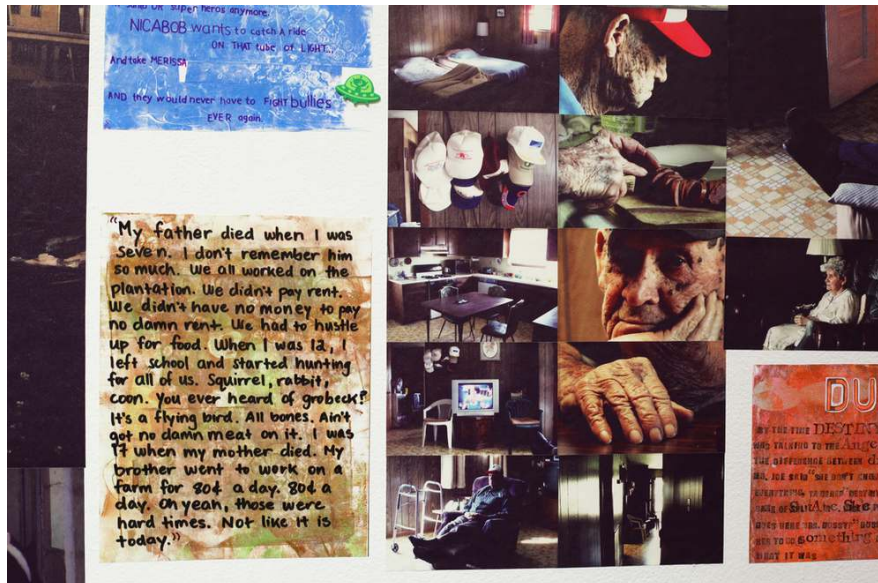


CHALMATIA: A FICTIONAL PLACE DOWN THE ROAD {REVIEW}

July 4, 2013

by [RYAN SPARKS](#)

"IF WE DIDN'T HAVE THE POOL, WE'D PROBABLY KILL EACH OTHER LIKE THEY DO IN THE EAST." This small snippet from a fictional diary, part of the multimedia exhibit *Chalmatia: A Fictional Place Down the Road*, is just one example of how transparent the fantasy world is overlaid across its real inspiration, the drowned, gutted, and depopulated St. Bernard community of Chalmette, Louisiana. The East, a singular directional term used throughout the Greater New Orleans area to refer to its red-headed stepchild district, has always seemed to hold the implication of barbarism on the edges of society, a place where wild things are left to their own devices and laws. The kids of Chalmatia and Chalmette alike live across an outfall canal from the East and mostly know nothing of its reality beyond what they have gleaned from the attitudes of their older peers. If the East is another kingdom with its own temperament and climate, then everyone must live in kingdoms, each with their own wild spirits.

