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Photo exhibit marked by introspection

Tess Martinez finds links in unrelated images.

By Steve Bennett

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Effervescent and outgoing, with a mocha complexion and long black hair that reflects her hodgepodge Chinese/Puerto Rican/African American heritage, Tess Martinez must be considered pretty cool by her students at Catholic all-girl Providence High School downtown.

But her teacher's ready smile disguises a somber, serious side.

"I'm an introvert," says the 34-year-old San Antonio photographer, who graduated with an art degree from UTSA in 2005. "I like being by myself. I mean, I can spend 12 hours in the darkroom and not know if it's day or night outside."

It is this side that emerges in "Uno Mas," Martinez's exhibition of a dozen silver-gelatin prints at REM Gallery, part of San Antonio's monthlong Fotoseptiembre celebration.

Martinez has produced a provocative collection of images of empty storefronts and abandoned building interiors, as well as intimate portraits — not overtly sexual, more like shots of makeup being applied in the bathroom — of Martinez and her husband, John Hurtado.

The couple has been together 18 years, and the title of the show comes from a comment he made way back when: "One year down. You ready for one more? Uno mas?"

Around 2004, Martinez happened upon a curious development (sorry) in the darkroom. A diehard who continues to use film rather than digital, Martinez noticed contiguous frames — three shots of the back of her own head, which became "Tres Moi" — that seemed to lend themselves to being a single image.

"I thought, 'Hmm, that's interesting,'" she says.

She then began to look for relationships between images on contact sheets.

"And now I do it on purpose," she says. "I find a way to make it happen when I'm shooting."

This "multiple-image process" requires, she says, "intense engagement with each image prior to clicking the shutter. It's essential for me to stay aware of how one frame will affect the next before I click the shutter."

It is at once intuitive and counterintuitive, and the resulting photographs, which might be of



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completely different subject matter, or shot from varying points of view, trick the eye into seeming like single entities.

In “The Process,” a print of contact sheets included in “Uno Mas,” Martinez has isolated two images with a grease pencil as a sort of blueprint for larger multiple-image pieces such as “Les trois lumières,” a ghostly view inside the Friedrich building on the city’s East Side, or “The Lost World,” a tour of empty retail spaces along Main Avenue downtown.

“I love abandoned buildings, empty spaces,” she says.

If you look carefully, you can locate the seams in the work that delineate the boundary between two clicks of the shutter.

In other works, such as self-portraits of the artist at her bathroom vanity like “Broken Blossoms,” the split is more pronounced, giving the work a sense of three-dimensionality — it seems to project toward the viewer like the prow of a ship.

“This process really makes you want to stand in from of an image for a while and examine it, I think,” Martinez says. “I hope the visual experience will capture you.”

By the way, if the titles strike a nerve, all 12 photographs in the show are named for silent films.

Not surprisingly, Martinez is a huge fan of the medium. She matched titles from noted silent films, including “Metropolis” and “The Unknown,” to images she photographed.

“I just saw ‘The Passion of Joan of Arc’ (Carl Theodor Dreyer’s 1928 silent film produced in France), and it was so emotional,” says Martinez, once again showing that enthusiastic side. “With no audio, there’s just music and facial expressions. I think silent film goes hand in hand with photography.”

Whichever Martinez you happen to catch, both are passionate about her chosen art form: “I love being behind the camera. I love being in the darkroom. I love film.”

“Uno Mas” by Tess Martinez remains on view through Nov. 4 at REM Gallery, [219 E. Park Ave.](#) Call 210-224-1227 for more information.

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