Five Voices: The Faces and Words of Five New Orleans Artists after Hurricane Katrina

Reflections of my summer research project

On a Monday in June 2006, I stumbled out of an airport shuttle into the Ninth Ward’s broken streets sagging under a heavy Louisiana sun. I dragged my luggage up the front steps of a Catholic elementary school—a place that saved 200 lives during Hurricane Katrina. It is now a temporary base for a volunteer organization called Common Ground Collective. During spring break the previous March, I was among a number of UPS students who gutted houses in New Orleans with Common Ground, so I figured hooking up with the same people would be a good way for me to start my summer project.

As I approached the school I saw a handful of volunteers enjoying their smokes and guitars. After I signed in, a girl about my age showed me to a cot in the library that would serve as my home for the next 8 weeks. I shared the library with a dozen others who, like myself, were chosen from a number of applicants to help in a handful of desperately needed summer programs for kids. Once at my destination I released the death-grip on a giant duffle bag full of camping gear, clothes, film, fresh notebooks, and Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude. My clenched nerves didn’t release as easily, however, so jarred they were by the kind of terrified excitement one gets when a potentially dangerous adventure lies in wait behind that first curve of summer. Though I went through a grueling five-day orientation for educators, nothing could prepare me for the intensity of teaching and hanging out with kids who redefined the phrase “tough love” for me.

The question I sought to address in my research project was this:

In what ways has the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina affected the deeply rooted, diverse culture in New Orleans, particularly the lives of local artists? In addition, how has art been used as a means to cope with and process the hardship?

I went into this project assuming a lot of things. Many of those assumptions dissolved after the first taste of the complexity of the situation in which I found myself. I had assumed that a couple of small boxes of art supplies would be warmly received and adequate for a classroom. I assumed that teaching an art class for kids, as well as living communally with about 200 other various volunteers, would be a casual part-time job that would leave me plenty of time and energy for my “actual” project—that is, finding out how artists and their art have been affected by the hurricane. I assumed that an essential component of this project would involve a fair portion of scholarly research in a library. Furthermore, I assumed that such research could provide me with some sort of overarching blanket of information—information I actually believed could neatly answer my giant questions. I thought statistical things could neatly contain the jumble of first-person accounts I planned on collecting from artists I hoped to run into.

Instead I found myself scrubbing cooking pots in the rain or sitting on porches in the heat after returning from my 12-hour work days, wearily watching as National Guard
hummers grumbled by. Each day I felt I sifted through a world still littered with rotting emblems of a passing life, yet still dotted with friendly opportunities for passing conversation. The sum of daily cultural exposure felt as mighty as the now-familiar Mighty Mississippi, which carries on its rolling back the dark shapes of nocturnal ships. I left Louisiana two months later weighed-down by the hundreds of defined faces and voices I had grown to love one by one. I had arrived wide-eyed, yet unable to see. By the time I left, my eyes felt old.

My experience manifested to me that in my struggle to understand the cultural effects of the hurricane, I absolutely had to connect with the people; I had to pass myself from faces to eyes to words to hands to laughs to sighs. I learned to surrender myself to the natural rhythms of the New Orleans culture and trust that this would bring me to the best conclusion to my project. In the end I chose to focus on the direct faces and honest words of five individuals—each of them are local artists—and I chose to present them in the form of black and white photographs and individual article-style interviews. What personal insights can they offer to the big questions? I can not pretend to speak for these people, but rather I seek to give you those faces and words each person gave to me for a brief moment in a broken place in a broken time.

--Gloria Treseder ’08