



PARALLEL WORLDS

Exploring the surreal in Central Louisiana **BY JOHN R. KEMP**

The Post-World War I French poet André Breton once described surrealism as an artistic expression that fuses the subconscious with the conscious to form a “new reality.” Alexandria photographers Michael Elliot-Smith and Leslie Elliottsmith — Michael hyphenates their joined names, she doesn’t — have fused their long careers in science, art and education to produce the dreamlike realities that exist in their imaginations and in their photographs.

In recent years, the husband and wife photographers have enjoyed considerable success. Both have received Louisiana Visual Artists Fellowships and both have exhibited and sold their work across the nation. More importantly, both have created in their photographs a visual poetry of light, shadows and objects from the world around them, scripted only by the camera lens and their subconscious. Their

photographs are not typical documentary pictures of objects or landscapes. They seem familiar but only in the sense of Breton’s “new reality” or, as Michael describes them, “constructed realities.” Like faint memories, they are montages of collected photographs of places, animals and cloud formations taken during their travels across Louisiana, the nation and even in their backyard. Back in their studios, they use computer software to layer those digital images to create single compositions. Layering unrelated images to create surreal effects is a concept introduced in the late 1960s by the surrealist photographers Jerry Uelsmann and his wife, Maggie Taylor. It is an influence Michael readily acknowledges. In fact, the four of them lunched together in 2002.

“It is a style that sets your mind free to explore thoughts, ideas and imagination,” Michael says. Like Uelsmann and Taylor, Michael and Leslie’s images are illusions. In

Michael’s photographic montage, “A Day at the Beach,” for example, a bird in the image is in Louisiana, the beach is Florida, the hovering concrete structure is a pool in the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, inside the structure is a scene in Central Park in Manhattan and their daughter, Megan, who looks like she is strolling in the park, is actually walking on a beach.

“These constructed places only exist in my imagination fueled by dreams, personal emotions, and life experience,” Michael says. “Whether the final print is composed of one image or several, I am simply presenting my vision of the world around me. Sometimes my work is dark. Other times it’s humorous. Sometimes the images don’t work, so I just play with them and they just morph. Sometimes, one gets in a show and I realize it has more growing to do. Some pieces spin off into other works.”



Leslie has different influences in her work.

“In our mass media consumer culture we are bombarded with easily disregarded images,” she says. “It is my goal to make the viewer stop, suspend reality and become aware of the vision I have created. I want the viewer to be mindful of the narrative presented, but also to be free to interpret the message. The story, however, is the key player in my work. I write myself notes on the thought process for each piece, so that I can write a statement about my work and the story. Some people get it and some people don’t like it. If you are an artist, you better have thick skin.”

Unlike Michael, who shoots mostly black-and-white infrared photographs for their spectral effects, Leslie prefers color. She likes the contrast color gives to the image. Because she works with digital photographs, she is able to add color in her computer, much like she would

“These constructed places only exist in my imagination fueled by dreams, personal emotions, and life experience,” Michael says.

use brushes and a palette when painting with watercolors. Prior to taking up art photography in 2010, she worked as a painter and printmaker.

“My paintings look like my photographs,” Leslie says. “I’m just painting with images. In composing the final photograph, I use layers of images, trying to create depth of color and texture, while building a personal world of symbolism and iconography. Sometimes the final image comes really fast. Sometimes they are not exactly what I want.”

Both Leslie and Michael, who met in 1983 and married four years later, came to art photography from different backgrounds. Leslie was born in St. Louis but grew up in the New Orleans suburb



of River Ridge. She received bachelor and master's degrees in art education and printmaking from Louisiana State University before going on to teach at the University of New Orleans and LSU. In 1983, she moved to Alexandria to become curator of education at the Alexandria Museum of Art. She later served as an artist-in-residence at several parish school districts before launching her 25-year career teaching online art survey and art history courses through the Natchitoches-based Louisiana School for Math, Science and the Arts as well as the Louisiana Department of Education. She retired in 2015.

