

LAURA PICKETT CALFEE

Of A Place



W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

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AUSTIN, TEXAS

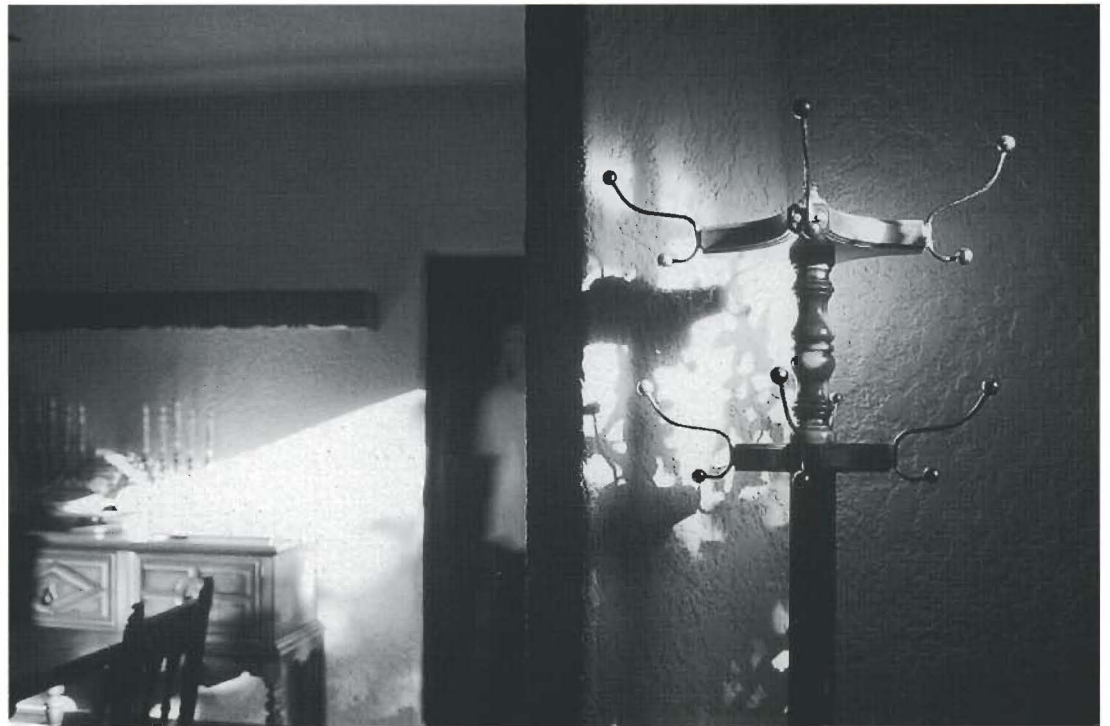
HEART BOUND

"I just don't know why you'd want to take a picture of my house."

—The first question everyone asks Laura Calfee.

Home figures prominently in photography and its history. As it is the source from whence the great majority of us humans begin, it is not surprising to find it constantly commingled with our interests, our beliefs, and our passions. Indeed, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's first photograph—that marvelous window/mirror that combined past science, present sensibilities, and future hopes—includes both the architectural elements of his estate and a view of the outside world from his habitat's everyday point of view.

Starting with Constance and William Henry Fox Talbot, who constantly returned to their estate of Lacock Abbey as the subject of their work, the home has been the point of inception for many photographers. In part this was a natural step, photochemistry and time being two of the chief components both necessary for the practice of the process and most easily accessible from home. As a photographer matured in his/her work, technical experimentation would give way to creative change and, again, the home could often serve as the source for studio, observation, inspiration, and a wide variety of subject matter. Some of the medium's most notable pioneers—among them J.B. Dancer, Peter Wickens Fry, Julia Margaret Cameron, and Lewis Carroll—found their homes to be the foundation of introspection and experimentation that led to some of our most notable photographs of the previous century.



