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Joan Frederick's moment of awakening

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By **Steve Bennett** - Express-News

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When Joan Frederick turned 35 in 1984, she had an epiphany — and not the good kind.

The futility of her life hit her like the onset of restless leg syndrome. Like many mired in the middle of their fourth decade, Frederick faced the brutal fact: "I had goofed off my whole life up to that point. I hadn't used the talent that was given me.

"I was a mother, raising my baby, and — that was about it," recalls Frederick, who is now 60.

Instead of turning to chocolate éclairs or antidepressants, Frederick decided to bear down: "I quit saying tomorrow. You know, 'I'll do it tomorrow.' I realized I needed to start doing something with my life, and I have. I've worked really hard."

That's an understatement. A retrospective of nearly 40 works — including photographs, paintings, mixed media conceptual pieces and even ceramics — by the San Antonio artist is on exhibit at the Carver Community Cultural Center through Sept. 30.

Part of Fotoseptiembre USA in San Antonio, "So Much Art, So Little Time" traces Frederick's artistic development over the past 20 years.

"It's really great that she's getting her due," says artist Franco Mondini-Ruiz, whose Infinito Botanica junk store/art gallery was well-documented by Frederick's camera.

A 2005 work titled "Fear Overtakes Indecision" reflects that moment of 30-something awakening. What began as a pensive portrait of her friend, writer Bárbara Renaud González, evolved into a disturbing portrait of a woman on a mental precipice. She's trying to grasp a collection of facial features — floating eyeballs, grimacing grins, tongues stuck out. It's as if she's watching her own head explode.

"It's the moment when you put your head in your hands and say, 'Oh no . . . oh no. Trouble,'" explains Frederick, who, with her long limbs set on a lanky frame and short salt-and-pepper hair, brings to mind a modern dancer with a lengthy resumé.

If all this makes the artist, who paid the bills teaching at Taft High School until a couple of years ago, sound dark and morose and way too serious, she's not.

Actually, Frederick is much closer to "Summer," a multimedia work dominated by a big color photograph of a lawn sprinkler happily feeding a thirsty green lawn. Every droplet is reflected in the sunshine.

"I also try to keep the flat photo from becoming boring by kicking it up a notch with a conceptual twist, so I added the sunglasses on a pedestal in front of the sprinkler image and reflected the spray in the lenses," Frederick says.

Several conceptual works in the Carver show reflect another of Frederick's deep concerns — the history and plight of Native Americans, developed over more than 20 years living in Oklahoma.

"Walking Slowly, Dressed in Original Sin" is Frederick's contemporary vision of a traditional medicine wheel, full of symbol and fury, while "Snow Before a Summer Sun" is a conceptual piece inspired by Seminole Chief Tecumseh's prophetic words on the Indians' plight in the face of relentless white expansion: "We are as snow before a summer sun."

Water plays an important role in Frederick's work, too; a recent piece titled "Prescription for the Blue Planet" features a worn wooden medicine cabinet stocked with glass vials and medicine bottles in which water-related photographs are suspended.

Yes, Frederick has issues: "On the second shelf, at first unnoticed, is a (rubber) poisonous coral snake, which represents the negative effect the modern world has had on our planet and its most precious resource."

Mostly, she just wants to have fun, as mixed media works such as "Bird Funeral," "Next to Last Supper," "Bowl of Fruit" and "Corn" make clear. "Supper," for example, features a full place setting for dinner with a twist — the flat, photographed entrée is extremely low in calories.

Perhaps Frederick's greatest strength as a pure photographer is her documentary work, particularly of the arts scene of the Alamo City over the past two decades.

"You should see her photographs of Esteban Jordan and Lydia Mendoza. Powerful," says Renaud González.

Seeing San Antonio through Frederick's lens — Liberty Bar and Salúte and such — is to see old friends with new eyes.

"I'm biased because Joan is one of my best friends," says Renaud González, author of the novel "Golondrina, why did you leave me?" "I think her very best work is her documentation of San Antonio artists and life. I've told her many times that she should have many photography books published with her special take on our city and people. I keep telling her that if she were in the university, she'd have tenure."

Joan Frederick's "So Much Art, So Little Time" is on view through Sept. 30 at the Carver Community Cultural Center, 226 N. Hackberry St. Hours are 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; and 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday. Free. Call (210) 207-2719. Visit www.joanfrederick.net

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