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STUDIO HOLDS
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magical REALISM

By Suzanne Stouse
Contributing writer

In the "front room," where photographer Josephine Sacabo takes her pictures, an oversized chaise longue stretches toward a pastoral backdrop once used by a turn-of-the-past-century photographer, and the dusky panels of an old mirrored screen flash back a surreal shot of the scene.

This is near a wonder wall populated by a Roman legionnaire, a puppet; the Virgin Mary, the embroidered centerpiece of an old processional banner; and a pair of Confucian figures, guards of a medieval-abbey set piece from an unknown stage production. Above it all, shrimp designs dance across the original tin ceiling, a hint, perhaps, that the place started life as a seafood market.

Through the looking glass — in this case an exquisite stained-glass door from Buenos Aires — is the only other room within these 1,850 square feet. Its walls bear a pair of foil Day of the Dead shields and eyes — drawn, photographed and painted, including an eye in a box by French symbolist Odilon Redon — that fix on yours. Everywhere, everywhere, dream-like black-and-white photographs, many with Spanish titles, stop you in your tracks.

And this is where somebody *works*?

Quite nicely, says Sacabo, who is featured through early January in a 25-year retrospective of her work at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, a major exhibit that also honors New Orleans sculptor Ery Schwartz and painter George Dureau.



Josephine Sacabo purchased the 1,850-square-foot Faubourg Marigny building, which housed a furniture refinishing business, in 2004.

Inside A CENTURY-
OLD BRICK BUILDING IN
FAUBOURG MARIGNY LIES
'A SPACE TO HARBOR
DAYDREAMS AND REVERIES'

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LEFT: 'I treasure most my press, which was made to order,' says Sacabo, who does all the printing herself.

LEFT, MIDDLE: The 'front room' of Josephine Sacabo's photography studio, which she has filled with dreamy decor.

FAR LEFT: A giant plastic foam eye from a Mardi Gras costume, contributed by friend and Carnival historian Henri Schindler, keeps watch from the corner of a seating area.

PHOTOS BY DAVID GRINFELD / THE TIMES-PIAYUNE



El Tiempo Ingrato by Josephine Sacabo

LOOKING BACK

WHAT: 'Oyeme Con Los Ojos (Hear Me With Your Eyes),' a retrospective on 'visual manifestations of the written word' by photographer Josephine Sacabo, exhibited with retrospectives on New Orleans sculptor Ersy Schwartz and painter George Dureau.

WHERE: Ogden Museum of Southern Art, 925 Camp St.

WHEN: Through early January

ON THE COVER: A neighbor's dog, Ferguson, visits with photographer Josephine Sacabo in front of a pastoral backdrop once used by a photographer a century ago.

'The old mirrored screen ... never fails to make everything it reflects into some kind of metaphor,' Sacabo says. 'It truly is magical.'

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Far from distractions, the playful pieces in Sacabo's studio make for some serious muses, she says.

Perchance to daydream

"I was reading Gaston Bachelard's 'Poetics of Space' the year I got the place," Sacabo said of the 1908 Faubourg Marigny building she purchased in 2004.

"And the book was basically my decorating manual. He says a house should be a space to harbor daydreams and reveries, and so I just filled the place with stuff that puts me in the mood to want to take pictures."

Stuff like those eyes, for instance. Friend and Carnival historian Henri Schindler left behind a giant plastic foam eye from a Mardi Gras costume; it eventually popped up in Sacabo's "Nocturnes" series, one of several on view at the Ogden.

More stuff of dreams has come from local auction houses and antiques dealers, especially Allain Bush, "who always had something in her store to set me off dreaming," Sacabo said.

"That explains some of my favorite things, like the old mirrored screen that never fails to make everything it reflects into some kind of metaphor — it truly is magical — and all kinds of other lunacies that would probably not make it into a place where one lives, but are great for a place where one dreams and works."

It is a place, she said, that's "kind of an opera set with no production playing that day."

Practically speaking, it is also "a beautiful, self-standing brick building" that housed a furniture refinishing business when Sacabo chanced upon it during a scouting trip for a new studio and instantly fell for the big windows and 16-foot ceilings.

