

FEMMES FATALES

Photo shows celebrate the work of some of the city's finest

By Doug MacCash
Art critic

The place to be Saturday night is Chartres Street in the French Quarter for the opening of a pair of Femme Fest affiliated (see rail at right) exhibitions, featuring the cream of the Crescent City's crop of female photographers.

The group show "Women of Focus" will be the first exhibit at Bassetti Fine Art Photographs since Hurricane Katrina. And it's a glorious comeback. Though rain flowed "like a waterfall" down the back gallery wall and elevator shaft, it wasn't storm damage that prevented the Chartres Street landmark from reopening, it was the psychological effects.

"I was depressed," gallery owner Vickie Bassetti said. "Every time I thought of opening, I said, 'There's nobody out there.' There were no tourists. It seemed so hopeless."

But planning the exhibit snapped her from her malaise.

"It gave me a reason," she said.

And it was a very good reason. With all-star photographers Debbie Fleming Caffrey, Sandra Russell Clark, Tina Freeman, Victoria Ryan, Jennifer Shaw, Michel Varisco and others, the show is a sure winner. But better yet, the sum is somehow even greater than the parts.

Though some of the photographers' homes and studios were damaged by the storm, "Women of Focus" isn't a post-Katrina display per se. But there's something so winsome and regretful about the artists' selections — such as Shawn Hall's teary landscapes, Elizabeth Shannon's burned books, Deborah Luster's lost souls (Angola inmates), Judy Cooper's somehow nostalgic Social Aid and Pleasure Club, Dawn Dedeaux's wilted tropical leaves and Shannon Brinkman's solitary white cat — that collectively they



A whisper of sexual allure adds spice to Josephine Sacabo's sentimental re-creations.

can't help but bring on cataclysmic contemplation.

A few doors down, at A Gallery for Fine Photography, the melancholic mood continues with "A Geometry of Echoes," the dark, deeply nostalgic series of pictorialist photos by romantic master Josephine Sacabo.

When Sacabo hired a new model for a series of works last year, something about the beautiful young woman gripped her with a sense of second sight.

"I would see her in a certain light," said Sacabo, "and flashes would happen, déjà vu. I said, 'I

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JOSEPHINE SACABO
photographer

know who this character is. This character is my mother. That's the way she looked at me when I was little."

Thus inspired, Sacabo, 61, let her camera carry her into a reverie of timeless interiors in which the alluringly distracted, sometimes nude young woman seems to dissolve into gauzy shadows, like a fond but fading memory.

As if she were writing a poetic memoir, Sacabo guided her shooting with a list of chapter headings that she hoped would produce a "fictional character inspired by, but not a likeness of, my mother."

The chapter titles give clues to

WOMEN OF FOCUS GROUP SHOW

What: Outstanding exhibit of works by 12 local female photographers.

Where: Bassetti Fine Art Photographs, 233 Chartres St., (504) 527-0072.

When: Thurs-Sun, 11 a.m. to 5, with a reception Sat from 6 to 9 p.m.

Prices: From \$550 to \$3,500.

A GEOMETRY OF ECHOES BY JOSEPHINE SACABO

What: Dreamy series of sentimental sepia-toned photos.

Where: A Gallery for Fine Photography, 241 Chartres St., (504) 568-1313.

When: Thurs-Mon, noon to 4, with a reception Sat from 6 to 9 p.m.

Prices: Prints are \$1,500.

the impressions she strove to capture: She wasn't really a Countess but she felt like she was. She lived in a beautiful house which she couldn't leave. She was very beautiful but she was not loved. Eventually death came and she greeted him like a lover who had finally come to take her away, and Before she left she gave me all her love.

"I wanted to say that she was sad, was beautiful, was sensual, that she was a woman. I wanted to do this complete picture of a woman," she said.

Sacabo printed the resulting photos in bittersweet chocolate and cream tones on highly textured imported paper "considered too sleazy and cheap to sell in the U.S.," producing utterly dreamy, adult devotions to her late mom.

"It's a subjective reality that can't take place outside of the person," Sacabo said of the sentimental mood of the show. "It can't be a real thing, it's too beautiful, too ethereal. This is a really idealized figure. You know how, when you're a child, everything is perfect?"

Sometimes it's perfect even when you're all grown up.