

BOOKS & ARTSART REVIEW

# ‘Maude Schuyler Clay: Portraits of a Place’ Review: Deep-South Snapshots

The photographer’s intimate, casual pictures of her family and friends form the core of an exhibition at the Mississippi Museum of Art.



‘Jasper, Anna, Lucielle’ by Maude Schuyler Clay

PHOTO: MAUDE SCHUYLER CLAY/MISSISSIPPI MUSEUM OF ART

By *William Meyers*

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*Jackson, Miss.*

The “Maude Schuyler Clay: Portraits of a Place” exhibition at the Mississippi Museum of Art is steeped in history; this is Mississippi, and William Faulkner’s aphorism—“The past is never dead. It’s not even past”—is still apt. And a camera, which preserves not just the appearance of things but captures moments of time, uniquely ensures this is so. The 60 small-format (13¼ by 13¼ inches) square chromogenic prints of the “Little Gems” series are over half of the exhibition; they are Ms. Clay’s record of her family and friends from the early 1980s to the mid-2000s, her way of holding on to her children’s childhoods. Phoenix Savage, who curated, arranged the “Gems” in two tiers around the perimeter of the exhibition space, with occasional pauses for work from other series.

Maude Schuyler Clay was born in 1953 in Greenwood, Miss., on the eastern edge of the Delta and less than 100 miles from the site of this show; she now lives in Sumner, just a little further north, where her family has lived for generations. Most of the “Little Gems” pictures were taken in or around that rural town. Ms. Clay used a Rolleiflex twin-lens camera that produced the square negatives and shot in natural light. Her style is casual, like snapshots in a family album. She calls it “one long continuous story”; she told me the children finally “got so

used to me being there with my camera that they just went about their lives.” First-born daughter Anna shows up in 10 “Little Gems” pictures: She is a child laughing on a porch; she is older and reading a book; she is with sister Sophie in Sumner, but also in Maine and in Vermont; she and Vanessa are looking at birds in a cage. Vanessa is a young black girl, and there are portraits of other black people among the “Gems”; race is unavoidable in Mississippi, where the Civil Rights Museum is next door to the Museum of Art.



'Anna Reading/The Narrows, Maine'

PHOTO: MAUDE SCHUYLER CLAY/MISSISSIPPI MUSEUM OF ART

Mae Jean Waters is the black woman who was Sophie's nanny. In one picture she holds an infant Sophie, who reaches out excitedly toward the photographer, her mother. Another picture of Mae Jean is a portrait; it shows an attractive, smartly dressed and groomed young woman. Ms. Clay says Mae Jean “helped me raise this child, Sophie. I was so dependent on her for a very long time.” Pictures of Jasper Staples, a black man who worked for Ms. Clay's family for over 50 years, thread through the exhibition. And Ms. Savage, the curator, is also black; an old friend, she edited down the “Little Gems” prints with Ms. Clay and sequenced them.

The house in Sumner that Maude Schuyler Clay lives in is 110 years old; the pale green of the museum walls is the same green as that of the house; it is the house that her cousin, famed color photographer William Eggleston, was born and grew up in. Mr. Eggleston is in several pictures, notably a “Gem,” “Bill and Andra,” in which he and his daughter, an actress, both share a chair; he looks at her and she pointedly turns away. When Ms. Clay was studying in Memphis, she worked for her cousin, who now lives there. “He was always trying to educate me,” she told me. “He would bring in big stacks of prints and just say, ‘I need you to look through these thousand prints,’ and that would be my work for the afternoon.”



'Bill and Andra Eggleston/Memphis, TN'

PHOTO: MAUDE SCHUYLER CLAY/MISSISSIPPI MUSEUM OF ART

A selection of recent portraits, medium-format chromogenic prints, includes son Schuyler in profile, cousin Bill smoking a cigarette, husband Langdon, Sophie grown up, and Anna now with her own child, baby Sam.

Judge Joseph Albert May (1882-1949), who lived in the Sumner house, was a photo hobbyist; he was the common grandfather of Mr. Eggleston, who knew him, and Ms. Clay, who did not, and both of them were influenced by his photo practice. Judge May left a cache of glass-plate negatives in the house, and prints made from some of them—e.g., “Day Laborers” (c. 1920)—are included in the current show.



'Summer in Maine/The Narrows, Maine'

PHOTO: MAUDE SCHUYLER CLAY/MISSISSIPPI MUSEUM OF ART

Judge May's practice was certainly the inspiration for the "Sepia Toned Landscapes" included in "Portraits of a Place." In these 11 Mississippi scenes Ms. Clay makes her most conscientious foray into the past; early on, photographs were sepia-toned to keep them from fading, so the brownish cast is emblematic of a time gone by. The barn in Lambert is falling apart, the wooden planks coming off the frame. The Fitzgerald House in Albin is overgrown and obscured with vines. The still waters of the Tallahatchie River in Leflore County look as they have always looked. The dirt road in Lost Town goes where?

Like the characters in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Ms. Clay's subjects keep recurring.

—*Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. See his photographs at @williammeyersphotography.*