

## ESSAY

### ***Nature Morte: Photographs by Bruce Katsiff***

***Written by Heather Campbell Coyle, Curator of American Art, Delaware Art Museum***

#### **The Cabinet of Dr. Foto**

The collector's cabinet is filled with obscure specimens. Some are recognizable: skulls, vertebrae, mandibles. Others are more mysterious: a horn, perhaps; a set of tail bones; pairs of long bones that might come from arms or legs or wings. Still others hover between legibility and confusion: a tiny skeleton appears complete, but is it a mouse, a squirrel, a lizard? Scale is impossible to determine. There is no human skull to provide a benchmark, and what other bone would serve?

The cabinet itself is an orderly structure—an ordering structure to be more precise—with compartments designed to keep related objects in place. But what common logic relates these objects? Certainly they are bones, but they come from different species, likely different classes, of animals: mammals, birds, and reptiles share the cabinet. Most rest neatly in their slots, but some are unruly. Refusing to be contained, they leap over the slats meant to divide them. The structure itself shows wear. The wood is nicked and scraped and some slats have been removed to accommodate what they house. And then there is the orientation: despite its many cavities, this is not a specimen drawer, but an upright cabinet, a display. It is a collection arranged by an artist more concerned with formal relationships than scientific ones.

*The Cabinet of Dr. Foto* exists only as a photograph. The cabinet was constructed solely for this photograph and was dismantled as soon as the image was printed. The photographer Bruce Katsiff collected the bones, repurposed a typesetting drawer to make his cabinet, and arranged the items before his view camera. Many of the items appear in his other compositions, and here they are set out as raw materials awaiting combination. Like Charles Willson Peale in *The Artist in His Museum* (1822), Katsiff seems to give us a glance into his cabinet of curiosities, housing the specimens he employs to craft the works that make up his series, *Nature Morte*.

Produced over more than a decade, the photographs that make up *Nature Morte* present the artist's meditations on mortality, geometry, and the history and practice of photography.

#### **Memento Mori**

Katsiff's project began with a chance encounter, made at the right moment. Walking through the woods near his home in Lumberville, Pennsylvania, the photographer spotted a deer carcass decaying—"melting into the earth, going back from where it came," as the artist described it. Intent on recording it, he brought his 4 x 5-inch view camera outside and photographed the animal where it lay. Intrigued by his encounter, he became alert to similar subjects.

Months later, Katsiff found a freshly killed raccoon on the edge of the road. He carried it to a nearby field. Again, he transported his view camera and tripod outside, ducked under the dark cloth, and tried to make sense of his subject photographically. This time he isolated a striking

detail on the ground glass: the raccoon's forepaws folded across the soft fur of its belly. Lying still, with their attenuated digits, the paws resemble human hands, and the image evokes a body at rest in a casket. The photograph is peaceful, almost prayerful, with a centralized composition and a full range of tones. The detail allows for universality—there is no striped tail to identify the mischievous creature and call to mind its chaotic nighttime rambles—and the artist's title, *The Sleep of Peace*, transforms the animal into an allegory.

Charged with its evocative title, the photograph presents a meditation on aging and mortality. As the artist has pointed out: "These are pictures you don't make in your youth. These are middle-aged pictures."<sup>1</sup> Katsiff commenced this series in 1982, in his late 30s, when he began considering his own mortality. *Nature morte*, which translates literally to "dead life," is the French term for still life, and, like historical still life paintings, Katsiff's photographs point to the fleeting nature of life. They are *memento mori*, reminders of the inevitability of death. The critic Susan Sontag has characterized all photographs as such: "To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."<sup>2</sup>

The first photographs in the Nature Morte series activate this inherent condition of photography, playing on the borders between life and death, motion and stasis. In *The Sleep of Peace* Katsiff memorialized a liminal moment as the animal, still warm, seemed to hover between life and death. While the title and composition emphasize repose, the raccoon's rear paw, with its rough footpads, injects an element of animalistic energy. Similarly, in *Dancing Feet*, 1984, Katsiff framed the image to leave ambiguous the status of the bird. The bird's grasping talons might be frozen by death, or just by the camera. The odd angle and the extraordinary textural detail indicate a still subject, but the title implies motion and life, or at least a dance of death. The photograph, taken on a tabletop in the artist's studio, has a suspended, underwater quality to it. Katsiff uses natural light and long exposures—five minutes or more depending on the light—and the passage of time seems to inhabit his prints, enhancing their melancholy mood.

### **Katsiff's Cats**

Many of the photographs taken on Katsiff's table leave no doubt as to the status of the subject. In *Joan and Denver's Cat*, the desiccated corpse of a cat, discovered by friends in their barn, confronts the viewer. The subject is as disturbing as the printing is beautiful. The cat is neither fleshy nor skeletal but appears mummified with dried skin stretched taut over bones. The cat's tail is missing. Its teeth seem too large without a fuzzy muzzle. It looks like the lean predator it must have been in life—a stray living in barn. Yet the feline corpse is beautifully modeled in light and set at the center of an exquisite platinum print.

