

Word & Art

Elegy and Artifact

Deborah Samuel

Text by Steven Heller

For the past 13 years Deborah Samuel has lived about eighteen miles outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico in the small village of Galisteo. It is a remarkable place; a large portion of the population are old Spanish families that can trace their roots back some 300 years living beside artists working in many disciplines.

The Santa Fe area has also fascinated David Hurst Thomas, Curator of North American Archaeology at the Richard Gilder Graduate School at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Dr. Thomas is an archaeologist who in many ways respects a world away from art. In a 1989 publication he observed: “Archaeology is not what you find, it’s what you find out.”

Like Thomas, Samuel is not necessarily concerned with what she finds, but with what she discovers about herself and the world surrounding her. She’s a uniquely talented and curious blend of archaeologist, botanist, painter, curator, philosopher, geologist, physician and psychoanalyst. She employs the camera in much the same way as Dr. Thomas uses shovels and excavation protocols to unearth subtle evidence regarding hidden questions of our past experiences—some that lay just beneath the surface, others that may be miles deep.

Born in Vancouver, Canada, Samuel and her five siblings grew up in a household that always had horses and many dogs. Her childhood pivoted around a Kodak Instamatic camera, National Geographic and Vogue. At 14, her parents moved to Ireland, primarily because of the deeply rooted Irish tradition of horse culture. Her father, a former businessman, had followed his passion to become a steeplechase owner, breeder and trainer.

Samuel attended Alexandra College in Dublin to complete her schooling and then pursued an art degree at Limerick College of Art. Shortly after Limerick, Samuel returned to Toronto, Canada to further her education in creative studies at Sheridan College. “I always thought I would end up in ceramics, but a five-day darkroom course changed that direction,” she recalls. “The first print I watched develop in the tray was the closest thing to magic I had ever experienced. To this day that feeling has never left me; the darkroom became my creative center, sanctuary and my world within.”

Following graduation from Sheridan, Samuel worked for two fashion photographers, primarily as a darkroom printer. “There I met makeup artists, hairdressers, stylists and models during the day and at night I would test these models by taking them out into the night using my flash to create my first portfolio. My fashion photographs were bizarre and strange, but [they] created an awareness that I’d never known.”

For more than 40 years Samuel has methodically explored commercial, advertising, entertainment, fashion and editorial assignments. Her working protocol invariably results in an ever-present invitation into an inner world of unabashed integrity, emotion and oftentimes dark passion. Her various bodies of work are akin to biometric scanning devices that use visual forensic fingerprints, or the iris of the human eye with its complex

of lines and patterns surrounding it to isolate one from another. Some may call that “signature” and “style.” Others identify it as “theory” or “conclusion.” Samuel uses the inner world—almost always her own—to tell a story. She is a photographer with a deep understanding of what she is setting out to photograph. Her work is deliberate and profoundly focused. The iconic mental image we collectively share of a team of archaeologists and their students shaking a screen with increasingly small holes in order to get to the treasures is what Samuel calls “problem solving.” In turn this has guided her diverse personal projects into a unified photographic vision. There is a very real sense that she is exposing “what was” in order to see “what is.”

“Part of being successful for a long period of time is being able to develop techniques or looks that are synonymous with who you are. Fashion photography is about the pursuit of perfection. It’s about presenting perfect sort of illusions. It all came together when I arrived in Los Angeles. It was a culture I’d never lived in. I quickly realized that the point of my commercial fashion work was actually adding to the creation of myths, magic and a whole set of totally unrealistic illusions.

It’s no surprise that Samuel’s portraiture has a deeply charged element of movement, mystery and magic (see the cover of *ELQ* 41.1, and inset image here of the same woman, Canadian artist Claire Wilks). Upon even a slight bit of forthright observation, we will see in the mirror truths about ourselves that lie cloaked behind the trappings of what we’re wearing or how our hair looks or the wrinkles on our face, but these are all ever-changing, like blowing desert sand dunes. Samuel embraces the impact of dark values, refined exposure, ring lighting, experimental film-development techniques and a love affair with the darkroom.

