



# PENNSYLVANIA PHOTOGRAPHERS III

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A Selection of Current Work  
Allentown Art Museum  
April 24 - June 12, 1983



*Bruce Katsiff. Photo by Judith Taylor.*

## ***Bruce Katsiff at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts***

**H**is license plate reads "Dr. Foto;" a bikini-clad torso sculpture somehow found its way into the reflection pool near the entrance to his home; and his handmade chimney is an irregular column of stone-studded concrete incrustured with jewel-like pieces of glass — all clues that reveal the playfulness, keen observation and rich creativity that underlie Bruce Katsiff's administrative exterior and awesome list of accomplishments.

He is the newly appointed director of the James A. Michener Arts Center, Doylestown, PA, beginning June 1 and has already

set in motion an exciting 1990 exhibition calendar.

Since 1973, Bruce has chaired the art and music departments of Bucks County Community College, Newtown, PA, where he also teaches photography, art, history, design and desk top publishing. An accomplished photographer, Bruce has exhibited nationally and internationally including the Tainjan Institute, China; American Arts Center, Exeter, England; and Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Out of the darkness and into the light, photographer Bruce Katsiff beckons his subjects to reveal the mystery of life in a exhibition opening May 4 at the Morris Gallery of The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA. Skulls, bones and hidden structures live through the power of his vision and his sensitivity to the exquisite beauty of the unseen elements of life.

"My pictures examine subject matter that we've been taught to avoid," he explains, noting our cultural prejudice against death. "It is not uncommon for the viewer to be troubled by the subject matter in my images. But for me, the 'creatures' that I record with my camera, reveal the structure beneath the surface. Many of my subjects are not 'born' until the death of their 'hosts'."

Katsiff was led to his discovery of these secrets beyond the flesh in the spring of 1983 when he came upon the carcass of a deer decaying in the woods near his home in Lumberville, PA. His camera followed his curiosity and he began to photograph the animal as it melted into the earth. These early photographs began the series "Natural Morte."

"One thing led to another and I started to bring my subjects into my studio. There I was able to construct environments and to have complete control over the lighting and visual organizations of the images," he relates.

These directed or constructed images run counter to some of the thinking about photography that maintains a "window to nature" or "slice of life" disposition toward the media. Katsiff likens his approach to that of a painter that builds images on the canvas. "These constructions have been done since the first photographs were made but they're much rarer than the usual shots," he concedes.

Utilizing a complicated process developed in 1854, Katsiff elicits spectacular crispness and tonal variety from these Platinum/Palladium prints. After laboriously hand-coating fine drawing paper with a light sensitive plantinum emulsion, he makes a contact print from a 12 x 20 negative.

"Everything is difficult about it — the humidity, the kind of paper you use, what you ate for breakfast," he quips. "It's a process that takes a lot of precision and a lot of time. I can make about two prints a day."

The constructions take two to three days to create. Katsiff waits for the lighting to be "just right" and then shoots one negative with a huge camera used to photograph banquets in the early 20th century that he has fitted with modern lenses. This tightly controlled technique allows Katsiff to create a very specific narrative that pushes the viewer to understand the subject.

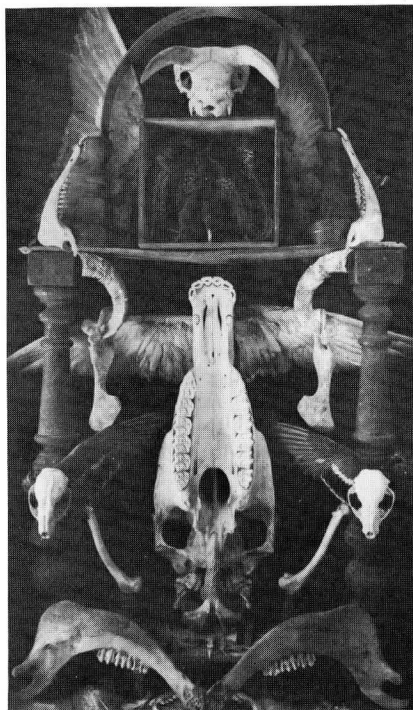
"Some people are really upset by these pictures," he admits. "For me, they provide an opportunity to deal with my own morality. I can use the whole process to address these issues in my own life."

Although his earlier works were confrontive, an elegance and transcendent quality has developed in his more recent works. Lighting and positioning depict ephemeral moods as a stately peacefulness seduces the viewer to take a closer look at what is often most frightening.

"These pictures are not intended to offend," he says gently. "My goal is to share with the viewer my own discoveries of elegance and beauty in a subject matter that many of us have been taught to fear."

From May 4 through June 17, Bruce Katsiff will share the floor in a two-person exhibition, Recent Works: Photographs by Susan Fenton and Bruce Katsiff, at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Broad and Cherry Streets, Philadelphia, PA.

Corresponding lectures include: Pushing the Limits of Media: Making Photographs, Not Just Taking Photographs, a panel discussion, May 5, 1 p.m.; Conversation with the Artist, Susan Fenton, May 18, 12 Noon; The Constructed Image, Bruce Katsiff, June 1, 12 Noon. Hours are Tues.-Sat. 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sun. 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Accessible to the handicapped.



"Flying Totem," 20 x 12 platinum/palladium print by Bruce Katsiff at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

## Photography

## Of Nudes, Madmen and Nature's Beauty

By GENE THORNTON

TRY as I will, I cannot find any common bond uniting the May shows at the three photography galleries, so I shall take each one separately in geographical order, going from uptown to downtown and from east to west.

At the Witkin Gallery, 237 East 60th Street, Dean Brown is showing 30 slightly-larger-than-picture-postcard-sized dye-transfer color prints of the Painted Desert in Arizona. (His wife, Carol Brown, is simultaneously showing 30 watercolors.) Sunset on the desert, rust-reds against dense blue-blacks, pink mesas and pucker-purple arroyos, char-treuse sagebrush, sunlit cliffs and gnarled desert trees against deep blue skies of a lunar depth and intensity—with subject matter like this, what half-way decent photographer could miss? Brown who is a pro, with informal portraits and landscapes in Holiday, Redbook and Mademoiselle to his credit, does not miss. His color is luscious, his choice and framing of subjects expert and experienced.

Brown favors a high horizon line, as who would not with all that juicy landscape before him? Sometimes he drops out the sky altogether in favor of ranges of eroded rock or the lacy precision of desert plants. And such a finess and wealth of detail, not just in the foreground but in the middle distance and background as well! When Daguerre's process was first made public in 1839, one of the things that astounded people most was the details. "The image is reproduced to the most minute details with unbelievable exactitude and finesse," reported the distinguished French scientist Francois Arago to a meeting of the Académie des Sciences.

Time and familiarity have dulled our wonder at this ability of the camera, but Dean Brown's photographs are capable of stirring it again. One thing I do balk at, however, and not for the first time, is the unflinching beauty of Brown's desert. It takes a great effort of the imagination to realize that these gorgeous backdrops are hostile environments, unfriendly and often fatal to man. Why do photographers never show this?

Fredrich Cantor, at Exposure Gallery, 214 East 10th Street, photographs people. He is a former student of the painter, Philip Pearlstein, and an accomplished draftsman himself, to judge by the pencil-drawn drapery study he includes in his show of 25 one-of-a-kind photographic prints. But do not expect carefully worked out portraits or oddly cropped studies of nudes rendered with Pearlstein's cold precision. The most straightforward pictures in this show are portraits of — what? vampires? lunatics? transvestites? sorcerers? actors? The least straightforward pictures might be scenes from hell in the style of "Marat/Sade," though in fact they are staged tableaux posed by friends of the photographer in such unlikely settings as the men's room of the Elgin Cinema. (Yes, Virginia, there really are people like this—at any rate, people who are willing to pose like this. No, Virginia, you don't have to worry about it, it's only make believe.) Here is a bare-bellied madman leaping up and down in total ecstasy before a scabrous brick wall. There is a young lady posed like Whistler's mother in a wheel chair; another is posed as a freaked-out Olympia by Manet, with a prancing spook in the background instead of the decorous kerchiefed serving girl.



Abstraction of female torso by Bruce Katsiff  
"colorful landscape and freaked-out fantasy"

Is that Marlene Dietrich's blue angel lifting her knee so coldly and proudly in a tiled room lurching with shadowy stumblebumps? And is this an actor from Fellini's "Satyricon," is he leering contemptuously or screaming in mortal agony?