Lingering over the photograph, admiring the elegance of the lighting and the lushness of the printing, seems wrong. Looking at dead things is taboo in modern American culture, but photographers from Brassai and E. J. Bellocq to Diane Arbus and Joel-Peter Witkin have drawn our attention to those things that polite society dictates that we turn away from. Photographs let us examine and confront their subjects and our fears. Such images inspire strong reactions, and Katsiff has been grilled by animal activists about his most challenging images.

Within a few years, Katsiff's imagery became even more difficult as he began to build constructions for the cat corpse and a growing collection of similar items. *Cat Fight*, 1987, activates the animal, placing her in an imagined landscape with the remains of another animal. The cat's exposed teeth register as predatory, and the photograph is infused with animal energy despite its obviously long-dead subjects. *Kitten's Leap*, 1988, has a similar effect. A (different) cat sits perched on a wooden structure shrouded with dead grasses and seems to look down, anticipating a leap she will not make. In their constructed sets, Katsiff's cats become stage actors and the photographs appear to be slices from a familiar narrative—cats fight, cats pounce.

*Barn Swallow's Web* uses the familiar feline subject to set off in a different direction. The remains of Joan and Denver's cat are placed in a frame, with a halved nautilus shell (a favorite subject of formalist photographers) in the center and a pair of mandibles spread out like wings in the upper left corner. Strings lace across the surface, providing a convenient perch for a bird. The photograph recalls a Joseph Cornell box full of formally and psychologically resonant items. If *Cat Fight* and *Kitten's Leap* introduce basic narrative structures, *Barn Swallow's Web* creates a fantasy world full of vague associations and haunting references.

### **The Directorial Mode**

The staged narratives and constructed sets in Katsiff's feline photographs highlight the artist's active role in shaping his subjects. His impulse as a photographer is not to document, but to create from whole cloth. Assembling items in his studio for his camera, Katsiff embraced what A. D. Coleman has termed the "directorial mode."<sup>3</sup> Like theater directors, directorial photographers stage fictions, creating tableaux of people or objects specifically for their cameras. In contrast, documentary and straight photographers (theoretically) capture the events and objects before their lenses with minimal interference. With the exception of portraiture and still life photography, most mainstream photographs—snapshots, spot-news photographs, landscape pictures by Ansel Adams, the "decisive moments" of Henri Cartier-Bresson—fall into the documentary or straight photography tradition. Coleman theorized the directorial mode as a counter-tendency running through the history of photography, generally overshadowed and frequently decried by photographic purists wedded to the ideal of photography as truth. In the late sixties and early seventies he saw a flowering of directorial photography, represented by artists like Duane Michals, Lucas Samaras, Ralph Gibson, and William Wegman.

Katsiff was in art school in the 1960s when the documentary method was enshrined as the essence of the photographic medium—that which separated photography from painting and the other arts. In 1964, John Szarkowski, the curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, explained in *The Photographer's Eye*:

The invention of photography provided a radically new picture-making process—a process based not on synthesis but on selection. The difference was a basic one. Paintings were *made*—constructed from a storehouse of traditional schemes and skills and attitudes—but photographs, as the man on the street put it, were *taken*.<sup>4</sup>

Szarkowski's project, a landmark exhibition and book, encompassed works from 1850 through the 1960s, but it was by no means a comprehensive history of the medium. Photographers who dared to arrange their subjects or manipulate their negatives too obviously were left out of this narrative. A few years later, for the exhibition *New Documents*, Szarkowski picked out three contemporary photographers— Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, and Lee Friedlander—as the most recent exponents of the documentary tradition. Like most documentary photographers, they embraced an aesthetic of objectivity, producing sharply focused silver prints and refusing to manipulate or crop the images captured on their negatives.

As an undergraduate at Rochester Institute of Technology, Katsiff took a more expansive approach to photography. The program at RIT emphasized technical mastery. History of photography was team-taught by Beaumont Newhall (curator and historian of photography), Jim Card (an archivist at George Eastman House), and Nathan Lyons (photographer, curator, and founder of the Visual Studies Workshop), who pulled liberally from the museum's collection to illustrate their points. Katsiff was exposed to the wide range of photographic techniques, historical and contemporary, and his own work was experimental.

