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After disaster, artists find inspiration in the city's outskirts



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Special to The Advocate
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St. Bernard Parish struggled to recover after Hurricane Katrina and the devastating floods of 2005. Daneeta and Patrick Jackson, who lived in a relative's home in Chalmette after the storm, take the bare slabs and dark

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nights of post-disaster Chalmette as inspiration in “Chalmatia: A Fictional Place Down the Road,” at the Contemporary Arts Center, opening Saturday.

“Chalmatia” offers photographs, text, three-dimensional pieces and film to show how a broken community existed as a tribe in a nether world of survival. The artists capture joy, isolation, child’s play, spiritual devotion and dedication to place, encountered from December 2008 through today. Residents of Chalmette serve as the “characters” in the display’s fictional realism.

The artists, who together are branded as The Elektrik Zoo, use the past to define both memory and evolution. Fog in some frames and light in others capture the surreal and eerie quality of life in the years after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the downriver community.

“Circumstances (after Katrina) found us living on my sister’s living room floor in Chalmette, and at that time it was still slabs and broken fences and water everywhere,” Daneeta Jackson said. “We set up the camera and started shooting photographs.”

Daneeta said there were a number of family members — four children, four adults and “a ton of animals” — packed into a single-family home, a common occurrence in many communities after the hurricane.

It took more than two months for electrical power to be restored to St. Bernard after the storm; light became a powerful symbol. In “Chalmatia,” Jacksons used specific shutter speeds, LED lights on moving hula hoops, Christmas displays and lighting from televisions and smartphones to focus on a subtheme called “Little Baby Light.”

“We wanted to capture Chalmette at night, the light at night,” Patrick Jackson said.

He believes people will experience both the fantasy and fiction of the art, but also the real people and real elements of the community.

The population of the parish is still only half what it was before Katrina. The empty spaces resonated with the artists.

“We wanted to create this world and focus on children and old people; everyone else is gone,” Daneeta said.

Throughout the project, she and Patrick held the belief that the youngsters are waiting for life to happen and the elderly are waiting for life to end.

Daneeta, who is also a writer, grew up in Southeast Louisiana and met Patrick, from Sweden, in film school in London. They married and have been working as artists for 13 years in various locales around the world.

The world of Chalmatia exists only in the 426 photographs and two films the Jacksons created, including a fictional piece, “Destiny Lives Down the Road” (Best Louisiana short, 2011 New Orleans Film Festival) and a documentary short about a real-life resident, Miss Carmella. The Destiny character appears in the film on Carmella, which blurs the artistic line between fact and fiction.

“We were inspired by Chalmette because it’s a small town outside of New

‘Chalmatia: A Fictional Place Down the Road’
 WHEN: Opens at 6 p.m. Saturday
 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. through Sept. 8, every day except Tuesdays
 WHERE: Contemporary Arts Center, 900 Camp St., first floor, Emerge Gallery
 INFO: (504) 528-3805, <http://www.cacno.org>
 ADMISSION: \$5; free for Louisiana residents with ID

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Orleans,” Daneeta said. While New Orleans has generated a large share of artistic attention over the years, “We’re more interested in the outskirts,” she said.

In addition, “It was a deliberate choice to come back here and be inspired by our families,” Patrick said.

Daneeta’s niece, Dominique Thompson, plays several different characters in the Destiny film and appears in a number of still photos.

One special element of the exhibit will be a kitchen window “film” that creates the illusion of looking out at fictional neighbors in Chalmatia. There will be a recreated slab and a swimming pool as three-dimensional parts of the real world inserted into Chalmatia.

“I want people to walk into the space and remember what childhood was like (at that time), playing on broken slabs, in broken houses and there was still an element of childhood,” Daneeta said. “It’s almost as if we’re peeping into the lives of these ‘characters.’ There’s a sense of wonder.”

Said Patrick: “We want people to spend time in Chalmatia.”

The exhibit is supported by grants from the Louisiana Division of the Arts, Office of Cultural Development, Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, in cooperation with the Louisiana State Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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