

“DOCUMENTING” EAST TEXAS: SPIRIT OF PLACE  
IN THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF KEITH CARTER

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This thesis examines similarities in photographs made by the contemporary photographer Keith Carter and photographers active with the Farm Security Administration during the 1930s. Stylistically and in function, works by Carter and these photographers comment on social and cultural values of a region. This thesis demonstrates that many of Carter's black and white photographs continue, contribute to, and expand traditions in American documentary photography established in the 1930s. These traditions include the representation of a specific geographic place that evokes the spirit of a time and place, and the ability to communicate to a viewer certain social conditions and values related to such a place.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Photographic work made by Texas photographer Keith Carter resembles American documentary photographs from the 1930s. Stylistically and functionally, Carter's work and work by photographers active in the 1930s comments on the social and cultural values of a region. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Carter focused on a particular geographic region of the state - East Texas. This study will explore how in black and white photographs he produced during these years, Carter "documented" this area of Texas and thus continued, contributed to, and expanded traditions in American documentary photography established in the 1930s. The traditions with which this study is most concerned include the visual representation of a specific geographic region evocative of a spirit of a time and place, and the ability to communicate social conditions and values to the viewer.

Keith Carter was born in 1948 in Madison, Wisconsin. Shortly thereafter, his family moved to Beaumont, in Southeast Texas, where Carter has lived since. In 1977, he opened a photographic studio there. In the early 1990s he received a Mid-America Arts Alliance/National Endowment for the Arts Regional Fellowship in Photography and the Lange - Taylor Prize from the Center for

Documentary Studies at Duke University. He has served as a Visual Arts and Architecture Advisor to the Texas Commission on the Arts and he presently holds the Photographic Arts Chair at Lamar University, Beaumont. Currently, Carter exhibits his work in several galleries across the United States, Europe and Argentina. His photographs can be found in the permanent collections of the Art Museum of Southeast Texas, Beaumont; the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth; and the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago.<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1980s, Carter was inspired by a public lecture given by writer, producer, and director Horton Foote. Foote encouraged the audience not only to look to outside sources (New York, Europe) for creative inspiration, but also into their own backyard. “Well, when he said that, I felt like St. Paul on the road to Damascus. I felt this great weight lifted off my shoulders,” said Carter.<sup>2</sup> From that point on, Carter began to accept his own geographic location – East Texas – as “entirely sufficient for his purposes.”<sup>3</sup> Probing for what he once termed “imagination in the boondocks,” Carter began his first regional project by

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<sup>1</sup> “Profile: University Professor Keith Carter,” *The President’s Report: Lamar University* (Spring 1998): 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> Keith Carter, *Keith Carter Photographs: Twenty-Five Years*, with an introduction by A.D. Coleman (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 76.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

surveying small Texas towns.<sup>4</sup> From Uncertain to Blue, 1988, was his first publication of photographs in a book format. The photographs in it serve as evidence of his search for the spirit of place and:

...a respect for the relentless aspects of the Texas terrain, a delight in its occasional fecundities and darkneses, an uncondescending admiration for those who inhabit it and (as much as humans can) make it their own.<sup>5</sup>

The photograph Fireflies, 1992, demonstrates Carter's search for the spirit of East Texas (Fig. 1). The photograph depicts two young boys peering into a glass jar containing fireflies. Positioned at the edge of a murky pond, their dark silhouettes contrast against the bright reflections on the water behind them. Within this photograph, Carter chooses to place several elements place specific to East Texas. Both the swamp in which they play and the magnolia branch hanging over their heads indicate that the locale is Southern, perhaps Texan. Cypress "knees" in the photograph are common in rural East Texas. Catching fireflies at dusk is an activity which all can enjoy most times of the year in this region. Carter shows the boys out of focus, making it difficult for the viewer to identify them. At the same time, he represents other features of the setting in sharp focus, including foliage and the water's edge in the foreground. These kinds of artistic decisions on Carter's part can cause the viewer to question

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



whether the scene might be from a dream or a mystical tale. The uncommon natural setting, blurred focus, and inability to anchor our recognition of the subjects result in more questions than answers. Under typical viewing conditions, the viewer sees his world in sharp focus. This blurred vision, therefore, does not represent our normal visual experience. By not being able to identify these boys, the viewer is given the impression that they could be any boys; therefore, Carter is making a generalization within a representation of a specific place. Such effects could also prompt the viewer to reminisce nostalgically about similar childhood activities or, more specifically, to consider activities in this particular dream-like swamp region. In February 1999, Fireflies was reproduced on the back cover of Reader's Digest, a publication that targets a wide range readers throughout the United States.<sup>6</sup> The inclusion in such a magazine demonstrates that Carter's photographs allow any viewer, no matter what his or her geographic location, to observe aspects unique to this part of East Texas, as well as to project onto this scene specific to a geographic place their own personal experiences.

Like Carter, documentary photographers of the 1930s such as Walker Evans and Russell Lee attempted to represent the spirit of a time and place that appealed to the emotions and values of a wide range of viewers in the United

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<sup>6</sup> *Reader's Digest*, 154, no. 922, (February 1999): back cover.

States. Their success relied upon it. Evans and Lee worked at a time when President Franklin D. Roosevelt had established government aid programs to help meet the crisis on farms (on which a quarter of the U.S. population lived in 1935.) As part of these efforts, the government established a photographic agency, the Resettlement Administration, which could reveal the problem and promote the effectiveness of the New Deal programs. That photographic agency was later renamed the Farm Security Administration (FSA), and it left behind a collection of pictures that has since become “a classic archive of documentary photography.”<sup>7</sup> According to James Curtis, FSA pictures aroused more than concerned curiosity about physical and social circumstances. They prompted many to reflect on their own lives.<sup>8</sup> In 1938 art critic Elizabeth McCausland praised “How American People Live,” an exhibition of FSA photographs:

The hard, bitter reality of these photographs is the tonic the soul needs....In them we see the faces of the American people (and) (if we are completely honest and fearlessly intellectually) the faces of ourselves.<sup>9</sup>

In recent years scholars have explored the ways in which this “bitter reality” characteristic of documentary photographs of the 1930s was, in fact, the result of

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<sup>7</sup> *Documentary Photography* (New York: Time Life Books, 1972), 66.

<sup>8</sup> James Curtis. *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 23-26.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

deliberate stylization in order to affect social change. In other words, while photographs may seem to be “true” because they are mechanical reproductions of reality and seem to document any subject matter faithfully, we can argue that photographs derive their power from the ways that photographers construct, rather than mirror, reality. Of Walker Evans one author wrote, “He had to discover the universal symbols beneath the welter of their everyday existence. Unconsciously, he made life into art.”<sup>10</sup> We can argue that photographs derive their power from ways that photographers construct instead of simply mirror representations of life.

For example, in (298) Laura Minnie Lee Tenge, Hale County, Alabama, Summer 1936, Evans photographed a young girl named Laura sitting in her chair on a porch and peering into the distance, oblivious to the viewer (Fig. 2). Laura’s disheveled gown, bare feet, and the overturned can may suggest hard times. The porch appears to need sweeping, yet Laura sits quietly by herself. Such a photograph was intended to appeal to the sympathies of the general public on the issues of poverty, neglect, and the reality of everyday circumstances facing the nation’s youth. In fact, this was one of several photographs that Evans produced of this young girl and her mother on their porch. Another example, (303) Laura Minnie Lee Tenge, Hale County, Alabama, Summer 1936, reveals

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

that the girl is not alone (Fig. 3). In fact, in this image Evans represents Laura sitting in her own chair beside her mother. A melon rests at their feet. Although the porch still appears to need sweeping, Laura looks straight at the viewer and appears resilient. A comparison of the two photographs demonstrates that Evans' choice of subject matter and arrangement of his subject, that is about what to represent and how to represent what he chooses, constructs our view and manages our interpretation, including the associations Evans might want his photograph to help us make with a young girl in rural Alabama in the 1930s.

From 1936 to 1939 many FSA photographers including Walker Evans and Russell Lee traveled the United States recording social conditions and, important to this study, taking pictures of small-town life whenever possible. FSA administrators debated whether or not small towns preserved lost values such as a sense of community, strong religious faith, and the maintenance of regional folklore. Although staff for the FSA photographic file said they were “doing much to keep photography an honest woman,” they were in fact constructing an idealized version of American life through the creative decision-making process.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the work of Thomas Hart Benton and other regionalist painters appealed to audiences hungry for “traditional” American

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

themes such as responsibility and respect they promoted as being inherent in hard work.<sup>12</sup>

Exhibitions and books provided vehicles through which FSA photographers shared their images with the public. For instance, a book with a body of work emphasizing the theme of regionalism, such as America, 1939, provided a way for Walker Evans to share his work with a larger audience. During these years, America's small towns were the subject of several publications including Land of the Free, 1938, American Photographs, 1938, and Home Town: The Face of America, 1940. In fact, Russell Lee spent several weeks photographing the Texas town of San Augustine, just north of Beaumont, for Home Town: The Face of America.<sup>13</sup>

The publication and dissemination of Carter's work followed a path similar to that of 1930s FSA photographers. For example, in addition to exhibiting his work in galleries and museums, Carter has published regionalist-oriented photographs in book format. By partnering with organizations interested in Texas regionalism, such as Texas Monthly Press, Carter has been able to publish his work in a series of books with an emphasis on place, specifically East Texas. These books

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew Baigell, *Thomas Hart Benton* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1974), 7.

<sup>13</sup> F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 100-102.

include From Uncertain to Blue, 1988, Blue Man , 1990, and Mojo, 1992. His other books include Heaven of Animals, 1995, Bones, 1996, and published in 1997, Keith Carter: 25 Years of Photography.<sup>14</sup> In recent years, Carter traveled outside the United States in order to pursue his interest in the significance of place in locations other than East Texas. For example, the west coast of Ireland captured his attention in 1998 and he traveled there to photograph the land and its people.<sup>15</sup>

The photograph Garlic, 1991, further demonstrates Carter's relation to and expansion of a tradition of documentary photography established in the 1930s (Fig. 4). Carter chooses to depict subject matter that captures spiritual practices unique to East Texas. Like Fireflies, Garlic is a black and white photograph. Carter's choice of uncommon subject matter, which is not easily identifiable, and his decision to print in black and white forces the viewer to question whether these photographs were taken in the past or the present. As color photography is the more common method of presenting visual information today, the use of black and white causes the viewer to question when the photograph was taken,

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<sup>14</sup> Shari Fey, "Poetry of the Ordinary," *Beaumont Enterprise*, 14 November 1997, sec. D, p. 1; Keith Carter, *Keith Carter Photographs: Twenty-Five Years*, with an introduction by A.D. Coleman (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1997), 75.

<sup>15</sup> Shermakaye Bass, "Keith Carter," *Dallas Morning News*, 14 September 1997, sec. E, p. 3.

or to presume that it was taken in the past. In Garlic, an African-American woman stands holding two long stalks of garlic and waving them in the air. According to folklore expert Newbell Niles Puckett, the small ball-shaped blossoms at the top of garlic plants are considered lucky in East Texas and Southwest Louisiana African-American myths.<sup>16</sup> Thus, this woman is calling for good fortune, perhaps in her crops, the presence of which are suggested by the line of trees at the edge of a field. Like Evans' photographs of Laura Tenge, Garlic records a person involved in an activity viewers may surmise conveys something about the person and place represented. Unlike Evans, however, Carter did not reveal the identity of his subject. Rather than recording a specific individual, Carter emphasized the place and activity itself without specifying who is this woman. Evans specifies the identity of his subject by including her face and referencing her name in the title of the image. Carter, on the other hand, emphasizes the place and spiritual activity in Garlic, without visually identifying the woman being photographed. He also does not state her name in the title as Evans did. Evans' Laura comes to represent a larger theme of the need for governmental aid. The woman in Carter's photograph instead serves as a vehicle to depict the spiritual activity being conducted and referred to in the title.

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<sup>16</sup> Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 314.

As in Fireflies, this combination of specificity of place and ambiguity of message about place allows for a more open-ended or narrative interpretation. Just as Evans consciously arranged his image to a desired effect, so, too, did Carter. Although Garlic has the appearance of a “feel of habit to it, not a one-time chance or freak occurrence, but the expression of a way of being,” Carter intentionally arranged his subject and the viewer’s vantage point for a desired effect.<sup>17</sup> By positioning the viewer behind the woman, Carter sets up an opportunity for him or her to become almost a participant in this spiritual activity. Carter often prevents the viewer from making a specific identification of the person or persons he depicts in order to create such an effect. He does this in order for the viewer to become more involved as a participant, as though he or she stands only a few steps behind. This technique also invites Carter’s viewers to relate the activity being depicted to their own life experiences. Carter takes the documentary approach a step further by allowing for more questions than answers, thereby creating an environment in which viewers have a personal interaction with statements on the human condition.

