

WATER AND LIGHT

River ritual inspires art

Photographer wades in to record area baptisms

By TOMMY STEVENSON

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TUSCALOOSA — Local photographer Caroline Davis is an artist submerged in her work.

Literally.

To get her shots of baptisms at black churches in Greene, Sumter and Hale counties, Davis often gets into the lakes, rivers, ponds and stone baptism pools alongside her subjects.

What emerges from her submersions are startling images that often are taken under the water but just as often combine perspectives from below and above



Photographer Caroline Davis stands in the darkroom with some of her photographs of baptisms throughout the state.

the water.

"I have been doing this long enough that the preachers and the people in the churches trust me and accept me almost as part of the ceremony," Davis said.

"And I feel that way, too — like I am part of something very holy and good."

Twenty-three of her black-and-white photographs, collected in a show called "Water and Light: Photographs by Caroline Davis," will be on display through Aug. 28 at the Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham.

The photographs have been exhibited at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts and will be on display later this year in Montevallo and at the Rosa Parks Museum on the Troy State campus in Montgomery.

Davis, who owns commercial studios in Tuscaloosa and Birmingham, said two of her passions — diving and flying — led her to the baptism series.

"I've always been an underwater photographer," said Davis, whose Rivermont home is decorated with striking pictures of fish and reefs. "I've done work in the Caribbean for the St. Kitts Department of Tourism and MasterCard.

"One time I was scuba diving in Grand Cayman and there was a baptism going on, and we came up underwater and



Caroline Davis' photography is on display through Aug. 28 at the Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham. Above is "Now Those Who Were with Me Saw the Light But Did Not Hear the Voice of the One Who was Speaking to Me," 1998. This title is from the Bible verse Acts 22:9.



Another Davis photograph on display is "And Since I Could Not See for the Glory of That Light, Being Led by the Hand of Those Who Were With Me," 1998.

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watched it without them even knowing we were doing it," she said. "I thought that was so cool and started thinking about photographing them back in Alabama."

Not long after that, Davis was flying in a small plane over the Black Warrior River and saw another baptism occurring.

"I thought then that it was meant to be," she said.

Davis said she is attracted to the emotional and spiritual aspects of baptisms and now regularly attends a black church in Livingston.

Since Davis began photographing baptisms about five years ago she estimates she has attended more than 100 of them at about a dozen churches in Hale, Sumter and Greene counties.

Since baptisms rarely are performed very far in advance, she says she often spends her Saturday nights "calling preachers to see if they will be having a baptism the next day."

While many of the services are performed in local creeks, rivers

and ponds, many of the churches have concrete pools set up on the church grounds.

"I get right in there with them," says Davis, who usually dresses in white to match the robes often worn for the occasions.

Davis uses a Nikonos camera which is made specifically for underwater photography and a variety of lenses also adapted for underwater work.

She captions most of her photographs with Bible scripture, but does not provide specific details about where her shots are taken or who is in them.

"I respect their privacy," she says. "These are my friends, and this is something special for them."

Part of the proceeds from the sale of prints of her pictures will be given to the churches involved in the baptisms, Davis said.

There also will be a public reception for the show at the Civil Rights Institute, 520 16th St. N., on Aug. 17, from 6 to 8 p.m.

The show is in the institute's downstairs gallery.

Davis' art has yet to be displayed in Tuscaloosa, but she said she would welcome a space to hang her work.