



**ARTIST**

Susan Worsham

**TITLE**

Margaret's Rhubarb

**DATE**

2008

**DIMENSIONS**

8 in H x 10 in W

**MEDIUM**

Inkjet Prints

**IMAGE NOTES**

Paper size 10X12"

**CATALOGUE NUMBER**

2015.021

**CURRENT LOCATION**

1620-8D

**DESCRIPTION**

This is one of a limited edition of signed and numbered prints made by the artist for Light Work's Fine Print Program. Since 1991 Light Work has sold limited edition prints to benefit all of our activities. The generosity of our former artists and friends makes it possible for us to continue our support of emerging and under recognized artists working in photography and related media.

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**SUSAN WORSHAM**

**BORN**

1969

**BIRTHPLACE**

Richmond, Virginia

**GENDER**

Female

**CITIZENSHIP**

United States

## CULTURAL HERITAGE

European-American

## LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2010

Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery, 2012

## LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 162

Contact Sheet 168

## BIOGRAPHY

For a more recent CV or bio please visit the artist's website, [susanworsham.net](http://susanworsham.net)

In her series *Some Fox Trails in Virginia*, Susan Worsham evokes a Southern Gothic atmosphere in which the verdancy of this landscape and its people seems to have run wild and then aground. Worsham began the series when she was 34 and had moved back home to Virginia to care for her mother, her last living relative, who died very shortly thereafter. With an exquisite use of color, and the amazing ability to weave a quiet thread of grace through every image, Worsham reveals the world of her childhood through the experience of an adult's eyes. She writes, "These photographs are not meant to be purely autobiographical, but rather representations of how I view things, based on my own experiences, and those of the people that I have met along the way. My boyfriend Michael, stands on the street I grew up on, bridging the gap between past and present. Lynn, the first stranger that ever sat for me, continues to pose for me, along with her son Max. I have been photographing her for seventeen years now."

During her residency, Worsham plans to edit, scan, and print editions of *Fox Trails* as well as her newest work, *By the Grace of God*, which focuses on the hospitality of strangers in the South.

Worsham's book *Some Fox Trails in Virginia* was first runner up in the Blurb Photography Book Now International Juried Competition, Fine Art Category, in 2009 when she was also a Critical Mass Finalist and nominee for the Santa Fe Prize for Photography. Her work has been featured online at F-Stop magazine, Nymphoto, and Flak Photo. Worsham has exhibited her photography at Silver Eye Center For Photography, Sasha Wolf Gallery, and Dean Jensen Gallery, among other venues. For more information about Worsham and her art, visit her website.

