



Fellowship 20 Rory Doyle: Delta Hill Riders

About Fellowship

Fellowship is Silver Eye's international juried photography competition. For nineteen years this competition has recognized both rising talent and established photographers from all corners of the globe, and from the state of Pennsylvania. This year, Silver Eye made the decision to have the exhibition take place in two parts. The Fellowship Award, awarded to an artist working within the United States or abroad, will take place September–December 2020, and the Keystone Award, awarded to an artist working in the state of Pennsylvania, will be shown in the Spring of 2021. As an exciting new addition, we are also exhibiting the work of the artists chosen as honorable mentions for each award.

About the Artist

Rory Doyle is a working photographer based in Cleveland, Mississippi in the rural Mississippi Delta. Born and raised in Maine, Doyle studied journalism at St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont. In 2009, he moved to Mississippi to pursue a master's degree at Delta State University. Doyle has remained committed to photographing Mississippi and the South, with a particular focus on sharing positive stories in the Delta. He won the 16th Annual Smithsonian Photo Contest in 2019, the 2019 Southern Prize from the South Arts organization, the 2019 Zeiss Photography Award, and the 2019 ZEKE Award for Documentary Photography. His work has been published in The New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, ProPublica, ESPN, The Guardian, CNN, among others.

About the Juror

Julie Crook is the Assistant Curator, Photography, at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto (AGO). She received her PhD in the Department of History of Art and Archaeology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. She has curated several exhibitions at the AGO including Mickalene Thomas: Femmes Noires (2018) and Free. Black. North (2017).

Delta Hill Riders

I would encourage photographers everywhere to consider looking within their own backyard. Not only can you create really strong work, you can create unique and special connections within your own community.

— Rory Doyle

Rory Doyle's camera is well traveled. For his work as a photojournalist, Doyle has walked through the vibrant markets of Havana, Cuba and traversed the sacred mountain spaces of Nepal. Yet, for much of the past four years, he has continued to focus on a specific group of people within his home in the Mississippi Delta. His project *Delta Hill Riders* looks to the African American cowboys and cowgirls in the rural parts of the Delta, focusing on a band of horse riders that have historically been overlooked. His images form a long-running archive of this community, and project an intimacy that is readily apparent to the viewer, one which can only be gained by being welcomed into the folds of the group. Doyle's images seek to overturn the stereotypes of the American cowboy by giving viewers a look into a collective of individuals who have kept up historical traditions and cultures—whether anyone was looking or not. In sharing his project, Doyle hopes to diversify the histories of cowboy culture in America, highlighting the joy, love and empathy this community has for its horses, its traditions, and each other.

While many of Doyle's images are what the mind's eye pictures when we think of a documentary photographer, his background is actually that of a journalist. Doyle's attention was first turned towards the community of the *Delta Hill Riders* through photographing a Christmas parade in Greenville, Mississippi. When he saw the riders in the parade he was struck by their presence riding along the main street, having not previously known about their existence in the Delta. In that first moment of seeing the cowboys and cowgirls in the parade, his journalistic roots took hold, and he leapt into the crowd at the first opportunity to introduce himself to the riders. What has followed from this first encounter is a long-term project of documenting the traditions and events—the rodeos, parades, horse shows, and countless casual rides for the simple love of riding—kept up by this community.

Many of the images in *Delta Hill Riders* have a cinematic feeling. Dusty golden hours and crimson sunsets flood the landscape, the low glow of neon in an after-hours bar beckons us closer, and an uneasy spotlight from a lone street lamp creates a startling contrast against the single figure and the deep black of night around them. This sense of drama isn't new to stories about cowboys or the American Southwest; From John Wayne in Stagecoach to the more contemporary adventurous danger in the 2010 rendition of True Grit, cowboy culture has long had a home in the United States. What differs in Doyle's project is largely the riders themselves. Early Black rodeo stars like Bill Pickett¹, born in 1870 in Texas to formerly enslaved parents, or 20th century cowboys like Nat Love² aren't largely known, yet historians have estimated that one in every four cowboys was African American.³ With the end of the Civil War, many formerly enslaved people took advantage of the freedom that came with cattle drives, and later on, travelling rodeos and wild west shows. Unlike earlier generations of cowboys and cowgirls who rode and worked the land as a vocation, the Mississippi Delta riders keep the tradition alive for the simple joy of riding and the sense of community it brings.