Cantor's theatrical pictures are full of artifice, and the artifice extends beyond the subject matter and mood to the manipulations that he

subjects his images to. He uses black and white film and most of the portraits are fairly straightforward, sepia-toned prints. However, some of the little scenes in hell are so bleached, toned, solarized, rephotographed and resolarized that they flare with halos of light, disintegrate into faded silhouettes, and suddenly start to flicker with fugitive tinges of burnt orange, purple and green. "Don't make too much of these manipulations," Cantor says. "I print my pictures whatever way will bring out the image best, and when I'm in the darkroom, I don't always know what I'm going to do next. It's like action painting; one thing suggests another, and I get caught up in it." Nevertheless, the bizarre faded-photograph effects that often result do add to the impression that these are pictures from an album found in the attic of the Charles Addams family manse. And, despite the artifice and make believe, (I take it back, Virginia, I spoke too soon) there is something chilling about Cantor's vision of lives lived just barely this side of total insanity. One has only to walk out into the street to feel that he is onto something real.

\* The black-and-white photographs in Bruce Katsiff's first one-man show at The Underground Gallery, 51 East 10th Street, are truly black and white. No sepia tones, no

## EXHIBITIONS

- SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION—Washington, D.C. "Photographs and Anti-Photographs," more than 60 pictures by Elliot Erwitt at the Institution's Hall of Photography Print Gallery. Through July 14.
- SEAMAN'S CHURCH INSTITUTE OF NEW YORK—15 State Street. Color and black-and-white by Eva Harrison "Mother Love." Closes today. Hours, 1 to 6.
- TERRAIN GALLERY—39 Grove Street. Work of 11 Aesthetic Realism Photographers. Through June 1. Hours, 2 to 6 every day.
- SIERRA CLUB—250 West 57th Street. "Today is the Beginning of the First Day of the Rest of my Life." 35 color photos by Ellen Roain. Through May 31. Hours, 9 to 4, Monday through Friday; 10 A.M. to Noon, Saturday.
- SPIRATONE, INC.—130 West 31st Street. Black-and-white photos by Sidney Fichtelberg. Through May. Hours, 9 to 6, Monday through Friday; Thursday to 7:30; Saturday, 9 to 9:30.
- AMERICAN-SCANDINAVIAN FOUNDATION—127 East 72d Street. "As We Saw It," color photos by Morris and Edith Jaffe. To run indefinitely. Hours, 9 to 5, Monday through Friday.
- METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART—"The Rise of an American Architecture, 1815-1915," photographs and architectural displays; adults \$1, students 50 cents. Through Oct. 3. Hours 10 to 5, Monday through Saturday, Tuesday to 10 P.M.; Sunday, 1 to 5.
- WITKIN GALLERY—237 East 60th Street. 30 color prints and 20 water-colors of landscapes in the Painted Desert, Arizona, by Dean and Carol Brown. Through May 31.
- MODERNAGE—6 West 48th Street. Photos by Casey Allen. Through June. Hours, 9 to 5:30, Monday through Friday.
- ART WORKS GALLERY—303 West 13th Street. "One New York Family," photographs and art work by the Ortin-Ensel family. Through June 12. Hours, 1 to 7, Tuesday through Saturday.
- LONG ISLAND UNIVERSITY, BROOKLYN CENTER—Flushing Avenue Extension at DeKalb Avenue, Brooklyn. "The Face of Vietnam," black-and-white photos by Raymond Cauchetier. French photographer. Through May 24. Hours, 10 to 7, Monday through Friday; 10 to 4, Saturday, Sunday and holidays.
- PANORAS GALLERY—62 West 56th Street. "Eros," photographic studies by Iris Fort rest. Through May 30. Hours, 11 to 6, Monday through Saturday.
- IMAGE GALLERY—565 Fifth Avenue. Work of Iris Fort rest. Through May 31. Hours, 9 to 5:30, Monday through Friday.
- PARENTS' MAGAZINE ENTERPRISES GALLERY—52 Vanderbilt Avenue. Photographs by Paul Buck. Through May 31. Hours, 9 to 5, Monday through Friday.
- HUDSON PARK BRANCH, NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY—147 Seventh Avenue South. Photographs by Geoffrey Gove, Ellen Levine and Robert Lisie. Through May 29. Hours, 10 to 9, Monday and Wednesday; 10 to 6, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday.
- DARK ROOM—25 Avenue A. Color and black-and-white prints by Robert Nadler. May 25 through June 4.
- NEW YORK CULTURAL CENTER—2 Columbus Circle. "Hiroshima and Nagasaki." Through June 21. Hours, 11 to 8, Tuesday through Sunday.
- UNION SETTLEMENT—227 East 104th Street. Photos of children in the Settlement's Day Care and Head Start Program, by E. C. Hamilton. Through Wednesday. Hours, 9 to 5.

against bold and jagged whites. The effect is abstract, especially in a group of five long, horizontal composite photographs made by piecing together several different negatives and rephotographing them. In these, almost all sense of subject matter is lost in a striking complex of interlocking and overlapping black and white areas reminiscent of the paintings of Franz Kline and Willem DeKooning. These prints could easily be enlarged to mural size without losing the effectiveness.

Although Katsiff emphasizes the decorative element, there is a subject matter common to all his compositions: the female nude, or parts of her. I say "female nude" rather than "naked woman" because nearly all feeling of sensuality is lost in the high contrast printing and the beautiful framing and cropping that turns the original images into elegant designs. In some prints, Katsiff further reduces the impact of the image by silkscreening it onto metallic or colored surfaces, or, in one piece appropriately titled "Cerise," in colored ink on a mirror. How far it is from these cool, decorative abstractions to the frenzied fer-

## News of Camera Doings

THE Eastman Kodak Company, in cooperation with the University Film Foundation, has just announced its 1970 Kodak Teen-Age Movie Award Contest for all youngsters 12 to 19. Any 8mm, super 8 or 16mm film on any subject may be entered in one of four categories: Junior, for super 8 and 8mm films, ages 12 through 15; Senior for super 8 and 8mm films, ages 16 through 19; One-Reeler, for super 8 and 8mm, ages 12 through 19, single 50-foot reels; Sixteen, for all 16mm films, ages 12 through 19. Prizes will vary from \$25 to \$150, plus one grand prize, a six-week summer scholarship to the University of California. Requests for entry forms should be sent to: Kodak Teen-age Movie Awards, Dept. 840F, Eastman Kodak Company, Rochester, N. Y.

FOR STUDENTS

six-week summer course, "8mm Film Production for High School Students," beginning July 6. The course, limited to 30 students, will offer instruction in Camera Lighting, Editing, Animation, Script Writing and Directing. For further information, call (212) OR 9-7350.

## TWO-IN-ONE

A rubber lens shade that folds flat against the lens rim when the camera is stored comes with a matching metal slip-on cap that seals the lens when the hood is not in use. The hood is always left in place. When the cap is pulled off, it pops out to shade the lens. Called the Combi, it is available in all popular screw-in sizes from 40.5mm to 58mm, at prices that vary from \$3 to \$5. It is sold by Spiratone, Inc., 135-06 Northern Boulevard, Flushing, N.Y. 11354.

2½ by 1½ inches, a new compact electronic flash unit comes with rechargeable nickel cadmium batteries and a recharging transformer for household current. Called the Agfatronic 140A, it has a recycling time of 10 seconds on battery operation and provides a guide number of 40 for ASA 50 film. It is distributed by Agfa-Gevaert, Inc., 275 North Street, Teterboro, N. J. 07608, and is priced at \$44.95 with the batteries. Reflector coverage is 65 degrees.

## IMPROVED CUBES

Photo flash cubes that require much less battery power to fire properly have just been introduced by the General Electric Company. A nearly invisible filament wire is much more sensitive to lower voltages so that the bulbs will fire even when batteries are almost depleted,



# VIEWFINDER

SANFORD ROBINSON

**Bruce Katsiff**  
**Photographs from the Series**  
**"Nature Morte"**  
**Book Trader Gallery**  
**April 11 — May 10**

We are living creatures, and like all living creatures, we die. However incontrovertible this statement may be, we choose for the most part to live as if it were untrue or, at the very least, as if it need not concern us. In this mass delusion we are supported by our culture, which sanitizes death and isolates the dying, as if to shield the rest of us from its reach. Part of the cost of sustaining this fiction is that a certain falseness pervades our habits of mind, so that when an artist chooses to present to us a body of work whose origins lie in a prolonged meditation on the theme of death and its visible manifestations, many of us will tend to respond unthinkingly. Such work will be seen, conventionally, as "morbid;" the artist himself considered unhealthy-minded, perverse. But the real significance of labels like these is that they serve to divert attention from our essential dread of death, from our unwillingness to confront the truth of our own common mortality.

