



Nexicolis

DEBBIE FLEMING CAFFERY

EARTH, SWEAT

AND FIRE

BY CLAIRE SYKES

Flames shoot up from the sugarcane fields, punching the sky with thunderclouds of smoke. The fiery light glints off the lens of Debbie Fleming Caffery's camera as it seizes the fall harvest scene.

For over three decades, she has taken pictures of these southern Louisiana acres — with their blazing fields, hunched-over workers singing hymns, mill machinery grinding the night and sugar-loaded barges floating down the bayou. It's a place I've never been. But when I look at her silver gelatin print of that field on fire, I can almost smell the sweet burning.

In all of her photos — from the sugarcane fields to Katrina-ravaged churches to prostitutes in Mexico — there's more feeling than fact, more mystery than materiality. Carrie Springer, senior curatorial assistant with the Whitney Museum of American Art, puts it this way: "Debbie looks for the spirit of things. She connects with the spirit of a place and people, and uses photography to portray that. And she has a very strong, personal and distinct vision; I don't think it could be easily confused with anyone else's." Though most of Caffery's photos clearly show faces and places, they don't document as much as depict. Springer adds, "I

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think of her as an artist who uses a camera. She’s not using it to convince or make a point, but rather to express what she sees and feels.”

The emotional aesthetic that Caffery articulates in her work is driven not only by her interest in and empathy for her subjects (she shares a common cultural background with many of them), but also by the personal connections and relationships she builds with them over long periods of time. “Debbie’s work comes from the core of who she is as a person. It’s all about her expression, based on her interaction with her subjects and how they have affected her. And she’s sharing that with us,” says Tom Gitterman of Gitterman Gallery in New York City, who has known Caffery since 1995 and represented her since 2007.

Born in 1948 in New Iberia, Louisiana, Caffery, who now lives in nearby Breaux Bridge, grew up across the Bayou Teche from a sugar mill. The complex cultural mix of French Cajuns (Caffery’s origins), African Americans and Creoles in this part of southern Louisiana sets it apart from any other area of the state or the U.S. Her father, a lawyer, and mother, a housewife, assured their children a comfortable upbringing, with the typical black hired help that their socioeconomic bracket took as a given. Caffery was very aware of the widespread poverty and racial discrimination in 1950s Louisiana that she saw outside of her home.

“Everyone had housekeepers and babysitters. I remember being really upset as a little kid by the way people talked to the women, especially the African American women. I saw it a lot at friends’ houses. It was not the way my family treated people,” she tells me.

After school every day, the young Caffery went straight to her grandmother’s house where her great-grandmother, who spoke primarily French, also lived. “I was always around really strong women,” she says. “The Acadians have such a rich heritage, coming from France to Canada and finally Louisiana. I grew up around great storytellers. So I’m interested in people’s stories and their lives, particularly people who’ve had difficult lives and how they’ve managed to make it through hard times.”

The shadowed tonality so dominant in Caffery’s work emo-

tionalizes those trials and tribulations, mostly in her photos of the sugarcane workers, an elderly black woman named Polly Joseph and the prostitutes in Mexican villages and cities — all of whom she took the time to befriend. For many years, she photographed at night and predawn, either because that’s when her three young children were sleeping or when her subjects were working.

Darkness in her photos also appears as a “piecemeal veil,” says Anne Wilkes Tucker, curator of photography at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, in her essay in Caffery’s book *Carry Me Home* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990). Speaking of the photographs of sugar country, Wilkes says, “Within a picture she shifts surprisingly easily from descriptive details, such as a shiny slicker or rusty truck door, to broad areas of black void without orienting details. Reality is simultaneously retained and detached. Retaining salient details keeps the composition from becoming merely a high-contrast design. Scenes take on the quality of a vivid but eerie dream. And like dreams, the pictures are open to multiple interpretations.”

In “May Van’s Camp” (1987), the mid-distant silhouettes of her three young children, whom she often photographed, press against a bright swath of bayou as light dapples the screen door. What makes this photo for me is the small lizard climbing the screen, epitomizing the heat and play of summer in the Deep South. Caffery tells me she later realized, “This picture is a sort of self-portrait. I was looking out at myself as a kid.” The photo appears in her book *The Shadows* (Twin Palms, 2002), a mix of images including her children, sugarcane workers, Mexican prostitutes, rural Portugal and Louisiana Zydeco nightclubs.

In many of Caffery’s photographs, screen doors and gauzy curtains, shadows and smoke, clouds and fog, and the blurred effect of long exposures join an inky palette in the act of concealing, adding to the enigmatic feel of her work. Obscuring elements play against the light — light that bleeds through worn-out fabric, offsets someone’s shadowy form, or throws a dim patch onto a dusty wooden floor — creating a tension for what’s grueling and sweltering, sorrowful and heartfelt.

