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The Visual Poetry of Josephine Sacabo

THE LIGHT, THE DARK, AND THE ANGELS IN BETWEEN

By Mary Ann Lynch

Now seen in one-person shows around the world, Josephine Sacabo's photographs are highly subjective, introspective images that hover between reality and the dream state. From Paris, London, and Madrid, to Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and major U.S. cities, viewers have embraced her intense images. They are in collections including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Sacabo's most recent publication, *Cante Jondo* (*Deep Song*), came out in January 2003 (21st, The Journal of Contemporary Photography). Each of the 55 hand-sewn books in this limited edition includes the poetry of Ana Cristina Rudholm y Balmaceda and ten toned silver-gelatin photographs printed and signed by the photographer. A handcrafted clamshell box holds the book and a freestanding signed print of *La Mano* (*The Hand*, page 20). The edition opened at \$2500 and quickly sold out.

The images in *Cante Jondo* are also among the 51 photographs included in an illustrated edition of *Pedro Páramo* (The University of Texas Press, 2002) by famed Mexican novelist Juan Rulfo (1918-1986). This affordable book pairs a 1994 translation by Margaret Sayers Peden with Josephine Sacabo's photographs. Book reproductions cannot compare with the luminosity of Sacabo's original prints, but those in *Pedro Páramo* are nicely reproduced. They heighten the impact of the text and whet the appetite for viewing the original prints.

SEEKING THE MUSE

Raised in a large cattle-ranching family in Laredo, Texas, as a girl Sacabo wanted to be a poet. At home she found little encouragement but at Bard College in New York City she was in her element, and her artistic side blossomed. She became a poet and after college and marriage performed with a theater company in London, New York, and New Orleans.

It was not until 1970 while she was living in the south of France that her first camera came to her. A house guest left behind a Contax, which she bought. A friend taught her the basics and when she saw the results in the darkroom, she was smitten. Cartier-Bresson's photographs were the first she looked at seriously. Sacabo's early efforts were in his mode, her teacher coaxing her

to "dress in black, be invisible, snap the picture when no one knows."

By 1973 she was back in the States, roaming New Orleans' French Quarter as a street photographer, creating a portfolio called "Sanctuaries." But the streets were no haven and photojournalism offered limited artistic fulfillment. Of this time she says, "The streets began to feel sinister. I would ask myself, 'Where are you going with all this?' I was feeling spiritually bankrupt. I wanted to connect with others with something beautiful. I realized, 'If you want that, you'll have to make it for yourself.'"

Turning inward, Sacabo moved away from photojournalism, beginning her transition into the artist she is today. The poet in her was kicking in. "If you're alive, you are experiencing things," she says. "You feel. And then you must decide what to do with that feeling. You can block it out or you can use it." And there was something else driving her. "I grew up in a privileged, super Catholic, super conservative family. I feel a responsibility to do something good because I have been given so many blessings."

WORKING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

As a street photographer Sacabo had photographed from the outside in. She was now starting to work from the inside out. For her there could be no turning back. "I do this work not by choice but by disposition. I'm not trying to make any statements. If I am completely moved, I trust that feeling. When you begin to see with the eye and the heart, you end up seeing what they want. Desire seals our vision."

She also began to work with a model, always the same woman, Jacqueline Miro, with whom she still collaborates. They are close, and Sacabo shares the revenue from photographs with her. Literary influences played a part as well, and continue to do so. In 1989 Sacabo created work to be shown with Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. "Those are on the soft side of what I do," she remarks. "Quiet male and female nudes in a room, done in the spirit of the *Elegies*. They look like ethereal creatures. They speak to the idea of us and the angels in between." Then she adds with a knowing laugh, "The pins come later."

Here she refers to those images that are heavy with



Cuerpo Atado (Bound Body)

darkness and the nether world. "I can't deny that sometimes I start from a dark, scary place in myself. But this is necessary. The work can transmute the pain and sadness. It makes transcendence possible." Her moody, contemplative works are favorites with collectors. Nowhere is this signature style better illustrated than in the photographs Sacabo created in response to the novel *Pedro Páramo*. Rulfo's work is a truly great classic of Mexican and Latin American literature. It is at once a haunting tale of longing and desire and an elegy for the disappearing Mexican culture.

ENTER JUAN RULFO

Just as the Contax had come to Sacabo at precisely the right time, so did Juan Rulfo. Sacabo had been drawn back to photograph in her home territory, using her mother's house as a base as she and her husband forayed out to deserted Mexican towns. Guerrero Viejo, just 15 miles from where she was born, especially moved her. Afterward she learned that her own grandmother had been born there. The ghosts were stirring. She called her model to come, telling her that she needed her to make photographs that would involve a woman wan-



El Patrón (The Bloss)



La Golondrina (The Swallow)

dering around in the ruins.

Sacabo did not know of *Pedro Páramo* until her model's aunt recommended it as pertinent to her work. It was more than pertinent. It became a turning point in Sacabo's photographic career. Her personal history and the Rulfo story are both rooted in the Mexican ranchero culture. The novel begins with a man traveling to his mother's village, Comala, in search of his father, Pedro Páramo. From the moment he arrives, details of Pedro's life and the lives of the villagers hypnotically intertwine.

In this novelistic world, Sacabo found her alter ego, Susana San Juan. The tragic heroine—Páramo's obsession—moves through the story as an uneasy spirit, making utterances from her tomb. In parallel, Sacabo's ancestral past and its lingering essence were calling to her in the present. Susana would reground Sacabo in the world of her Mexican grandmother.

