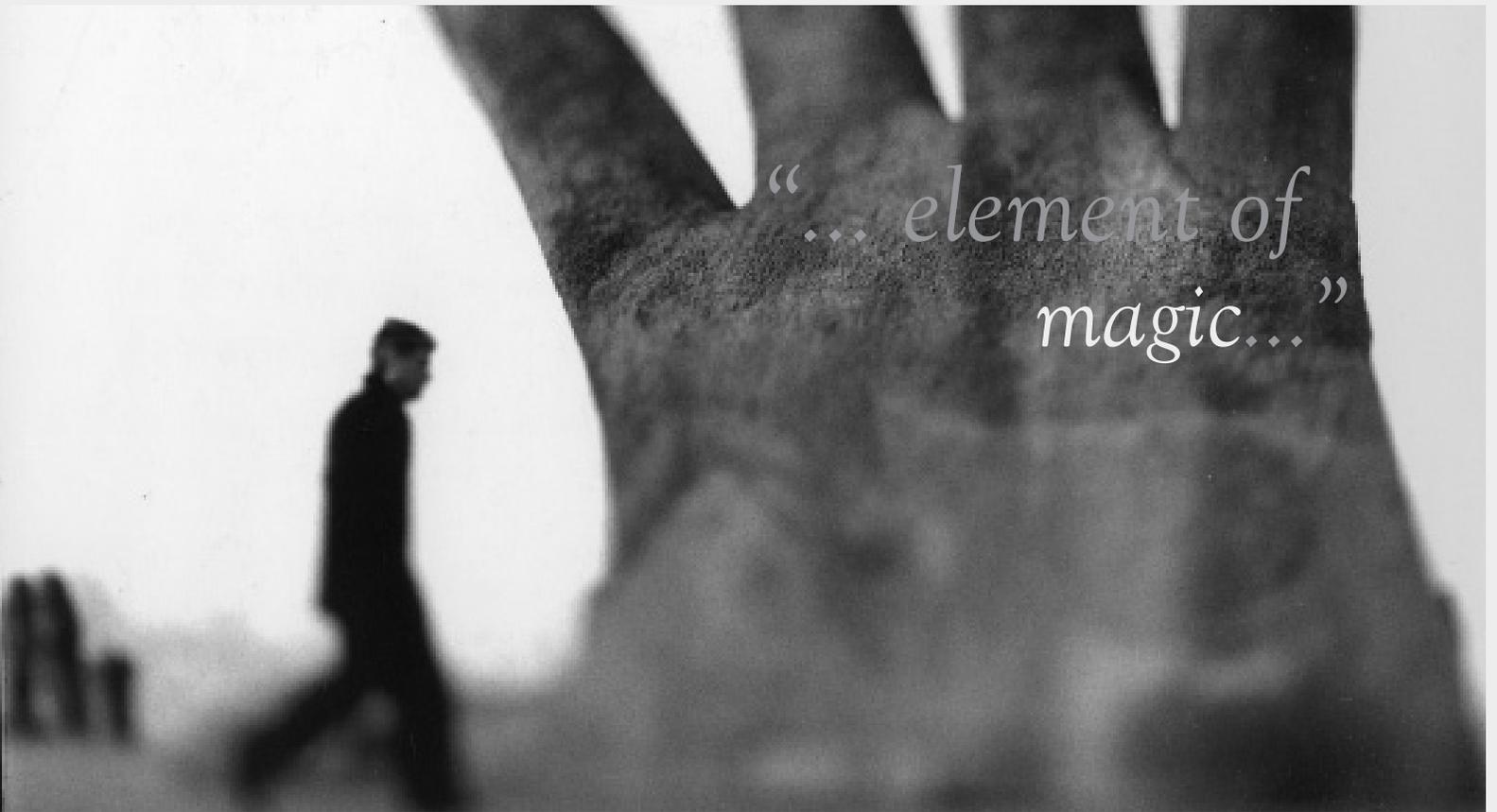




Keith | Carter
PHOTOGRAPHY

“I think there is an element of magic in photography-light, chemistry, precious metals-a certain alchemy. You can wield a camera like a magic wand almost. Murmur the right words and you can conjure up proof of a dream. I believe in wonder. I look for it in my life every day; I find it in the most ordinary things.”