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Michael, on the other hand, was born in Natchez but grew up in the little river community of New Era in Concordia Parish. After high school, he studied agronomy at Northeast Louisiana University, now the University of Louisiana at Monroe, where he says he traded in his "cowboy boots and jeans for bell-bottoms and long hair." After graduation in 1974, he spent the next 32 years as a soil scientist for the U.S. Forest Service's Southern Research Station in Pineville. Shortly after starting his new job, his superiors handed him a camera to document research studies. He then signed up for darkroom classes at nearby Louisiana College.

"That changed my life," says Michael. Then in 2004, thanks to a grant from the Louisiana Division of the Arts, he switched to digital photography, a move he had long resisted. "Once I understood the power of the digital darkroom it opened up a new

world to explore and this has taken me into the surreal."

Michael and Leslie work in parallel art worlds. They keep separate studios at opposite ends of their home and rarely critique or even look at the other's work until it's finished or when asked.

"We are both equals in the art world," Michael says. "We both have won awards, and one is not stronger than the other. That helps."

For more information, visit artelliottsmith.com and michaellottsmith.com. ♦



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DAWN DEDEAUX

New Orleans artist uses installations to save 'MotherShip' Earth and Louisiana's wetlands

BY *John R. Kemp*

▶ **IN RECENT YEARS, MANY LOUISIANA** artists have worked to document the alarming rate at which Louisiana is losing its environmentally-rich coastal wetlands. Galleries and museums across the state regularly show dramatic images of watery landscapes where marshlands once stood. Few artists however, have used their art as a call for public and political action.

In steps New Orleans artist Dawn DeDeaux, who has gained international acclaim for her monumental, synchronized, media-driven art installations with a conscience. Her work is complex, layered and unsettling with razor-sharp social consciousness that examines the human condition, inner-city violence, and, more recently, the destruction of Louisiana's wetlands. As an strident advocate for saving the environment, her conceptual artworks are more than simply art for art's sake, but art for social and environmental justice.

In her constantly evolving "MotherShip" project for instance, DeDeaux explores the sustainability of life on earth, beginning with ancient myths predicting the end of time, to contemporary social, economic and ecological signs that show those prophecies may be coming true. A later phase conjures images of humans escaping planet Earth and what earthly souvenirs they may take to a new utopian life on other planets.

"I have had a long-term interest in using public art as an educational, communicative tool that aims to connect citizenry across socio-race-class-political barriers," she says.

Her work has not gone unnoticed. DeDeaux, a co-founder of the New Orleans Contemporary Arts Center, has shown her art in major museums across the nation, including the prestigious Whitney Museum in New York. Her awards could fill a wall, and in 1996 the International Olympics Cultural Committee selected her



as one of the eight most important Southern artists. The following year, the American Academy in Rome awarded her a Prix de Rome, and in late 2019 the New Orleans Museum of Art will stage a major retrospective of her work from 1975 to 2019.

DeDeaux's interest in art began early in life.

"As a child, I lost a brother and a sister to disease and observed its classic destruction of our family," she says. "Early grief and loss led me on a path aiming to reconcile love, suffering and spirit. I turned to art as a tool for investigation and as a refuge for the heart."

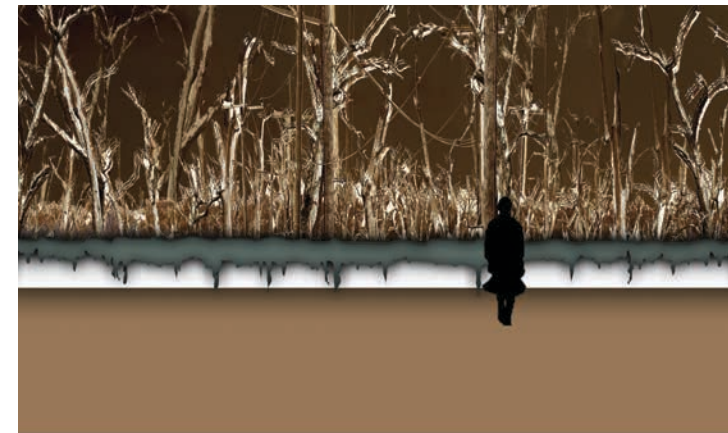
That refuge eventually led her to study art and theater at LSU, the University of Colorado and Newcomb/Tulane University. As her interest in conceptual public art expanded, she took courses in mass communication theory at Loyola University in New

Orleans and advanced digital technology at the University of New Orleans.

