

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 *Fraction Magazine*, *Flak Photo*, *Conscientious*, *Humble Arts* New York, NPR's Picture Show, PDN's Photo of the Day, *Oxford American*, and *Garden and Gun*. She is represented by the Rebekah Jacob Gallery in Charleston. In 2012, she was part of the Critical Mass top 50 and she was the recipient of the 2011 PhotoNOLA Review Prize. She currently resides in Columbia, SC with her husband Ben and their son Asher, where she is an associate professor of art, coordinator of the photography program, and affiliate faculty of southern studies at the University of South Carolina.



SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

August 22, 5:30pm
Kathleen Robbins Artist Talk
Room 309, Simons Center for the Arts

August 22, 6:30pm
Opening Reception

August 23, 2:00pm
Kathleen Robbins Gallery Talk

October 2, 6:00pm
Members Only Curator Led Tour
With Mark Sloan, curator
and Dr. Mark Long

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This project is supported by the Henry and Sylvia Yaschik Foundation, the Open Grants program of the Coastal Community Foundation, the Joanna Foundation, the Gaylord 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.



TOP IMAGE: *Shotgun House*, 2009, archival pigment print, 30 X 30 inches **MIDDLE:** *Ashwood*, 2012, archival pigment print, 30 X 30 inches **BOTTOM:** *Burning Field at Ashwood*, 2011, archival pigment print, 30 X 30 inches **FRONT COVER:** *Skinning House*, 2007, archival pigment print, 30 X 30 inches **BACK COVER:** *Blackbirds*, 2007, archival pigment print, 30 X 30 inches

LOCATION: The Marion and Wayland H. Cato Jr. Center for the Arts
161 Calhoun Street, 1st Floor (on the corner of St. Philip & Calhoun Streets)
College of Charleston, School of the Arts, Charleston, SC 29401

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

GALLERY HOURS: Mon - Sat, 11am - 4pm, or by appointment
OPEN UNTIL 7PM ON THURSDAYS! Free and open to the public.

CONTACT: (843) 953-4422 or halsey@cofc.edu

BLOG: Join the conversation! halsey.cofc.edu/EDU/blog

BOOK A GUIDED TOUR: Free tours are led by knowledgeable and experienced guides and can be adapted to different time lengths, group sizes, and ages. Contact our curator of education and public programs, Lizz Biswell at BiswellL@cofc.edu or (843) 953-5957.

OUR MISSION: The Halsey 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.

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HALSEY INSTITUTE 30TH ANNIVERSARY

COLLEGE of
CHARLESTON
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Kathleen Robbins: *Into the Flatland*

August 23 – October 4, 2014





Davis Farm, 2012, archival pigment print, 30 X 30 inches

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 virulent and uninhabitable swamplands; communities holding some of the richest while also the poorest inhabitants; over-soaked 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 leanings have migrated in and out of the Delta, fueled by an aesthetic dynamism that is palpable, alluring, and profoundly felt. Distinct from all the travelers, visitors, and recent Delta arrivals, Kathleen Robbins draws her artistic energy from a deeply placed history within the Delta, from knowing familial stories and domestic vegetation and from her 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 beset by ordeal 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 regularly reminded of Laura, Eudora Welty's character from *Delta Wedding*. "Thoughts went out of her head and the landscape filled it," Welty writes as Laura rides the train from Jackson down into the Delta. "In the Delta, most of the world seemed sky." Robbins's photographs *Dad's Apple Tree* and *Mom New Year's Eve*, 2007 give us that great sense of the world seeming mostly sky, of the diminutive nature of human presence and imprint. 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 final equalizer here in these Delta photographs, where everyone and everything gets similarly swallowed by the landscape, all treated one and the same.

There's a reverence to Robbins's point of view—no nostalgia or obligatory embrace—in the way she looks directly at a deeply global place through the intimate familiarity of her relationship to people and place. Her photographs inhabit the space they come from—or as she says, "re-inhabit"—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 not from a mysterious and unexplained vantage point, but instead from *Dad's Cadillac*.

The dogs in Robbins's photographs seem like family, and her 2011 portrait of a sweetgum tree is *Mom's Sweetgum Tree*, 2011. There's a transforming luminance in her picturing of the familial, finding that photographic sense that Welty saw when she wrote of the Delta, "The land was perfectly flat and level but it shimmered like the wing of a lighted dragonfly. It seemed strummed, as though it were an instrument and something had touched it." That shimmering touch is ever present in the photograph *Me on Belle Chase*, 2008, where we feel the power of "Delta" time and space completely interwoven with Robbins's inclusively endless shadow, an image with incantations of then, now, and later.

When we first meet Little Steele (in *Little Steele, 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 Ivy*, 2009, the kind of wonderful reward that a good story delivers in time. 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 some things clear and suggesting through other things, the unexplainable complexity of these flatlands. It's impossible to say Money, 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 chilled blue day.



Asher at the Big House, 2012, archival pigment print, 30 X 30 inches



Asher on Belle Chase, 2012, archival pigment print, 30 X 30 inches

Leaving and returning, away and at home, the symbolic and the particular are what's at work here, all are grounded powerfully by that place, that Delta, and by Robbins's fluent knowing. These journeys of the leaving and the returning converge here, each so dependent on the other. There may be but two places in photography: home and away from home. But they are hardly ever as separate as they seem. This confluence (a riverine word, of course, evoking blending waters), in Welty's words, "exists as a reality and symbol in one." "She went on to say that she found this to be "the only kind of symbol that for me as a writer has any weight, testifying to pattern, one of the chief patterns, of human experience." Here too is the power of Kathleen Robbins's work, the blending of these confluent themes—with beauty and truth, honesty and devotion—imagery that covers all the ground it stands on.



Me on Belle Chase, 2008, archival pigment print, 30 X 30 inches

Essay by Tom Rankin

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