Samuel’s personal work has always been intertwined with her commercial and editorial assignments. Sometimes it takes years for these conceptual projects to become fully realized. But it is her portrait work that has always been at the center of her passion and signature style.

“I don’t think the shape of a person’s face is the only identity of a person. I think there are lots of facets to people, whether it be their spiritual self, their intelligent self or their emotional self that tells a better story. I’m drawn to the square format, because for me it has ‘angst.’” Samuel delves deeply into her subjects’ mystery and underlying significance, just as an archeologist examines a pottery shard unearthed from an excavation that tells a story of an entire village.

And what about the square?

“I’m very much about line and the graphic quality as it plays against the square frame. The square keeps the eye moving in the picture and engages the viewer in a way that they cannot get out of the frame. That’s when you have a much better shot at people actually engaging with the photograph. If you give them a way out [of the frame], the eye will take it. I don’t want that to happen.”

Samuel’s move to New Mexico in 2003 gave her the opportunity to once again own and work with horses. Her passion hasn’t dampened despite acquiring her share of broken bones and injuries from riding. When her favorite horse, Mao, became sick she devoted 16 hours a day, seven days each week for a full year trying to nurse him back to health. It was not to be.



“It was a very tough illness. During that time I collected rocks on my walks or whenever I was out. I had no idea why I’d begun to do this. But then I began to realize that the rocks were the exact shape of my horse’s eyes. You can always tell what’s going on inside a horse by looking at their eyes. Their eyes will reflect what is happening internally. When he was sick I had to rely on that intuitive sense of looking in his eye to see whether I saw fear, pain, discomfort or being comfortable. You start to see the quality of their life in their eye. His situation could sometimes change 10 times in a single day.”

At the same time, the emotional strata that had been Samuel’s life were likewise becoming visible, interconnected and more clearly understood than at any other time in her life. “When he died I had him cremated and built a sort of little shrine with his ashes and the rocks I had collected. I was absolutely grieving over the loss of Mao and didn’t know what to do with those feelings. Then I realized that the only way to grieve his loss was to somehow record his existence. That’s why the project Artifact has subgroups titled Excavation, Thread and Matrix. I couldn’t see it at the time because it was so incredibly personal, but now I understand that the rocks were the shape of his eyes, and each reflected how differently he felt throughout those days.”

There is a quality to Artifact that reminds one of images of the far reaches of the Milky Way and beyond from the orbiting Hubble Space Telescope.

“The unsettling, granular surface that is the pattern of the ashes becomes the rock and dust of the Milky Way,” Samuel says. “What have I done with these objects; what level of resolution am I expressing about my horse and me? There is a stellar galaxy that seems to orbit around the vortex of stone.”

It may seem that these minimalist images are purely about light, surface and composition, but they are merely portals leading to deeper elements forged from well-honed conceptual roots. For Samuel, the “artifact” in front of her lens represents a documented surface that is missing elements; without a void pulling the viewer back to make their own conclusion there is only the “surface” without meaning.

Samuel’s quest to find meaning of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico became the focus of Elegy. “Photographing the oil covered wildlife should have been the metaphor and immediate wake up call for the world to more fully comprehend.” But her attempts were thwarted by the politics of the disaster. Samuel began collaborating with the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto where Kelvin Browne facilitated access to the skeleton collection for photography. “It was the closest I could get to making a statement about the dire consequences of the spill.”

