



Debbie Fleming Caffery: *Best Juke Box*, 2013. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy Octavia Art Gallery.

Caffery's Poignant Moments

BY TERRINGTON CALAS

DEBBIE FLEMING CAFFERY
Southern Work
Octavia Art Gallery
New Orleans, LA

TWO SOMBER, ABSORBING PHOTOGRAPHS, *Junior* and *Sarah*, are exemplars of the contemplative portrait — the soul-searching, soul-revealing portrait. And, for the viewer, it's often a markedly painful kind. But it discloses human truth as few other genres can. The two images are part of Debbie Fleming Caffery's "Southern Work" (on view at Octavia Art Gallery), a strong, if unwieldy, exhibition chronicling her efforts over the past several years. Caffery has long been a master of the contemplative portrait, most notably featuring the working people of rural Louisiana. This display has but a few examples, but they dominate.

You look at the stirringly dark *Junior* and attempt to read it formally. It is, by any standard, a faultless pictorial structure. There is, initially, the canny placement of the figure's head, just

barely off-center — seizing your notice. And then, there is the insistent play of pattern, of striations upon striations: the scored wall in the background, the striped sofa, the verticals on the man's shirt. Seldom do we see a photograph so compositionally cohesive.

But this picture is certainly not about design. That's merely its firm girding. All of Caffery's work invariably touches on humanity, even when her subjects are ostensibly distant from it. In *Junior*, she confronts — and verges on entering — one personality. Her camera searches the face, revealing a complex, cerebral quality. It seems to promise a story. You expect a story. Or, certainly a past, certainly joys and tragedies, unthinkable tragedies. This sort of face usually means precisely that. But Caffery is not so intrusive. Nor is she even vaguely sentimental. Her *Junior* reveals nothing. Or, rather, nothing conclusive. The aesthetic posture here is one of judicious intimation. And, of course, this visage intimates quite a bit. In an almost blackened room, you see a white-haired man — white-haired but with a spotless, lineless face. His frame appears slightly flexed, slightly tightened, as



Debbie Fleming Caffery: *Junior*, 2014. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy Octavia Art Gallery.

if from weakness, perhaps an illness. And yet, there is a curious, unwonted aspect that prevails. He looks patently unassailable; his eyes are barely visible, but somehow they rivet, penetrate. And he is eerily serene. You register the image, finally, as a beguiling paradox.

As I say, such impressions result from sheer intimation. Caffery offers no more. In her portraits, she probes and probes, and then steps back, creating a kind of benign enigma. There is a rare nobility in this. You sense an honest esteem that compels her discretion. And the viewer, in spite of all the visual clues, is left captivated and perplexed.

This is true even in an image as potent as *Sarah*. To be sure, there are varied possibilities here, but only possibilities. The photograph feels, at once, both sinister and fearful. Again, utter darkness. The work is a numbing scheme of somber shapes: only mid-greys and charcoal and black. And Caffery has shrewdly manipulated the space; it obscures the figure, but only to a measured degree — prompting a certain urgency in the way we approach it. This is a maneuver she has wielded again and again with perfec-

tion (a maneuver also mastered by certain of her greatest stylistic forebears, notably Manuel Alvarez-Bravo and Eugène Meatyrd). In *Sarah*, these techniques once again yield a perplexity. Seeing the picture, your immediate grasp is a tone of apprehension, even dread. But there is also an unmistakable — and perhaps concomitant — suggestion of defiance. Or, is it outright contempt? Or, simply a look of inquisitiveness? No, there is nothing simple about this. The woman seems disquieted by something or someone; still, what you perceive is her mystifying response, and ultimately a mystifying whole. It galvanizes, no question; but it mystifies too.

In most of Caffery's portraits, this recurring enigma is what first seizes you. And for a time, you think of that enigma as the very point of her art. The photographs radiate what Gauguin called "the mysterious centers of thought . . . an enigmatic power . . . the undefinable." Of course, it is almost canonical that serious art, especially pictorial art, must embody an element of mystery. It urges wonder; it urges query. And it evinces the strangeness of life itself. Caffery knows this, and everything she does lies behind a luring, cryptic veil. Ultimately, however, her mission is beyond

this. The veil serves as a vehicle for channeling a crucial but difficult theme: uncloaked humanness. Or, perhaps, humanness as a besieged condition. The difficult part, plainly, is doing this without bathos.

There is emphatically no bathos in *Junior*. Rather, you feel something akin to private heroism, a brave façade conquering, or attempting to conquer, an invisible plight. The picture's structure yields an aura of psychic implosion. It's a gripping design. Consider the immured, boxed-in setting, and the pose, the back-lighting — all contributing to a smoldering quality. The temptation is to envisage a life of heartbreaking endurance. What halts that notion is the man's gaze. It evokes the complex mien of a late Rembrandt self-portrait — gentle, detectably sad, but unflinching. Roland Barthes, commenting on Baroque portraiture, broached the viewer-subject dynamic: "the gaze that disturbs, intimidates . . . posits you, implicates you." *Junior* is looking just as fixedly as you are. And his gaze signifies unstallable resilience, puts him in a place beyond pity.

The aura in *Sarah*, as I say, is ambiguous enough to preclude any pinpointed emotions. Still, you cannot bypass the woman's fiercely hypnotic cast. Nor can you deny a certain toughness in her very bearing. Above, I noted the disquiet in her expression. Yes. But she exhibits this with an almost dismissive turn of the head. She looks somehow uncrushed in such a fevered moment. However complicated her private reality may be, she displays, via Caffery's lens, the emblem of an indomitable life.