Through his artistic efforts Carter has “documented” East Texas in a fashion similar to that of photographers working for the FSA in the 1930s. As demonstrated by Fireflies and Garlic, Carter represents features specific to a

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<sup>17</sup> Rosellen Brown, forward to *Mojo*, by Keith Carter (Houston: Rice University Press, 1992), 12.



place. Through stylistic and technical choices he constructs an idea of the character of this place. As photographers in the late 1930s captured the look and ways of small-town life, Carter, too, uses this subject matter to evoke and comment on the human condition. Carter's comment on the human condition applies to experiences, beliefs, and activities in this specific place that represent experiences or interests that all humans share. Evan's work, as outlined by the FSA, also applied to experiences and activities, but of individuals in need of public empathy and government action, according to the FSA. In addition, Carter's work constructs values for the region of East Texas by evoking old traditions, religion, and folklore, as well as a respect for hard work, a commitment to the spiritual, and an appreciation for and desire to remember the past. Thus, he also contributes to a preservation of special traits and practices. As this study demonstrates, by focusing on a specific geographic region, evoking the spirit of that place and then using the spirit to make larger comments on human conditions and values, Carter continues, contributes to, and expands upon traditions in American documentary photography established in the 1930s.

### Statement of the Problem

This thesis analyzes connections between Carter's work in East Texas and that of 1930s documentary photographers active in the southern United

States, exploring the nature of American documentary photography as it concerns the visual representation of the spirit of a place.

### Methodology

In order to investigate this topic, I employed a variety of research methods. In order to gain a clear understanding of Carter's photographs and how he presents them to the public, I viewed exhibitions of his work at East Texas State University in 1995, the Jones Gallery, Houston in 1996, and the Art Museum of Southeast Texas in 1996 and 2000. I heard Carter speak publicly on two occasions - as one of five featured artists at the Texas Art Education Association convention in 1995 and as a panel speaker at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas in 1996. Since 1996, I have studied Carter's photographs in the permanent collections of the Museums in which I have held employment: the Art Museum of Southeast Texas, the San Antonio Museum of Art, and the Amarillo Museum of Art. Periodically I received updates about his most recent work because I placed my name on mailing lists of art galleries that represent him. Over the years I have also collected or borrowed each of Carter's six books in which he has published his work. During the course of this study I have met Carter two times. In 1996 I visited briefly with Carter about his work while touring his home and studio. In February 2000, I conducted an interview for this study with Carter at his home in Beaumont.

In order to better understand the works of FSA photographers, I examined FSA files at the National Library of Congress in Washington D.C. in August 1999. I studied FSA photographs in the permanent collection of the Amarillo Museum of Art, which number approximately five hundred. This collection includes many works by Walker Evans and Russell Lee, photographers whose work constitutes examples central to this study. In addition, I have studied photographs produced by other FSA artists in published books on the subject.

For this study, I applied a formal and stylistic analysis to a limited number of both Carter's photographs and documentary photographs of the 1930s. The purpose of this activity was to determine visual similarities between the photographs and use these to guide me in developing a discussion of how and why the photographers produced what they did. In addition, the study explores traditions of American photographic practices of the twentieth century, especially in Texas during the 1930s. Further, the study reviews contemporary critical writing concerned with links between representation (as associated with documentary photography), place, and values concerning spirit of place. As a part of the study, I analyze the social/cultural history of Southeast Texas. The study involves an examination of both primary and secondary literature on documentary photography of the 1930s in order to shed light on Carter's photographs. Also, I situate Carter's work within current art historical literature emphasizing representations of place and region in the visual arts.

In order to examine these issues, this study addresses the following questions:

- In his photographic activity, how does Keith Carter contribute to traditions in practice, history, and criticism concerning the relationship of documentary photography and place?
- How does Carter “construct” East Texas through his photographic practices? Does he utilize particular places or points of view, techniques, subject matter, or methods of presentation?
- Why does Carter do this? How might we begin to understand why Carter does what he does, or why he produces what he does? For example, what develops or results from circulating Carter’s photographs of East Texas in exhibitions and publications?
- Why might Carter wish to use photography to produce an image that seems to reflect East Texas and also infuses this region with a sense of spirit? Is this part of a nationwide way of thinking about East Texas? Does it develop at a time when people are romanticizing the past history of this region? Does it develop at a time when land in East Texas is being transformed and is in danger of losing its unique character?

The following questions concerning documentary practices were also explored in regard to recent scholarship on the subject:

- In the literature of the history of American art and photography of the twentieth century, what have photographers and scholars meant by “documentary photography”?
- What has been the role of spirit of a place in photographic traditions we describe as “documentary”?
- How might we understand photography that constructs or creates place?
- How are historians and critics of art and photography exploring links between place, and historical and social values?

#### Review of the Literature

Although Keith Carter’s work continues to grow in popularity nationally, little substantive work has been published. Research in archival files at the Amon Carter Museum and the Art Museum of Southeast Texas as well as in various databases indicates that most of the literature on Keith Carter and/or his work exists in the form of introductions and prefaces to his publications. Written by art critics, art curators, or friends, these essays and brief statements summarize Carter’s work for a particular book, but do not place his work within an art historical context.

Since the mid-1990s, a number of newspaper and magazine articles have been published about Carter. Most of these accompany reproductions of a limited number of photographs by Carter. Focusing on his interest in the region

of East Texas, the articles introduce the reader to Carter and his work. Written by art critics or cultural activity reporters, they provide valuable background information on Carter, his subject matter, and his influences, but do not situate his work in relation to a discussion of place and spirit as an important, recurring theme in Carter's work. Pertinent literature to this study will be discussed in greater detail in succeeding chapters.

The literature on Carter has helped to introduce his work to a wider audience, but it has been cursory in nature. Whether specific to a certain publication, or a general overview on Carter and his work, none of it has examined connections to 1930s photographs. In doing so, this study contributes a new approach to the interpretation of Carter's work that situates it in traditions of the history of photography and recent criticism and scholarship concerning the documentary photograph as a construction having significance due to choices the photographer makes in subject matter and style, and how these choices constitute the visual representation of a place and time evocative of a specific geographic region of the United States.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE LIFE AND WORK OF KEITH CARTER

A variety of factors led to Carter's development as a photographer interested in the spirit of a place. Family members, writers, and other photographers have made a significant impact on his choice of subject matter and style. Examining Carter's background, the development of his work, and the growth of an audience for his work aids in an understanding of the increasing recognition of his work and its significance in relation to FSA photography produced in the 1930s.

A long-time friend of Carter said that he "just grew up with photography. It was part of who they were."<sup>18</sup> Carter was born Keith Dickinson Carter III in 1948 in Madison, Wisconsin. Shortly thereafter he and his family moved to Beaumont, Texas, located ninety miles east of Houston and thirty miles west of the Louisiana border. After his father left, Carter's mother, Jane Goodrich, supported the family with her portrait photography business. She developed a well-respected studio in Beaumont specializing in children's photography. Carter learned not only the mechanics of taking photographs from his mother, but also

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<sup>18</sup> Shermakaye Bass, "Keith Carter," *Dallas Morning News*, 14 September 1997, sec. E, p. 3.

how to work with people. He would assist her with setting up shoots and he helped the sitters relax so that his mother could make a successful picture. “I come from a working class family and I’m very proud of that...My father deserted our family and our mother held us together. She was a working woman. That was not a badge of honor in this town in the 1950s.”<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Carter spent countless hours in the studio to support her family.

In 1977, after earning a bachelor’s degree in business management from Lamar University, Carter, too, opened a photographic portrait studio in Beaumont. Using his mother’s photographic equipment, he worked hard at his job. The people skills he fostered while assisting his mother were a beneficial trait, as coaxing the sitter was a much easier task when he could make them feel at ease. Although Carter studied at Duke University and the Winona School of Professional Photography in Indiana during these years, he says that his real education in the medium came from looking at photographs of others in books. His occasional non-portrait work followed in others’ footsteps as he made pictures in their styles. Carter explains, “...I was Cartier-Bresson. I was Walker Evans...”<sup>20</sup> This absorption and awareness of the styles of different photographers that he admired would prove to be an important factor in his later development.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



As a turning point in his development as an artist interested in spirit of a place, Carter points to a film festival in Galveston, TX in the early 1980s. In a public lecture, writer, producer, and director Horton Foote encouraged the audience to look beyond outside sources (New York, Europe) for creative inspiration to their own backyards. About the aspects of Foote's presentation Carter emphasizes as pivotal to him, Carter recalls:

He [Foote] said, 'When I was a boy growing up in Wharton [Texas], I wanted to make art, and I was told that you had to know a couple of things: You had to know the history of your medium...and you had to be a product of your times.' And then he said, 'But for me, that wasn't enough. I have to belong to a place.' And I just sat up, and I thought, why do I have to run all over the place and take photos of exotic things when I live in the most exotic place in the world? I left that place [the film festival] on fire. That's when I found my voice.<sup>21</sup>

"I felt this great weight lifted off my shoulders," said Carter.<sup>22</sup> From that point on, he began to accept his own geographic location – East Texas – as "entirely sufficient for his purposes."<sup>23</sup>

In his first photographic project Carter examined small East Texas towns. He intended for the project to be an enjoyable road trip with his wife, Pat, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of their 1975 wedding. "What about a trip all

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<sup>21</sup> Shermakaye Bass, "Keith Carter," *Dallas Morning News*, 14 September 1997, sec. E, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

around Texas, living the highways...and messing around the back roads and taking pictures?”, Pat recalls him suggesting.<sup>24</sup> Together they traveled many miles by breaking the project up into several trips from late summer 1985 through 1986. They stopped in towns with interesting names where they sought subject matter that posed a curious juxtaposition with the name of the town. For example, in a town named Industry, Carter avoided photographing buildings and other architectural or technological sites that might help to illustrate this town’s name. Most likely, there was no such material to be found. Instead, in his photograph Industry he chose to depict a group of beehives in an open field (Fig. 5). Like a miniature town, the beehives represent industry of a different kind – the simple forms of industry taking place in concert with natural elements specific to a place. This pairing of the town’s name with an image of the town held great interest to Carter, as it helped both him and the viewer to “think more.”<sup>25</sup> He enjoyed the project and said that most importantly, “It was manageable. It was something that I could do”, said Carter.<sup>26</sup> Never quite sure if the photographs

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<sup>24</sup> Horton Foote, forward to *From Uncertain to Blue: Photographs by Keith Carter*, by Keith Carter (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1988), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

would be exhibited or published, Carter kept them assembled as a group focused on a place, in the hope of presenting them in some fashion in the future.

At that time, Carter was involved in commercial work for publications such as *Texas Monthly*, *GQ*, and *The New York Times*. He mentioned his East Texas project to the art director for *Texas Monthly*, who then asked to see his work. Carter recalled, “He [the art director] just kept shaking his head. Shaking his head. He said, ‘Nobody is doing anything like this. Nobody.’”<sup>27</sup> As Carter explained, indeed nobody in magazines was representing place, of East Texas specifically, as he was beginning to do. Photographs in magazines were meant primarily to illustrate a story. In contrast, Carter was producing photographs evocative of stories in their own right – “prose” as Carter describes them.<sup>28</sup>

A plan for publication followed, and in 1988, *From Uncertain to Blue* became Carter’s first collection of photographs compiled in book format. Carter had not taken the photographs with the intention of compiling them into a book. He explained:

I was just doing things that I wanted to do....You start these projects, you know it’s going to take a couple of years, and you don’t know if it’s going to pay off but you just do it. I put them in a box....It just took on a life of its own is what happened. I wasn’t smart enough to figure it out. That wasn’t what I was intending, that’s just what happened. But once I figured out what was

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

happening there, well, that gave me enough direction, that this is important, worth doing.<sup>29</sup>

While working on From Uncertain to Blue, Carter accepted a teaching position at Lamar University in Beaumont. As an adjunct professor of photography, Carter had much to offer his students, in the way of technical and artistic skills for making photographs. At the same time, Carter was getting his start in the art world, and from this position, he could serve as an advisor on the trials and tribulations students might encounter as they launched their careers as professional artists. He enjoyed his role as educator so much that he continued teaching classes. Currently, Carter holds the Walles Chair in Performing and Visual Arts at Lamar University and was the Distinguished Faculty Lecturer for Lamar in 1999.<sup>30</sup>

Since the publication of From Uncertain to Blue, Carter has produced five additional books of photographs. In his next three projects, Carter maintained a focus on East Texas. The projects warrant brief descriptions as sources important to this study.

