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ARTS PHOTOGRAPHY

‘Wildly Strange: The Photographs of Ralph Eugene Meatyard’ Review

Discovered in an archive long after their creator’s death, these are uncommon images from an uncommon talent.



Detail of an untitled 1959 photo by Ralph Eugene Meatyard of his son Christopher. PHOTO: HARRY RANSOM CENTER/THE ESTATE OF RALPH EUGENE MEATYARD

By WILLIAM MEYERS

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Wildly Strange: The Photographs of Ralph Eugene Meatyard

Blanton Museum of Art

Through June 21

Jessica McDonald was appointed the chief curator of photography at the University of Texas’ Harry Ransom Center in 2012. In 2005, the Center had acquired the archives of Guy Davenport (1927-2005), a poet, translator and critic who taught for many years at the University of Kentucky. In 2014, when the Davenport archivists came across some photographs, presumed to be mostly family photos and such, they

asked Ms. McDonald to help them identify and arrange to preserve them. It turned out that the archive contained a treasure, 48 photographic prints by Davenport's friend Ralph Eugene Meatyard. Thirty-one of those prints are the core of "Wildly Strange," the present Meatyard exhibition curated by Ms. McDonald at the University of Texas' Blanton Museum of Art.

Gene Meatyard was born in 1925 in Normal, Ill., and moved to Lexington, Ky., in 1950. He worked there as an optician, after 1967 at his own shop. He befriended many regional artists, including the photographer Van Deren Coke and the poets Wendell Berry, Jonathan Williams, Thomas Merton and, after 1963, Guy Davenport. He learned from them and collaborated with several on book projects. It was Davenport who, after Meatyard's death in 1972, described his photographs to the literary critic Hugh Kenner as "wildly strange."

Meatyard's photographs are not like those of other photographers. Although he lived far from the centers of creative photography—New York, Chicago, San Francisco—and worked 51/2 days a week as an optician, he determined in the weekend day and a half available to him to explore the possible limits of photography. For example, all competent photographers understand selective focus, having one part of an image in sharp focus and the rest blurred, but Meatyard experimented with "No-Focus." The subjects of the "No-Focus" pictures are unrecognizable, and are seen only as abstract masses of light and dark. The "Light On Water" project abstracted reflections by reducing the tonal values to just white and black, and only small parts of the branches are in focus in the "Zen Twigs" series.

The Blanton exhibition includes two prints from Meatyard's "Motion-Sound" experiments; by jiggling the camera during the exposures, he tried to produce visual analogues of music. And there is an untitled picture from 1961 of a rubber mask, some doll heads and a leaf in shallow water, one of his compositions with the assorted props he collected, as well as several more or less straight portraits of his literary friends. But the heart of the Austin show consists of his sui generis pictures of his family—wife, Madelyn, and children Michael, Christopher and Melissa—and friends, whom he posed in carefully selected settings and frequently had wear masks. It is these unsettling images, sometimes referred to as "gothic," that are key to Meatyard's continuing influence and importance.

There is an untitled 1959 picture of Christopher, then 4 years old; tangled shrubs and two trees occupy the foreground, and he is seen through a scrim of bare branches wearing a dark sweatshirt with a hood. His pale face is turned up slightly, his mouth is open and his eyes are shut. This is odd, the composition is odd and his expression is odd, but like so many of Meatyard's pictures, it is very touching,

An untitled 1960 picture, also taken in a wooded area, has a primitive soapbox derby racer in sharp focus in the left foreground; a young boy, his body so attenuated by his movement that he almost disappears, in the middle ground; and a background so filled with light that it is blown out. It is an image of portents, but it harbingers what?

"Romance (N.) from Ambrose Bierce #3" (1962) is full-bore Meatyard. The setting is a wooden stadium with painted numerals—1, 2, 3, 4, 5—identifying the rows. Four children wearing rubber masks sit on ascending stairs. All the masks are of adult faces; the bottom three grotesque, and the one in the upper right comic. The convention when people pose in scary masks is for them to assume a threatening stance, but the body language here is very relaxed; one child rests his chin in his hand, another has his arms crossed on his knees. The paradoxes between the young bodies and adult faces, and the horrific faces and benign poses, present a seemingly unfathomable riddle, the visual equivalent of the koans Meatyard learned about in his study of Zen.

It is relevant that Ambrose Bierce (1842-c. 1914) defined “romance” in his Devil’s Dictionary as “Fiction that owes no allegiance to the God of Things as They Are.”

The Davenport archive also included “Lucybelle Crater and Her 15-Year-Old Son’s Friend, Lucybelle Crater” (1970), a print from Meatyard’s “The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater,” a series that mimics contemporaneous family photo albums.

In all but the last of the 64 photographs in this project, Madelyn Meatyard wore the mask of Lucybelle Crater, a hooknosed, virtually toothless, pathetic crone. In the last picture of the series, taken shortly before his death from cancer, Meatyard himself wore the Lucybelle mask. All the subjects in the “Album” wear masks and all are named Lucybelle Crater.

In the Blanton print, Lucybelle and another woman are in the country, standing casually in front of a disintegrating concrete pillar at the end of a wall. If it were not for their masks, this would be a very ordinary picture, but the masks transvalue it. We are ineluctably drawn to question who these two are; who the masks represent, who the people wearing the masks are, and what the relationship between them, and between them and us, is. And so we go spiraling down the trail of existential inquiry Meatyard has blazed for us.

Meatyard had a library of almost 2,000 books when he died. William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens all worked day jobs, as he did, and were among his favorite poets. Meatyard, the photographer and seer, puts me in mind of the listener in Stevens’s “The Snow Man” who “beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”

Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. “Outer Boroughs: New York Beyond Manhattan,” an exhibition of his own photography, is on view at the New York Public Library through June 30.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/wildly-strange-the-photographs-of-ralph-eugene-meatyard-review-1430345730>