Keith Carter



If I were to compare Carter's images directly to poems, I would suggest that we might think of them as sonnets. In its structure the sonnet contains a definite formality, a weight and density, a sense of containment, a demand for resolution. Less flexible than more open forms of verse, it resembles in its symmetry the square, that elementary geometric shape Carter favors as the cutting edge for his vision.

Many poets find sonnet form constraining; for some it proves so much so that they chafe at its restrictions and abandon it for more loosely defined modes. But some embrace its strictures, settle into them, and begin to explore what they allow. And, of those, some few discover there, in the words of one of its most devoted servants, "not chains but wings." If, of all the pleasures this survey monograph affords us, the one most generously and deliberately offered is its open invitation into a peculiar and magical parallel universe, then the deepest intimacy in which it involves us is that of watching Keith Carter learn to fly.

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My mother was a photographer of children. My father deserted our family when I was five. We lived in Beaumont, where I still live. Before her marriage my mother had traveled around photographing sorority girls in the Midwest. So when my father left, she rented a small space and began to photograph again. This time it was children.

She would run a "Sunday Special" in the newspaper, advertising four 5" x 7" prints for \$5.00, and she would have mothers and children lined up down the sidewalk. She would photograph sixty children on a Sunday afternoon and make three hundred bucks. When I was five or six years old, my mother turned our apartment kitchen into a darkroom at night. My sister and I would have little pallets on the floor, and we'd

be sort of dozing off; and I remember the orange light and the sound of running water, and every now and then getting up and watching as one of Mother's prints would come up in the developer.

I never really paid attention to her work or to photography in general until I was about twenty-one. I remember coming into our house and seeing a large stack of 16" x 20" prints against a wall-color photographs of children-and there was this almost cliched image of a little girl in a straw hat in profile, leaning against a tree and holding a basket of kittens. But it stopped me dead in my tracks, and I can pinpoint that it was, in some respects, a small epiphany in my life; because what stopped me wasn't the picture so much-it was the light. She was just completely rimmed in light.

I remember getting down on one knee where I could really look at it. That afternoon asked my mother if I could borrow her camera. It was a twin-lens Rolleflex. I made some photographs and showed them to her. She said things like, "oh, you have a nice sense of light,"



and “That’s a good composition,” or “You have a good eye.” Things like that- just being encouraging. But by encouraging me, she gave me a certain confidence, a certain license to create. I’ve never really looked back.

When I was about twenty-three, I started traveling with my mother around the state, photographing children. I was a clown. I made the children smile, laugh, and she made the pictures. It was a great learning experience, and I did it for 15 years, not always as a clown. After a while she retired, and I did the photographs - by my count, I did over 6000 sittings of children. It taught me a lot of things.

From the beginning, I wanted to make art. I felt that very strongly, even though I stumbled around for a long time. The great thing is, it’s twenty-five years later, and I feel that even more passionately now. I just want to make art. I have a friend who says, “ ... all great art reminds you of something you already knew, but didn’t know you knew.”

My mentor was a sculptor, David Cargill, who lives in my hometown. Aside from my wife, Pat, David with his early advice helped shape my work the most. David had an interest in photography, a darkroom, and a life in art. He would look at my early work and talk to me about artistic matters. He would say things like, “Be ruthless with space; don’t waste it. It’s all you have to get your message across.” Then he would crop and recompose my pictures. He would say, “Don’t just look at photographs-don’t just think like a photographer.” He and his wife, Patty, had a magnificent art library. I guess the most important thing David did was to loan me books and to instill in me the feeling that photography could indeed be art. The first book he loaned me was on Vermeer. He said, “Take this home and look at it. Pay attention to his use of perspective. He paints much like a photographer sees. Look at his use of natural light, his gestures.” Then he loaned me Cartier-Bresson’s *The Decisive Moment*, which just blew me away. Then books on Bosch, Rousseau, and Ansel Adams. So, for a while, I became whoever’s work







place.” Well, when he said that, I felt like St. Paul on the road to Damascus. I felt this great weight lifted off my shoulders. I sat up, and I had chills, and I thought, “Oh, Jesus, I belong to a place. Why am I thinking I have to go to New Guinea or somewhere exotic to make a picture that counts, when I live in the most exotic place I know. I live in this peculiar region of East Texas that has everything.”