Bruce Katsiff's recent show of black-and-white photographs at the Book Trader Gallery consists of some twenty images of, literally, dead animals. (It is interesting that our language offers only a politely evasive term for the genre: *still life*.) Many of the images are studies of bones. Others include apparently mummified remains. The larger prints, generally 12 x 20 inches, chiefly portray carefully composed arrangements of animal skulls and other

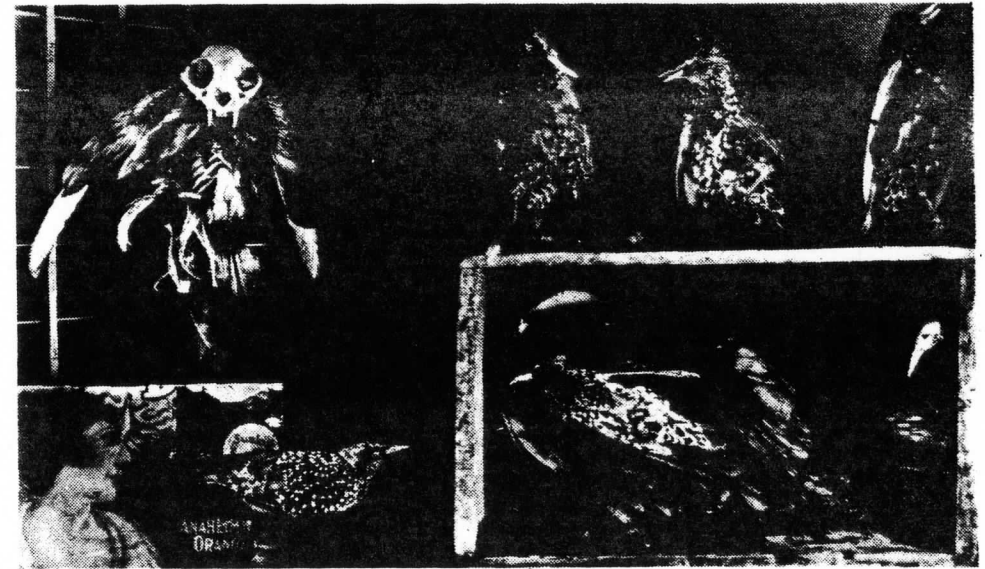
bones, sometimes with other objects and materials: fur, feathers, garden twine, weathered wooden columns and crates, a bisected nautilus shell. All of the prints are, from the standpoint of craftsmanship, exceedingly well made by the costly and now seldom-used platinum/palladium process. This technique is cherished by photographers and collectors for its ability to render a very long tonal scale, from pellucid white to densest black, with more subtle and delicate gradations than can be obtained from modern commercial papers. (Incidentally, you cannot make enlargements on platinum-coated paper, which requires a very long exposure time, so all of these images are in fact contact prints. The resolution of fine detail is extraordinary.)

In some measure it is because Katsiff has lavished such bravura technique upon his theme that the viewer is drawn into an encounter with the specific content of the work. The sensuousness of the print surface mitigates any impulse to shrink from what we are invited to behold. Among the discoveries to be made is that there exists an austere and formal beauty in the design of bone, because the architecture of organic forms becomes accessible to vision only after the death and decay of the animal have occurred. The base of a deer's skull, for example, in the complex geometry of its hollows and protuberances, is at once a remarkable piece of structural engineering and an essay in pure form, revealed by the play of light and shadow in the artist's studio and recorded on film.

The Nature Morte series has occupied Katsiff since 1983. It is possible to trace a

progression from, say, the starkly confrontational early photograph of a cat's near-skeletal hindquarters, with remnants of fur still attached, to the rigorously ordered compositions like "Shadow, Light and Birth" (1986) in which the whole is to be seen as greater, presumably, than the sum of its parts. In the more recent work there is a density of allusiveness that evokes the hermetic assemblages of Joseph Cornell, and the exquisitely toned prints of contemporary Virginia photographer Olivia Parker, steeped in 19th-century attic

delicately prehensile, so human-like.) In the position of the animal's hands there is a suggestion of surrender and repose so mutely expressive as to invite comparison with any of several Pietas, or any of innumerable Bodhisattvas in lotus posture. Of course the analogy will seem pretentious and irreverent, but my point is precisely that the eloquence of the animal's gesture calls into question our received ideas about the uniquely human qualities of our spiritual avatars. The natural process of death to which we, like all creatures, are



"Frozen Flight," from Bruce Katsiff's *Nature Morte* series.

twilight, and every bit as painstakingly composed as an O.G. Rejlander allegory.

To the extent that it aspires to universality, however, Katsiff's work seems to belong to no particular time or place. One image especially stays with me, a small close-up of the hands of a freshly dead raccoon. (It seems inappropriate to use the work "paw" to refer to an organ so

Latin *animale*, neut. of *animalis*, animate, fr. *anima*, soul.

Sanford Robinson is an editor of medical books for J.B. Lippincott Co. A resident of Philadelphia, he is also an exhibiting photographer. His work has been seen extensively in Canada and was a finalist in *ART MATTERS'* 1986 Philadelphia Photographers International.



# Photos rethink death's visage

By Phillip C. Pina  
Staff Writer

There is beauty in things that are dead.

Photographer Bruce Katsiff is taking that idea and creating beauty. His "Natural Morte" series of photographs is just that, dead things as art.

Displayed earlier this month at the Washington Center for Photography, it is the stuff that makes people squirm. A dead raccoon, the skull of a horse, and the skeleton of a dog.

"The objects are really quite beautiful if you can get past the nature of our cultural fear," Katsiff said. "They are beautiful objects that somehow hint at the mystery of life."

"Many of my subjects are not born, until their death."

His love of photography started as a youngster; his love of the morbid about 10 years ago.

Growing up in Philadelphia, he aspired to follow his older brother into the arts. He got his first camera as a teen-ager and like most people spent most of his time photographing friends and

family.

His talent evolved quickly and while in high school, he had his first exhibit of photographs. It was a display on the walls of a Center City coffeehouse in Philadelphia.

Katsiff wanted to study photography in college, but his parents convinced him that becoming an attorney was the career for him. He enrolled in pre-law courses at Penn State, he said. After a year, he dropped out, moved to New York, and got a job in a photo studio.

He eventually got that degree in the arts, and now teaches photography at Bucks County Community College. January will mark four years as director of the James A. Michener Arts Center in Doylestown.

When he took the teaching position in Bucks County about 20 years, he moved from the city to the wooden countryside of Lumberville. The natural surroundings offered him new subjects to be photographed.



Bruce Katsiff works in his studio creating art using carrion and dried flowers.

(Staff photo)

See IMAGES on Page C 2

## Photographer:

# Images not deadly but artful

Continued from Page C 1

While walking through the woods near his home in 1983, he came across a dead deer on the ground. His camera in hand, he began to take photos of it. He returned several times and caught its slow decay.

"It melted into the Earth," he said.

Many of his photos afterward would be of animals found dead along a highway. He then started scooping them up into a shovel, and taking the animals back to his home where he would photograph the animals in his studio.

"Some people see them for their subject matter — bones, skulls and dead animals — and are horrified," said Peter Blume, director of the Allentown Art Museum. "Others see them for the formalist essay that they are. I think they are wonderful."