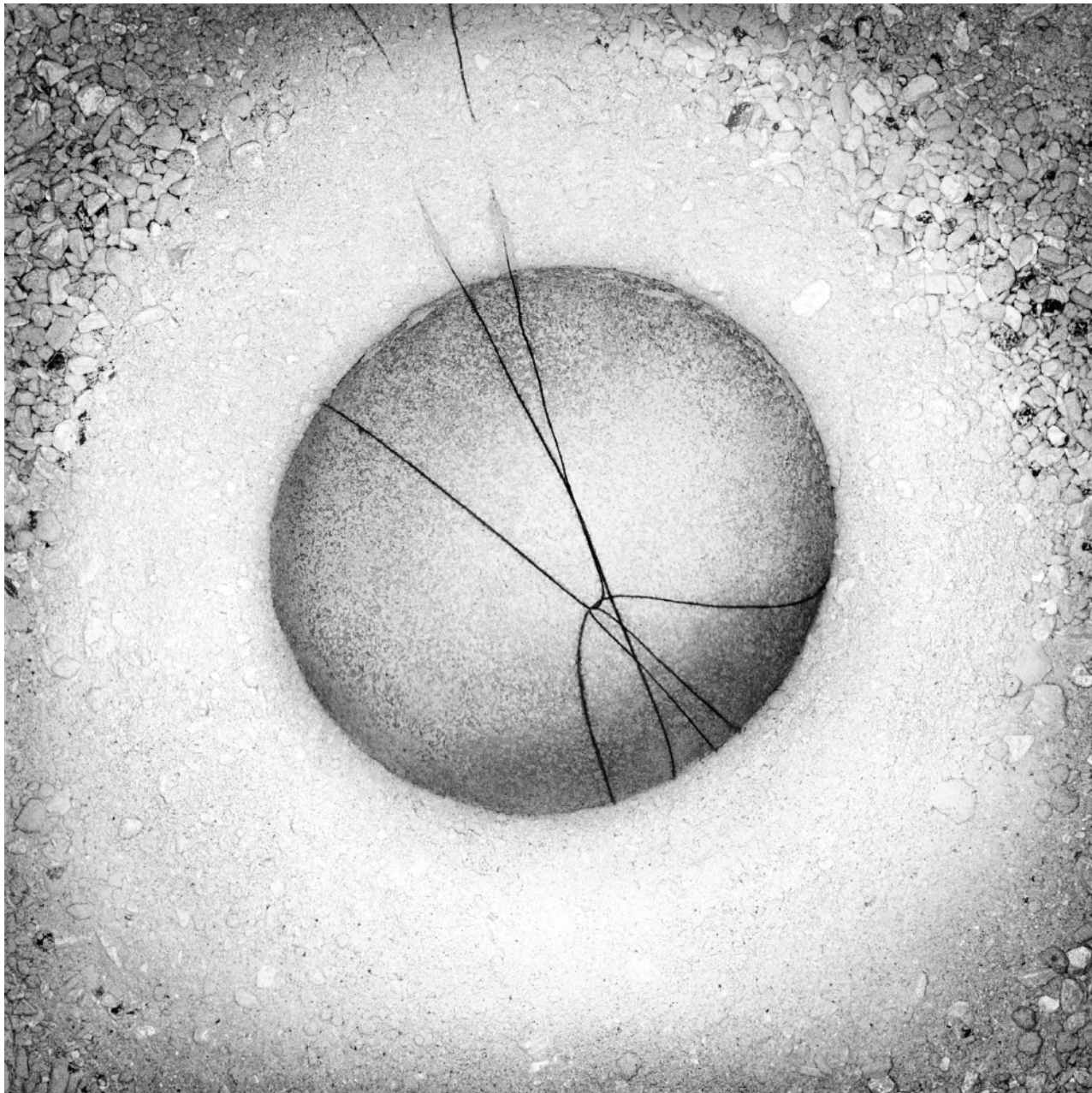
“Elegy examines the extremities that exist within us.” The series is a conceptual postscript that strives to answer Samuel’s rhetorical question: “how is the darkness defined that exists around us? How do we discover all that lies beneath the beauty?”

The skeleton is understood as the intermission, that mysterious dimension between “life” and “death.” It mesmerizes the viewer with all its complexity, representing the transition between substance and form prior to what inevitably becomes dust and memory. What had been a world of color, texture, and function, upon death becomes components bearing no path to truly understanding the preceding period of beauty and existence.

The beauty that “was” becomes beauty “now” as forms project from a black void. The structure of “Armadillo.I” spirals into a composition of symmetry, grace, and subdued color. “Cardinal + Solitare.I” remain forever locked in a harmonic visual ballet. The yellow tip that accents “Barred Owl.I” anchors the understanding of what was once hauntingly majestic. Viewing the strata of Samuel’s projects is like looking at the various layers of earth piled upon each other throughout millions of years; like mountains – once jagged and aggressive – over time slowly becoming gentle rolling hills; or valleys widening and growing deeper as water and erosion proclaim their powerful musculature. The psychoanalyst, historian, scientist and photographer in Samuel, each in their own manner, seeks to find explanations and answers.