"Louise", 1996, Ilfochrome print. 13.5" x 19"

I want a house that has got over all its troubles; I don't want to spend the rest of my life bringing up a young and inexperienced house.

—Jerome K. Jerome

However, home is also the wellspring of family and, therefore, the source of the vast human majority's initial confluence with photography. The medium has always answered our need to make its visual record of our family and friends, and thus, by extension, the home which has fostered and nurtured them. At first the house may only serve as backdrop to our family snapshots—the family dinner, the holiday tree in the living room, the pets on the porch, etc. Gradually, however, the building itself emerges as life and memory kick in and we come to appreciate a number of those other elements of human experience—compassion, curiosity, doubt, hope, symbolism, change, love—and

turn to the photograph to help us record, recall, and subsequently try to appreciate and understand them. As the family and each of its members grow and change, so too does the home that surrounds them.

So the concept of home—be it apartment or estate, rented by the month or owned for generations, sheltering one or many—remains an important reference point for photographers. And while for some it has been only a point for beginnings and returns, for many of our recent generations of artists—Wright Morris, Walker Evans, Russell Lee, Bart Parker, Rita DeWitt, Bill Owens, Larry Sultan, April Rapier, Debbie Fleming Caffrey, Catherine Wagner, Patricia Richards, Beth Yarnelle Edwards and Paula Chamlee are only a few who come immediately to mind—home is a continuing source of subject matter, inspiration, concern, and even enlightenment. And for us

viewers of such bodies of work, it is the artist who helps us understand just a little bit better about our own experience of this phenomena of home.

*Some things are over;
Some things go on;
And part of me you carry;
And part of me is gone.*
—Tom Petty, *Walls*.

Which brings me to Laura Calfee—who knows and feels what a home is about.

Of A Place is her work in progress: not surprising since Laura recognizes life itself as a work in progress also. For the present the project entails her intimate, unvoyeuristic look at a half dozen Texas homes (in Luling, Liberty, Archer County, Austin, Terrell, and counting) which began in October of 1996.

Her criteria for the project were simple—and are, therefore, complex by their associations: a home rather than a house; currently being lived in; generally kept in a family for generations; entered by invitation; the family interviewed by the artist; the place photographed with little or no accompaniment of the artist. And, there is perhaps Laura's most important criteria: that the people who live in the home are place bound by choice. (Her original title for this body of work was "Homesick and Other Stories" but she felt the connotations were too negative and uninspiring to match her bittersweet and life-affirming imagery. Good call.)

The resulting images—and the titles which accompany them—are heart bound: from the inhabitants, from the artist, from the heart of each home itself. They show us that what we

surround ourselves with is most telling about our lives. We are all drawn to the quotidian (a Szarkowski phrase) that is the elegance to be found in everyday objects. But it is the certainty of Laura's eye—combined with natural light, a solid color sensibility (with a palette that has some hues yet to be bestowed by nature), and her own particular sense of wonder—that reveals to us this rich aspect of honor and respect that awaits the return of the residents.

I recall the artist/curator Arthur Ollman once pointing out how Laura's work reminded him of that of William Eggleston: "A sort of female Eggleston. If Eggleston were not so male he might be more attached to belonging rather than attached to observing. But Ms. Calfee is deeply attached. She is of her place the way that soil is of its place. She is part of a powerful movement in photography, a sort of Southern literacy photography which is devoted to belonging to place...Laura Calfee is in there working the light, the combinations, and plucking poetry from the plastic flowers." And, since much of Arthur's own art resonates, like Laura's own, with the music of time and place you can be certain that he recognizes a kindred soul.

*It's a poor sort of memory that
only works backwards.*
—Lewis Carroll

Finally, Laura also believes passionately in what arises beyond her subjects: what Don DeLillo pointed out when he observed that "ordinary things represent the most overlooked knowledge." There are reasons why the sense of one's place is such an alluring emotion that is capable of continuing to draw us all to homes present and past. It is that

particular talent of Laura's that guides her from room to room and permits her to join with the ghosts and the memories that wait—sometimes briefly, sometimes forever—for one to occupy roof, walls and floor.