circa 2010

## ESSAYS

When we travel we often look for things that remind us of home. For Susan Worsham, home has always been Richmond, VA. Although a few of the photographs shown on the following pages were taken in upstate New York, around Syracuse, during her month-long residency at Light Work, they could be her backyard haunts—down the road a piece in Skinquarter or perhaps in Winterpock on the way to Petersburg. Regardless of where they are actually taken, there is certainly a humid, worn texture in many of Worsham's photographs that feels like we are driving southward, passing through layers of time. Having travelled around Richmond myself in years past, paying homage to its history at every corner monument, it is easy to understand how concepts of tradition, time, and legacy filter Worsham's photographic vision. Her images remind us of being alive at this moment, but also that we are only a small dot on the timeline. Her work also indicates that we carry around those historical dramas as we live our lives. Her photographs help us see these layers of time and uncover lost legacies. For example, three seated figures photographed in warm summer's light remind us of three graces; a standing child becomes youth's sentinel. Mythology and the idea of Arcadian wilderness seem to be present in many ways in these images. Often hovering at the edge of the woods, Worsham's girls are comfortably at home in a protective stand of trees or overgrown thicket. Sitting together to form a triangle, these seated girls look like they have been pulled from a Greek temple frieze, muses touched into life. Religion and race, historically volatile subjects, are never entirely put to rest in the Southern mind. Even if they seem peripheral and mythical, as in Worsham's portfolio, they hover in the background. The Bible, propped up on a chair in one photograph, is at once an artifact of another generation and an enduring symbol of both human potential and failure. The wreckage of the surrounding room suggests a separation between these best intentions and actual practice in a messy world. In another image, a frayed poster depicting a girl, white-skinned and well coiffed, appears to optimistically greet us. Ideas of beauty, privilege, and youth have all changed since her day. For better or worse, nothing lasts forever. There is a soft, rounded luminosity in these photographs that owes much to the fact that Worsham still uses film with an old 4 x 5 view camera. Some say these details (like manners) do not matter much anymore, but do not believe them. Like a surveyor's tool, this unwieldy camera rewards those who take the time to learn its methodical ways. It encourages waiting for the sun to reach the right angle, and paying attention to when the sun goes behind a cloud. These efforts are repaid in the soft pinks and metallic golds that are all rendered with gentle fidelity using film. It is also the special attention to light that gets us in the right mood to see into these photographs. Time has washed colors to a paleness that reminds us of the days and years that have preceded this photographic moment. However, in many of Worsham's photographs, the moment hangs heavy in the air. A quiet pile of discarded dining utensils lays among twigs and dust; a faded poster of a once fresh-faced beauty hides protected in a barn-like sanctuary. Both images are excavations of a bygone age. In another photograph, a girl in a pink tunic presents us a golden garland, perhaps a trophy or memorial of some important event. A ruin of a rusted swing set stands in the background. The past has a siren's pull in these photographs. As viewers, we are held enchanted. It is ultimately the elegance and beauty in the everyday (even when it is discarded) that Worsham's photographs help us realize. Her photographs seem to ask if we have been digging all along in the wrong place for our treasures. Here, repositories of history and memory are found when we follow our nose, knock on doors, or wander into a stranger's backyard. We sometimes forget that we are all explorers and the furthest place we can go is right where we are. Elijah Gowi Susan Worsham participated in the Light Work Artist-in-Residence Program in June 2010. For more information about Worsham and her work, please visit her website at [www.susanworshamphotography.com](http://www.susanworshamphotography.com). Elijah Gowin is an associate professor in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. His photographs have been exhibited internationally and are in the collections of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Nelson-

