

Review of Heaven of Animals

by Peter Brown

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Book Info:

Heaven of Animals

Keith Carter

Essay by Greil Marcus

Rice University Press

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Keith Carter's book, Heaven of Animals is the darkest and most beautiful of the remarkable four that he has published in an equally remarkable eight years. He is a photographer from East Texas, a part of the state that derives more from the deep south than from the open spaces generally associated with the west, and over the years he has come to photograph this country like an apparition. On the most basic level, his work has to do with the rural river bottom communities of the Trinity, Neches and Sabine, but his photographs also tend to creep around corners, drop unexpectedly from trees, and hand out manna and sly jokes in church.

In his books, From Uncertain to Blue, The Blue Man, Mojo and now Heaven of Animals he has given himself wide latitude in his choice of subject matter. And while each book has its own set of concerns, in many cases images might be interchanged book to book without great consequence. The books, viewed in this way, become apiece, one unfolding and deepening into the next in a progression that moves from documentary concerns, to a description of an inner world of place that deepens with each volume.

The look of Heaven of Animals is one of opulence, that of a lavish nineteenth century photographic album or strange small town funeral register. (Design, in all of Carter's books becomes virtually inseparable from the tone set by his photographs, and D.J. Stout who has collaborated with him on each, deserves great credit for this seamlessness.) The book is magical, creating a pocket one drifts into, as one would into sleep, or a daydream, or a strange roadside museum - as though we have entered another's memory, and thoughts not our own but intimately connected to us, tug us along. A child might have us by the hand (we are close to the ground and our focus is limited) and we are shown a world - things that are loved, things that are frightening, beautiful things, strange things: dogs, fires, out of control horses, old people, chickens, a hunter with a halo, a mannequin that may be breathing, a clock with no hands.

All this could be hokey of course - but instead it feels dark and sad, sweet and beautiful, smooth and velvety - rescued from the gothic by editorial clarity and visual depth. There are a few photographs in which Carter seems to strut a bit: two black kids with watermelons stuck on their heads, a man with a rattlesnake skin streaming from his mouth, or a boy who sits with half a globe for a hat - riveting photographs, but images that confirm a photographer's forceful presence; and these tend to bring us up short. Stout's use of text does this as well, but with different purpose. While

the photographs seem almost silent, the large title type shouts - a discordance, but one that effectively if uneasily balances the page. Greil Marcus's thoughtful afterword is given similar treatment. Key words - talismanic, spirit, animal and the like are placed in bold type, creating a visual score of sorts from a considered essay. 'No room for words here,' forces seem to say. 'If you insist on staying, we'll kudzu you up and make you our own.'

Carter has tapped into an area of national consciousness. His more than regional following confirms this - and beneath the layered beauty of his work, an American romance with the South simmers away. There's an innocence maintained in these photographs that has to do with childhood, yet the potential for its violation by remembered history, by local custom, or by any one of us, hovers in the shadows, counterbalancing it, confirming its preciousness and vulnerability.

Heaven of Animals enters into our own preconceptions and stories, as our stories and histories have formed our lives. Through the photographs, we move in and out of ourselves as we might move in and out of a shared memory - ghost dogs in one of Carter's swamps, hummingbirds dodging cold fronts and love charms, off to find shelter.