While in his first book Carter published photographs of small East Texas towns with interesting names, in his second book he addressed broader themes

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<sup>29</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

<sup>30</sup> "Carter's Enduring Grace," *Cardinal Cadence* 27, no. 2, (Spring 1999): 7.

for which place could serve a vehicle or foundation for exploring. Such themes included an appreciation for life, a respect for death, the power of spiritual convictions, and other common threads of the human experience – all anchored in an East Texas setting. Published in 1990, The Blue Man demonstrated a well-developed theme from conception to publication. The seventy-two images in it feature subjects involved in narratives, as they “live out the greatest dramas on small stages.”<sup>31</sup> Even the title of the book comes from a tale Carter first heard from his mother-in-law. Carter’s wife and her mother are from the tiny East Texas town of Trinity. While reminiscing about old stories from the town and surrounding area, she made reference to the “blue man.” Surprised and confused, Carter asked, “What do you mean? Was he blue like in depressed or melancholy?”<sup>32</sup> When they explained that the man was actually blue as in the color blue, Carter recalls being stunned by not only this “fact,” but also by his wife’s and her mother’s “matter-of-factness about the whole thing. It was as though I had learned a whole new lesson and started looking at where I lived as an exotic land, almost as an allegory.”<sup>33</sup> Carter’s lesson involved a shift in the

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<sup>31</sup> “Professor’s book features photos taken in Europe,” *The Beaumont Journal* 4, no. 50, (30 March 30 – 5 April 2000): 14.

<sup>32</sup> Keith Carter, *The Blue Man* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1990), 123.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

way he thought about his photographic work. He began to investigate the place with which he was most familiar, but had not yet considered as worthy subject matter for his photographs concerning broad-based themes. This focus on East Texas makes The Blue Man an important body of work in Carter's development towards an examination of place and its importance in the realm of human experience.

In Melanie Wiggins' book, They Made Their Own Law (1990), Carter's photographs accompanied stories of the Bolivar Peninsula along the Texas Gulf Coast. In the foreword, Wiggins describes the peninsula: "To this day, it remains a definable entity with its own past, its own flavor, its own particular breed of inhabitant."<sup>34</sup> It is no wonder then, that Wiggins asked Carter to participate in the project by photographing the unique inhabitants of the peninsula who shared their stories for her book. The project held an affinity to Carter's own interests as an examination of a place and characteristics unique to it.

Mojo (1992) maintained a focus on a region - the South - but it was not as place-specific as Carter's other projects. Broader themes to which any viewer could relate became even more prominent, including the search for the spiritual, death, and the passage of time, themes Carter treated as "backyard

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<sup>34</sup> Melanie Wiggins, *They Made Their Own Law: Stories of Bolivar Peninsula* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1990), xi.

phenomena” with the sense of the everyday, or habit, to them.<sup>35</sup> Carter’s attention to these larger themes of human experience allows the viewer of photographs in Mojo to make even greater personal connections. For example, in Garlic, the viewer witnesses an unusual spiritual activity as the woman in the picture calls for good luck. Though not an event that a person outside this region would recognize easily or regularly experience, the activity introduces a theme of hope and spiritual belief to which many viewers may relate. The word “Mojo,” an African term meaning spiritual spark or soul, fascinated Carter and in the photographs in his books he explores belief systems and forces seemingly beyond humans’ grasp.<sup>36</sup>

After the publication of Mojo, Carter pushed his subject matter beyond the place-specific. Heaven of Animals (1995) and Bones (1996) indicate Carter’s interest in and respect for animals. While Heaven of Animals includes images of many different animals, dogs are Carter’s focus in Bones. In both books, however, Carter’s subjects exude almost human qualities while demonstrating ties between human beings and their animal neighbors. This interest in human commonalities marks a consistent theme in Carter’s work and serves as the basis of his most recent publication, Keith Carter Photographs: 25 Years.

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<sup>35</sup> Rosellen Brown, forward to *Mojo*, by Keith Carter (Houston: Rice University Press, 1992), 7.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

Intended to be a mid-career survey, this book compiles images from all of his previous publications in order to study his development.<sup>37</sup>

Of interest to this study is how Carter's audience has responded both inside and outside the region of East Texas. Viewers of Carter's photographs who live in the region of East Texas may perceive his photographs as being too familiar. The place depicted is their own and, therefore, they may perceive his earlier work as snapshots of their own backyards. A 1988 event in Beaumont featured Carter and Violette Newton, then the poet laureate of Texas. "Not a single soul came," said Carter, laughing. "But it turned out not to be a bad thing. We spent a pretty pleasant hour. She read me some poems and I showed her some photographs."<sup>38</sup>

Carter's audience beyond the region of East Texas does not have familiarity with this place. His depiction of unique and different qualities of the area thus constitutes fresh material for such audiences. Therefore, their connection to East Texas may occur on the level of larger human commonalities to which many can relate. In the early 1990s, art critics and galleries in larger Texas cities such as Houston and Dallas began to take notice of Carter's

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<sup>37</sup> "Keith Carter Book, Show on Exhibit in San Marcos," *Scene and Sound: College of Fine Arts and Communication* (January 1998): 7.

<sup>38</sup> Evan Katz, "Putting Pictures in Words," *Beaumont Enterprise*, 16 October 1998, sec. D, p. 1.<sup>38</sup>



photographs through newspaper articles and gallery exhibitions. Publishing his work in book format also allowed Carter to build a nationwide audience. However, local notice of Carter's work has increased in the past three years. Recognizing "such a well known photographer living right in our own back yard", local newspapers have responded to his growing recognition in the art world rather than the value of the photographs as documents of the region of East Texas itself.<sup>39</sup> As his recognition grows, Carter becomes acutely aware of how both he and his photographs are perceived. As a result, he has made deliberate decisions about how he describes himself and his work.<sup>40</sup>

Carter is a self-proclaimed outsider in the art world. Terms like "underground," "cult," "folk hero," and "counter-culture Southerner" have been used to describe him and his work. Part of this "outsider" mentality is due to the fact that he chooses not to live in New York or Los Angeles; Carter still lives in Beaumont, not exactly the center of the art world. His stone cottage home is located in "Old Town," a part of Beaumont known for its charming older homes, and is surrounded by ivy and live oak trees that serve as a canopy over the house and studio. Carter seems to enjoy the contrast between small town and big city. He seems to delight in the fact that people in New York can be surprised

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

that an artist in an unknown small town can hold his own in business matters, instead of being pushed around.<sup>41</sup>

Although he has been building a strong reputation in the art world for several years now, Carter admits, “I’m not the Tom Cruise of the photographic world. I’d be more like a character actor, like Robert Duvall.”<sup>42</sup> This he attributes to his chosen subject matter, which is not “beautiful people or beautiful bodies...It’s not rock and roll.”<sup>43</sup> Carter defines his subject matter as a glimpse into the “eloquencies and mysteries of being human. That may be the only real value they [his photographs] have.”<sup>44</sup> His humble nature is combined with a self-admitted arrogance in that he says his art is driven by his interests alone. “The day that I start thinking about what is going to sell...is the day that I’m probably going to get real worried.”<sup>45</sup>

The demand for his work continues to grow in the museum field. Carter has exhibited his work in France, Belgium, Japan, Switzerland, Mexico, Ecuador,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Shermakaye Bass, “Keith Carter,” *Dallas Morning News*, 14 September 1997, sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

the Czech Republic, and almost every major city in the United States.<sup>46</sup> The following museums' permanent collections contain photographs by Carter: the Art Museum of Southeast Texas, Beaumont; the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth; the Menil Collection, Houston; the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago; the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago; the George Eastman House, Rochester, NY; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Harry Ransom Center at UT, Austin; and the International Center for Photography, NY.<sup>47</sup>

Popular publications and stores have begun to feature his work as well. In the past year, his photographs have appeared on the back of Reader's Digest magazine, in the sets of the trendy Pottery Barn catalog, in the backgrounds of movie sets, and even on the Internet as company image logos. Carter states, "I feel like I'm the luckiest man on the face of this earth to do what I do. The fact that I've had any success at all has been both a pleasure and somewhat of an amazement to me."<sup>48</sup> Things have certainly become busy and complicated in Carter's world which these days is filled with "big business and bizarre

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<sup>46</sup> Shermakaye Bass, "Keith Carter," *Dallas Morning News*, 14 September 1997, sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>47</sup> Shermakaye Bass, "Keith Carter," *Dallas Morning News*, 14 September 1997, sec. E, p. 3; "Profile: University Professor Keith Carter," *The President's Report: Lamar University* (Spring 1998): 10-11.

<sup>48</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

contracts.”<sup>49</sup> Printing deadlines, intellectual property concerns, gallery openings and finding time to make photographs compete for Carter’s time, along with international travel and teaching classes at Lamar University.

As this material demonstrates, Carter’s work has attracted much attention in recent years. The Journal for Contemporary Photography Culture and Criticism (1998) cites Carter as part of a photographic “advance guard as prescient as Picasso, Stravinsky, and Conrad were in their time...”<sup>50</sup> Though Carter’s most recent work has branched beyond East Texas, he continues to address the theme of the spirit of a place. With two additional books scheduled for release in the year 2000, it is apparent that Carter’s quantity of published work and his notoriety within the arts community will continue to grow.

Though his interest in place and subject matter has broadened, the region of East Texas remains a central theme of Carter’s work. An examination of documentary photography, its role in the 1930s, and its critical reinterpretation

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> John Wood, “Transcendent Vision: Four Metaphysical Photographers,” *The Journal of Contemporary Photography Culture and Criticism* 1 (1998): 9.

help place Carter's work and this theme in the broader context of photographic art history.

## CHAPTER 3

### CARTER'S WORK AND DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

#### IN 1930s AMERICA

In order to better understand the work of Keith Carter and how it relates to the work of 1930s documentary photographers, the term 'documentary' itself must be examined. Since its inception, photography has recorded information about the world and as a result, its documentary nature has been a part of its history. Over the past three decades, critics and theorists have reconsidered its nature, as the definition of documentary photography itself has evolved and undergone a transition. An examination of documentary photography, including how it was defined in the 1930s through FSA photographs, is a valuable exercise as a means to understand and position Keith Carter's work of the late 1980s and early 1990s in the history of photography.

*Webster's New World Dictionary*, 1987, defines document as "anything printed, written, etc., relied upon to record or prove something."<sup>51</sup> By this definition, the documentary photographer shows or analyzes "news events, social conditions, etc. in nonfictional but dramatic form."<sup>52</sup> These terms reappear in Beaumont Newhall's History of Photography. Newhall states that any photograph can be a document if it contains "useful information about the

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<sup>51</sup> *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (1987), s.v. "documentary."

specific subject under study.”<sup>53</sup> According to Newhall, the photograph serves as evidence or proof that an object photographed not only exists but carries with it some significance, or else no one would bother to photograph it. The dictionary also addresses this concept in its discussion of the term documentary: “an original and official paper relied upon as basis, proof, or support of anything else; - in its most extended sense, including any writing, book, or other instrument conveying information.”<sup>54</sup> Although these definitions may seem straightforward and clear, contemporary theorists’ examinations of 1930s documentary photography have enriched and complicated definitions of the genre.

Roy Stryker, the project director for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), stated that his team was “articulating the philosophy of the documentary approach” in their work.<sup>55</sup> The FSA project charged photographers with recording governmental programs created to aid farmers forced from their land, and dislocated from their livelihood and community. Stryker and other administrators for the program also stated their concern to preserve the “decency” and “dignity” of rural people.<sup>56</sup> However, the project broadened its focus on rural poverty to

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 235.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Pete Daniel, Merry A. Foresta, Maren Stange, Sally Stein, *Official Images: New Deal Photography* (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 2.

include small towns, cities, and good farms and farm-lands, all demonstrating social and economic interconnections.<sup>57</sup>

In a book publication of FSA photographs, Edward Steichen elaborated on the term “documentary.” He took issue with those writers who “pigeonhole” documentary photography and concluded “that the beginning of photography and the end of photography is documentation, and that’s that.”<sup>58</sup> Steichen observed that photographs that told a story were passed over by these critics because “indignant condemnation ran high as the idea of propaganda came into consideration.”<sup>59</sup>

Although supporters of New Deal programs claimed that the FSA photographs demonstrated both the need for and evidence of government relief in a time of crisis, critics of the programs relegated the FSA images to propaganda.<sup>60</sup> Prejudice against government publicity in the 1930s focused on two points. First, government publicity usually resulted in an added expense to the budget. Second, it was meant to stimulate the economy by creating large-

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<sup>57</sup> F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 120.