It took me a decade to really earn a living as a photographer-ten years to make any kind of a living at all. I did every sort of portrait and commercial assignment I could get my hands on. But all the time I worked on my own pictures too. That was my focus. It took me sixteen years to publish a book. It's twenty-odd years later now, I've had six books published, I occasionally take outside assignments, and I teach. I ask my students if they can live so long with that kind of ambiguity in their lives. Can they work on a project for a decade without knowing whether it will ever come to fruition? I enjoy teaching, and I enjoy my students. I have this self-centered mission. Living where I do, teaching at a state university that mainly serves a few essentially rural counties, I have a lot of students who are hungry to learn but who have not really been out there away from home a lot. Some of them aren't going to travel that far, and I want them to be aware that art exists and can be made in their own backyard, and I want them to go away with a sense that life is marvelous no matter where you are, and if you don't leave Mauriceville ever, you can still have a highly fulfilled, interesting life. The world is full of people who do it-it's a matter of attitude. So in some respects, I try to teach them art, the art of photography. On another level, I have this slightly hidden agenda to make them proud of who they are and where they come from.

As best I can, I've tried to remove most of what is superfluous from my life. I try to put myself in positions-in physical locations-where the possibility exists to be astonished. I also try, as William Stafford said, “ ... to be on guard against perfection.”

When I work, I look for an interesting area, or place, and try to make it intimate. If, as happens nowadays, I find myself in a strange city, I look for a neighborhood, or a single block, and work there. I just generally try to rein things in, rather than get too scattered.

I print early in the morning, 5:30 a.m. until around 9:00 or 10:00, before my other responsibilities kick in. Sometimes I print a little in the afternoon. If I'm printing new work, I can print two, maybe three, new negatives. If I'm printing older work, I can print maybe four. I don't dwell on prints. I don't dwell on making proof prints to look at first. I just go straight for it. I work with a certain contained intention and expectation.

I write messages to myself in the darkroom. I write them on shelves; I write them on the walls; I tape them to my enlarger-things other people have said that I want to remember. Wallace Stevens: “Poetry must almost successfully resist intelligence.” Reynolds Price: “Nobody under forty can believe that nearly everything is inherited.” Robert Frank: “Above all, life for a photographer cannot be a matter of indifference.” Ellen Gilchrist: “We live at the level of our language. Whatever we can articulate, we can imagine, develop, and explore.” Aristotle: “The soul always begins a thought with an image.” I need these things. I need to stay grounded, I need to stay focused. My pictures evolve around folktales, poems, real people's lives, animals. I don't just look at the thing itself or at the reality

