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Art via the lens

[By Elda Silva](#) - Express-News
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The photographs Elva Salinas and Luisa Wheeler produced for their two-woman show couldn't be more distinct.

Salinas creates occasionally startling, frequently lyrical digital images such as Red Rose With Bird - a photograph of the tiny corpse of a bird cradled in the velvety petals of a bloom cupped in a woman's hands.

Wheeler digitally manipulates single and multiple exposures of cityscapes to produce mazelike images that look more like drawings than pictures.

Both Salinas and Wheeler's work, however, fits into curator Kathy Vargas' conception of the "poetic," a word that serves as both as theme and title of the exhibit, which opens Thursday at Rendon Photography & Fine Art. Poetic is part of Fotoseptiembre USA. The annual photography festival runs through the end of the month with exhibitions at venues across the city.

"Elva is doing very classical romantic stuff - romantic in the sense of idealization and looking above the day-to-day for the ideal of beauty and the spiritual," says Vargas, an internationally known photographer who is the chair of the art department at the University of the Incarnate Word.

"With (Wheeler) it's the layering; it's the relationship her work has with space and time. Especially for the ones that are super-layered, it really is about getting lost in the depth of the piece. It's that question of, 'Where am I? Exactly what is my point in time?' To me, that's very poetic, that questioning of space and time."

Salinas, 28, is a former student of Vargas'. She was on her way to a major in chemistry when she took her first photography class. She needed an art elective, she says, "and I was afraid of painting, and I was afraid of drawing."

"(Vargas) gave us tons of assignments, and documentary was not for me," Salinas recalls. "And then all of a sudden, she assigned us directorial projects. She taught us that you could have a model or objects and create your own little world. And I just went wild - and never stopped, really."

The photographer, who recently moved to Denton to pursue a master's degree in studio art at Texas Women's University, has photographs from two series in the show.

Between You and Me is a series of what Salinas calls "abstract portraits" that focus on women's eyes, hands and feet.

As Salinas photographed the women, they chatted, sharing stories about their lives; hence, the title.

"Usually I base the portrait on their life or their emotion, and how I feel," she says. "So it's kind of a dialogue between me and my subjects."

Birds of Love and Sorrow is a series of photographs in which Salinas incorporates the image of dead birds to represent the fleeting nature of life. She began working on it after losing a couple of family members.

"So I was having to deal with death, and I took the dead-bird series as symbolic for being able to study how this beautiful bird that used to fly and had its own life process could cease," she says. "I guess at that point I was learning that everything has a process - the beginning and the end."

Salinas combines black and white with color in her images and uses vignettes and blurring to give the photographs a surreal, dreamlike effect.

Wheeler's photographs are from images she captured on the streets of New York and Paris. She uses a digital camera, which allows her to sandwich multiple exposures, then manipulates the images with Photoshop, adding vivid color. In some of the photographs, the images look like they've been drawn in pastels; in others, they look as if they've been outlined in neon.

Her first foray into multiple images was a happy accident. At the time, the Piedras Negras native was working on her bachelor's degree in photography from UTSA, commuting twice a week from her home in Eagle Pass.

"I started with classical photography - black and white - and I was using a Rolleiflex," says Wheeler, 52. "When I started using it, I accidentally didn't roll the film, so I shot three pictures in one, and when I developed my images, I loved it."

Wheeler and her fiance, Robert Price, go to Paris each year in November and travel to New York frequently, and her images of the city streets were piling up.

"I knew I had to do something with those images one day because I had been taking them over and over and over again," she says.

Previously, she has exhibited more documentary-style work, such as the black-and-white image of a Mexican woman holding a young child and standing near a clothes line that was included in Arte Latina: ROAR, an exhibit at the Blue Star Contemporary Art Center in 2008.

The photographs in Poetic are "different from the other work I have been doing, and I knew I was capable enough now," Wheeler says. "Since I spent so many hours trying to figure it out - Photoshop - I knew there was something good happening from all of this."

Like Salinas, Wheeler finds the fantastic in the everyday.


"Especially with this series," she says. "To me, they seem very poetic; they seem dreamlike. It's like images you

see from stories you hear and memories."

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