With these tools in her palette box, DeDeaux's conceptual installations are like theatrical stage settings, complete with electronically-driven lighting, sound and narrative where each object is an actor playing a part in visual dramas before live audiences. To heighten that drama, she creates on a human scale so that viewers react with a visceral response to what they see.

Those installations first take form in her studio on the edge of the old Gentilly section of New Orleans. The main studio, housed in a long vacant early 20th century neighborhood corner grocery store, is one of four adjacent clapboard structures that she recently restored. All are filled with oversized artworks in progress or

▶ Dawn DeDeaux's dynamic conceptual installation "Vanishing Coast Wall" (above) depicts South Louisiana's fragile and threatened coastal wetlands. For example, in "Lostscapes: Killing Fields" (right), DeDeaux illustrates the disastrous effects caused by saltwater intrusion into Louisiana's coastal waterways especially in Terrebonne and Plaquemines parishes where dead oak trees stand in watery graves. The oak is a metaphor for South Louisiana's endangered culture and heritage. The human silhouette in each dramatizes the enormity of the problems facing Louisiana.



EXHIBITIONS AND EVENTS

THROUGH OCT. 1 BATON ROUGE

LSU Museum of Art, "Reflections: African American Life from the Myrna Colley-Lee Collection." Show features 50 artworks that present the lives, traditions and environments of African American in the 20th century, Shaw Center for the Arts, 100 Lafayette St., 225-389-7200, lsumoa.org

THROUGH OCT. 15 NEW ORLEANS

Ogden Museum of Southern Art, "Louisiana Contemporary." Fifth annual statewide juried exhibition, featuring contemporary artists from across Louisiana. Also, "William Eggleston: Troubled Waters." Featuring renowned Southern photographer William Eggleston's images of rural life in the Mississippi Delta. 925 Camp St., 504-539-9650, ogdenmuseum.org

THROUGH OCT. 22 SHREVEPORT

Meadows Museum of Art, "Unraveled by Jim Arendt." South Carolina artist Jim Arendt explores shifting paradigms of labor and place and how transitions in economic structures affect individual lives. 2911 Centenary Blvd., 318-869-5011, centenary.edu/campus-community/meadows-museum

THROUGH DEC. 2 LAKE CHARLES

Historic City Hall Arts & Crafts Center, "Colorama from the George Eastman Kodak Museum: The Stories Behind the Pictures." Traveling show, featuring 36 large, nostalgic photographs of American families on vacation across the United States from the 1950s through the 1990s. These color images once hung in New York City's Grand Central Station, 1001 Ryan St., 337-491-9147, cityoflakecharles.com



longer an extracurricular activity for the world's fastest eroding land mass."

To interpret that destruction, DeDeaux launched her "Lostscapes: The Killing Fields" and "Mutants" series. The latter work, still in a planning phase, will consist of large, handmade, translucent orbs set afloat in waterways. Each is filled with chemicals that change color and glow when they encounter water pollutants.

In "Lostscapes," DeDeaux illustrates the disastrous effects of saltwater intrusion on Louisiana's coastline, especially in Terrebonne and Plaquemines parishes where the land is disappearing rapidly. In these "apocalyptic landscapes," DeDeaux memorializes dead oak trees that now stand in thousands of watery graves along the coast. The oak, she says, is a metaphor for south Louisiana's culture, heritage and all that is being lost. Here she focused on conditions in Lake Hermitage south of New Orleans, a lake that was once filled with thousands of live trees.

"You see marsh turning into water," she says. "Thousands of oak trees and marsh grasses are dying. When you see these trees disappearing, it hits you hard. When I saw those dead oaks, I cried. It was horrid. This is the land our people live on. New Orleans is next."

DeDeaux is currently working with Tulane University and NASA to build a satellite geopositioning map of south Louisiana that will regularly update the amount of land loss and the changing shape of the state's coastline. Though still in its conceptual form, "Lostscape: Live Data Vanishing Coast Wall" will use constant incoming water-level data collected just offshore in the Gulf to update the coastal map. When completed, DeDeaux hopes to mount the 200-foot-long art installation at a public site on the riverfront in downtown New Orleans.