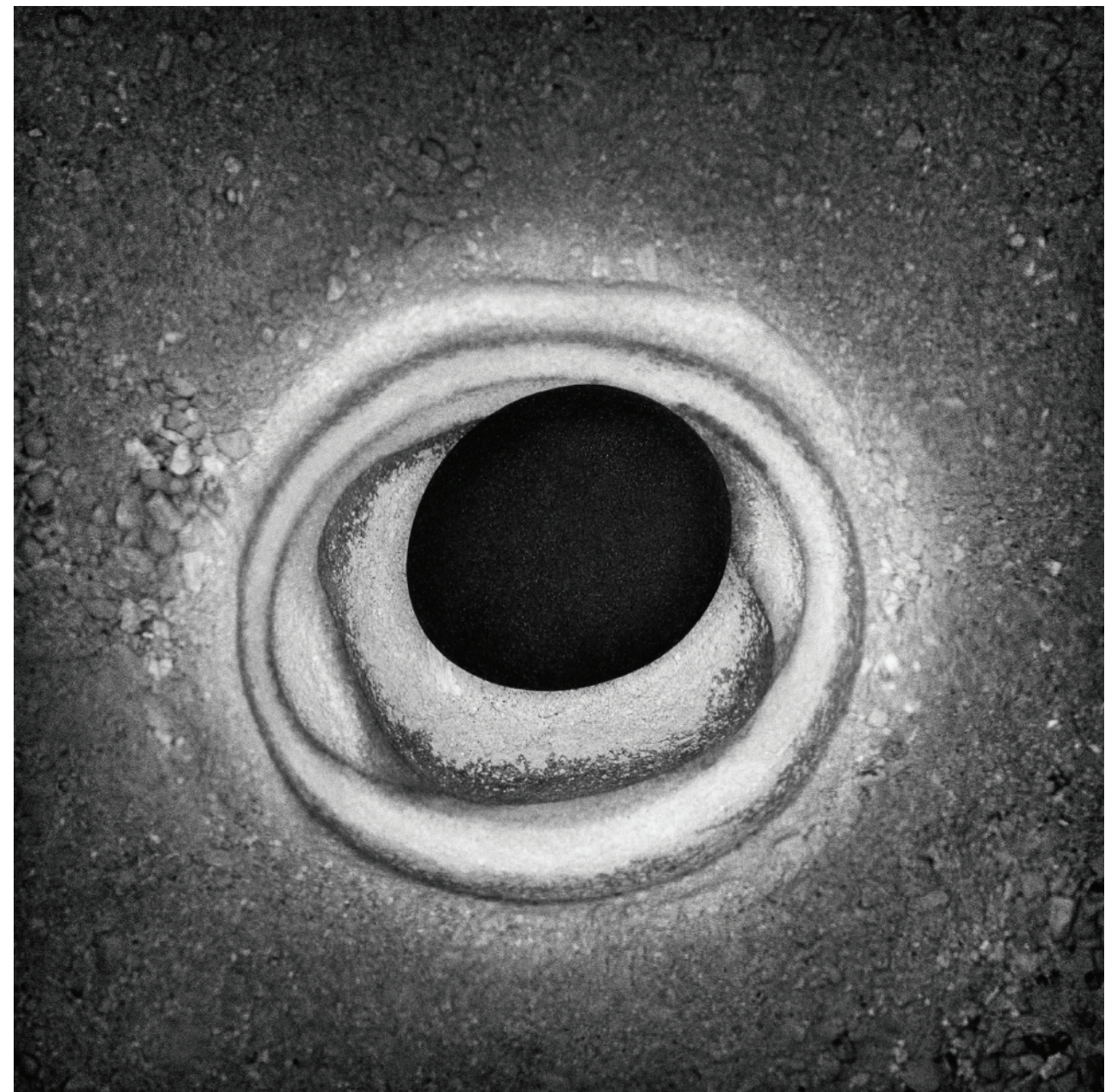


Thread.34, 2009/2016 – Artifact

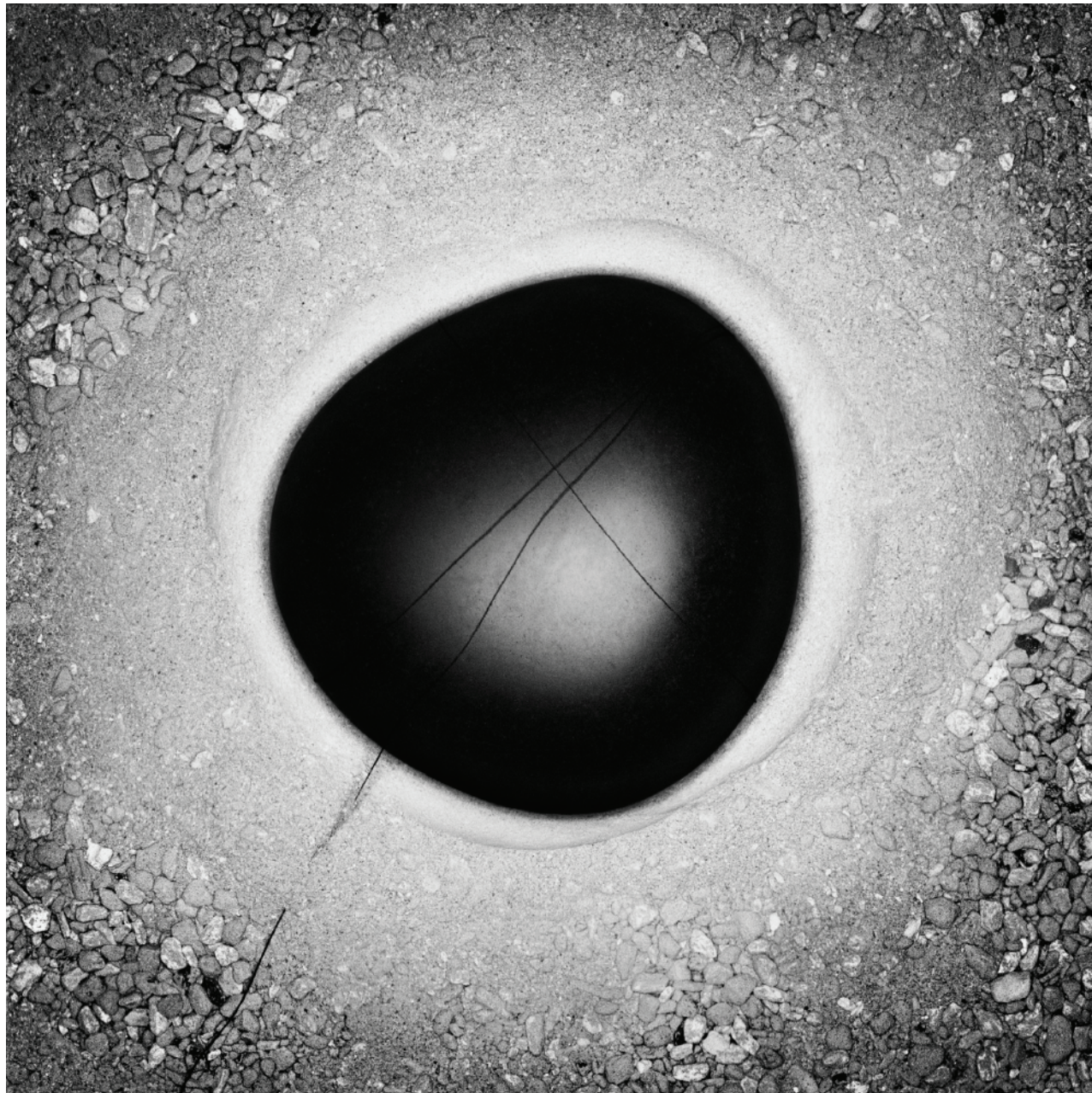


Barred Owl.1, 2012 – Elegg





Thread.45, 2009/2016 – Artifact



Caiman.1, 2012 – Elegg



Cardinal + Solitare.I, 2011 – Elogy

