

AMERICAN
CONNECTION

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Susan Burnstine in search
of the late **James Fee**

I first discovered the work of James Fee while wandering through Craig Krull's booth at Photo LA eight years ago. Fee's haunting imagery instantly took my breath away and has continued to resonate ever since. I quickly purchased Fee's book and dreamed of meeting him but, sadly, he lost his battle with cancer in 2006 only a few months after I was introduced to his imagery.

This month, Craig Krull Gallery in Santa Monica, California will be presenting a retrospective of James Fee's work entitled *Buoyancy*. As it speaks to me on a profoundly personal level, I explored the history of this great photographer by chatting with his close friend and patron, Robert Brinkmann, and his longtime friend and gallery representative, Craig Krull.

Craig Krull considers Fee as: 'One of the truly great practitioners and experimenters in the traditional darkroom process.' He explains that his former mentor, Edmund Teske, was best known for his duotone-solarisation process, which Fee also practiced. Krull explains, 'For Teske, the process was a reflection of his belief in Vedanta teachings that emphasised the interplay of natural forces of the universe. For Fee, I believe it was more of an exploration into the unknown. He was manipulating the medium, but it was a collaborative process with the materials.' He continues, 'He not only solarised and played with the duotone process, but he scratched and marked his negatives, layered and sandwiched them, and used gold and selenium toners.



His energy and zeal to produce was Herculean, like Picasso.'

Robert Brinkmann first met James Fee in 1991 while attending an exhibition of his work in Los Angeles. He recalls that he was instantly taken by the imagery, then arranged to view his portfolio some months later.

During their meeting Fee presented 20 photographs to Brinkmann and discussed how he wanted to travel across America to document the decaying industrial base and infrastructure of a once mighty industrial nation. Fee had wanted to leave his career as a commercial photographer to focus on personal work and was trying to find a way to make this dream a reality. Brinkmann recalls, 'James and I connected through this vision and, when I laid eyes on the images he brought, in particular the *SS United States*, I was hooked.' Brinkmann then agreed to pre-purchase a first edition of each photograph before Fee created them, which allowed him to fund his travel and create the images he envisioned. It was Fee's intention to create 100 images in one year, but it took him over five years to complete what is now known as the *America Series*.

The themes of decay and loss

were prevalent in Fee's work and he readily stated he felt his work was 'filled with death'. Yet, the dichotomy of hope is also in his images. Brinkmann explains, 'I think James believed in the promise of this country, its potential and ideals. He saw the sacrifices made by the generation of his father in World War II and was disturbed by the fact that these ideals had been hijacked and subverted by the narrow self-interest of the powerful. Call him a romantic, an idealist, a child of the 60s – he saw the beauty of what had been and the potential of what could be in the decay he photographed. His work is not just about death, but contains the dream of re-birth, a hope that was certainly present in James, and without which he surely wouldn't have laboured as tirelessly as he did.'

While discussing Fee's impetus for the work as a whole, Brinkmann specifies that it was

EXHIBITIONS

USA

CHICAGO

Art Institute of Chicago
Dawoud Bey:
Harlem, USA
Until 9 September

artice.edu

Catherine Edelman Gallery
Some of the Parts
Kelly Anderson-Staley,
Elizabeth Ernst, Myra Greene
and Gregory Scott
13 July to 1 September
edelmangallery.com

LOS ANGELES

Annenberg Space
For Photography
Who Shot Rock & Roll
Featuring Diane Arbus, Lynn
Goldsmith, Henry Diltz, Annie
Leibovitz and more
Until 7 October
annenbergsspaceofphotography.org

NEW YORK

Guggenheim Museum
Rineke Dijkstera:
A Retrospective
Until 3 October
guggenheim.org

NEW YORK

Pace/Macgill Gallery
Nicholas Nixon
21 June to 22 August
pacemacgill.com

PORTLAND

Blue Sky Gallery
Bobby Abrahamson,
North Portland Polaroids
and Daniel Traub,
Philadelphia
Until 31 July
blueskygallery.org

SAN FRANCISCO

Corden/Potts Gallery
Beth Moon
Until 28 July
cordenpottsgallery.com



Fee's relationship with his father that created the central theme of his life and work. His father was a survivor of one of the bloodiest battles of World War II on the island of Peleliu and suffered undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder, which contributed to a very difficult home environment and, ultimately, his

suicide. Years after his death, Fee worked to reconcile his love and admiration for his father and his troubled upbringing by photographing the *Peleliu* series.

Fee's upcoming exhibition, *Buoyancy* denotes several significant thematic elements within Fee's life. Krull explains, 'James once told me that his life

and work were about "staying afloat". I took this to mean that there was a degree of struggle involved. It also affirmed the powerful symbolism of water in his work. Boats appear quite often in his photographs, sometimes afloat, but usually sinking. So the boat becomes a symbol of sinking principles, once considered as sound as a perfect ship, like the *SS United States*. The boat could equally represent the artist himself.'

The monograph, *James Fee*, published by St. Ann's Press in 2001 remains a favorite to this day. The book is now out of print, but to purchase a copy, send an email inquiry to:
jamesfeebook@gmail.com.

Buoyancy opens on 14 July and remains on view until 1 September at the Craig Krull Gallery in Santa Monica, California, craigkrullgallery.com

jamesfee.com