In a sense, therefore, the memories become as real and as eloquent as the photographs that serve them. When was the last time that Mariella's relative put on a hat and checked himself out in that wall mirror—just days or merely decades ago? Why is Chino now tending Sam's garden? Does Kalita still predominate in the owners' memories even if she doesn't dominate their bureau top? Why is a bare hatrack, fixed in a dash of sunshine like a fleeting dragonfly's lifetime, more animated than the walls that surround it? Do we have to know why Gay passed away in her youth, or are the windows empty eyes and the alien planetscape of a bedspread eloquent enough testimony? Can we expect answers? Should we?

As we see and ask and whisper among our own souls, Laura Calfee goes on. To other homes; with other ghosts and memories; in other towns or cities; with other inhabitants; around and beyond Texas and perhaps throughout the world. She will find more such homes. And they will find her. They are out there.

*Even as we return, each to our
own home.
Which is, after all, where they say
the heart is.*

Roy Flukinger
Senior Curator of Photography & Film
Harry Ransom Humanities
Research Center, The University of
Texas at Austin, © 1999

LAURA PICKETT CALFEE

Resides in Austin, Texas

EDUCATION

1979 **The University of Texas at Austin**,
Bachelor of Journalism

GRANTS AND AWARDS

- 1999 Honorable Mention, Santa Fe Center for
Visual Arts Project Competition
- 1998 Honorable Mention, Santa Fe Center for
Visual Arts Project Competition
- 1996 Best of Show, 5th Annual Governor's
Exhibition, Institute of Texan Cultures,
San Antonio, TX
- 1996 Juror's Commendation, Photoview,
Longview Art Museum; Longview, TX
Honorable Mention, State of the Art
National Juried Competition; Ithaca, NY
- 1994 Honorable Mention, Phoenix
Gallery Annual Juried Competition
- 1994 Honorable Mention, Fourth Annual
Prints and the Paper Competition,
San Diego, CA

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 **Of A Place, Women & Their Work**
Gallery, Austin, TX (catalog).
Except for Memory, Blue Sky
Gallery, Portland, OR.
- 1998 **Except for Memory**, Rudolph Poissant
Gallery, Houston, TX.
- 1997 **The Zedler House**, Mayfair Gallery,
Austin, TX.
- 1996 **Tuscany Revisited**, Mayfair Gallery;
Austin, TX.
- 1995 **Small Scenes**, Texas Department of
Agriculture, Austin, TX.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 **All That Remains**, Columbus, TX.
Curator: Sean Rudolph, Rudolph
Poissant Gallery.
Photowork 99, Barrett House Gallery,
Poughkeepsie, NY.
**Texas Photographic Society
Members' Only Show**, Photo
Archives Gallery, Dallas, TX.
- 1998 **Governor's Exhibition**, Southwest Craft
Center, San Antonio, TX.
- 1997 **The Assistance League of Houston
Celebrates Texas Art**, 1600 Smith
at Cullen Center, Houston, TX.
Juror: David A. Ross, Director, Whitney
Museum of American Art.
**Phoenix Gallery National Juried
Competition**, Phoenix Gallery, NY.



