

# Photos capture natural rhythms

By LUCIA MURO

The skin of a diamond-back moccasin hangs in a tranquil spiral on a wall in Jane Fulton Alt's upstairs home-studio. On a nearby table rests a chalk-white bovine skull. Curtains from an open window brush against a black-and-white photographic image of a child's bare feet, egg shells and feathers encased in a wire-mesh box.

Yet, there is nothing macabre or foreboding about this unobtrusive work space. Instead it brims with life or, more accurately, a blissful acceptance of the life cycle.

Fulton Alt, an Evanston photographer, respectfully links vitality and decay in her black-and-white studies of Mexico and Louisiana. Her exhibit of silver-gelatin prints, "Southern Exposures," is on display through Oct. 30 at the Wilmette Public Library, 1242 Wilmette Ave. A reception will be held from 6 to 8:30 p.m. Friday. The exhibit is free and open to the public. For more information, call 256-5025.

Mysticism and mortality hover, above these paradoxical portraits at once soothing and arresting; sublime and grotesque. She presents opposites as part of a continuum where life meets death with no apologies. A quiet sense of liberation comes with this fearless artistic plunge into the inevitable end we all must face. Her travels to the bayous of Louisiana and Mexico's rugged interior have given the artist insights into humankind's profound connection to the earth.

## Facing death

"In our society, we're so phobic about death," commented Fulton Alt as she unveiled a photo of two wide-eyed Mexican children waving skeleton puppets during the country's Day of the Dead celebrations. "It's viewed as something to be feared, not embraced."

"I have found in less industrialized areas that, because people live closer to the land, they are more involved with the rhythms of the life cycle. Death is like a leaf falling from a tree. It's the idea that birth is but a death begun."

A licensed clinical social worker,

Fulton Alt began exploring ideas of mortality, regeneration and spirituality via black-and-white photography seven years ago. She was at the point of "letting go" and devoting time to self-examination after raising three children. In fact, her multimedia piece with the feathers and egg shells serves as an early visual encapsulation of this key



Photographer Jane Fulton Alt snaps a self-portrait.

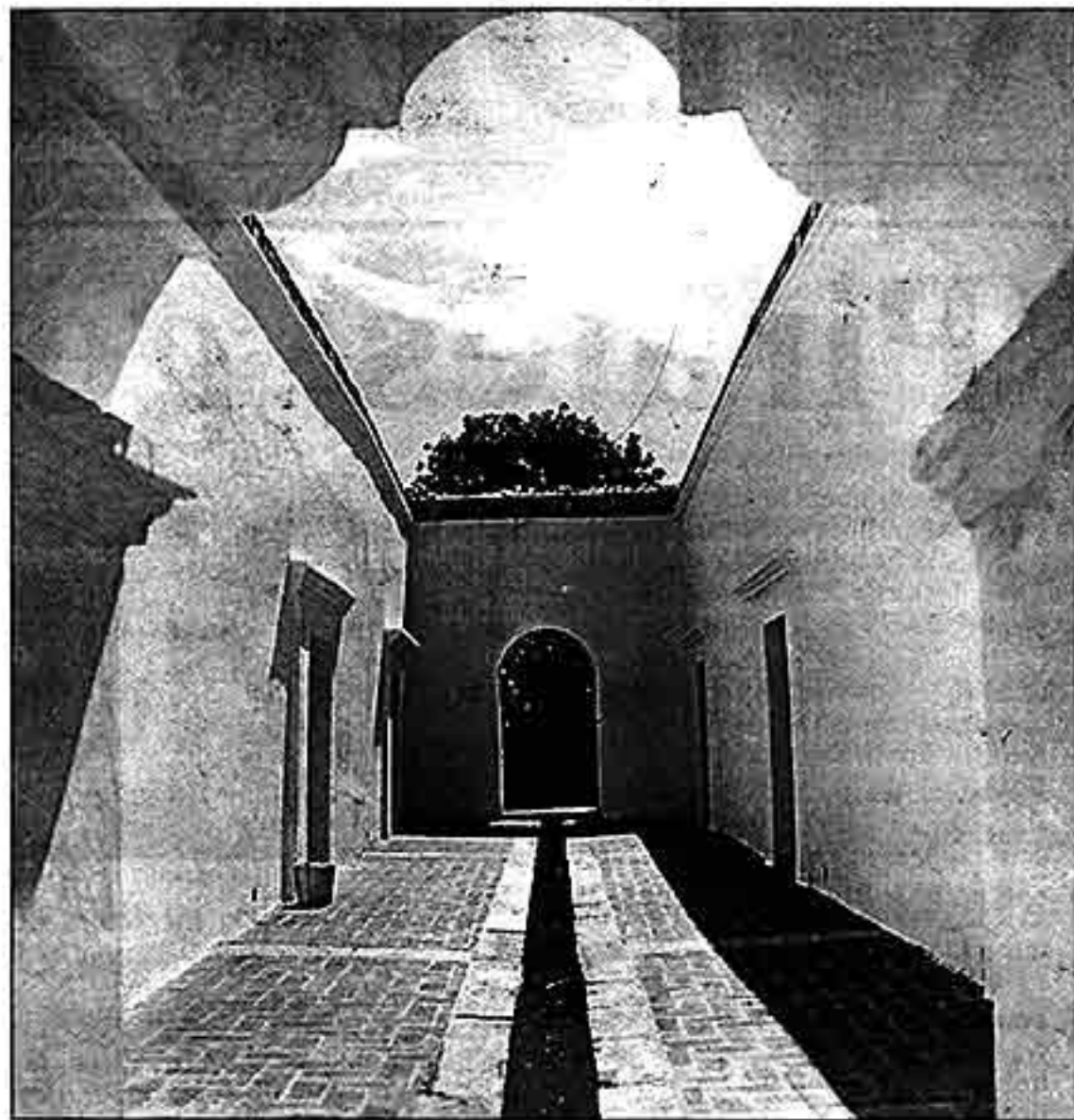
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An intrepid traveler, she has viewed the total eclipse of the sun on the Black Sea as part of a tour sponsored by the Adler Planetarium and has participated in famed chef Rick Bayless' excursions to Tabasco, Veracruz and Guadalajara. Her work hangs in Bayless' Frontera Grill and Topolobampo.

