Duel
MICHELLE ELZAY
MATRIX 156
SEPTEMBER 7, 2006– JANUARY 7, 2007
Wadsworth Atheneum
Museum of Art
Floating on Air.

In a period when much contemporary photography is characterized by highly staged images, the result of either Hollywood-like production sets or digital sleights of hand, Michelle Elzay’s photographs provide a stark and refreshing contrast. Restrained in composition, palette, subject matter and installation, Elzay’s work is Minimalist in the truest sense—pared down and literal. Much like Bernd and Hilla Becher, who document the remnants of industrial-era water towers and factories, Elzay photographs subjects whose lives are similarly rooted in the past, vestiges of a disappearing practice that is often invisible to mainstream society.

Elzay began experimenting with conceptually-based serial photography in 2002 for a project entitled Abbaye. Comprised of fifty-one color photographs, the series depicts a group of Benedictine nuns from the Abbaye Saint Marie du Maumont in the Charente region of France. According to Elzay, Abbaye was originally conceived as a visual experience comparable to that of viewing a choir. Each sister is seated in the same frontal position, set against a neutral white background, and wearing a traditional habit and vestment. From afar, the portraits appear nearly identical. Their strict formalism and repetitive nature echo the quiet routine of monastic life. However, this restraint allows the subtleties of each nun’s personality to surface, pure and unmanipulated, providing a glimpse into the private world of the abbey.

After completing Abbaye in 2004, Elzay turned her attention to the ancient sport of falconry. Veiled in history and myth, falconry has been documented as far back as 2000 B.C., and can be found emblazoned in illuminated manuscripts, carvings, frescoes, and tapestries. During the Middle Ages, it was regarded as the “noblest” of all medieval sports, ardently pursued by knights, emperors, and even bishops. Falconry remains virtually unchanged today, and is most often used for hunting. However, in and around New York City raptors are often employed for the less dignified purpose of urban pest management. Falcons are flown at JFK airport to clear the runways of birds that might otherwise be caught in jet engines, and hawks have been used in city parks to scare away pigeons and rats. Once revered by ancient societies,
these magnificent creatures now occupy the margins of contemporary life.

Over the past two years, Elzay has researched every facet of this guarded community, meeting falconers and photographing their birds. The resulting archive of falconry raptors, entitled Hawke, extends the tradition of falcon imagery into the twenty-first century and makes
visible a little-known subculture. For MATRIX 156, Elzay has selected thirteen images from the ongoing Hawke series, illustrating twelve different birds of prey. Despite their genteel names and regal appearance, they are all “working birds,” belonging to a group of mostly male falconers, including breeders and wildlife rehabilitators living in the New York Metropolitan area. Each photograph features a raptor perched on its owner’s gloved hand. Taken in the moment just before flight, their compact and athletic bodies are poised and alert, as if charged with an invisible energy. Elzay has isolated the birds against a white backdrop, and digitally erased the falconer’s outstretched arm in order to focus attention on the trappings of the sport: the gauntlet, leashes, bells and hood. As a result, each falcon seems to hover in the center of the photograph, suspended in time and space.

The notion of suspension is, in fact, a central trope in much of Elzay’s work. Not only do many of her subjects literally appear to float within the picture plane, as described above, but their place within society is similarly detached. Falconry, a sport once revered by commoners and nobility alike, has all but ceased to exist in the modern cultural imagination. And yet, as the photographs attest, this ancient practice continues to thrive today. Elzay captures this tension between past and present by removing the birds from their traditional environment and presenting them outside of any recognizable historical context. In doing so, she not only suggests the timelessness of falconry, but also its radical (and largely unknown) transformation in certain segments of contemporary society.

Another historical sport that continues to attract a small, but dedicated coterie of practitioners is classical fencing. Guarded continues Elzay’s exploration of serial photography, and documents the members of this quietly flourishing subculture. Created specifically for MATRIX 156, Guarded consists of formal portraits and action shots of fencers from The Martinez Academy of Arms in Manhattan. Inspired by the traditional elegance of fencing portraiture, Elzay’s photographs push beyond idealized images, making evident the physical and psychological effects of the sport—flushed cheeks, or a twinkle in the eye. As in the Hawke series, Elzay draws attention to
the accoutrements of the sport: the foil, rapier, mask and gloves. Here as well, the notion of suspense—physical, emotional and temporal—is crucial.

Each fencer was photographed before, after, and during a round of practice. The resulting images depict moments of anticipation and suspense (much like the falcons just before flight), that evoke the pressure and solemnity of the sport. However, Elzay has also managed to tease out the individual personalities of these serious swordsmen (and women). Some are shy and avoid the camera’s gaze; others are defiant and proud, confronting the lens as if preparing for a duel. Some peer out from behind their masks, reminding us of the stately hooded falcons that Elzay has also photographed. Together, these images of fencers and falcons illustrate an antiquated world of valor, fantasy, and danger, which remains alive and well today.

