

# OUT OF THE DARKNESS



*Frank Relle's haunting nightscapes capture the city's pain*

**By Doug MacCash**  
Art critic

Six weeks after Hurricane Katrina laid waste to great swaths of his hometown, photographer Frank Relle, 29, drove into the darkness of the devastated Lower 9th Ward, camera at the ready, searching for the perfect place to capture the eeriness of the nocturnal disasterscape.

"I went into the 9th Ward in my minivan," he said, "looking by headlight. There were no streetlights. I turned the corner and the headlights fell on the scene."

He'd come upon a forlorn crossroads, with a ghostly, tilted shotgun house looming in the night. Relle was confident that it ideally described the magnetically dismal situation.

"I don't always know I have a picture," he said, "but with this one, I knew."

He prepared to take the photo in his customary way, arranging lights and setting the camera for a long exposure — 18 minutes in this case. Then he stood waiting in the silence.

"It's so quiet," he said. "I just stood listening. You hear the strangest things, tin falling off of houses, flapping plastic. There are no air conditioners, no cars."

Ten minutes into the exposure, the quiet was broken by the noise of an approaching vehicle. A National Guard patrol had spotted his lights in the distance and come to investigate. His first fear was that the Humvee headlights would ruin the shot. So he sprinted in the direction of the approaching vehicle, pleading that they turn off the lights.

"I ran up to the Humvee, through the exposure," he said. "They were young guys sitting in the front seat with guns on



their laps. They were like, 'Are you crazy?' They turned off their lights immediately. They said I was way past deadline (curfew). They said, 'You're not supposed to be here.'"

"I just played dumb," Relle recalled. "I said, 'Can we finish the exposure?' So they waited, then they escorted me out."

The result was "Lizardi," one of the most striking of Relle's haunting, post-Katrina street scenes, which can be found in Contemporary Craft Tent H during the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival's second weekend.

West Bank-born Relle didn't always want to be a photographer. At Tulane, he was a philosophy major, specializing in cognitive science, which somehow unites Darwin's theories of evolution with computer design.

After graduation, his technical skills

promised steady work in the information industry, but, at a computer-oriented career fair, it dawned on Relle that he didn't want to spend his days tied to a computer.

Instead, he volunteered to accompany a local researcher on a trip through the wetlands of Canada in search of carnivorous plants. One of his duties on the expedition was to photograph the plants. And thus began his love of cameras and light.

Back in New Orleans, he took a job waiting tables at The Pelican Club and visiting A Gallery for Fine Photography and Bassetti Fine Art Photography, drinking in the classical photo techniques. In his spare time he assisted in the darkroom of photographer Rick Olivier and others, learning the ropes. He later traveled to Los Angeles and New York, assisting in the studios of nationally known masters such as Chris Callis, Mary Ellen Mark and Arnold Newman, soaking up camera and lighting skills as he went.

Two years ago, he returned to New Orleans and began stalking the city streets at night, creating beautiful, poignant images of streets and houses — architectural portraits that were strange and forbidding even before Katrina scarred the environment. He'd printed only four such street scenes when he applied to the 2005 Jazzfest. He was accepted and his booth was a hit.

"Last year was my first year," he said. "I was all prepared to lose my butt on the booth fee. But I brought the pictures and the people came."

"Some people say the most amazing things," Relle recalled of his Jazzfest experience. "A lady said, 'Do you know what you're doing? You're making music with these pictures.'"

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