In addition to the sweeping, cinematic feel of the images, the other large takeaway from this body of work is an overwhelming sense of joy and pride. In Doyle's images, young boys and girls appear just as confident astride a horse as their older relatives and neighbors, and young men stand in almost balletic poses atop their horses. Older riders project a contentment in these images too, smiling up at a dusky sky or simply sitting alongside their grandchildren and horses, all together. While the tradition of riding has kept this community intact across generations, this community is about more than just riding. Doyle captures intimate moments—mother and daughter braiding hair or a rider's newborn cradled beneath a cowboy hat—as well as more raucous ones like a club awash in disco lighting, a sea of cowboy and cowgirl hats moving to the groove. These moments off the horse, or indoors, also form deep roots within the *Delta Hill Riders* community.

As a White man making these images within a Black community, Doyle grapples with the unjust whitewashing of large swathes of American history, and the prevalence of White photographers being hired to document Black America.

Doyle feels grateful for the time he has been able to spend among this exceptionally talented and dedicated community. "There have not been many opportunities for artists and photographers of color to photography even within their own community," Doyle says, "I feel an immense sense of gratitude for being welcomed into this one." He is quick to point to Black photographers working to document African American cowboy culture in other parts of the country, citing Ivan B. McClellan as a prominent example. While the cowboys of the John Wayne era may remain fixed in many American's minds, the *Delta Hill Riders* have and will continue to uphold their long standing traditions. These riders all share in the joy their community brings, the pride in their enduring traditions and culture, and the desire for the long and venturesome ride.

1 Dianna Everett, 'Pickett, William,' The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=PI003>.













2 Kansas Historical Society, 'Love, Nat,' The Kansas Historical Society, <https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/nat-love/12135>

3 Katie Nodjimbadem, 'The Lesser-Known History of African American Cowboys,' Smithsonian Magazine, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lesser-known-history-african-american-cowboys-180962144/>



Images, top to bottom, left to right: True Cowboy Love; Delta Hill Riders Mother; Gee Rise Up

	<i>Archie and Pig</i>	Archival Pigment Print 11×16'	On request
	<i>Air Jordans</i>	Archival Pigment Print 13×20'	On request
	<i>Ride At Own Risk</i>	Archival Pigment Print 11×16'	On request
	<i>Jeremy Training</i>	Archival Pigment Print 13×20'	On request
	<i>True Cowboy Love</i>	Archival Pigment Print Size 13×20'	On request
	<i>Western Light</i>	Archival Pigment Print 13×20'	On request
	<i>Big Mac Dancing</i>	Archival Pigment Print 11×16'	On request
	<i>Peggy at the Ride</i>	Archival Pigment Print 11×16'	On request
	<i>Afternoon Trailer</i>	Archival Pigment Print 11×16'	On request
	<i>Newest Cowboy in Town</i>	Archival Pigment Print 11×16'	On request
	<i>Muddy Bree in the Magical Light</i>	Archival Pigment Print 20×30'	On request
	<i>Faithful Cowgirl</i>	Archival Pigment Print 11×16'	On request
	<i>Riding High</i>	Archival Pigment Print 20×30'	On request
	<i>Young Riders</i>	Archival Pigment Print 11×16'	On request

	<i>Delta Hill Riders Mother</i>	Archival Pigment Print 11×16'	On request
	<i>Joes Antique Ride</i>	Archival Pigment Print 13×20'	On request
	<i>Aubrey at Sugar Shack</i>	Archival Pigment Print 11×16'	On request
	<i>Gee Rise Up</i>	Archival Pigment Print 30×20'	On request
	<i>All Around Cowboy</i>	Archival Pigment Print 13×20'	On request
	<i>Jessie at Night</i>	Archival Pigment Print 20×30'	On request
	<i>Lester and Grandkids</i>	Archival Pigment Print 13×20'	On request
	<i>Gee and Geese</i>	Archival Pigment Print 11×16'	On request
	<i>Burning City</i>	Archival Pigment Print 13×20'	On request
	<i>Horses Wait</i>	Archival Pigment Print 11×16'	On request
	<i>Kyran's Letterman</i>	Archival Pigment Print 13×20'	On request
	<i>Rodeo Dancing</i>	Archival Pigment Print 11×16'	On request
	<i>Shannon at Dusk</i>	Archival Pigment Print 20×30'	On request
	<i>Shaq and Dad</i>	Archival Pigment Print 11×16'	On request

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