Three Acadiana Artists Are Breaking Onto The National and International Arts Scene This Year. The Following Are Portrait Sketches of the Life and Busy Times These Days of Debbie Fleming Caffery, Robert Dafford and Francis Pav.

By Katrinna Huggs

Photos by Robin May

Debbie Fleming Caffery: Documenting The Mood of The Cane Fields

Debbie Fleming Caffery's life is a picture of sweet antebellum. The gracious old Southern home where Caffery lives with her husband and three children in the historic community of Franklin is off the main old New Iberia highway near sugarcane fields. Hidden from the highway by a grove of oak trees, the well-worn house that's been handed down in the family nourishes a style of living that inspires writers, artists or photographers like herself.

Growing up in the rural community of Franklin, Caffery, now 42, was raised around the sugarcane fields. Hidden from the highway by a grove of oak trees, the well-worn house that's been handed down in the family nourishes a style of living that inspires writers, artists or photographers like herself.

As life in the sugarcane fields has evolved, so has Caffery's process of developing her work. Perhaps it's the way she photographs workers that became her passion as an artist. Since 1973 she has been photographing them—their beauty, their productivity and their workers.

Caffery's black and white portraits have been exhibited in collections in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which recently purchased one of her works for its permanent collection; the Smithsonian, where she is in a permanent collection; the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which has purchased two of Caffery's prints; the New Orleans Museum of Art; the Louisiana State Museum; and the Carpenter Center for Visual Studies at Harvard University. Back in Caffery's kitchen, the photographer is surprised to be able to offer her guest a Coke. Cokes don't last too long around her place, especially in the summertime. One check on the kids watching TV in another room, a couple of kisses, then Caffery does a quick rig job on the kitchen telephone so that the line will ring in her darkroom in the back yard. That's where she's spending most nights these days. Long after the rest of the family is asleep is when Caffery finds a few hours of the uninterrupted, peaceful quiet that all artists need but that a wife and mother of three must contrive to get.

For the next few weeks, 3 a.m. nights in the darkroom will be de rigueur for Caffery. Prints need to be made for her show in Munich, Germany, on Sept. 14, followed by an exhibit at the Opus Foundation in New York City on Oct. 1. Prints must also be made for Caffery's second Smithsonian show, which opens Oct. 17. The opening will also be a book signing event for Caffery's first solo photography book, Carry Me Home, a retrospective of her work from 1973-89, published by the Smithsonian Press.

And before all that, Caffery is planning to go to Portugal in early September to wrap up a photography project she was commissioned to do by Encontros de Photographia in Combra, Portugal to commemorate the local university's 700th anniversary. That exhibit, which Caffery will attend, opens in Portugal on Nov. 3. In fact, Caffery just got back from Portugal. She also has a French publisher interested in publishing her Portuguese work. And as if that's not enough, after the November opening there are four other exhibits lined up through March of next year, in Houston, Lafayette, New Orleans and Arizona State University.

Dressed in a very feminine cotton blouse, pants and knee-high rubber boots, Caffery is a cross between Southern elegance and tomboy. Her darkroom looks like an old abandoned servants' quarters. On the way to the darkroom, a green garden snake swiftly slithers in front of her feet. Caffery doesn't even flinch. Instead, she tries to catch it. Her kids would love it, she says.

Inside, Caffery takes off her boots and seats herself horizontally in an old tasseled chair. "I feel this year is major," says Caffery, casually slinging her bare feet and legs over the chair's arms. "I have nine one-person exhibits. That's too much for me, really. But you know. Anyway..."

The phone rings. "There's the kids."

In Caffery's earlier work, the photographer was more interested in documenting a period in history that she sees as threatened. Caffery began feeling the agrarian aspect of the industry was dying years ago when so many of the local sugar mills started closing and hand labor was being replaced by mechanical labor. While some farms have gone back to using more field hands for efficiency, the effects of modern technology and economic devastation like last winter's freeze have endangered the viability of this industry's continuity with the past.

As life in the sugarcane fields has evolved, so has Caffery's process of depicting it. Her simple, documentary style in the '70s and mid-'80s that showed exactly what was going on in the fields—the actual physical work, the texture and color of skin and tools—has developed into more artistically composed portraits that are dark and abstract and sometimes hauntingly surrealistic in nature.

