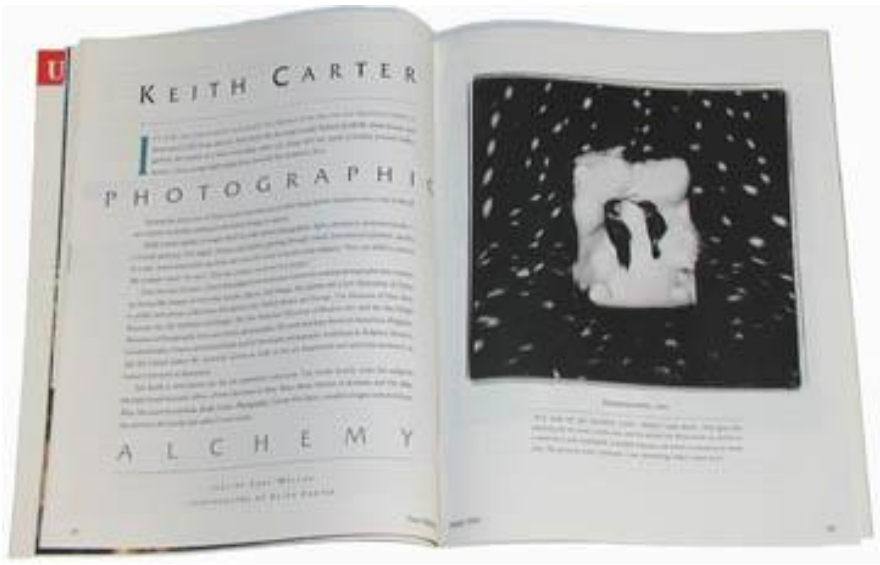
Photographic Alchemy:

Photographer Keith Carter Reveals the Mythic in the Mundane

by Cory Walton

It's 5:30, and the morning sun hasn't yet broken over the oak and magnolia trees of Beaumont's Old Town district. But inside the tin roofed studio behind a modest stone house, the sound of a blues recording wafts out, along with the smell of freshly brewed coffee. Inside, a deep orange light peeps from beneath the darkroom door.



Behind that door, one of Texas most unique and prolific visual artists excitedly waits over the trays of developer, as his latest image ghosts through the liquid onto a blank sheet of white paper.

Keith Carter speaks of an element of magic in photography: Light, chemistry, precious metals--a certain alchemy. The slight, 50-year old Carter, peering through round, horn-rimmed glasses, speaks in a soft, warm drawl that can disarm even the most reticent of his subjects. "You can wield a camera like a magic wand almost," he says, "Murmur the right words and you can conjure up proof of a dream."

In the last 25 years, Carter has gained international renown for his ability to conjure up the magic, the dream state behind everyday people, places and things. His work has added a secret dimension of Texas to public and private collections throughout the country and Europe, including the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, the Art Institute of Chicago, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the San Diego Museum of Photographic Arts.

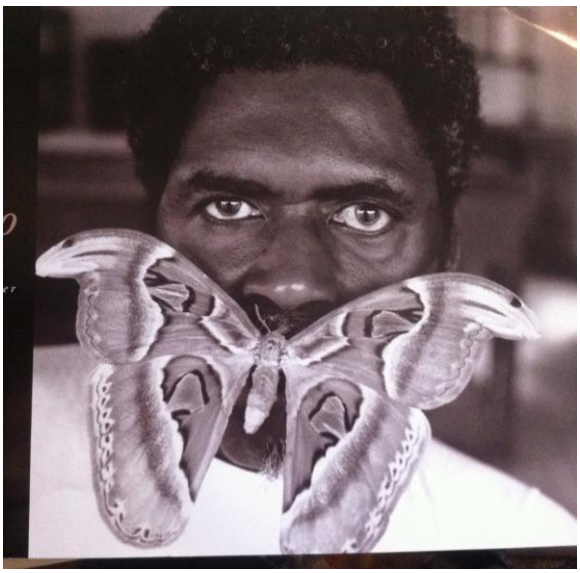
But Carter is best known for his six published collections. The books loosely unite his subjects through broad thematic titles like, "Mojo," "Bones," "Heaven of Animals" and "The Blue Man." His most recent book, "Twenty-five Years," is a compilation of images from the previous five, adding 37 new works.

