



clockwise: from the *Elegy Series*: Barred Owl; from the *Bird Series*: Reeve's Pheasant, Mourning Dove, Superb Lyrebird IX.

A Canadian photographer comes home, eager to explore and share the bizarre and beautiful images that dance in her imagination.

CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF DEBORAH SAMUEL

BY JANET DAVIES



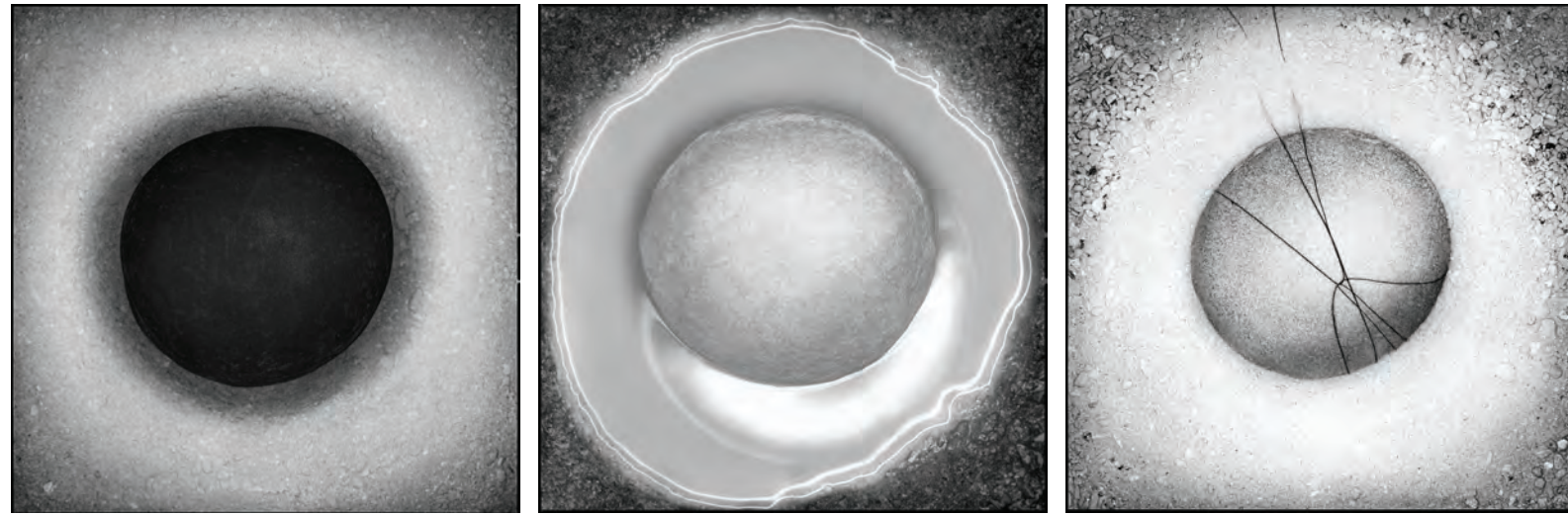
ACCLAIMED Canadian photographer Deborah Samuel has come home after 27 years in the U.S., most recently in the sun-baked isolation of New Mexico. I met her in a borrowed cabin near Colborne. "I don't get on well in big cities," she said, despite years spent in Toronto, New York, London and Los Angeles.

I'd read she could be difficult to write about, and she is intense. But as I sipped hot tea, stroked her scruffy little Jack Russell and listened to her talk freely about life and work, I knew my only difficulty would be condensing her passion and stories onto these pages.

In the 1980s and '90s Deborah Samuel was one of Canada's most sought-after commercial and editorial photographers. Today, she concentrates on fine art, commissions and the occasional book. Her work is in public and private collections around the world, and possibly in yours, too, if you collect vintage vinyl. Her first clients were musicians and she shot iconic album covers for the likes of Rush and Alannah Myles.

In the 1990s she moved to California and spent a couple of years shooting celebrities, but "L.A. is like another planet," she said shaking her head. "I had to get back to earth." In 2000 she walked away from it all to do the personal projects she had wanted to do for 20 years, starting with photographing dogs. She picked up a three-book publishing offer and her title, *Dog* was a bestselling instant classic. Bold and funny and beautiful,

above: Mao and Deborah Samuel, photograph by Kirsten Scollie



it was followed by *Pup*, but she balked at a third, not wanting to get pigeonholed as a dog photographer. Today, Deborah shoots what she pleases: flowers, bones, nudes and still life. She's hard to categorize which can frustrate galleries, but her explorations thrill collectors.

