrops for the lives and lifestyles of the folks in the series.

All of the images to date stem from my peers around the city. I have approached the subjects of my project by casual, natural means: friends, acquaintances, and occasional strangers that come into my life. Now, however, I want to branch out of this scope and document a specific set of new individuals.

The fourth anniversary of hurricane katrina has just passed. Of course, great progress has been made and there is still much more to be done. However, despite the overall population loss of the city, what I find interesting is the newer influx of people. I am referring less to the people who came to New Orleans to work and help rebuild in the first year or two, but more to those types who did that and then stayed as residents.

Latin construction workers, teachers, young volunteers, and even a new set of underground bohemians have all been drawn to New Orleans for various reasons. Some of them have invested so much that it made sense for them to stay; all of them have directly helped reshape and restructure New Orleans. The ongoing labor of reconstructing damaged homes, retooling the dysfunctional educational infrastructure as well as the new creation and propagation of eclectic - often exotic - cultural fabrics are the

roots of what this city is now and will be as seen through its long transition into post recovery.

Documenting these folks is also important for the continuation of my project. With a published book about to be released (*Portraits: Photographs in New Orleans, 1998-2009*) and two concurrent exhibits, the project is at a natural moment to either end (or at least, lie dormant for awhile) or change in some significant way. I feel that by shifting my focus away from my immediate peers toward the newer residents that are actively, positively changing the city, the project can resume with a new vitality matching that of the progress of the city itself.

The grant money from Michael P. Smith fund would tremendously help me in the most fundamental ways: materials and production. Film, film processing chemicals, scanning, paper, printer ink, and matting/framing expenses would all be greatly defrayed by this money. Also, purchasing the occasional meal providing sustenance during long work intervals would help as well!