"Here, art iconography can translate and simplify the complexities of erosion to a larger audience and increase civic participation," she says.

DeDeaux believes artists have an important role in translating scientific data into works of art that can help educate people about ecological problems facing Louisiana and the world.

"We can convey more information in a small amount of space," she says. "It has however, been grueling with a lot of work and disappointments."

Fortunately, she continues.

For more information about DeDeaux and her work, visit dawn dedeaux.net. ■



EXHIBITIONS AND EVENTS

THROUGH DEC. 7 LAKE CHARLES

McNeese State University, Shearman Fine Arts Center Annex's Grand Gallery, "Annual Faculty Show." Show features artwork by McNeese State University art faculty held in conjunction with communitywide gallery promenade. 4205 Ryan St., 337-475-5428, mcneese.edu/visualarts

THROUGH JAN. 20, 2018 ALEXANDRIA

Alexandria Museum of Art, "Refining & Defining a Nation." Through historic paintings borrowed from museums across the nation, this exhibition explores how late 19th and early 20th century American artists visually defined rural and urban America. 933 Second St., 318-443-3458, themuseum.org

THROUGH MAY 5, 2018 LAFAYETTE

Paul and Lulu Hilliard University Art Museum, "Tina Freeman: Artist Spaces." Exhibition features Freeman's photographs of the studios and workspaces of contemporary artists based in New Orleans along with examples of their work. 710 East St. Mary Blvd., 337-482-0811, hilliardmuseum.org

► Dawn DeDeaux (above) is an internationally-acclaimed New Orleans artist who creates complex and layered monumental, synchronized, media-driven art installations to draw public awareness to Louisiana's vanishing coastal wetlands and rising world sea levels. Large conceptual artworks such as "The End with Ladders and Rings" (above) are DeDeaux's call for direct political and social action to head off impending environmental catastrophes.

left over from previous shows. In the garden, large remnants of past art installations seem to grow organically from the dark soil among banana trees and thick bushes of lush flowering plants and vines.

This semitropical setting is a fitting place to create environmental art. Since Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the 2010 BP oil spill, DeDeaux has worked to make people aware of impending ecological catastrophes facing Louisiana. The state, she says, is at the frontline of environmental issues, ranging from coastal erosion and water contaminants found in rivers and wetland marshes to expanding dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico.

"After Katrina, I turned to sculpture to reconstruct the landscape," she says. "Then came the oil spill. That is when I became so aware of the eroding coastline and how much damage the oil company canals have done to the wetlands. The BP spill has shaped my work by going out there and experiencing the loss. Prompted by the wake-up call of Katrina and oil industry accidents and interventions, environmental activism is no

RUSSELL WHITING

Hot Steel and Angels in St. Martin Parish

BY *John R. Kemp*

ON A WARM AFTERNOON IN RURAL

St. Martin Parish sculptor Russell Whiting sits out in his studio putting the final touches on a new work titled “Dreamer.” Scattered around him are scraps of metal slag, tools, acetylene gas tanks and unfinished statues. Comet-like trails of sparks fly as his 5,000-plus-degree torch cuts deep into the hot metal.

“My art is the only reason I am alive today,” he says, glancing at his work. “I would have gotten into serious trouble had it not been for art. It’s my life.”

Whiting is a gifted artist inspired not by the sugar cane fields that surround his home and studio but by hot steel, angels and the spirits of ancient heroic mythologies that appear like specters in his imagination. The soulfulness of his work often transcends reality and moves viewers to respond in a personal way.

“What I love most about Russell Whiting’s sculpture is that over and over again his pieces capture tensions of spiritual balance,” says former Louisiana Poet Laureate Darrell Bourque. “His figures exist in the balance of grace and distress, chaos and order, the world of forms and the world beyond form.”

Over the last three decades, the 62-year-old, self-taught artist has gained national recognition for his remarkable life-size and sometimes larger than life welded steel sculpture that have won awards and appeared in shows across North America from Montreal to California. His list of commissioned work includes a full-size steel buffalo for New Orleans art benefactor William Goldring and a nine-foot-tall steel rooster for the E. & J. Gallo winery in California. Gallo is Italian for “rooster.”

