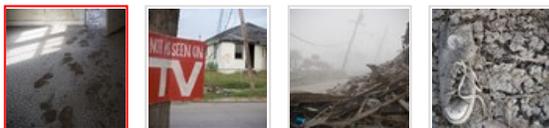


Jane Fulton Alt's "After The Storm"



(Jane Fulton Alt)

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Like the rest of America, Chicago photographer [Jane Fulton Alt](#) watched the events, the destruction, and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on television. But unlike many people, she found herself in a position to do something. Within weeks of Katrina's landfall, Jane found herself in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward, the hardest hit part of the city, block after block wiped out by flood waters as the levees gave way. Jane was part of a program run by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that assisted residents in returning briefly to their homes to see what they could find but who also had to immediately turn around and leave. And in this time in New Orleans - as well as several subsequent visits - Jane found herself taking photos of the destruction.

In some photos, she uses the power of singular objects to capture what feel like "small moments" among destruction of a breadth that, to this day, is still impossible to comprehend. A mud-caked shoe, a waterlogged bible, a faded family photograph. Jane's photos bring back the human element to a disaster of an immense scale. There's also a haunting beauty to her photos: the intricate patterns of caked mud, the residue from the flood waters, ghostly footprints across a dusty floor. So many photos are wrapped in a mist, a fog, similar to the dreamlike haze the victims of Katrina experienced. Ultimately, too, there is a hope, especially in some later photos. Amongst the browns and grays of the post-disaster landscape springs green grass and towering sunflowers, showing signs of life and rebirth in a desolate place.

As her exhibit at the Chicago Cultural Center enters its final weeks, we caught up with Jane - on the road in New Orleans - about her involvement in the post-Katrina clean-up, how photography was an outlet for her, and how the city is rebounding, especially a new, growing arts scene. You can see these photos for themselves at the Chicago

Cultural Center; there are only a few weeks left, though, to get down to the Center and see the photos, an exhibit that includes essays and even a video feature accompanied by music. But it's worth a visit on your lunch hour or on a break from shopping. If you like what you see or want to see more of Jane's work - including more photos and essays from post-Katrina New Orleans that aren't on display - you can purchase her book [Look and Leave: Photographs and Stories of New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward](#).

Jane Fulton Alt, *After The Storm* photograph exhibit, on display until December 27, [check here for hours](#), Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington St., FREE

Chicagoist: How did you originally wind up in New Orleans after the storm?

JFA: I had just completed an American Red Cross disaster training program which I signed up for because of 9/11 and while I was going through that training, Katrina hit.

I didn't get go down with the Red Cross because they wanted people to go down the day after I finished training and I wasn't able to. But I found another organization to go down with- it was actually the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that had a two week period to go down. So I signed up with them not really knowing where I was going to be stationed or what I was going to be doing. Like everybody else, it was excruciating to watch it unfold on TV and whereas the government failed everybody, I really think it was the private citizens that made a difference.

C: When did you go down?

JFA: November 3, 2005 so a little over two months afterward but it felt like it was immediately after. The whole city was pretty desolate. The few grocery stores that were open barely had anything on the shelves.

C: What struck you the most about the aftermath of the storm? Was it the breadth of the damage?

JFA: The physicality of being in that space was overpowering, overwhelming. It taxed everybody and I was haunted by this one woman who I met on the site and she had this horrific cough. I got it, too, anyone who was in the area had the "Katrina Cough." I was only there for two weeks but the only place she had to stay was in the Upper Ninth Ward so she was in the area and I knew the cough just wasn't going to get any better. And who knew what the long term effects were going to be of living in that air?

The other thing is that I met one man who was suicidal. He had been through the Iraq War, he had been a policeman, he had been shot at and he said nothing had ever prepared him for what he went through [with Katrina]. He said that he could understand and accept natural disasters but what he couldn't accept was man's inhumanity to man. He said he hadn't slept in days because he could hear people going from house to house, looting. That was the really hard part about it. And still is, in a way, the way things aren't getting done. The politics, people not being able to come together to get done what they need to get done... But that was one of the hardest part, and a part that made people really angry and upset and in part what motivated me to take the photographs.

C: Photographs are such an important means of capturing moments, particularly with Katrina, so many images that will be with us forever. When you're taking photos, what's your thought process? Do you see something and your immediate reaction is to take the photo or is it more complex?

JFA: I had been down there for four days before I started taking photos and in those first days I had heard story after story and been with people as they went through the neighborhoods to go back and see their homes. I felt like a container for their grief and sorrow and for them being upset. I had never photographed like I did when I was in the Lower Ninth Ward because I had taken on these peoples' stories as I was walking through the neighborhood... It's almost like the pictures found me. I had a car and I would see something that I thought was a potential picture and I'd get out of the car... It's almost like the pictures took me. It was the first time in all the time that I've been photographing that I felt totally secure and confident that I was getting what I needed to get. I knew I that I was getting it and I was going to be able to tell this story. It's almost like when I decided to photograph it was this epiphany; I felt like I knew what was going to happen and that it was going to be a strong body of work and that it'd be called "Look and Leave" (the name of the program I was with).

The photography kind of saved me. Everybody, whether you were a resident or someone coming down to help out, everybody had Post Traumatic Stress syndrome. You could always tell who had been down there too long. People got really burned out pretty fast. The camera really helped me to deal with my feelings. And returning to Chicago, I had an exhibit right away at DePaul and working on this book, it was all really good for me. I feel almost like I'm a messenger with this work.

C: How many times have you been back?

JFA: I've been back four times since that initial trip. This trip is the first since 2007. There was an article in the New York Times recently about the Lower Ninth and these new homes, how they weren't really designed for the residents who are used to a different kind of construction and architecture. But I went down there a couple of days ago and I thought they were kind of stunning and beautiful and the Lower Ninth Ward didn't feel as desolate or vacant as I had expected, then it had been since the last time I had visited in '07. There were pockets of people moving back. There's this essay in the book called "Inch by Inch" and I went back to that man's house and he had all these birds and birdfeeders there, even some exotic parrots.

C: So you've seen improvement?

JFA: In the Lower Ninth from 2007, yes. There are more people living there. It's not like it was pre-Katrina when there was a house on every lot because that's just not the case but there are people who have moved back. There's an artist, [Jose Torres-Tama](#). He's originally from New York City but he's been down [in New Orleans] for a while. I was talking with him yesterday and he was telling me how the arts scene is so lively. There's [Prospect New Orleans](#) with Dan Cameron. He made New Orleans an international focus point of art and he held the program last year and he's doing it again next year and I think it's going to be even better. There's also [PhotoNOLA](#), organized by the [New Orleans Photo Alliance](#), which did not exist pre-Katrina. It started with something like five photographers but now it's grown to almost 350 members. It's a world-class organization. They're getting ready to have portfolio reviews with the New York Times, the New Yorker, the Smithsonian...it's kind of amazing.

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