Atkins Museum of Art, among others. Gowin is represented by the Robert Mann Gallery in New York City, and Dolphin Gallery in Kansas City. He is a 2008 recipient of the Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. He participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence Program in 1998. As a little girl in Richmond, Virginia, Susan Worsham watched the world through a big picture window in the family room of her childhood home at 15 Bostwick Lane. Her first encounter with death was witnessing a bird fly into the glass—as if in slow motion—falling lifeless onto the porch. In just an instant, a moment of wonder was fraught with tragedy. Though we learn early on that death is an integral part of life, for many of us it is difficult to address until we must. In her first solo exhibition, *Bittersweet/Bloodwork*, Worsham captures the landscape of her childhood through a woman's eyes. Through her personal reflections on innocence, nature, love, and loss, we discover the power of regeneration in storytelling. Worsham digs deep into the soil of her past in search of roots. At the top of Bostwick Lane lives her oldest neighbor, Margaret Daniel. Margaret is one of the only remaining connections to her childhood as well as the last person to see her brother Russell alive. When Worsham was just eighteen, Russell was paralyzed after severing his spinal cord in a motorcycle accident. On the day of his first visit home, Margaret baked him her homemade bread. He finished the whole loaf before he shot himself that afternoon. Though tragic, Worsham has come to understand and accept her loss, even finding beauty and solace in a few poetic lines from Russell's suicide note. Over the years Margaret has become a close friend to Worsham and, in turn, a vibrant photographic subject. Worsham has a way of meeting people, a distinct magnetism; her sincerity builds trust between her and her subjects. It's no surprise that the first portrait she made was of a complete stranger, a woman named Lynn, who continues to be her muse today, nearly two decades later. Worsham weaves Lynn and her son Max into her photographic work—Max in many ways representing her brother in the underlying narrative. One of her most powerful portraits is of young Max in his bathing suit, lying on the bed next to Lynn. His gaze is direct and piercing. Precariously placed next to him on the bed is half of a bright orange papaya, a fruit often regarded as a symbol of love and protection. Worsham finds inspiration in the symbolism of objects, details, names, streets, and towns, or simply the way a particular color oscillates within the frame of an image. She is drawn to the poetry of everyday life, as both a passionate artist and a person. Above all, Worsham is moved by the way people let her into their lives and by the stories they share. In her conversations with Margaret, which Worsham recorded and which play back in the gallery in the company of her photographs, Margaret's soft Southern voice is both ripe and reassuring as an elder, and at times playful and new as a child. They speak about plants, life, and death. The very themes that run through Worsham's photographic work are present in their conversations. Margaret tells her of the towering black walnut trees that were just saplings when Worsham was a child. Margaret collects the walnuts that fall from the trees and labels them by year, stashing them in boxes in her basement. The walnuts embody endurance to hardship; some years are sparse, others plentiful. In many ways, Worsham's time spent with Margaret illuminates the past, allowing her to see or understand things that she had not been able to previously. In one of Worsham's portraits, Margaret is asleep in a chair with a hand-knit American flag draped on its back. There's a subtle ring of blood around her mouth from a visit to the dentist—the bloodstained mouth of a storyteller. The stain conjures up thoughts of Worsham's brother, of his last day. But for Worsham there is an even more resonant association. She explains, "Margaret often tells the story of taking the children of Bostwick Lane to the persimmon tree and bringing Russell back home with a ring of persimmon stains around his mouth." In a recorded conversation, Margaret talks about how to plant seeds by putting them in the ground and "covering them up with earth," bringing to mind a burial of sorts. Again, the soil is rich with metaphor. At the age of thirty-four, and shortly after her mother's passing, Worsham came across a set of antique veterinary slides. "They were some of the most interesting things that I had ever seen," she says. She framed ninety of them in a long wooden frame resembling the shape of the slide itself. "I called the piece a 'watercolor' because of the collection of pastel colors," says Worsham, "but it was also a sort of poem when you got close and read the titles . . . Rabbit's Lung, Fowl's Spleen, and even Human Umbilical Cord. They seemed to hold beauty and death at the same time." One day in a moment of profound serendipity, Margaret brought out her dissection kit and microscope slides. She had been a biology teacher and had been keeping the same sort of slides that had fascinated Worsham for years. Margaret's microscope and slides have since become a metaphor for Worsham's desire to look deeper into the landscape of her childhood—from the flora and fauna to the feelings, what Margaret calls "blood work." In recent years, Worsham has become increasingly inspired by the lyrical quality of scientific objects—particularly the slides—and has begun to document them in a methodical fashion. Floating gracefully in a field off-white, the delicate studies highlight the unique quality of individual specimens, and their systematic treatment unifies them as part of a collection. In the gallery, Worsham's romantic photographs gain added depth through the presence of the slides. Spending time with Worsham's work results in an unveiling of the world's magic, and before we know it we discover that her photographs do the very same thing as the slides—embrace beauty and death at the same time. Margaret and Worsham engage with the world in similar ways. Margaret looks at the world through a microscope and Worsham looks through her camera, both seeking to discover the splendor in details. Worsham puts the past to rest so new things can grow in its place—something that she has learned from Margaret over the years, as well as through her photography. The very act of taking a picture is an attempt to contain something that may never be again; the photographer puts the moment to rest, and something new grows in its place. While Margaret takes apart and dissects, Worsham attempts to put things together to make connections to understand them. The introspection and inward contemplation is palpable. We imagine Worsham as a woman peering in through the big picture window of 15 Bostwick Lane at her childhood self. The photographs and accompaniments in *Bittersweet/Bloodwork* show us that life is overflowing with emotion, with sundry hues, dark and light. "Each photograph, like a seed, needs light to become itself," says Worsham, "and light makes things more beautiful." Shane Lavalette Associate Director Light Work