Another dramatic work depicts the Greek mythological winged “Icarus” that now stands perched over the Tennessee River in Chattanooga’s River Gallery Sculpture Gardens. Closer to home, Whiting’s 24-foot-tall, 5,000-pound steel statue “Man Conquers Chair” stood on Poydras Street



in New Orleans from 2012 to 2014 as part of the Helis Foundation’s Poydras Corridor Sculpture Exhibition. He is currently making a life-size statue of the proclaimed father of Zydeco music Amédé Ardoin for the St. Landry Parish Visitors Center at I-49 north of Opelousas.

The creative incubator for his art is located on five secluded, wooded acres east of Breaux Bridge where Whiting lives with his wife Michelle Vallot, a retired federal public defender, and founder-operator of Zydeco Foods. Their house, set in a large garden with a pond, rusting sugar kettles, round millstones, and his statues, is itself a work of

art built in the 1960s by landscape architect Russell Dupuis. Outside, Whiting has a large open-air studio that could easily be mistaken for an industrial metal fabrication shop.

Whiting’s journey to acclaim and to this little corner of the Acadiana is a classical existential story of self-destructive choices and self-redemption. Born in 1955 in Bastrop, Texas, at 16, his mother shipped the restless young Russell off to New Orleans to live with his sister and her husband. Two years later, twisted fate changed his life forever. Whiting killed a man in a fight when he tried to stop the older man from beating a woman.

▶ Russell Whiting of Breaux Bridge, La., is inspired not by the sugar cane fields that surround his home but by hot steel, angels and the spirits of ancient heroic deities. Just as painters use brushes, paints and canvases, Whiting uses oxy-acetylene torches to carve graceful figures from three-inch steel plates salvaged from local scrap yards.



“I knew her and had never seen that kind of behavior,” he says. “It freaked me out, no one else was going to do anything so I felt like I couldn’t abandon her. I was a peaceful hippie but things just got out of control, I was 18.” He was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 12 years in prison. In 1981, he received parole after serving eight years at Angola and correctional facilities in Pineville and Dequincy.

During his prison stretch, Whiting took college courses, taught himself mathematics, studied art and learned how to weld. He also enjoyed carving small wooden figures that he gave to other inmates. Upon release, Whiting went on to good-paying welding jobs in shipyards in South Louisiana and offshore drilling rigs. When those jobs dried up, he moved on to other shipyards along the Gulf Coast.

Then in 1986, he was in trouble again, this time in Georgia where he was convicted of possessing LSD. Facing a 20-year



sentence, Whiting knew he had to change his life. He remembered a man who made a living selling his pottery at art fairs across the South. Whiting decided that when he got out of prison, he would hit the art circuit with his woodcarvings. That opportunity came sooner than he planned. In 1987 he was paroled after serving just one year, when Georgia’s governor launched a crusade to clear the prisons to make room for DWI convictions.

Free again, Whiting returned to Louisiana to live with his sister and husband in New Iberia. There he launched his new life and career, selling his carvings at art shows. Along the way, he came across an artist cutting out steel figures and realized that he could create art with the welding skills he learned in prison and honed in the shipyards. Beginning in 1990 he was back on the circuit with his “carved” steel art that not only sold but impressed gallery owners who offered to represent him.



EXHIBITIONS AND EVENTS

THROUGH NOV. 12 COVINGTON

Three Rivers Art Festival. This two-day arts festival features all media from artists across the South. Nov. 11-12, Downtown Covington. 985-327-9797, threeriversartfestival.com.

THROUGH DEC. 7 LAKE CHARLES

McNeese State University, Shearman Fine Arts Center Annex’s Grand Gallery, “Annual Faculty Show,” features work by McNeese State University art faculty held in conjunction with the citywide Annual Gallery Promenade 2017. 4205 Ryan St., 337-475-5060, mcneese.edu/visualarts.