<sup>58</sup> Edward Steichen, “The F.S.A. Photographers,” *U.S. Camera Annual* (1938): 43.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Pete Daniel, Merry A. Foresta, Maren Stange, Sally Stein, *Official Images: New Deal Photography* (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), ix.



scale relief programs. So while the FSA photographs may have appeared to be “candid, intimate, yet non-intrusive,” critics stated that such efforts propagandized forceful intervention to “jump start” a stagnant economy.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, New Deal publicists distributed FSA photographs to congressional committees, newspapers, and magazines in order to provide evidence of the widespread problems and the need for aid programs. Roy Stryker countered such negative attacks with “philosophical and historical zeal,” believing that FSA photographs were of value in terms of historic preservation.<sup>62</sup> In other words, the FSA was preserving both a time and place in American history by documenting it as historical fact. In order to support this claim, Stryker promoted FSA photographs as objective documents.<sup>63</sup> These photographs were used to further the cause of New Deal programs and share with both the government and the public the need for the programs and their potential for positive results. On the other hand, the term “propaganda” had negative connotations because it made the FSA work appear to be more about “big government” than a tool for providing

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 10.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

relief to Americans in need. Stryker's stance of historical education gave the FSA's body of photographs legitimate purpose.<sup>64</sup>

In Steichen's view, FSA photographs were significant in that the photographers "found time to produce a series of the most remarkable documents that were ever rendered in pictures."<sup>65</sup> What made them remarkable was their storytelling quality. Steichen took issue with the "art for arts' sake boys" who were upset, in his opinion, that these photographs told stories with such "simple and blunt directness" with the potential result that a viewer may overlook "what stop was used, what lens was used, what film was used, what exposure was made."<sup>66</sup> In other words, Steichen found that techniques like these could be overshadowed by the story being told. According to Steichen, FSA photographs were unique in the history of documentary photography specifically because of the photographers' interest in representing a story of human interest, and also due to the impact of the resulting photographs on an American viewing public.

Indeed, the public had powerful reactions to an exhibition of FSA photographs in New York City in 1938. Visitors to the exhibition were given an opportunity to comment on what they saw by filling out cards asking for their

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<sup>64</sup> Edward Steichen, "The F.S.A. Photographers," *U.S. Camera Annual* (1938): 44.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

responses. One person wrote, “One spot of exhibition where truth is shown.”<sup>67</sup> Another wrote, “Excellent and vivid portrayal. Far better than reams of the written word. Have never witnessed more clear depiction of things as they are.”<sup>68</sup> The FSA photographers “developed and perfected a documentary style that proved to be capable of more than simple reportage.”<sup>69</sup> The photographs both captivated the attention of their viewers and directed it to the underlying stories or narratives that addressed such themes as need, hope, individual and community resilience, and empathy for one’s fellow man.

These comments from 1938 also suggest that the public viewed FSA photographs as factual, truthful documents due to their direct, blunt style. Walker Evans’ photograph Flood Refugees, Forrest City, Arkansas, February 1937 provides an excellent example (Fig. 6). In this photograph, Evans depicted people standing in line for food after their homes were flooded by heavy rains. Evans’ point of view forces the viewer to look only at a few specific items to indicate the subject: coats, hands, and bowls. By assimilating this information through Evans’ careful cropping, the viewer can decipher that this is a food line where people are standing in the cold while holding empty bowls waiting for food, presumably provided by a government aid program.

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<sup>67</sup> Pete Daniel, Merry A. Foresta, Maren Stange, Sally Stein, *Official Images: New Deal Photography* (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 155.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

At first glance, the viewer is confronted with a stark depiction of reality. In other words, Evans' photograph of flood refugees does not reveal evidence of manipulation. In recent years, however, many contemporary critics of photography have revisited this notion of "truth" seemingly inherent in a photograph. As photographs are subject to an artist's many decisions and choices, these critics propose that photographs do not inherently show truth and a pure reality.<sup>70</sup> For instance, upon closer study we may realize that Evans carefully arranged his photograph of flood refugees in order to heighten their experience of a particular situation. Evans took many pictures of this same food line (Fig. 7). He produced Flood Refugees, Forrest City, Arkansas, February 1937 from a very close vantage point, cropping the view to include only the coats, hands, and bowls of those in line. This spare visual material in Evan's composition echoed the spare emptiness and loss in these people's lives. Evans' choice not to represent faces of these people standing in line for a simple meal also heightened the viewer's personal connection, allowing the viewer to feel as if he or she could be part of this line, or part of this narrative.

The very notion of a photograph may imply reliable, credible information - free from the photographer's decision-making capability. Yet, steps taken by photographers necessarily cause photographs to become reports of the photographer. Dorothea Lange, one of the photographers recruited for the FSA project, addressed this subject when she elaborated on her three most important

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considerations when taking a photograph:

First – hands off! Whatever I photograph, I do not molest or tamper with or arrange! Second – a sense of place. Whatever I photograph, I try to picture as a part of its surroundings, as having roots. Third – a sense of time. Whatever I photograph, I try to show as having its position in the past or in the present.<sup>71</sup>

As Lange states her priorities, she declares that most importantly she does not tamper with or arrange her subject. Critics, however, are now exploring the notion that deliberate decisions were indeed made by photographers working for the FSA in the 1930s in order to deliver the desired message. Time of day, angle, positioning of the photographer in relation to his or her subject, and other choices were all important factors photographers considered as they chose a particular subject.<sup>72</sup>

Lange also addresses the attempt to capture a subject's surroundings and its placement in time. Indeed, documentary photography does carry with it a certain charge or inherent responsibility to preserve a moment, time, or place. The entire FSA file itself has been called "a national treasure; a research tool for photographers and virtually all the social disciplines."<sup>73</sup> The eighty thousand prints and two hundred thousand unprinted negatives housed today in the Print

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 244.

<sup>72</sup> James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 25-26.

<sup>73</sup> Hank O'Neal, *A Vision Shared: A Classic Portrait of America and its People 1935-1943* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 9.

and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, offer a unique view of America. Never before had a nation been examined so closely in photographs. The FSA photographic collection has also seen its importance grow well beyond the life of the program. In 1976, the year of the United States bicentennial, more photographs of the Historical Section were reproduced than were ever reproduced during the program's existence.<sup>74</sup> As these facts demonstrate, our tendency to rely on photographs as records preserving the truth of a moment or place may increase with time.

Throughout the development of the FSA file, Stryker became more convinced of the photograph's ability to record time and place. The small town of rural America became a major sub-category of 1930s documentary photography. Indeed, rural America was a major subject of the FSA project, and Stryker sent photographers on assignments to small communities for weeks at a time. Typically he briefed photographers on the sociological and economic background of their assignment areas and in the process he stimulated their imagination and enhanced their curiosity. These briefings and extended stays resulted in a great quantity of photographs added to the FSA file. With the intent to capture, inform, and preserve, this sub-category of FSA photographic efforts allowed for stories to be told in a series of photographs emphasizing one subject or theme. Newhall states that the small town as a photographic theme was "such an integral part of

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

our agricultural fabric that it could not be overlooked.”<sup>75</sup> Indeed, Sherwood Anderson found enough material in the thousands of FSA photographs to make a picture book, Home Town: The Face of America, showing the positive side of typical American small-town life.<sup>76</sup>

As these points demonstrate, documentary photography and its role in the 1930s are worthy of further examination in order to inform our understanding of Carter’s work in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Critics continue to explore the photograph’s effect on public concepts of truth, preservation, and the visualization of small-town values. These concepts are significant to an understanding of documentary photography. As FSA photographers were hired by the FSA to record specific activities within a time, place, and event, they consciously arranged their photographs in order to meet the FSA’s needs. When applied to a geographic location, FSA photographers transmitted values to and about that place. Carter’s work of the late 1980s and early 1990s demonstrates many similarities in both purpose and effect on the viewer. By examining the setting and decisions he made to depict East Texas photographically, we may better understand similar traits between his photographs of this region and FSA photographs of the 1930s concerned with a particular place.

East Texas, the geographic region on which Carter has chosen to focus is referred to often as the “piney woods” due to its great quantity of pine trees. It is

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<sup>75</sup> Newhall, Beaumont, *The History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 244.

an approximately fifteen county area along the Louisiana border between the Trinity and Sabine rivers and is primarily rural and with many forests and lakes. The Big Thicket, a National Forest, has underbrush so dense that in some parts it “forms an almost impenetrable jungle.”<sup>77</sup> In addition to its rich ecological make-up, Carter has noted the region’s great cultural diversity, “You have Anglo-Saxon Protestants; you have blacks, Mexicans, Vietnamese, Cajuns – all of these influences in a primarily rural region.”<sup>78</sup>

This area was the place of choice for Carter’s photographic subjects in the late 1980s and early 1990s. A brief survey of how this place has been depicted in different print and visual media aids in understanding how Carter’s own view constructs meaning in a manner similar to that of FSA work of the 1930s. The region has been depicted in a variety of visual and printed media, but with different results.

In a 1947 publication, Big Country: Texas, author Donald Day divided the state into regions and discussed them in terms of their unique characteristics. He described Texas as “practically untouched by modern ways.”<sup>79</sup> References made to the “backwardness” of the region are evident in a tale told by an economics

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Donald Day, *Big Country: Texas* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1947), 201.

<sup>78</sup> Keith Carter, *The Blue Man* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1990), 124-5.

<sup>79</sup> Donald Day, *Big Country: Texas* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1947), 199.



professor at the University of Texas. Bob Montgomery summarized the people of East Texas: "About all they do there is to sit in the shade in the summer and the sun in the winter."<sup>80</sup> After class a student came up to his desk and with a long drawl protested, "Why, Mr. Montgomery, we don't just sit there all the time. Sometimes we rock."<sup>81</sup> Such an interpretation provides a humorous, though inaccurate, representation of the area. It also demonstrates that the depiction of a geographic area is affected by the viewpoint or experiences of the person or organization that chooses to depict it.

In its search for small-town community values, the FSA included East Texas as an area of particular interest. Photographer Russell Lee focused on San Augustine, located north of Beaumont, for a number of photographs he made in 1939. Lee came to the area to do a story on the effects of hookworm and became interested in the community for its own sake. He found that "many of the patterns of small-town life could still be clearly seen."<sup>82</sup> In describing these patterns, Lee noted the town square as a political center and market, the general stores and old-fashioned shops, and the high-quality nineteenth-century traditions in its architecture. Overall, Lee thought San Augustine was a perfect

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 118.

place to do a “major documentary on small-town life as it related to an agricultural area.”<sup>83</sup> In Courthouse Square, San Augustine, Texas, 1939, the viewer sees a bustling small-town square anchored in the center by a figurative sculpture (Fig. 8). Around it, dozens of people gather – they walk, stand, talk and interact with one another. Businessmen in suits congregate with farmers. Women and children are present, too. This cross section of people gathering at their town square implies a sense of communal spirit. In fact, this gathering was atypical, as was the vantage point. Normally “wide” and “tranquil” according to the WPA Texas guidebook, the square was packed on this particular day because of a community meeting in the courthouse.<sup>84</sup> Lee knew of this large-scale event in advance and positioned himself from above the square in an adjacent building in order to gain a vantage point from which to photograph a large number of people and their interactions with one another. These kinds of deliberate decisions suggest that Lee imbued the area of East Texas with the desired values of the FSA project, such as community cohesiveness and neighborly relations among a wide diversity of people.

The depiction of the region in the medium of motion pictures has been discussed in the East Texas Historical Association Journal. Don Graham bemoans the fact that when films have been set in East Texas, usually one of

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 108.

two things has happened: “Either the film made East Texas into West Texas, or it blurred East Texas into the Old South, and the sense of Texas was lost or ignored.”<sup>85</sup> In one western from 1962, the main character gets off a train on his way through East Texas. Graham explains, “...a sign beside the railroad track says, Beaumont, One Mile.” A tumbleweed blows past. Are there tumbleweeds in the Beaumont area? Only in the movies.”<sup>86</sup> In one of his suggested examples of good films about east Texas, Graham cites a short film by Texan Ken Harrison called ‘Hannah and the Dog Ghost.’ “Based on a tale drawn from folklorist J. Mason Brewer’s Dog Ghosts and Other Texas Negro Folk Tales, ‘Hannah and the Dog Ghost’ is a lyrical, haunting evocation of folklore in film.”<sup>87</sup> According to local African-American folklore, dog ghosts may appear embodying the spirit of a lost loved one.

Novelist, playwright, and screenwriter Horton Foote (who originally inspired Carter to investigate regional subject matter) has spoken about the inaccuracies of depicting a region and the resulting interpretation of the character of that region. In 1984 he spoke about a 1966 Hollywood production that falsified his hometown of Wharton (in East Texas). The film was a production of his novel, “The Chase,” and included Native Americans dressed in full tribal regalia

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<sup>85</sup> Don Graham, “The Displacement of East Texas in Movies About Texas,” *East Texas Historical Journal* XXV, no. 1, (1987): 18.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

“to provide a little local color.” Though there were no Native Americans in Wharton in Foote’s lifetime, the film played on anyway.<sup>88</sup>

These photographic and film representations of the region of East Texas are significant in that they provide an archive of depictions of place in both visual and written format. Based on the vantage point of the artist or writer, each adds to a legacy of associations to the place and its significance. As documents, films and photographs supply information about East Texas just as FSA photographs of the 1930s supplied information about San Augustine and its activities. Carter’s work provides another visual representation of the region, and its connections to FSA work of the 1930s are significant to placing his work in a larger context.

