

Ralph Eugene Meatyard
1925 - 1972

by

James Rhem

Copyright © 1999

This text is the English language original for Photo Poche No. 87
Ralph Eugene Meatyard
NATHAN/HER
2000, Paris
ISBN 209-754 142-9

The book is available in the United States through local bookstores or
Photo-Eye in Sante Fe, New Mexico
1- 800-227-6941.
Photo-Eye also has a web site www.photoeye.com

Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925—1972)

Ralph Eugene Meatyard's death in 1972, a week away from his 47th birthday, came at the height of the "photo boom," a period of growth and ferment in photography in the United States which paralleled the political and social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. It was a time of ambition, not reflection, a time for writing resumés, not thoughtful and inclusive histories; in the contest of reputation, dying in 1972 meant leaving the race early.¹ It was left to friends and colleagues to complete an *Aperture* monograph on Meatyard² and carry through with the publication of *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater* (1974) which he had laid out and sequenced before his death.

While he lived Meatyard's work was shown and collected by major museums, published in important art magazines, and regarded by his peers as among the most original and disturbing imagery ever created with a camera. He exhibited with such well-known and diverse photographers as Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Minor White, Aaron Siskind, Harry Callahan, Robert Frank, and Eikoh Hosoe. But by the late 1970s, his photographs seemed consigned to appear mainly in exhibitions of "southern" art. In the last decade, however, thanks in part to European critics (who since at least the time of De Tocqueville have forged early insights into American culture), Meatyard's work has reemerged, and the depth of its genius and its contributions to photography have begun to be understood and appreciated.

¹ John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*. (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1978) pp.14 - 15. Among other statistics about the "photo boom," Szarkowski notes that between 1966 and 1970 "the number of students studying photography or cinematography at the University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana) increased from 132 to 4,175 — a growth of over three thousand percent in four years."

² Hall, James Baker, ed. *Ralph Eugene Meatyard: Emblems & Rites* (Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1974) There had already been an earlier book—*Ralph Eugene Meatyard*—done in 1970 by the Gnomon Press with an introduction by Wendell Berry and notes by Arnold Gassan.

In a sense Meatyard suffered a fate common to artists who are very much of but also very far ahead of their time. Everything about his life and his art ran counter to the usual and expected patterns. He was an optician, happily married, a father of three, president of the PTA, and coach of a boy's baseball team. He lived in Lexington, Kentucky, far from the urban centers most associated with serious art. His images had nothing to do with the gritty "street photography" of the east coast or the romantic view camera realism of the west coast. His best known images were populated with dolls and masks, with family, friends and neighbors pictured in abandoned buildings or in ordinary suburban backyards.

At the same time he often turned from this vernacular focus and, like such photographers as Henry Holmes Smith, Harry Callahan and others, produced highly experimental work. These images include multiple exposures and photographs where, through deliberate camera movement, Meatyard took Fox Talbot's "pencil of nature" and drew calligraphic images with the sun's reflection on a black void of water. However, where others used these experiments to expand the possibilities of form in photographs, Meatyard consistently applied breakthroughs in formal design to the exploration of ideas and emotions. Finally—and of great importance in the development of his aesthetic—Meatyard created a mode of "No-Focus" imagery that was distinctly his own. "No-Focus" images ran entirely counter to any association of camera art with objective realism and opened a new sense of creative freedom in his art.

In short, Meatyard's work challenged most of the cultural and aesthetic conventions of his time and did not fit in with the dominant notions of the kind of art photography could and should be. His work sprang from the beauty of ideas rather than ideas of the beautiful. Wide reading in literature (especially poetry) and philosophy

(especially Zen) stimulated his imagination. While others roamed the streets searching for America and truth, Meatyard haunted the world of inner experience, continually posing unsettling questions about our emotional realities through his pictures. Once again, however, he inhabited this world quite differently from other photographers exploring inner experience at the time. Meatyard's "mirror" (as John Szarkowski used the term³) was not narcissistic. It looked back reflectively on the dreams and terrors of metaphysical questions, not private arguments of faith or doubt.

Meatyard's early life offered no hint of the artist he was to become. It was his brother Jerry, a sculptor and arts educator, who showed artistic talent. Where Jerry was quiet, Gene was outgoing, the center of a social set, a boy who enjoyed music, dancing and good times. During World War II at age eighteen, he enrolled at Williams College as part of the Navy's V-12 pre-dentistry program, but he so enjoyed working on stage plays and other extra-curricular activities that he let his grades slip and was dropped from the program. However, as he revealed in an oral history interview in 1970 his conflicts at Williams had as much to do with his stubbornly independent intellect as with his youthful energies.⁴ Essentially Meatyard's Williams experience defined him as an autodidact, and for the rest of his life he educated himself through his diverse and voracious reading. Perhaps, given the powerful interest he showed in dramatics during these years, it is not coincidental that masks, props and other tools of the theater would later become vital elements in his photography.

