

Entrevista: Josephine Sacabo's *Oyeme con los Ojos* -- the eyes have it

On her recent visit to Laredo, I caught up with photographer Josephine Sacabo, or Marialice Martin, as she is known to many. She was in her hometown for the opening of *Oyeme con los Ojos*, an interpretative homage in 50 photographs to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the courageous 17th century nun and poet whose literary work as a free-thinking intellectual survived the confines of a cloistered life and the censorious oppression of the Inquisition.

Sacabo's smoky images, which hang in the main gallery of the Laredo Center for the Arts, prompt introspection and inspire immense appreciation for her intuitive matches to sentiments of poetry penned so long ago by a luminary of New Spain about love, life, religion, and feminism.

And speaking of luminaries, Sacabo's life behind the lens and in the darkroom bears the riches of accomplishment and accolades in circles far beyond the city of her birth.

And yet, according to her childhood friend Sharyn Jordan, "Marialice leads a simple, very grounded life. She is very talented and has drive and vision as an artist, but she never loses sight that she is a stakeholder in making the world a better place. She will never finish learning in this life, because she is open to new ideas. Hers is a life of much empathy for those who struggle."

Jordan continued, "She is a happy person. Her work, showing her work, and having it appreciated brings her great satisfaction. She was so excited to be in Laredo to share her work."

I've long admired Sacabo's artistry for its purpose, substance, and its refined methods. I wrote a story about her years ago after the publication of the Pedro Paramo book, but I'd not met her until now. What a grand surprise to find Josephine Sacabo/Marialice Martin to be an engaging and disarming woman, a woman with eyes so adept at capturing images, deep brown eyes that brim all at once with fierce intelligence and merriment.

—MARIA EUGENIA GUERRA

In interviews you've cited the influences of photographers such as Henri-Cartier Bresson and literary influences of the likes of Rilke, Baudelaire, Vicente Huidobro, Mallarmé, and others. Talk about how places have also influenced your work.

JS: I live in the French Quarter in New Orleans and in the Centro Histórico in San Miguel de Allende, in the very heart and soul of both cities. Both are redolent with a sense of history and have exquisite architecture. Often the places themselves are my actual subjects, but even when they are not, they strongly influence the tone of what I do. After all, this is where I chose to live, and for very good reasons. I love living and working in a historical continuum -- in places where beauty greets me every time I walk out of my front door.

What, if anything, about your bi-cultural hometown makes itself present in your art?

JS: I feel like I create almost entirely out of the Mexican side of my culture and that the other side has given me wonderful opportunities to work, exhibit, publish, etc.

When I look at the homage to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, there's an almost palpable sense to your introspections that you discovered something -- came on to something -- as you worked. Is this usually self-discovery or is it a larger revelation that brings you to an understanding of both your subject and your work?

JS: Thinking about this question made me realize that a lot of my work is about spiritual survival under duress. It wasn't a conscious revelation, but looking back on the Sor Juana work I can see that once I intuited that aspect of her life and work, I identified with that effort, and a huge bond developed.

Why is the life story of the poet and nun of New Spain Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz a story that has relevance for the rest of us?

JS: Sor Juana's life and work are enormously relevant today, particularly for women, because it is the story of a very courageous and gifted woman living and fighting for intellectual and spiritual freedom. Not unlike the brave women in Iran, Africa, Ciudad Juárez, or here in Laredo for that matter who are basically in the same fight

across continents and centuries -- and who have still not won. It's also a cautionary tale about the oppressive side of prevailing ideologies, whether it be the Inquisition or the Taliban.

Talk about how the written word in a body of poems makes the leap to images. How does that work for you?

JS: I familiarize myself with the poetry to such an extent that certain phrases keep coming up in my mind and seem to be begging for a visual equivalent. Essentially my images are composed partly from the words that haunt me and partly from the material world around me.

When do you know that a concept for new work has come to you, that you understand the direction your next body of work will take? Does any of it go to paper as a written plan for development before you start taking photographs?

JS: This one is easy. I become obsessed, and that's a sure sign I'm on to something

new. There is absolutely no written plan. I feel my way along and start taking pictures having no idea where it will go. It takes shape slowly.

When is an image perfect; what signals that you have reached the depth you wanted?

JS: For me an image is perfect when it says what I want it to say. This is very laboriously pursued technically until it feels and looks just right. I know I'm there when I feel like I'd be really jealous if someone else had made that image.

Please define photopolymer gravure for me?

JS: The original image is scanned into the computer -- it can be film or digital, I use both. That image is then adjusted in Photoshop specifically for the gravure process, and it is then printed out on any printer in the size you want the final image to be on transparent film.

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This digital positive is then exposed onto a pre-coated metal plate using either the sun or an ultraviolet light vacuum unit. The plate is then scrubbed with a soft brush in running water and dried with a hairdryer and then re-exposed to UV light to harden it. At this point you have the image etched into the plate and you proceed as you would for a normal etching -- i.e. you ink the plate, wipe it down, and put it through a printing press with a pre-dampened sheet of watercolor paper (or whatever you choose as the medium) over it, and when you lift the paper you have the image engraved into it. Same way Gutenberg did it! What I love about it is that there are no chemicals involved -- just light and water. There are a couple of YouTube videos about it, all done in my studio, which is on my website under "news."

You spoke of your recent visit to Laredo as a homecoming of sorts. Talk about that and the two you -- Marialice and Josephine.

JS: Coming back to Laredo as Josephine makes it a lot easier to be Marialice when I have to. I was born Marialice, but I came into being as Josephine in terms of my values and how I wanted to live my life. But Marialice has a wonderful family and friends here that throw great parties with great Mexican food and always welcome her back lovingly. So it's a slightly schizoid win-win situation at this point.

What's next?

JS: I have a big retrospective at the Ogden Museum in New Orleans coming in Oct. 2011, as well as shows in several galleries around the country. I would love to publish a book on Sor Juana, so I will be looking into that. And I am deep into a new series based on the poem, "Noche Oscura," by the Spanish poet San Juan de la Cruz. I don't want to talk about it yet in case I fall short, but I will tell you I am once again blessed with the feeling of being haunted and delighted. I am very grateful.

Josephine Sacabo is an internationally acclaimed photographer who has published four books including *Une Femme Habiter* in Paris in 1991 by Editions Marval; the award winning *Pedro Paramo* in 2002 by the University of

Texas Press; *Cente Jordo* in 2002 by 21st Publishing; and *Dwino Elegie* in 2005, also by 21st Publishing.

From her web page: Sacabo has had solo shows in Paris, London, Madrid, Toulouse, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and other major U.S. cities. Her work has also been widely published in magazines in the United States and Europe, including *Camera Arts*, *BSW Magazine*, *Rangefinder Magazine*, *ZOOM*, and others. The Laredoan's work is in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, N.Y.; The Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.; The Art Institute of Chicago; Houston Museum of Fine Arts; The Smithsonian, Washington D.C.; The Library of Congress; The New Orleans Museum of Art; The Wittliff Collection, Austin; The Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris; and La Maison de la Photo, Paris; among others.

She has taught highly acclaimed workshops at the Center for Photography at Woodstock, the Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie in Arles, France, and at the Santa Fe Workshops. ♦

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