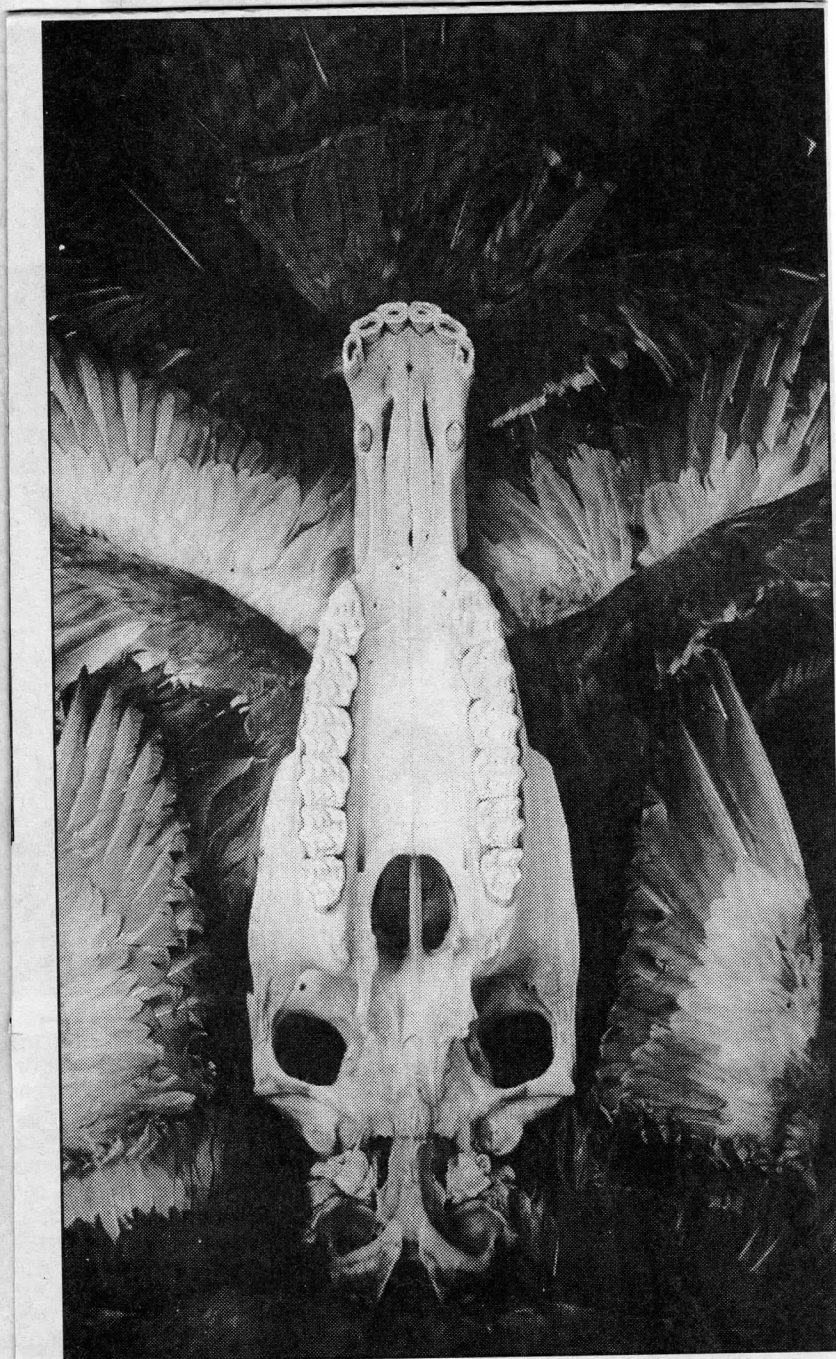
Katsiff photographs have been displayed at the Allentown museum, on occasion, with other Pennsylvania photographers.

They are still life photos of life and death, Blume said. By removing the animals from the roadways, and taking the pictures in his studio, Katsiff gives them a special dignity.

His collection of skulls, bones and animal parts are spread throughout his studio. Many who would first walk through the room full of "little horrors" would cringe, he said.

Now, many are his best source for new subjects: A student once brought him the complete skeletal remains of a mouse and a friend dropped off several dead birds that he found in his wood stove. However, his son still refuses to help him pick up a dead raccoon while driving along the highway.

Since he first started parts of his "Natural Morte" series, people have gradually come to appreciate the photographs. At first,



Here is an example of Bruce Katsiff's work.

many who saw the shots found them distressing. But as they con-

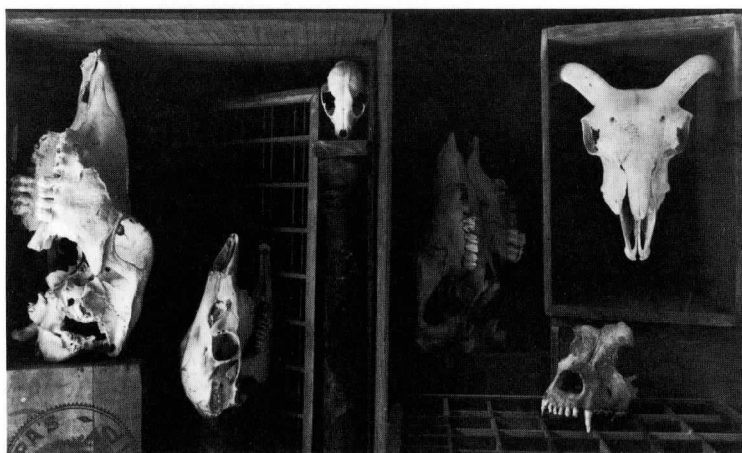
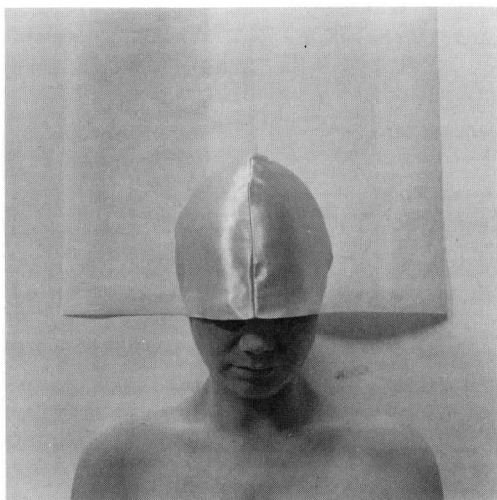
tinued to look, they see the complicated designs, not the deathly image.



**Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts**  
**Morris Gallery**

Susan Fenton/  
Bruce Katsiff  
May 4 through  
June 17, 1990

**SUSAN FENTON/BRUCE KATSIFF**  
**RECENT WORKS: PHOTOGRAPHS BY**  
**SUSAN FENTON AND BRUCE KATSIFF**



Top: Susan Fenton  
*White Satin Helmet*, 1990  
Hand-painted silverprint, 24" x 24"

Bottom: Bruce Katsiff  
*The Golden Section*, 1990  
Platinum/palladium print, 12" x 20"

# The arts

## Striking for expression, hip and thigh

By GEOFF GEHMAN  
Of The Morning Call

Bruce Katsiff knows there are viewers who think his photographic constructions dealing with mortality are perverse. Some are so revolted by the sight of animal skeletons, they imagine the smell of rotting flesh, even though the bones are stripped clean. Some are morally outraged, or just plain spooked, by a cat's head placed on a bird's body like some voodoo talisman. Death monger; grave robber; even killer: Katsiff has been called them all.

Katsiff answers these charges much like he composes pictures: rationally, meditatively, like someone who has spent a decade enshrining life and death. Ever since he came across a deer melting into a forest, the subject that launched "Nature Morte," a series excerpted at Lehigh University, he has been exposing the hidden wonders of anatomy.

"How could you *build* a skull?," asks Katsiff from the James A. Michener Art Center in Doylestown, which he directs. "And yet our skull travels with us our entire life, and we never see it. It only comes to life with the death of the host."

The 46-year-old artist considers himself a kind host. The completely reticulated mouse in "Nature Morte"? Katsiff insists its marvelous framework is more valuable on paper than in the earth. Clay, the eight-years-dead dog spread over another image? "In my view, I've paid him a lot of honor." Joan and Denver's mummified cat, a poster of which made an animal-rights activist demand if Katsiff had been the shotgunner? It's a kind of homage to its owners.

According to Katsiff, objects as beautiful as these deserve memorable settings. His unboxed groupings of bones, wings, dried flowers and ornaments resemble Indian shrines, medieval triptychs, music visualized. His divided boxes are more like stories.

The lower portion of "Pieces of a Life," featuring Clay, is all about ritual. Uncertainty and fate are forces in the upper section. The pelvis in the center doubles as a canal of birth and death. It is one of Katsiff's favorite symbols.

These 12- by 20-inch images are vibrantly soft and firm, thanks to long exposures in natural light, negatives as big as lenses, and the wide tones of platinum/palladium developing. Chalky-white bones seem to hover, even dance, like death masks. Warm greys mist. Prints push subjects like nature does: fram-

ters of severed heads and other grotesques. His chief bank, the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia, produced a 1993 calendar with images of such medical marvels as twins fused at chest and head. The first edition of 3,500 copies sold out.

As Katsiff's work has softened, so, too, has criticism of it. The resident of Lumberville, Bucks County, recalls the days when relatives and friends were paranoid about close encounters with his "little horrors." There was the S.O.S., for example, from a neighbor who was storing two dead dogs, a pair of horse skulls and a ram's head in his backyard — above ground. It seems the wind had whipped up, creating an overpowering stench. Katsiff buried his booty and let the beetles munch.

These days, the same people save specimens for Katsiff. A student donated the prize mouse. A friend found the grackles inside a wood stove. They were covered by a film Katsiff compares to a papery shroud.

Still, death of any sort makes some viewers queasy. Katsiff sells far more prints to museums than individuals. His son, who once refused to pick up a freshly killed raccoon with him, hasn't asked to show "Nature Morte" in his college room. "Some people still take me aside," admits Katsiff, "and say: 'Bruce, you'll feel better when you grow out of this.'"

