

DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

Beth Moon

Essential Forms / Augurs and Soothsayers

October 7-30, 2021

Dolby Chadwick Gallery is thrilled to announce an exhibition of work by the acclaimed photographer Beth Moon, on view this October. The show will feature two series by the artist: *The Oak Seed* and *Augurs and Soothsayers*.

Born of an environmental imperative, Moon's work is motivated by a deep desire to celebrate and advocate for the natural world and its non-human inhabitants. Past subjects, for example, have included the world's most ancient trees, carnivorous pitcher plants, and ravens. She examines her subjects in depth, becoming involved with them for a number of years. The intimate knowledge she gains during this time is translated into her black-and-white photographs as assiduous attention to detail and an ability to reveal nuanced emotional and visual frequencies that can only be discerned through close-looking. Her photographs display a captivating yet quiet drama, highlighting the majesty and power of nature.

The techniques she uses—a mixture of old and new photographic technologies—help bring the complexities of her subjects to the fore. Key to her process is platinum-palladium printing, a nineteenth-century technology rarely used in photography today. Because of their tremendous tonal range, rich blacks, and delicate luminosity, platinum-palladium prints capture fine details and contrasts with extraordinary precision. This sensitivity to degrees of change is further heightened by their subtle three-dimensionality: ground down to form a tincture, the precious metals are not held in a binder layer but rather soak directly into the cotton paper. An additional advantage is the archival quality of the final works, which can last for thousands of years.

On view in the main gallery is Moon's recent *Oak Seed* photographs, each of which features a single germinating acorn, enlarged to a monumental scale. The framed length of *Oak Seed #1*, for example, is over 76 inches, or nearly 6.5 feet. The work also comprises six separate sheets of paper; this is because the negative must be the same size as the printed image in contact printing. Multiple negatives are therefore required to achieve scale. Although the series is not a precursor to her photographs of ancient trees, Moon explains that, with the *Oak Seed* series, "I am, in a way, looking backwards. I'm used to looking up at the canopy of wonderful trees, but on this day, I happened to be looking down. An oak seed caught my attention. I saw so many things in this tiny little capsule, the source of endless hours of fascination and references." Notably, she points back to Aristotle, who used the example of an acorn in his musings about teleology to describe how everything aspires to grow into its own form: coded into this little, humble seed is the genetic DNA of an oak tree. Scaling it up, as Moon does, not only allows her to better see and examine her subject, it also elevates it so that we can start to appreciate it as being just as powerful and grand as the mighty oak tree it contains.

Moon captures the acorn right at the cusp of two life stages. We tend to think of seeds as stationary, but as the artist explains, they move around quite a bit, scattered across fields and forest floors by animals, the wind, and other forces. She chooses seeds that have just begun to germinate, placing them on their crowns so that the nascent root rises into the air. With the emergence of this root—the tap root—the acorn will soon find its foothold in the earth and no longer move. There is something deeply sensual about this moment as the seed cracks open under the pressure of new life, the play of textures enhancing the sense of unfurling, dance-like motion. The vitality and veracity of these scenes, Moon observes, emphasizes the primal ability we share with every other organic entity on earth to procreate and carry on the species.

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Like *The Oak Seed* series, *Augurs and Soothsayers*, exhibited in the smaller gallery, features crisply focused subjects against an atmospheric background, which Moon achieves by creating a shallow depth of field. Within its historical context, augury is the art of foreseeing future events by observing the behavior of birds. Moon chose chickens as her augurs because they “have become so maligned. I wanted to highlight this creature, learn about it, see it in a way other than we’re used to—as food or as a common barnyard animal.” The advancement of an alternative mode of living that upholds the sustainability of the planet was the impetus for this project, a portion of proceeds from which she donated to the non-profit Mercy for Animals.

Moon began photographing chickens in the backyards and farms of friends, who would connect her with other chicken owners; she was even put in touch with Isabella Rossellini, who breeds stunning heritage chickens in an effort to save them from extinction. Moon explains that the chickens made for terrible models—they would immediately hop off the low table she used as a set, resulting in mostly empty frames. You would never know it, however. The hens are regal and striking in the photographs, which read as formal studio portraits. Their expressive feathers, coloring, and wattles combine to create costumed effects: a dramatic headdress for *Black Crested Polish*, a luxurious collar for *Salmon Faverolles*, and an intricate frock for *Silver Sebright*. This air of nobility, however, brings with it a sense of whimsy, reflecting back to us how seriously we at times take ourselves. With their wide range of personalities and emotional profiles, they remind us of specific people we have met throughout our lives. In this way, Moon reveals the hen to us as exquisite, unique, and highly individualized—a creature with a soul.

Augurs and Soothsayers entreats the viewer to look into the eyes of the animal and reconnect with what writers like Michael Pollan and John Berger describe as our original relationship to them: in previous eras, we respected animals and were even inspired by them. And so, when we restore our connection with the hen, we are able to once again tune into what it can show us about both ourselves and a future that better fulfills our duties to neighbor, earth, and animal.

Beth Moon was born in Wisconsin and currently lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. She has exhibited extensively across the United States and Europe, and nine books of her work have been published. Her photographs can be found in the permanent collections of the Cleveland Museum of Art; the Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego; Louisiana Art & Science Museum, Baton Rouge; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Bolzano, Italy. This will be her first solo show at Dolby Chadwick Gallery.