

JANUARY 12, 2021

In the Studio: Deborah Luster



Deborah Luster is a New Orleans-based artist and Fall 2020 Artist-in-Residence at the Joan Mitchell Center. This interview was filmed at the Joan Mitchell Center in New Orleans, November 2020. Learn more about her work at deborahluster.com.

[View here](#)



NEWS



Sarah Amos, *Blue Isabelle*, 2018. Courtesy of the Joan Mitchell Foundation.
January 29, 2020 at 10:15am

JOAN MITCHELL FOUNDATION NAMES 2020 ARTISTS-IN-RESIDENCE

The Joan Mitchell Foundation announced today that thirty-seven artists were selected to participate in its artist-in-residence program at its center in New Orleans. The 2020 cohort is made up of eight New Orleans–based artists and twenty-nine artists from fourteen other states, including California, Oregon, Ohio, Texas, Vermont, Florida, and New York. The residents will receive studio space on the center’s two-acre campus as well as a \$600 monthly stipend.

“The 2020 artists’ work represents an incredible spectrum of formal and conceptual approaches, and an engagement with place, culture, identity, and the importance of the creative process in ways that feel timely and deeply meaningful,” said Toccarra A. H. Thomas, director of the Joan Mitchell Center. “The residency program provides a platform for participants to continue to develop their work, share ideas and innovations, and to be inspired in new ways through dialogue with other artists, arts professionals, and the local community as well as by the unique history and culture of New Orleans.”

Established by the Foundation in 2015, the Joan Mitchell Center has hosted more than two hundred artists since its inception. The residents are chosen through a multi-tiered process that includes a review by a five-person panel, comprising artists, curators, and arts professionals, which takes each artist’s studio practice and body of work, as well as the impact the residency may have on their career, into consideration.

The full list of 2020 artists-in-residence is as follows:

Sarah Amos, Enosburg Falls, VT
Scott Andresen, New Orleans
Olive Ayhens, Brooklyn, NY
Elenora “Rukiya” Brown, New Orleans
Andrea Carlson, Chicago
Cindy Cheng, Baltimore
Oreen Cohen, Pittsburgh
Yanira Collado, North Miami, FL
Pamela Council, New York
Lauren Davies, Cleveland
Florine Demosthene, New York
Theo Eliezer, New Orleans
AnnieLaurie Erickson, New Orleans
Kasimu Harris, New Orleans
Elana Herzog, New York
LaToya M. Hobbs, Baltimore
Sedrick Huckaby, Benbrook, TX

Ariston Jacks, Baltimore
Lisa Jarrett, Portland, OR
Yashua Klos, Brooklyn, NY
Daniela Leal, New Orleans
Deborah Luster, New Orleans
Kaori Maeyama, New Orleans
Rose Nestler, Brooklyn, NY
Ebony G. Patterson, Chicago
Pat Phillips, Pineville, LA
Juan Carlos Quintana, Oakland, CA
Jamea Richmond-Edwards, Silver Spring, MD
Julia Rooney, New York
Rebecca Rose, Davenport, FL
Katy Schimert, New York
Elizabeth Simonson, Minneapolis
Laura Spector, Houston
Stephanie Syjuco, Oakland, CA
Hui-Ying Tsai, Brooklyn, NY
Jose Villalobos, San Antonio
Antoine Williams, Greensboro, NC



Benny Andrews, *Mississippi River Bank (Trail of Tears Series)*, 2005.

we see the world, for the way we see others.”

These acquisitions were made possible through the support of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which is funding a new initiative at the museum, called the Center for Art and Public Exchange. This initiative aims to use original artworks, exhibitions, programs, and engagements with artists to increase understanding and inspire new narratives in contemporary Mississippi.

“It is not enough for museums to simply recognize societal inequities and gaps in representation,” said Julian Rankin, managing director of the museum’s Center for Art and Public Exchange. “Acquiring thought-provoking artworks, employing them in accessible and innovative programming, and involving communities in the thinking and decision-making of the institution are all components of what responsible museum stewardship looks like in contemporary life.”

May 04, 2018 at 1:22pm

MISSISSIPPI MUSEUM OF ART ANNOUNCES NEW ACQUISITIONS

The Mississippi Museum of Art has added several new works to its permanent collection. Among the acquisitions are pieces by Benny Andrews, McArthur Binion, Jeffrey Gibson, Titus Kaphar, Glenn Ligon, Deborah Luster, Noah Saterstrom, Toyin Ojih Odutola, and Hank Willis Thomas.

Andrews’s *Mississippi River Bank*, 2005; Gibson’s *Sharecropper*, 2015; Binion’s *DNA: Black Painting: IV*, 2015; and Saterstrom’s *Road to Shubuta*, 2016, are currently on view in “Picturing Mississippi, 1817–2017: Land of Plenty, Pain, and Promise” through July 8. Thomas’s *Flying Geese*, 2012, is also on view through July 8, in the William B. and Isabel R. McCarty Foundation Gallery.

“The common denominator in my work is framing and context,” Thomas said in 2016. “Whoever is holding the frame gets to create the context—for history, for the way we see ourselves, for the way

The New York Times

THESE TIMES

EBO L STE Tooth for an Eye'

By COLLIN COTTE N. 2, 2

Jack Shainman Gallery

513 West 20th Street, Chelsea

Through Feb. 5

In Deborah Luster's mother was murdered by a hired killer. A decade later, still trying to come to grips emotionally with that death, Ms. Luster began taking photographic portraits of inmates, many of them convicted of violent crimes, in state prisons in Louisiana, where she lives. The portraits were tender and personal. She sent prints of them to the sitters, and published them as a book called "One Big Self Prisoners of Louisiana," with text by the poet C. D. Wright. In 2012 she turned them into a public installation for the contemporary art festival Prospect. 3 in New Orleans.

She has said in interviews that the prison experience was cathartic. Yet violence remains front and center in her recent photographs at Shainman, which add up to a topological survey map of death on the streets of New Orleans. For this series Ms. Luster researched city police homicide reports, pulled a sampling and photographed the exact locations of the killings: an empty lot in the Lower Ninth Ward, the doorway of a clinic in the Eschere area, the sidewalk in front of a boarded-up house in the Sixth Ward, where a returning Katrina evacuee had been gunned down.

The earlier prison portraits were intimate in size, meant to be hand held. By contrast, the city pictures are large and circular in format, as if viewed through a gun

sight. The scenes of the crimes, whether a cramped backyard or a street corner under a “Crime Stoppers” billboard, are physically unremarkable and empty of people. But once you learn the significance of the locales — and by annotating each picture with the victim’s name, age and cause of death Ms. Luster insures that you will — they feel haunted.

This is true even in a skyward shot of birds perched on overhead telephone lines. On the exact spot where Ms. Luster stood to take the photograph, a man named Brian Christopher Smith, 22, had been found dead of multiple gunshot wounds. In every picture in the show, and in the book that accompanies it, “Tooth for an Eye,” produced by Twin Palms Publishers in Santa Fe, N.M., we learn of terrible events now in the past, violated lives now gone. Yet through the materialized memory that is photography, malignant spirits of place live on.

A version of this review appears in print on January 21, 2011, on page C30 of the New York edition.

From the book: Deborah Luster, *Tooth for an Eye: A Chorography of Violence in Orleans Parish*, 2011. Published by Twin Palms Publishers, Santa Fe.

Absent Populations: Deborah Luster's *Tooth for an Eye*

By Eva Díaz / Posted 05-12-2011



I first encountered Deborah Luster's work at the Prospect. 1 Biennial in New Orleans in 2008, when a selection of photographs from *Tooth for an Eye* was displayed at the Old U.S. Mint, a hybrid treasury museum/contemporary arts venue. In the series of large-scale, circular-format, black-and-white photographs, Luster documents sites in New Orleans where murders have taken place.

It wasn't until I saw the work in a different location, at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York this February, that I noticed the extended title given to the project: "A Chorography of Violence in Orleans Parish," also the subtitle of the book published this spring in the wake of the exhibition. Upon first reading, I misread "chorography of violence" as "choreography of violence," possibly because I'd never seen the word "chorography" before coming across it in Luster's work.

According to Ptolemy's 2nd century BC text *Geographia*, chorography is the study of small parts of the world, as opposed to geography, which demands a more scientific surveying of larger tracts of land and nations. The root "choro" derives from the Greek word *choros*, or place; whereas choreography is rooted in the Greek *choreia*, or circle dance. Two very different words, with quite distinct implications.

My misreading—a choreography of violence in Orleans Parish—might imply that the artist herself was organizing these deaths, an unlikely interpretation. But Luster, like any photographer, *does* construct her images—she researches and travels to locations around New Orleans in which murders took place and photographs them; she is obviously directing the viewer's experience of these histories and places. However, my assumption was that the (erroneous) word "choreography" implied that others orchestrated the events she documented. In so many of her works the same locations recur as sites of violence, as though there were some coordination or planning at play. Indeed, some places in New

Orleans are visited by murder with unnerving regularity, on two, three, or even four distinct occasions, the way dancers repeatedly hit their marks on the stage, every single night of the show. Choreography is about repetition, about composing gestures, about rehearsing and executing those movements in a repeatable way. Chorography is about place, about mapping at a small scale; Ptolemy believed it should be undertaken by draftsmen and artists, as they were better prepared to represent details of local experience.[i]

Not to dwell on that absent “e” too long, but murder in New Orleans, the subject of Luster’s book, intersects choreography and chorography, movement and place, intention and accident, repetition and trauma, in very specific ways. Looking at these violent events with hindsight, once you’ve seen the script of the inexorable finality of a death, these occurrences begin to feel depressingly practiced, predictable even. New Orleans has the highest murder rate in the United States (for over 20 years running), a rate ten times the national average, which also makes it the third most violent city in the world. Two thousand three hundred and twenty three individuals were murdered in the city in the years 2000 to 2010; in 2009, a year not uncharacteristic in terms of these statistics, 91.5% of those killed were black.[ii] Most murders in New Orleans take place in historically black areas like the 1st and 5th Districts, which include the neighborhoods of Tremé, Mid-City, Faubourg Marigny, the 7th Ward, Bywater, the 9th Ward, and St. Roch.[iii] It is estimated that at least a quarter of the murder victims in New Orleans do not know their assailant; of these a great deal are casualties of seemingly random killings: drive-by shootings, botched robberies and muggings, or stray bullets. The victims were in the wrong place at the wrong time; unfortunately for many, the wrong place is their own neighborhood. In my misreading, my mental insertion of that little “e,” I believe I was thinking about these kinds of systemic repetitions.

* * *

Luster’s black-and-white images are round, shaped like peepholes or gun scopes. The circular format results from the particular lens she used in the project. Rather than framing the image to the square or rectangular format of the camera’s film, it offers a complete, uncropped image of the view through the lens. As the artist describes:

These prints are 49 inches high, by about 62 inches across... I have an old 8 x 10 Deardorff camera that I’d never used before and I had bought a lot of old lenses on eBay, so I started throwing all these lenses on this 8 x 10 camera and one of the lenses formed a perfect circle. It didn’t cover the entire film plane, so you see what the lens sees in its entirety, it’s surrounded by this little bit of fall-off called “the circle of confusion;” I don’t know, it images the city in a slightly different way, it does something to the grid, it reinforces the void. I thought “yes this is it” so these are all circles, all of these images.

The images were taken in extended, 90-second exposures, resulting in a great deal of ghostly blur in the prints. Anything moved by wind, or traveling through the image, becomes spectral and indistinct. Given the charged nature of these sites, where blood has

been spilled and lives taken, these phantom presences create visually complex surfaces that are simultaneously disconcerting and eerie. In one image, taken from the point of view of the victim's parked car looking on to the murder scene, a large bush trembles with preternatural force. Buffeted by the wind, the shrub is captured in Luster's photo as a large and angry presence. In this case, 22-year old Adolph Grimes III was shot by N.O.P.D. undercover agents early on New Years Day, 2009, as he sat in front of his grandmother's house.

According to Luster's deadpan textual commentary, "Grimes was shot 14 times (12 times in the back)... The case is under Federal investigation." [v] This and other information about the crime is conveyed to the reader in Luster's careful cursive handwriting, facing the image, as indeed is the case for each site she documents. Each record is brief but methodical, and employs the visual codes of the archive: a rubber stamp creates a template that names the project in its heading, and retains blank spaces for identifying facts such as the location, date, names of victims, and other notes. In these blanks Luster painstakingly outlines the essential details of the murders. In the upper right of each grid is a second stamp with two numbers separated by a dash, a private code of Luster's project, filling in the enigmatically titled "disarchive" section.

* * *

I'm still hung up that little "e" I imagined in Luster's title. Probably because language is so important to her project, and captions are essential. In this sense, *Tooth for an Eye* is particularly suited to a book format, in which information about the victims and murder sites faces the large, circular images of the crime scenes. Luster's thoughtful essay is a fitting coda to this iteration of her project documenting 28 crime scenes, abbreviated as it is from the many she has documented.

But "chorography" isn't the only puzzling aspect of Luster's title that invites further consideration. "Tooth for an eye" is a deceptively familiar axiom, but Luster has transformed its original phrasing. She altered the "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" proverb found throughout the Bible into something more ambiguous and strange. The first occurrence of the saying is God's command in Exodus 21:22-25:

If men fight and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no lasting harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman's husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if any lasting harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

In the New Testament, in Matthew 5:38-40, a contradicting theological principle is put forward by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth." But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the

other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.

The Old Testament usage is known as the juridical principle *lex talionis*, Latin for “law of retaliation,” which asserts that a punishment should equal the crime in severity. This retributive code of “like for like” is opposed by Jesus in his call for generosity in the face of violence—what others have called the ethic of Christian pacifism.

Luster transforms the saying into a third formulation—“a tooth for an eye.” One possible meaning of this revision could be that the crime should not exceed the punishment; that the already retaliatory notion of exact retribution should not become something more punitive. Yet a literal reading of Luster’s reformulation could be construed as contending that a punishment, though still retaliative, should be less harsh than the crime. We have more teeth than our more essential single pair of eyes, so a tooth for an eye would be a relatively lenient sentence (an eye for a tooth would be the more severe punishment).

But could it instead mean that her photography has bite, that it “has teeth”? That her acts of witnessing, sometimes long after the murders were perpetrated, produce an archive empowering new considerations of the role of violence in society, that may even galvanize viewers to action? Luster’s images picture an absent population, an absent public, one could say, of New Orleans. But she shows it to *us*, the living, those who can use her memorialization of erased lives, these often forgotten people, in order to rethink why this large, missing public continues to be taken before its time.

[i] In this sense Luster’s choice of “chorography” is interesting as an update of Situationist’s notion of psychogeography, a study of more subjective experiences of place than what maps offer.

[ii] <http://www.city-data.com/crime/crime-New-Orleans-Louisiana.html>. Stats taken from Charles Wellford, Brenda J. Bond, and Sean Goodison, “Crime in New Orleans: Analyzing Crime Trends and New Orleans’ Responses to Crime,” March 15, 2011, p. 12, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Accessed on April 26, 2011 from www.nola.com.

[iii] Wellford, Bond, and Goodison, “Crime in New Orleans,” p. 18.

[iv] “Tooth for an Eye: A Gallery Walk with Photographer Deborah Luster, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,” February 1, 2011, www.kitchensisters.org/girlstories/tooth_for_an_eye/.

[v] Grimes comes up again in Luster’s book; it haunts her, one could say. Luster documents another police brutality case, in which 32-year old Kim Marie Groves was shot in the head on October 13, 1994. According to Luster, “N.O.P.D. Officer Len Davis

ordered Paul “Cool” Hardy, a drug dealer, to murder Grimes in retaliation for her filing of a complaint of brutality against Davis and his partner.” Note Luster’s parapractic substitution of “Grimes” for “Groves.”

New Orleans' Hidden Violence

by *Blake Gopnik*

They look like typical street corners and parking lots, but Deborah Luster's haunting new photographs reveal the unpitying areas where murders occurred in New Orleans.