All that needed doing was knocking out a couple of partitions, putting in the massive stained-glass door and a bathroom with clawfoot tub for houseguests, and painting the walls and concrete floor.

Those chores were a shade different from those that came with the 6,000-square-foot French Quarter house Sacabo shares with her husband, writer and artist Dalt Wonk, and earlier, their daughter Iris. When they moved in, the 1830s merchant's house hadn't seen the light of day for years because the previous owner had covered all the windows with black garbage bags and packed the place stem to stern with forlorn pieces of the past, including "whole circular staircases in pieces on the floors."

Life on the set

Among the noteworthy pieces in Sacabo's studio are a set of original Thonet bentwood armchairs made in Vienna that hug an



Sacabo keeps in her studio items that inspire her. Along one wall is a Roman legionnaire, a puppet; the Virgin Mary, the embroidered centerpiece of an old processional banner; and a pair of Confucian figures, guards of a medieval-abbey set piece from an unknown stage production.



More stuff of dreams has come from local auction houses and antiques dealers.



Shrimp designs on the original tin ceiling hint, perhaps, that the 1908 Faubourg Marigny building started life as a seafood market.

PHOTOS BY DAVID GRUNFELD / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

equally handsome cypress table. But it's the wealth of antique theater-set pieces — including an enormous chunk of cypress and painted canvas that makes a fine counter — that perhaps best suits erstwhile actress Sacabo.

A force of nature from Laredo, Texas — where "the Spanish side of the family" has lived since the town's founding in the late 1700s, "when it was Mexico," she said — Sacabo and Wonk studied theater at Bard College in the '60s, ran their own stage company in London and New York and worked in the outre Grand Theatre Panique in

France, where they lived for some 10 years.

In 1973, Sacabo agreed to her husband's suggestion to "come back to the U.S. and be more involved with the life and language here." Convinced that New Orleans "would be a little of both Europe and the U.S.," the two chose New Orleans — and traveled here by freighter "in order to do a story about it so that we could sell ourselves as journalists when we got there."

Which they did, handily, getting work at New Orleans magazine and the late Vieux Carre Courier, she producing the "journalistic street photography under the influence

of Henri Cartier-Bresson" that she favored when she started taking pictures in 1972.

But that was before "the magic and sadness and poetry of the city started permeating everything I shot," she said "and it all became more Clarence Laughlin than Cartier-Bresson."

'I'm where I need to be'

Now known for her dream-like, archaic-looking portraits inspired by great works of poetry, Sacabo said that influence began to shape her work in 1985, "when I did a street photography series in the French Quarter based on Baudelaire's prose poems called 'Spleen De Paris,' and then a series based on

Rilke's 'Duino Elegies' — the latter work featured in a new translation of the German collection.

"And poetry," she said, "has been there ever since."

Her highly praised work inspired by Latin literature, largely the result of efforts by 20-year "model and muse" Jacqueline Miro to help her reconnect to her Latin roots, continues with Miro's 7-year-old daughter Clara Abreu.

A Sacabo model for three years, Clara has "played" the "baby Sor Juana" in the series "Oyeme Con Los Ojos" ("Hear Me With Your Eyes") — also the title of the Ogden show — which was inspired by 17th-century Mexican nun and poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, "a woman who created the most renowned salon of her time from behind the bars of her cloistered cell."

The Sor Juana series and a trove of other studies have led to Sacabo's work's placement in major galleries and museum collections around the world, and to the production of four books featuring her photography, including a reissue of the novel "Pedro Páramo" by the Mexican author and photographer Juan Rufo.

In addition to location shoots in Mexico, Sacabo does "outside work" here among the trees of City Park. Inside the studio, accompanied variously by classical and ranchera music, she gets down to business with a practically perfect part of her workplace.

"I treasure most my press, which was made to order," said Sacabo, who does all the printing herself, a polymer photo-gravure process producing "the beautiful handmade look of an engraving — which it is — but it's achieved with sunlight and water and is not toxic like the older engraving methods."

Without the press, she reasons, "all the rest would be just decor."

Dug in so well in this place, in this city, does Sacabo ever see herself living somewhere else? The chance seems remote.

"I'm definitely where I need to be," she has decided. "Here and in Mexico."