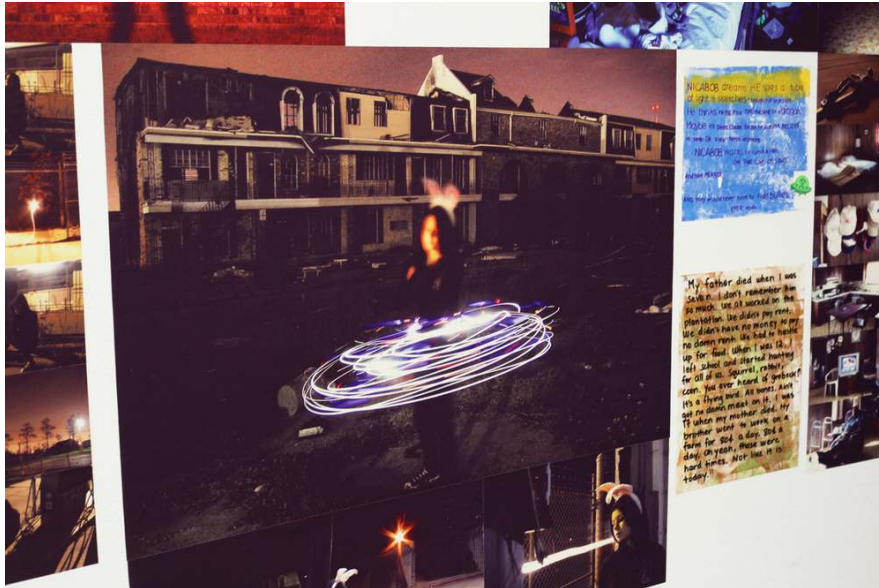


Multimedia artists Daneeta and Patrick Jackson of the [Elektrik Zoo](#) have deconstructed a storybook into a spiraling installation along the walls of the [Contemporary Art Center](#)'s Emerge Gallery. The photos pivot between documentary and illustration and are grouped loosely into a vignettes of childhood imagination and the wistful recollections of the elderly. The children in the photographs inhabit a ruined landscape. They turn to the world of imagination in order to cope, repurposing the concrete slabs where neighbors' homes used to stand into playgrounds and stages.

The hundreds of photos selected from the Jackson's multiyear project are carefully arranged, printed on a special adhesive-backed paper that allow them

to be pressed to the gallery's curved walls. The images are drenched in diffused colored light, illuminated fog, and gritty sweat. There are landscapes and still lives, but the majority of the exhibit is expressed with improvised portraits of characters like Little Baby Eyes, Nicabob, the Lion Fairy, and the Oyster Queen.

Daneeta's family members along with their friends and neighbors play parts and characters based on themselves. Interspersed with the images are handwritten pages that let the viewer peer into the thoughts the artists want us to associate with the characters—sentiments designed to sound like they come directly from the people in the photos and, unsettling enough, might well have.



From a few yards back, the story is a pixelated ribbon. Once you draw in close enough to discern the separate images and see how they relate to each other, though, you realize how much work went into the project. Not just the accumulation of the photos and the writing of the diary pages, but the selection of their placement and actual handiwork of affixing the work to the walls as well.

The two most prevalent characters are Nicabob, a young boy tan from long hours outside with a permanently worried upturn to his eyebrows and Destiny, who communicates a defensive nature with her body language but whose eyes demonstrate a desire to share her thoughts. Though the angst of Katrina is not the subject of Chalmatia, its evidence is everywhere. The children lead lives cluttered both within and without. Nicabob's bedroom is a typical boy's wasteland of toys and socks, but nearby outside is a greater mess of plaid couches, cracked lamps and untended hedges. Things that belong inside are out there without a home, a tumbled backdrop to his adventures as a fireman or policeman or an amalgamated superhero in mismatched costume pieces. Even without the neighborhood wreckage there are the refineries looming over their green backyards, the power line towers buzzing, and the erratic drainage.

The elder residents of Chalmatia are Joe and his dying ember of a wife Dussy. The portraits of Joe's loneliness make living a life of steadfast routine late into

one's nineties seem magical in and of itself, but Patrick's portraits cull a special spirit out of the old man who has more mesh trucker caps than living friends. He is a landscape in and of himself. In contrast, a caring old woman named Carmella has earned supernatural power by having survived for decades in this precarious place. She is armed with a lawn-cutting sickle and significant prayers.



Chalmatia drops a translucent curtain between these characters' world and ours, allowing us to share in the transformative power of cheap K-mart costumes and Nerf guns once again, but also preventing the embarrassment of voyeurism as we lean in over these people's personal lives. In one particularly moving image, Destiny and her friends sit in the grass after a swim, wrapped in bright beach towels featuring cartoon characters. Their faces fixed on points past the border of the photograph, something in the empty neighborhood unknown to us. The towels cover all of them, offering protection and warmth even as they outgrow the Scooby-Doo and Disney motifs before our eyes.

The exhibit hangs strongly on the hinge of an idea that playtime is a relief, a way to disguise unspoken emotions and challenge frustrations. In our alternate worlds we can put out the fires, we can prove our older sister wrong when she negates our hopes and reclaim authority for ourselves, we can imitate our heroes and select our own royalty—just like those city people do.

To keep up with that relief, though, we usually have to shift our focus, change our masks, or abandon one game for another. *Chalmatia* ably portrays many of these transitions, but never culminates in a singular storybook ending.

At the end of the exhibit we find the trashed remnants of the communal above-ground pool mentioned often through the story. Its sides have burst and presumably flooded the surrounding yard. It holds unintentional trash, toys abandoned one afternoon and never returned to. It has been hanging over your head the entire time, waiting for you to leave the story and view the evidence yourself.

Chalmatia runs through September 8th at the Contemporary Arts Center, 900 Camp St., New Orleans, LA.

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