Tooth for an Eye: A Chorography of Violence in Orleans Parish is a large series of photos by the photographer Deborah Luster, and now on view at the [Jack Shainman Gallery](#) in New York. The images, printed huge or bound into deluxe scrapbooks, record the sites where murders have occurred in New Orleans. And more than anything, they demolish the pathetic fallacy—that the world weeps as we do. These cityscapes show no care at all that people died in them; they barely even show traces of the murder. One interesting wrinkle: Luster's images are circles because they record the entire field of view her lens has taken in. (All lenses project circles; most cameras cut a square or rectangular image out of the middle of the optical pie.) It's as though Luster is insisting that she's not hiding a thing—and still not revealing much, either.

Image: Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery



Tooth for an Eye, Ledger 06-22
Location. 8801 Edinburgh at Eagle, Big Time
Tips Bar and Lounge
Date(s). November 30, 2002 9 pm
Name(s). Jeffery McLeod (24), Ivory White
(27) Notes. Gunshot at bar
2008-2010 toned silver gelatin print
mounted on Dibond
49 1/2 x 61 1/2 inches framed

49 X 61 inches unframed
Edition of 2 + 1AP DL08.041. M1

Deborah Luster

ARTslant

Murder Mystery by Yván A. Rosa

TOOTH FOR AN EYE

Jack Shainman Gallery

513 W. 20th St., New York, NY 10011

January 6, 2011 - February 5, 2011



Deborah Luster's photographs are a kind of search. More properly, one might even call it an investigation. Don't get the wrong idea; her manner of probing is nowhere close to scientific in nature or ambition. Despite first appearances these pictures are far too moody, and she's way too attached to her subject for them to be labeled objective. The mood conveyed leans toward the noirish, though perhaps this invokes a camp sensibility, and there's none of that here. But what is the Noir if not the quintessential murder mystery? So maybe the reference is apt, for Luster's photographs are just that, scenes of brutal homicides.

The city of New Orleans provides the ground on which Luster conducts her investigation. Each of the nearly forty black and white photographs depicts a vacant, or nearly vacant, scene of New Orleans' urban sprawl. Possessing a strange eeriness, they act as the emptied stage of an historical or recent homicide. At first sight Luster's images might seem distanced and objective, even removed. Yet they maintain an air of mystery. The banalities of the depictions are charged with a tension that vibrates just below what is immediately perceptible. The numerous instances of detritus and the general dilapidation appear to only be fragments of a more immense bleakness.

Each photograph is delimited within a circle, echoing what the lens of Luster's 8 x 10 Deardorff field camera sees. This framing device disturbs the conventional, and therefore neutral, rectangular frame. They might remind one of the view through a spyglass, demarcating a distance within the narrow margins of a circle while simultaneously calling attention to the act of looking, and by extension, searching for something.

New Orleans is the city with the highest homicide rate in North America. It is the immensity of this incomprehensible fact that Luster is attempting to probe. By revealing these surfaces and the concrete materiality of the city, Luster attempts to answer the many question of 'why' - Why this city? Why its inhabitants?

~ Yván A. Rosa

Images: *Tooth for an Eye*, 2022, installation views. Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



THE NEW YORKER

JANUARY 31, 2011

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK THE BIG UNEASY

If Deborah Luster's photographs of New Orleans at the Jack Shainman gallery look like they came from police-evidence files, that's probably because her subject is crime scenes. Someone was killed at each of these



sites; the photographs' captions note the names of the victims and the method of their death (almost always by gunshot). Although the crimes include several of the notorious police shootings after Hurricane Katrina, most were far

less sensational, and the intersections, sidewalks, and alleys where they occurred have sunk back into anonymity. But Luster turns the locations into memorials, and the subjects of her carefully focussed attention are impossible to ignore. Her format emphasizes that focus by framing each site in a circle not unlike the lens of the view camera she uses. The device is old-fashioned, recalling the circular vignettes of early Kodak prints; for modern-day viewers the effect is both seductive and unsettling, like looking through a peephole or the sight of a gun. Suddenly, we are there, and desolation, desperation, and death are very real.

—Vince Aletti

Latest News and Views in New York City

John Haber - <http://www.haberarts.com>

1.26.11 — An Eye for an Eye

Every death, they say, leaves a hole in the community. Loss of life is everywhere in Deborah Luster's New Orleans, but with only the barest hint of community. Perhaps only the emptiness unites them—the fence, the narrow alley, the shuttered house or storefront, the underside of a highway, the thick weeds outside a cemetery. Perhaps the emptiness *is* the community.

I did not know at first that she had photographed the murder capital of the United States, but I might have guessed. Indeed, the look of abandonment made me think of the aftermath of Katrina, as with Sara VanDerBeek. Luster calls it "Tooth for an Eye: A Chorography of Violence," which is not the same as choreography, for this is a very slow dance. One woman sits in a lawn chair, with no eye contact, staring away. Otherwise, one can look for a long time for signs of life, other than absences. Graffiti of a little girl or the blanket cast aside on an empty mattress tempts one for a moment to imagine more, but only for a moment.



Did the portrait begin as a memorial and the blanket end as a shroud? Even then, they look abandoned, without the hopefulness of a proper memorial or the fashionable populism of street art. One wall reads *RIP*, but warnings like *NO LOITERING* or *FUCK YOU* seek self-preservation in keeping others away. So, in a sense, do the photographs in black and white, at Jack Shainman through February 5, no matter how beautiful and riveting. Often frontal, they preserve the regularity of closed spaces. They also keep the circular frame of the large-format camera, like a porthole, and the surrounding white emphasizes the photographer's distance from what she sees.

Yet they also draw one in, as violence has a way of doing. One could mistake the circle for a fisheye panorama, and one could mistake the largest photographs, at nearly fifty by sixty inches, for the scale of the objects themselves. They are not, but they bring one up close, like the perspective of unmediated vision—a literal eye for an eye. The paradox of distance and immersion reflects the disturbing subject matter, but also work's place between documentary photography (and indeed *chorography* means the detailed analysis of a place) and portraiture or poetry. That space between continues in smaller but still large prints, at more than twenty-four by thirty inches—many in tight rows on a gallery wall and others in portfolios on a table. One can turn the pages and appreciate the quality of the medium, as well as the care to label each print with a name, age, place, and date of murder.

Documentary photography and portraiture alike have to deal with that paradox of sympathy and scrutiny. It appears obviously in other records of confrontation, as by Catherine Opie, or of displacement, as by David Goldblatt and Zwelethu Mthethwa in South Africa. Luster is certainly no stranger to dedication or detachment. Although she grew up in Arkansas, her commitment to Louisiana dates to 2002, when, after her mother's murder, she took on the project of photographing prisoners. She has stressed that she could not know them as individuals or present them as psychological studies. The series grew all the same into two books and a collaboration with a poet, C. D. Wright.

The series took her to medium- and maximum-security detention in the northeast part of the state, including the infamous Angola prison. And there, too, humanity does not mean community, while a lack of community does not mean a deficiency of sympathy. Luster called the work *One Big Self*, but it used neutral backgrounds to focus on the people and efface their surroundings. The new photographs, in contrast, are all surroundings. "Tooth for an Eye" clearly refuses the logic of revenge, suggesting rather a breakdown in logic entirely. Instead of a cycle of violence, it depicts a cycle of violence and the loss of community.

Deborah Luster and Carlos Vega: The Pleasures of a Great Two-Artist Exhibition

Benjamin Sutton / January 20, 2011 <http://www.thelmagazine.com/>



The West 20th Street gallery Jack Shainman, with its two large galleries and series of smaller rooms, generally shows works by two artists simultaneously. But rarely do its parallel exhibitions work together so well as the current pairing of Deborah Luster's circular black-and-white photos of murder sites in New Orleans and Carlos Vega's etched, punctured and painted sheets of lead (both through February 5). The two could not be more different, whether materially, stylistically or in terms of their temperament, and the extreme juxtaposition adds immensely to the impact of each.

Deborah Luster's large-format circular photos, the shape of which is the result of her 8x10 Deardorff field camera, evoke portholes to a different world. The first few pieces in her show, *Tooth for an Eye*, sustain this sense of dislocation, and it's only gradually that the time and place pictured becomes clear: post-Katrina New Orleans. The images are incredibly forceful and eerily beautiful, even without reading the exhibition description and discovering that each was the site of a murder. The all-encompassing emptiness of the city after the flood takes on spectral tones in light of the homicidal theme—Weegee-style crime scene photography this most definitely is not. Luster manages to convey that desolation with great sensitivity, an impressive accomplishment considering the restricted and often cramped compositions of circular images. The format lends these photos an unexpected softness, the broad curves playing against the rigid diagonals of trash-strewn streets in undeveloped subdivisions, train tracks under elevated highways, narrow alleys

and concrete sidewalks. Knowledge of the locations' criminal past renews the sense of devastation: not only was this city abandoned to a natural disaster in 2005, most of its citizens remain in a state of perpetual abandonment. Luster melds notes of unsettling beauty and intense sadness—a "Fuck You" tag at one murder site seems directed at the viewer standing safely in the Chelsea gallery. The massive series, which can be perused in its totality in large bound ledgers in the main gallery, punctuates a metropolis in mourning with more personal and specific death notes. An unfortunate decision to include two screens framed in kitschy locket marks "Friends" and "Family" on which photo-portraits of the deceased pass in a looping slideshow detracts from the ghostly absence felt throughout Luster's photos.

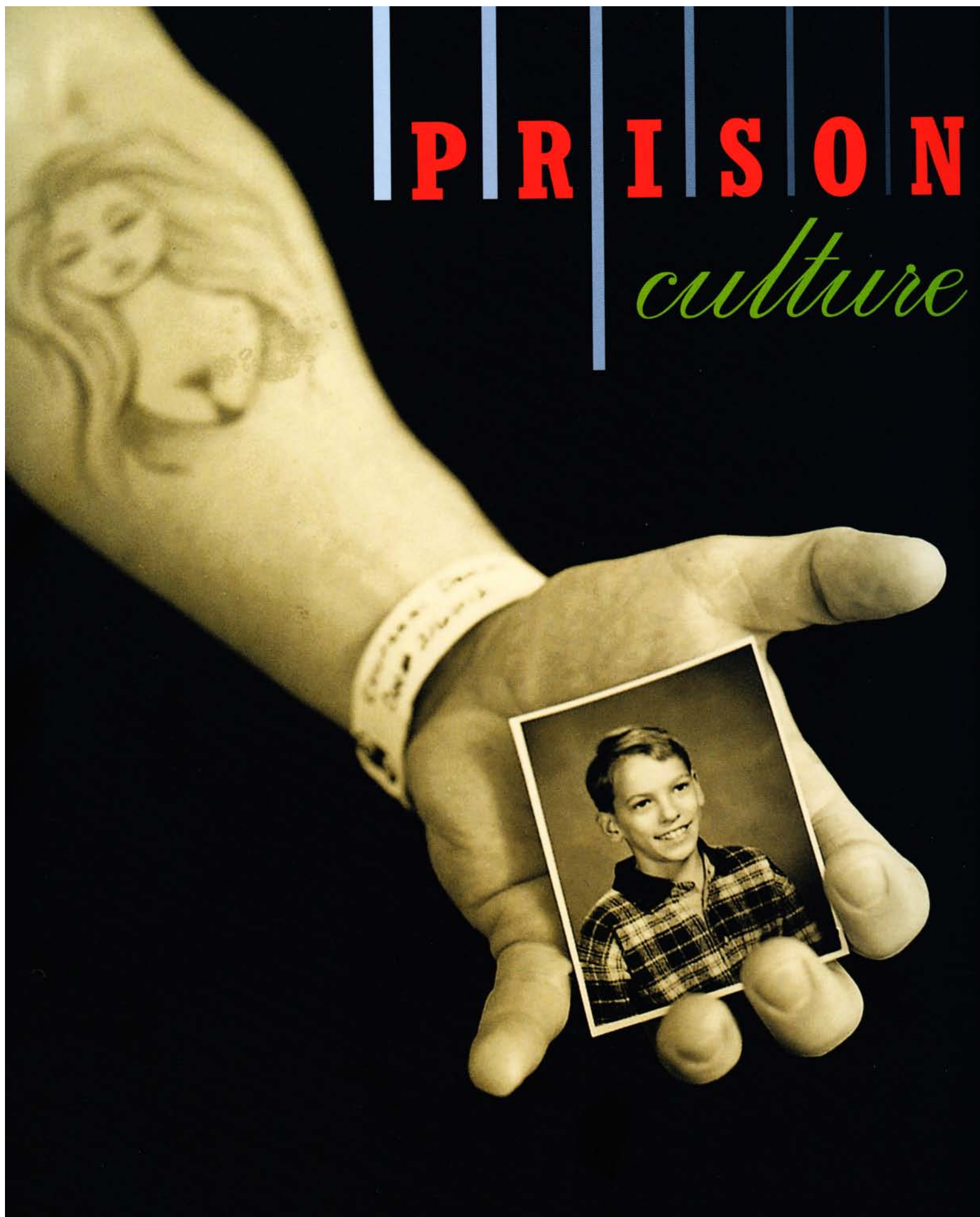
Carlos Vega's etched, perforated, painted and collaged lead sheets substitute grayscale for the black-and-white of Luster's photos. One piece in particular, the epic "Nebula" (2010), looks minimalist from certain angles where the light doesn't catch the grooves marked on the malleable lead surface. Getting closer one picks out the scene: a huge Broadway-sized theater filled with spectators looking towards the stage, which we can't see. Above them, an explosion of color has ripped through the metal, allowing us glimpses of the colorful collage beneath. As with Luster's photos, the presentation creates the experience of looking in, of peeking onto a concealed or rarely glimpsed scene—not quite voyeurism, more like being in on a secret. In other pieces Vega paints the marks he makes on the matted gray surface in sparse, bright hues, conveying brushstrokes that are wispy and delicate in appearance, but thick and heavy in dimension. He moves between figurative etchings and collages—a tree, a tuft of grass filled with strange insects—and abstract patterns of objects and carved notches, like the Tomasellian set of concentric rings rippling outwards from rocks embedded at the center of "Worn Out" (2011). Aside from the intrigue of this highly tactile and rarely used material, Vega's collaged, painted bas-relief sculptures are incredibly rich and sensitively composed, the subtle work on the metal surface contrasting with the elaborate found materials layered beneath, all assembled into sometimes-jarring, sometimes-organic relations. Each piece demands close, detailed inspection, whereas Luster's photographs require distance, and work well in great numbers as one flips through the whole series.

The interaction between the two—with the large-format photos hung generously in groups and series while the lead pieces are gathered in small rooms that invite close inspection—made for one of the few memorable viewing experiences during a recent tour of Chelsea. Vega's bright, magical and idiosyncratic pieces provide much-needed and very vivid optimism to play off the documentary harshness of Luster's arresting photos. But there's also a good deal of violence in the way Vega carves and punctures each sheet of lead, which can't help but evoke the acts of human violence that make the locations Luster shoots more significant than the vacant lot around the corner, or the deserted bit of sidewalk down the block. Both artists draw our attention to one little bit of activity in a larger field of possibility—the gleaming lead sheets, the devastated New Orleans cityscape. This set of overlapping contrasts and parallelisms makes the juxtaposition of these two exhibitions improbably enriching, their force amplified by their proximity.

(images courtesy the artists, Jack Shainman Gallery)

P R I S O N

culture



DEBORAH LUSTER ON THE PHOTOGRAPHIC PERFORMANCE

An Interview with Lizbet Simmons

December 21, 2008

Lizbet Simmons: In your book *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*, you produced portraits of inmates in Louisiana prisons. Could you talk about how this project emerged and how you gained access to your subjects in the prison system?

Deborah Luster: My mother was murdered in 1988 and, although I was interested in photography prior to that time, I didn't study or practice it. I began photographing in response to her murder. The women in my family were avid photographers. My mother and my grandmother were constantly photographing our family's every formal and whimsical occasion. And then, in quick succession, they both died and, I don't know, I just picked the camera up at that point. I learned to photograph, learned to roll film, develop film. In a way, it was a crawling out from this loss. I was very isolated after my mother's murder.