Katsiff expects his prints will do the growing. Hungry for detail, he has commissioned a 20-by-24-inch view camera. Alfred Stieglitz and the Secessionists had it wrong, he points out. Instead of fuzzing up the world, photographers should magnify it.

Photographs from Bruce Katsiff's series "Nature Morte" are exhibited through Dec. 3 in the Girdler Gallery of Lehigh University's Packer Hall. For information, call 758-3615.

### Gallery review

ing, feeding, filtering. Seen from a moderate distance, they mimic etchings. Little wonder, then, that Katsiff considers himself a painterly director.

Nor is it surprising he thinks photography is therapy. That cat's head on a grackle's body, for example, is partly his response to a fear of birds. Reordered and filmed, the winged creature is "majestic" to him. His parents' deaths in the last five years have forced him to re-examine life, which has led him to make less confrontational pictures. "Nature Morte" began as an essay on decomposition; now it's more about composition.

"Somehow, when we cross the line of life and death, there's a barrier," notes Katsiff. "Rather than deal with that fear, we want to hide it . . . These are pictures you don't make in your youth. These are middle-aged pictures."

Katsiff insists he is hardly alone in believing art is an ideal outlet for reactions to the taboo. After all, Leonardo da Vinci couldn't wait to record dissections, particularly of corpses who had been friends. Photographer Joel-Peter Witkin makes charac-



## A R T

# From Bucks County, by Way of France

D. DOMINICK LOMBARDI

**A**ROUND the end of the 19th century, Bucks County began its long association with the fine arts. Groups like the New Hope School of Impressionists and the New Hope Modernists were inspired, largely, by the success of the French Impressionists.

Today, as before, this area of eastern Pennsylvania is known for its representational artists who specialize in portraying the beauty of the local landscape. What some may not be aware of is that there are many contemporary artists from the region who focus their attention on other movements like Conceptual and Abstract Art.

An exhibition, "Artists of Bucks County," which was curated by Sigmond Balka, includes a cornucopia of styles by 16 artists and is on view at the two Krasdale Galleries — in White Plains and the Bronx.

At the site here, the main thrust of the work is Representational Art. The artist, whose work best sums up the historic link between the French Impressionists and the Bucks County artists is Bruce Katsiff. Two platinum/palladium prints by Mr. Katsiff executed in 1998 — "Roof Snakes" and "Mercer's Vision" — relate specifically to Claude Monet's "Rouen Cathedral" series of 1892-94, whereby Monet painted the same view of the famous cathedral at different, and very specific, times of the day.

Mr. Katsiff's subject is the 1914 castellated, precast concrete rooftop of the Mercer Museum. Judging by the cast shadows and the variant weather conditions, one would assume that the two photographs were taken on separate days, and at or about an hour apart. What gives these works their magical presence is the exceptional tactile quality of the surfaces and the lofty angle at which the rooftops are photographed.

Specializing in the 19th-century Collodion process are the husband and wife team of Mark and France Scully Osterman. Their silver gelatin prints are derived from the same photographic technique that was invented in the 1850's. This process uses a chemically coated glass negative, which when exposed to light must be quickly developed in a makeshift, portable darkroom on site. Regardless of which defects or impurities are avoidable or what is



"The Altar Stone, Cloughbrack, County Galway, Ireland" by France Scully Osterman, above. "Ross Abbey Transepts, Headford, County, Galway, Ireland" by Mark Osterman, top right. Bruce Katsiff's "Mercer's Dream."

accidental or purposely done for effect, the results are wonderful. One piece by Ms. Osterman, "The Altar Stone, Cloughbrack, County Galway, Ireland" (1996), brought to mind the work of Mathew B. Brady.

The art at Krasdale's Hunts Point building is less about representing the region of Bucks County and more about the philosophies embedded in modern and contemporary art. The abstract artists Barbara Osterman and Sandra Scicchitani create works that are the polar opposite of the regionalist landscape. Ms. Osterman, who is the mother and mother-in-law of the aforementioned Osterman team, creates in the traditional medium of watercolor, minimal abstractions that reflect subtle tensions of form and space.

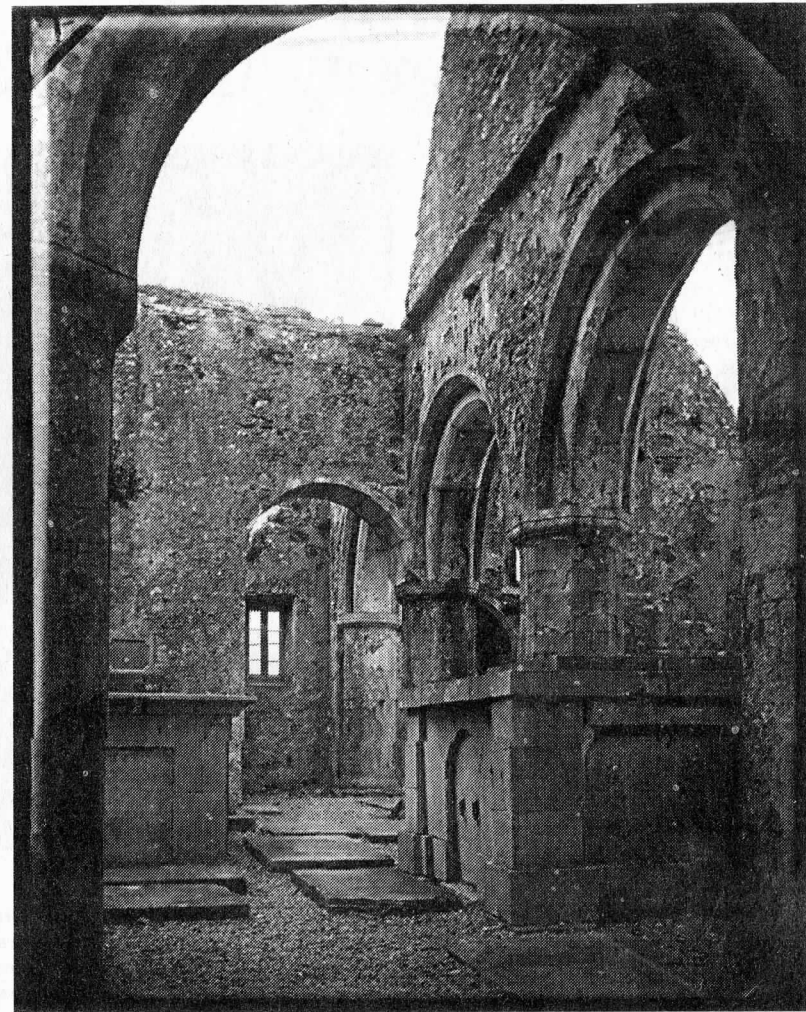
Ms. Scicchitani's images, which are inspired by Henri Matisse's late paper cuts, are equally engaging. Her technique, which capitalizes on

the slow-drying tendencies of oil paint, is derived from the effect of applying, then removing metal or glass plates from the surface of the canvas. After laying down interlocking trapezoidal patches of monochromatic color with a palette knife, Ms. Scicchitani pats the wet paint with a flat plate. The friction from the patting sporadically pulls up some of the paint, creating many raised points, which de-intensifies the starkness of the hard-edge designs.

Conceptually and visually, David Graham's work is this exhibition's most intriguing. "Mathew Stockton, Feasterville, Pa.," two Dye Coupler photographs done in 1987 and 1979, quite nearly re-invent the meaning of timelessness. They are both of a redheaded young man named Mathew Stockton. In both, he stands at the end of a freshly cleared pathway during the peak of autumn. His placement at the end of this soon-to-

be-leaf-covered sidewalk gives the disorienting impression that we are looking at the end of the earth. We see, in the photographs, Mr. Stockton go from adolescence to manhood, a day marked by the spit and polish of his formal military garb.

At the subject's feet sit two matching concrete lions — perhaps a metaphor for protective parents. Behind him and to his left stands a life-size figure of Jesus in a familiar hands-raised and palms-forward pose. What is most compelling about this picture is the subplot. The house, which fills up nearly the entire background, shows signs of neglect punctuated by vandalism. The statue of Jesus' faded and damaged surface makes the clearest impression, when one compares the 1987 version to the earlier work. Its paint is more than half peeled away and the handleless right arm, which is probably made of lead or some sort of malleable ma-



terial, is inexplicably bent inward.