3 *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*.

4 Ralph Eugene Meatyard, oral history interview February, 1970. Audio tape and transcript University Archives and Records Center, University Libraries, University of Louisville, Kentucky. Transcript p. 4. Meatyard remembers with irritation a young math professor unwilling to accept novel solutions to problems, and with affection, recalls an older German teacher who, despite his age, remained open to new ways of learning.

After the war, Meatyard returned to Bloomington, Illinois near his birthplace, a town called Normal. He was twenty-one and, like many returning servicemen, eager to get on with his life. He soon met and married Madelyn McKinney, a strikingly beautiful blonde destined to become the hag, "Lucybelle Crater," taking her place in photo history alongside Stieglitz's Georgia O'Keeffe, Callahan's Eleanor, and Emmet Gowin's Edith (who appears as one of Lucybelle's friends). The newlyweds moved to Chicago where Meatyard took apprenticeship training as an optician. During that time, Meatyard (who'd played the accordion in high school) began a jazz collection that grew to over 1,500 phonograph records. Indeed, for Meatyard photographic practice became an art closer to music and poetry than to any of the other arts,⁵ Many of his most memorable images lend themselves to being read as poems are read, and a silent music animates many others, especially the "Light on Water" series and the multiple exposures he called "Motion-Sound."

In 1950, Meatyard took a job with a large optical firm in Lexington where he worked until he opened his own shop, Eyeglasses of Kentucky, in 1967. While hardly a major urban center, Lexington was home to the University of Kentucky and attracted an unusual collection of writers and intellectuals to the area especially during the 1960s. In time, Meatyard joined their circle and counted the poets, critics, and scholars Wendell Berry, Guy Davenport, James Baker Hall, and Jonathan Williams among his friends. He became close friends as well with the Trappist monk, poet and critic Thomas Merton,

⁵ In the 1970 oral history interview, Meatyard expresses his "belief that photography is closer to poetry, written poetry, than it is to any other part of the art world, including visual art. That it has more to do with the poetic word, written and spoken word, and closely allied to some music, than it does with visual imagery. . . . Now, you can just make your eye play a song . . . on this thing and practically repeat it time after time after time." (Transcript pp. 38-39.) Meatyard's correspondence with poets Jonathan Williams and Thomas Merton contains a number of suggestions that they send him poems with the idea that he might respond to them

who shared Meatyard's strong interest in Zen. So, although he lived and worked in a quiet college town, Meatyard traveled in very creative and well-read company.

Friendships with that company developed some years after Meatyard discovered his native artistic genius. That discovery came in his encounter with another unusual feature of Lexington—the Lexington Camera Club. Though camera clubs sprang up all over the United States after the Photo-Secession, most focused on the gadgetry and technical aspects of photography. From its founding in 1936, the Lexington Camera Club had followed a different course, one defined by artistic concerns.,⁶

When Meatyard joined in 1950, Van Deren Coke was the club's dominant member. Coke, who was soon to go on and become a noted art historian, photographer and curator, had already worked with Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. Thus he was already well versed in photography and visual aesthetics. He quickly saw indications of Meatyard's genius and began to encourage its development. As Coke recalls, his relationship with Meatyard soon became one of peers rather than teacher and student as they went out photographing together on Sunday afternoons.⁷ By 1954 Meatyard had begun to study photography seriously, and in 1956 he and Coke attended an unprecedented photographic workshop at Indiana University organized by Henry Holmes Smith. Together with the private tutelage he'd had from Coke, that three-week-long

photographically, and that perhaps he might send them photographs to which they might respond in poetry

6 Christian A. Peterson, *After the Photo-Secession: American Pictorial Photography 1910-1955*. (W. W. Norton, 1997) PP 125-130. Peterson gives an overview of the popularity of camera clubs, but though he lists Robert C. May's history of the Lexington Camera Club in his bibliography (*Lexington Camera Club 1936-1972*. University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington, 1989), he does not mention the Lexington Camera Club or its special characteristics. Interestingly, Mary Louise Tucker notes in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (eds. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1989, "Photographers and Photography," p. 97a) that camera clubs were extraordinarily popular in the Kentucky - Tennessee region and were distinguished from other clubs by their interest in artistic ends rather than mere "kodaking."

