

# AMERICAN CONNECTION

Watching her grandfather care for birds instilled a lifelong reverence in **Debbie Fleming Caffery** that inspired a magical series of avian portraits – and a greater appreciation for those who rehabilitate injured birds. Susan Burnstine reports.



Nekhbet

Last July, I attended Debbie Fleming Caffery's beautiful exhibition *Portraits of Birds* at Obscura Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and was mesmerised by the rich beauty of this work. While the subject matter is different than earlier work, these majestic portraits mirror the same respect, admiration and reverence she conveyed for her human subjects in the past.

I have been a longtime fan of Caffery's poetic imagery in former projects such as *Carry Me Home, Polly, Hurricane Images* and *Alphabet*, and first wrote about her in this column in December 2009 when I selected her hypnotic book *Spirit and the Flesh* as the best monograph of the year. In 2005, she received the Guggenheim Fellowship for a series she created about women working in Mexican brothels. And in 2006,



Squeaky

she received the Katrina Media Fellowship from Open Society Foundations to help support her continued work on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Caffery grew up along the Bayou Teche in Louisiana and still maintains a residence there. Her admiration for birds began between kindergarten and seventh grade when she'd help her grandfather, Papa Angers, care for them. 'I loved to watch my grandfather hatch guinea

hen eggs in an incubator in his garage. He had chickens and a rooster that lived in his yard. The chickens were my pets,' she says. 'After school, I would often go with my grandfather to feed other birds at a beautiful, magical place on the Bayou Teche. He was a modest man, but he always wore a suit. He was blind in one eye, and he often took another old man with us, Mr Polk, who only had one eye, so they had two good eyes between them.'



Owl standing on a carousel horse



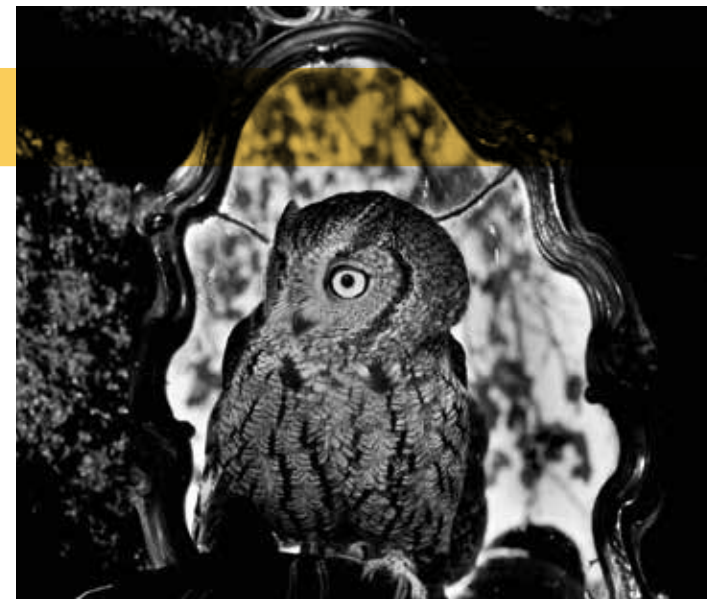
Nigel

Caffery had always wanted to photograph birds but refrained from doing so for some time because they felt 'too far from her' since she held them in her own hands as a child. Finally, inspiration hit during her travels to Mexico. She recalls, 'I loved to go to the different markets that sold animals, costumes, potions and crafts. I was with my assistant and daughter, and we were going to the costume market, and I asked if there were birds at the market. There were different kind of owls, hawks, all kind of parrots and peacocks. My first subject was a great horn owl sitting on a carousel horse and a white peacock.' She notes that it's now against the law to collect and sell these birds.

Caffery has also photographed at a wildlife centre and hospital in New Mexico that takes in injured birds with the goal of returning them to their natural habitat. When non-releasable birds recover, they become 'avian ambassadors' and they visit schools and community events to teach the public how to respect and understand the importance of birds in our world. 'The first avian ambassador I photographed was Celeste, a barn owl who had a terrible eye injury. Jemez, a Mexican spotted owl, suffered from an eye injury and head trauma. Bubba the great horned owl's injury was a



Smoking turkey



Shadow

fractured wing,' she says. These subjects were photographed in 2018 and are still alive. She has also photographed injured birds handled by wildlife experts in New Mexico and Louisiana against a backdrop in a similar way that she'd shoot a portrait in the studio. There have also been a number of healthy birds she's photographed in France and New Mexico that are handled by falconers. 'Photographing these birds has given me the greatest appreciation for the people that rescue and rehabilitate the birds. Their patience and devotion to protecting birds and educating others is extraordinary,' she says. 'Being so close to birds again is

the greatest, magical feeling yet heartbreaking that they cannot fly but joyful they are protecting other birds and the planet.' When she first began making the bird portraits in Mexico, she used film, but is now using a medium-format digital camera. Her digital files are converted into 4x5 negatives by Chicago Albumen Works, resulting in truly mesmerising 20x24 silver gelatin prints. Currently, Caffery has a retrospective on view at the New Orleans Museum of Art highlighting her 52 years as a photographer. The exhibition remains on view until spring 2024. [debbieflemingcaffery.com](http://debbieflemingcaffery.com)



Bubba

## EXHIBITIONS USA

### DENVER

**Denver Art Museum**  
Until 11 February 2024  
Personal Geographies:  
Trent Davis Bailey & Brian Adams  
[denverartmuseum.org](http://denverartmuseum.org)

### NEW BRITAIN

**New Britain Museum of American Art**  
Until 28 January 2024  
Ellen Carey: *Struck By Light*  
[nbmaa.org](http://nbmaa.org)

### NEW YORK CITY

**Whitney Museum of American Art**  
Until 1 February 2024  
Trust Me  
[whitney.org](http://whitney.org)

### RICHMOND

**Virginia Museum of Fine Arts**  
From 18 November to 25 February 2024  
Dawoud Bey: *Elegy*  
Until 28 April 2024  
Willie Anne Wright: *Artist and Alchemist*  
[vmfa.museum](http://vmfa.museum)

### SAN JOSE

**San Jose Museum of Art**  
Until 25 February 2024  
Liliana Porter:  
Actualidades/Breaking News  
[sjmusart.org](http://sjmusart.org)

### SANTA FE

**New Mexico Museum of Art**  
Until 4 February 2024  
Manuel Carrillo: *Mexican Modernist*  
[nmartmuseum.org](http://nmartmuseum.org)

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