Carter has addressed the depiction of East Texas by others in the past, specifically in their inaccurate generalizations of this region:

When Texas is geographically defined it’s thought of as a part of the Southwest, along with Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Arizona. To me, the texture of East Texas has very little in common with the rest of the state.<sup>89</sup>

In his photographs, Carter tries to avoid the misconceptions that East Texas is similar to other geographic regions. Choosing to present factual people, events, and scenery, he focuses on the region’s unique characteristics. The region provides Carter with a great quantity of subject matter for his photographs “documenting” the area.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Keith Carter, *The Blue Man* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1990), 124.

Carter says that the traditional, factual approach to the genre of documentary photography has held little interest for him. Even so, he admits “my early work [late 1980s and early 1990s] is really documentary photography and to some extent today [in that] I work in the real world.”<sup>90</sup> The photographs from Carter’s first publication, From Uncertain to Blue, indeed capture factual places and people of the small towns of East Texas, but construct a particular view of these towns as a place which is then passed on to the viewer.

For example, Lovelady, a photograph published in From Uncertain to Blue, depicts a group of people at the Alexander Chapel, built in 1899 and rebuilt in 1953, in the East Texas town of Lovelady (Fig. 9). Carter chose a wide vantage point to show the bustle of activity. Volunteers, both black and white, have gathered to repair, clean, and repaint their church. As Carter’s wife states in her notes on this event, “It seems at first almost too trite, too sentimental. But it is real and true, and sweaty and tiring, and funny and joyous.”<sup>91</sup> Pat refers both to the event as an actual, unstaged occurrence, as well as to the heartfelt sincerity with which the activity is undertaken. But by selecting this event as one representative of this region, and selecting an angle that shows all of the participants working together, Carter imbues this town with values such as community spirit, racial harmony, and hard work. Because the town of Lovelady

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<sup>90</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

<sup>91</sup> Keith Carter, *From Uncertain to Blue: Photographs by Keith Carter*, with an introduction by Horton Foote (Austin, TX: Texas Monthly Press, 1988), 172.

is photographed and compiled with others from East Texas in From Uncertain to Blue, Carter's values extend to the entire region of East Texas.

Just as FSA photographers intended that their work representing small towns conveyed themes common to the human experience, so does Carter. He explains:

I think there's a great deal of interest now in smaller communities and their values. I also think many of the things that happen in New York also happen in Deep East Texas. It's just on a different scale.<sup>92</sup>

Russell Lee intended for his images of San Augustine to demonstrate positive values such as community spirit, a sense of belonging, and hard work. The specific place served as a vehicle to communicate these themes of human commonalities to which a larger audience could connect. Carter's photographs, like Lovelady, serve a similar function. In fact, when asked in 1989 whether or not he would continue with the subject of East Texas as his central subject matter, Carter replied:

Insomuch as that's where my pictures take place, but I've never meant them to be specifically about Texas. I look at the writers I admire – Eudora Welty, Walker Percy, Horton Foote, Katherine Anne Porter, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende – they all have this sense of place, but they transcend it. In literature, places become universal but in photography ideas along the same lines have to work hard not to be considered regional. The photographs I'm currently working on are being done in a Texas-Louisiana

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<sup>92</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

corridor, but I don't think they're about Texas. That's just where they're taking place.<sup>93</sup>

Rooted in a place, but also addressing more universal human themes, Carter's work demonstrates connections to FSA representations of small towns, as well as an entire trend of interest in place and regional identity during the 1930s.

In addition to photography, artists in other media benefited from New Deal programs. President Franklin Roosevelt's financial relief to artists across the nation provided a vehicle for artists to participate in a kind of "renaissance of American art."<sup>94</sup> During the late '30s and early '40s, many painters in the South competed in mural competitions. In their work they sought to record, examine, and interpret familiar subject matter and as a result, achieved a "regional artistic identity and a national significance."<sup>95</sup>

This "renaissance" is reflected in a great deal of source material from the time period and demonstrates a widespread interest in place and its significance. In 1934, in an article he published in the Southwest Review, John Gould Fletcher discussed regionalism and its new role as America's attempt to "recover a new contact with its lost heritage."<sup>96</sup> Though mainly addressing literature, Fletcher

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<sup>93</sup> Keith Carter, *The Blue Man* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1990), 141.

<sup>94</sup> Francine Carraro, *Jerry Bywaters: A Life in Art* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1994), xviii.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> John Gould Fletcher, "Regionalism and Folk Art," *Southwest Review* XIX, no. 4 (July 1934): 429.

also refers to music and the visual arts. He commends this “new regionalism” and states that each region:

...must therefore agree to keep out of the territory of all others, and to develop culturally, as well as politically, economically as well as socially, on its own account, or we must accept an artificially created standard such as that of New York, and cease to go on creating according to local requirements.<sup>97</sup>

Fletcher’s remarks are echoed in the spirit behind a great deal of work in the ‘30s – from literature to painting to photography. As demonstrated, many FSA photographs, particularly those Russell Lee produced, focus on a particular place with the intent to communicate themes to which all Americans could relate. Americans were seeking ways pull together in the difficult time period of the Great Depression. Lee and other FSA photographers through the FSA were promoting this collective call for solidarity and resolve in difficult times of change.

In the July 1935 edition of American Magazine of Art, art critic Constance Rourke stated, “lasting art had to spring from the center rather than the periphery of our social pattern.”<sup>98</sup> She felt that the true American artist was one who would develop in a particular environment with a deep sense of a particular place. She urged artists not to use generalities by trying to paint “American.” She wanted the American artist to turn away from mere naturalism, towards the poetic. She described this process an evocation of “the forms of our character” in cultural

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 434.

<sup>98</sup> Constance Rourke, “American Art: A Possible Future,” *American Magazine of Art* 28 (July 1935): 390.



expression.<sup>99</sup> Significantly, these efforts were already being accomplished in the South, particularly by painters in Texas.

In the 1930s, Texas saw a regional cultural spirit develop in painting which “formed an important part of the larger American experience in that era.”<sup>100</sup> Artists were embracing subjects native to Texas and they asserted these in the cultural mainstream of America.<sup>101</sup> Today, Jerry Bywaters is recognized as the leader of this group of artists in Texas who “broke out of the limitations of provincialism” and attained national recognition. He became a central figure and spokesman for a group of young, energetic painters known as the Dallas Nine, which included Alexandre Hogue, Everett Spruce, Otis Dozier, William Lester, and others. This group of artists discovered their region as a means to discovering America and saw themselves as an avant-garde in the pursuit of identifying a truly American art.<sup>102</sup>

Bywaters’ subject matter transcended “the tired stereotypes” of his chosen region. He believed artists should convey a sense of locale in their work in order

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 395.

<sup>100</sup> Rick Stewart, *Lone Star Regionalism: The Dallas Nine and their Circle* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1985), 11.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Francine Carraro, *Jerry Bywaters: A Life in Art* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1994), xv.

to “identify the universal in the particular.”<sup>103</sup> His images of the land and people suggested positive and negative aspects of his chosen region. Bywaters once asserted that “it takes a different kind of artist to develop in a place like Texas where there is plenty of space and fewer restrictions, where current fashions don’t influence you.”<sup>104</sup> Through his art, then, Bywaters sought a universal expression by way of regional context.

Like artists associated with this regionalist movement of the 1930s, Carter chooses to focus on a geographic region with which he is greatly familiar. He has articulated his frustration, like many from the 1930s, in regard to being defined as a regionalist:

I heard the sculptor James Surls say once, “If you live in New York and you look out your window, and you create create from what you see – buildings or air condition ducts or whatever – for some reason it’s called world-class. But if you live in East Texas and you look out your window and you create art from what you see, it’s called regional.”<sup>105</sup>

Like the FSA work, then, Carter’s photographs capture real events, people, and places, with the intent to introduce themes of the human experience. The distinct region of East Texas provided Carter with a variety of subject matter from which to choose. That place gave his photographs a unique quality, as well as a

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>105</sup> Keith Carter, *The Blue Man* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1990), 129.

cohesiveness as a group of work. Similar to the narrative quality viewers responded to in FSA photographs, Carter's work emphasizes the narratives or "small operas" being told beyond his lens.<sup>106</sup> For example, the narrative of Lovelady, concerns a community that pulls together to care for their place of worship. This speaks to a larger community spirit and commitment to those parts of our lives from which we draw comfort and strength. Like the regionalists' of the 1930s, Carter's familiarity with his subject matter adds to the sense of "truth" behind the stories being told.

The significance and values of a place is a topic contemporary photography critics are examining more carefully in order to gain a greater understanding of our interactions with photographs, particularly those of a documentary nature. New approaches to analyzing these themes help situate Carter's work in contemporary art historical discussion.

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<sup>106</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

## CHAPTER 4

### NEW APPROACHES TO ANALYZING DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

#### Memory, Nostalgia, and Time in Contemporary Critical Theory

Many contemporary historians and critics of art and photography are exploring links between photographs, place, and social values. The concepts of memory, nostalgia, and time are three aspects of these links that critics argue are reshaping the value and significance of photography. An examination of memory, nostalgia, and time in relation to both the work of FSA photographers in the 1930s and the work of Keith Carter's photographs of the late 1980s and early 1990s demonstrates parallels in their construction of meaning specific to spirit of a place.

The role of memory in photography is an important concept being explored by many historians and critics of photography. For instance, Celia Lury suggests in *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory and Identity* that the photograph, more than merely representing the world around us, has taught us a new way of seeing that involves our own memory. Indeed, the ways that the photographic image shapes memory may contribute to new understandings of subjectivity.<sup>107</sup> Lury and other critics are exploring the narratives that are created about oneself through photographs and the resulting forced recovery of memory.

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<sup>107</sup> Celia Lury, *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 105.

In other words, these critics argue that without photographs, memories may be forgotten or at least relegated to the back of the mind. Therefore, the photograph serves as a visual reminder of a time, place, or event. As a result, the creation and pervasiveness of images has also had a profound – if often unrecognized – significance in modern self-understandings.<sup>108</sup> As we reflect on our life experiences, the photograph becomes a way to remember and define. Capturing a time, place, or event, and later referring to it through a photograph, contributes toward the recollection of our memory and a better understanding of our experiences. Critics like Lury use the term “rescue” to describe how photographs trigger recollection of a subject. Rescue, or recovery, is significant in that both FSA works and Carter’s work rescue the memory of the viewer, resulting in a reflection of the viewer’s own time, as well as the past.<sup>109</sup>

### Constructing Meaning and Values in FSA Photography of the 1930s

In the 1930s, Roy Stryker’s team of photographers, including Russell Lee and Walker Evans, aimed for commented on social and cultural values of a place for their viewing public. For example, they sought certain “common denominators” as a means by which to document life in the American small

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

town.<sup>110</sup> Subjects assigned by Stryker included “people going to church, people coming out of church, people visiting after church,” as well as leisure outdoor activities and special celebrations.<sup>111</sup> Charged with capturing these and dozens of other points on their “outline for photo-documentation,” the F.S.A. photographers were seeking and connecting small-town activities to their associative values. In doing so, per Stryker’s instructions, these photographers either rescued personal memories from their viewers or informed their interpretation of small towns, if such a place was not part of their own personal experience.

Home Town: The Face of America is an excellent example of a group of photographs accompanied by text that provided an avenue to rescue personal memories from and impart social values on the viewer or reader. In this 1940 publication, photographs by F.S.A. photographers were juxtaposed next to passages of text that encouraged the reader to reminisce about day-to-day activities, seasonal changes, and values basic to small-town life all over the United States. Short captions were placed next to the photographs that directed the reader to associate the image with a specific subject discussed in the text. For example, one photograph from Home Town: The Face of America depicts two men walking together, arms draped over one another’s shoulder (Fig. 10).

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<sup>110</sup> Arthur Rothstein, *Documentary Photography* (Stoneham, MA: Butterworth Publishers, 1986), 164.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 167

Above the photograph, the caption reads, “Friendships are formed.”<sup>112</sup> The body of the text includes observations such as, “There remains, both for the small townner and the city man, raised in an American small town, the memory of the sharing of the experiences, the dreams, the disappointments of youth.”<sup>113</sup>

Though not specific to a geographic region, this book’s focus on small towns as a particular kind of place constituted them as unique in their contribution of positive values to the cultural fabric of America. The image of the two men projects positive values about the small town such as faithful friendship, trust, and a community spirit through the photographer’s choice of subject, its visual arrangement, and its inclusion in a publication about small-town America.

