

Crescent City soldiers

Lorraine Lax pays artistic homage to New Orleans survivors

BY LINDY T. SHEPHERD

The two-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina is upon us and the broadcast media is once again spotlighting the city of New Orleans by airing dismal reports of sluggish restoration and treacherous profiles of victims' salvation. There's no effective way for the ravages of New Orleans to be captured with canned words and digital imagery; one must witness the scene of the crime in person to experience the natural response, which has a visceral and dumbfounding impact. Remember that it wasn't the forces of Mother Nature that left the Mississippi River melting pot FUBAR after Labor Day 2005. No, it was the leaks in the three levees that filled the under-sea-level city like a bathtub, drowning dwellings and dwellers.

From day one, life went on for the survivors, and their indomitable courage in the face of continuing challenges even two years later is what struck Maitland artist Lorraine Lax last spring on her recent and first visit to the city that was. She found tourism, the main feeder of the economy, making a comeback in whatever ways possible and stepped aboard a devastation bus tour that travels through different areas of the community. That's when the depth and breadth of the destruction grew palpable. It wasn't just what Lax saw, but what she heard and felt while talking to the natives, like the bus driver whose former livelihood had been wiped out. In a matter of days, his way of life was gone, leaving him no choice but to fold or to play on.

When she returned home, Lax unwound her tangle of emotions using her paintbrush. From there, the *NOLA Warriors* series took shape and makes its debut Sept. 8 at the Steve Martin Studios in Miami.

"The current *NOLA Warrior* series, as you know, is dedicated to the brave and spirited people of New Orleans. ... I relate strongly to the need to be a 'life warrior' in order to keep reaching for inner strength no matter what indignities may be heaped upon us," says Lax.

The large and commanding works in brilliant shades of yellow, orange and green depict proud beings seemingly descended from a spiritual plane and capped by intricate headdresses. The top half of the wood surfaces carries the form of the warriors; the bottom half looks as if

the paintings were left in a storm and partially washed away, leaving colorful, elongated drips hanging in a suspension of ether. Viewers are reminded of the scientific law, "Matter can neither be created nor destroyed." Wide brown margins, textured to look like rustic wood, frame the left and right sides. Pieces of intricate antique-looking jewelry adorn some of the paintings, furthering the air of ritual and revelry (but not in an overt Mardi Gras manner).

As a whole, the paintings are studies of Lax's layering techniques. She is a process painter who never knows the outcome when she begins a visual journey. It is not unusual for her to paint over a week's worth of work, starting all over again. The approach is personal and painstaking for Lax, but that doesn't stop the torture, which has been a lifelong partner to her artistic expression.

The characteristic that binds the individual pieces in the *NOLA Warriors* series is the face of each warrior, which originated from photographs of sculptures in the famed New Orleans cemeteries. Lax is an accomplished photographer and has always been fascinated with mannequins, busts and other replications of the human form, particularly the head. Selection of the face is where a painting begins, and from there it's all Lax's imagination and acrylics.

One of her last series of paintings centered on the faces of classical sculptures she snapped while visiting the Louvre Museum and Rodin's garden in Paris. The muted shades in her resulting "angels" kept to a palette of mostly earth and stone colors, and included simple words and phrases, such as "Please love my art," which became the name of her 2001 exhibit at Dexter's in Winter Park.

"My 'angel' series was rooted in dealing with internal demons that we fight in an effort to reach for the good in ourselves and further



NOT WASHED AWAY: 'NOLA Warrior 1'

fueled by 9/11," Lax explains. Her "warriors" tap into her reaction to another national disaster that caused similar feelings to surface.

Steve Martin met Lax, who's also the creative director of d'lor, a graphic-design firm for commercial real estate and architects, while she was serving as the art consultant on the NuRiver Landing condominium project in Fort Lauderdale last year. In her usual compulsive manner, she ended up the fine artist as well, creating almost all of the art, though Martin was one of the few other contributors.

From New Orleans himself, where he still maintains a gallery, Martin was taken with Lax's angel and warrior series. He arranged the opening of her Miami show to coincide with the Design District's monthly Art + Design Night (6 p.m.-10 p.m. Sept. 8), and is planning a 2008 show for Lax in New Orleans.

"Lorraine Lax is a mixed-media artist who

incorporates her own photography into provocative, introspective paintings," Martin says. "She feels the need to acknowledge the city's brave and spirited people by depicting powerful warrior-like figures that have emerged victorious in the face of adversity. A portion of all proceeds will be donated to Save Our Cemeteries, a New Orleans organization dedicated to protecting and preserving these historical landmarks."

"Although my art is very personal," Lax says, "it is also created for viewers to reflect on [their] own lives. It is my intention to be provocative because I believe that to a reasonable extent introspection brings inner peace. We're not in control of many of the big breaks for better and worse that come our way, but we are in control of how we allow ourselves to react. I'm working on it ... always."

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NOLA WARRIORS

Sept. 8-29

Steve Martin Studio, Miami
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