7 Interview with the author December, 1998.

workshop opened the floodgates of Meatyard's creativity. Though more technical matters like the Zone System were discussed, the workshop's emphasis fell on analytic, historical, and personally expressive aspects of the medium, instead of its craft. Smith, an influential theorist and photo educator, had gotten his start at Moholy-Nagy's "New Bauhaus," (later renamed the Institute of Design) in Chicago.⁸ Shaped by Moholy-Nagy's influence, he had long approached photography as a means of knowing. At the time of the 1956 workshop, Smith drew particular intellectual inspiration and direction from I.A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* and translated Richards' ideas about reading literature into a series of analytic experiments in "reading" photographs.

The workshop exposed Meatyard to two other important figures in addition to Smith—Aaron Siskind (then part of the faculty at the Institute of Design along with Harry Callahan) and Minor White (then criss-crossing the country giving workshops when he wasn't curating or teaching). Siskind, a seasoned educator, had found major inspiration for his photography in the abstract expressionist paintings of Franz Kline. Thus, seeing painting and photography as sister arts, he stressed what photographers could learn from painters and painting.

As part of his contribution to the workshop, Minor White offered an eclectic list of materials serious photographers ought to read. Among them were György Kepes's *The Language of Vision*, Richard Boleslavsky's *Acting: The First Six Lessons*, works on Zen Buddhism by Eugene Herrigel and D.T. Suzuki, and material on André Breton's conception of surrealism⁹. Meatyard read these materials closely, underlining extensively

8 *The New Vision: Forty Years of Photography at the Institute of Design*, ed. Charles Traub Aperture, 1982. pp. 28-35.

9 Herrigel, Eugen. **Zen in the Art of Archery**: Pantheon Books; 1953 and Suzuki, D.T. **Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki**. Barrett, William, editor. New York: Doubleday & Company; 1956 It's unclear from his notebooks precisely what materials on or by Breton Meatyard read.

and copying out the underlined passages into a notebook. His study of these books was perhaps the most intense of his life. Throughout his markings in Boleslavsky, for example, he crosses out the words "actor" and "play" and inks in "photographer" and "photograph." Likewise his reading on the religious philosophy Zen introduced him to ideas whose importance increased throughout his life.

When Van Deren Coke left Lexington that same year (1956) to begin his academic career, Meatyard became the dominant personality in the Lexington Camera Club. His energy fueled the critiques of new photographs that were the center of every club meeting. As Coke had done, Meatyard began to meet weekly in his home with a handful of especially interested and promising club members, teaching them what he had learned in Indiana as well as what he was formulating in his own mind from his reading and artistic practice. More than once Meatyard declared, "I never will make an accidental photograph."¹⁰

During this period, Meatyard stripped image making down to a set of essentials and began to experiment with them. The architecture of pictures engaged him, but how this architecture served emotional expression remained his primary concern. A diary he kept for several months early in 1958 shows how powerfully committed he was to his inner dialogue, a dialogue that fully forged him as an artist. Never does the diary suggest that Meatyard had the slightest lack of confidence in his own expressive capacity. He describes the photographs he's making, reveals his critical perspective by assessing the progress of his private students, alludes to the thinking of a few photographers—Stieglitz, Weston—but draws his greatest stimulation from painters: Matisse, Klee, Morris Graves, Mark Tobey, Larry Rivers, Charles Burchfield.

¹⁰ Meatyard, artist's statement for the University of Illinois's "Six Photographers" exhibit in 1961.

Photography had opened the world of art to him, but his deepest commitment was to making pictures. To explore that process, Meatyard began to paint and photograph simultaneously. He painted on glass and then photographed the paintings under different lighting conditions. He constructed ephemeral collages of paint, dead birds and other objects, allowed them to freeze in white porcelain trays and photographed them in various stages of freezing and thawing. At times he found painting a superior medium; at others, photography. "Painting is the tougher of the two mediums to use at first," he writes, "but photography becomes the hardest after you have been at it."¹¹

How did photography differ from painting? From poetry? From music? What did it share with them? How might photography participate, not just in the almost inescapable world of self expression, but in the world of ideas? If photographs could record and comment, could they also pose questions and elaborate thought? Meatyard wanted to know, and he saw from the start that the supposed realism associated with the camera's capacity for optically sharp focus did not define photography's special expressive power.

