AN AVENUE OF LIVE OAKS LEADING TO AN OIL refinery in Louisiana. North Carolina’s Eno River, crowded with children cooling off on the Fourth of July. Iridescent oil swirling in the Gulf after the Deepwater Horizon disaster. Each of the 220 photographs in the exhibition Southbound—debuting this fall at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston—says more than meets the eye, an inherent friction at work in every image: between Old South and New, black and white, the environment and the demand for energy. Together, the photos call and respond to one another, telling a story of the modern South through the lens of fifty-six photographers, an unprecedented collection previewed here with images selected by Garden & Gun photography and visuals director Maggie Brett Kennedy. ¶

Southbound’s alchemy comes from co-curators Mark Sloan, the director and chief curator of the Halsey, and Mark Long, a professor of political science at the College of Charleston. Sloan and Long set out to explore an “idiosyncratic slice of the South,” as Sloan calls the project, with the duo culling photos that range from the poetic to the political, and that “ask more questions than they answer.” ¶ The exhibition, which runs from October 19 to March 2 in Charleston before touring, also features a documentary, an interactive map, and a catalogue with essays, including one from the Southern Foodways Alliance director John T. Edge, and poetry by the National Book Award–winning Nikky Finney.

The gestalt creates an “ability—not to understand the South; that’s probably far too tall an order,” Long says, but “to come to grips with what makes the South tick in the early twenty-first century.”

Southern Exposures
“It’s the elements here at play one with the other that’s so compelling,” says Long of this photo of a New York Times section featuring a Confederate statue lining a basket of tomatoes. The work of Langdon Clay, a New York native and longtime Mississippi resident, can be found in such collections as the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s.

The Delta is heavily represented in Southbound, Long says, calling it a “magnetic place” for photographers. In addition to the Spanish-born Solé, artists such as Brandon Thibodeaux, Maude Schuyler Clay, Will Jacobs, Thomas Rankin, and Kathleen Robbins have work included from that Mississippi region.

The Tennessee native Bill Steber, who has documented the Mississippi blues culture for two decades, is a musician himself and friends with the Betty’s Place crowd, affording him “privileged access,” Mark Sloan says, to moments such as this. “You can almost smell the air and feel the energy in that room.”
Jerry Siegel, who grew up in the region of Alabama known as the Black Belt, captures here not only anachronistic finery juxtaposed with the Southern football tradition but also the historical freight both carry. "You can read almost as much into this as you want to," Long says. "The meaning of these images comes in that space created between the photographer looking, the image itself, and our looking."
Finger-Lickin’ Good, 2007
Photograph by SUSANA RAAB
From the Consumed Fast Food in the United States series
London, Kentucky
Susana Raab, who lives in Washington, D.C., snapped this photograph during the Colonel Sanders look-alike contest at the annual World Chicken Festival. “It’s almost like seeing three Santa Clauses,” Sloan says. John T. Edge, who wrote an essay about “cloaking and costuming” in the South to accompany this shot for the catalogue, reminds viewers that “Sanders pivoted from selling gasoline and fried chicken to selling conceits rooted in antebellum fantasies.”

Wedding Silver, 2010
Photograph by McNAIR EVANS
From the Confessions for a Son series
Laurinburg, North Carolina
San Francisco resident McNair Evans photographed this series while back home in North Carolina shuttering his childhood home after his father’s death, as a way to come to terms with his grief, as well as to reassess his family history. The pieces evoke a “sense of holding on to the way things were,” Long says, “once upon a time.”

Four on a Bike, Piety Street, 2010
Photograph by KEVIN KLINE
From the Someday You Will Be a Memory series
New Orleans, Louisiana
Kevin Kline has photographed his neighborhood, New Orleans’ Bywater, for decades—he lives in the house in the background. He most likely captured this image after stepping out of Frady’s, Sloan says, the corner store across the street. The photo, Long says, speaks to the “pandemonium of childhood.”