A comparison of another photograph from Home Town: The Face of America with a photograph by Keith Carter with similar subject matter helps to demonstrate similarities in their construction of values for place, as well as a preservation of time and memory of that place. An FSA photo depicting people departing after church services shows them shaking hands and visiting - engaged in congenial fellowship (Fig. 11). This image emphasizes interaction with one’s community as a result of attending church services – a strong social thread in small towns. During a period in American history when rural populations were undergoing an increasing move towards the cities, Home Town: The Face of America served to remind its readers of the past, either rescuing their

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<sup>112</sup> Sherwood Anderson, *Home Town: The Face of America* (New York: Alliance Book Corporation, 1940), 18.

memories of the small-town experience or associating such values with small towns if they were not from such a place. This helped to promote positive, “all-American” values about small towns to the American people.

#### Constructing Meaning and Values in Keith Carter’s photographs

Carter’s Easter Sunday, 1990, addresses this same subject matter of a church service, an activity common to small-town life in East Texas (Fig. 12). Carter refers to the geographic place by including trees and underbrush so common in the region - pine and dogwood trees, different varieties of fern, mondo grass, and azaleas. The arrangement of people in the background alludes to a communal atmosphere in which people gather for a common purpose. Carter positions the viewer so that he or she sees the back of the minister who faces his congregation. This vantage point, in addition to the fact that Carter almost hides the congregation behind the branches, introduces a sense of mystery appropriate to the religious event.

Part of this quality of mystery is due to the fact that Carter positions the viewer as bystander, looking in on the outdoor religious service unnoticed. It is questionable whether or not the viewer is even supposed to be observing this activity, which adds to the viewer’s curiosity or wonder. The branches and unclear focus of the congregation allude to a secretive quality of this service veiled behind the branches. The effect is disconcerting, not only because most

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.



religious services take place inside a church or synagogue, but because the viewer is not given enough information to make sense of this activity in this outdoor environment. Carter's decision to leave peoples' faces out of focus in the background keeps their identity a secret. The resulting quality of mystery is developed purposefully in this and other photographs by Carter. By presenting this activity in such a manner, Carter suggests this place possesses a spiritual mystique.

Both Evans' post-church photograph and Carter's photograph of an outdoor religious service present their respective place as having religious and community ties important to their identities. The fact that the subject matter has been captured in photographic form serves as a tool for future recollection of such memories, as well as preserving the activities. Carter's uncommon subject of an outdoor church setting, as well his use of black and white, allude to the past when outdoor services were more common. Whether resulting in viewers recalling personal activities from their past or capturing a collective sense of the way things were or the way the viewer would nostalgically like them to have been, Carter and Evans both dealt with the photograph's ability to convey something about values associated with a time and place.

Both contemporary critics and critics from the 1930s have remarked on this function of preservation, memory, and time in photographs. Photographer David Plowden has addressed time and the role of the photograph as preservation tool. He remarks on the:

...unique power of the photograph to convey a sense of presence; to preserve – what was there....If the artifacts of the past...hold a key to a better understanding of its attitudes and priorities, then the physical evidence of the present should be able to tell us something about the achievements of our own time...and perhaps also about what might lie ahead.<sup>114</sup>

Photography critic Jonathan Bayer has also explored the ways in which the concept of time is important to the photograph:

Photographers have become fascinated with time, both with the means to convey a sense of time as well as with the subject of time itself, as an abstract, philosophical concept. The ability to capture a fleeting instant of ordinary everyday life has generically become known as the “decisive moment”, a term coined by the arch-practitioner of this type of photography, Henri Cartier-Bresson.<sup>115</sup>

In 1937, photographer and writer Berenice Abbott commented, “Photography has then a double range of communication, speaking to the present, but speaking also to the future and telling what sort of world it was.”<sup>116</sup> In On Photography, 1977, contemporary photography critic Susan Sontag elaborated on this issue of capturing the past and the concept of memory. She stated that photography supplies not only a record of the past, but a new way of dealing with the present, “as the effects of the countless billions of contemporary photograph-documents

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<sup>114</sup> Arthur Rothstein, *Documentary Photography* (Stoneham, MA: Butterworth Publishers, 1986), 133.

<sup>115</sup> Jonathan Bayer, *Reading Photographs: Understanding the Aesthetics of Photography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 14-15.

<sup>116</sup> Pete Daniel, Merry A. Foresta, Maren Stange, Sally Stein, *Official Images: New Deal Photography* (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 155.

attest.”<sup>117</sup> Old photographs “fill out” our mental picture of the past, while new photographs transform what is present into a mental image like the past. She noted, “Photographs give mock forms of possession: of the past, the present, even the future.”<sup>118</sup> This commentary aids in an understanding of how Carter’s photographs relate to these concepts of preservation, memory, and time.

Carter presents the viewer recognizable subject matter so that he may identify what is visually presented. However, the larger themes that Carter addresses force the viewer to make this image part of his or her own experience. Therefore, the viewer establishes some personal connection or experience with the subject to which he or she can relate. That connection allows for an interpretation of the past, present, and future. For example, in Boy with Cat, Jefferson County, 1990, Carter presents the viewer with a back view of a boy between two structures (Fig. 13). A cat walks on the ground near his feet. The peeled paint on the wooden clapboard structures indicates that the structures are old, thereby alluding to time that has passed. Carter’s spare visual information makes it difficult for viewers to associate this scene, at first glance, with a particular time period. The clothes that the boy wears, specifically a t-shirt and shorts, suggest the present day. The fact that the viewer cannot see the face of this boy, along with his drooped shoulders and his interaction with the cat, causes the viewer to question what is happening or what is going to happen.

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<sup>117</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 166.

Again, Carter sets up the viewer as a bystander. He or she, in essence, stands behind this boy. As positioned in this way, the viewer is forced to make a personal connection, perhaps reviewing his or her own memories of playing outside as a youth, or developing a fictive memory of participating in such an activity. All of these factors were conscious decisions on Carter's part in order to make us curious about what might come next. Carter addresses this complicated issue of time in the photograph:

...here you are recording on the basis of a moment in time; but... what you're looking at is...a whole different thing, it's a whole 'nother dimension: the past that's no longer there, what's there. I love the element of time and the certain elegy of memory involved in the medium itself.<sup>119</sup>

As Carter explains, time and memory interrelate in his photographs, allowing for the viewer to see and appreciate them on many different levels at once.

Nostalgia, or a longing for the past, is related to time and is a concept useful for making further sense of the significance of Carter's work. In his essay in Jonathan Bayer's book, Reading Photographs: Understanding the Aesthetics of Photography, Ian Jeffrey states that currently we are living in an age of nostalgia and that photographs actively promote it:

All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability,

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>119</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.<sup>120</sup>

Through photographs, we in essence preserve a moment and in turn, make possible the memory of that moment. A longing for that memory, or nostalgia, becomes another vantage point from which to examine Carter's work. Art critics and museum curators have described photographs from Carter's publication, From Uncertain to Blue, as nostalgic. However, Carter wants nothing to do with the term or idea: "...nostalgia is a deadly word in the art world....I try to stay away from that word, because it's (like the word) love."<sup>121</sup> Carter is concerned that nostalgia connotes trite sentimentality in a negative sense. He refers to his mentor Horton Foote on the subject:

Horton once told me, he said, "I don't think about nostalgic things, I don't look back and look at the land as a romantic place, you know, because it broke a lot of people's hearts. That was a hard life for a lot of people, you know? There's nothing nostalgic about that. There's nothing romantic about that." And he's right.<sup>122</sup>

Although Carter shuns the concept, nostalgia is evident in his photographs of the late 1980s and early 1990s. His photograph Bebe, for example, presents the viewer face-to-face with an older woman smiling behind the counter of a store in the town of Bebe, located west of Houston in Southeast Texas (Fig. 14). Carter chose to incorporate several elements with which to

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<sup>120</sup> Jonathan Bayer, *Reading Photographs: Understanding the Aesthetics of Photography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 15.

<sup>121</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

evoke memories of times past and question what is in store for this place and person in the future. In times past, clerks like this woman would know their customers, their supply needs, and certainly where to find items. This attention to customer service has become scarce in modern day supermarkets. The clerk's age suggests that she has been working at this job for some time, and the viewer is left to wonder how much longer she might work behind the counter in this store. The items carefully stocked on tall shelves behind her are reminiscent of old-fashioned general stores. In addition, many items are from older times, including the wide array of bottles on the top shelf. On her left, the two tobacco boxes on the counter are frayed from frequent use. These boxes may have been this clerk's system of bookkeeping. Often in general stores such as this one, one box held cash, while another box held account records for credit clients. Rather than having a high-security cash register, these boxes allude to a simple, more trusting method of small-town business accounting in times past. With these elements, Carter captured a mode of business that is fading from the present day.

He provided other clues, however, that plant this photograph within the present day. The woman's blouse and eyeglasses are of recent style and the adding machine to her right is modern. The clerk's smile, proud stance, and apparent comfort with her surroundings suggest that she has been working at this store for a long time and refuses to give it up. By choosing such subject

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

matter and presenting it in this manner, Carter imparts qualities of rugged individualism and steadfastness in the face of change on this clerk, this store, the town of Bebe and the region of East Texas.

As such stores like the one depicted in Bebe are uncommon today, the viewer is left to reminisce about his or her own experiences with or perceptions about such small-town life. Carter himself may have been reminiscing about his own experiences, and may even have been familiar with 1930s FSA photographs that depicted small-town general stores in a similar manner. Like Carter's clerk, the merchant in Russell Lee's Merchant, San Augustine, Texas, April 1939 was posed in front of his goods neatly arranged on shelves behind him (Fig. 15). This demonstrated pride in one's work and an "egalitarian spirit of small town enterprise."<sup>123</sup> Evan's photograph appears to focus on the small town as able to keep up to date as demonstrated by the then modern goods behind this clerk. Carter's Bebe, although also depicting goods modern to the 1980s, speaks more to a nostalgic longing for such a setting and way of life as depicted in Evans' photograph. By presenting this subject matter in such a manner, both Carter and Evans invite the viewer to associate with a place and connotations of community and individualism. As home-town general stores continue to be replaced by larger super-market chains, the viewer may wonder how the store in Carter's Bebe has survived. The viewer may also wonder about the store and the clerk's future. The apprehension of change and often resistance to it, as well as

the perseverance of the human spirit to survive change, points to values such as courage, survival, and the preservation of the familiar. These values are projected onto the place of East Texas in Carter's photographs like Bebe.

By introducing dimensions of memory, nostalgia, and time, Carter has presented a perception of Southeast Texas that is both specific to place and universal in its comments on human commonalities. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Carter developed a body of work focused in its depiction of a particular geographic region. The first publication of his photographs in a book format, From Uncertain to Blue, exemplifies this focus. As discussed previously in this study, the photographs in this book illustrate Carter's travels around East Texas and capture the uniqueness of these small towns so well that "you could feel the pull of the very soil on the shoes of its inhabitants."<sup>124</sup>

The book format, in which Carter has published his work, makes possible additional experiences of memory and possession. The public does not need to travel to a gallery or museum to see his images. By purchasing his book, or borrowing it from a library, the viewer can enjoy unlimited access to photographs by Carter. The book format is similar to the format and function of a photo album, a cultural possession that can be considered a kind of guidebook to rescuing memories. The images contained in an album, as in Carter's books, allow the owner to experience and relate to the people, places, and events that are

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<sup>123</sup> James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 106.



photographed, whether he or she has experienced them firsthand or not. As these books may serve as a guidebook to this place and its unique qualities and as they can be referred to over and over again, they become part of the owner's experience. FSA administrators published books for similar purposes. Certainly a book such as Home Town: The Face of America could gain a wider audience than an exhibition, and its owners could refer to its images and messages with frequency. Carter has commented on the fact that while an exhibition lasts for a finite period of time, a book publication of his photographs has a much longer life. This appeals to Carter's interest in sharing his work over a long period of time, and results in a kind of immortality for his art. A book publication also allows Carter's audience to possess and assimilate his work into their visual vocabularies about East Texas.

Carter's choice to print in black and white rather than in color is also significant. By using black and white, Carter seeks to influence the viewer's interpretation of place. He explains, "when you take away the seduction of color, it's a little more challenging, it makes you think a bit more."<sup>125</sup> His statement implies that black and white prints allow, on the part of the viewer, for a more open-ended interpretation of subject.