On the left side of the house's foundation, unchecked ivy encroaches on the siding, and to the right, the missing downspout on the side extension was never replaced. I may have it all wrong. Mr. Graham could be a sentimentalist who is well aware of the sacrifices most parents make for

their children, although there is something eerily premeditative about these two images that compels onlookers to read between the lines.

"Artists of Bucks County" continues through June 15. For more information and to schedule a visit, the number to call is 694-6400, extension 2125.



# Katsiff to head Michener museum

By Kathy Boccella  
Inquirer Staff Writer

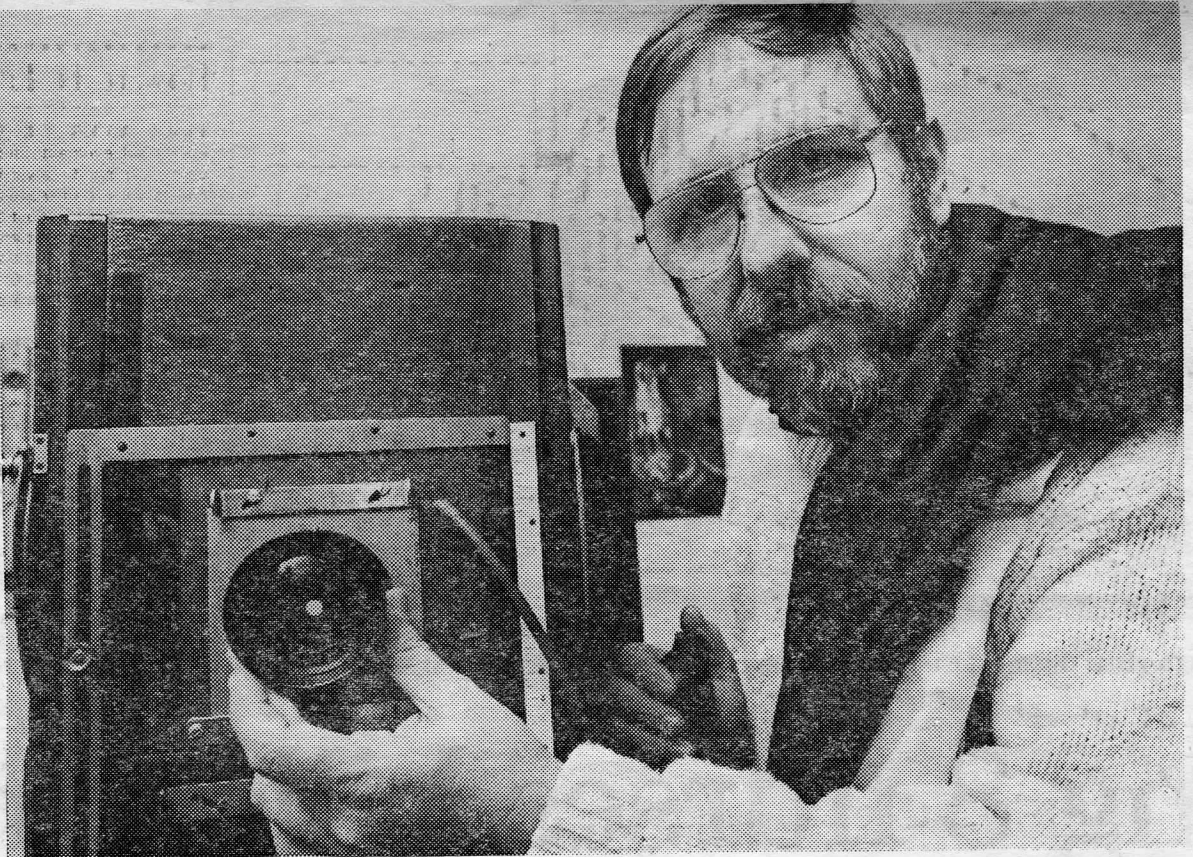
In the 20 years he has lived in Bucks County, Bruce Katsiff has made a name for himself as a photographer and teacher. His still-life photographs have appeared in major museums, and he has won kudos as head of the nationally acclaimed arts program at Bucks County Community College.

Now he is taking on a new role — museum director. On June 1, Katsiff will take over as head of the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, a tiny gem among a growing collection of regional art museums in the Philadelphia area. Katsiff replaces Linda Buki, whose two-year contract was not renewed in January.

The museum opened in September 1988 to much fanfare with three days of festivities and a rare local appearance by Michener, who was born in Doylestown, and his wife, Mari. Since then, however, the museum has suffered from inertia and internal strife.

Last fall, the board of trustees decided it needed a new director, one who had "the ability to get other people motivated," said Herman Silverman, president of the trustees.

The new person also had to have a



Special to The Inquirer / JILL ANNA GREENBERG

**Katsiff, a photographer, has built up the arts program at Bucks County Community College.**

broad art background, administrative abilities and fund-raising experience.

It was a tall order.

The trustees were having trouble finding the right person, when Silverman remembered Katsiff, with whom he had worked on the community college's Artmobile, a 48-foot traveling art gallery.

"My wife is on the college's foundation board. One day I was lying in bed worrying about who we were

going to get when it hit me like a shot. I got up and said to my wife, 'Who's that guy who comes to you all the time and asks for money for programs?'" recalled Silverman, a long-time friend of Michener's and the museum's founder.

Katsiff, a genial 44-year-old, concedes it was his ability to raise money that gave him a competitive edge.

"One of the things that's a little unique about me is, I have an iden-

tity as an artist and this experience in the administrative fund-raising arena," said Katsiff, director of the community college's Arts and Music Department.

During his 17 years at the college, Katsiff amassed thousands of dollars for such critically acclaimed programs as the Artmobile, woodworking and a computer graphics center. He has dabbled in other artistic areas, helping to plan Philadelphia's (See MUSEUM on Page 41)

## BCCC arts director going to Michener museum

**MUSEUM, from Page 3**

Photo Sesquicentennial, a year-long tribute marking the birth of photography.

As museum director, he will be called upon to meet a \$1.5 million endowment goal and raise \$500,000 to double the size of the museum, which occupies a portion of a former county jail on South Pine Street.

"Museums always have a hard time. Generally, they can only bring in a small portion of their budget from door donations. It's always a struggle to find financial resources," said Katsiff, whose work — which he describes as mystical and dealing with life and death — has hung in the Museum of Modern Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

He sees the Michener Museum, which is on the National Register of Historic Buildings and Sites, as filling a huge void in Bucks County's cultural life. Before the museum opened, there was no showcase, other than galleries, for the county's cornucopia of talented artists.

To make his point, Katsiff, who lives in Lumberville with his wife and son, tells the story of the Michener art collection, consisting of hundreds of works by important American paint-

ers. In the early 1960s, Michener offered the collection to the county with the condition it build a museum to house it. The gift was turned down, and the collection is now at the University of Texas in Austin, where Michener lives.

The museum will continue to focus on local artists, such as Fern Coppedge, a Bucks County woman who painted in relative obscurity in the 1950s. The museum will mount the first retrospective of her work in September.

Katsiff was born in Philadelphia and graduated from Central High School. He received a bachelor of arts degree from the Rochester Institute of Technology and a master of fine arts degree at the Pratt Institute in New York. Under his guidance, the college's art program became only the fourth two-year program in the United States to receive accreditation by the National Association of Schools of Art and Design.

As a working artist, he understands the importance of having a highly visible platform like the Michener Museum.

"It's an opportunity for artists' work to be seen, to educate the public and to serve as a catalyst or bridge between the artist and the public," he said.

Art By Edward J. Sozanski

# He made the Michener what it is

*After two decades, director Bruce Katsiff is returning to his calling: Photography*

**B**ruce Katsiff remembers being asked, sometime around 1990, by the board president of the James A. Michener Art Center if he would be interested in running the organization, which had recently opened on the site of the former Bucks County prison in Doylestown.

To that point, Katsiff had been chair of the fine art department, and more recently the art and music division, at Bucks County Community College since 1975.

He was ready for a change but, as he remembers, "I had no interest in running an arts center. I wanted to run a museum."

That turned out to be as easily done as said. The center was rebaptized as a museum, Katsiff was appointed as the organization's second director, and the James A. Michener Art Museum took off on a sustained run of development that continues unabated.

Under Katsiff, the Michener has become one of the more prominent cultural institutions in the Philadelphia area. Until recently, he said, it was the second-most-visited museum in the region, behind the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

It's about to celebrate a double milestone — the opening of its fourth new wing, the Edgar N. Putman Event Pavilion, and of the museum's first international exhibition, a collection of paintings and tapestries from the prestigious Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

Katsiff could legitimately bask in the glow of these accomplishments, but instead he's decided to surrender to the call of his inner vocation, fine-art photography, and step down from museum stewardship.

