

**"Animal Longings":
The Still Lives of Kate Breakey**

by A. D. Coleman

Kate Breakey's sensuous, sumptuously colored, riveting pictures comprise a suite of what one could call nature studies or still lifes. They depict once-living things — birds and flowers, mostly, but also a lizard, a dragonfly, a butterfly, a moth — that have died and found their way into her studio, to lie beneath her lens and undergo what might be described as a solemn, protracted rite of passage. Some of these she herself comes across in her peregrinations; some reach her by other paths. "My friends and their friends give me small dead things as gifts," Breakey writes. "It is because they know that I will try to give them life."

In their original form, these images generally measure 32 inches square. (She has produced one small group, "Loose Ends," roughly half that size, 15 inches square.) The substrate of each is a gelatin-silver print, a considerable enlargement of a 2-1/4-inch black-and-white negative of an extreme close-up of the image's subject and a decidedly larger-than-life rendering thereof. Breakey then slowly, carefully hand-paints each print with transparent oils and colored pencils, producing a complexly worked, densely layered final object. (Due to the extent of Breakey's handwork, and the nature of it, this means that each print is necessarily a significant variant of the basic image, not a rote replication.)

Taken as a whole, they constitute a series of portraits of the dead. Within the medium of photography, these images hark back to the poignant hand-colored postmortem daguerreotypes of the mid-1800s, with the cheeks and clothing of deceased individuals tinted to evoke the subject while alive; and they link themselves to much work that's been done since, up into the present day, by photographers as different from each other (and from Breakey) as Frederick Sommer, Rosamund Wolff Purcell, Joel-Peter Witkin, and Jayne Hinds Bidaut, to name just a few.

For all their gravity and reverence, Breakey's studies come across as neither

fearsome nor fearful. She consistently presents these creatures — even if clearly defunct, even when stripped down to the bone — as vessels of life. Her treatment of their residual vestiges evokes the sense of touch without the slightest hint of revulsion. The quality of her attention and activity — first the scrutiny of these flora and fauna through the camera, then the painstaking manual re-creation of their living glory — emanates the deepest respect for these beings, along with an evident belief that their passing matters.

This reverential treatment of them *post mortem* functions as an equivalent of the ancient funerary process of embalming: the ritual anointing, perfuming and wrapping of the body that serves at once as a physical farewell to the mortal remains of the departed and as symbolic preparation of the now-freed spirit for its next phase. This caring for the dead contains a poignant mirroring of the birth process, maternal and tender in its feeling-tone; not surprisingly, therefore, many cultures and belief systems choose women as the appropriate agents for this procedure.

The attentive viewer cannot help but sense the deeply affectional core of this project. Demonstrably, Breakey accepts as a given that these creatures partake of the sacral; she portrays them as if they not only have a right to the tree of life but can claim an equal place in any afterlife one might imagine possible, and deserve honoring with no less splendid a send-off than kings and saints receive.

This tacitly egalitarian aspect of her project should not go unemphasized: in Breakey's ontology, insects, flowers, and little creatures loom as large, or even larger, than do humans, whose presence in the real world is implicit in the microcosm constructed by these images but who make no appearance there. Others have made portraits of animals and flowers, certainly; but no one has presented them both as big as or bigger than ourselves and, as it were, on their deathbeds. Breakey speaks of this method as an "attempt to memorialize these individual creatures as little representatives of all the lives and deaths that we disregard." Yet those "disregarded lives" are not only the brief existences of plants and small animals but also, symbolically, those of the millions of bigger creatures too — including most humans — who will die without fanfare. We are all tiny and fragile in the larger scale of things; we all want our lives — and our deaths — to matter. This is, I think, part of the reason Breakey's images touch

us so deeply: because they represent a version of what each of us would hope to have happen when we pass on.

Which is to say that they reveal a philosophical and spiritual premise whose roots lie deep in the history of the still life — which, as a form of art, originates in seventeenth-century Holland. The Dutch term for such work, *stilleven*, translates simply as "motionless models," and, from the beginning, many still-life images served primarily as decorative replications in oil paint of the trappings of the successful life of the emerging bourgeoisie. Since shortly after the birth of the form, however, others have been fashioned to operate as meditations on mortality and the flesh; it's from that branch of the still-life tradition that Breakey's work emerges, and to that line of inquiry that it contributes. The French version of the term *still life*, notably, is *nature morte* — "dead nature"; this variant, though it has no commonly used English equivalent, makes clear the philosophical implications of one major approach to the still-life mode.

An undercurrent of lamentation runs through this suite of pictures, which functions overall as a threnody. Understandably, in that regard, many of the images strike a somber, mournful note. Yet these images reveal themselves as not exclusively elegiac. Some radiate a tranquil acceptance of death. Others of them seem to encode screams of anger at fate. Still more appear celebratory and joyful; indeed, many of the flowers, in particular, seem to relish their own decay, proud of the withering of their fleshy forms. All are rendered as noble and heroic.

Kate Breakey was born in August of 1957 in Adelaide, South Australia, the daughter of nature lovers. She grew up some 200 miles west of there, in the coastal fishing town of Port Lincoln, where she wandered the countryside in her childhood and adolescence, discovering in herself a rapport with the natural world. She earned a B.F.A. from the University of South Australia in 1981. During that period she found photography, or vice versa, acting upon what she calls "my own animal longing to distill color and light into explanations."

Photography is a necessary, inevitable component of her project. Certainly these images would reverberate much differently if they did not give us clues to their photographic basis. By the same token, they would echo in quite different fashion if they

prioritized impartial observation over poetic engagement and interpretation. Of the media she blends in her work, Breakey says, "I begin with a photograph — a highly convincing illusion, a map of reality, a piece of evidence rendered in silver-grey tones. This I smear and coat with oil paint in many transparent layers — the layers of emotional subjectivity — lies, dreams, delusions, exaggerations and embellishments. If I am lucky the media combine, become enmeshed and inseparable, a curious marriage of what might be real and what is imagined or desired. They now collude to play with my perceptions about what truth is, my favourite game. I am a sensualist. I admit to my seduction by texture, colour, light and form. It is my deepest pleasure, my lovely addiction."

[This is the complete text of a curatorial essay for the exhibition *Light Quartet: Themes & Variations* — Kate Breakey, Connie Imboden, Jerry Spagnoli, Robert Stivers, published in the catalogue for that show by See+ Art Space/Gallery, Beijing, China, 2009, pp. 101-03. It appears here in conjunction with an online version of that exhibition published by the [VASA Project](#), January 2011.]