Certainly, growing up among the sugarcane workers and often



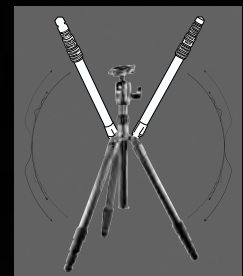
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Irma

“Polly lived on a curve in the road, and whenever she heard cars driving by she’d help them get around the corner by snapping her fingers. She was superstitious.”

—Debbie Fleming Caffery

visiting the mill with her grandfather planted the visual seeds that would later sprout as award-winning photographs. But there was no clue Caffery would become a photographer until high school. “I hated school and wasn’t a very good student,” she says. “I struggled all through high school, and then when I was a senior, I took an art class and it saved my life. I just loved it; it was so much fun the minute I realized I could draw. It was the first time I didn’t get a C, D or F.”

She started off as a fine arts student at Louisiana State University and later took classes in documentary photography and film at Rice University Media Center. “I loved roaming around taking pictures,” she recalls. Then came the San Francisco Art Institute. As a student there in 1974, Caffery got a work-study grant to photograph sugarcane life in her home state. That’s when she met and married a man who worked for his family’s sugar mill.

One of her work-study photos, of a man standing in the fields looking wearily into the camera, turned her photography in a completely new direction. When she saw the print, which she titled “Sunrise,” she says, “I was very moved. I saw sadness and my heart was stirred. I realized then that this was more than just a straight documentary portrait, and that I could take even better pictures.”

After earning her MFA, Caffery moved back to Louisiana. For years, in between raising her children and conducting workshops in the U.S. and France, she acquainted herself with the workers in the fields and mills while photographing them, giving them prints in return.

For a few months in 1984, along the Mississippi River two hours from where she lived in Franklin, Caffery drove by a cabin that seemed to have someone living in it, but she wasn’t sure. “I was attracted to the neat arrangement on the front porch: a sofa

made of branches, a rocking chair with no rockers and a mailbox,” she writes in her book, *Polly* (Twin Palms, 2004). Then she noticed an old woman crossing the front yard. “I was awestruck by the sight of her as she walked along the side of her house, her face old but magnificent, her body held regally.” That day, Polly Joseph invited her into the home that she lived in alone, without electricity, gas or running water. It was the start of a deep friendship that lasted until Polly’s death from a heart attack in 1996.

The two women met frequently for long visits, Caffery bringing her food and other basics. When they did talk, it was mostly about the weather, flowers, her chickens, family and love. Polly rarely mentioned her husband who abandoned her or her son who drowned in the Mississippi.

“She lived on a curve in the road, and whenever she heard cars driving by she’d help them get around the corner by snapping her fingers. I saw her do that a lot,” says Caffery. “She was superstitious.” I can’t help but see magic in her photo, “Polly Snapping Fingers,” with her blurred figure and the cabin’s dark interior stabbed by a blade of sunlight — aimed right to her heart.

The strong ties to the earth and religious tradition that Caffery saw in the rural South are what initially attracted her to Mexico. She made her first trip there in 1990 to photograph Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) and returned two years later, visiting Oaxaca and rural villages. She photographed churches, private side chapels and life in the streets and cantinas, always searching “for the darkest, most mysterious places I could find.”

One of them was a cemetery, where in 1995 a chance encounter changed Caffery’s life, and once again, her photography. A gold crucifix near the entrance inspired her to return to the graveyard with her camera at night. Her friend Martha Posner wasn’t so thrilled but went anyway. While she was photograph-



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Smoking Torso

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Burning Cane



Polly's Baby Shoes

For many years, she photographed at night and predawn, either because that's when her three young children were sleeping or when her subjects were working.

ing, a Jeep full of men suddenly charged through, and Caffery, unfazed, urged her friend to just ignore them and sing. "And out of the Jeep jumps the most handsome guy I had ever seen in my life," she says in *The Spirit & The Flesh* (Radius Books, 2009).

The man was the village priest. He served as her guide in the village and renovated an outbuilding on church grounds for her to rent during her visits. Next to it was a tortilla house that she used as a studio. Down the street at a cantina, she noticed a lot of activity and an upstairs room for prostitutes and their clients. She had been fascinated with prostitutes ever since childhood, when she caught glimpses of them on New Orleans' Bourbon Street where her grandmother sometimes took her to lunch.

For the next nine years, Caffery returned often to villages and cities in Mexico, exploring and immersing herself in the world of prostitutes. She spent hours waiting, listening and observing, acquainting herself with the women, gradually gaining their respect and trust.

"The brothels are a tragic environment," Caffery says. "There's this sadness, and yet it's a very human place. And of course there's perversion, but I didn't witness that. I did see lots of loneliness, though, in talking to the women and why men go to them."