Eight months prior to her death I met a man who introduced himself to my mother as a reporter. I happened to walk into this meeting and I was very jangled by this experience—I was terrified of this man. After he left, I asked my mother to call security where we were staying in California. I slept with a butcher knife under my pillow that night. When she was killed, something in me knew this man was involved.¹ I was the only person, other than my mother, who had met him that evening. I assumed he might choose to dispose of the one person who could identify him. I didn't sleep for a couple of years, and from time to time would find myself acting strangely—diving under a stranger's porch in the middle of the afternoon, things like that. And so, after I began photographing, being/hiding behind the camera allowed me to move out into the world and meet people without panicking and climbing a tree or jumping into somebody's trashcan. I had something to hold on to. The camera helped me enter the world again. I looked for a long time. I thought surely there is something I can do photographically in response to my mother's death. Every idea I came up with was just really bad. All my ideas were quite predictable and most unfortunate.

In 1998 I was enlisted to participate in one of those "day in the life" projects, which to my way of thinking are just a terrible idea. The thought of going out to photograph for a single day and produce a visual record of significance is anathema to me. However, the goal of the project was commendable. The Louisiana Endowment of the Humanities (LEH) determined that producing photographic images of the poverty-stricken northeast corner of the state to accompany a Federal Empowerment Zone application would boost the chances of securing federal monies for the area's economic development. The LEH invited several photographers from around Louisiana to participate in the project. I said okay, but I went out scouting prior to "the day." I didn't want to walk in cold. So I went driving along the Missis-

sippi River around Lake Providence, which was, by the way, in Transylvania, a wide spot in the road. There was a big vampire bat painted on a water tower and all of these abandoned houses. Then I began noticing a number of little prisons along the highways. About that time I rounded a curve and there was another little prison, out in the middle of nowhere, East Carroll Prison Farm (ECPF). I parked and got out of my truck and walked up and knocked on the prison gate. It was Sunday afternoon. A man walked out of the prison office—Warden Dixon. I asked him if I might photograph in the prison and, lo and behold, he said, "Yes, yes. I'll have to go through my board for permission. Can you drive over to Lake Providence on Tuesday? The board's meeting and I think I can get you in." I said, "Great, I'll be there."

So on Tuesday I drove over to Lake Providence to the parish courthouse. I walked inside, past the door to the parish jail, and climbed the steps to the second floor. I looked in the office at the top of the stairs. [Laughs] The office was completely burned out. File drawers were pulled out and there was police tape everywhere. So I walked past this scene and into the room where the prison board was meeting. I explained what I was hoping to do and they gave me permission to photograph. On my way out of the meeting I said, "So, what happened, you know, down the hall." And someone said, "Oh, well, that's the D.A.'s office." So someone had just walked into the district attorney's office [located directly above the jail] and destroyed it. It was the wild frontier over there. Lake Providence is the home of Jesse James Caston, who at that time was on America's Top Ten Most Wanted List.² And the former parish sheriff had just been sent to prison for dealing crack. Anyway...this was the setting. The day of the shoot I went to the prison. I took my camera equipment and a stool and a piece of black velvet. Warden Dixon took me back by the "iron pile" where the inmates work out. I taped my piece of fabric up to the side of an exterior wall, placed the stool in front of the backdrop, asked for volunteers, and took some portraits. When I developed the portraits I thought, "This is it!" This was the project I had been looking for the past nine years. The idea was so counterintuitive yet somehow made perfect sense.

I took prints back to the prison and Warden Dixon agreed to let me photograph whenever I wanted. I gave images back to the prisoners. The first time I asked for volunteers, there was some reluctance, but once I gave the inmates their photographs, that was it. I was swamped. So...that's how I got in.

Subsequent to photographing at ECPF, I tried to gain access to other prisons in the area for many months. No access but lots of run-around. An extremely frustrating exercise. I suppose it was fortuitous that I stopped and knocked on that particular prison gate on that Sunday afternoon.



DEBORAH LUSTER

LCIW 98, St. Gabriel, ed. 5/25. 1999, photographic print on prepared black aluminum. 5 x 4 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Deborah Luster began her series of photographic portraits of prisoners in Louisiana after the murder of her mother. Her work does not seek to show images of prisoners but, rather, likenesses of the people, bars removed, who are in prison. The result is a collection of individual portraits recalling nineteenth-century tintypes. Luster provided each sitter with a dozen paper copies of his or her photo, many of which have now been integrated into prison barter and exchange systems. In the artist's words, "The aim is not to connect particular perpetrators to particular victims but to convey a cultural landscape of violence, its consequences, its toll. This is clearly not a systematic document but one photographer's...subjective views of an American institution, indeed, an American phenomenon."

L.S.: You said that the inmates were initially reluctant to participate in your project. Can you describe their reluctance?

D.L.: Well, I was standing there in the middle of a prison with a camera. I mean, what is that? Who does this white woman think she is walking in here to take pictures? I can certainly understand their confusion and suspicion. They didn't quite know what to think. I'm not very intimidating. I was, most likely, a mildly interesting distraction, and there were several inmates willing to be photographed simply by my asking. I understand that sometimes a person is incarcerated for one crime but may have committed other crimes, and so I'm sure there's a bit of reluctance by someone in that position to offer extra visibility. I did hear later that there were rumors circulating through the dorms that I was from the FBI.

L.S.: Your work at that point was framed by the larger context of the correctional unit itself, so it would be difficult to disentangle you and your work from that of the larger sphere.

D.L.: It's where the inmates were. It's where they were and it's where I had come.

L.S.: So that's the lens that they're using to interpret you.

D.L.: That's the lens they were using. And that was the lens that I was trying to obscure for the viewer by bringing in, for instance, the backdrop. I made several rules for myself when I began this project. One rule was that participation in the project was voluntary. Also, I gave back images to every inmate who volunteered. [Approximately 25,000 images were given to inmates over the course of this project.] Another rule was the use of the backdrop. I didn't want any sort of prison architecture to be visible to the viewer. So if someone's out working in the field with no guard towers or fencing visible, I made the portrait there, but otherwise I always used the backdrop. I didn't want to photograph people *in* prison, I wanted to photograph people who *happened to be* in prison.

L.S.: So, you weren't photographing them as inmates, but they were your photographic subjects, who were at that time incarcerated.

D.L.: There are brilliant prison documentary works by Danny Lyon and Bruce Jackson and others. Amazing, wonderful work. When I look at that work, however, I don't see a somebody. I see somebody in prison. *One Big Self* was very much about portraiture. I wanted to see who was behind those gates, in prison. Prior to walking through the gates I didn't study any sort of sociology, any statistics about prisons—that was another rule I made for myself. I wanted the individual portraits, bracketed of course by the understood, prison context—to tell a story, and I tried to minimize any unintentional tendency on my part to bend the photographic outcome.

L.S.: I'm wondering if you could talk about your relationships with your subjects, both what you brought and what they brought to [the project] and how that relationship is revealed in your photographs. You're not a blank slate. You're a person with a certain disposition and experiences and traits, and how did that shape the relationships that you ended up having with your subjects?

D.L.: I hold the utmost respect for anyone willing to pose for my camera. I abhor having my picture taken. [Laughs] One might assume that an artist choosing to

produce work in a prison in response to the murder of a family member might carry along a heavily toxic attitude. But my experience was quite contrary to that reasonable expectation. When I began photographing in the prison, the weight of the loss I had been carrying for ten years lifted. There was a release. It seems very counter-intuitive, but that would be the case. I had such a great time photographing, especially at the minimum-security prison where I had the opportunity to photograph many of the men on a regular basis. Some of the inmates were quite theatrical with their posing. It was a creative time for them. I did assume I would be surprised by the variety of men and women I would find there. Beyond that, I can't say that I carried notions of whom I might find there.

I mean, I have friends that went to prison. I grew up in the seventies. [Laughs] There are many different reasons people come to prison. I'm very interested in implied narrative. I studied literature, and I collaborate with a poet. I tend to think of myself as a frustrated writer [laughs] who lost her pencil and found a camera to replace it—trying to tell a story. I was giving inmates handfuls of images of themselves and a break from their daily routine. They were sharing glimpses of their incredible lives with me.

The depth of my interactions with the inmates was determined in large measure by the restrictions placed on me by the individual prison's administration. At the minimum-security prison, I was given freedom—I was back there at the iron pile alone with the inmates most of the time. On occasion a guard might walk by, but usually there was just a bunch of gorgeous, sweaty [laughs], shirtless inmates and me making photographs.

However, at Angola, the maximum-security prison, the administration reserved the right to censor my images. No one could be photographed shirtless, for instance. They wanted the inmates' shirts tucked in. Bandanas could not be worn in certain ways that might signify gang affiliation or homosexuality. Guards accompanied me at all times. And with few exceptions, each inmate was photographed only once. I wasn't in a position to develop relationships with them. And I was working really quickly to take advantage of my time there. I would shoot, I don't know how many rolls of film—maybe a thousand frames in a couple of days. The time available to photograph during the day is limited. There are the "counts," where the over five thousand Angola inmates are required to return to their dorms or cells to be accounted for five times a day. Until the count clears and they file back out, you take no photos. Occasionally it would take well over an hour for the count to clear. So I would have narrow windows of time to photograph. But the circumstances were different from prison to prison.

At St. Gabriel, the women's prison, I did re-photograph a lot of the women. The institution was looser, of course, than Angola, where men were incarcerated primarily for murder or rape or armed robbery. And [at St. Gabriel,] they were women. There isn't even a gun on the premises at St. Gabriel. The administration at the women's prison is really quite amazing. They organize an annual Mardi Gras for women. The inmates costume and parade. The Mardi Gras Court is composed of older inmates who are dressed in ball gowns and driven around the prison grounds on the backs of the guards' four wheelers. I mean, where else [laughs] in the country do you celebrate Mardi Gras in prison? Everyone is dancing and getting down, guards and inmates together. St. Gabriel also has a Halloween Haunted House each

year where inmates completely transform the gymnasium by dividing the space into black-plastic-walled rooms. There's the Bird Room, the Snake Room, the Bat Room, the Execution Chamber, the Swamp Room. So inmates are dressing up and acting out these ideas. The Alligator Girl is submerged in a horse trough. In the Execution Chamber the "condemned" is dressed in stripes with plastic handcuffs. She sits in the "electric chair" with a strobe behind her head. The "executioner" then throws the switch and the inmate starts jumping around. It's really wacky [laughs], black humor. The inmates attend and the guards can bring their families, but the public is not allowed. The inmates create this for themselves.

L.S.: So, your portraits that picture the inmates with hats, or awards, or Halloween costumes are actually taken in context. These weren't props.

D.L.: Oh no, they're not props. I mean they're props—but they're *their* props. I invited the inmates to be photographed any way they wished. They posed themselves and chose what they wore.

L.S.: And in Angola you have some portraits of the men in Angola Prison Rodeo attire. In a rigid prison system like Angola, how was that possible?

D.L.: I was given permission to photograph at the rodeo. There was a little tack shed, with a porch attached. I taped up my velvet. I had about an hour and a half to photograph prior to the grand entry. I don't know how many men I photographed—fifty, seventy-five? I was photographing so fast. They looked so proud in their just-issued striped shirts. At the end of the day, they have to relinquish those striped shirts and place them in a barrel before riding a prison bus back to the camps where they live.

L.S.: How many portraits did you take in an hour?

D.L.: In an hour, I made ten to fifteen or so images of each of the men I photographed. Another concern of mine going into this project was not so much the production of the perfect portrait but somehow communicating the staggering numbers of people that are living in our prisons. Also, I found by working in this quick, exhaustive, repetitive manner there was less risk of my getting in the way by over-thinking my role or, god forbid, being tempted to direct. I was just trying to keep up.

L.S.: Since you have produced a vast number of portraits, do you consider this work in terms of an archive, or in terms of a documentary? You said earlier that the women in your family participated in a kind of archival project. Do you see your own work in those terms?

D.L.: I do. I think very much in terms of archive. The work that I'm doing now, documenting homicide sites,³ is structured in much the same way. I'm trying to communicate the seemingly endless violence of our culture through the collection of these sites, and it's staggering, really, in terms of archive. And so, again with this project, I'm attempting not to think about the perfect photograph so much as a completed (or more precisely, incompletable) body of photographs, an archive of images that tells a truth through the juxtaposition of large numbers of idiosyncratically collected images.

L.S.: So, do you then come to a point in the project in which you find a natural conclusion? And is that conclusion one of exhaustion?



DEBORAH LUSTER

Raymond Guidry, Angola, Louisiana. 1999, photographic print on prepared black aluminum. 5 x 4 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

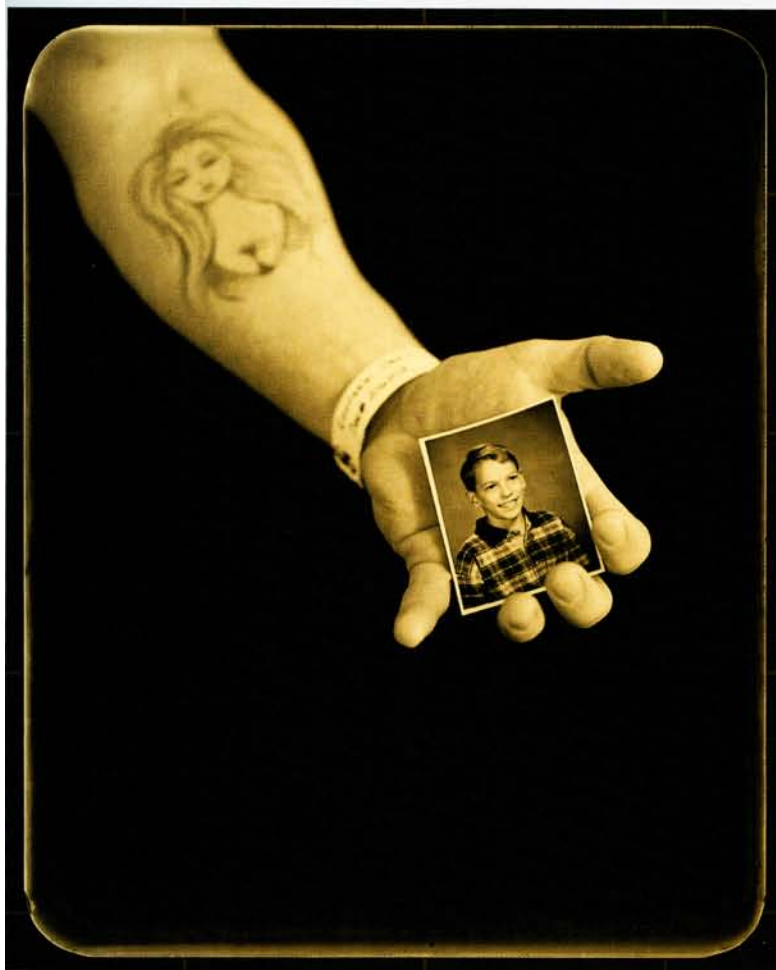
D.L.: Yeah [laughs], that's absolutely right!

L.S.: Because there are other portraits to take, and yet, the project is complete.

D.L.: Oh, yes. *One Big Self* and I exhausted one another. There was definitely a somatic component to the conclusion of the project. The process I used to produce the images is extremely labor-intensive. [Laughs] They are silver emulsion on prepared aluminum. Doesn't sound so difficult saying the words, but the process turned out to be a lot like working in the license plate factory at Angola—endless. Mind-numbing.

L.S.: The exhaustive nature of the archive matched the exhaustive process that you underwent to produce these images.

