

# THE ADVOCATE

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## ARTS

### Photos capture everyday New Orleans before Katrina

BY ROBIN MILLER

Arts writer

He savors the stories behind those told in the photographs, his stories.

Because he didn't mean to include the London Lodge's television antenna in the composition. Well, there was really no thought to composition at all.

"I was too busy trying to grab my 4-year-old son's hand to keep him from running into Airline Highway," William Greiner said.

Not Airline Highway as it runs through Baton Rouge, but the part stretching through Metairie. It's the setting for many of the photographs in the Louisiana Art & Science Museum's exhibit *William Greiner: Fallen Paradise: Photographs of New Orleans 1995-2005*.

But the exhibit could be called *William Greiner: Slices of My Life*, because personal experiences are attached to each.

And now Greiner stands in the museum's upstairs gallery, connecting the memory dots.

He's already told the story about how he was too busy to notice the antenna, because he was trying to keep his son out of the road while snapping the photo. The antenna was a mistake, really.

But the photo wouldn't be balanced without it.

"Do you see how the antenna reflects the red from the sign?" Greiner asked. "It makes the whole picture."

He shrugs. It's OK to talk about this stuff, but the more interesting stories are found in the passerby, how they would stop, take in the scene and ask, "Why are you taking a picture of that?"

The scenes were something the passerby saw every day, roads, waterways, parking lots, old buildings — none of it too special. Then again, catastrophe has a way of making the ordinary extraordinary.

Which is why Greiner is so close to these photos. There are 28, all depicting sites in the New Orleans area forever changed by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, none of them historical landmarks in the conventional sense but monuments to everyday life.

For these were the ordinary places, the things people took for granted yet counted on being there. Some were completely wiped out by the storms. Some continue to be dismantled.

A few have changed for the better.

"See this old cinderblock building?" Greiner asked, standing beside a photo titled "Cinder Block Wall." "It was just this old building that had been abandoned and was falling down. Some developers have bought it and turned it into an apartment building. So it changed, too, but in a different way."

Greiner stands in the center of the gallery. He's seen his work in exhibitions before; this one travels next to a college in Georgia. Still, there's some-



Photographer William Greiner sits amidst his body of work titled *Fallen Paradise Photographs of New Orleans, 1995-2005* now on display at the Louisiana Art & Science Museum.

#### William Greiner: *Fallen Paradise Photographs of New Orleans 1995-2005*

**WHAT:** Exhibit featuring the photographs by William Greiner  
**WHEN:** Through Sept. 28. Hours are 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and 1-5 p.m. Sunday. Greiner will be speaking about his work at 2:15 p.m. today, Aug. 3, at the First Sunday/Artist Perspectives program.

**WHERE:** Louisiana Art & Science Museum, 100 S. River Road  
**ADMISSION:** \$6 for adults, \$5 for seniors age 65 and older and children ages 2-12 and \$4 for groups of 15 or more. Admission is free for museum members, and to the general public on the first Sunday of the month.

**INFORMATION:** Call (225) 344-5272 or (225) 344-9478 or e-mail lasm@las.org.

The carousel won't be preserved. It is, after all, just a piece of old playground equipment, which doesn't have much meaning when compared to the recovery efforts of an entire city.

But it has meaning here. It tells the story of Metairie children who once played in the park, of the people who passed it on their way to work every day.

It tells the story of permanent change, how suddenly things that once were taken for granted become irreplaceable treasures.

And it tells Greiner's story, of how he unknowingly preserved this piece of the city's history.

Greiner stares at the photograph. He didn't plan this composition or any of the rest in the gallery, for that matter. They just happened.

Ask him, and that's what he'll tell you. He depends on intuition in his photography, and it's pretty much on target.

Downstairs, teacher Brett Long oversees a group of teenagers through Michael Crespo's exhibit *Myth and Magic*, eventually leading them upstairs. The group is part of the University of New Orleans' Upward Bound program.

And they really didn't expect to see the home they once knew on display in Baton Rouge.

"I live in Metairie, and I recognize a lot of the places," Long said. "But it's haunting — almost bizarre. A lot of these places have changed."

Which means Long's story has also changed. As has Greiner's.

"I'm taking photos of Baton Rouge now," he said. "I'm concentrating on the points where roads cross the waterways. That's where the change seems to be happening."

And when glancing back at his New Orleans photographs, Greiner knows that's a given — life will always change.

thing about standing among these photographs in his new home of Baton Rouge, so close to his former home in New Orleans.

Greiner was one among the thousands in New Orleans displaced by Hurricane Katrina. He and his family have permanently relocated to Baton Rouge, his wife declaring they would not return to the Crescent City.

Living through the destruction and wake of one monster storm was enough.

And it would seem that being in Baton Rouge wouldn't be that big of a deal, since so many of the displaced ended up in cities outside of Louisiana. Still, Baton Rouge wasn't home, and Greiner was suffering from a case of the blues.

Which resulted in a small book of photos taken in and around Baton Rouge after the storm. A very small book at that, measuring about 2-by-4 inches.

"I started taking photographs in Baton Rouge when I moved here, and I was really down," Greiner said.

So, he started looking back. He'd been photographing New Orleans for 10 years prior to Katrina, concentrating on the personality of the city's living environment. It was another New Orleans, one not featured in tourism brochures, but the reality of home.

These were the things Greiner taught himself to look for after graduating from Tufts University of Boston. Other photographers relocated, hoping to establish niches in bigger cities or exotic landscapes.

But Greiner decided to return to his native New Orleans after earning a master's degree in finance from Suffolk University, also in Boston.

"That sounds kind of weird



'BEWARE, Martin Luther King Boulevard, New Orleans, 1995' is by William Greiner.

doesn't it?" he said.

Not weird but practical. Sometimes people need a backup career in case the first one doesn't work out. Greiner owns a framing business now, which gives him time to pursue his craft.

And the craft at hand was photographing things at home, which, in a way, gave him an advantage over the photographers establishing themselves in new places. Yet the familiar territory could also prove to be a disadvantage.

"My senses weren't heightened as they would have been in a new place," he said. "I wouldn't be noticing everything, because I already knew it."

So, he began making himself

take notice, and from 1995 to 2005, he took photographs of the little things — the blue pipe in a sand pile, the bull mural painted by prison inmates on U.S. 10 and Metairie Road, the lounge chairs on the New Orleans Athletic Club's rooftop and the 17th Street Canal.

The canal photo is a foreshadow of sorts. Greiner snapped it in 1998, the attraction being a big drainage hole along the side of the concrete wall with a steady stream of water pouring into the canal.

Greiner had no idea disaster would strike seven years later, that the canal would be one of two that would flood the city. No one did.

So, this is where the exhibit

begins.

"And it ends with the word 'hope,'" Greiner said. "It's a lit sign, but it's over a mausoleum — the Hope Mausoleum."

There is a sense of foreboding in some images, where subjects are already outdated. Take the playground scene in Metairie, for instance. It features a miniature carousel. The horses are tiny, designed, of course, for small children.

But it's old, something not usually seen on modern playgrounds that host plastic, cubical slides and jungle gyms. The carousel is a relic, and parts of it are already rusting.

"And when I passed it the other day, I noticed that the top had collapsed," Greiner said.