

Debbie Fleming Caffery
Portrait of Neglect: Injustice of Hurricane Katrina

Gallery/Study Guide

Debbie Fleming Caffery is a fine art photographer. Her photographs capture the displaced residents of New Orleans, the destruction and neglect of the Ninth Ward, and artifacts left behind which result in a poignant view of the personal loss, grief, and devastation for those who lived through one of the United States' worst natural disasters.

Debbie Fleming Caffery's photos are shot in black and white, are overly pictorial,

Debbie Fleming Caffery is known for her dark images and moving portraits. A New Orleans native, she received a Katrina Media Fellowship from the Open Society Institute Soros Foundation to photograph the aftermath of the hurricanes Katrina and Rita. For more than 30 years, Caffery's keen eye and camera have explored the people and culture of Louisiana. From immigrant sugar cane field workers to alligator hunts and family portraits, she has exhibited extensively in the US. Among her highly praised publications are *Polly* (Twin Palms Press 2004) and *Carry Me Home* (Smithsonian 1990).

yet psychological and sometimes darkly beautiful. Caffery's images deal with what she calls *shades of mystery and shadow*. For Caffery, even bright daylight doesn't dispel mystery. Most of the time Fleming Caffery deliberately blurs her pictures, for atmospheric effect, but sometimes she focuses them so sharply they become hyper-real. (*Tucson Weekly: Arts, 2002*)

Fleming Caffery is most comfortable in the shadows, drawn to movements, patterns and deep tonality. Caffery's photography has garnered praise for over twenty years, and has been included in exhibitions from the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D. C. to the Photo Gallery International, Tokyo. Her work is in the collections of the Metropolitan

Museum of Art, New York; the George Eastman House, Rochester; and the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, France.

Before Debbie Fleming Caffery received the Katrina Media Fellowship in 2006, she received the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship for 2005. Her most recent book, *Polly*, chronicles her long friendship with a solitary and proud African-American woman in the sugar country of Louisiana.

Look closely at the photographs on display. Choose one photograph to concentrate on as you describe what you see.

- What is the subject matter or idea that is conveyed?
- How does the artist use lights, darks and gray values in the photograph?
- Does the artist use angles, lines, perspective? How?
- How does the artist use shape and form?
- Would you describe the space within the photo as empty or full?

- Does the artist use texture? If so, describe what it looks like.
- Describe the feelings and thoughts you have when viewing this photograph.
- Describe the people in the photograph. Do they appear happy, joyful, sad, angry, depressed, indifferent or what?

Now compare all of the photographs.

- Do you think these photos tell a story? What is that story? Is the story the same for each photo?
- What do you think is the primary concept or idea underlying this exhibit?
- Do you think the artist is successful in her attempt to present the primary concept? Why or why not?
- Do you respond most to the photos that include people, or those with animals, or those without either in them? Why?
- Discuss which photo is your favorite and why. Which photo do you like the least?
- If you were to describe this photographic exhibit to someone else, what would you say? Would you encourage them to see this work or not?

After Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, fine art photographer Debbie Fleming Caffery found herself in the role of photojournalist, documenting the stories of those most affected. This is what she wrote:

I did not experience the first few days in New Orleans during the horrific flooding, as I was at the River Center Shelter in Baton Rouge photographing for People Magazine. The assignment was to do portraits of the evacuees and what they evacuated with. I worked with a writer from New York and we both were extremely upset in our quest for the story. We watched people being checked into the shelter, having to go through typical airport security machines and have their belongings checked by the National Guard. They were evacuated into a huge convention room lined with hundreds of cots. We talked to many people and I photographed few. We found that most of the people we met were evacuated from the flood waters of New Orleans and did not have any personal items with them. An elderly woman showed me the only personal item she brought with her besides the clothes on her back, was her dead husband's driver license. The few that were able to bring belongings with them brought their Bible, family pictures and family members. One kid told me he brought himself! . . .

Not being a photo journalist and all of a sudden being part of the press in my backyard, seeing my people so hurt was heart wrenching. We heard many stories, we consoled, the evacuees cried and I cried and Ryan the writer bowed his head in sadness. The Red Cross was at the shelter helping in the most kind, patient, human way possible. The evacuees were greeted as criminals by the soldiers, but thank heavens were comforted by the Red Cross and the volunteers. I saw hundreds of volunteers from all over the country arrive on their own dollar and sometimes on their vacation time to help the victims of the hurricanes. I also am aware of the millions of dollars given by people all over the world to help. The volunteers and the voluntary donations were not begged for, they were given from the good hearts of compassionate people. The state of Louisiana continues to beg for help from the government. It is still desperate. As late November, trash is piled up all over the area. I was photographing in St. Bernard Parish and had to leave because of burning eyes and a severe headache. Imagine what the people go through whose homes were destroyed and are searching through the rumble for any memento they can find, as well as the clean up crews.

Each morning I say a prayer of thanks that the media was there to show the world the truth.