

The New York Times

Life and Art, Side by Side

AT HOME WITH
ERSY SCHWARTZ
AND JOSEPHINE SACABO



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARA EDNEY BRADLEY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Two women, influenced by each other and their French Quarter houses.

By PENELOPE GREEN

NEW ORLEANS

ERSY SCHWARTZ, a sculptor, and Josephine Sacabo, a photographer, are old friends, neighbors and artistic collaborators who live in the crumbling village known as the French Quarter, in houses that are exemplars of a certain local aesthetic composed of equal parts grandeur and mystery, funk and rot. They are also fomenters of the sort of time-traveling artwork that comes with a distinctly New Orleans point of view.

In Ms. Schwartz's meticulous, mischievous pieces — which might be peopled with tiny winged figures that have bird skulls in place of heads or real mice cast in bronze — and in Ms. Sacabo's ghostly, smoky female figures, you can see the collision of magic realism, allegory and surrealism. It's a territory of fallen angels, omnivorous ancestors and all manner of fantastic creatures.

The two artists are the subject of side-by-side retrospectives, "Ersy: Architect of Dreams" and "Oyeme con los Ojos (Hear Me With Your Eyes),"



MAGICAL REALISTS Ersy Schwartz, top left, and Josephine Sacabo, right, use their houses in New Orleans as incubators for their artwork. Above, Ms. Schwartz's bronze mice; right, a photograph by Ms. Sacabo.



opening here Saturday at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art.

This is significant not just because it's a celebration of two local heroes. (Although devotees of Ms. Schwartz, a shy, gruff woman who is clearly allergic to self-marketing, will find it satisfying to see four decades' worth of her work in one place for the first time.) It is also an intermezzo in the drama of real life, which has dealt some blows to both

women in the last decade, a period that has not been easy for anyone in this town.

As Kyle Roberts, Ms. Schwartz's partner, said, it signifies a moment "when we can all exhale."

"Sorry about the dust," Ms. Schwartz was saying early last week, as she handed over a photograph of her grandmother decked out as Queen of Comus (that's high up in the caste society of New Orleans, as it plays out in Mardi Gras krewes).

This reporter added it to a little pile of objects she had accumulated on the red velvet and rosewood sofa, part of a suite of furniture that in all likelihood had occupied the same spot in Ms. Schwartz's front parlor since 1925, when her grandmother bought the place, which was built in the mid-19th century as a billiard house, an extension to the gaming club next door.

There was also one of Ms. Schwartz's cast-bronze mice, in a horizontal arabesque pose, and a painted metal parakeet, a prop in a practical joke her father liked to play on her, which involved hiding her real parakeet and replacing it with this tiny simulacrum.

"I had a very odd childhood," said Ms. Schwartz, 60, whose family moved into the house when she was 10. Indeed, her father, an avid hunter who ran a wholesale hardware company, liked to use his only daughter as target practice, shooting her with his BB gun as she ran back and forth on the front lawn.

"It didn't hurt," she said unconvincingly.

Ms. Schwartz's childhood was also marked by tragedies, including the early deaths of several family members. In a city where you expect a gothic family history, Ms. Schwartz's stands out.

"If my work seems a little grim, it is," she said.

At Cooper Union, in Manhattan, where she taught for 20 years, Ms. Schwartz would harvest the mice that sanitation workers flushed out from under the statue of Peter Cooper. She cast them in bronze and tucked them into pieces like a cheese grater fitted out on the inside with spiky teeth and tufted red velvet — a luxurious, toothy coffin. (After Hurricane Katrina, Ms. Schwartz mourned the

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**'The house always wins,' says
Ersy Schwartz, who stayed
during Hurricane Katrina and
bathed in the fountain.**

"Ersy said it looks like someone under ether," Ms. Sacabo said. "She'd say, 'Sacabo, if you make me paint this one more time, ...' But it had to be just right."