He expects to vacate his office in the former warden's house sometime during the summer, depending on how long it takes the Michener board to hire a successor.

"It's time for me to return to making pictures, and to restore my identity as an artist," he said. "I think I've done all I can do here. My goal now is to make photos, have exhibitions, and be a dilatante potter."

(Katsiff, who turned 66 in



**Bruce Katsiff stands outside** the nearly complete Edgar N. Putman Event Pavilion, which will soon open. The sculpture is Masami Kodama's "Six Triangles." Katsiff has led sustained development that continues unabated. CLEM MURRAY / Staff Photographer

December, studied ceramics at Pratt Institute, where he earned an MFA. His BFA is from Rochester Institute of Technology.)

If you examine his record at the Michener, "all I can do here" turns out to be quite a lot. Although not the founding director, he essentially built up the museum from next to nothing.

Physically, it began with two 19th-century stone buildings partially enclosed by a section of the 30-foot-high prison wall on a three-acre site; the rest had been haphazardly demolished. When Katsiff took over, the only new construction was an L-shaped gallery building nestled against the wall.

Yet he could see the potential for much more. "Bucks County is known for its arts, but where could one see this artistic tradition?" he asked

rhetorically.

"The site was great, it's the cultural acropolis of Bucks County," a reference to the Mercer Museum across the street. "We needed a facility and a collection that would meet national standards."

Under Katsiff, the museum has achieved both — as well as accreditation by the American Association of Museums in 2001.

The first addition, opened in 1993, more than doubled the museum's size and added an outdoor sculpture garden. The second, funded by a \$1.5 million bequest from Mari Sabusawa Michener, the author's wife, opened in 1996.

In 2009, the museum pushed out its walls again, adding a special-exhibitions space large enough to accommodate such major traveling shows as that from the Uffizi.

The Putman wing, a sleek

glass cube that projects into the sculpture garden, gives the museum a space dedicated to special events and fundraising activities.

(Physical expansion also included establishment in rented quarters of a satellite gallery in New Hope in 2003. The Michener board closed it in 2008 because attendance failed to meet expectations.)

Katsiff's development of the museum's collection is perhaps even more impressive than its physical expansion, because it has established the Michener as a primary center for studying and exhibiting work by Bucks County artists, particularly impressionists associated with the New Hope colony.

This effort began in earnest in 1992 with a campaign to acquire donations of at least 40 museum-quality works. In all, 55 donors gave 187 works,

representing 42 artists from the region. Another key gift in that year came from New Hope physician Kenneth Leiby, who donated 14 paintings by important impressionists.

Katsiff's biggest coup occurred in 1999, when he negotiated the gift of 59 impressionist paintings from Marguerite and H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest. This acquisition pushed the museum into the top rank for this movement, and made it a must-see for Pennsylvania landscapes.

Likewise, the exhibitions program has consistently explored and promoted the achievements of Bucks County painters, many of whom are featured in the current exhibition "The Painterly Voice" (through April 1).

Katsiff hasn't done it all alone; impressive response to various capital campaigns since 1992 indicates that the

museum has built up a broad base of support in its community.

The bond between institution and community began, he said, with James A. Michener himself, who grew up in Doylestown, graduated from Swarthmore College, and became an internationally famous novelist.

"He was a good namesake" who not only contributed \$100,000 to the founding endowment "but who generated a lot of support in the community," Katsiff said.

Perhaps just as important to the Michener's success is Katsiff's background, experience, and philosophy of running a cultural institution.

He grew up in working-class South Philadelphia, son of a butcher and a seamstress. Unlike most museum directors, he's not a credentialed art historian but a studio artist who has compiled an impressive exhibition record for his composed still-lives, including inclusion in a group show at the Museum of Modern Art.

His populist vision for the Michener emerges when he says things like, "Museums are a place where the one percent and the 99 percent come together, voluntarily, and they share. The museum for me represents the democratization of art collections. People who have had good fortune can share with the people less fortunate."

The inevitable question in an exit interview is usually something like, "Do you think you achieved what you had in mind when you came here? To which Katsiff responds, without hesitation, "I think I've surpassed what I dreamed. I think we have achieved more than any of us thought possible 20 years ago."

As someone who has followed the Michener's fortunes since opening day, I agree without reservation, and with considerable admiration.

Contact contributing art critic Edward J. Sozanski at 215-854-5595 or esozanski@phillynews.com. Read his recent work at <http://go.philly.com/edwardsozanski>.





## Bruce Katsiff - Crossing the Golden Section

By

Lizabeth A. Johnson

"This body of work represents the subject matter that I've been concentrating on for the last ten years. I feel it's evolved a lot from where it originally started to where it is now. I think, in part, these are the kinds of pictures you make at this point in your life. I don't think these are the kinds of images that you can make when you're in your twenties."

Bruce Katsiff, November, 1991.

For the most part, people tend not to think of bones as beautiful things. While they are an important part of us in life, we often equate them with the remains of death. In Bruce Katsiff's mind, however, the elements that remain after life are an exquisite and integral part of his imagery.

Katsiff began photographing this subject matter almost ten years ago. In the beginning, he would only photograph found objects. "It all started with one deer," he explains. "I was walking in the woods one day and I came across a dead deer that was slowly melting into the earth, going back from where it came as it were. I just knew I had to record it, so I got out my view camera and began to photograph."

From this starting point, Katsiff began to look for similar subject matter to photograph. Reflecting on his initial interest to shoot these kinds of things, he states, "It's interesting because I think there's a sense of photographers wanting to look at things they're not supposed to look at. That's a basic drive in photographers who want to make art." Another aspect that attracted him was a drive to photograph things that you don't, or can't fully understand.

Early on, the images he created were very confrontational. In fact, Katsiff admits that they often had an attitude that shouted look at that, look at that fly, the  
**Above - The Golden Section, 1989, Photograph © Bruce Katsiff.**





decay, etc. These kinds of images were an important part of the imagemaking process for him, however, and they allowed him to work through to where he is today.

Over time, as the work progressed, Katsiff moved away from found settings and into the studio. He feels that, in part, creating an environment; building and constructing the pictures rather than simply photographing them as they were found has "made the images a lot more elegant". To him, working in "real space with real gravity" brought the pictures together. This also allowed his friends to begin giving him objects that would eventually comprise his collection of "little horrors".

"Once people know that you are interested in this sort of subject matter," states Katsiff, "they go out of their way to bring you things they think you might want." A case in point is a collection of crackles that Katsiff has. "A friend of mine went to start up his wood stove, and inside he found this collection of crackles that must have flown down through the chimney, into the stove, and couldn't get back out. He called me over to see them, and I saw this incredible image where the paper over them was like a shroud. I decided to construct an image with them where I would be able to deal with this sense of flight." In this image, *Frozen Flight* (please see above), Katsiff carefully constructed a set that would not only show the beauty and fragility of the birds, but also a

hidden sense of fear and mystery. In one part of the image he's replaced the head of a pigeon for one of a cat. He will, at times, alter an image in this way, causing people to not merely react to the imagery, but to think more closely about it.

Friends aren't the only ones who will give objects to Katsiff. In fact, one of his better sources are his students. "My students know what I'm doing," he says, "and every so often I'll go into class and find something like this on my desk." "This" is a small box that has a completely reticulated mouse skeleton in it. Not exactly the type of gift most teachers would like to open, but in the case of Katsiff, it is yet another item that will eventually find a place in his work.

One of the things that intrigues Katsiff about working with this imagery is the beauty and mystery of the objects that he photographs. "If you try and imagine that these beautiful things are underneath the surface of our smooth flesh and skin, hidden objects that never see the light. The expression, 'they're not born until the death of the host' comes to mind. It's only after the host has disappeared that these objects are revealed. If you begin to look at them as an object to be photographed, a thing of beauty, a lot of our fear and cultural biases fall by the wayside."

The objects that lie beneath the surface are ones that are impossible to even imagine making. In the photograph *Winged Equine* (please see p. 37), for example, a horse's skull is the central fixture of the image.

