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VISUAL ARTS » ART REVIEW

### **Dreams Made Real**

by D. Eric Bookhardt

"The aliveness of a city depends on the bond between its water and its flow of dreams."

— Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*

Ostensibly a photographic meditation on the transcendental feminine form inspired by her late mother, Josephine Sacabo's *A Geometry of Echoes* is indeed that, but it is also an exploration of other things as well. Things so subtle they are hard to put into words. Consequently, this really is a photographic meditation and not a photo essay in the usual sense. Yet, like all such things, there is at least the hint of a story. To cut to the quick, it is what happened when Sacabo began photographing a new model in her new studio, an actually quite old Faubourg Marigny building with pressed tin ceilings. How her mother came into the picture was a surprise, a story within the story.

The model was important because Sacabo had for many years photographed the same woman, so any change in personnel was a big change indeed. Yet, while most of these images suggest romantic 19th century portraits of an especially psychological and impressionistic sort, not all involved a studio. Some are landscapes that come across as dreamscapes, random glances into the unconscious recesses of the imagination. Actually they are fleeting reflections taken from the surfaces of lagoons in City Park, an urban green space known for its lingering aura of wildness. In the series' lead image, *The Peristyle*, the columns of the City Park landmark appear as shimmering upside down reflections, vertical slashes of whiteness rippling beneath the darkened murk above, an effect like looking down a well and seeing the ruins of a lost civilization. From here on in it's a journey through the looking glass.

The great French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, once wrote an essay about water and dreams and what he deemed "the imagination of matter," notions that all seem to find fruition in Sacabo's *A Geometry of Echoes*. But while water, as we know too well, can penetrate even the most remote places, dreams can penetrate time and space, and turn up when we least expect them. That is what happened when Sacabo began working with her new model in her "new" antique studio. One moment the woman was simply the new model trying a new pose, but in the next moment she would suddenly turn another way, and "it was like another spirit would inhabit her." That was when she realized that this beautiful woman was her mother, not as she knew her in recent years, but as she was in Sacabo's early childhood, a time when dreams, spirits and reality intermingle, and when mothers and daughters share idealized views of each other.

One such moment is seen in *El Fulgor* -- Spanish for a splendid or dazzling brightness -- in which the model pauses in reverie, eyes closed under a veil of filmy fabric that catches the slanting light, bathing her in an aura of dark luminosity. The pose may be theatrical, but it works because it appears as an epiphany, a moment when time and space yield to the penetrating hydrology of dreams bathed in the light of revelation. In other words, something happened. Exactly what, of course, cannot be stated in words, but that is why we have visual art. But Bachelard, the philosopher, perhaps came closest in works such as *The Poetics of Space*, which explored the relationship of intimate places, especially the nooks and crannies of childhood, and the recesses of the imagination. But New Orleans contains unusual numbers of such places, and Sacabo credits her studio for being one of those chambers of dreams and memories where the walls vibrate with the imagination of matter. In such places, shadows whisper and the emptiness is a presence in its own right, as we see in *La Juala*, where a female figure rests her head on the arms of a velvet chair in a space where light and shadow dance to the music of a distant time and all things seem lost in reverie. In *A Geometry of Echoes*, Sacabo's photographs become their own reality, not as artifacts but as slices of the life of the imagination, as dreams made real -- dreams channeled so that, like water, the force of their tidal surge yields light as well as shadow.



*Josephine Sacabo's La Juala suggests a place where light and shadow dance to the music of a distant time and all things seem lost in reverie.*