Jon Newlin, an author of "Geopsychic Wonders of New Orleans," said that like so many New Orleans artists: "Josephine and Ersy are sat givers. Josephine is sort of guided by her literary enthusiasm, and Ersy is completely instanced. I think everything comes out of that deranged head of hers. The connective tissue? They are both eccentrics in their art."

D. Eric Bookhardt, Mr. Newlin's co-author and a longtime art reviewer for *Gambit*, the city's alternative weekly newspaper, noted that each artist's habitat is tangled up in her work.

"Josephine's influences are the French Symbolist poets," he said. "But being a Latina, she has that sort of magic realist DNA in her blood." Like Keith Carter and Debbie Flanning Catlett, Ms. Sacabo is representative of a group of Southern Gulf Coast photographers who have their antecedents in the work of Clarence John Laughlin and E. J. Belloc, the Storyville documentarian who inspired Louis Mallie's "Pretty Baby."

The artwork of both women "reflects this sort of transmutation of humanistic values into these, hence, symbolic creatures," as Mr. Bookhardt put it, and "that all relates to the environment they live in. Because what I would designate as the New Orleans *modus operandi* for interior décor is surrounding oneself with talismanic objects that create a certain aesthetic."

"Small things take on a certain charge that somehow communicates," he added, "even if you don't know what they mean to the owner."

And if these two houses are "tropical magical realist" environments, as Mr. Bookhardt would say, they are merely emblematic of the sort of rotting grandeur, the embrace of the inevitability of decay, that pervades the city.

Time, Mr. Bookhardt continued, warning to his theme, "is really the design element here. It's a palette, a creative pool and expression."

Peeling paint, family photographs thick with dust and decomposing on a mottled, pockmarked plaster wall: these represent existential truths, mementos moel. And who can be bothered, or has the money, for upkeep? Better to make a friend of decay.

"It keeps you in touch with the organic unity of life," Mr. Bookhardt said. "It's going to happen to us all one day."

THE year before Katrina, Mr. Wink had a mysterious seizure, and surgeons removed a piece of his brain. It was Ms. Schwartz who met Mr. Sacabo and their daughter, Iris, at the airport (they had been in New York for a show of Ms. Sacabo's photographs) and let them know he had made it through the night. It would be three months before Mr. Wink left the hospital. When he did, Ms. Schwartz made him a piece of art: a little bronze *l'arcus* figure caught in a goblet.

Two years earlier, she had finished a significant work, called "Homage to the Society of St. Anne." A darkly comic piece with 100 precisely rendered bronze figures, tiny mythic creatures — a headless pig, a cowboy boot, a bird — striding across a table at eye level, it compares up the real St. Anne's parade, which was started in 1904 by three local characters, Henri Schneider, Paul Poche and Mr. Newlin, and took on a funerary quality

EMBRACING DECAY

Ms. Schwartz helped Ms. Sacabo and Mr. Wink paint the living room four times, to get the appropriate shade of smoky blue, right. But it took a leak to achieve a real New Orleans patina. Ms. Schwartz also built the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Above the fireplace is one of Ms. Sacabo's photographs, "El Final," from 1995. Behind the roses, above, is a tragedy mask Mr. Wink found in Venice.

The early-20th-century marionette theater, far right, was a gift from Ms. Sacabo to her husband. Below right, Tina the cat sits on two 19th-century toy children's beds welded together.



PHOTOGRAPH BY GARY COOK, BEAUFORT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

during the worst years of the AIDS epidemic, when marchers would carry the ashes of friends and tip them into the Mississippi.

The piece was also a tribute to Ms. Schwartz's mother, some of whose ashes Ms. Schwartz poured into the river that year at the parade. The rest are buried in the garden out front, under a camellia bush, next to those of her aunt and her grandmother.

As in most New Orleans houses, the dead are everywhere. Ms. Schwartz's cousin, Jack McIlhenny, is in the front parlor, in a wooden box. Most of the ashes of Jimmy Vial, a friend who died of AIDS in the mid-1980s, are in the Pacific Ocean, in a piece Ms. Schwartz made to look like a metronome, but some were stuffed into capsules and laid on the seat of another artwork, a miniature wheelchair inside a pyramid. That sculpture is at the Ogden this week, but not the capsules: "They're in the house somewhere," Ms. Schwartz said.