"His images remind you of something you remember but didn't know you remembered," says screenwriter Bill Wittliff, founder of San Marcos' Wittliff Gallery of Southwestern and Mexican Photography, repository of over 400 Carter images. "Keith's a poet with a camera," Wittliff says, "The power of his work is partly on the surface; part is the invisible content within."

The photographic alchemy within Keith Carter began before he was born. His mother traversed the midwest before she married, making portraits of sorority girls. His earliest memories were of

studio to support herself, Keith and his sister. "My mother turned our apartment kitchen into a darkroom at night," he recalls, "I remember the orange light and the sound of running water, and every now and then getting up and watching as one of Mother's prints would come up in the developer."

But he never took any interest in his mother's work until years later, during a visit home from college. "She had this stack of prints on the floor leaning against the wall," he recalls, "and there was this portrait of a little girl sitting next to a tree, backlit by the sun, and the rim of light looked like a halo around her head. It fascinated me. I asked my mom if I could borrow her camera, and I spent the day shooting pictures. I showed them to her and she said things like, 'Oh, you've got a good sense of light,' and, 'That's a good composition,' or, 'You have a very good eye.' That kind of encouragement, combined with the fact that I was almost through college and still didn't have I clue what I wanted to do with my life, steered me into this career."



While assisting his mother, sometimes dressing as a clown to humor her subjects, Carter voraciously studied the great photographers. Sculptor David Gargill, a fellow Beaumonter and an early mentor, fed Carter books on the arts and artists. Nineteenth century French photographer Eugene Atget, primitivist painter Henri Rousseau and surrealist collage artist Joseph Cornell particularly influenced him.

After his mother remarried, moved to Rockport, and began winding down her portrait business, Carter returned to Beaumont in 1977, moved into

the stone house in Old Town and opened his own portrait studio in the garage.

Taking every portrait and commercial assignment thrown his way during the ensuing years, Carter didn't begin to find his "voice" as a photographic artist until 1985. That's when he attended a lecture from southern writer Horton Foote, who said that an artist has to "belong to a place." "That made me straighten up in my seat like I'd been struck by a thunderbolt," Carter says, "I realized I had this exotic place right here, and I started looking at my surroundings like some foreign, forgotten land."

At that time, he was compiling his first photo essay book, "From Uncertain to Blue", which portrays tiny crossroad Texas towns with oddball names like "Diddy Waw Diddy," "Looneyville," "Uncertain" and "Blue" The project began as a tenth anniversary present to his wife, business manager, critic and greatest supporter, Pat. It lead to a full year of the "fandangos" that became a hallmark of Carter's working methodology-loading up his station wagon with the ancient Haselblad medium format camera, and driving the backroads of Texas with Pat in search of what Carter once called, "imagination in the boondocks."

"I'd been muddling through that book, still in a documentary style," Carter says, "but Horton gave me the freedom to explore these places as microcosms, complete with hope, despair, skeletons in the closets, elegance and grace right next to depravity and misery-almost as allegory. And the transition in my work was dramatic."

The transition really came to light in his next book, "The Blue Man" (1990). The title came from a conversation by Pat about the butcher in her home town of Trinity, whose skin was, literally, blue. "Blue Man was my first simplification of East Texas," Carter says, "That's when I started working within the animal world and nature. I combined that with the music, religion, and folklore I'd grown up with. These are my points of reference. They're what I know."

"Once you discover your art," says Carter, "it's not only close at hand, it's transportable." In the ever-widening path of his "fandangos," Carter strives to make his photos non location-specific. "I think I've done well if I take a photo in Argentina or Antwerp and no one knows it was taken in Argentina or Antwerp."

"Even though he's gone far beyond Texas with his work, he's done it with the same reverence for the place he emerged from," says Houston Museum of Fine Arts photographic art curator Anne Tucker, "Keith has a style that evolved because he didn't pick up and move to New York or Europe or Los Angeles. It evolved from his origins in the luxuriant, wet, warm, humid landscape-that excessive kind of place that is East Texas."

In his studio darkroom, Carter, intent on his work like some modern day Merlin, pulls his latest print out of the fixer bath and slides it into the final stage of the alchemy: water-the supremely ordinary, yet crucial element in all life forms-before hanging it up to dry.

"Texas is a mythical state," he says, "I try to make my work mythic, and I take this place with me everywhere I go. I look for the same enigmatic elements of humanity-the same way human and animal consciousness overlap. It just may not talk with a drawl."