The fundamentals of visual grammar and emotional expression excited Meatyard's imagination more than external subject matter. He saw in this grammar of perception, as described by Kepes and others, new ways of probing experience, new ways of knowing. Thus, while he sometimes described his work—especially his early work—as abstract surrealist, he was quick to clarify that to him that meant "sur-Real" or "more real than real."¹² For Meatyard, what he called the "believability" of photography represented both a powerful tool and a dangerous trap. Viewers brought presumptions of truthfulness to photographs that they did not bring to paintings, but he knew those

11 Meatyard Diary February 21, 1958. Meatyard Archives.

12 Oral history interview transcript p. 38

presumptions could be used to lead viewers to new, "more real than real," experiences. Before 1958 he had been calling his efforts to create such experiences "non-representational emotionalism." What he meant becomes clear in the context of the diary where he differentiates "sentiment" from "sentimentality." "Sentimentality" was particular, localized, representational; "sentiment" was abstract, universal, but nonetheless "felt."

Thus Meatyard would put Halloween masks on his family and friends to release the "aroma of having a person, a human being in the picture, which stands for an entirely different thing than having a particular human being in the picture."¹³ The non-particularized human being presents an enigma at once grotesque, comic, mysterious and engaging, an enigma both attractive and repellant, one as likely to evoke a sympathetic response as apprehension. In the very process of destroying anonymity by denying particularity, the masks refuse to let us dismiss these figures as anonymous "other people." They become instead effigies of ourselves.

Comic and tragic, grotesque and beautiful simultaneously, Meatyard's images pose the kind of persistent and unanswerable questions that animate existence. Whether Meatyard acquired this philosophical perspective from his extensive study of Zen or whether he merely found his natural inclinations confirmed in what he read remains unclear. Certainly Buddhist thinking offers more profound insight into his work than do such notions as "the southern gothic." When Meatyard pictures children in an abandoned house, he is picturing life in death, the past present, both immanent in the moment. When he deliberately displays a blurred figure, he represents mortality by dwelling not on decay, but on movement, animation, life. His shadowy walls marked with graffiti (plate 58) or covered with newspapers from long ago (plate 55) bear witness to a

13 Oral history interview transcript p. 31.

host of long departed souls and forgotten events still present and perhaps meaningful, as history is always present and always rewritten. In all these ways Meatyard locates his photographs not in frozen or in time-less moments, but in moments that implicate all of time.

Everywhere in Meatyard humankind appears merged with nature, not separate from it. Buried behind branches and a dark pole, we see a man peeking out, his hands holding his place in the darkness (plate 40). A child lies in the shadow of a forked tree, her legs spread in imitation of the shadow (plate 10). Nature appears as a cold, powerful fact. Meatyard's skies are white voids uncluttered with clouds. A spire may hint at piercing the firmament, but only hint (plate 77). The forest appears complex, perhaps impenetrable; Meatyard fills his frames with thickets of dark, criss-crossed branches, creating a view of nature as intriguing and fearsome as the *Le Carceri* of Piranesi's imagination. (switch Rizzoli 106 for plate 29) In an optical tour de force like plate 34, Meatyard turns an innocent garden path into an unsettling vortex of possibility.¹⁴ Is this the way through Alice's rabbit hole¹⁵? A portal to another imagined world? It is emphatically a photograph whose formal design invites viewers to ponder its meaning.

Meatyrd developed no code, no system of private metaphors that would reduce his enigmatic dramas to mere puzzles. Like poems, his images can be read using the

14 Quite possibly this image and several others using such circular patterning are Meatyard's response to vorticism, the aesthetic movement invented by Ezra Pound around 1915. Meatyard had over two dozen books by or about Pound in his library, and his friend Guy Davenport is a noted Pound scholar. Furthermore, Meatyard owned a portfolio of photographs by Alvin Langdon Coburn who had attempted vortographic photographs (including a portrait of Pound) in 1916. See Mike Weaver's "Beyond the Craft" pp. 64 - 74 in *Alvin Langdon Coburn: Symbolist Photographer 1882-1966* (Aperture Foundation, 1986).

