

NEVER FORGET

Photos of the flood and aftermath on exhibit at NOMA

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By Doug MacCash

'Katrina Exposed,' a deeply touching and surprisingly beautiful collection of 700 photographs taken during last August's catastrophic flood and its aftermath, opens Saturday at The New Orleans Museum of Art. It could well be the vivid, relevant, exhibit that emotionally reconnects the moribund museum with the storm-ravaged population it serves. NOMA assistant director and photo curator Steven Maklansky seems to have been preparing for just such an historically ad hoc exhibit for seven years. In 1999, he began a series of annual come-one-come-all photography shows titled "Underexposed," which allowed anyone to display their shutter work at the venerable old museum. All you had to do was spread out examples of your best work on the museum's folding tables and greet the crowds at the one-night-only photo bazaar. The "Underexposed" series gave renowned and aspiring photographers a free forum, complete with museum imprimatur.

As importantly, "Underexposed" gave Maklansky a chance to exercise his belief in the egalitarian nature of photography, a medium that, in a flash, can transform anyone into an instant artist or historian. High art or homespun, Maklansky always seemed to see holistic cultural importance in every photo. He describes the medium, not as mere art, but as "a knowledge system." That knowledge system surely would have been on display in the usual spring installment of "Underexposed," if it hadn't been for Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flood, which temporarily turned the museum into an island, inundated Maklansky's home and altered the future of New Orleans.

Katrina changed everything, everything except the holistic cultural importance of photography. "What did we equip ourselves with when we returned to the city," asked Maklansky as he waded through the stacks of storm-related photographs lining the walls and floor of NOMA's galleries last Sunday. "We brought bleach, boots . . . and a camera. A camera is a coping mechanism. It gives great credibility to memory. In fact, given time, photography becomes memory. Seeing it with our own eyes is one thing. Believing it is much more possible with photography."

In the days after the storm, Maklansky began imagining a more focused version of "Underexposed," a show dedicated entirely to the disaster. As always, everyone would be welcome, but this time the show would last three months. The photographers would deliver their photos ready-to-hang in frames, or, if they were unable to do so, their photos would be pinned directly to the wall. Though the photographers would be advised to submit only "what was essential viewing for the people of New Orleans," nothing would be rejected. "This is not your typical juried show," Maklansky said during the exhibit preview. "People expect the guy with the suit to select one photo and reject the rest. This is a celebration of the democracy of the photo."

In February, the museum publicized a call for submissions and soon photos began arriving from steely-eyed photojournalists and casual camera-owners faced for the first time with life-altering images, 140 photographers in all. Hovering helicopters, crushed buildings, streams of refugees, floating bodies, moldy still-lives and Venetian landscapes arrived at the museum in abundance

There were some artistic standouts, of course: Casey Coleman's shot of a traditional tile North Rampart street sign submerged in muddy water, Andy Levin's Kentwood bottled water vending machine floating atop the flood, Victoria Ryan's storm-torn tree shrouded by a windblown sheet, Donna Hurt's Captain America action figure standing in the rubble, Krista Jurisich's photo collage landscape and several others that Maklansky describes as "terribly beautiful." But the real power of the show is the cumulative effect of hundreds of alarming, fascinating, sometimes depressing images. Images that may, frankly, have little artistic merit, but are psychologically stunning. "Not every single picture in the show is a great picture," Maklansky said. "Some of the great pictures give cover, if you know what I mean, to not great pictures. Things have a way of balancing out."

To emphasize the balanced cumulative effect, Maklansky, 42, plans to crowd the photos on the walls in a tight grid from shin level to 8 feet high. The photos will bear the photographer's name, but no explanatory text. "We are presenting them naked on the walls," he said, "freed from the captions or the descriptive text, taken out of the context of the magazine news spread. It might be frustrating to some people." I doubt most local viewers will be frustrated. For us, the photos don't need description, they're all too familiar. "This show is, in part, about human desperation," Maklansky said. "In some of the people pictured in the photos, like the people at the Convention Center, there's the sort of desperation we expect to see in photos like this, people who are desperate for water, shelter. . . . But the exhibit as a whole shows a different kind of desperation, the desperation of the photographers to understand and confront how horrible it all is and encapsulate it. . . ." That goes for Maklansky as well, who plans to insinuate himself in the exhibit, displaying what he describes as a "blob" of the fused remnants of his flooded wedding photos.

After a 13-year career at NOMA, "Katrina Exposed" may be Maklansky's finest hour. It is the first show since the museum reopened in March that even acknowledges the flood took place (not counting a small exhibit of children's art). It's an overdue antidote to NOMA's seeming obliviousness.

KATRINA EXPOSED

What: A stirring collection of hurricane-related photographs by professionals and amateurs.

Where: The New Orleans Museum of Art in City Park.

When: The exhibit opens on Saturday. Regular museum hours are Fridays through Sundays, 10 a.m. to 4:30, through August.

Admission: Free to Louisiana residents. Out-of-state adults \$8, children and seniors \$6.

Catalog: "KATRINA EXPOSED: A Photographic Reckoning," a selection of 175 photos from the show, \$24.95.

Panel Discussion: "Eyes of the Storm," a panel discussion with photographers Doug Clifford, St. Petersburg Times; Bill Haber, Associated Press New Orleans; Dave Martin, AP Atlanta; David Rae Morris, freelancer; Tommy Staub, amateur photographer and first responder; and Lori Waselchuk, freelancer. Moderated by George Long, American Society of Media Photographers. Sunday, with cocktails at 5:30 and presentation at 6:30. Admission \$10. Limited seating. Advance purchase recommended. For advance tickets sales call (504) 861-9200 or go to photo@asmpno.org.