Inspired more by Andy Warhol than Robert Frank, he combined printmaking and photography, screen printing his images onto reflective metal surfaces. A work from his senior thesis exhibition was selected by Peter Bunnell for the 1968 exhibition *Photography as Printmaking* at the Museum of Modern Art. Szarkowski's younger colleague, Bunnell sought to problematize "the traditional critical separation between 'straight photography,' which seeks to mirror external reality by extending the viewer illusionistically into the picture space, and the aesthetic that emphasizes the distinctive surface quality of the print itself in order to evoke an emotional response to the image." It was an approach that Bunnell saw as "extremely fruitful for today's young artists."<sup>5</sup>

A few years later, Katsiff was excited when Diane Arbus came to critique student work at the Pratt Institute where he was a graduate student, and he brought her his portfolio of contrasty, collaged, and rephotographed prints. (For his part, Katsiff has always been more engaged with "crooked" than "straight" photography.<sup>6</sup>) "I can't look at these. These aren't photographs," she remarked.<sup>7</sup> Interested in exploring the diverse possibilities of the photographic medium—what Coleman called "its almost infinite adaptability to any style of expression"—Katsiff was part of another generation.<sup>8</sup> His was a culture "actively engaged in stretching the boundaries of their medium by overriding externally imposed limitations and violating all prohibitions in regard to technique, form, style, subject matter, and content."<sup>9</sup>

For the photographs in *Nature Morte*, Katsiff felt free to pick and choose the elements of straight photography that appealed to him: composing his images as full frames and printing with rich detail. He combined these modern methods with his postmodern directorial sensibility.

### **Little Horribles**

By the mid-eighties, Katsiff was deep into his directorial moment. He was chair of the Fine Art Department at Bucks County Community College and head of a bustling photography program there. The photographs from *Nature Morte* were exhibited at the Book Trader Gallery in 1987

and at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1990. If individuals struggled with the work, curators and critics embraced it, fascinated with the articulate artist's disturbing subject matter and labor-intensive process.

For nearly a decade Katsiff actively gathered "little horrors" for his work, developing a collection of animal remains, dead birds, and bones. Attending a country auction, a friend spied three boxes of taxidermy and bones. He bought the lot for Katsiff, and his finds became the raw material for *Lou's Gifts*, 1989. A student brought him a completely reticulated mouse skeleton. Friends called him when they discovered dead animals on their property. Katsiff visited a knacker in Philadelphia to purchase a horsehead and a ram's head. He learned to employ beetles to clean off the bones.

As he deepened his engagement with the material, Katsiff turned his attention to the structure of bones beneath the fur and feathers. "These beautiful things are underneath the surface of our smooth flesh and skin, hidden objects that never see the light," he noted.<sup>10</sup> In pursuit of beautiful bones, the photographer convinced a friend to unearth his German Shepherd, Ensor, buried for nine years, for the photograph *Pieces of a Life*, 1987. Ensor's bones are arrayed decoratively in a shallow box. Curves dominate the arrangement, representing the circle of life. The dog's skull emerges from an oval—for the photographer, a symbol of the birth canal. Katsiff appreciates that his creations begin with death: "My subjects are not 'born' until the death of their 'hosts.'"<sup>11</sup>

When a friend discovered a cache of crackles that had perished in his wood stove, he called Katsiff, who put them to work in *Frozen Flight*, 1989. The birds inhabit a custom box, which they share with a sheaf of crumbling, partially burned newspaper, a vintage advertisement, and other dead things. The tattered remains of a pigeon are topped with a cat's skull, introducing an element of the grotesque into the composition. This bizarre creature is perched above a vintage advertisement for Sunkist oranges that features a blandly beautiful woman in profile, an image made nostalgic by age and wear. The dissonance is palpable between the pretty birds from our world, an idealized woman from the past, and this hybrid creature from the island of Dr. Moreau. *Frozen Flight* seems to question our comfortable notions of beauty and horror: it is artfully composed, carefully lit, and expertly printed.

## **Precious Metals**

The composition of *Frozen Flight* is notable for the series of proportional rectangles within the frame. Katsiff's tool of choice by the mid-1980s was a 12 x 20-inch view camera, which creates a rectangle with the proportions known as the golden section. A golden section rectangle has a proportion of roughly three to five and has been considered an ideal format in the arts and architecture since ancient times. A golden section can perpetually be divided by locating a square within the section. This leaves another rectangle with the same proportions, which can then be divided, ad infinitum. Katsiff finds this ratio "mystical" in its appeal from a design standpoint.

Engaging with the golden section, Katsiff brought simple structure to his compositions—structure that complemented the complexity of the bones he set within his boxes. *The Golden Section*, 1987, may be the artist's most overt statement on composition, but proportional

rectangles also organize *Lou's Gifts*, *Frozen Flight*, *Laughing Horse*, and *Because I Do Not Hope to Turn*, all from 1989. Set within simple boxes and supported by turned wood columns are complex creatures and bones, especially skulls, with shapes that would be impossible to imagine making. While many of the skulls greet the viewer head on and symmetrical in their orderly rectangular compartments, a few, like the laughing horse, are set at angles which enliven them. These carefully cleaned bones refuse to be aestheticized. The horse head asserts a charge of animal energy, and the artist expresses his dark sense of humor.