"Why We Stay", 1997, Ilfochrome print. 13.5" x 19"

- Sixth Annual Governor's Exhibition**,
Texas Photographic Society, San Antonio,
TX. Juror: Arthur Ollman, Director,
Museum of Photographic Arts
- Positive Negative 12**, Slocumb
Galleries, Johnson City, TN.
- Members' Only Exhibition**, Texas
Photographic Society, Austin, TX.
- 1996 **New American Talent: The 12th
Exhibition**, Austin Museum of Art,
Austin, TX (touring) Juror: Lisa
Phillips, Curator, Whitney Museum
of American Art.
- 5th Annual Governor's Exhibition**,
Texas Photographic Society, San
Antonio, TX. Juror: Roy Flukinger,
Senior Curator, HR Ransom Humanities
Research Center Photography Collection,
The University of Texas.
- 8 x 10 Contemporary American
Photographers**, Godwin Ternbach
Museum, Flushing, NY. Curator:
Jerald Green, Director.
- 1995 **State of the Art National Juried
Competition**, State of the Art Gallery,
Ithaca, NY.
- All That Remains**, Slover McCutcheon
Gallery, Houston, TX. Juror: Matthew
Armstrong, Associate Curator, Johnson
Museum, Cornell University.
- 14th Annual Competition**, Alexandria
Museum, Alexandria, LA. Juror:
- William Fagaly, Assistant Director for
Art, New Orleans Museum of Art.
- 1994 **Phoenix Gallery National Juried
Competition**, Phoenix Gallery, New
York, NY. Juror: Diane Waldman,
Deputy Director and Senior Curator,
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
- Fourth Annual Prints and the Paper
Juried Competition**, San Diego Art
Institute, San Diego, CA. Juror: Terrie
Sultan, Curator of Contemporary
Art, Corcoran Museum of Art.
- 1993 **Second Annual Governor's
Exhibition**, Texas Photographic
Society, Wunderlich Gallery, Austin,
TX (touring). Juror: D.J. Stout,
Art Director, *Texas Monthly*.

COLLECTIONS

- Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center
Photography Collection, The University of
Texas, Austin, TX
- Texas Midcontinent Oil and Gas Corporation,
Austin, TX
- Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, LLP,
Austin, TX
- Honorable William P. Hobby Collection



This Panel: "Kerry's Art Collection", 1998, Ilfochrome print. 13.5" x 19"
 Cover Panel: "Family Remains", 1998, Ilfochrome print. 13.5" x 19"
 Back Panel: "Gay and her Grandmother", 1996, Ilfochrome print. 13.5" x 19"

Of A Place

*It is believed by most that time passes; in actual fact,
 it stays where it is. —Dogen, Zen Master*

A few years ago, a friend asked if I would like to photograph her aunt's home. That simple invitation led to a surprising examination. I grew up in Liberty, Texas, with generations of relatives living all around me. More than a few lived and died in the houses where they were born. So, when I went to photograph Empress Zedler's home, the intimacy of looking through the rooms provoked surprising feelings and long-forgotten questions. Before I knew it, I had set out to examine other such place-bound families, their culture—my past—by photographing the interiors of other such homes around the state.

Why do they stay in one place? The more I have explored and photographed these homes, the more I have wondered why this is so. I'm much too Southern to ask directly, but there are hints in family pictures on the bureau, the baseball trophy gathering dust,

and the idiosyncratic juxtaposition of freshly jarred pickles and regional histories on the breakfast room shelf. The clutter and mementos are the telltale signs of an enduring world. This relationship of the quotidian surroundings to people's lives and their family histories speaks volumes about who they are and what really matters to them.

They're tied to place through family, their memories and dreams, through an identity with the house and the land and the community in a way that transcends other longings. They are people with the resilience to stay in one place—or the wherewithal to return to a place—which has some mysterious draw, a permanency, a foundation. They have a sense of faith, a sense of place, in themselves and their communities. While many Americans take collective pride in their zeal to explore, they are proof that this same determination breeds the stamina to stick it out, to make it work. To stay.

Except for memory, time has no meaning at all. —Pat Conroy
 Laura Pickett Calfee, May 1999



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Now celebrating its 21st anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1584 artists in 187 visual art exhibitions, 81 music, dance, and theater events, 19 literary readings, 12 film festivals, and 129 workshops, in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and National Public Radio and was the first organization in

Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 5,000 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.

The artist thanks the following: Boo Inks, Inks Production Co., for help with audiotape.



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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