D.L.: Yes. But the process and the scale of the work became very important to me early on in the project. Other photographers were saying, you know, "Nobody's really interested in prison portraits. It's been done. But if you just have to do it, you should



DEBORAH LUSTER

Transylvania, Louisiana. 1999, photographic print on prepared black aluminum.
5 x 4 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

make them really big, and you should tone them brown..." Um, yeah, whatever. I had been using liquid emulsion on metal for an earlier project, *The Rosesucker Retablos*. I told myself I was never going to use this process again as long as I lived, and then, as I was beginning the prison project, I thought, oh, maybe, you know, I'll just, a little bit of this, and a little bit of that, and see what it looks like on here. I began by coating 8x8-inch pieces of metal and gridding them on the wall. Following the wall-grid exercise, I coated some 5x4-inch plates and handed handfuls of them to my friends for feedback. When I saw my friends holding these images in their hands I realized, "Oh my god, they have to be touched!" This experience *completely* transformed my concept of the work. We can see without being seen, but we can't touch without being touched. There was something about touching these people, this invisible population—that our society is reluctant to admit even exists—that I felt was essential to the success of this work. It just clicked. The portraits had to be touched and held, but I needed a way to hide them away yet make them accessible for installation. I

called my friend Kevin Kennedy and asked if he could build a steel cabinet to house the portraits. And he said, "Okay, all right, I'll build it for you," and I thought, oh good, he's going to come over tonight and design it, and build it, and so he came in and said, "Okay, what do you want?" and I thought, *oh no*, I don't know how to design such a thing. I looked around the room. There was an old African American pulpit there in the living room—the kind that could be carried outdoors for brush arbor meetings.⁴ It had drawers and an angled top. It was painted pink on the inside and black on the outside, very primitive. So the prison cabinet was fashioned after this pulpit with three divided drawers. When the drawers are pulled open they sound like the closing of heavy prison doors.

L.S.: The process you employed to produce these portraits makes use of silver emulsion on aluminum plates. Would you call it a tintype?

D.L.: The prison plates *suggest* tintypes—that's why I used black aluminum—but, unlike the nineteenth-century collodion process used to produce true tintypes, these "tintypes" are reproducible. The backs of the plates are engraved with the individual inmate's information: the prison name and location, the inmate's name, department of corrections number, date of birth, date the inmate entered prison, length of sentence, work at prison, number of children, future plans, etc. I did not, however, ask the crime the inmate was convicted of committing.

L.S.: Are there ways in which this process informs your composition?

D.L.: Yes and no. I was primarily trying to find a stable substrate so the portraits could be handled repeatedly without destroying them. So the process was about durability initially. Beyond the durability issue, the portrait's physical similarity to the tintype references the long history of incarceration in our country. I chose not to use the tintype (collodian) process for several reasons quite specific to my goals. The true tintype process produces a unique image. I needed to reproduce the portraits in order to return photographs to the inmates, so I ruled that out right away. Beyond that, it would have been impossible to photograph the large numbers of inmates that felt was critical to the spirit of the project. I would probably have completed a dozen or so portraits in a day had I chosen to use the collodion process.

L.S.: The fact that these portraits were small enough to hold in your hand is really intriguing, and it seems that in some of them the diminutive size of the image itself seems to be in tension with the bravado of the subject. On the other hand, there are times when the fragility of the image in your hand suggests the shyness of your subject and is in collaboration with the expressions of the subjects. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that.

D.L.: The decision to make the images small and handheld came from my personal history. I grew up with my grandparents in the Ozarks. Like many families, one of our favorite pastimes was visiting and revisiting our family photograph albums. The visual images contained in the albums would trigger our family stories, our family history in a more or less set sequence. We also had a large orange wooden box of loose images. I spent many hours with the images contained in that orange box. I would lay all of the images out, arranging and rearranging them around the house. Some time was spent remembering the stories our family told, but I spent most of

my time inventing my own stories, an alternate family history. I loved the orange box. Where the albums were very linear and set, the orange box was a jumble. I could place a photograph of myself next to a photograph of my great-great-grandmother, and we could spend the afternoon walking in the woods. She would instruct me in secret Indian things. She was Cherokee. So...this play was a powerful childhood experience for me. And taking care of the photographs—when I was a child I was not careful with most things, but I did understand that I had to take care of the photographs. I had to put them back in the box. I couldn't hold them in some brutal fashion, you know, I had to be careful, they were under my care.

L.S.: In your custody, so to speak.

D.L.: You know, it's interesting, this project started out as a document of a prison population in Louisiana at the turn of the millennium. Over the course of the project, through the process, and the repetition, I came to realize that the project was about the power of the personal photograph, the importance of that slip of paper with the image of another printed there. I was at Angola, I was walking down the sidewalk at one of the camps, and this inmate, I couldn't even see where he was, yelled out to me, "You've been to St. Gabriel, haven't you?" which is the women's prison, and I said, "Now, how would you know that? I've only been there one time, and you've been out here in the middle of nowhere." And he said, "'Cause I sent my girlfriend a picture of me and she sent me one back just like it." So I realized that these portraits are flying all over the place. That's a big regret—not having the means to track the images I returned to the inmates and somehow document the work they did.

L.S.: It seems that in so many ways inmates lose control of their identities. They're a number, they're in a uniform, they're homogenized, they're contained, they're restricted, they're isolated. But there are certain ways even within this totalizing context that the power of identity can be re-initiated, and it seems that your portraits were able to do that.

D.L.: I think they were valuable for many of the inmates. I was surprised and somewhat overwhelmed at the extent of the images' impact.

L.S.: They even helped to maintain relationships across prisons.

D.L.: And they helped to shape the inmates' self-identity. One afternoon, my collaborator on this project, poet C. D. Wright, and I were working at Angola. I was handing back images to inmates. We watched one of the men scratching his head and looking at his portraits as he walked away, and we heard him say, "Damn, I done got old!" We asked a guard, "What does he mean, 'Damn, I done got old'?" And the guard said, "Well, you know, the security mirrors here are very distorted, and the men come in at eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old, and now they're fifty, they're sixty, they're seventy; they don't know what they look like. They can't see who they have become."

That was most shocking. And I started noticing then how formal many of the poses were, especially at Angola. The inmates wake and eat and do their work and eat and do their work and eat and play sports or attend church or whatever, eat and sleep. Every day of every week of every month of every year. They lead a very physical,

repetitive existence. They have little outside visual stimulation. Each camp has a t.v., but they don't have much time for t.v. viewing. They don't see billboards, they don't have access to many magazines. They just don't get it, what we have. Very few men have photographs of themselves at any age. I began to recognize a nineteenth-century formality in many of the portraits I was printing, a formality that suggested these images were important to many of the inmates.

L.S.: To show their best profile.

D.L.: Yes, to present themselves for someone else.

L.S.: And to show themselves in a more positive light. Inmates are represented so negatively in the prison system and in the larger society, and yet, here's this opportunity to construct their identities differently.

D.L.: I believe that the success of many of these portraits lies in the fact that the inmates were not posing for me. They were posing for a sister they hadn't seen in thirty years, or the mother or son or daughter, or the lover at home or in another prison. And for a few minutes, they had some freedom to create themselves anew.

L.S.: So they had constructed their subjectivity differently. They were a subject, but not at every instant your subject.

D.L.: The prisoners and the photographer were collaborating. Each brought his or her personal desires to the photographic performance. Photographer and prisoner each respected the other's right to those desires. And in the best of the images from *One Big Self* there is a combination of chance and choice that creates a kind of sympathetic magic. It is a convergence. ■

NOTES

1. The man Luster suspected of murdering her mother was James "Butch" Harrod. In 1998, the year that Luster began the project, Harrod was tried and sentenced to death for the crime. He is currently an inmate on Death Row in Arizona.
2. Convicted murderer Jesse James Caston, from Lake Providence, Louisiana, is serving a life term in Louisiana State Penitentiary Prison in Angola for the murder of his wife and a woman friend. He and his brothers were named after the James Gang outlaws by their father, and the three brothers are now all convicted murderers serving prison terms.
3. Deborah Luster's newest body of work, *A Tooth for an Eye: A Chorography of Violence in Orleans Parish*, is a collection of photographs of homicide sites in New Orleans, one of the country's killing capitals. The work was exhibited from November 18, 2008, through January 18, 2009, as part of *Prospect 1. New Orleans*, a citywide art event produced by the New Museum of New Orleans.
4. Brush arbor structures were pavilions made by constructing an overhead frame out of saplings or small trees that was then covered over with "brush" or tree boughs and used in the South by Native Americans, certain European immigrants, and African Americans for various activities, but mostly they were used as places of worship. The main purpose of the brush arbor was to give protection from the sun. They were often constructed annually in the spring or early summer just outside of a church and used to escape the summer heat of the interior of the church.

CRITIC'S PICKS

Visual Art

In another ambitious venture, the Halsey Institute of Art presents "On the Inside," a powerful two-part exhibition that candidly chronicles the lives of American prisoners. The first body of work, entitled "One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana," is a collaboration between photographer Deborah Luster and poet C.D. Wright. Luster's emotional portraits, accompanied by Wright's exploratory text, effect an unflinching document of lives spent under the watchful eye of the State of Louisiana. "Cell Block Visions: Prison Art in America," the exhibition's second portion, is a collection of inmate artwork created behind bars and collected by Phyllis Kornfeld, a prison art educator for more than two decades. Whether a conduit for rage or a vehicle for peace, each work is a remarkable exercise in transcendence. Prepare to be moved and surprised by the exhibition's mix of grave and, at times, even humorous results. "On the Inside," January 19-March 2. Opening reception January 19, 5-7 p.m. Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, 54 St. Philip St. Monday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. (843) 953-5680 or www.halsey.cofc.edu —Elle McGee



The **lowest**
recorded temperature
in **Charleston**
was **10**
degrees on
January 21,
1985.

SUNDAY, MAY 21, 2006

The last word: NCMA's planned expansion seems to be steps closer. 10G

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THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Arts & Entertainment

A collector has gathered works tied together not by artist or style but a theme: humanity

AN UNCOMMON VISION

By MICHELE NATALE
CORRESPONDENT

RALEIGH

Elliott Erwitt captured the image five years before Rosa Parks made her famous bus ride. On the lower right side of the photograph titled "North Carolina, 1950," a black man leans down to drink from a public water fountain under the sign that reads "colored." To his left sits the forbidden fountain, the one labeled "white."

Art collector Julia J. "Judy" Norrell went on a quest for such a photograph in the late 1990s after speaking to a group at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. She realized that most people in the audience were too young to have experienced separate fountains in the Jim Crow South. She wanted them to see what Erwitt's image conveys in startling urgency.

Where some collectors focus on an era or a style or a medium, Norrell pursues art that reflects the humanitarian issues close to her heart. The works manifest themes of man's inhumanity to man, religious intolerance and racial injustice.

"Segregation was a tattoo on my whole soul," said Norrell, speaking recently at the N.C. Museum of Art, where part of her eclectic collection is on view in the exhibition "Common Ground: Discovering Community in 150 Years of Art." Growing up in the segregationist South "was enough to make you existential if not a product of an insane asylum."

Norrell, the daughter of two members of Congress, was raised in Arkansas and Washing-

SEE COMMON, PAGE 6G



DETAILS

WHAT "Common Ground: Discovering Community in 150 Years of Art."

WHEN Through July 16.

WHERE N.C. Museum of Art, 2110 Blue Ridge Road, Raleigh.

HOURS Tuesday-Saturday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. (until 9 p.m. Friday); Sunday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

COST Free.

CONTACT 839-6262, www.ncartmuseum.org.

Top: Selection from Deborah Luster's 'One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana.'
Middle: Louis Stettner's 'Penn Station, 1958.' **Below:** Shimon Attie's 'Mulackstrasse 37: Slide Projections of Former Jewish Residents and Hebrew Reading Room, Berlin.'

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

A PRISON SETS PHOTOGRAPHER FREE

Craig Jarvis / May 21, 2006 / Arts & Entertainment
The News & Observer: Raleigh, North Carolina

Deborah Luster sought solace in photography after her mother was murdered. She never expected to find it inside Louisiana's state prisons.

Her discovery is captured in an exhibition that has appeared in dozens of venues around the country and invites viewers to join the photographer's surprising embrace of humanity.

"Once I got in prison, something clicked -- it was what I'd been looking for," said Luster, who will lecture today at the N.C. Museum of Art, where the "Common Ground" exhibition is on view. "Although it seems counterintuitive, it was a great help to me."

Along the way, it became something else entirely.

The year was 1988, and Luster had just moved to Beaufort. Her mother, who had remarried and become a wealthy widow living in Phoenix, Ariz., was shot to death in a suspected murder-for-hire.

Luster, an Arkansas native, began studying photography in North Carolina and immersed herself in that pursuit around the state before moving to New Orleans in the late 1990s. But her efforts to salve her grief with a camera didn't work.

"I wanted to find some project that would help me deal with what had happened," she said last week in a phone interview from her home in New Orleans. "Everything I concocted was inadequate."

In 1998, the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities invited Luster and five other photographers to an especially impoverished corner of the state to bolster its application for special tax breaks. As she drove around Lake Providence, La., everywhere she looked were abandoned buildings, empty streets and prisons.

"So I thought, 'Well, where is everybody? Is everybody in prison?' " she said. "I rounded a curve in the road and there was another prison. I parked the truck, got out and knocked on the gate.

"As it turns out, the warden had been from a long line of under wardens at Angola Prison. He wasn't so uptight about it. He said, sure, come on in."

Once inside the minimum-security prison, she ended up taking portraits of the men, who seemed to welcome her.

Encouraged by the prisoners' reception there, Luster expanded the project to a women's prison and eventually talked her way into the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, a maximum-security prison for more than 5,000 men. Her status as a crime victim, rather than just a photojournalist, probably helped her get inside, she said.

The project consumed her from 1998 to 2002. She enlisted a poet and friend, C.D. Wright, and the pair began collaborating on a book about the project, which they would call "One Big Self."

Rather than display them on a museum wall, Luster turned the images into 4-by-5-inch silver prints on metal plates and placed them on top of an old metal file cabinet and inside the drawers -- "sort of neo-archived," she said. Information about each inmate is on the backs of the metal picture, sometimes statistical, sometimes personal. Viewers are invited to handle them.

"I realized I wanted them touched," Luster said. "For me, when I picked up the prints, it completely transformed what I felt about the subject, somebody that society almost doesn't want to admit exists."

Luster also made wallet-size copies of every photograph and returned them to the prisoners -- 25,000 pictures in all, she said. Typically, the prisoners mailed the photographs home to loved ones, sometimes in hopes of softening the hearts of estranged relatives.

"Once we were returning photographs and this guy at Angola said, 'Damn, I done got old,' " Luster said. "We asked the guard, what did he mean, 'I done got old?'"

"The guard said they just have these stainless steel mirrors. They come in when they're 18, 19, 20 and they're here 20, 30, 40 years. They don't know what they look like, which is mind-boggling to me.

"I thought, 'Oh my God, that's the reason why they're posing in such a way: It's almost like a 19th-century photograph. They inhabit their bodies differently than the rest of us -- not stimulated by the mass media, by the bombardment of images."

That insight was one of many avenues Luster unexpectedly explored. What had begun as an opportunity to come to grips with her mother's death turned into almost innumerable connections with individuals. By then, it had transcended from journalism to art.

"The project became more about the power of the personal photograph rather than a document of inmates," Luster said. "I didn't realize when I started the project, but that's what rose to the top for me."

The photographer said she had prepared herself to be criticized for humanizing criminals, but the criticism never came. Once at a show at a Chicago gallery, she said, a man walked up to her holding some of the plates and crying. He thanked her and said his father had been murdered.

"He got it," she said. "It's hard to articulate. I was so pleased he understood where I was coming from."

N.C. CONNECTION

Deborah Luster's many ties to the region include:

- Photographer/interviewer, folklife survey project, Carteret County, funded by N.C. Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1988.
- Creative consultant and videographer for a production funded by a N.C. Visual Arts Project grant, 1992, and by a N.C. Visual Artistic fellowship grant, 1993.
- Mecklenburg Arts Council, purchase award, "The Light Factory," 1991.
- Meredith College, North Carolina photographers award, 1992.
- Arts Council of the Lower Cape Fear, emerging artist grant, 1994.
- Visiting artist, Penland School of Crafts, Penland, N.C., 1998.
- Dorthea Lange-Paul Taylor prize, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University (with C.D. Wright), 2000.
- Artist-in-residence, Penland School, 2001.

Photographer Deborah Luster to Speak at Hampden-Sydney College

On Monday, September 5, photographer Deborah Luster will speak at Hampden-Sydney College about her latest photography project, *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (Twin Palms Publishing, 2003), which was selected by both *The New York Times* and the *Village Voice* as one of the best photography books of 2003.