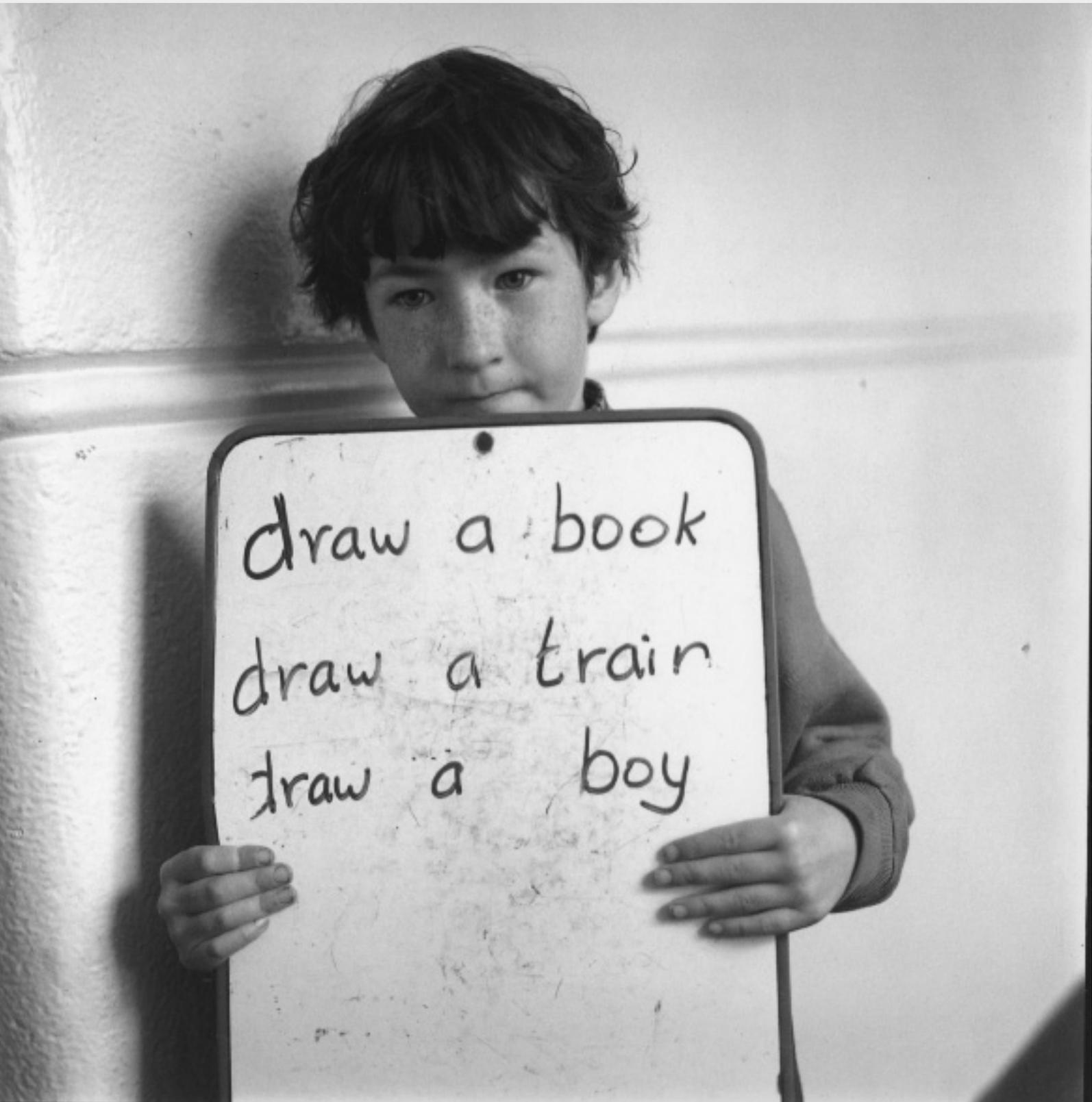
I could get my hands on. I'm self taught. I learned to print by trying to make my work match the tonal scale of the reproductions in the photography books. At that point, I had never really seen a great original print.

I read James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* when I was about twenty-two or twenty-three. I didn't understand Walker Evans' photographs in those days, but the prose electrified me. I've never been able to recover from that. It's probably why I'm attracted to rural areas. At that time there was no photography being shown in this region, so I was working pretty much in a vacuum. I was desperately seeking some kind of validation, some kind of direction or guidance.

When I was twenty-five I took the bus to New York City for the first time. I had written the Museum of Modern Art, asking if I could look at prints in their collection. They wrote back and said yes. At the time, I was working as a picture framer and photographing in black and white on the side. I thought I had saved enough money, if I was careful, to stay a month. I was wrong; I made it three weeks. It was February, and I stayed in the least expensive place listed in my guide book, the Hotel Albert in the Village. The elevator didn't work, so I had to climb flights of stairs, stepping over all these stoned people. But for two hours a day, three days a week, for three weeks, I went to the Museum of Modern Art, put on little white gloves, and interns brought me boxes of photographs that I had only dreamed of seeing—images I had only seen in books. I think I was a little obsessed at that point.

It was the first time I'd ever heard of Paul Strand or Eugene Atget. I would look at an Ansel Adams print and compare it to a Strand and try to figure out why they struck me so differently. I was searching for ways to make my prints more expressive. I was on fire, and I was in heaven for those few hours each day. Then I would go to galleries and see what was going on in the contemporary art world. I think of that experience now as my three-week graduate education.

