

## Inside Constance Thalken's Whitespace Gallery Talk

by [Sherri Dave Scott](#) September 9, 2026

Atlanta photographer Constance Thalken sat down with High Museum of Art curator Gregory Harris at Whitespace Gallery in late August to discuss her debut photo book, "Heart of a Bird," and [the exhibition of the same name](#) that pairs with it. The Saturday afternoon talk drew a crowd that spilled onto the gallery's brick floor, seated beneath a wall of black-and-white prints pulled from a body of work Thalken shot nearly 30 years ago and is only now publishing as a monograph. Here's some of what was shared.



Constance Thalken, "Heart of a Bird," on view at Whitespace Gallery through Sept. 12. (Courtesy of Whitespace Gallery)

### 1. Thalken didn't start out as a photographer

[Thalken's path into photography](#) ran through psychology, not art school. She only discovered photography after enrolling in an intro class taught by photographer Baldwin Lee at the University of Tennessee. "I am an anomaly, I guess, among artists in that I did not go through an undergraduate photo program, and I had another life," she told

Harris. Thalken went on to earn an MFA in photography from Yale in 1988 and later taught at Georgia State University for nearly three decades before retiring in 2018.

2. The project started with a VW camper van and no real plan

“Heart of a Bird” grew out of a five-year period beginning in 1988, when Thalken drove a Volkswagen camper van through small Gulf Coast towns. She’d park, start walking with her camera, and let conversations lead to the next picture. “I would inevitably meet people,” she said. “Either they were curious about me, or I was curious about them.” Conversations sometimes turned into invitations, in one to come back the following fall and join a family gator hunt.



Attendees fill Whitespace Gallery for the Constance Thalken and Gregory Harris artist talk. (Courtesy of Whitespace Gallery)

3. The book’s title comes from alligator anatomy

Thalken was calling the project “Fragments of an Elegy” until a workshop audience reacted poorly to the title. Stuck for a replacement, she and a friend looked into alligator physiology and found that while most reptiles have

three-chambered hearts, alligators, alone among reptiles, have four chambers, the same as birds. The detail became “Heart of a Bird.”

4. One photograph came from a hand-raised lion cub named Sasha

Asked which image in the show has the most surprising backstory, Thalken pointed to a portrait titled “John and Sasha.” While wandering a small community, she found a house where a young man named John lived with a lion cub. Days before her visit, the cub — Sasha, then seven and a half months old — broke loose, attacked a neighbor’s goat and was shot. Thalken photographed the pair shortly after: John bathed Sasha and put fresh linens on the bed before they took the picture together. “That’s sacred to me,” she said of the portrait.

The 80-page “Heart of a Bird” monograph is due out this fall from the London publisher Stanley/Barker. The hardback, cloth-covered book will include 48 images. [Pre-orders are available now.](#) The Whitespace Gallery exhibit closes Sept. 12.