Murder is not generally a subject in which most artists find themselves immersed. But twelve years ago, Deborah Luster's mother was murdered, sparking a photographic project which led her to three different state penitentiaries in Louisiana, her home state, as a means of healing and understanding. Photographing inmates against a black backdrop or in the fields, Luster captures the individuals housed behind the barbed wire and prison cells in a project called "One Big Self."

Cutting 5 x 4" aluminum and coating it with a liquid silver emulsion, Luster creates images which serve as reliquaries for these men and women whose cockiness, youth, bravado, and shyness are imbedded in these pocket-sized contemporary tintypes. Through these images she asks us to "see beyond their crimes ... to suggest that our punitive models are as reflective of who we are as our reward system."

Luster is the recipient of the 2000 Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize (with poet C.D. Wright) from the Center

for Documentary Studies at Duke University, the 2001 Bucksbaum Family Award for American Photography, the 2002 John Gutmann Fellowship and an Anonymous Was A Woman Award. Her work has been collected by the Whitney Museum of American Art, the San Fran-

cisco Museum of Modern Art, and The Los Angeles County Museum of Art; among others.

The lecture, free and open to the public, will take place at 8 PM, in the Parents & Friends Lounge, which is accessible from the rear of Venable Hall, both by stairs and an elevator. *All parking for the Parents & Friends Lounge is behind Venable Hall. Parking on Via Sacra is prohibited.* Parking spaces for the handicapped are located immediately behind the building and are accessed by the second walk/driveway after entering the lot. This program is

sponsored by the Hampden-Sydney College Department of Fine Arts.

Luster is one of ten artists whose work is currently on exhibit through October 1, at 1708 Gallery in Richmond. For the artists represented in the photography show, *Casting a New Light*, process is a vital means of enhancing the material presence and associative power of the photographic image. As evident in their daguerreotypes, calotype negatives, salt prints, collodion wet-plate negatives, ambrotypes, tintypes, and photograms, vintage proc-

esses are still richly evocative tools. "These artists grapple with the complexities of these techniques," Spagnoli notes, "tapping into their historical contexts and psychological effects. The ultimate meaning of each image, in other words, is intimately

bound to the process that created it."

For more information on the photography exhibit *Casting a New Light*, contact Kate Groninger, Assistant Director, 1708 Gallery, at 804-643-1708.



Kenbridge-Victoria Dispatch, Victoria, VA
Wednesday, August 31, 2005

HARTFORD Advocate

SEPT 23, 2004

Belly Up to the Bar, Boys **Examining Male Body Image at UConn's Contemporary Art Gallery**

The University of Connecticut's Contemporary Art Gallery in Storrs is a small space, made crowded by the assertion of the images on the wall of its current show. Male Body Image. Despite its size, this show has scope.

Entering the space, for instance, one is greeted on the left with a photographic "chorus line" of larger-than-life male nudes, exposed neck to pubis (no genitalia evident, just the wiry tangle of pubic hair above the lowered waistband of jockey shorts) -- each one as big-bellied as a 100-pound sack of flour.

This sweeping phalanx of torsos -- by Alan Labb, assistant professor of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago -- are mounted chest-to-eye-level on a curved wall panel that literally bellies into the space.

These may be beefy fellows, but they are not beefcake. They are lived-in bodies, worn and fleshy, sprouting hair in ridiculous places, utterly unpretentious and anything but preening. It is their very unloveliness that is their beauty -- the humanity of their truthfulness, the craggy history of skin and follicle, of flesh and bone.

Appropriately, then, they face off with the glistening, gorgeous physiques set out by Robert Mapplethorpe -- presumably-male figures as androgynous as female body-builders, their bodies tapered, their muscles rippling, the question of gender unanswered (except for their inclusion in this show) since their backs are turned to the camera.

Also in this company is a series by **Deborah Luster** and C.D. Wright, a joint audio-photography documentation project that focuses its dual lens on members of Louisiana's prison population. A stark black telephone, the old-fashioned kind, heavy and upright, the sort one would use to talk through the protective glass of a penitentiary visiting room, sits on a corbelled ledge. It is our link to the voices of prisoners -- though their words are narrated in Wright's female voice (just as their portraits, small-scale gelatin prints, are rendered through **Luster's** camera).

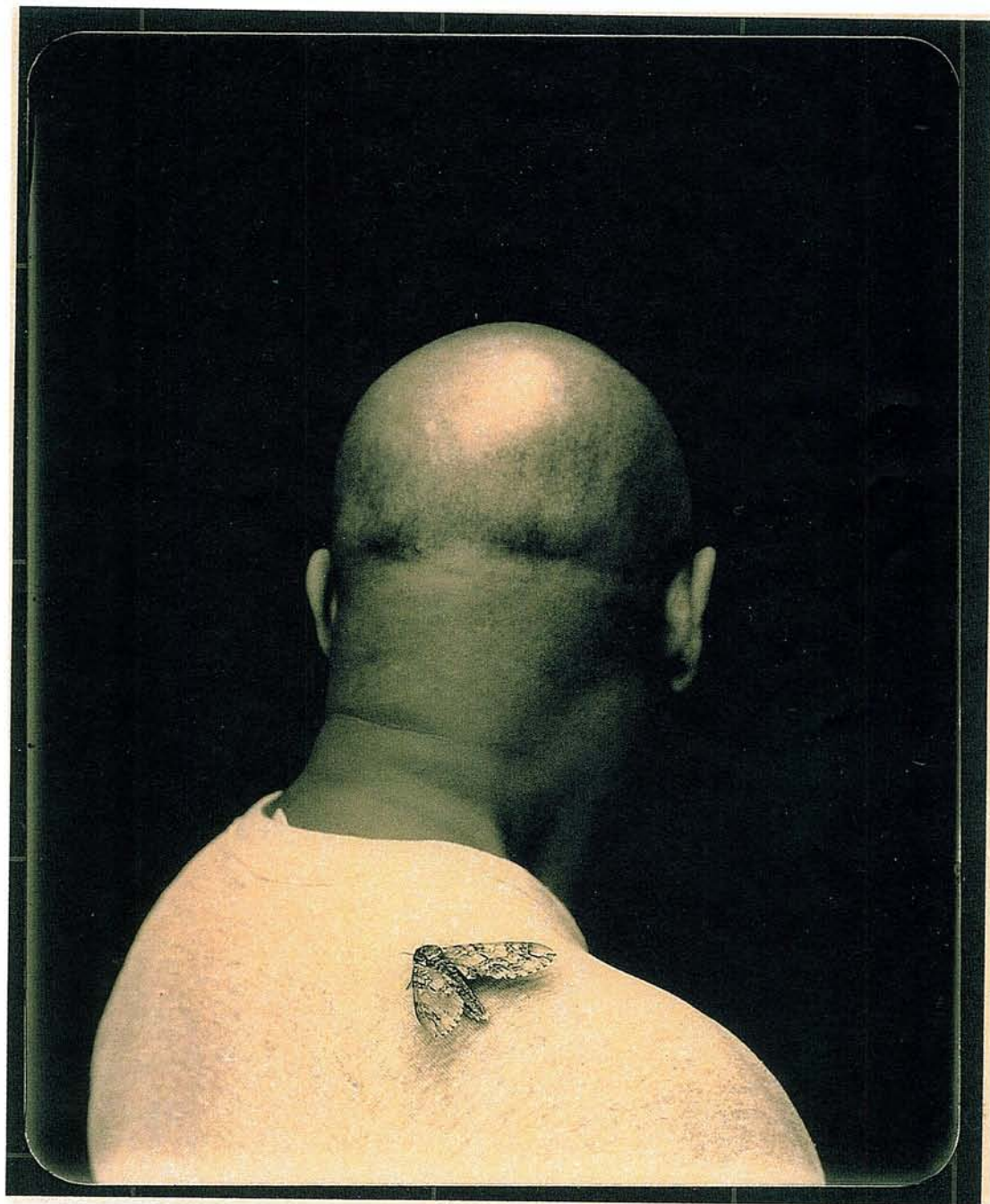
These, like Mapplethorpe's, are classically beautiful images -- the young men muscular and glistening, each one composing himself for the lens, each as astonishingly elegant as a Greek Adonis, though our view is tainted by our knowledge of the subjects' incarceration.

Speaking for the show as a whole, David Rosenthal's "The Impossible Underwater Torture Cell: Palms Forward" (pictured above) equates the challenge of gender identification in a post-modern world to Houdini's feats of escape -- sinking its subject, dressed in the suit-and-tie, into a tank of water. Near-lifesize, our subject flattens his hands against the glass which is our picture plane and stares blankly out at us. It would seem to be a safe little fabrication, except that we can see the clustered bubbles of air trapped in the folds of his clothing, and read his submersion in the crazy floatation of hair, tie, coat tails -- and in the goofy attempt at calm in the expression of his face.

Probing, whacky, serious and comic at the same time, this image -- along with its companions in the lively discourse of the show -- makes for a wonderfully, well. human, investigation of the notion of identity in the arena of art.

Photographer's Forum[®]

MAGAZINE FOR THE EMERGING PROFESSIONAL



Summer 2004

\$4.95



DEBORAH LUSTER: ONE BIG SELF

DIANE ARBUS RETROSPECTIVE

WINNERS: COLLEGE PHOTOGRAPHY CONTEST



III.

And though my birds be torn to rags of Smoke
 And cl into a Mess of Feather and Ash
 you must move ahead unencumbered
 By Melancholy or defects
 Behold the woman Chica Rosa
 May you never endure a wife
 Without letters from an inmate
 Never the day without apples nor bread
 from distant penetralia Eased immaculacy
 from the lejano penetralia Torricolada immaculacy

Deborah Luster

Curiosity cornered me into opening up *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (Twin Palms, 2003) by photographer Deborah Luster and poet C. D. Wright. Sure, I wanted to know what these people confined in the “belly of the beast” looked like. More than that, by looking at them, I wanted to see how I felt and what I might learn about myself.

From three correctional facilities, 150 murderers, rapists, drug dealers and junkies deliver themselves to the pages of Luster’s book. Among the bronze-toned, tintype-like portraits, against solid black backgrounds or in the fields, Wright’s extended poem meanders. There are the prisoners you’d expect — sinister, beaten down by hard living, with self-made tattoos and facial scars. And then there’s a man with soulful eyes, a woman’s faraway gaze, and another who looks with longing. They never stop being prisoners, but they are human beings, just like the rest of us. From Terrence Malick’s film, *The Thin Red Line* (the inspiration for the book’s title): “Maybe all men got one big soul where everybody’s a part of — all faces of the same man: one big self.”

It makes sense that Luster’s camera would gravitate towards these individuals, not that different from others she’s photographed. The first work of hers I’d seen, five years ago, still haunts me. There on the cover of C. D. Wright’s *Deepstep Come Shining* (Copper Canyon Press, 1998), three dead hummingbirds, string tied at their throats, hang around an old woman’s neck — her face pulled in despair, or maybe just vacancy. Later, I’d learn that this image, from Luster’s “Rosesucker Retablo” series, is printed on aluminum. Along with alternative printing processes, people and places of the rural South show up in her photographs, which focus on outsiders and outcasts, the ordinary and the overlooked.

“I like these people. I feel comfortable with them,” Luster tells me by phone from her New Orleans home. “They have such amazing lives. My work is as much about the stories they tell me as the pictures I take of them.”

An only child, Luster, born in Bend, Oregon in 1951, was raised in Siloam Springs, Arkansas by her grandparents. “Because I lived with them in an isolated part of the Ozarks, it was like growing up a generation behind the rest of the country. My concerns were

family concerns. My grandmother was interested in traditional culture—and she loved her camera.”

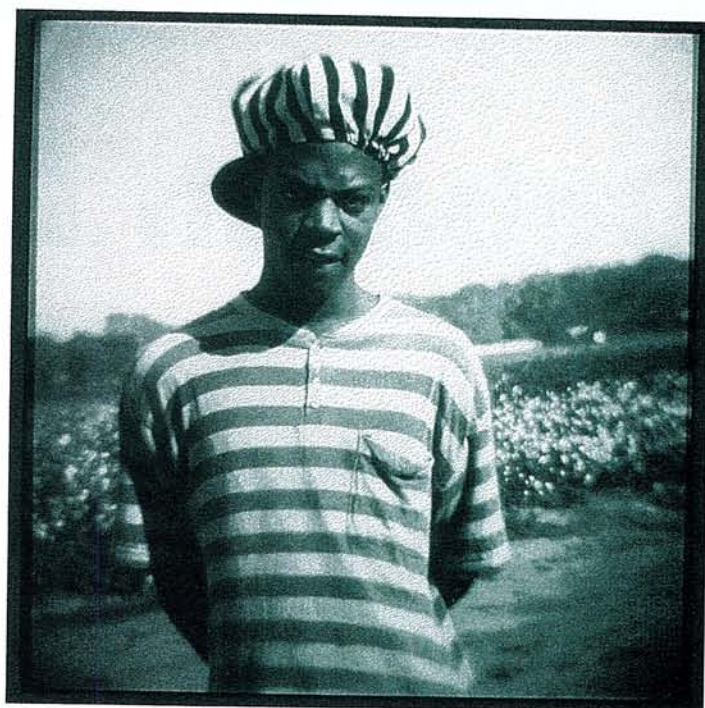
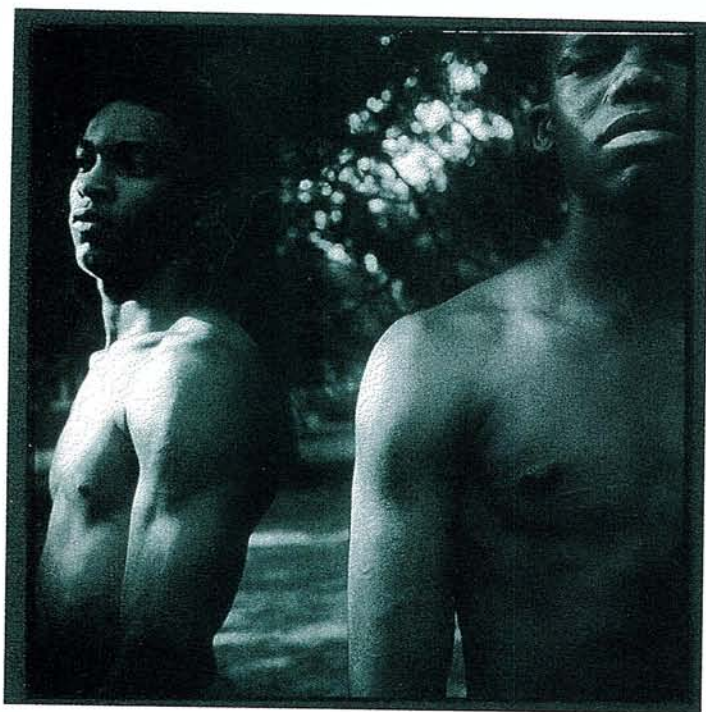
Hundreds of family photos filled several albums and overflowed from an orange, wooden box. “For countless hours I would arrange and read the hypnotic language of the bodies and faces of my kin. Time and death dissolved when my great-grandfather and I stood side by side as slips of paper...I was making contact. I was converging,” Luster says in her introduction to *One Big Self*. On long drives, her grandfather told her stories about every house they passed. When she grew up she wanted to dance (coming from a town where nobody did), or write. Though she later studied both, her focus became photography.

But not until the deaths of her grandmother and mother. The former died in 1986. Two years later, her mother was found murdered in her bed. Says Luster, who then lived in a small North Carolina coastal town, “I felt so isolated. I was terrified and sleepless. Photographing was a way, finally, for me to make contact with people again. And I did what my grandfather taught me. I found a strip of road outside of town that led to the Outer Banks and started driving it over and over. There was this little spur that dead-ended, and mostly African Americans lived there. I’d stop and talk to the people, and photograph them.”