Like Ms. Schwartz herself, who battled lung cancer a year and a half ago ("Yes, and I'm still standing," she'll say, brandishing an unfettered Cartier), her house is standing through sheer force of will, and, perhaps, the will of the ghosts collected there.

"It's a beautiful house," said Ms. Roberts, 33. "But its needs are insatiable."

When Ms. Roberts left town the day before Katrina, she said, "I was really convinced I was going to come with me. But no, the house always wins."

As Ms. Schwartz said, "The house is an illness with me." She stayed on for a week, post-Katrina, entertaining several guests. They bathed in the fountain.

In 2008, Ms. Roberts bought the "Homage" piece and donated it to the Ogden, which gave the museum's curator at the time the idea to collect Ms. Schwartz's work in a major retrospective, and pair it with Ms. Sacabo's.

"When things were really ugly," Ms. Sacabo said, "when Ersy was in the hospital, I'd say, 'Come on, we're doing this show.' It was like an incentive."

"You know, there is no art manifesto between us," she continued. "It's not this surrealistic dahlia dahl. That's irrelevant. What connects us is a shared sustaining feeling, this life of going back and forth, this emotional support."

She added: "It's more a life-experience sort of connection, rather than Ersy's surrealist bird heads and my eyeballs. The point is that we are friends."

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"Don't Walk," but Mr. Wonk, a playwright and theater critic, said these days he tells people it's Romanian Jewish.

"I got sick of telling the story," he said. "And anyway, I didn't want people to think I didn't want to be Jewish." (Mr. Wonk, 69, is also the author and illustrator of books of fables with a jaundiced worldview. "Experience teaches nothing until it is too late" reads the epigraph of one he dedicated to Ms. Schwartz's mother, who died in 2001.)

MS. Sacabo, 60, was raised Catholic, in a formal Latin family that was not overly thrilled by her choice of a husband. Her father never really forgave her, she said, for marrying "outside of my milieu." When he died, her mother bought her the merchant's house as a kind of peace offering. Since the 1970s, Ms. Sacabo and her husband had been living in an atmospheric rental nearby, after a decade in the south of France, where they'd had a theater company.

Their new house had been owned by a reclusive architect who was a hoarder. He had covered the windows in black plastic, to save on air-conditioning, and was camping in two rooms. The rest of the house was stuffed with birdcages of his own design, brass chandeliers, wooden shutters, old doors, kitchen cabinets, vacuum cleaners, spiral staircases, curious iron grillwork boxes and fire irons, to name a few of his obsessions. When he died, his family sold the house for about \$380,000, contents included.

"That was the condition," Ms. Sacabo said. "That we clear all the junk out. But for people like us, it was like some serious flea market."

She and Mr. Wonk and Ms. Schwartz made the house habitable, laying in new plumbing and wiring, and plastering and painting. Shutters became closet doors; the weird iron boxes are now planters.

"We were broke, Ersy was broke, dah dah dah," Ms. Sacabo said cheerfully. A cattle inheritance back in Laredo was a windfall that paid for the kitchen, though its cabinets she found in the former owner's stash upstairs.

Ms. Schwartz built the grand floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in the living room and the sinuous spiral staircase, with help from her Cooper Union students. They painted the living room four times, under Ms. Sacabo's precise direction. It looks like a cloudy sky, and now that the paint has peeled, exposing the crumbly, water-stained plaster, it has that distinct New Orleans patina. As in Venice, decay is a design element here.

ADOPTED Josephine Sacabo and her husband, Dalt Wonk, bought an old merchant's house from the family of an eccentric architect, who had filled it with a crush of objects that Ms. Sacabo and Mr. Wonk culled to furnish it. The cabinets in the kitchen, center, were part of the former owner's stash. Ms. Schwartz and her students made the stair rail, bottom left.

