

In May 2004, I returned to my hometown of New Orleans after studying photography in New York and gaining a new understanding of lighting and patience. Inspired by insomnia and eager to test out my new skills, I made my first exposure of the *New Orleans Nightscapes Series*. Scouring the neighborhoods during midnight walks, I used these quiet hours to capture the city's mysterious nocturnal spirit.

Some people say these photographs are "political", claiming I intentionally juxtaposed the structures of the rich and the poor. Others interpret these images as late-night postcards of the city's historical architecture. I say the photographs are another artist's attempt to tell the intriguingly paradoxical story of New Orleans through its buildings. New Orleans sits in a naturally decaying environment. Moisture deteriorates wood, whether that occurs by humidity's slow hand or with the catastrophic blow of a levee break. Before Katrina, the buildings of New Orleans revealed their owner's choice to either fight this decay or surrender to nature's will. Even after shooting the image of a house with a now prophetic background sign reading "Flood Prone Area," I could not anticipate the next chapter in the city's long reliant and embittered relationship with the waters that form her boundaries.

I returned six weeks after the levees broke following Hurricane Katrina. In early October 2005, in the thick of a blackout, I turned down an unmarked street in the Lower Ninth Ward. The headlights of my minivan stretched across the mud-covered road and fell upon a tilting shotgun structure. The building had been lifted by rising waters off its foundation and deposited like silt in the middle of the street. This single misplaced structure, formerly someone's home, symbolized the vast, tragic story of this ruined neighborhood. The solemnity of the wrecked landscape was amplified by the silence of my surroundings. I could only hear the scraping of tin, the flapping of torn plastic, and the wind rustling countless personal possessions. I set up my lights, and ten minutes into an 18-minute exposure, I heard the engine of an approaching National Guard patrol. I knew their headlights would destroy the shot so I ran past the lens up to the Humvee. Inside, two young men sat with guns in their laps.

"Please turn off your headlights. There are eight minutes left on the exposure." They readily complied before asking, "What in the hell are you doing out here?" I was not supposed to be in this restricted area. I played dumb and asked if I could please finish the exposure. Agreeing, we all waited until the camera clicked. The guardsmen watched patiently as I packed up the lights and my camera and then they escorted me out of the barricaded area, asking only one more question: "Are you crazy?"

The result of that particular night's craziness is *Lizardi*, pictured here. In making these photographs, I want to compose and light the houses in a way that invites viewers to look a little longer, more than we typically do in our rapid page-turning habits. I hope this photo essay captures viewers' complete attention and inspires people to help rebuild the city of New Orleans with the integrity she deserves.



NEW ORLEANS

NIGHTSCAPE

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