Together, she and her husband Mike Luster, a folklorist, photographed and documented the family photo albums of North Carolina’s rural African Americans. “I’d see these family photos and think, these aren’t about technique, or light or paper quality. They’re about this transference of feeling between people. Who do I think I am, trying to ‘make a good photograph’ when what I’m seeing has such power? But I couldn’t think of anything else to be doing. I kept going.”

Luster started taking photography workshops, first with Keith Carter, then with Craig Stevens, Linda Connor, Larry Fink, Charles Harbutt and others. She also admires the work of Emmet Gowin, E. J. Bellocq, William Eggleston, Seydou Keita and Debbie Fleming Caffery. One of her biggest influences is Mike Disfarmer, a photographer of 1939-45 rural Heber Springs, Arkansas.

She says, “I learned that there wasn’t a right or a wrong, that I just had to shoot for myself.” She also found she enjoyed collabo-



Left: *Young Rappers*. Arkansas, 1993. Right: *Young Man*, Arkansas, 1993.

rating. "It's more interesting that way. And I believe the work benefits from the conversation. It's a way of having a friendship."

From Providence, Rhode Island, where she is a member of Brown University's English department, the Ozarks-born-and-bred poet C. D. Wright (who met Luster in a creative writing class in the mid-1970s) tells me, "We think along the same lines, the same aesthetics and politics, and we like each other's company. Because we're not in the same medium, we don't get in each other's way. But because we're in constant conversation and working in the same direction, our collaboration is an extension of our work independent of one another."

In 1992, Luster joined Wright in the first of several book projects, *Just Whistle: A Valentine* (Kelsey St. Press, 1993), illustrated with photos of the female form. For these, Luster employed the nineteenth-century photographic process *mordançage* ("etch-bleaching") whereby the emulsion is partially, chemically "skinned" from the print. This marked the start of Luster's ongoing interest in alternative processes.

In 1994, "The Lost Roads Project," a book (University of Arkansas Press) and multimedia exhibit (a collaboration that included her husband and others), explored Arkansas's literary history. In 1998, Luster and Wright teamed up for the "Deepstep Come Shining" exhibit, the result of their road trip in the Carolinas and Georgia visiting "outsider artists" combined with Luster's "Retablo" series. Inspired by a trip to Mexico and her own collection of retablos from there, Luster created this series "in homage to the spirit of the Mexican people and their history." It took her two years to produce eight images using photo emulsion on aluminum with oil and ink.

"After that, I couldn't do something as easy as paper," she says half-seriously. So she printed her prisoner portraits on four-by-five-

inch pieces of black aluminum. Then she handed them to some friends. "I watched them holding the little stacks of plates, and there was this tactile connection to the work. I knew people just had to touch these images."

In fact, at a "One Big Self" exhibit, you won't see them unless you do handle them. (You'll have the chance at the "One Big Self" exhibit at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City, May 26 - June 26, 2004, and at Washington, D.C.'s Corcoran Gallery of Art's exhibit "Common Ground: Selections from the Collection of Julia J. Norrell," October 23, 2004 - January 31, 2005.) To encounter Luster's prisoners you must enter their world by opening the drawers of a large, black steel cabinet built by sculptor Kevin Kennedy. "The uncomfortable metal makes a clanging, harsh noise so evocative of the prison context," says Merry Foresta, curator of the Smithsonian Photography Collection in Washington, D.C. "You pull out handfuls of the 300 portraits and set them under the single bulb of a gooseneck lamp. You begin making groups of them, for all kinds of reasons—because they're dressed the same way or they're holding things or they're women."

Says Luster, "It goes back to the box of family photographs I loved as a child, when I would rearrange them any way I wanted. Time dissolved then because there were old and contemporary images, and we were all somehow the same on these slips of paper."

Etched on the back of Luster's prison portraits, in her handwriting, are inmate facts, such as name or nickname (if they wanted), prison, Department of Corrections (DOC) number, and date and place of birth. One of two, small, leather-bound books offers prison statistics and excerpts from Wright's poetry. Pages and pages of DOC numbers fill the other.

Dr. Sandra Phillips, senior curator of photography at the San

Francisco Museum of Modern Art, says, "It's a spatial experience, but it's also a journey that you take by yourself. You figure out what to look at, in what order and how. It's a unique extension to photography in the world of conceptual art and installation. It's a different way of examining the work — different than opening up the book, which I think is one of the very best of this period."

Designed by Twin Palms publisher Jack Woody, *One Big Self* elegantly merges portraits and poetry with gravity and dignity. Pairs of prisoners are temporarily released from captivity with an amnesty of generous white space. Throughout, Wright's vernaculars blend the inmates' words with her own, cooking up a gumbo that both elucidates and eludes, without ranting or romanticizing, the rhythm and repetition of prison life. Consider: "Count your fingers/Count your toes/Count your nose holes/Count your blessings/Count your stars (lucky or not)..." Or: "I too love. Faces. Hands. The circumference/Of the oaks. I confess. To nothing/You could use." And: "The septuagenarian murderer knits non-stop/One way to wear out the clock/In Tickfaw miracles occur/This weekend: the thirteenth annual Cajun joke contest..." Says Luster, "Her poetry shows the complexity of the prison situation, how human and desperate it is."

Today, the man who murdered her mother sits in an Arizona prison cell. I ask Luster why she'd want to interact with and photograph his fellow felons. "After my mother's death, I felt so angry," she begins. "Maybe I was desperate not to be consumed by that, and that energy went into this project. I don't know if I fully understand it. But I do know if you don't use what fortune gives you and try to gain some sort of understanding, or if there isn't some grace that descends into the middle of it, it will destroy you and no good can come out of it."

Breaux Bridge, Louisiana-based photographer Debbie Fleming Caffery says, "Luster's personal experience of a severe crime against her mother has given her an unusual artistic bravery. With her valiant energy, she undertook a rare project of emotional and creative confrontation to understand the wounds of the broken-hearted prisoners."

Ten years after her mother's death, Luster received a grant from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities that sent her and other photographers into the state's northeast parishes to document the people. She came upon the East Carroll Parish Prison Farm, a minimum-security facility for 200 men, and a knock on the gate got her in. She gained access to the maximum-security Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola for 5,000 men (known for its public rodeos) with help from her crime-victim status and someone who had filmed there. These contacts got her into the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women at St. Gabriel, a minimum-, medium- and maximum-security facility for 1,000.

Before photographing, Luster didn't research prison life or statistics. "I didn't want any of that to be in my consciousness. I'd absorb it as I went along." Over the next three years, during exhibits of the work around the country (which have won several awards, including the prestigious \$10,000 Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize sponsored by Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies), she visited the three prisons often, taking

She visited the three prisons often, taking more than 25,000 pictures.

"I wanted to suggest the numbers of people in prison. It's a lot about counting — counting the people who commit the crimes, counting the time, being accounted for."

more than 25,000 pictures. "I wanted to suggest the numbers of people in prison. It's a lot about counting — counting the people who commit the crimes, counting the time, being accounted for."

Luster insisted that all subjects be volunteers with complete control over their poses. She refused to edit out any faces, inquire about people's crimes or include penal architecture in the portraits. All the portraits she took she gave to the inmates who participated. Each received approximately 15 wallet-sized paper proofs at no charge, which they kept, traded with other inmates and sent to family and friends.

For the Angola prisoners, allowed only crude, metal mirrors, the photos showed them a clear view of their own faces for the first time in years. The fact that the pictures were free, in a place where everything has a price, was a true gift. "I wanted them to present themselves to somebody besides me. These were their photographs, and I was simply there at their service to photograph them," she says.

Wright, who accompanied Luster to all three prisons to interview and converse with the inmates, says, "It was endlessly interesting and complicated and problematic. There were so many issues about photographing an incarcerated population, about subject-object and who's looking at whom, and the implications for all of us. The tricky part was not to idealize and pretend that you have any answers, and always keep in mind that everybody is a whole person."

Wright wrote from her conversations with the inmates and Luster's stories. "Lines from her would pop out, like 'It gets old the way we do things,'" says Luster, "so I not only saw through the lens but also through the words. They kept me centered, so I could move out from there."

Luster worked quickly, sometimes just a few minutes with each person. Using a black backdrop, a small stool and natural light, she "set up an artificial situation, which was brilliant," says Foresta. "For the period of the portrait shoot, they were not in prison." Happy to break the monotony, the prisoners may have been laughing in line (once, several women broke out in a call-and-response hymn), but before the camera they became serious and formal, reminding Luster of nineteenth-century portrait subjects.

Continues Foresta, "There is something very staged and determined about such a formal portrait shoot, and printing the images



Easter Morning. North Carolina, 1991.

"There's an inexplicable sense of contact between the camera and the subject in nearly all of the images, which is true of the best portrait photography." – Merry Foresta, curator

on cards, that throws you back into a nineteenth-century model of portraiture — everything from Mathew Brady's gallery of great Americans to J. T. Zealy's daguerreotypes of South Carolina plantation slaves."

Photographer Keith Carter, from his Beaumont, Texas home, tells me, "It's a supremely intelligent mix of nineteenth-century materials and twenty-first century aesthetics, with a healthy dose of Joseph Campbell symbolism thrown in. There's a certain mythology at work in these images." He's referring, in part, to the Mardi Gras and Halloween costumes worn by some of the women in a prison that liberally celebrates those holidays: an African-American in minstrel-show blackface and another wearing a cartoon mask and clutching a fake cleaver. In these — and the one of an Angola inmate with his back to the camera, a single moth

Deborah Luster's work joins collections at the National Archives in Washington, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, among others. She has shown at New York's Whitney Museum, the Houston Center for Photography, San Francisco Cameraworks and the Light Factory in North Carolina. For ten years, Catherine Edelman Gallery in Chicago has represented Luster's work, which can be viewed at www.edelmangallery.com.

perched on his shoulder — Luster's images take on a surrealistic edge, juxtaposed with the f22 realism of her medium-format Hasselblad and Mamiya cameras. In some of the photos, prisoners hold objects meaningful to them, such as a high-heeled shoe or picture of a loved one. Most are straightforward portraits with little attempt to reveal or obscure.

Some may argue that Luster's photos are voyeuristic. Phillips disagrees. "Voyeurism means holding yourself apart from what you see and making a judgment. In this work, there's no condescension, no pigeonholing or keeping anyone at a distance," she says. "You don't forget that they're portraits of prisoners. But more than that, it's the experience of being on the outside and thinking about what it means to examine people who've been incarcerated."

James Hugunin, associate adjunct professor of art history at the Art Institute of Chicago and author of *A Survey of the Representation of Prisoners in the United States* (The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), contrasts Luster's portraits to the prison photography in Morrie Camhi's book *The Prison Experience* (Tuttle, 1989). "Camhi plays with our expectations of what criminals look like and gives their responses to the carceral institution. I don't see that in Luster's work. It doesn't come across in the way that people normally engage with photographs of prisoners. The aspect of the institution doesn't come in, so it focuses on them as people, decontextualized from their prison experience."

Foresta observes, "There's an inexplicable sense of contact between the camera and the subject in nearly all of the images, which is true of the best portrait photography. I think we're more aware of this because of the almost-primitive studio set-

up that creates a kind of anonymous space. There's a lot more reason to look deep into the picture."

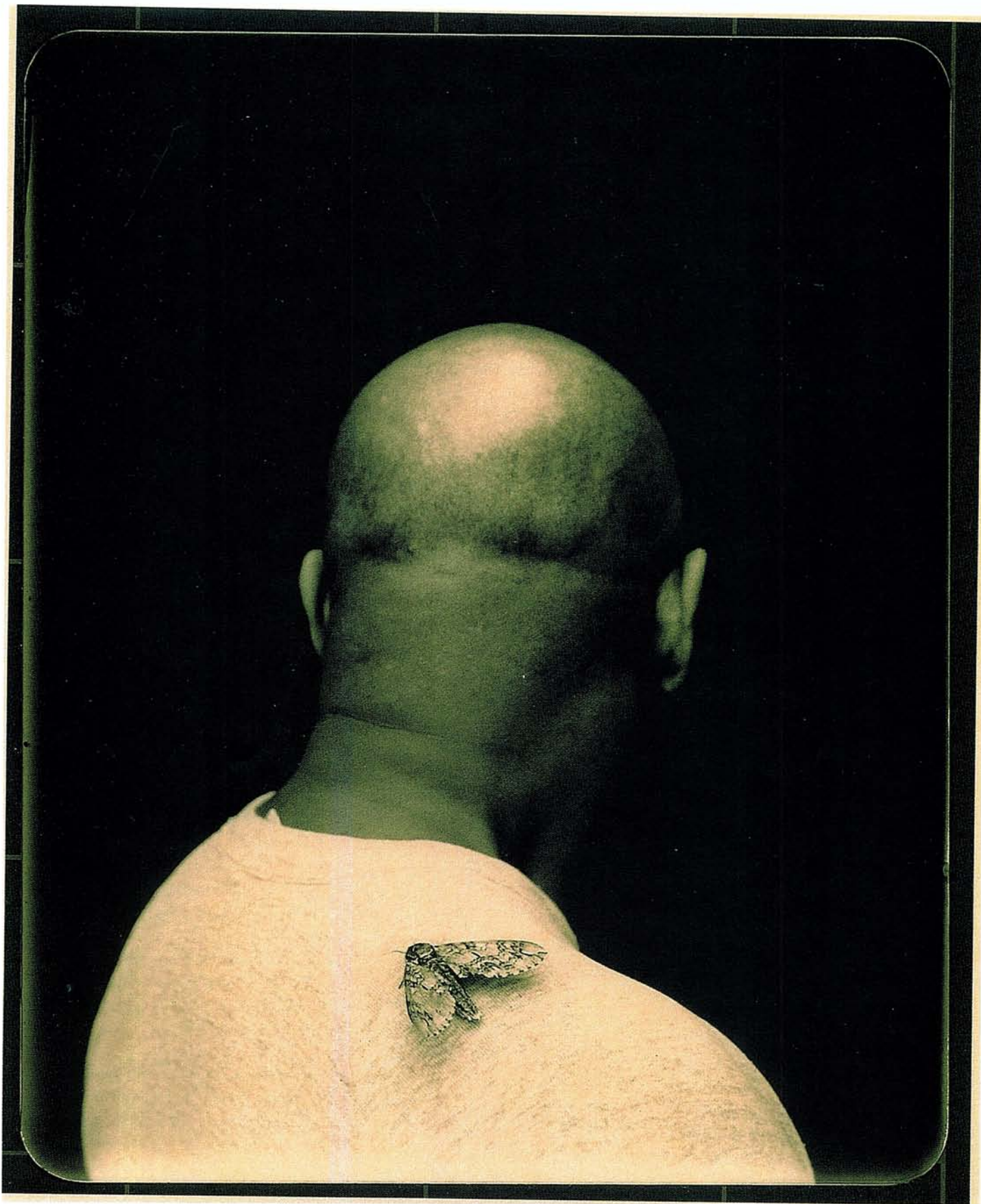
And when we do — "we look into the eyes of pain and danger straight on," as Caffery puts it.

Says Carter, "Debbie's pictures are what, ultimately, all great photos are about, and that's hope. I have hope that when some of these prisoners get out, things will be better for them."

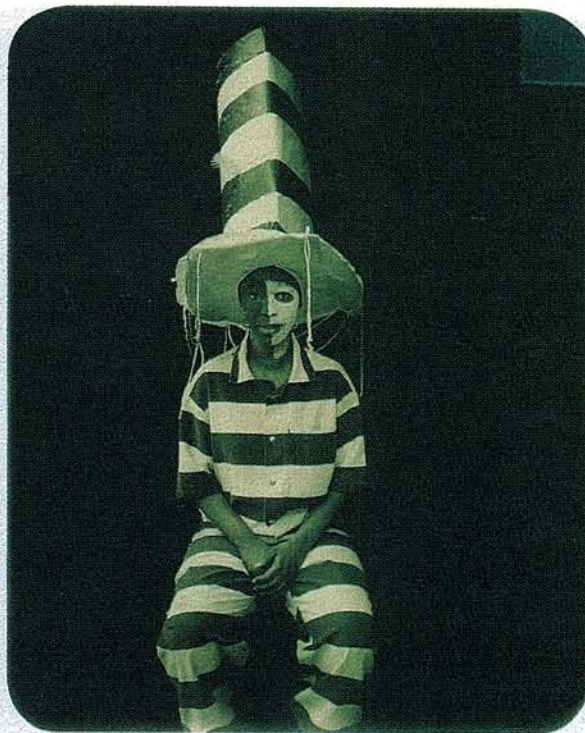
Foresta adds, "We're all in one kind of prison or another. 'A prison is about limits, and we all put limits on ourselves. We limit what we think of as beautiful or worthwhile. Are these prison portraits worthwhile? Yes, because they lift us out of the limits of our expectations.'"