Contemporary critics are addressing the aspect of making sense of black

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<sup>124</sup> Rosellen Brown, forward to *Mojo*, by Keith Carter (Houston: Rice University Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>125</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

and white prints. In Documentary Photography, Arthur Rothstein notes:

As opposed to color, black and white photographs have an abstract quality that demands interpretation by the viewer....Color adds a picturesque quality...that in some cases may interfere with the stark, realistic message that the photographer intends.<sup>126</sup>

Not only do such prints allow the viewer to examine carefully the images' visual elements, such as line and texture, but they also evoke associations with the past. Carter references a quote from the photographer Robert Frank that addresses this point, "Black and white are the true colors of photography. For me they symbolize the pathos and the beauty to which mankind is forever subjected."<sup>127</sup> This sense of timelessness or ability to transcend time by representing the world in black and white prints is also being examined by critics. Ian Jeffrey comments, "Enclosing time in general, they cease to refer directly to the instant from which they are taken, or do so only incidentally. The experience which they evoke is of things in general rather than of things in particular."<sup>128</sup> According to critic Jonathan Bayer, however, individuals associated with the FSA produced black and white photographs for a somewhat different purpose. By using black and white photography, the FSA presented a "documentary style

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<sup>126</sup> Arthur Rothstein, *Documentary Photography* (Stoneham, MA: Butterworth Publishers, 1986), 136.

<sup>127</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

<sup>128</sup> Ian Jeffrey, "Photographic Time and "The Real World," in *Reading Photographs: Understanding the Aesthetics of Photography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 85.

[that] evoked a set of ‘humanitarian’ responses.”<sup>129</sup> Its stark, graphic quality contributed to an empathetic response from audiences confronted with such images.

Bottle Tree, 1990, exemplifies how Carter’s choice to print in black and white is related to the element of time in his work (Fig. 16). In this photograph, Carter placed a bottle tree in the center of his composition. According to African American traditions, a “tree”, made with a post and nails on which to hang bottles would attract and then capture evil spirits inside the bottles.<sup>130</sup> Carter’s photograph suggests that this fading spiritual practice still exists in East Texas. In the background, the viewer sees old, run-down buildings amidst tall trees. Had Carter produced this image in color, the green or brown grass, green trees in the background and colored paint on the houses all may have taken the viewer’s attention away from the focal point of the image – the bottle tree itself. The colored labels on the bottles also would have pulled the viewer’s eye towards individual bottles rather than the tree as a whole. Thus, by using black and white for formal considerations, Carter made the bottle tree a strong focal point with its dark post and shimmering bottles catching the light, all centered in the composition. Most important to this study, Carter’s use of black and white photography also forces the viewer to question the time period he represents. As

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<sup>129</sup> Jonathan Bayer, *Reading Photographs: Understanding the Aesthetics of Photography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 130.

<sup>130</sup> Rosellen Brown, forward to *Mojo*, by Keith Carter (Houston: Rice University Press, 1992), 3.

bottle trees are fading from present day spiritual practices, the viewer would most probably assume that this is an image from the past.

Upon closer inspection, however, the labels on the bottles reveal their former contents: Pepsi, Diet Pepsi, 7-Up, and Slice, to name a few. These beverages are from the current day, thus confusing the viewer's first impression that this is a bottle tree of earlier times associated with long-forgotten spiritual practices.

Today, black and white photography also communicates the impression of factual reportage. When audiences in the year 2000 look back to photographs taken by FSA photographers in the 1930s, black and white may connote realistic reportage. This is due to the fact that today, color images bombard us in magazines, films, television and newspapers. Therefore, we become conditioned to color and more accustomed to photographs having similarity to the range of color we experience in everyday life. Also, as photographs today are so readily manipulated by computer technology for a desired effect, black and white photographs hark back to simpler times in the development and presentation of images, thereby introducing an additional element of trust. Such factors represent a shift in the significance of black and white photographs from the 1930s to the 1980s and 1990s.

In the 1930s, not only was black and white photography more widespread in its use. Its emphasis on form and tonal value produced images having stark and dramatic compositions that could elicit strong responses from viewers. This

often resulted in a humanitarian response from the viewers. For example, in Flood Refugees, Forrest City, Arkansas, February 1937 Walker Evans used black and white to sharply contrast empty white bowls against dark coats worn by individuals standing in line (Fig. 6). He not only made a photograph visually appealing in its composition. He capitalized on the composition to narrate a thesis – the empty white bowls symbolizing a great need for relief in the 1930s. Evans' empty bowls were meant to evoke a caring response from this photograph's audience.

Viewing this black and white photograph today raises the question about when it was taken. Evans presents the viewer with a limited amount of information. Similarly, Carter's choices concerning subject and background, as well as his use of black and white, most often a method used in the past can cause confusion as to whether his photographs are from the past or present.

In Carter's work, black and white is used to introduce associations with timelessness – forcing the viewer to question whether his photographs are from the past or the present. It also allows the viewer to take possession of or rescue that past, its activities, and values, because of its timeless quality. In addition, as Carter states, black and white prints allow for a more challenging and open interpretation of the subject. This Carter accomplishes intentionally by not providing color, which is today's most commonly used method of representing images visually.

By examining these contemporary critics' comments, viewing images of

East Texas by Carter and images of small-town America by FSA photographers, this chapter has demonstrated that the documentary photograph's role in preserving a time and place has multiple layers that continue to be examined and reinterpreted. The concepts of memory, time, and nostalgia are significant factors in examining Carter's work and its relationship to FSA work of the 1930s. They aid in our understanding of how Carter constructs meaning about East Texas in a manner similar to FSA photographs of small-town life in the 1930s. This examination concludes with an exploration of why Carter addresses such material and what results from his choice to develop photographic work in this manner.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLACE IN CARTER'S WORK

Both Carter and FSA photographers of the 1930s constructed a vision of reality in which the viewer is positioned to interpret the respective photographs in a certain way. A closer examination of what results from such deliberate actions by Carter will help us understand the potential impact of his photographs on audiences in East Texas and beyond.

As earlier noted, audiences in East Texas were slow to appreciate Carter's work. The subject matter of his photographs was too familiar to them, and his work appeared simply to be a record of the world in which East Texas inhabitants were familiar. In his 1996 address to the Texas Art Education Association convention in Houston, Carter alluded to the fact that support from the art community in the area where he lived and worked was not as strong as he would hope.<sup>131</sup> Because on the surface the subject matter appeared to be nothing new, Carter's work was misunderstood locally, perhaps even as limiting

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<sup>131</sup> Keith Carter, *Artist Discussion: Texas Art Education Association Convention*, Houston, 10 September 1996.

to the local audience in its specificity of place. As he extended his interest in place beyond East Texas in the mid to late 1990s, East Texans began to recognize Carter's intent to use a specific place to comment on universal human themes.

Several factors helped overcome the East Texas audience's misconception of Carter's work as being simply regionalist. First, his recognition both nationally and internationally has grown tremendously since the publication of From Uncertain to Blue in 1988. Newspaper articles, gallery exhibitions, and even a featured segment on the CBS television program *Sunday Morning* in 1997 brought greater local attention to Carter and his work.<sup>132</sup> Such accomplishments also added to his professional standing as a faculty member of Lamar University. In 1998, Carter was selected from the entire campus faculty to present the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Distinguished Faculty Lecture, an honor both within the University and the entire community.<sup>133</sup>

The art museum in the region began to take greater notice as well. Museum staff at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas in Beaumont chose to highlight Carter's work in 1999 for a long-term interactive exhibition in their children's gallery. Quotes from Carter discussing his working method and

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<sup>132</sup> CBS, *Sunday Morning*, 16 November 1997.

<sup>133</sup> Evan Katz, "Putting Pictures into Words," *Beaumont Enterprise*, 16 October 1998, sec. D, p. 1



interests were displayed adjacent to three of his photographs. This exhibition served as a vehicle for both children and adults in the area to examine Carter's work more closely and appreciate the fact that he comes from their area.<sup>134</sup> The East Texas arts community and the general public have become increasingly proud of this hometown artist who has found success. Ironically, his recognition outside the region of East Texas has affected local appreciation of Carter and his work.

Similarly, people in other areas of Texas were quicker to respond to and appreciate Carter's work than inhabitants of East Texas. First, for audiences outside East Texas, Carter's place of choice was not familiar to them and therefore would not have the common, everyday associations. An audience from outside this region was more apt to see that the people, places, and activities in East Texas were not only of interest for their unique subject matter of place, but were of value as a method specific to comment on universal human themes.

Carter's growing recognition began with the publication of From Uncertain to Blue. Because the photographs in it were published in a book format, his work was given a sense of legitimacy and importance early in his career. A book is also a long-lasting and important method of presentation. As Carter explains:

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<sup>134</sup> *Conn Take pART Gallery*, art exhibition, Art Museum of Southeast Texas, May 1999 - May 2000.

From the beginning...I always wanted to do a book. I think most working photographers, and probably also other artists [do] because it stands the test of time.<sup>135</sup>

The presentation of Carter's work in book format added to both the dissemination and recognition of Carter's work during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

For audiences in Texas and other states, Carter's choice of subject matter fosters curiosity and interest in East Texas. In few places today will one find bottle trees, murky swamps, and outdoor religious activities. Carter's choice of subject matter alone serves to preserve and promote the unique qualities of East Texas. In addition, a longing for preservation of the unique qualities of the region was on the minds of others in East Texas during the early 1980s, as evidenced by two publications on Beaumont and the surrounding area.<sup>136</sup>

Beaumont: A Chronicle of Promise, 1982, and Beaumont: A Pictorial History, 1983, examined the history of Beaumont, the largest city in the region, as well as the surrounding rural areas through text and photographs in order to preserve and remember a way of life that was disappearing. In Beaumont: A Pictorial History, authors John H. Walker and Gwendolyn Wingate called specifically for readers to appreciate the book's "nostalgic views" so that "anyone

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<sup>135</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

<sup>136</sup> Judith Walker Linsley and Ellen Walker Rienstra, *Beaumont: A Chronicle of Promise* (Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publications, 1982), iii; John H. Walker and Gwendolyn Wingate, *Beaumont: A Pictorial History* (Norfolk, VA: Donning Company/Publishers, 1983), ii.

who has ever lived in Beaumont will cherish memories of the way things were.”<sup>137</sup> In another example, the authors lamented the death of a historic oak tree that had been brought to the area as a sapling in 1849. The owner of this oak stipulated in his property deed that it was never to be destroyed. In the 1960s a major road was built around the tree to avoid knocking it down, but it was dying by the 1970s. As the authors suggested, “Perhaps all that concrete was too much for the oldster which had grown up when streets were dirt trails.”<sup>138</sup> It was within this period of concern for the vanishing sites and unique qualities of East Texas that Carter produced his work of the 1980s.

Indeed, over the last few decades the landscape of East Texas has been altered tremendously. Industry has continued to encroach on the region’s natural resources, and modernization has brought the destruction of many buildings of architectural interest in the name of progress. As a result, the area’s identity as a unique natural and built place continues to be threatened. Concern over the loss of this identity may have influenced Carter, which he in turn also countered by preserving it in his photographs of East Texas.

A longing to revisit and desire to preserve the places and activities of the past accompanied enormous changes for the population throughout the United States. During the 1980s, the nation’s population witnessed a multitude of

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<sup>137</sup> John H. Walker and Gwendolyn Wingate, *Beaumont: A Pictorial History* (Norfolk, VA: Donning Company/Publishers, 1983), ii.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

advancements in technology, communications, and transportation. In the face of unprecedented change, one coping mechanism might be to cling to what one knows. Events, activities, and places of our past can serve as sources of comfort and stability. With so much change, it may seem “natural” to identify and seek out those elements that withstand the test of time. As noted in this study, Carter intended for his photographs to represent any place. According to Carter, the threads of human experience including life, love, loss, and death, are the important elements that last and exist no matter where we live. Carter has said:

I wanted to give myself vehicles that would be open-ended,  
...would help me get a wide variety of subject matter, which I really  
like a lot, but try to keep it...where there's a thread between it all.<sup>139</sup>

Consciously or subconsciously, Carter may have responded to the fact that the world was becoming more confusing and as his audiences were seeking comfort or stability, his subject matter provided such a source of comfort: a message that human ties continue to exist to connect us one to another, no matter what change is around us.

This study has also demonstrated that visual depictions of a place can influence how we perceive that place. During the 1980s, the medium of television projected a strong perception of the state of Texas to outsiders. For example, the dramatic television show *Dallas* fostered many stereotypes, including the idea that everyone in Texas owned oil derricks, everyone was rich, and everyone wore cowboy hats. Carter's photographs break down some stereotypes related

to Texas in general, while they become vulnerable to new stereotypes about the region of East Texas. Not all of the people represented in his photographs are rich and wear cowboy hats like many outside the state might believe, due to other representations of the Texas. At the same time, the person living in New York City who has never been to East Texas may very well believe that East Texas is only inhabited by “backwoods” phenomena such as recreation by the swamp’s edge, outdoor religious activity, old-fashioned general stores, and bottle trees. Carter’s decision to publish his photographs in book format results in a broader dissemination of his images, and therefore a greater forum for such generalizations to occur. Regardless, Carter examined the qualities that made East Texas distinct from other parts of the state. At the same time he used this place as a platform from which to state that no matter who we are and where we live, there are basic elements that remain the same – common threads in the human experience that are unbroken by time and change.