Instead of photographing the workers and the sugar mill in broad daylight during the height of activity, Caffery now captures
the mood of the sugarcane industry in the earliest hours of the morning.

"If you go before 6 a.m. the mills are grinding and it's real noisy because of the huge payloads carrying cane. Then there's all the steam coming out from the mill. The light is very strange. It's real moist around the mill.

"Then at 6 a.m., all of the sudden, right before dawn, there's an incredibleshift of light. You have an orange-pinkish light coming from the mill, the darkness in some areas, then truck lights streaming in from the fields. These precious minutes before the end of the night when the trucks are unloading the cane. It's very surreal and scary."

A woman alone in the night in sugarcane fields photographing a way of life during harvest season. "Am I afraid to go out? No," Caffery says candidly. "I'm much more scared to go to a tea party."

**ROBERT DAFFORD:**

**Expanding His Horizons**

Robert Dafford's house is a wreck. Dafford and his wife, Sissy Whipp, are wrecks. Two nights ago they flew back to Lafayette after a five-week stay in France where Sissy was the choreographer and a dancer with the touring company La Compagnie Louisianaise, and Robert was commissioned by two cities to paint murals.

In a week Robert's sister will be moving in. Boxes are everywhere. Dafford will be off to Seattle on another mural job, and Sissy will be heading to New York in the family's van loaded with furniture and kids. The family is moving to New York for a year. This time, Sissy will be teaching dance at the University of New York at Potsdam and Robert will be working on a group of historical paintings commissioned by Acadian Village.

It's hectic but not impossible for Dafford to keep up with his wife's dancing career nowadays. Dafford can find work as a mural artist in almost any city he chooses. When Whipp decided to work with La Compagnie Louisianaise this summer, for example, Dafford decided to plan his work around touring in France. With the help of Le Centre International he proposed murals to 20 cities in France. He ended up painting two, one on a government building across from City Hall in Suresnes, west of Paris on the Seine, and another on a public building in the countryside town of Le Puy in central France.

By the end of his weeklong job in Suresnes, Dafford had been courted by Avenir, Europe's biggest ad agency. The agency is interested in Dafford painting some of the 40 or more murals it produces in France each year. The Paris Department of Public Arts has offered Dafford a commission to paint a mural in the city this winter. There were definite or possible commissions with several other cities.

The murals Dafford did in France are part of his "Horizon" series. The series is a "trompe l'oeil," or "trick the eye" style that features a painted wall with a large violin jetting out from an illusory arch. The background of each mural represents the local landscape of the particular city. The idea of the wall and the violin, perhaps Dafford's most creative mural concept yet, is that walls represent barriers—whether social, political or economic—between people, and the universality of music opens the walls.

The first "Horizon" series was painted on a building on Vermilion Street in Lafayette for the Festival International de Louisiane in 1988. Next, Dafford did another "Horizon" for the Festival Franco-Ontarien in Ottawa, Ontario. The two "Horizon" murals in France bring the series to four. "The desire is to have this violin take me around the world, and it's going so far," Dafford says.

Dafford's name and respectability in the business have come after a decade-long haul as a commercial mural artist.
painting large-scale works in "every environment, in every style, and on every surface imaginable," as his job description reads. And after doing it for much less than his time or the murals were worth.

"People used to say, 'You're crazy to do those paintings so cheap.' But it's been part of a plan. Now that I've got all of it done, you can comprehend what I've been up to. After 10 years of painting murals I've paid my dues."

The Horizon series is only part of the Dafford story. The bulk of his work is historical murals. Considered one of the most prestigious mural painters in the country, Dafford's work is everywhere now—from British Columbia to Ohio to New Orleans. Although he feels he hasn't always been accepted by the local arts community because he is not a "fine" artist, Dafford has no qualms considering himself a commercial painter.

"When I first set out to be a professional artist, I didn't have the illusion I'd be an Andy Warhol. And I wanted to be comfortable and as stable as possible. Or as stable as an artist can be! The historical work would always bring me work."

He also sees the trend of historical murals in cities across the country as the trend that will bring him the most recognition in the long run. "It was my desire to be a world class painter. I want to be the guy that gets invited to all those things."