

# Duel

MICHELLE ELZAY  
MATRIX 156

SEPTEMBER 7, 2006–  
JANUARY 7, 2007



Wadsworth  
Atheneum  
Museum of Art

# Floating on Air.

**I**N 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,



ABBAYE, 2002-2004

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



TOP: GUARDED: CARL MASSARO, 2006

BOTTOM: GUARDED: MARTIN, 2006



# Michelle Elzay

## 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 Alguis and Bob Nickas, Mitchell Alguis 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

LEFT: GUARDED: ELODY MASSARO, 2006

RIGHT: HAWKE: PARKER; GYR X SAKER FALCON, 2004-2005

BORN IN LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK, 1973  
LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK CITY AND FRANCE

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



## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2006

Smith, Roberta. "Exquisite Corpse – Cadavre Exquis." *The New York Times*, March 10.

2005

Littman, Brett. "Michelle Elzay." *Greater New York*, PS1 MOMA.

Murrison, Jason. "At The Abbey." *New York Arts Magazine*, January/February.

Slide Show. [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com), August 5.

Cotter, Holland. "Justin Lowe." *The New York Times*, August 5.

Smith, Roberta. "Desired Constellations." *The New York Times*, August 5.

2004

"Goings On About Town: Michelle Elzay." *The New Yorker*. September 20 & September 27.

Ruble, Casey. "Cloistered." Abbaye Brochure, Fordham University.

1999

Longo, Robert. "The Searchers." *The Artist's Space Newsletter*, September.



## 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

*Guarded: Martin, 2006*  
C-print, 30 × 24 inches

*Guarded: Sagar, 2006*  
C-print, 30 × 24 inches

*Guarded: Victoria, 2006*  
C-print, 30 × 24 inches

*Guarded: Maestro de Armas*  
*Ramón Martínez, 2006*  
C-print, 30 × 24 inches

*Guarded: Parry 1, 2, 3 and 4, 2006*  
Four C-prints, 40 × 40 inches each



HAWKE: NO NAME: GYR X PRAIRE FALCON, 2004

## MATRIX 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.

MATRIX 156 is made possible by the members of the Contemporary Coalition: Mickey Cartin, The Cheryl Chase and Stuart Bear Family Foundation, Emilie and Raul R. de Brigard, Howard and Sandra Fromson, Nancy D. Grover and Robinson A. Grover, Carol and Sol LeWitt, Jeffrey G. and Marcia Reid Marsted, The Ritter Foundation, The Saunders Foundation, Philip and Robin Schonberger, Linda Cheverton Wick and Walter Wick.

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