She never planned to be a photographer. After Limerick College of Art and Design in Ireland, where her family had moved to start a stud farm, she applied to study pottery at Sheridan College, but the course was cancelled. "I had to choose again, so I said, 'okay I'll do photography,'" she recalled. "I sort of fell into it. I was a very good darkroom printer, so after Sheridan, I got a job printing and then opened my own studio. It was so much easier back then!"

Her radical edgy style shot her to fame. "I did a lot of grainy, black and white fashion which everybody wanted. But I didn't want to become known as the Grain Queen of Canada," she laughed. "There were huge budgets then, and when money is flowing, companies love creativity. When times get tight it's a different story. One thing I've learned," she said wryly, "is when you do well, save some money for the lean times."

FROM COMMERCIAL TO FINE ART

"I was good at what I did; I had a great time and made money," she said, "but I was ready to do my personal projects. It was a time of change for me – a lot of growth, a lot of loss too." It shows in her work as her lens follows her seamlessly from one awakening to another: *Elegy* – colour images of stark, bleached bones lovingly arranged on inky blackness; *Passing* – a series of luminescent flowers shot in black and white. She did eventually do a third book, *The Extraordinary Beauty of Birds* in partnership with the ROM and their ornithology department. Breathtaking images of antique bird skins and skeletons, beaks and eggs, and, of course, gor-

geous feathers – all staggeringly beautiful – reveal the wonder of creatures we usually take for granted. "I like to make people stop and think and look more closely," she said.

FROM FILM TO DIGITAL

While not an early adopter of digital photography, Deborah realized its value in 2001 when a New York gallery wanted very large prints of her dogs. "Dogs always have something in their gums or their eyes or their hair," she said, and the little Jack Russell looked hurt. "I could clean that up with traditional retouching, but not on enormous prints." She began to embrace the power of digital tools. Her current work, *Elementals*, consists of landscapes shot on an iPhone. (I told you hers was a complex story.) But she shoots her animal commissions – horses, dogs and now, incredibly, cats – on film. "It's the only way I can get the quality," she said.

Her work was in storage so I viewed her images on her website, and they are glorious. But I think nothing compares to a real photograph, and when she dug out a small print of her Peony, it took my breath away. If I ever see the 30 inches by 30 inches exhibition print, I'll probably faint. How does she achieve that glow? "That was one of my signatures as a printer," she said, pleased. "I shot in the camera with a view to getting that glow in the darkroom. That was the craft. I don't miss darkroom chemicals; I do miss darkroom solitude."

THE MOST PERSONAL WORK OF ALL

I asked her about the *Artifact* series, and she welled up with tears. "That was so personal. That was my horse," she said. I'd love to share it here, but it's not fair to not tell it properly. Suffice to say the luminous black and white images are the ashes of her beloved horse and stones she collected during his illness. "When he died, I realized I had picked up the stones because they were like his eyes. All I had

from the *Artifact* Series:
Excavation, Matrix, Thread

"I see now I was working my way through issues of death and life. The bones were memorials, the birds were beauty and life. Ultimately *Artifact* felt like the universe to me. Elementals, influences, connections."

DEBORAH SAMUEL



left were ashes and stones so that's what I used. I worked obsessively on it, then put it away for six years." She returned to *Artifact* after completing *Elegy* and *The Extraordinary Beauty of Birds*. "I see now I was working my way through issues of death and life. The bones were memorials, the birds were beauty and life. Ultimately *Artifact* felt like the universe to me. Elementals, influences, connections."

Deborah has been called "skilled in the bizarre and the beautiful." I found her a passionate communicator. She said simply, "I'm a portrait photographer. I do portraits of bones and flowers and stones and dogs. I like people, too! It's a silent communion with animals. There's more camaraderie with humans."

Her *Elementals* – sweeping, saturated landscapes – are also portraits of weather and skies and places

dear to her heart. "It doesn't matter how you capture an image, as long as you have something to say," she said. "And I'm having more fun than I've had in a long time. Whether it's New Mexico or Ireland or here, I look for the vibe that makes a place different. I want to get to know Ontario. I feel the trees and water, but there's more. The land speaks to us, you know. You just have to listen."

"It was time for me to come home," she said. "It's getting a little weird down there." I am delighted that she is moving to Prince Edward County in the spring. All her six siblings are in the arts, and two of them live in the County, glass artist Kirei and furniture maker Rod. Deborah Samuel is a Canadian legend, and now she's bringing all that talent to the County. Hallelujah! To see more of her glorious work, visit www.deborahsamuel.com

Deborah Samuel's camera lens follows her seamlessly from one awakening to the next.

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- Art Around Ah!
- Photo Show
- Fundraising Luncheon
June 9

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featuring
KAREN OXORN
jazz vocalist

with: Alanna Ellison • HARP
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