Take mine, for example. Before I opened *One Big Self*, I didn't expect to feel any closer to what I already imagined regarding these prisoners' hopes and regrets, pleasures and sorrows, fortuities and intentions. I surprised myself. What I did assume, though, was that I'd feel something new about my own life. And I have. I'm just not sure what that is yet. Δ

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

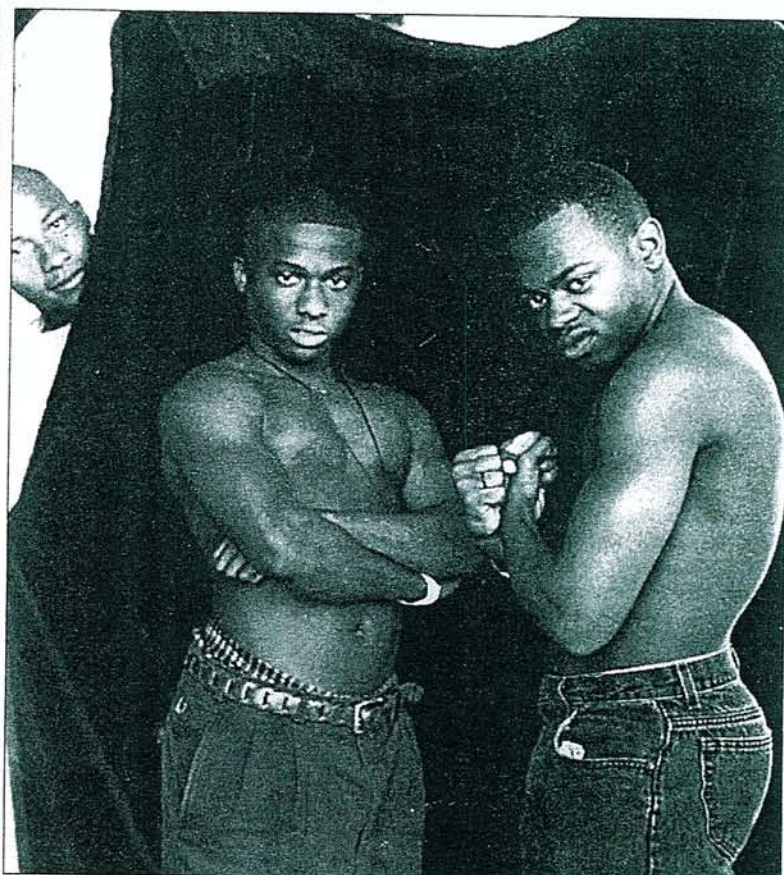


L.S.P. 23 ("Count"). Silver emulsion on aluminum, 1999.



Tammy Mullins, Zelphea Adams, an anonymous woman, and the DeMars Sisters (clockwise from top left), inmates at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women in St. Gabriel, Louisiana, photographed by Deborah Luster. The women in the top row are dressed for Mardi Gras, and those below for Halloween, both of which are celebrated at the prison. From *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*, a book of Luster's photographs published last winter by Twin Palms.

Hartford Courant.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

IMAGE OF THE MALE BODY

The male body is the subject of 30 photographs in an exhibit that runs through Oct. 1 at the Contemporary Art Galleries, 30 Bolton Road, Storrs, on the main campus of the University of Connecticut.

"'Male Body Image' highlights the post-Vietnam-era male body as conceptually, ideologically and even physically fragmented," writes Kelly Dennis, a UConn contemporary art history professor. "Masculinity is as much an ideological trap as femininity."

Represented in the show are works by Robert Mapplethorpe, John Coplans, Deborah Luster, Vito Acconci, Lyle Ashton Harris, Jacqueline Hayden, Alan Labb, John O'Reilly, David Rosenthal and C.D. Wright. Shown here, Deborah Luster's "James 'Shake Back' Jackson, Transylvania, Louisiana" (2001).

A reception for the show is set for 6 to 7:30 tonight.

Information: 860-486-1511.

— DONNA LARCEN

Belly Up to the Bar, Boys

Examining *Male Body Image* at UConn's Contemporary Art Gallery

By Patricia Rosoff

Male Body Image

Contemporary Art Galleries
School of Fine Arts
University of Connecticut
30 Bolton Road, Storrs
(860)486-1511
through October 1

The University of Connecticut's Contemporary Art Gallery in Storrs is a small space, made crowded by the assertion of the images on the wall of its current show, *Male Body Image*. Despite its size, this show has scope.

Entering the space, for instance, one is greeted on the left with a photographic "chorus line" of larger-than-life male nudes, exposed neck to pubis (no genitalia evident, just the wiry tangle of pubic hair above the lowered waistband of jockey shorts) — each one as big-bellied as a 100-pound sack of flour.

This sweeping phalanx of torsos — by Alan Labb, assistant professor of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago — are mounted chest-to-eye-level on a curved wall panel that literally bellies into the space. These may be beefy fellows, but they are not beefcake. They are lived-in bodies, worn and fleshy, sprouting hair in ridiculous places, utterly unpretentious and anything but preening. It is their very unloveliness that is their beauty — the humanity of their truthfulness, the craggy history of skin and follicle, of flesh and bone.

Appropriately, then, they face off with the glistening, gorgeous physiques set out by Robert Mapplethorpe — presumably-male figures as androgynous as female body-builders, their bodies tapered, their muscles rippling, the question of gender unanswered (except for their inclusion in this show) since their backs are turned to the camera.

Also in this company is a series by Deborah Luster and C.D. Wright, a joint audio-photography documentation project that focuses its dual lens on members of Louisiana's prison population. A stark black telephone, the old-fashioned kind, heavy and upright, the sort one would use to talk through the protective glass of a penitentiary visiting room, sits on a corbelled ledge. It is our link to the voices of prisoners — though their words are narrated in Wright's female voice (just as their portraits, small-scale gelatin prints, are rendered through Luster's camera).

Entering the space, one is greeted with a photographic "chorus line" of larger-than-life male nudes.

These, like Mapplethorpe's, are classically beautiful images — the young men muscular and



PHOTO COURTESY CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERIES

David Rosenthal's "The Impossible Underwater Torture Cell: Palms Forward," 2002.

glistening, each one composing himself for the lens, each as astonishingly elegant as a Greek Adonis, though our view is tainted by our knowledge of the subjects' incarceration.

Speaking for the show as a whole, David Rosenthal's "The Impossible Underwater Torture Cell: Palms Forward" (pictured above) equates the challenge of gender identification in a post-modern world to Houdini's feats of escape — sinking its subject, dressed in the suit-and-tie, into a tank of water. Near-lifesize, our subject flattens his hands against the glass which is our picture plane and stares blankly out at us. It would seem to be a safe little fabrication, except that we can see the clustered bubbles of air trapped in the folds of his clothing, and read his submersion in the crazy floatation of hair, tie, coat tails — and in the goofy attempt at calm in the expression of his face.

Probing, whacky, serious and comic at the same time, this image — along with its companions in the lively discourse of the show — makes for a wonderfully, well, human, investigation of the notion of identity in the arena of art.



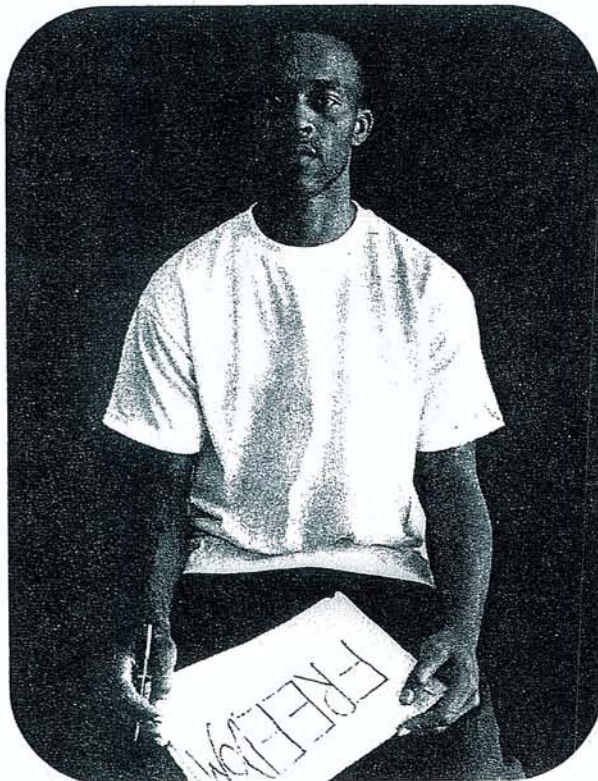
JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

ART

BEHIND BARS Photographer Deborah Luster and poet and essayist G.D. Wright collaborated for three and a half years on "One Big Self," a series of formal portraits of Louisiana prisoners now on view in Chelsea. Many of the photos were taken at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, once a slave-breeding farm and now the largest maximum-security prison in the country. Luster's subjects included inmates wearing Halloween and Mardi Gras costumes, women enrolled in a culinary arts training program at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women at St. Gabriel, and a wide variety of tattooed prisoners. The photographs are printed on black aluminum plates and are displayed in frames and in a steel cabinet where they can be handled and studied. Over the course of the project, Ms. Luster made more than 25,000 wallet-size prints for her subjects to keep. *Through Saturday, June 26, Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 W. 20th St., between Tenth Avenue and West Side Highway, 212-645-1701, free.*

The NEW YORK Sun

THURSDAY, JUNE 17, 2004



HIDDEN FACES Deborah Luster's photographs of inmates in the Louisiana prison system are on view in 'One Big Self' at Jack Shrainman Gallery.

Above, left to right, 'LSP20' (1999), 'LCIW133' (2001), and 'LCIW25' (1999), which are titled using codes that correspond to each subject's prison.

VOICE

VOICE CHOICES JUNE 23–29, 2004

SHORTLIST

Photo

DEBORAH LUSTER Luster's small tintype portraits of male and female inmates at three Louisiana prisons are classic in their restraint but full of feeling on both sides of the camera. Luster started her series after the murder of her mother, but she never seems judgmental or even merely curious. Instead, she allows her subjects a moment of freedom, and they usually present themselves with a gravity that recalls turn-of-the-century studio portraiture at its most intimate and soulful. Her study of an electric chair adds an appropriately somber note. *Through Saturday, Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street, 212.645.1701* ALETTI

The New York Times

E25 N

FRIDAY, JUNE 18, 2004

Deborah Luster and C. D. Wright

'One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana'

*Jack Shainman Gallery
513 West 20th Street, Chelsea
Through June 26*

Armed with nothing but a camera, Deborah Luster gained access in 1998 to the East Carroll Parish Prison Farm in Transylvania and spent the next three and a half years taking pictures of inmates there and in two other Louisiana state prisons.

Without knowing quite why, Ms. Luster searched for some contact with the forces of violence and greed that were responsible for her mother's death by a hired gunman a decade earlier. She took hundreds of individual portraits of inmates at the three prisons, patiently shooting killers, rapists, drug dealers and petty offenders in a neutral way that honors their identities. The inmates got a dozen wallet-size prints of their portraits.

A selection of her results, arresting amber-toned prints that evoke 19th-century tintypes, appeared in a book of the same title as this show, issued last year by Twin Palms Publishers of Santa Fe, N.M. They are presented here in a uniform series of 5-by-4-inch black aluminum plates, mounted in frames and also loosely arranged in the drawers of a black metal chest where they can be freely handled by visitors.

Dressed in prison or work garb, in Mardi Gras costumes and masks, some prominently tattooed, a few holding objects that they have made or other prized possessions, the subjects form a touching and occasionally amusing saga of life behind walls (88 percent of the men incarcerated at Angola, the state's maximum security facility, will die there, Ms. Luster reports).

One inmate at Angola is seen in a posture of prayer; several at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women appear in the garb of culinary trainees; a few prisoners at Angola pose in boxing stance. A convict at Transylvania holds a placard that reads "Missing You"; another simply reveals a smuttily

tattooed arm whose hand holds an angelic photograph of a young son.

Adding to the power of the show, the pictures are accompanied by the rich poetry of C.D. Wright (available on earphones), wrought in part of salty inmate dialogue.

GRACE GLUECK

ART IN REVIEW

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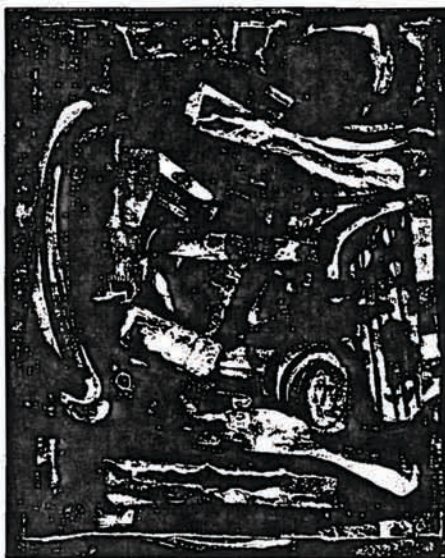
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GRACE GLUECK



A 'spiritual' collection

On view at Corcoran

"Common Ground: Discovering Community in 150 years of Art, Selections

From the Collection of Julia J. Norrell is the off-putting title of this former Arkansan's spiritual journey through art, now at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

But, visitors, don't despair. This show of some 185 photographs, paintings, sculptures

and works on paper, selected from "Judy" Norrell's still growing 1,500-object collection is not so much the story of an art collection as of one woman's search for life's meaning and personal redemption.



Reached by telephone at her Washington home, the collector, 69, says in her refreshingly blunt way, "I'm not an art

person and never set out to pursue collecting. I grew up

see COLLECT, page B2



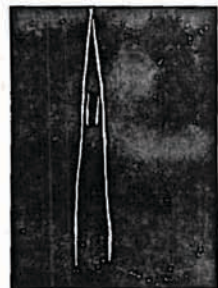
"Cage" by Whitfield Lovell (clockwise from top left), David Driskell's "African Musician," Rashid Johnson's "George," "One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana" by Deborah Luster, Beverly Buchanan's "Small Red Shack," Linda Connor's "My Hand With My Mother's," a detail from Eldridge Bagley's "Reunion Table," and a photograph titled "A Woman of the Thirties" by Eudora Welty are part of the exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

COLLECT

From page B1

the child of two members of Congress from Arkansas and was raised in segregated societies, both in Monticello, Arkansas and Washington, D.C. I was definitely from the South. Still, I couldn't reconcile my love of the South with the inequities and cruelties."

In 1957, Miss Norrell went abroad to study philosophy on a Fulbright Fellowship at the University of Madras. It was on her return to the United States to study at George Washington Law School that she began for the first time to buy art seriously — usually intuitively. "She collects as artists do, from



the gut," says Virginia artist Bill Dunlap, whose his work is in her collection.

Later, while working as a lobbyist in Washington, she began collecting first editions of books. Miss Norrell "was especially interested in southern literature, and beginning in 1961 she sought scarce editions of William Faulkner," writes Paul Roth, associate curator of photography and media arts at the Corcoran, in the exhibit catalog.

It was while searching for rare editions of Mr. Faulkner's work that she stumbled upon an early purchase, Mississippian Theora Hamblett's "Two Trees With Blowing Leaves" (1967). A charming folk painting that conveys childhood memories of the Southern landscape, it



shows the "dream" component of many of the collector's art objects.

From Miss Norrell's literary interests grew her large, varied cache of narrative and storytelling art. This collection ranges from nonsophisticated folk images, such as Clementine Hunter's "Cotton Pickers" to more complex views of poverty, such as Walker Evans' Depression-stricken "Scene From Negro Quarter, Atlanta, Georgia." The Farm Security Administration had assigned the photographer to document differ-



ent aspects of the Depression.