Elements of these thoughtful compositions and careful constructions were inspired by the artist's encounter with Roger Fenton's luscious still life photographs at Oxford University. In 1860, Fenton produced a series of approximately forty photographs of fruits and flowers. Like a still life painter he created "a study in textures, piling detail upon detail and heightening its tactile diversity."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Katsiff combined varied elements—wood, bone, feathers, paper, wire—in *Nature Morte*. *The Helix* locates its eponymous form across flora and fauna. A wealth of textural detail is crowded into the frame and photographed up close for maximal impact.

Equally important to the look of these photographs is the use of platinum/palladium printing, a process Katsiff adopted specifically for this series, feeling that gelatin silver was not giving him the look he wanted. Platinum printing allows for a full range of mid-tones, as well as velvety black and chalky white that mimics the texture of bone. The use of platinum requires contact printing, so Katsiff must use a large camera to produce a large print.

An expensive and difficult technique, platinum printing reached the height of its popularity around the turn of the last century when it was the preferred medium for Pictorialists and artistic portrait photographers. These photographers produced hazy, painterly prints, but Katsiff uses the process to capture extraordinary detail as well as atmosphere. The platinum process lends an antique look to these photographs, imbuing them with an instant poignancy that complements the subject. The character of the *Nature Morte* prints reminds viewers of old photographs, photographs of and by people who have died.

### **Altarpieces and Totems**

If death hangs over all of *Nature Morte*, the theme is most clearly articulated in *Homage to My Father*, 1987, an elegiac photograph produced the week after the death of Katsiff's father. A circle of white light hovers above the skull of a horse in a symmetrical, vertical composition evoking an altarpiece. The skull is turned, obscuring its specific animal origin and allowing the bone to function formally and symbolically. Flanking the skull two wooden posts hold a bird and a mouse skeleton. Multiple sets of wings hover above the light. Juxtaposed with the wooden posts and skull, the wings conjure totem poles—markers of familial identity that feature graphic masks and arcane symbolism—a connection the artist makes explicit in *Flying Totem*, 1990, and *Totem Pole Skulls*, 1993.

*Homage to My Father* is not the only example of this symmetrical, vertical arrangement. One year earlier Katsiff had produced *Balancing Life*, a complex composition with dozens of objects balanced atop one another. The verticality of the image is insistent; the pull of gravity, palpable. One cannot help but imagine the artist constructing this work: selecting matched pairs of bones,

balancing them, backing up to check the composition, and shifting elements until he is satisfied. With the bent wood hoop forming an arch at the top, *Balancing Life* seems more overtly an altar, though perhaps (with its proliferation of bones and dead flowers) a voodoo one. *Winged Equine*, 1991, is similar, if a bit more concentrated, in its effect, characterized by fewer and larger elements.

In the 1990s, Katsiff concentrated on the formal possibilities of the altars and golden section rectangles, investigating beauty and balance, composition and texture. The signs of animal energy slipped away, as did the accessibility of the narrative. The series winds down and the photographs approach silence. With its deadpan cataloguing, *The Cabinet of Dr. Foto* is a late example from Nature Morte. Katsiff would soon pack up his boxes and bones and move on to a new project. Returning to Nature Morte in 2012, Katsiff reprinted many of these photographs, leaving visible the edges beyond the image. The contrast between the uneven brush strokes at the periphery and the precision image in the center speaks to the almost magic potential of photography to capture and contain “time’s relentless melt.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Geoff Gehman, “Striking for Expression, Hip and Thigh,” *The Morning Call*, Sunday, November 29, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave,” in *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1990): 15.

<sup>3</sup> A. D. Coleman, “The Directorial Mode: Notes toward a Definition,” (1976) in *Photography in Print*, Vicki Goldberg, ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994): 480–491.

<sup>4</sup> John Szarkowski, *The Photographer’s Eye* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Press Release, Photography as Printmaking, Museum of Modern Art, March 19, 1968.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.moma.org/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/4007/releases/MOMA\\_1968\\_Jan-June\\_0024\\_24.pdf?2010](http://www.moma.org/pdfs/docs/press_archives/4007/releases/MOMA_1968_Jan-June_0024_24.pdf?2010)

<sup>7</sup> Interview with the author, December 18, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with the author, December 18, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Coleman, “The Directorial Mode,” 482.

<sup>10</sup> A. D. Coleman, *The Grotesque in Photography* (New York: Ridge Press/Summit Books, 1977), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Katsiff quoted in Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Bruce Katsiff—Crossing the Golden Section,” *View Camera* 5, no. 5 (September/October 1992): 33.

<sup>12</sup> “Bruce Katsiff at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts,” COMPLETE CITATION 1990, 18.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2005.100.15>

<sup>14</sup> Sontag, 15.