

ARTIST profile

NEW ORLEANS HOMES & LIFESTYLES

PHOTOGRAPH BY THOM BENNETT LIGHTING BY FRANK RELLE

[frank
relle]

"NEW ORLEANS IS A NIGHTTIME CITY,"

photographer Frank Relle says, explaining the nocturnal work habits that produce his evocative, unsettling images of houses around the city. "Even if I wanted to take these pictures during the day, I just wouldn't feel these pictures during the day."

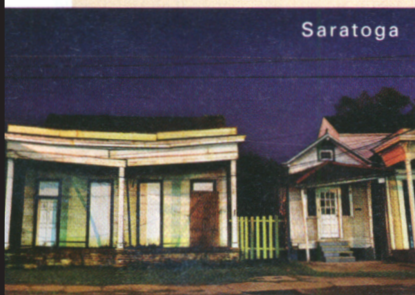
That Relle is able to extract feeling, mood and atmosphere from something as familiar—even clichéd—as a dilapidated New Orleans shotgun house is a testament to the 30-year-old photographer's technical prowess and artistic vision.

Relle, who learned sophisticated lighting techniques while working on movie sets and in photography studios, essentially "paints" his subjects with a range of high-powered lights and shoots them in the very early morning hours; the results, which are not digitally altered,

are ghostly images that reveal aspects of the city's architecture, well-tended mansions and neglected cottages alike, that are unseen to all but the most observant night-dwellers.

Working at night is not without its hazard—just weeks after Hurricane Katrina, Relle was sneaking into the ravaged, barricaded Lower Ninth Ward to capture images of flood-damaged houses there. "I can't believe I didn't go to jail," he says of his run-ins with the National Guard. The risks paid off: Relle's post-hurricane photos marked both a breakthrough for the artist and an important addition to the storm's extensive documentation.

Photo courtesy of Frank Relle



"When the storm hit, I thought I was done," he says of the New Orleans Nightscapes series, which he began in 2004. "I didn't want to capitalize on it, and with so much journalism coming out, I didn't want to add to the pile of negativity." Relle felt the need to continue the series, allowing the city's houses to tell their stories, even those that had become victims of the storm, and would likely be demolished.

"It's strange having a subject matter that's disappearing," says the New Orleans native. "A lot of the houses I photographed have been torn down." The storm and its long aftermath have lent urgency to Relle's work. "I'm trying to shoot the ones that I know are going to be gone. With a photograph, the documentary value is very important." Relle's photographs are much more than documents—he gives his subjects dignity, even the battered and doomed ones. "I'm trying to capture the spirit of these houses," he says, "and the people who lived in them." ♦

— BY RUSSELL McCULLY