DEBORAH LUSTER biography

Born in 1951, Bend, Oregon
Resides in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Galway, Ireland

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2018-19  Passion Play, Art Museum of Southeast Texas, Beaumont, TX
2013-14  Tooth for an Eye, Blue Sky Gallery, Portland, OR
2013  Deborah Luster – Tooth for an Eye: A Choreography of Violence in Orleans Parish, Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans, LA
2011  Tooth for an Eye, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY
2008  Tooth for an Eye, Prospect.1, New Orleans, LA
2007  One Big Self, Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA
2004  One Big Self, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA
2002  One Big Self, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2018-19  Prison Nation, Aperture Foundation, New York, NY
2017  Southern Flair: Photography from the Stephen R. Reily Collection, Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY
2016-17  Southern Accents: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art, National Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham, NC
2016  The Things We Carry: Contemporary Art in the South, The Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, SC
2015  The Memory of Time: Contemporary Photographs from the National Gallery of Art, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
2014  The World According to New Orleans, Ballroom Marfa, Marfa, TX
2005  A Charge to Keep, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY

SELECTED AWARDS & GRANTS

2017-18  Ford Foundation Art of Change Fellowship
2016  Robert Rauschenberg Residency
2015  AAA Prize for Contemporary Southern Art, The Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, SC
2014  Michael P. Smith Memorial Award for Documentary Photography, Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities
2014  S.J. Weller Fund Award
2014  Irish Museum of Modern Art Residency, Dublin, Ireland
2013  John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship
2011  Peter S. Reed Foundation Award
2002  Anonymous Was A Woman Award Recipient
2013  John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship
2001  The Baum: An Emerging American Photographer Award, University of California Art Museum, Berkeley, CA
2000  Andrea Langa - Paul Taylor Prize (with C.D. Wright), Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University, Durham, NC

PERMANENT COLLECTIONS

Aeron Art Museum, Akron, OH
Brown University, Providence, RI
Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA
The Smathers Library, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

Front: Mary Bell (Anna), 2013, toned silver gelatin print, 50 x 40 in.
Loan Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

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DEBORAH LUSTER
Passion Play

Art Museum of Southeast Texas
500 Main Street
Beaumont, Texas 77701
(409) 832-3432  www.amset.org
The first time I met Deborah Luster, she invited me to climb up on the roof of her home in New Orleans, which gives a panoramic view of our neighborhood, the Marigny. We had just had lunch together at a local restaurant where, among other things, we’d discussed her latest project, the documenting of a passion play, “The Life of Jesus Christ,” at Louisiana’s maximum security prison at Angola. Since 1998, Deborah had been making black-and-white tintype photographs that explored themes of crime and punishment, first in the series One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana, and then in Tooth For An Eye: A Chorography of Violence in Orleans Parish, which depicted homicide sites in our city, then the murder capital of the world.

There was a special connection between Deborah and me that we also discussed at lunch that day, a coincidence that illuminates why we address similar themes in our work. Both of us have a parent who was murdered. Both murders happened in the same city, Phoenix, Arizona. They were both contract killings. Now, many years later, she and I had ended up living two blocks away from each other in New Orleans, where neither of us is from. That afternoon, from Deborah’s roof, I could see my roof.

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In the spring of 2013, we spent a week together at Angola prison documenting the rehearsals and performance of “The Life of Jesus Christ.” Deborah made her first tintype portraits in a Louisiana penitentiary in 2006, and though she has made portraits of many other places, her approach to her inquiry has always been the same. Her work, which has received numerous awards, including the 2018 Howard Howard Foundation Grant, and in 2015 was the subject of a solo exhibition at the Jack Sheiman Gallery in New York, has been exhibited in galleries and museums across the country and abroad. Her work has been written about in publications including the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and Artforum, among others. She has also received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Creative Capital Foundation, and has been the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship in 2015.

In 2013, Deborah began working at Angola Prison, the largest maximum security prison in the United States, and is now the director of the prison’s arts program. She has made over 300 tintype portraits of inmates, and has been working on a series of tintype portraits of inmates from the prison, as well as a series of tintype portraits of inmates from other prisons around the country. She has been working with a group of inmates called the Prison Arts Collective, which is made up of inmates who are working with her on various projects, including a series of tintype portraits of inmates from the prison, and a series of tintype portraits of inmates from other prisons around the country.

Deborah’s portraits capture the complexity of all these people—they do in a way that seems to me that she was talking about the rigor of looking, not glancing, not turning away. I think this insistence explains something about the singular power of her images, their intimacy. Along with the tintype photographs, Deborah has also made several “screen tests” of the passion play actors, partly as an homage to Andy Warhol. These short, silent movies bring yet another dimension—time—to the intensity of our looking. We see the subjects through the camera’s lens and they meet our gaze in return, sometimes brazenly, sometimes shyly, sometimes defiantly, sometimes vulnerably, and always there is an unstable flux in what we perceive.

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