One of Fulton Alt's most self-revelatory trips was a six-day solo exploration of Louisiana's swamp country. Here she could assume the role of a photographer- not mother, wife or social worker- who was free to roam and make her own cathartic discoveries.

"This trip was like shedding my skin," admitted the artist after pointing to the dried snake hide on the wall. "I really opened up on this trip and felt deeply connected to the quiet, awe-inspiring nature around me. I feel like I am being guided in this direction. My photos are almost like gifts. I'm interested in things we can't see; things we don't know. Somehow I try to reference them on film."

And Fulton Alt's ability to truly see the miracles of a chrysalis forming, a dragonfly molting, or a spectacular sunrise gives her photographs a transcendent quality. Her soul is laced throughout every image- from the primeval "Lord of the Rings"-like abstraction of meat grilling on cross-shaped skewers to a stone angel weeping into a planter where a plant has taken root.



Jane Fulton Alt's "Inner Courtyard"



Jane Fulton Alt's "Maia Dolorosa del Monte Calvario".

Perhaps one of the most startling works is "Self Portrait Holding a Heart" in which Fulton Alt, clad in a "saintly" draped white gown cradles an actual pig's heart against her chest (she is photographed from the neck to the bust). The picture is encased in a wooden box decorated with fabric and gold leaf.

"This image is so personal for me," she explained, "I wanted it protected from the viewer. I had visited a slaughterhouse and felt the pig was being sacrificed for all of us. I wanted to elevate the heart."

## Back to basics

Over time, Fulton Alt has been more compelled to get back to our

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roots as human beings. She is concerned that a society like ours, which buys its meat neatly packaged at a supermarket and is rarely exposed to the realities of the life cycle, will lose sight of those crucial instinctual ties to nature. She is, therefore, trying to reawaken that inextricable bond within herself by seeking out and photographing the natural rhythms of time.

These are not necessarily pleasant images, but they all encompass a provocative inner beauty. In her photograph of a decomposing dog, off the side of a road, the animal becomes one with the earth as foliage sprouts through its pelvic bone.

"I'm always drawn to where nature overtakes man's structures," shared Fulton Alt. "I'm finding that I get more answers about the true meaning of life from older civilizations. All of our needs are the same. We all need to be loved and cared for. If we look around, the natural world has so much to teach us."

Then, as she opened another window to let in the sounds of rustling trees on this bright autumn afternoon, the photographer added pensively, "I think life is a string of connections and separations."