

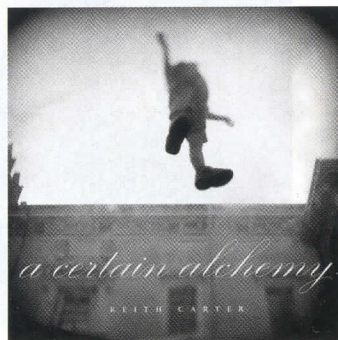
MASTER CLASS



"Birth of Photography (Lacock Abbey)," 2004.

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Always lyrical, Keith Carter's photographs have in recent years relied on the soft-and-sharp look so loved by art-minded users of plastic cameras, adapted by view camera users for fashion and food photography, and lately promoted by the selective-focus Lensbaby. The effect can now be found in mainstream magazines, popular culture having accepted blur (once viewed as a mistake) as part of photography's legitimate vocabulary. Yet while Keith Carter's new book, *A Certain Alchemy*



THROUGH A GLASS SOFTLY

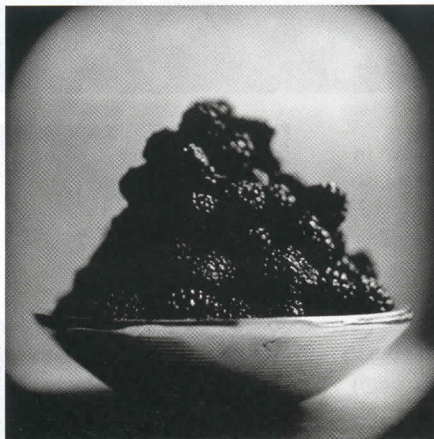
FOR KEITH CARTER, PHOTOGRAPHY ISN'T IN THE DETAILS.
BY RUSSELL HART



Here: "Phonograph," 2005. Below: "Blackberries," 2000.

(University of Texas Press, \$50) contains many photographs in which little to nothing is sharply rendered, his use of the soft-and-sharp effect is hardly trendy. Achieved with eccentric framing, shallow depth of field, and a keen attention to the relationships between objects, his work has always relied on a subtractive process—often reducing the world of an image to a few elements.

In that reduction Carter's photography is perhaps most akin to the written word, with its inherently selective nature. "I've always been interested in Southern literature, and my mother encouraged that kind of secular reading," says Carter, who grew up in Beaumont, Texas and has taught for 20-odd years at the town's Lamar University.



LESSON 1 ON EQUIPMENT

"I think the equipment you use has a real, **visible influence** on the character of your photography. You're going to work differently, and make different kinds of pictures, if you have to set up a view camera on a tripod than if you're Lee Friedlander with a handheld 35mm rangefinder. But fundamentally, vision is not about which camera or how many megapixels you have, it's about what you find important. It's all about **ideas.**"



Here: "Thirty Plates," 2004.
Below: "Boy and Hawk," 2005.

LESSON 2 ON LOCATION

"I grew up and still live in a ragged little **piece of Texas**, but in many respects the region has fueled my sensibilities. There's a **storytelling** tradition here, with all kinds of ethnic and folkloric overtones. Though I travel widely now, I always try to take this place with me. I try to design photos in a way that's not based on where I happen to be. If I'm successful, you can't tell where that photograph was made."



"I still play this game any time I read something about a writer or writing: I just change the words to photographer and photography. Because I think the creative impulse comes from pretty much the same place. I try to recognize things that have an implied narrative, where you give the viewer a little bit of room to finish a story."

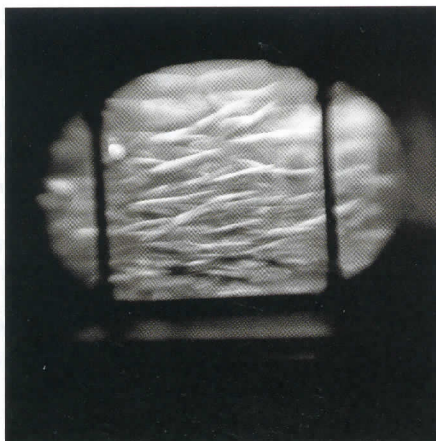
Whatever viewers may read beneath the blur of Carter's images, that defocus is not produced by the familiar plastic camera or even the ubiquitous Lensbaby. "I had a bad lens made to my specifications for a good camera," says Carter. He then mounted that lens to a Hasselblad Flexbody fitted with a 2¼-square film back. Though the Flexbody was originally designed to allow view cam-

Here: "High Stepper," 2004. Below: "Twenty Thousand Leagues," 2005.



LESSON 3 ON PROCESS

"In the **history** of photography, one process has always replaced another. The tumultuous realignment that's going on in photography now is really just a **natural evolution**. The irony is that none of the processes that have been replaced have disappeared. More people than ever are practicing every approach to shooting and printing."



era-style rise, fall, swings, and tilts both for control of perspective distortion and to increase sharpness beyond what depth of field affords, Carter uses it to angle the focal plane so that large areas of the image are blurred. "It's like using a view camera incorrectly," he explains. "I skew the focus with the Flexbody's bellows."

Carter feels that this effect, together with the lens's abundance of aberration and wide, fixed aperture, approximates the way he really sees. "The only thing that's in focus when I look at something is what's directly in the center," he says, plainly. "I wanted to make the scene look like what I see, or what I think I see." If only artistic vision were really that simple. ■