

## THE SOUTHERN PHOTOGRAPHER

THE BLOG ABOUT FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

"IN THE SOUTH THEY ARE CONVINCED THAT THEY ARE CAPABLE OF HAVING BLOODIED THEIR LAND WITH HISTORY. IN THE WEST WE LACK THIS CONVICTION."

-- JOAN DIDION

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### Thibodeaux and McCord on One One Thousand



*One One Thousand*, the online magazine of Southern photography, brings us for February two photographers who work in black and white, and who also work along the Mississippi river, in the Delta region.

Dallas-based photographer [Brandon Thibodeaux](#) (see image above) offers us his *When Morning Comes* portfolio, work made in the Mississippi Delta, in Thibodeaux's words, in "five communities that span roughly 15 square miles of the northern Mississippi Delta.

"Villages with names like Alligator, and Bo Bo, as well as the country's oldest completely African American city, Mound Bayou, where in 1910, a New York Times headline once declared, 'no white man can own a square foot of land.'"

For Thibodeaux, this is intensely personal work, work made "after troubled times," when he traveled to the Mississippi Delta "in search of something stronger than myself and attended its churches not to photograph but to cry and be redeemed and to just be a part of the place. I was there to listen as I prayed for a revelation."

Thibodeaux found in the Delta "signs of strength against struggle, humility amidst pride, and a promise for deliverance in . . . a land stigmatized by poverty beneath a long shadow of racism" where he found "evidence of the tender and yet unwavering human spirit that resides within its fabric."

For Thibodeaux, "what began as a journey for personal exploration is found a narrative of another man's faith, identity, and perseverance." "I see the strength of a single man while acknowledging the machine that replaced thousands, the flight of childhood innocence grounded by the scar of life hard lived, a living room altar to a symbolic president and a toppled white king in a conquered game of chess."

Thibodeaux acknowledges that "this work makes specific reference to the rural black experience," in which he is "reminded with every visit that these themes of faith, identity, and perseverance are common to us all. These are the traits of strong men."



Los Angeles-based photographer [Lisa McCord](#) (see image above) also works in the Delta, in her case on the western side of the Mississippi, in the Arkansas Delta.

McCord offers us images from her *Rotan Switch* portfolio, images made to "document life on a cotton farm, specifically Rotan, also known as Ohlendorf Farms at Rotan Switch. This is my grandparents' farm on the Mississippi River in Northeastern Arkansas near Osceola."

McCord says that her family traveled so much when she was a child that this place, her grandparents' farm, constitutes for her a "sense of place," which turns out to be "a cotton farm in Arkansas on the Mississippi Delta, where they lived for most of their lives."

"My grandparents and their home," says McCord, "was the only permanent thing in my life. Much of my work draws from my relationship with permanence and transience."

For her, the images in this portfolio represent -- as they will for many Southern white folks, "not only... reflect my family's heritage, but also the agricultural life of many African-Americans in the rural South."

McCord discusses that world, the world of people of color, with a deep sense of being a privileged visitor.

"I was allowed into the local homes, cafes and churches to capture images similar to those of my childhood. I remember drinking water from gourds dipped into metal buckets."

"Twenty years later, James used the same metal buckets to wash the family cars and for other household tasks. I learned to ride my small, navy-blue bike with the help of Penson's children. When I photographed their family I saw the neighborhood children playing much the same way as we did.

"As a young adult, I "snuck" into the cafes, to join the people who met to relax after a hard week of work. Although I was always the only Caucasian in the café, I was received warmly.

"It was natural to photograph these endeared friends. We shared fried chicken and black-eyed peas, cooked by Cully, my grandparents' cook and our beloved nanny. We sang "Sweet Jesus Take Me Home" at Cully's church so many times.

"These memories are printed on my heart as clearly as these images are printed on paper."

Thibodeaux and McCord are making strong work here, powerfully seen and deeply felt work, work about personal discovery and the making of complex meaning in their lives. Indeed, their work in my view gets to the heart of the Southern dilemma, especially for the Southern photographer who happens, as they do, and as I do, to be white.

Both Thibodeaux and McCord, in making these images, are working in a long-standing tradition of Southern artistic practice, a tradition in which white artists depict people of color in their work and for

whom people of color represent continuity, "stability," "home," "strength," "humility," "promise," "warmth," "friendship," and in both the case of Thibodeaux and McCord, religious faith and practice that has integrity.

One thinks of William Faulkner, who says of his most significant African-American characters that "they endured." One thinks of the countless numbers of Southern white folks who grew up in homes where most of the child care, including most of the nurturing and support and love they received, came to them not from their white parents, but from the "Help," from their (usually not very well-paid) African-American caregivers.

One does not doubt the sincerity and heart-felt thankfulness of artists in this tradition for the roles of people of color in their lives and in their work. One does not doubt the power of the work that emerges from their work in this tradition.

This practice -- complex and multifaceted -- is at the heart of so much creative work from artists working from the white side of the Southern racial conundrum.

But one cannot also help but wonder what people of color make of all us white folks who show up from our positions of privilege to take an interest in them, with our cameras or our tape recorders or our typewriters, when it suits us to notice.

Philip Weinstein of Swarthmore College (who is white) has written of Toni Morrison and Faulkner, that Morrison "joins Faulkner in registering the often unwanted and always unavoidable reciprocity of the two races in American history—their strange intertwining."

"Yet she registers as well," Weinstein writes, "as Faulkner cannot, the ways in which American blacks have absorbed the worst that a white world could do to them, and—thanks to their own cultural ingenuity— made of it a living repository of wary wit and hard-earned wisdom."

It seems to be the fate of some African-Americans to be just the people some white folk needed to meet, when there was a need to fill, a life to orient, some story to be told, or a photograph to make. We've made a lot of art out of these encounters. There are a lot of folks whom we have made into our "Other," to help us figure out who we are.

I hope its a reciprocal relationship. I hope there are African-American artists who have been enabled in their creative work by knowing some of us. I hope its not just a one-way street. But I don't know. I suspect I can't know, not even in this 21st century world, a full century and a half since the end of slavery.

And that's a conundrum at the heart of Southern history, and culture, and identity, part of Weinstein's "strange intertwining." At least for white folks like me.

POSTED BY JOHN N. WALL/PHOTOGRAPHER AT 1:25 PM