Exhibit co-curators Philip Brookman, senior curator of photography and media arts at the Corcoran, and Jacquelyn Days Serwer, chief curator at the Corcoran, could have told the fascinating story of Miss Norrell's collecting.

Instead, they organized their selections around five themes: "Past and Present," "Hope and Belief," "Community," "A Sense of Place" and "Memory and Tribute."

The result is curatorial overkill and a barrage of art historical jargon. Such section titles as "Past and Present" only distract viewers from the essence of such images as South African Zwelethu Mthethwa's

photo of a black sharecropper holding his little albino son, "Untitled" (2002), and Linda Connor's "My Hand and My Mother's" (1967). Mr. Mthethwa's blazingly colorful photo of the man and child sums up unconditional love. Its intensity is unparalleled in the show. Miss Connor's "Hands" are more than artifacts of "past and present." They also express love.

Washingtonian William Christenberry's

art is a favorite with Miss Norrell, and "The Bar-B-Q Inn, Greensboro, Alabama" — a series of color photos showing the ruin of an old southern shack — is also in this section. Yet his art is also, confusingly, represented in two other exhibit sections.

Another favorite artist is Mr. Dunlap, whose "Dogs ... " gives a surrealist spin to a traditional Virginia landscape. The work is rather inappropriately hung in "A



Sense of Place," which trivializes the spirituality that infuses this work.

At the end of the exhibit catalog, Miss Norrell returns to the concerns about life that originally motivated her to collect. In her essay, "Let the Mystery Be," she acknowledges that, despite her persistent delving, life's universal questions can never be answered. Quoting her favorite singer Iris DeMent, Miss Norrell concludes, "But no one knows for certain/And so it's all the same to me/I think I'll just let the mystery be."

Her choice of works by both known and unknown artists aptly reflects her search for answers to that "mystery." Her "spiritual journey" through art will be a treat for many during the exhibit's run through Jan. 31.

WHAT: "Common



"K House" by William Christenberry (clockwise from top: Arthur Rothstein's "Sharecropper's Wife and Children," "Two Trees With Blowing Leaves" by Theora Hamblett, "B-Q Inn, Greensboro, Alabama," by William Christenberry, "Scene From Negro Quarter, Atlanta, Georgia" by Walker Evans, "Old Salem: A Family of Strangers," and "Rebels" by Jacob Lawrence are included in the collection. J. Norrell at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. At center is a photograph of Ms. Norrell.

WHEN YOU GO

Ground: Discovering Community in 150 Years of Art, Selections From the Collection of Julia J. Norrell
WHERE: Corcoran Gallery of Art, New York Avenue at 17th Street NW
WHEN: Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

daily except Tuesdays a p.m. on Thursdays, closed days through Jan. 31
TICKETS: \$6.75 adult seniors, \$3 students with ID, \$12 families, free for children under 12
mission is "pay as you go" Mondays and after 5 p.m. Thursdays.
INFORMATION: 202 or visit online at

San Francisco Chronicle

Saturday, August 21, 2004

Brilliant hues. Everyday objects. William Eggleston sees beyond simple and snaps life as it is: ordinary, odd and nonsequential.

Kenneth Baker, Chronicle Art Critic

Deborah Luster has a room to herself as an adjunct to "Los Alamos." In it sits a heavy metal cabinet with three deep drawers, a sloping desklike top surmounted by a goose-neck lamp.

Inside the drawers are some of the scores of portraits that make up Luster's "One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana" (1998-2002).

Stirred by the murder of her mother a decade earlier, Luster set out to rehumanize inmates of three prisons in Louisiana, her home state.

She collaborated with willing prisoners on photographic portraits of them. She printed each image on a 4-by-5-inch aluminum plate and etched into the back of it scanty details about the life and sentence of each sitter.

An array of prints hangs framed on the wall, but visitors can take the small metallic portraits from the cabinet drawers and study them closely under the lamp. Every move of the drawers evokes the clanging sonics of prison.

People will find studying the portraits by turns touching, unnerving and absorbing. Like Eggleston's work, Luster's project restores complexity to human questions we prefer simplified.

Focus on the forgotten

Inmates at the minimum-security prison farm in Transylvania, La., gather for a group photo in "ECPPF 34" (1999).



Artist reveals the person behind the prisoner

BY PETE HUMES

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

She stared into the eyes of a hundred stone cold killers. She faced robbers, rapists, thugs and thieves. And Deborah Luster asked them all to say "Cheese."

Selected works from Luster's series of jailhouse portraits are included in "Casting a New Light," the 1708 exhibit opening tonight.

The show is part of a larger project that includes "Recasting the Landscape," a concurrent display at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Casting a New Light"

WHERE: 1708 Gallery, 319 W. Broad St.

WHEN: Through Oct. 1

INFO: (804) 643-1708 or www.1708gallery.org

The project, curated by New York photographer Jerry Spagnoli and 1708 Gallery's Alyssa Salomon, features work from a dozen artists who employ antique photographic processes.

Artists such as Sean Culver, Dana Moore, Dan Estabrook and Roland Wirtz use labor-intensive techniques

to create calotypes, daguerreotypes and tintypes. The results fall somewhere between modern art and ancient artifact.

In 1998, while taking photos in poverty-stricken areas of Louisiana, Luster found her curiosity piqued by local correctional facilities.

"I knocked on a prison gate one Sunday morning and I got lucky," Luster said.

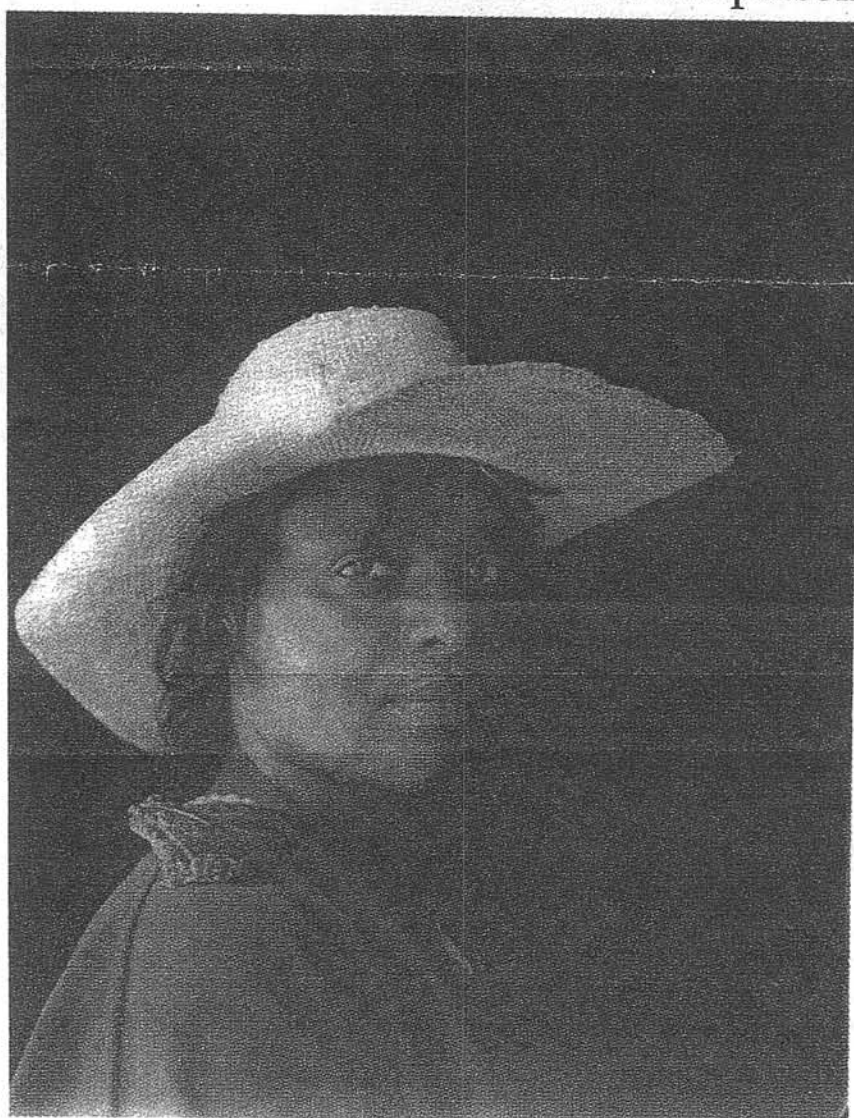
The warden allowed her to photograph some of the inmates. The session went well. But it wasn't until she returned with wallet-sized keepsakes for the prisoners that the project gained momentum.

The convicts displayed them, mailed them, gave them as gifts and clamored for more. "I was inundated," Luster said. "In many ways, that was the most interesting part for me. All of the little photos. Where did they go?"

Part of what brought Luster to the prison was a search for closure. Questions remained in the years after the murder of her mother. Luster longed to understand the act and the perpetrator.

She wanted to use her art to make sense of the senselessness.

"But the minute I walked into the prison," she said, "that was lifted and the project be-



DEBORAH LUSTER/JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

"V 80" (2000), an inmate at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women in St. Gabriel poses with pet toad.

Luster

FROM PAGE D1

came about something else entirely."

Luster visited three prisons in Louisiana: the minimum-security Transylvania Prison Farm, the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women in St. Gabriel and Angola, the maximum-security Louisiana State Penitentiary.

Her makeshift studio consisted of a duct-taped, black-velvet backdrop and a chair.

A full-time resident of Monroe, La., Luster also has a home in New Orleans. (It was spared the destructive wrath of Hurricane Katrina.)

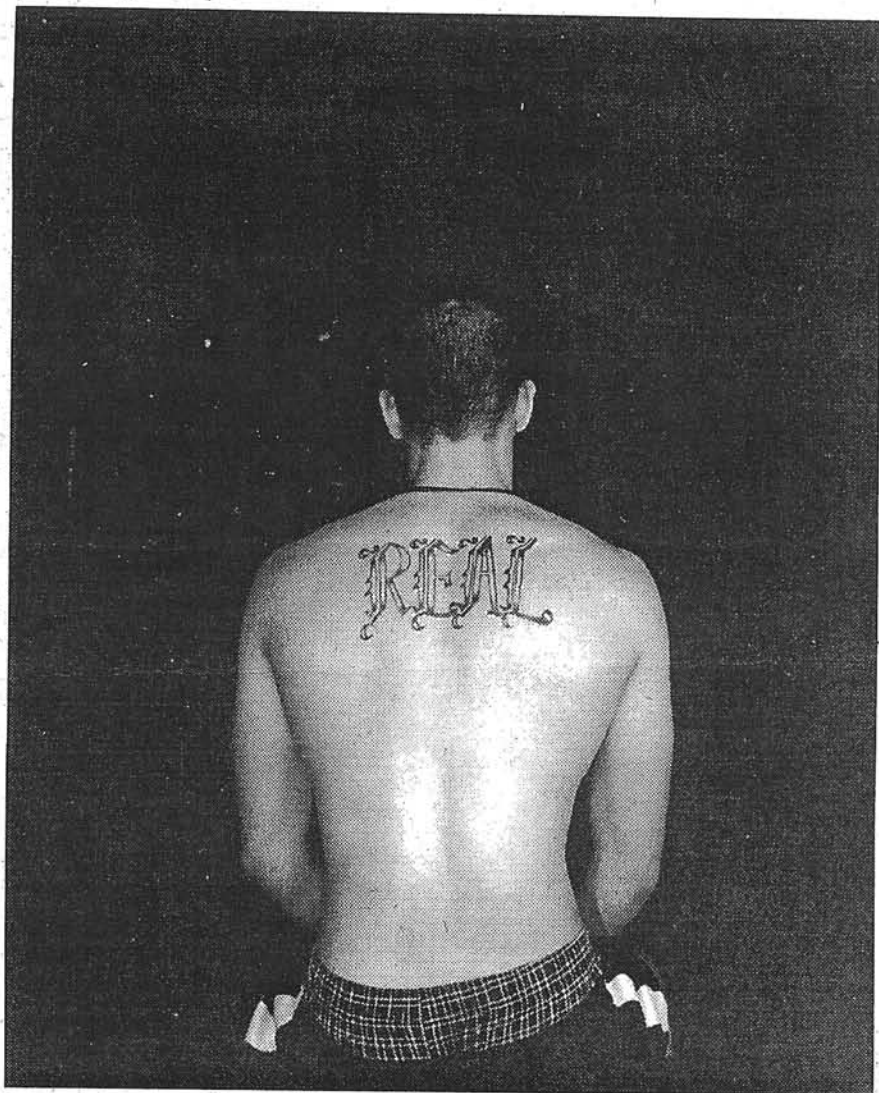
The more time Luster spent in the prison, the more she became fascinated by her state's penal system.

Not only are the prisons crowded (Louisiana has the highest number of convicts per capita in the U.S.), but they evoke the sense of another era (Angola was built on the site of five former plantations, and inmates still labor in cotton fields).

The aged feel of her 4x5 aluminum prints speaks to that sense of history. Though Luster's work at 1708 is displayed in frames, the work is often shown in a custom-made filing cabinet where viewers can shuffle through the aluminum photos like trading cards.

"They become intimate like family portraits," said Luster. "They're tactile. You get to touch people who would usually remain unacknowledged."

One man at Angola, after gazing at his picture, said, "Damn, I done got old." The reaction struck Luster as odd until she learned that all of the mirrors at Angola are made of steel. The man had



DEBORAH LUSTER/JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

A minimum-security inmate turns his back on Deborah Luster in "ECPPF 16" (1999). Some prisoners preferred to show off scars and tattoos.

not seen himself so clearly in years.

"The photographs are about remembering individuals," said Luster, who considers her collection of 25,000 images an "archive of human beings."

Luster doesn't use the inmate's name to identify the images. Personal details are etched on the back, and the titles are simply the Department of Corrections identification number for each prisoner.

Luster knows it seems disjointed to stare into faces of such emotion, struggle and hardship and see them referred to as "ECPPF 16," "LCIW 117" and "LSP 23."

But that's exactly her point.

"Each one of those numbers is someone with a story."

• Contact Pete Humes at (804) 649-6733 or phumes@timesdispatch.com

The New York Times

Book Review

December 7, 2003



Deborah Luster's photograph of Robin Forgette, an inmate in Mardi Gras costume, from "One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana."

ONE BIG SELF: Prisoners of Louisiana. Photographs by Deborah Luster. Text by C. D. Wright. (Twin Palms, \$60.) In 1998, 10 years after a hired killer murdered her mother, Deborah Luster began making portraits of convicted criminals held in Louisiana's state prison system, the most notorious and severe unit of which is the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola. She photographed murderers and rapists, short-timers and lifers, using a straightforward, respectful technique that produced, for each convict, a dozen wallet-size prints of him- or herself and, for Luster, an intense, evocative, poignant and occasionally amusing rogues' gallery. Some of her subjects are shown in their plain prison garb, but often they wear the costumes of labor (cook's toque, cowboy hats) or recreation (boxing gloves, Mardi Gras garb). The pictures are printed on palm-size metal plates that recall the immensely popular tintypes from the time of the Civil War; indeed, the serious manner in which her sitters present themselves is a close match to that of the young Union soldiers who had photographs made before joining their units on the front lines. Both groups faced the very real prospect of death apart from their families and loved ones. "Eighty-eight percent of the men who are incarcerated at Angola will die there," Luster tells us in her introduction.

Her photographs are lustrous and beautiful by themselves, but the addition of an extended poem by C. D. Wright makes the book doubly wonderful. Rather than attempt to echo or amplify the photographs, Wright has wisely followed her own ear, creating a kind of chapbook of Southern prison lore. "AC or DC / You want to be westinghoused or Edison / Your pick . . . you're the one condemned," she writes, adding, "Tennessee's retired chair available on E-Bay." Interspersed throughout the amber-toned reproductions rather than cordoned off as front or back matter, the poem adds tragicomic richness to the pictures and makes "One Big Self" a big success.