THROUGH DEC. 30 LAKE CHARLES

Historic City Hall Arts & Cultural Center, “150 Years of Lake Charles.” Exhibition featuring the history of Lake Charles, 1001 Ryan St., 337-436-9588, cityoflakecharles.com.

THROUGH JAN. 7, 2018 SHREVEPORT

R.W. Norton Art Gallery, “From Alaska to Zimbabwe: Don Edwards Paints the Wild Side.” Exhibition features the work of naturalist/artist Don Edwards and his wildlife paintings from across North America to Kenya and South Africa, 4747 Creswell Ave., 318-865-4201, rwnaf.org.

THROUGH JAN. 20, 2018 ALEXANDRIA

Alexandria Museum of Art, “Refining & Defining a Nation: From Impressionism to Regionalism.” Through historic paintings borrowed from museums across the nation, this exhibition explores how late 19th and early 20th century American artists visually defined rural and urban America. 933 Second St., 318-443-3458, themuseum.org.



Since that time, Whiting has developed a painterly style of cutting and working steel unlike anyone else. Just as painters use brushes, paints and canvases, Whiting uses oxy-acetylene torches to carve graceful figures and mythological deities from three-inch steel plates that he purchases at local salvage yards. Each project begins with a concept either drawn from his imagination or commissioned.

“These images are all in my head,” he says. “When I was a kid, I went to the cinema all the time. I was always in a fantasy world. When I got to prison, they were the figures I thought of most. I would escape to those times and places.”

Once Whiting has a concept, he cuts out a series of silhouettes of that design in three-inch steel plates. He then layers one over the other and welds those layers into a single block. Next he uses his torch to carve the image from the metal block. He describes the process as a “fusion of classicism and contemporary execution.” To achieve that fusion, he lets the torch decide what the finished work will look like.

“It’s like magic,” he says. “There’s nothing like the torch.”

Thinking back over his troubled early life and his successful art career, Whiting notes the irony of having his art stand among 14 other nationally renowned sculptors in the Helis Foundation’s 2012 Poydras exhibition.

“At one time I was in Orleans Parish Prison,” he says, gazing into the garden. “Now I have ‘Man Conquers Chair’ on Poydras, standing victorious. I made it back. I’m OK now.”

For more information about Whiting, visit whitingssculpture.com ■



▶ Whiting is a gifted, self-taught artist who has been on a remarkable journey of self-redemption through art. Over the last three decades, he has gained national recognition for his remarkable life-size and sometimes larger than life welded steel sculptures that have won awards and appeared in shows across North America.



EXHIBITIONS AND EVENTS

THROUGH JAN. 27, 2018
LAFAYETTE

Paul and Lulu Hilliard University Art Museum, “Lin Emery: A Movement, 1957-2017.” Features the art and career of New Orleans-based sculptor Lin Emery, who gained international acclaim for her graceful kinetic sculpture inspired by the coastal breezes and currents of the Mississippi River, 710 East St. Mary Blvd., 337-482-0811, hilliardmuseum.org.

THROUGH FEB. 4, 2018
NEW ORLEANS

Ogden Museum of Southern Art, “Photonola Currents 2017.” This annual show features the work of 15 contemporary photographers who are members of the New Orleans Photo Alliance, opens Dec. 7, 925 Camp St., 504-539-9650, ogdenmuseum.org

THROUGH FEB. 4, 2018
BATON ROUGE

Louisiana Art & Science Museum, “Alyce Simon: Atomic Art.” Exhibition explores New York artist Alyce Simon’s radical art work created with the use of a particle accelerator, 100 River Road South, 225-344-5272, lasma.org.

THROUGH FEB. 11, 2018
BATON ROUGE

LSU Museum of Art, “Broken Time: Sculpture by Martin Payton.” Features local artist Martin Payton’s steel sculpture inspired by New Orleans jazz musicians and the influences African musical traditions. Shaw Center for the Arts, 100 Lafayette St., 225-389-7200, lsu-moa.org.

THROUGH FEB. 25, 2018
NEW ORLEANS

Prospect New Orleans, “Prospect 4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp.” This citywide art show, billed as one the nation’s largest triennial art exhibitions, features artwork by 73 local, national and international artists from 25 countries. opens Nov.18, prospectneworleans.org.

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