

THE EYE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Ralph Eugene Meatyard: The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater



Lucybelle Crater and 46 year old husband's tall photo friend Lucybelle Crater 1970-72 © Estate of Ralph Eugene Meatyard. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

L'ŒIL DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

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American photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925-1972) purchased his first camera in 1950 to document moments of family life and his casual interest in photography quickly turned to a passion. For the next twenty-two years, he spent his weekends touring the countryside around his suburban Lexington, Kentucky (USA) home with his wife and three children, Michael, Christopher and Melissa. His family became his primary subject as he captured them playing alongside streams, frolicking through fields, and exploring abandoned

barns. These ostensibly familiar photographs, however, are anything but. Here is a child cavorting through a meadow while wearing a grotesque rubber mask; there lies a decapitated doll resting beside a bucolic rolling stream. Meatyard approached his images with a dark humor that leaves their viewers with a lingering unease. Suffused with a sense of the uncanny through his sharp usage of the macabre, Meatyard's photographs present a phantasmagoric dream and the body of work he left behind has influenced generations of subsequent artists.

The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater is the title of a new exhibition of photographs by Ralph Eugene Meatyard currently on view at DC Moore Gallery in New York. A self-taught photographer who was an optician by trade, he made this photographic series in the two years prior to his death at age 46. He conceived of the series as a "*photographic poem*" with a deliberate sequence and captions, which form a loose narrative.

The series focuses on Meatyard's wife, Madelyn, as she dons a witch mask to become the character Lucybelle Crater. Madelyn then appears in each image alongside a rotating cast of characters portrayed by Meatyard's friends, neighbors, and children. Also dubbed Lucybelle Crater, they wear a second mask: the semi-transparent face of a very old man. The subjects' postures mimic ordinary family snapshots as they pose with arms slung around each other's shoulders, stand stiffly on front porches, or stoop to a child's height, but with their features obscured by the masks, they morph into inscrutable and unearthly figures. Meatyard cribbed the name Lucybelle Crater, and modified it slightly, from the Flannery O'Connor short story entitled *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*.

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DC Moore Gallery

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