Exhibit to reveal Eudora Welty as a Passionate Observer

By Sherry Lucas
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The show is the sixth in the museum's Annie Laurie Swain Hearin Memorial Exhibition Series. "Passionate Observer" is one of several events focusing on Welty the year following her death: the March 23 Mississippi Boychoir's performance of Sam Jones' musical adaptation of her story, "The Shuckers," the recent Natchez Literary and Film Celebrations tribute; Canton woman Jane Dune's prints of Mississippi writers and their homes, at Brown's Place Art and Other Outlets in the state; an Old Capitol Museum exhibit, "Remembering Welty," on the heels of the art museum's show.

Weltys's successful writing career spanned six decades. The personal photographs she took of rural Mississippi in the 1930s, while working as a publicist for the Works Progress Administration, show an eye as keen as her ear for the rhythms, character and characters of her home state.

"Mississippians have been very familiar with her photographs for a long time and we wanted to put them in a context of the national art of the period," said Pati Carr, Black, guest curator and author of "Art in Mississippi 1720-1980." The dominant theme in the country of that time was the American Scene movement, withRegionalism (rural) and social realism (urban) as major components. "The whole nation was looking to the nation for its inspiration, as opposed to Europe, where it had been looking. And Welty was part of that tapestry across the nation of people looking at their own back yards, so to speak." American Scene movement painters included Thomas Hart Benton, Reginald Marsh and Grant Wood. Because Welty's interest was in photography, works by three major women photographers of the era (Mandelka Bourie-White, Doris Ulmann and Berenice Abbott) are included for comparison.

The exhibit focuses, too, on Welty's art contemporaries in Jackson and in Mississippi who were also depicting the American scene — Helen J. Lotterhos, Karl Wolfe, William Hollingsworth, Marie Hall, Walter Anderson, John McCrady, Dusti Bongé, Caroline Compton and Richard Barthe (who painted in Europe).

"It really does examine her, not as a writer who also takes photographs, but as a visual artist working within an important movement for visual arts in this country," museum director Betsy Bradley said.

For instance, a pairing of photographs of houses of the rural poet in Walter Bone's image, reveals the poverty. "In Welty's, the camera and the eye shifted to a bottle of beer. She saw the poverty, beauty and hope in a situation like that," Bradley said.

Using Welty's photographs in the much broader context of the period will heighten awareness of her art beyond her home state and region, said Rose Paul Leland, museum chief curator and coordinator of the show. "She'll be appreciated as a visual artist at a national level, internationally even."

A $25 hardcover book by the same title will be published by the museum in tandem with the exhibit, $2 from the sale of each will go to the Welty Foundation, which is restoring Welty's Belhaven home and gardens. Welty scholar Suzanne Harris, Black and Francis V. O'Connor, a specialist in 1930s art, contributed essays for the book.

The museum will capitalize on the show's 30th theme with special events and educational programs. An economist will talk at a business lunch about economic lessons of the Great Depression. The museum's annual fundraising takes on a "Bootlegging and Bluegrass" flavor this year. An evening co-sponsored by the Crossroads Film Society will show films from the era, and a weekly evening series will feature Southern writers reading Welty's works.

Thursday, O'Connor, an expert on art of the 1930s and the Works Progress Administration, will give a lecture to the museum's Gallery Club at 10:30 a.m. at the museum; $8 open to nonmembers for $5 each. Additional symposium will be offered during the exhibit's run.

Brady said the show will be as dramatic and powerful as previous exhibits in the Hearin series. "Focusing on a Mississippi artist says we actually produce art worthy of this kind of show. It's not only about bringing in big shows from the outside. It's also about holding up our own."