**Above - Frozen Flight, 1991, Photograph © Bruce Katsiff.**

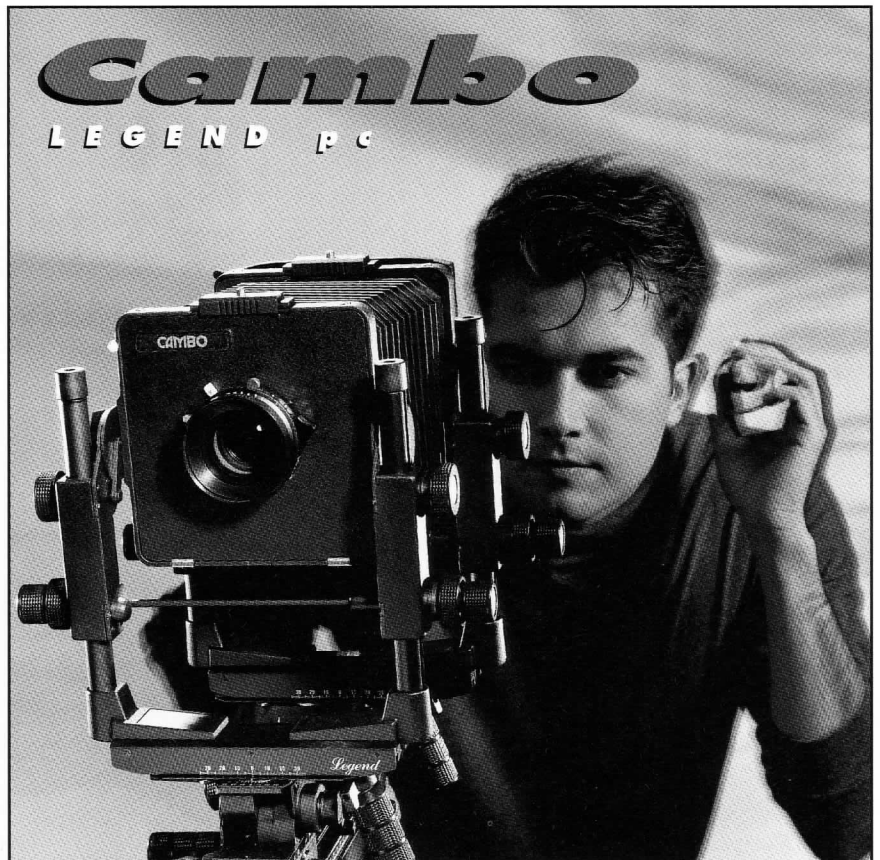
to have some problems in creating his work, but he can only think of one difficulty; people moving about the house while he is working. "It's not unusual for me to have a ten minute exposure on these things," he states, "and if someone is moving downstairs it will affect the shot."

The remaining factor that plays a large role in his work is his use of platinum materials. To a large extent, choosing the 12x20 format came about as a result of his desire to work in this process. He had originally been creating these images in 5 x 7 and 8 x 10, and after determining that he would like to move into platinum, he realized the bigger negative of the 12x20 would give him the look he wanted to achieve. As for the benefits of platinum, Katsiff states, "One of the things about platinum that's great is that you can't get that chalky white with anything else. There's just no way you can pull that kind of highlight detail, that brilliance of the whites; yet hold the richness of the blacks with any other printing method. I also think that there are many different looks that you can get with platinum. Most people think that platinum prints are hazy, but they don't have to be that way. It just depends on what you want to do, and the look you're trying to achieve."

One of the things Katsiff does when he is working in platinum is make masks for his pictures. This allows him to carefully lay the platinum on very large sheets of paper, without edges, and treat it like a printmaking process.

A fact that Katsiff finds interesting is how people's opinions of this work have changed over the years. At one time he admits, "A lot of people were very distressed by these pictures." As time has progressed, however, and as the images have moved away from ones that are thought of primarily confrontational to ones that are thought of primarily as beautiful, he feels that people are much more accepting of the images as a whole. When asked about this fact, he sums up his feelings best by replying, "The more you look at these images, the more you see the elements within them as a design, instead of merely objects. You get away from thinking about what it is, and you begin to see the images for their pure beauty."

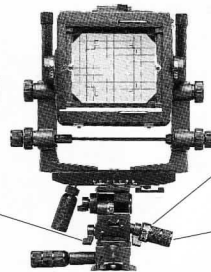
Most of all, Katsiff's photographs have a deep meaning to him. He sums up his own feelings about the work best when he says, "Minor White used to talk about putting energy into your pictures. There needs to be a tremendous amount of commitment that goes into the imagemaking process. This is because by the time you go through all the processes, and all the layers



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of an image, there must be something in a photograph that allows you to get swept away. That's the life and energy of an image. Otherwise it has no meaning. Every image must have an incredibly deep commitment on the part of the photographer. For me, what I want to communicate with the viewer is the life force of the work."

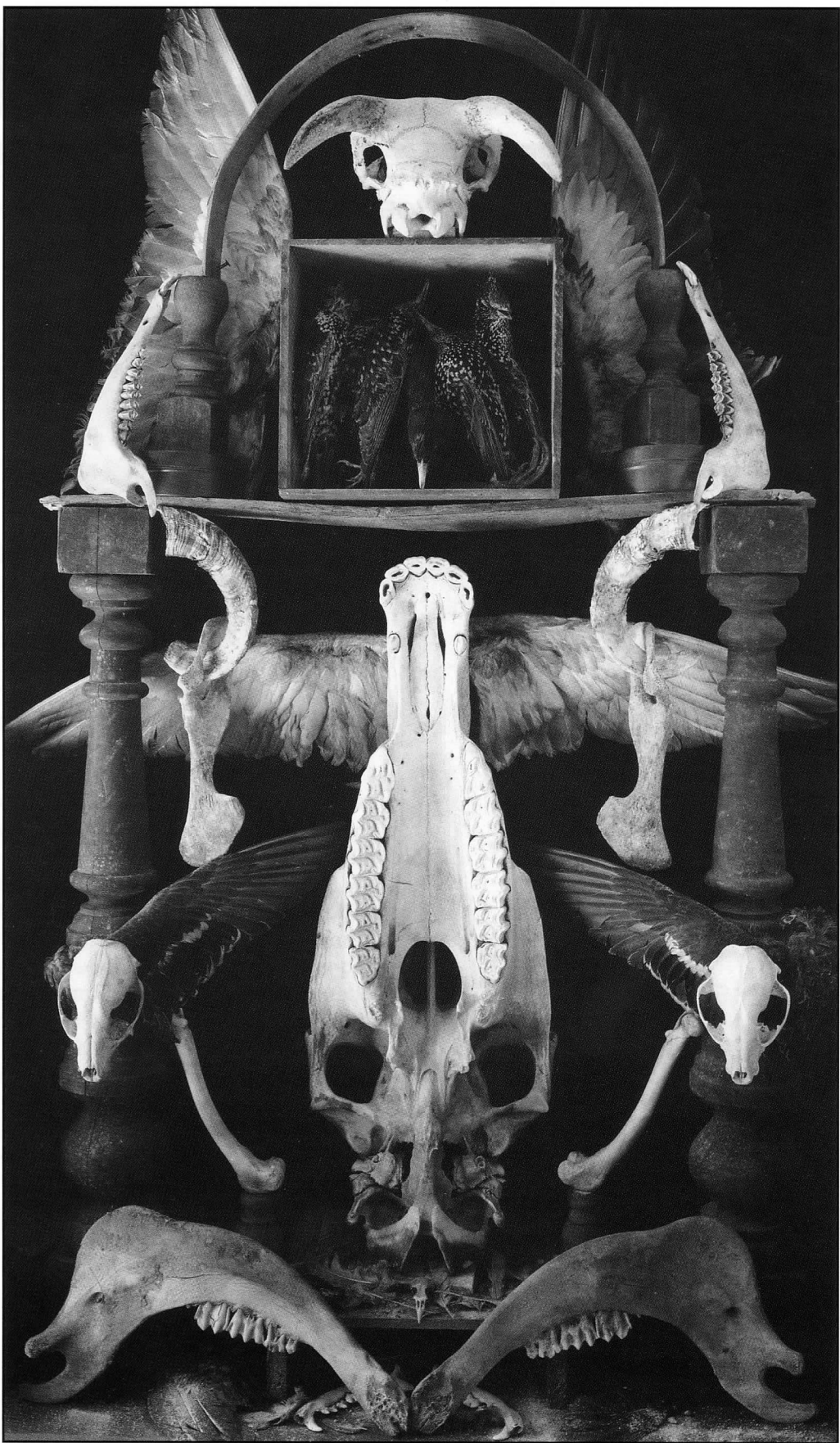
An exhibition of Bruce Katsiff's work will be at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, PA 9 Oct. - 3 Dec. 1992. **Lizabeth A. Johnson is a fine art photographer and writer, and a frequent contributor to VIEWCAMERA™ magazine.**

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**ED. Note. Please see pp. 36 & 37 for the images of Helix and Winged Equine that accompany this text.**



Above - Helix, 1991. Photograph © Bruce Katsiff.





Above - Winged Equine, 1991. Photograph © Bruce Katsiff.