

JANE FULTON ALT: AFTER THE STORM



At the Michigan Avenue Galleries of the Chicago Cultural Center

-jeffery mcnary

With "After the Storm", Jane Fulton Alt's dramatic, powerful exhibition recounts the aftermath of hurricane Katrina's impact upon the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. Her 30 photographs and accompanying commentary posted aside capture much of the devastation of the unprecedented disaster. The artist use of light and shadow reflect elegance and grit and draws the viewer into an emotional skirmish of irony and frankness. Now at Chicago's Cultural Center, the photos recall. The shots are carefully composed. The photography is brutally exact.

"I never went thinking I was going to "seriously" photograph the aftermath of Katrina," said Alt, also a clinical social worker who traveled to New Orleans via a program, "Look and Leave." "Up until my trip there, I always shot black and white film, had my own darkroom and never done color. I brought a new digital Canon rebel camera along. Had I thought I was going to photograph, I would have brought other equipment. It wasn't until the 3rd day, when I felt I had reached my end physically and emotionally, that I realized photographing would be helpful to me and the larger community."

In 'Blue Cup', Alt takes the viewer through a dense grey fog, down a street where leaning power poles come through like invading monsters. There is a collapsed structure of brown wood and rusted pipe in a heap, as a thing with wings and shanks stemming from it. Catching the eye is a teal blue paper cup, on its side as if a wounded survivor. The photo appears black and white with tint, yet, "They were all color images. There was just no color in the landscape", says Alt. "Everything was covered with mud and dust and the air was rancid. Never in my life have I seen such destruction."

Exploring the inherent strains and duality of roles of social worker/artist during Alt responds, "The stories were too much to contain. I asked my team leader if I could leave the "Look and Leave" site early as I thought I was going to have a "meltdown," she says. "I returned to my room and within an hour, I realized I had to photograph what I was seeing. It was like an epiphany...knowing the work would be strong and seen widely, and titled, "Look and Leave." She adds, "I actually had a change of clothes in my car for my different roles."

Differences are cutting in 'Mardi Gras Storage House', its roof gone, skeletal arches and timber appear to hold up a clear sky. On the floor lay's a silver 'Tin man' character from the 'Wizard of Oz' while across the way stands the Scarecrow sans broken neck. The vivid colors of the characters stand in sharp contrast to the rest of the picture.

"Superdome", holds its breath, a grey, alien structure, a threatening presence at nightmares edge. "This picture was difficult...how to get the menacing feel into the photograph. I have to say that for the first time in my photographic career," she recalls. "I knew when photographing that I was 'getting it.' It was like the pictures found me. It felt effortless, right. There was no struggle. My analytic mind took a back seat and I was responding to the landscape."

These photographs are not entertainment. The artist captures the community in its fear and despair and searches to do so in its optimism and hope.

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