Carter is aware of his role in creating meaning for the audiences of his photographic work. He has stated, “All things are equal before the lens given significance by what you, the viewer, place in it or what I, the photographer, place in it.”<sup>140</sup> He explains further,

...I have [a] passionate resolve to show that life is worth living, its poetry loose in the world, there’s hope, that hope is available for

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<sup>139</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

<sup>140</sup> Keith Carter, interview by author, tape recording, Beaumont, TX, 4 February 2000.

everybody, treat each other kindly, animals are precious, the earth is a living thing, all of those things revolve around my work ...they're on my mind all the time.<sup>141</sup>

Carter's work informs, validates, comforts, and causes viewers to reflect on their own lives. The subject matter is assimilated into our knowledge and becomes part of our vocabulary about the area. As Carter states, such information is transmitted through decisions that he, the photographer, makes. Carter's decisions resulted in photographs of East Texas during the late 1980s and early 1990s that are both visually rich and intriguing in their intended effect on the viewer.

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

This study has examined place and spirituality in the work of Keith Carter during the 1980s and early 1990s and has identified and explored links to the work of FSA photographers of the 1930s. These links have been established by demonstrating a number of parallels, both in style and intent. Issues proposed in the Methodological Statement warrant review to conclude this study's investigation.

In his photographic activity, Carter contributes to traditions in practice, history, and criticism concerning the relationship of documentary photography and place through a variety of ways. Carter "constructs" East Texas through his photographic methods of using particular places, subject matter, points of view, techniques, and methods of presentation. Carter's photographs from the late 1980s and early 1990s capture real people and places, enhanced by his personal knowledge of this material. However, this study has demonstrated how Carter's photographic methods including choice of place and subject matter, artistic decisions, and methods of presentation in book format connote certain values he associates with East Texas.

Several things develop or result from circulating Carter's photographs of East Texas in publications. First, producing his work in book format has gained

Carter a wider audience. People all over Texas, the United States, and the world are able to look at East Texas from Carter's point of view. By sharing geographical and culturally unique qualities of this place, he not only informs but imbues it with certain values. As FSA photographs presented small towns as possessing such values as community spirit, respect for hard work, and respect for one's fellow man, Carter presents East Texas as having values like community spirit, a respect for the spiritual, and rugged "staying power" in the face of change. As a result, both the FSA photographers' and Carters' respective audiences interpret these places as having possession of such qualities.

While FSA photographers were charged with a governmental purpose, Carter's intent reflects changes in his chosen region and our culture in the United States as a whole. His work also develops at a time when people are concerned with preserving the cultural history of this region and more simple times of the past. As East Texas is in danger of losing its unique character, Carter's photographs trigger memory of the past and also serve as a preservation tool. Changes to place threaten both the unique qualities of that place as well as a sense of comfort and values within our society as a whole. By preserving and communicating those values and comforting such concerns through the place-specific, Carter represents East Texas as a microcosm of the human experience, relaying human commonalities to which all can relate.

This study has also examined what photographers and scholars have meant by "documentary photography" in the literature of the history of American



art and photography of the twentieth century. The status of the photograph as document, as well as the potential a photograph may have to convey memory, time, and nostalgia have been examined to develop a greater understanding of Carter's work in relation to work of the 1930s. Contemporary critics' examinations of these issues helped to illustrate how both Carter and FSA photographers of the 1930s constructed meaning for their respective audiences. Other visual representations of East Texas, including film and text, provided an understanding for Carter's own depiction of the same region. Using examples of photographs by FSA photographers, this study has further explored the role of place or region in photographs we describe as "documentary." This has identified parallels between FSA photographers' and Carter's selection of subject matter, arrangement of the photographer's subject, as well as method of presentation.

An investigation of an interest in regionalism in 1930s America, particularly in Texas, provided a foundation of cultural trends behind the FSA project's interest in place. Links between place and values were examined in contemporary photographic criticism in order to situate Carter's work with current understandings in the field. Carter's photographs celebrate small-town values in a manner similar to FSA photography of the 1930s and present universal comments on the human condition, including the fragility of life, death and the strength of the human spirit.

This study examined Carter's photographic work also in terms of his growing recognition in the field. Examples of his work from the late 1980s and

early 1990s were compared both formally and in function to examples of FSA photographs of the 1930s as a means to understanding his work in the larger context of photographic traditions. Carter's interests in and familiarity with East Texas became part of his conscious presentation of the region in a particular way. This resulted in certain interpretations by audiences both inside and outside this region as a glimpse into a particular place, a means to rescue memory, and a preservation of time and place.

Recognition of Carter's work within the photographic field continues to grow. This study is important in establishing Carter's work within photographic traditions and contemporary critical art histories. It evaluates and establishes a new level of understanding of his work as a basis for future study.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Carter's interest in literature that focuses on place is an area that warrants future examination. Beyond the scope of this project, this investigation could be situated either as an art historical study or a study of regional literature and its relationship with Carter's work.

## ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1 Keith Carter, Fireflies, 1992.



Figure 2 Walker Evans, (298) Laura Minnie Lee Tenge, Hale County, Alabama, Summer 1936, 1936.



Fig. 3 Walker Evans, (303) Laura Minnie Lee Tenge, Hale County, Alabama, Summer 1936, 1936.



Fig. 4 Keith Carter, Garlic, 1991.



Fig. 5 Keith Carter, Industry, 1987.



Fig. 6 Walker Evans, Flood Refugees, Forrest City, Arkansas, February 1937,  
1937.



Fig. 7 Walker Evans, Flood Refugees, Forrest City, Arkansas, February 1937,  
1937.



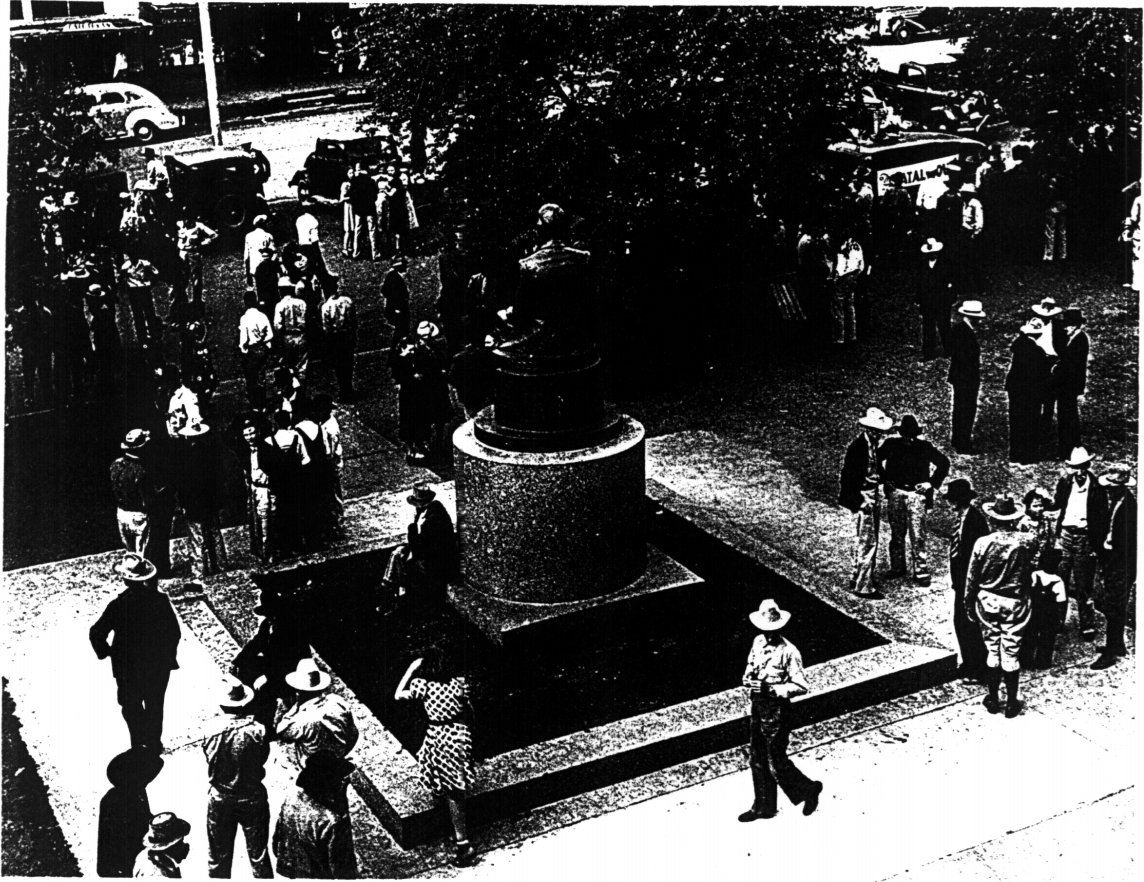


Fig. 8 Russell Lee, Courthouse Square, San Augustine, Texas, 1939.



Fig. 9 Keith Carter, Lovelady, 1987.

**Friendships are formed**



Fig. 10 Russell Lee, [Friendships are Formed], Louisiana, 1930s.



Fig. 11 Ben Shahn, [Church Service], Arkansas, 1930s.



Fig. 12 Keith Carter, Easter Sunday, 1990.



Fig. 13 Keith Carter, Boy with Cat, 1990.



Fig. 14 Keith Carter, Bebe, 1987.

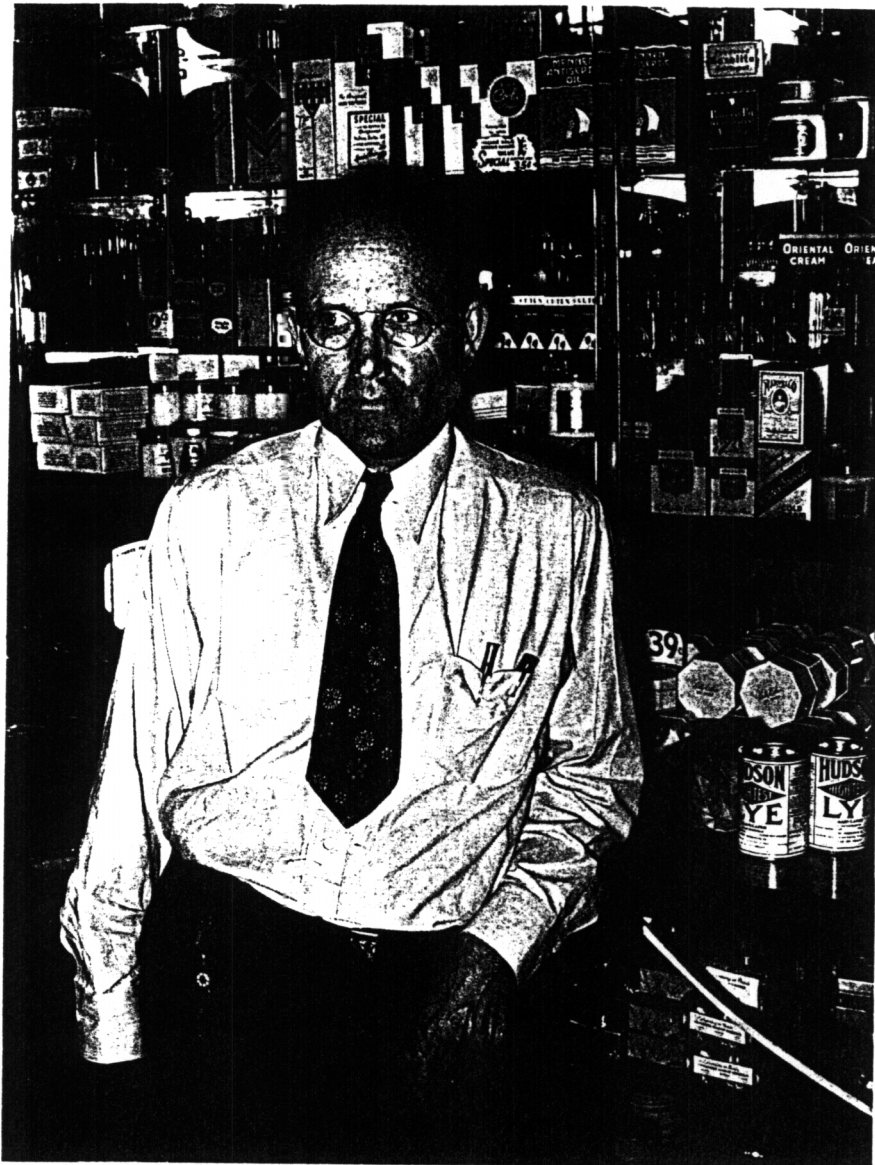


Fig. 15 Russell Lee, Merchant, San Augustine, Texas, April 1939, 1939.





Fig. 16 Keith Carter, Bottle Tree, 1990.

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