

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Photographing New Orleans

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, July 26th, 2017

When my friend [Susan Martin](#) asked me to join her on a trip to New Orleans, in February of 1976, I enthusiastically accepted her offer. She was going for business, to contact photographers for the G. Ray Hawkins Gallery, and for pleasure, to enjoy the Mardi Gras. Fat Tuesday is celebrated in Catholic countries as the day (and week) to dress up in costumes and party, prior to Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, 40 days of penance and fasting before Easter. The most famous carnival festivities in the world take place in [Rio de Janeiro](#), [Venice](#) and [New Orleans](#). Here they are a legacy of their French colonial past. And I was excited to experience the city and take photographs.



Cemetery, New Orleans. (c) Elisa Leonelli 1976

I followed the parades of floats populated by masked characters throwing colorful beads and gold coins (doubloons) to the cheering crowd. I shot color slides for these events because I figured magazines all over the world would be interested in my coverage.



Boeuf Gras float, Rex Parade. New Orleans (c) Elisa Leonelli 1976

See more [color photos at this link](#) of the [Elisa Leonelli, Photojournalist Collection](#) on the Claremont Colleges Digital Library website, and [B&W photos by clicking on this link](#).



Porch, New Orleans (c) Elisa Leonelli 1976

But I mostly shot B&W film when I was focusing my Nikon lenses on regular people, sitting on their front porch, walking in the streets or taking the bus.



Lady on bus, New Orleans (c) Elisa Leonelli 1976

I also came up with the conceptual idea of photographing a ghost in the cemeteries and the plantation homes along the Mississippi. I was inspired by the work of [Clarence Laughlin](#) and his book *Ghosts along the Mississippi*, except that his ghostly woman was dressed in black lace and mine was dressed in white, like a bride. It was actually Susan who gamely posed for me wrapped up in the wide lace skirt I had bought in a thrift shop.



Cemetery ghost, New Orleans (c) Elisa Leonelli 1976

We had visited the surrealist photographer in person in his New Orleans studio, as Susan explains from Albuquerque where she now lives, “because he was one of my favorite photographers and it was my dream to show him at the gallery. He was not well-known outside of photography circles and was already quite aged. His photos are dark, Baroque and that appealed to me.”

Susan and I also attended a closing, rather than an opening of a photo exhibit at the A Gallery by Joshua Mann Pailte. It was a feast of boiled crayfish that we ate with our hands out of huge steel pots in the backyard. We loved the spicy Creole food of New Orleans restaurants; that was one of the most delicious aspects of our trip.

I traveled to New Orleans a few times since then, but nothing would match the unforgettable experience of that first time.



Samba parade, Rio Carnaval (c) Elisa Leonelli 1983

In 1983 I organized a trip to Brazil with my friend Jivago to photograph the Rio Carnaval. That was another amazing experience. I remember staying up all night to follow the floats along the parade route, attracted by those spectacular costumes. See [my article and photo layout at this link](#), and the [complete series at this link](#).



Gran Canal. Venezia (c) Elisa Leonelli 1979

But despite being born and raised in Italy, and having visited my home country every years since moving to the US in 1972, I never went to Venezia for carnevale. I was there in 1979 and 2005 to cover the Venice Film Festival as a journalist.

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