ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kathleen Robbins was born in Washington, DC and raised in the Mississippi Delta. Robbins received her MFA from the University of New Mexico in 2001. Her photographs have been exhibited in galleries and museums including The New Orleans Photo Alliance, The Light Factory Museum of Contemporary Photography & Film, The Weatherspoon Museum, John Michael Kohler Art Center, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, Addison Gallery of American Art, and The Southeast Museum of Photography. Robbins’ work has also been featured by Fixation Magazine, Flak Photo, Cannon/Vertue, Hamble Arts New York, NPR’s Picture Show, PON’s Photo of the Day, Oxford American, and Garden and Gun. She is represented by the Hezekiah Jacobs Gallery in Charleston. In 2012, she was part of the Critical Mass top 50 and she was the recipient of the 2011 Photoforum Review Prize. She currently resides in Columbia, SC with her husband Ben and their son Ather, where she is an associate professor of art, coordinator of the photography program, and affiliate faculty at Southern State University of South Carolina.

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

August 22, 5:30pm
Artist Lecture & Wine Reception
Room 309, Simons Center for the Arts

August 23, 2:00pm
“Kathleen Robbins: Flatland” Talk

October 3, 6:00pm
Membership Only Gallery Lead Tour
With Mark Sloan, curator and Dr. Mark Lane

JOIN THE CONVERSATION:
This project is supported by the Harry and Silvia Tatterson Foundation, the Open Grants program of the Coastal Community Foundation, the Ancient Foundation, the Guylaid and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, and the Provost’s Creative and Performing Arts Grant program, the School of Visual Art and Design and the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of South Carolina.

LOCATION: The Hobey Institute, College of Charleston, 181 Calhoun Street, 1st Floor, (at the corner of St Philip & Calhoun Streets)

PARKING: Available in the St. Philip and George Street Garages

GALLERY HOURS: Mon.-Sat: 11am-6pm, or by appointment
OPEN DAILY, 7PM ON FRIDAYS Free and open to the public.

CONTACT: (843) 953-4422 or h Hobey@CofC.edu

BLOG: Join the conversation at hobeyartfund.org/35th

BOOK A GUIDED TOUR: Free tours are led by knowledgeable and experienced guides and can be adapted to different time frames, group sizes, and ages. Contact our curator of education and public programs, Jodi Howes at jhowes@ecots.org at (843) 953-4557.

OUR MISSION: The Hobey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston School of the Arts provides a multidisciplinary laboratory for the production, presentation, interpretation, and dissemination of ideas by innovative visual artists from around the world. As a non-collecting museum, we create meaningful interactions between adventurous artists and diverse communities within a context that emphasizes the historical, social, and cultural importance of the art of our time.

Kathleen Robbins: Into the Flatland
August 23 – October 4, 2014
Kathleen Robbins: Into the Flatland

The Mississippi Delta could be the most photographed place on earth—if not now, eventually. The magnetism of the Delta sprouts in part from the visible contrasts of the place: soil more fertile than most in the world, alongside violent and unrelenting swamps; communities holding some of the richest while also the poorest inhabitants; over-cultiva ted wet and drought-ridden land; lush green and somber gray seasons; a landscape defined by shapely hardwood breaks and infinite horizons. As the Delta can be rich and fertile, it can also be poor and desolate; as one can hear the powerful chords of humanity’s best music there, one also knows of Delta nights of terror and injustice. In part it’s these extreme contrasts that grace the culture with its irresistible power, creating a deep and at times confusing paradox. Artists of all stripes and persuasions have migrated in and out of the Delta, fueled by an emotive dynamism that is palpable, alluring, and profoundly felt. Distinct from all the travelers, writers, and recent Delta arrivals, Kathleen Robbins draws her artistic energy from a deep placed history within the Delta, from knowing familial stories and domestic vegetation and from people’s long presence in Leflore County. When Kathleen Robbins ventures into the Flatland, it’s an act of return and remembrance, nothing at all like a first or new encounter.

A Delta daughter, in her eighties at the time, once told me her father would say of someone he respected and admired that “he covers all the ground he stands on.” Such statements are expansive, metaphoric measurements based on the solid presence of the earth, the soil, a calculation born of the culture and life of agriculture.

Drainage has always determined the destiny of the Delta, Hodding Carter, Sr., the notorious Greenville, Mississippi, newspaper editor, wrote in 1942 that the Delta region is “a precarious Eden, which the river has fashioned and caused to be populated because of its promise,” Carter continued, aware of history but also a prophet in his predictions of what was to come. “It’s a promise barely by only and still only partially fulfilled.”

Like many people born in the Delta, Kathleen Robbins may have had to leave home to see as she does. We all have trouble seeing clearly without the perspective offered by distance. While a native daughter never fully leaves the Delta, being away—in New Mexico or South Carolina—brings change. Looking at Robbins’s photographs I’m reminded of Laura, Estelle Welty’s character from Delta Wedding. “I thought was one of my characters,” Welty writes as Laura rides the train from Jackson down into the Delta. “In the Delta, most of the world seemed small.” Robbins’s photographs, Delta’s Apple Time and Men Now New Year’s Eve, 2007 give us that great sense of the world seeming mostly small, of the diminutive nature of human presence and impact. While the land and the sky dominate, what is so particular and also so universal is right there for us in the photographic frame, land and sky seem the equalizer here in these Delta photographs, where everyone and everything gets similarly swallowed by the landscape, all treated one and the same.

There’s reverence in Robbins’s point of view—no nostalgia or obligatory embrace. In the way she looks directly at a deeply abiding place through the intimate familiarity of her relationship to people and place, her photographs inhabit the space they come from—er as she says, “I’m inhabiting”—since they are at once about home and about a return to home, about what has been known for a long time and about rediscovering new ways of knowing. There is no anonymity here, no sense that we’re simply passing through. The figures we meet in Robbins’s photographs are not “subjects” but instead are “her people.”

She views an African American church in the rain from not a mysterious and unexplained vantage point, but instead from Oak’s CarVis.

The dogs in Robbins’s photographs seem like family, and her 2011 portrait of a sweetgum tree in Mom’s Sweetgum Tree, 2011, there’s a transforming luminescence in its picture of the familiar, finding that photogenic sense that Welty saw when she wrote of the Delta. “The land was utterly flat and level but it shivered like the wing of a lighted dragonfly, it seemed shimmered, as though it were an instrument and something had touched it.” That shimmering touch is ever present in the photographs Me on Bridge Chase, 2008, where we see the power of “Delta” time and space completely interwoven with Robbins’s inclusively endless shadows, an image with incarnations of them, now, and later.

When we first meet Little Steele (Jr Jr, Christmas Day, 2006), we know there must be a Big Steele, but he’s nowhere to be seen. Later, of course, he appears in Big Steele in the Big, 2009, the kind of wonderful reward that a good story delivers in line. It’s the return that provides the gift, Robbins’s return home, once and again and again, and the way her story circles back and around, making things clearer and suggesting through other things, the unexplainable complexities of these Flatlands. It’s impossible to say Mississippi, without evoking the tragedy of Emmett Till and the deep residue of that history. And in Money Elementary, 2009 we can feel the cold encroachment of water and time and the dissolution of everything within the image on this blue day.