"My personal identification with Susana was immediate and strong. She became my character. I knew her cultural world, the very heavy patriarchal, somewhat violent Latin culture. Rulfo's was a poetic version of that culture, more intense, more violent," she said. Sacabo's relationship with her own father, a powerful French-Italian-Mexican blend, was troubling. Though she has now reconciled with her mother, who is French-Mexican (and who loves her daughter's photographs), their early relationship was also difficult.

"Isolation haunts me," Sacabo admits. Sacabo could not thank Rulfo directly for the passageway his work had opened to her. He had gone to another dimension a few years before. Their meeting ground was that visionary sphere artists inhabit through their creations.

THE UNREACHABLE WORLD OF SUSANA SAN JUAN: HOMAGE TO JUAN RULFO

Once Sacabo found her character, her focus was clear. She would create photographs in an attempt "to depict this world as seen through the eyes of its tragic heroine." They would be Sacabo's "homage in images to Mexico, to Juan Rulfo, and to Susana San Juans everywhere who will not be possessed" (from the Afterword to *Pedro Páramo*). The portfolio, which she titled *El Mundo Inalcanzable de Susana San Juan: Homenaje a Juan Rulfo*, would take five years. "The book became completely part of me. I had it halfway memorized," she says.

In Susana, Sacabo had found the catalyst for all her passions to come together: acting, literature, and photography. Susana was also like a magnet, unearthing unresolved issues of Sacabo's past. Working in locations from San Antonio, to the southern tip of Mexico, to her studio, Sacabo inhabited Susana, breathed the fetid air that suffocated her, saw Susana's strength and struggle come alive in her model.

In *La Golondrina* (*The Swallow*-above), all is dark and shadowy, save for two cupped hands holding a dark bird. It could be dead, it could be alive, and it could be in transition. In fact, it is all states in one. Enigma and ambiguity are the fiber of the novel, as characters in the text contradict, correct, or wonder about one another endlessly. Each Sacabo photograph offers a profound visual equivalent.

While Sacabo was intent upon the *Susana* portfolio, which included hundreds of hours in the darkroom, she could not foresee the day she would be asked to use them to illustrate a new edition of *Pedro Páramo*. But

that day came. Though she had done such a personal take on the material, the images worked because she had done landscapes as well as portraits. But she had not made a single image of a man in the whole series. "I was not about to dress up a man in a Mexican outfit," she says. And then another one of those serendipitous things happened.

"I was in Mexico having a meal and talking about my dilemma and I said 'I'm thinking, maybe just a hat. . . ' and then my friend answered, 'You mean like the one behind you?' He had found this wonderful hat when he was digging the foundation for his house. It was very elegant, well-preserved with gold threads." Using two negatives, Sacabo created an image of a man's hand holding that hat, set against an image of clouds. This became the perfect cover (*El Patrón-The Boss*-page 19). As Sacabo explains, "The form of that hat is the symbol of the whole world. And that all-powerful patrón holds it in his hand."

A RARE BLEND

As an artist, Josephine Sacabo embodies that rare blend of photographer and poet, further gifted with the ability to imaginatively enter another psyche. Using both camera and darkroom to weave wonder out of film fragments of the real world, Sacabo creates sublime photographs of depth and universality. Their potency is enhanced by her complicated darkroom artistry, where she blends techniques and materials to alter each photograph. It is no wonder that these works cross genres in their appeal, playing upon the eye, the ear, the mind, and the imagination. A Sacabo photograph embraces the viewer at the deepest level, for it springs from a spirit that has explored and transfigured both light and dark.

Mexico's best-known writer, Elena Poniatowska, described Sacabo's photographs in *Pedro Páramo* as "the works of an illuminata, a widow, a mourner, a tragic heroine, a Texan of ancient Greece." She is all that and more. She has set no limits for herself as she probes the



La Mano (The Hand)

human condition through her photography. ■

TECHNICAL NOTES

Cameras: Pentax 6 x 7 is her regular studio camera; Mamiya 6 x 7 is for landscapes. She has recently acquired a panoramic 35mm Hassleblad she is using for a New Orleans landscape series.

Film: Kodak Tri -X.
Darkroom Notes: "I work like crazy to get the prints. It's enormously time-consuming. But I need that trajectory, time in the light making the negative, and time in the darkroom creating the print. Often I print with double negatives. To make a montage there's a lot of trial and error. I may flash the paper, tone, add an oil wash for a color shift, and/or use a

mask. The negatives when I start are straight and very clear. I try to get all the information there and then I decide what to eliminate in the darkroom. The negative is really like notes or the alphabet for the final thing. Sometimes I feel like I'm struggling uphill, you try every idea and nothing works. But when things are working I feel like I'm in an altered state, a state of grace."

Josephine Sacabo lives and works in New Orleans. On September 6 & 7, Josephine Sacabo will teach at the Woodstock Center for Photography. Works from all her portfolios are available from A Gallery for Fine Photography, 241 Chartres Street, New Orleans, LA. For additional information on Pedro Páramo, contact the University of Texas Press, PO Box 7819, Austin TX 78713-7819 www.utexas.edu/utpress.

Images for this article were graciously supplied by the Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago, 312-266-2350 -ed.

Mary Ann Lynch is a writer and photographer living in New York. A retrospective of her Hawaii work, "Kalapana, a Hawaiian Place" is currently at the Lyman Museum in Hilo, Hawaii. A portfolio of her photographs, "Marilyn Monroe" appeared in the June issue of *Cheese*, the first photography magazine to be published in Estonia. Contact her at Mlynch3424@aol.com.