Joanna Marsh
Associate Curator of Contemporary Art
**EDUCATION**

1995
B.A. Smith College, Massachusetts

1998
M.F.A. Columbia University, New York

**SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

2005
Abbaye, The Quick Center for the Arts, St. Bonaventure, New York

2004
Abbaye, Center Gallery, Fordham University, New York, New York
Cloistered, Ingalls & Associates, Miami, Florida

2000
June in August, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin

**SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

2006
Exquisite Corpse – Cadavre Exquis a game played between Mitchell Algus and Bob Nickas, Mitchell Algus Gallery, New York
Bring the War Home, Elizabeth Dee, New York

2005
Greater New York, PS1/MoMA, New York*
Crit’s Pix v.2.0, Black and White Gallery, New York, invited by Sarah Valdez
Desired Constellations, Daniel Reich Gallery, New York, curated by Meredith Darrow
There’s a City in My Mind, Southfirst Gallery, New York
APT, a Project by Casey Ruble, New York
Justin Lowe: “On the Beach” (collaborative piece), Printed Matter, New York

2004
Lumpen Decadents, Ingalls & Associates, Miami, curated by Gean Moreno
Scandinavian Sparks, 798 Space, Beijing, China, invited by Fia Beckström
Blond Revolution, a Fia Beckström Production, New York

2003
Fresh Blood, The Center for Perceptual and Experimental Art, Buffalo, curated by Stephan Apicella-Hitchcock
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2006

2005
Littman, Brett. “Michelle Elzay.” Greater New York, PS1 MOMA.
Slide Show. nytimes.com, August 5.

2004

1999

2002
My Father Told Me..., Suite 106, New York
Haus am Meer, SITE, issue 6 (insert), Düsseldorf

1999
The Searchers, Artist’s Space, New York, curated by Robert Longo
WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

Hawke: No Name; Gyr X Prairie Falcon, 2004
C-print, 30 × 20 inches
Purchased through the gift of Robinson A. and Nancy D. Grover, 2006.13.1

Hawke: Hoot; Eurasian Eagle Owl, 2004-2005
C-print, 30 × 20 inches
Purchased through the gift of Robinson A. and Nancy D. Grover, 2006.13.2

Hawke: Luna; Redtail Hawk, 2005-2006
C-print, 30 × 20 inches
Purchased through the gift of Robinson A. and Nancy D. Grover, 2006.13.3

Hawke: No Name; Gyr X Saker Falcon, 2004
C-print, 30 × 20 inches

Hawke: Parker; Gyr X Saker Falcon, 2004-2005
C-print, 30 × 20 inches

Hawke: Charity; Gyr X Saker Falcon, 2004
C-print, 30 × 20 inches

Hawke: Wilma; Barn Owl, 2005-2006
C-print, 30 × 20 inches

Hawke: Powder; Gyr X Saker Falcon, 2005-2006
C-print, 30 × 20 inches

Hawke: Petunia; Harris Hawk, 2004-2005
C-print, 30 × 20 inches

Hawke: Unnamed; Immature Harris Hawk, 2004-2005
C-print, 30 × 20 inches

Hawke: Hemingway; Great Horned Owl, 2005
C-print, 30 × 20 inches

Hawke: Prudence; Lanner Falcon, 2004-2005
C-print, 30 × 20 inches

Hawke: Prudence, hooded; Lanner Falcon, 2004-2005
C-print, 30 × 20 inches

Guarded: Elody Massaro, 2006
C-print, 30 × 24 inches
Purchased through the gift of Robinson A. and Nancy D. Grover, 2006.13.4

Guarded: Carl Massaro, 2006
C-print, 30 × 24 inches
Purchased through the gift of Robinson A. and Nancy D. Grover, 2006.13.5

Guarded: Jared, 2006
C-print, 30 × 24 inches
Purchased through the gift of Robinson A. and Nancy D. Grover, 2006.13.6

Guarded: Doruk, 2006
C-print, 30 × 24 inches

Guarded: Christine, 2006
C-print, 30 × 24 inches

Guarded: Joseph, 2006
C-print, 30 × 24 inches

Guarded: Russell, 2006
C-print, 30 × 24 inches

Guarded: Russell, masked, 2006
C-print, 30 × 24 inches
MATRX TALK

On Thursday, September 7, 2006, at 6:00 p.m., Michelle Elzay will give an informal talk about her work in the MATRIX gallery.

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Wadsworth Atheneum
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HAWKE: NO NAME: GYR X PRAIRE FALCON, 2004