

## **ÓYEME CON LOS OJOS (HEAR ME WITH YOUR EYES)**

Born in Laredo, Texas, of a beautiful Mexican/French mother and a prominent landowner father, Josephine Sacabo was educated at Bard College; and then, marrying, she traveled widely, deeply involved with her art photography. In the first days of her arrival in France, it welcomed her with an acquisition of her works by the Bibliothèque Nationale. She and her husband lived and worked between Provence and London for almost 10 years. Returning to the United States, they were drawn to New Orleans, irresistibly for Sacabo, because it was the most French of cities, because of her hispanic ancestry, and because of its boundless creative energy, ambience, and mystery.

Sacabo's still lifes, portraits, and figurative works are created in her New Orleans studio, an ancient Faubourg Marigny brick building, with tin ceilings that have shrimp embossed around the border. She illuminates the large darkish space with sunlight, drawn in by mirrors, filtered through muslin. Her landscapes are mostly of New Orleans and Mexico, where she keeps a second home in the colonial town of San Miguel de Allende.

In 1987 -- well into mid-career, well established and well regarded -- Sacabo produced a portfolio of images, "Lost Paradise," that abruptly translated her seeing, her techniques and style, into something else entirely. Her earlier works had been in the modernist genre, influenced by certain photo-journalists of subliminal, psychological insight such as Robert Frank, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Josef Koudelka. But suddenly, as if reborn, Sacabo transformed her work into an unprecedented and original new vision. It went from outside in, to inside out. Words cannot quite describe it.

Dream-like?

Allegorical.

Mystic.

A master of words, poet and art historian Dr. John Wood, appraises Sacabo very well:

[Her art] is more about emotion than facts, more about the senses and sense experience than it is about intellectual or mundane experience. It travels like electricity through the blood and comes out as sighs and tears; it has a madness about it like the madness of passionate love. ... Again and again she depicts a world of women caught up in complex and extreme emotional situations. Her well-known series of images of Susana San Juan is inspired by Juan Rulfo's tragic, surrealist novel *Pedro Páramo*. It chronicles the world of a woman who, in Sacabo's words, was 'forced to take refuge in madness as a means of protecting her inner world.' Her book *Une Femme Habitée*, her Nocturne series, portray women at the brink of the precipice.<sup>1</sup>

Though her work has been inspired by Rulfo, Baudelaire, Rilke, Garcia Lorca, Vicente Huidobro, and Sor Juana Inés De La Cruz critic Morri Creech points out that 'Sacabo avoids the dangers of the artist who takes another work of art for her subject. She understands that the test of any artist is to transform, to filter the source of inspiration through the lens of creative vision. ... [Her] work rises beyond the source of its inspiration, shimmering with its own unique texture and

vision.' ...she is one of today's leading exponents of what could be called symbolist, mystical, or metaphysical photography.'<sup>2</sup>

With roots anchored deeply in New Orleans and its heritage, Sacabo's visions reach deeply into the interior, human-spiritual universe. Each image is vital, and eloquent. It doesn't look like anything else. It beckons us in, through the glass.

Some of Sacabo's alchemy is the rare medium that she has refined for her purposes. Leaving a tradition of optical cameras and silver gelatin prints, she has become a virtuoso of the digital camera. But she is less happy with digital prints. Cold, perfect, static, they lack conviction, nuance and life. Her solution is the translation of her images into gravure.

An exquisite form of image making, the hand-made photogravure is the aristocrat of the rarest, arcane photographic processes. Early masters, Steiglitz, Steichen, Strand, all considered photogravures to be the most sensitive means of aesthetic expression. But it is a method so fine and difficult that it has ever since teetered on the edge of extinction in the modern world.

So, Sacabo's first watershed was the transformation of her work visually and spiritually. This second one followed soon after, in her mastery of gravure, with her eye and heart now extended to her hand. Virtually no other important photographer today shows such a constellation of qualities.

This Ogden Museum exhibition is generous and important. Measured in one dimension, it provides a strong selection of Sacabo's fully-developed, mature oeuvre - the symbolist world of dreams and primal emotions, and drawing the outside in. Yet it is in another dimension that this work reveals its true scale.

To be sure, each component does stand on its own; a distinct, titled, portfolio of images. Each was preceded by a year or more of silence: artist at work. Then, all of a piece, the body of work appears fully formed. There is one characteristic in common: each portfolio crystalizes around a particular poem, or just a wisp of a poem, that somehow became caught up in Sacabo's imagination.

I think that the epiphany of the exhibition, this collection of a life's work so far, is that these portfolios are not isolated islands. They are components -- cantos -- of a single extended work.

We may be viewing a classic, epic work, in the making. Time will tell.

Ten years ago I met Josephine Sacabo personally and represented her works in my art gallery in New York City. These years of close association with her have been a cherished experience for me. I have known and worked intimately with hundreds of artists. None has impressed or personally affected me more. I have witnessed her finest works emerge from astounding energy, and masterly skill. They are presented herewith, in this important, probably historic exhibition.

Con admiración y amor,

John Stevenson

<sup>1</sup>John Wood, Introduction to Rilke & Sacabo: The Duino Elegies (Massachusetts: 21<sup>st</sup>: The Journal of Contemporary Photography, 2005).

<sup>2</sup>Morri Creech, "Josephine Sacabo's Lens of Revelation" in 21<sup>st</sup>: The Journal of Contemporary Photography, V, 27, 28.