Another great epiphany in my life came when I went to a film festival in Galveston because Horton Foote, the playwright, was going to speak. I was sitting in the Galveston Opera House about to fall asleep—the panel discussion was a real snoozerama—when finally, Horton's turn came; and this portly, handsome older man said, "Well, when I was a boy growing up in Wharton (Texas), I wanted to do art, and I was told if you wanted to do art you had to do or know a couple of things. You had to know the history of your medium; you had to know all that had come before you " I thought, "Yep, I agree with that." " ... and you also had to be a product of your own times. You had to write about your generation, what you knew, your times." I thought, "Yep, I know that." And then he said, "But for me, that wasn't enough. For me, I had to belong to a



draw a book

draw a train

draw a boy





itself; I look around the edges for those little askew moments- kind of like what makes up our lives-those slightly awkward, lovely moments.

I can trace a certain turning point in thinking about my work to a very nondescript picture I made in a cemetery in central Mexico. At that time (1981), I was still photographing the thing itself, things at a moment in time, kind of a classical definition of photography. I walked into the cemetery, knowing full well that when you walk into a cemetery you are not just treading, you are stomping dangerously close to a clichéd picture. But the old Mexican cemeteries are always fascinating places, so I wasn't planning to make a picture of anything, I was going to wander around. I was sitting under a tree, and I looked up, and above me, caught in the branches, were some paper streamers left from some sort of celebration. And kind of like a musician making a run in scale, I raised my camera to my eye just to see what it would look like- and it was a great moment. It wasn't a good picture, but for the first time I was consciously trying to make an image that didn't deal with reality, that didn't deal with the thing- a cemetery- itself, but rather with its essence. And so I worked there in a sort of fiery heat for about fifteen minutes. I knew I was making pictures that weren't very good, pictures that nobody, including Pat, would understand, pictures that I wasn't sure I even understood, but felt compelled to make. Taking those pictures gave me a certain courage I hadn't had before. My photographs are really about me. I think all art, to some extent, is about the maker.

I photograph ghosts. Mostly they're my own, sometimes they belong to others. I've often thought of playing the camera like a blues player plays an instrument-just bend the note here and there or just run a scale, just twist it a little bit, just practice, and never, ever, ever give up, and sometimes some magic creeps in or sometimes you hit the right notes and a picture materializes where you didn't think it would .

Today I think of myself as a portrait photographer.

My idea of really times. Something made people like us crawl deep into secret places in the earth and leave marks. They didn't just dip their hands in pigment; they apparently blew pigment around their hands and made a negative print. I guess maybe you could say they were the first negatives.

For me, a portrait is something that has a certain weight, a certain seriousness to it. It's not just replicating an image of somebody or something. These days I treat everything as a portrait, whether it's a safety pin hanging from a string in a woman's bedroom, or a man witching for water in a field. They're the same. They are all equal. I try to give them the same weight. My own idiosyncrasy is that, to me, it's all poetry. But since personal idiosyncrasies are all we have to work with, we might as well hang them out there.

A successful portrait is about the maker, the viewer, and the subject. It's about all three in nearly equal proportions. That's when a picture really works ... when it's about all of us. successful portraits are those handprints fond on cave walls that date from Paleolithic.

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- Carter





One might say~ therefore~ that Carter has rapidly evolved into the photographic equivalent of a regional writer~ though presently in this country we have so few such writers who achieve prominence~indeed~ such a scarcity of well-known regional artists in any medium~ that the term lends itself to misunderstanding. Too many mistake the commitment of regionalism for the condition of provincialism~ an unfortunate confusion. Jindrich Streit, a Czech photographer still little known outside his native land~ has lived and photographed in the same village for going on four decades; one of his monographs on Sovinec he titled *A Village Is the World*, which could serve as the motto for “regional” artists everywhere. Faulkner knew the truth of that~ and Edgar Lee Masters, and Marc Chagall, and many others; Carter knows it~ too. Once you find the artist in yourself~ what you actually need for your art generally lies close at hand. Yet~ paradoxically~ once you’ve allowed your central themes and methods to reveal themselves to you~ you usually discover them both transportable and omnipresent. Having had some success with his work~ Carter now travels more widely than before~ photographing wherever he goes. Some of the most recent pictures in this book~ previously unpublished~ he made in places far from East Texas- Ireland, for example; yet they fit easily in with the rest~ suggesting that, for him~ the entire world has slowly begun turning into Keith Carter country, becoming home.

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I believe in the power of narrative. I believe in the power of memory. I believe in a certain connection between people and the land. I believe in the consciousness and emotional lives of animals.

K.C. ●