* * *

IT IS GRATIFYING to speak of resilience and toughness in these works. Caffery does her job well; she persuades us of the power of the human spirit. But she does more than that. In *Junior* and *Sarah* — and in countless other portraits in the past — there is also an inherent rejoinder to the inevitable charge of condescension. Certainly the question of class is unavoidable. (And it is saddening that the word is even necessary today.) Caffery is not denying class. No one who has made her social explorations could even dream of such a thing. In images of this kind, class and all of its contingencies are implicit. And understood. Here, the larger issue is the individual, the singularity of character — the peculiar way each person faces life's gifts and curses. This is a question of the artist engaging distinct minds, distinct hearts. Caffery presents them so specifically and so varied in feeling that the very notion of class becomes an irrelevance. In front of these portraits, any viewer struck mainly by social distinction is looking through blinkered eyes, eyes that prefer not to see a fuller truth.

The notion of condescension suggests — indeed, requires — a patent divide between photographer and subject, something akin to a scientist-specimen relation. An arrangement without feeling. This is decidedly alien to Caffery's enterprise. The psychological richness of these works belies it. And her subjects are clearly involved, not vacant-faced, anonymous models. You sense a one-to-one interplay — a natural accord with palpable warmth. The general tenor echoes Walt Whitman's famous principle — seeking the peer in everyone — as abridged in his cogent line, "Each of us inevitable."

YOU QUICKLY NOTE how American this stance is, but also

how one-dimensional it usually appears in our art — specifically in American portrait photography. Most often, the depiction of "seeking the peer" amounts to a clinical typology of separateness; or worse, a merciless burlesque. What the idea warrants is a deeply subjective ethos. A reach for emotions. Today, few artists will risk it. Probably, few even understand it. Many still cling to faded late-modernist pieties that center around irony and the remains of auto-critical aesthetics. For this reason, the rare psychological camera artists are important and cherishable. Caffery is probably the strongest among them.

Her special salience may have to do with her concentration: less on surface distinction and more on interior life. And clearly, she attains this through personal knowledge. The communication I noted above is crucial. She knows her subjects, knows that their existence is far more than the tangible facts of appearance. Her keynote is the image of a complex human presence — the human presented with thoughts and memories poignantly near the surface. She seems to seek out people with countless incidences limned on their faces, and, moreover, in their very demeanor. The *Junior* composition — every inch of it taken as a whole — is tantamount to a layered personal history, and there are few as moving in contemporary photography.

Notably, the complexities Caffery offers invariably ring true, always seem familiar. You're intrigued by *Sarah*'s fears and contradictions, because you have lived your own. These are pictures of today's American experience, no matter what the private circumstance. That experience is an inclement one. And Caffery's subjects are — like all of us — its survivors.

* * *

ARGUABLY, PORTRAITURE reveals Caffery at her most affecting. But, as "Southern Work" reminds us, her oeuvre is truly varied. Another compelling facet are the near-abstractions. Also dark-on-dark, they are shadowscapes in which seductive beauty is wrested from utter vagueness. Sometimes, it is a question of the sheer rapture you feel before controlled tonal drama, as in *Enterprise Mill*, *Sunrise* — essentially a smoke-cloud tower impinged by two walls of darkness. Sometimes, Caffery transforms a figural piece into pure design. *Hanging Out*, for example, is ostensibly a genre scene, romanticized and made spectral by hazed figures. But it's also a flawless pictorial structure, a model of orthodox "significant form." In it, two bold triangles are united, then animated by a pattern of myriad greys and blacks. *Gerald's Truck* is classic Caffery, dusky tones and smoke and rhythmic diagonals, all blanketed with the ominous mood that abides in everything she does.

In some instances, she loads an image with a sort of magical insinuation. *Best Jukebox* initially feels like a Meatyard salute, complete with the requisite mystery child — here, in silhouette and hastening through a doorway. But there is nothing of Meatyard's quasi-surrealist contrivance. This is ostensibly another quotidian moment, perfectly normal. You see a vintage jukebox glowing in a shadowy room, and little else. Everything, even the child — possibly frightened — is effectively obscured by the low tonal key. Still, a certain density of meaning is felt. So is an ambient allusive quality. Caffery's deep sonorities haunt the scene; they read like some imprecise narrative, or a faint memory. You imagine skittering childhood. You imagine how, in childhood, cer-



Debbie Fleming Caffery: *Sarah*, 2008. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy Octavia Art Gallery.

tain rooms might hold inexplicable wonder, or unease. The photograph prompts endless stories. In actuality, this room is probably mundane and forgettable. In Caffery's photograph, it certainly is not.

* * *

LIKE ALL OF Caffery's work, *Best Jukebox* hangs in an umbral, ageless sphere. And this fact signals her position in today's art. Her images seem to exist outside of history and, as an artist, so does she. She creates an aesthetic far removed from our culture of data congestion and image surfeit — this era where everything is

placed before us simultaneously, blatantly. She counters the effect, provides its antidote. Caffery's work is *for* our time, not *about* it. These moody photographs urge you toward contemplation — like her own, the contemplation of human concerns. The method centers on isolated moments. Rich and poignant isolated moments. You discover that a single visual incident, when fervently considered, can recapture the depth of feeling lost to our culture. And further, it can underscore the poetics in what it means to be human. □