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Stark photographs reveal New Orleans' plight

By **MIY LEAVITT** | Staff writer

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In the strange world of hurricane-ravaged New Orleans, perhaps it's not surprising that a collection of photographs almost entirely devoid of the presence of human beings has become a favorite vision of the ongoing disaster.

Evanston photographer Jane Peltus Alt, a social worker, traveled to New Orleans 10 weeks after the Aug. 29, 2005, landfall of Hurricane Katrina, on a consulting trip of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Ethically, she was forbidden from photographing the people whom she counseled. But in early mornings, she escaped from their angst to walk the neighborhoods of the lower 9th Ward with her camera, where residents were then barred from returning to their homes.



This devastated home at a prominent intersection in New Orleans' 9th Ward has become a local landmark, says Evanston photographer Jane Peltus Alt. — Jesse Brown/Staff Photographer

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PLIGHT

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"The lower 9th was so gray." Alt remembered. "There wasn't anything living there."

All feasted on what news photographers used mainly as backgrounds as they followed emergency workers and fleeing or returning residents: smashed buildings, abandoned household items and such disposable detritus as masks and gloves, left behind by those who sneaked back to search for possessions, people or pets.

All shot in color, but grays dominate her photographs. Despite their lack of animation, they've welcomed widely, from Wilmette to Syria.

Now on display

Through Sept. 28, Alt's Katrina pictures can be seen in the Wilmette Public Library, where she spoke this week. She has dates to show photographs and speak at public libraries in Evanston, Prospect Heights, Glenview and Antioch. Katrina shots also will be included in Alt's one-woman show Sept. 8 through Oct. 25 at Chicago's Flatfile Gallery.

All's work also will be on display Sept. 21 through Oct. 21 at the Evanston Center for Photography, through Sept. 17 at the New Orleans Museum of Art, and even at next month's International Photography Festival in Aleppo, Syria. The photos will be included in an upcoming book, and Alt plans a short film.

The DePaul University Art Museum last winter was one of the first venues to show Alt's Katrina work. Director Louise Lincoln said Plight that Alt is "good at networking and sort of making people and resonating," but her work speaks for itself.

As "a clinical social worker... she's acutely sensitive to the emotional state of people who lived through" the disaster, Lincoln added. "She was careful not to include people without their permission, and didn't want to exploit them. That said, they're intensely personal images."

"The photos are beautifully composed and — unlike the photos out in the press, which were of intense colors — everything's covered with mud. Her color palette reflects the emotional tenor of the situation in very evocative ways, I think."

A different perspective

Alt said last week that more than her photos are different from media cover-

age. She says some of her 9th Ward contacts are right when they say the media made black people look like second-class citizens.

"One woman said, 'The media portrays us at the scum of the earth. I have three daughters, two with a college education, one with a master's degree. We've always paid our bills and we've never asked for anything, but that's not the story the media wants to tell.'" Alt remembered.

Though her photographs are largely colorless, her stories are vivid.

"I spoke to a nurse who had sent children ahead, trying to help a neighbor leave, who got stuck in the attic," Alt said. "She'll never forget the things she heard. She said the water was filled with alligators, fish and snakes... She heard people yelling for help in their attics, knocking on their ceilings, only to be silenced by the rising waters."

"She can't get that out of her head." Alt counted hundreds in New Orleans, including displaced people who were placed on buses that cruised slowly past their homes. The riders were allowed to get out to take exterior photographs of their homes for insurance purposes, but then return to the bus. The passengers often sobbed quietly or sang gospel songs.

"Later, people had free access," she said. "What was that about? There were people from Chicago, all over, who basically had a day there, and they all had to get there on their own money, then go back. Maybe the city was setting up closure, but you can't get closure on a bus ride."

She said she didn't sleep well until she had been in New Orleans six days. Nevertheless, she returned to the city in June to take more pictures.

"I feel a really deep connection to the lower 9th Ward and to New Orleans," she said last week. "I needed to see for myself what was the same, and what was different."

"The 9th Ward didn't look different," she said. "The streets were cleaner so you could drive through. There were a lot of workmen, and not so many abandoned cars."

In general, however, living conditions haven't changed much, she said. Alt maintained that if more residents were white, the differences would have been greater.

"If the same thing happened in Florida, it would have been taken care of immediately," she said. "This is a sad statement about how we treat our own."