

## ARTS IN REVIEW

## ART REVIEW

## An Artist Takes Flight

Photographer Debbie Fleming Caffery gets a career-spanning survey

By WILLIAM MEYERS

New Orleans

**'DEBBIE FLEMING CAFFERY:** In *Light of Everything*," a retrospective of over 50 years of Ms. Caffery's work at the New Orleans Museum of Art through May 5, begins at the end. The main entrance to NOMA opens on a spacious atrium, and on its surrounding walls are 12 of the 91 medium-format, black-and-white prints in the exhibition, the first of Ms. Caffery's pictures one sees. They are all of birds and all dated between 2018 and 2022—recent work in her long career. She was born in 1948 in southern Louisiana, and spent time with her grandfather who raised guinea hens, homing and tumbler pigeons, doves and bantam chickens. The wall text quotes her: "After school I would often go with my grandfather to feed his birds at a beautiful magical place on the Bayou Teche. I felt like I was in a bird paradise!" In 2018, she discovered organizations in New Mexico that rescued injured birds, healed them and released them back into the wild; many were injured beyond releasing. Those birds reminded her of her attachment to her grandfather's, and she has been photographing birds there and elsewhere since.



"Jemez, Rio Rancho, New Mexico" (2018) is a Mexican spotted owl, blind in one eye; it looks wise in spite of its impairment. "PAPA, King Vulture, France" (2019) is possessed of a more than avian ferocity. "Nigel, Livingston, Louisiana" (2019), a pelican, seems aware of his responsibility as the Louisiana state bird. It is characteristic of Ms. Caffery's practice that she has lengthy attachments to the subjects of her work, and

that she endows them with an aura of significance beyond their simple appearance: This is as much an achievement of close attention and patience as it is of technical virtuosity.

Most of the exhibition is in the museum's dedicated photography galleries, modest-sized rooms in which Brian Piper, NOMA's curator of photography, arranged Ms. Caffery's work chronologically, this time beginning at the beginning. She started in the 1970s by concentrating on the sugar industry, familiar from where she grew up, working with a 35mm camera in the documentary style of the time. Her portraits of African-American workers set against the cane—"Mary" (1974), "Reverend John Harris, Overseer" (1972), "Sunrise" (1974)—show her acute sensitivity to the human face. In the 1980s she acquired a Hasselblad; half-a-dozen square prints are dark, except for the flame and smoke of burning sugarcane. In "PaPa" (1987) and "Homer and Roland" (1985), silhouetted figures are set against the conflagrations. In "Sun Peeking Through Smoke" and "Sunset Burning Cane" (both 2001), it seems nature itself is being incinerated. In Ms. Caffery's pictures fire is more than just combustion; it has metaphysical implications, but whether as punishing hellfire or a purifying refiner's fire is un-



Debbie Fleming Caffery's 'Jemez, Rio Rancho, New Mexico' (2018), above, and 'Nigel, Livingston, Louisiana' (2019), above left.

certain. Maybe both.

In 1984, Ms. Caffery met Polly Joseph, an elderly black woman living in a cabin without gas, electricity or water; they became friends, and Ms. Caffery photographed Joseph until her death a decade later. The meager light in the cabin illuminated her dark face enough in "Polly Joseph" (1984) to limn her palpable affection for the photographer. When Polly moved into a nursing home, her worn Bible was left behind, turned to Ezekiel 19:1; the picture of the holy book, "Lamentations for Princes" (1989), is about the religious proclivities of both women.

Darkness is Ms. Caffery's signature element. "Marie and Angel Trumpet" (2004) is one of her pictures taken since the 1990s in Mexico; the young girl's face and hand emerge from shadow, but the white angel trumpet flower (a token of vivacity) that she holds is brilliant, appearing almost as a flame. Young "Bernardo Domingo" (1999), with his somber face and bare shoulders, is seen in spare light, so the white lace ribbon (part of a costume) crossing his naked chest stands out and seems a significant mark.

Ms. Caffery spent considerable time in two Mexican cantinas and photographed the people she befriended there. "Ocotlan" (2004), grizzled and wrinkled, a proprietor, is seen in profile against a dark background. "Marie" (1996), a woman past her first beauty, wears a satiny blouse that shines in the dim light and looks at the camera head-on; a man's hand rests on her left shoulder, either affectionately protective or ominously possessive.

When she went to New Orleans in 2005 to shoot the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Ms. Caffery was reluctant to go into abandoned homes since she hadn't been invited. Instead, she went to wrecked churches, still public spaces, and took pictures of damaged sacred objects. Paint had washed off the faces of "St. Augustine" and "St. Teresa," the "Saint Praying" was beset with displaced twigs, and the "Angel at the Pulpit" was missing a hand and her nose. One senses the photographer's purpose here is not just to document, but to sanctify.

**Debbie Fleming Caffery: In Light of Everything**

New Orleans Museum of Art, through May 5

Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. See his photographs at [williammeyersphotography.com](http://williammeyersphotography.com).



Ms. Caffery's 'PaPa' (1987), included in the current survey at the New Orleans Museum of Art.