Caffery was especially drawn to the convergence of sexual commerce and Catholicism, the religion of her childhood. Says Springer in an essay in *The Spirit & The Flesh*:

The influence of religion and the reality of human need and desire are basic undercurrents in Caffery's prostitute photographs. In Mexico she observed and experienced a complex relationship between spiritual yearning and the sensual aspects of life. The navigation between those two worlds is at the heart of her work there . . . There are,

however, few direct references in the prostitute photographs to religious subject matter; it is the artist's depiction of the human frailties, struggles and aspirations of her subjects, and her dramatic, sometimes otherworldly light that is most evocative of sacred imagery.

Crosses hang between the bare breasts of some of the women, many of whom posed for the shots (Caffery paid her subjects), some hiding their faces with eye masks, jewelry or their own hair. Few men appear in these pictures, and when they do, it's mostly marginally: a hand on top of a woman's head as she kneels naked on a bed with her back turned; a man's blurry profile with the vague shadow of a woman behind him; a man sitting in a car, city lights rushing through the driver's window and obscuring his face.

I find these photos disturbing and depressing. But I can't ignore the beauty in Caffery's poetic use of shadow and light. She pushes me past the subject matter of the women's occupation and toward their strength, faith and grace in the face of economic hardship and raw human desire.

Springer notes that, unlike other photographers' images of prostitutes (such as Mary Ellen Mark's *Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay* or Brassai's *The Secret Paris of the '30s*), Caffery's photographs "don't include specific information about the environment these women are working in. You see elements of the rooms, at times, but the focus is very much on the women, themselves, and the spirit that she saw in them."

Gitterman observes, "Debbie's eye is incredibly sensitive. These images reflect a dialogue between her and the women we see, and it's only because that dialogue is so honest and true that these women are able to show who they are to her. It's that integrity that makes the image of a prostitute compelling in ways



Lucy

Obscuring elements play against the light – creating a tension for what’s grueling and sweltering, sorrowful and heartfelt.

you never thought possible. The images are sensual, sad and seductive. They’re thought-provoking.”

A Guggenheim fellowship in 2005 gave Caffery the funds and time to delve further into her series on Mexican prostitutes, which she completed at the end of the year. In the midst of this project, Hurricane Katrina struck and *People* magazine gave her a seven-day assignment to take portraits of the evacuees and the possessions they fled with.

“I’d never photographed any kind of weather disaster before, and here it was happening in my home state,” says Caffery. After just a few photos, she couldn’t shoot any more, devastated not only by the destruction but also by the sheer disrespect toward the evacuees. She found herself in the role of comforter for the hungry and sleepless survivors, further battered by the heartless treatment by government workers who prodded them through metal detectors with rubber gloves and rudely snatched away any wet possessions for fear they were virus-ridden.

Thanks to a fellowship from the Soros Foundation, over the next two years Caffery photographed what was left of New Orleans’ Seventh and Ninth Wards. She plods through the rubble of churches and homes in a documentary film about her life and work, the third installment in *The Photographers Series* produced by Anthropy Arts.

Today Caffery continues to photograph churches, the old ones along the Bayou Teche that are still standing. “They’re starting to disappear because so few people are going to church,” she says. “You may see 10 people at the most.” Caffery is one of them, as she attends services and reintroduces herself to people she hasn’t seen for years. “Some of these are family churches, and the communities are trying to save them as historical buildings. I’m inter-

ested in documenting them, even if they’re torn or burned down.”

She’s also started recording oral histories of the elderly in New Iberia and the surrounding areas, people who worked the sugarcane fields when she first photographed there in the 1970s. Eventually, she’ll return to Louisiana’s Zydeco nightclubs and the prostitutes she knows in Mexico, this time photographing them in their homes.

I ask Caffery what fuels her devotion to her work, which she labels “an obsession.” She says, “I just keep finding more stories to tell, and more interesting people. It never ends. For the past 33 years, I’ve missed only two harvestings, and yet I still find spots I’ve never photographed, the sugarcane mills are so huge. The whole environment is always changing; there’s something new every year.”

It’s a good thing Caffery has taken so many pictures for so long. As today’s new cane cutting equipment replaces the old, you won’t see as much burning in the fields. And you likely won’t hear anyone singing hymns because the mills’ sophisticated machinery means there are fewer people out there working, many of them Mexican migrants. Now in Louisiana cane country, Caffery photographs mostly industrial and field landscapes. “I understand the weather better every year, so my images, especially of the skies, just seem to get more dramatic,” she says. I imagine standing among the rows of sugarcane looking up at that sky — as immense as the fields beneath my feet. ▲

Claire Sykes is a freelance writer living in Portland, Oregon. Her articles on photography and other visual arts appear in Afterimage, Art on Paper, Camera Arts, Glass, Graphis, Photo District News, Photo Insider and Communication Arts, among others.