15 Meatyard's library contained not only a 1949 edition of *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland*, but also a 1965 facsimile of the original story, *Alice's Adventures Underground*. In addition, he owned a copy of Carroll's complete works, a volume of his humorous verse, and Helmut Gernsheim's *Lewis Carroll, Photographer*. Clearly, Meatyard had more than a passing interest in Charles Dodgson. Both photographed children, and both perhaps saw children as ideal explorers of the fantastic.

rich, public language of metaphor and association found in the libraries of world literature he consumed. Consider his image of a boy sitting on the floor of an old house holding a reflective shard of glass in front of his face (plate 23). The graffiti on the wall above his head offer monuments of others' Halloween bravery left in their own handwriting—"A. J. Turner, Oct. 31, 1948, South Irvine, Ky" We know the names, the date, the addresses of the past visitors, but the men and women who scratched them here remain occluded by the passage of time just as the face of the present, living figure sits occluded by light itself. Thus we see the past and the present together, and yet dimly, just as the shard of window pane masks, reflects, and remains transparent simultaneously. Here among these reminders of "All Hallow's Eve," Meatyard reminds us that "now we see through a glass darkly."¹⁶

The formal construction of the photograph supports and extends its metaphorical contents. The arch in which the figure sits rises heavenward just as the shard seems to point up. And—as in the famous image of the one-armed man with the dress-maker's dummy, plate 42—the center of the picture summarizes the enigma in its refusal to mirror anything but the silent infinity of light.

To appreciate Meatyard's singular and complex originality, one might compare his use of graffiti with that of other photographers well-known for incorporating it in their images—Helen Levitt, John Gutmann and Aaron Siskind, for example. Seldom if ever does their formal invention elaborate such an exploration of ideas. But one finds this kind

16 I Corinthians 13:12. (King James Version, which Meatyard owned). While Meatyard disdained conventional religion as "a quack sort of business," he described himself as "religious without going to church." (Oral history interview transcript p. 8) In his artist's statement for the "Six Photographers" exhibition in 1961 at the University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana), he wrote: "I have been called a preacher—but, in reality, I'm more generally philosophical." In an artist's statement for an exhibit of his work at the Siembab Gallery in Boston a year later, he said: "I have always tried to keep truth in my photographs. My work, whether realistic or abstract, has always dealt with either a form of religion or imagination."

of rewarding complexity throughout Meatyard's imagery. Arguably, no American photographer during Meatyard's lifetime combined the intellectual strengths of such allusive and metaphorical content with the formal strengths of a fine-art aesthetic so consistently and so powerfully as he.

Always, his excursions into metaphysical territory carry Meatyard's humor into the adventure—his celebration of paradox. Indeed, one cannot escape Meatyard's comic sense. He takes the ordinary and expected and turns them inside out, not mocking, but re-visioning them unsentimentally. His "Madonna" (plate 67), for example, takes the conventions of Italian Madonnas and literally reverses them. The child does not look out at the viewer or adoringly at the mother; the mother does not look adoringly at the child. Instead the child looks directly, somewhat rudely, at her mother's belly, her place of origin, and her mother looks straight off into the darkness, perhaps into her own past. The lighting reverses the expected as well. We see the figures in silhouette against dilapidated Venetian blinds, blinds whose name, "Venetian," provides another level of appropriate humor in the kind of wordplay Meatyard very much enjoyed, for it, too, points toward "Italian" art. Yet, even while carrying all this wit and humor, the image never denies its own sensuous beauty. The light creates a loving halo; the profile of the mother, a disarming dignity; the darkness, a quietude as radiant as Titian's color.

If Meatyard's photographic sensibilities developed rapidly and soon after his introduction to the medium, his sense of the medium's unique qualities was also challenged and confirmed early. In 1958 Meatyard encountered abstract paintings by University of Kentucky art professor Frederic Thursz (paintings which defined space through sharp and, to Meatyard, "photographic" line). At the same time Meatyard was wrangling with the old criticism that photography was a mere mechanical craft defined by

point of view and occasion as much as by the photographer's vision. Together, these experiences led Meatyard to completely re-examine his work and his thinking about photography.

In studying the backgrounds of his photographs (always an important element in his construction of pictures), and especially the out-of-focus backgrounds, he again concluded that "the photographically sharp line" of nominal optical realism offered the only ground on which the "mechanical craft" criticism could stand. Immediately the idea of destroying that line, of creating "No-Focus" photography came to him, and he undertook to discover if aesthetically satisfying camera images might be created by merely bringing tone masses together (plate 28). "I found out that I could not choose a subject, throw it out of focus, and then have a good picture," he wrote.¹⁷ "I found that I had to learn to see No-focus from the beginning." When he showed his successful efforts, he found that most photographers did not like them, but painters did. Photographers, still locked to the lens as a means of focus and photographs as dependent on subject matter, wanted to know what they were pictures "of."

Though he made relatively few "No-Focus" images and they are not the images most often associated with him, Meatyard regarded these as his most original contribution to the development of the medium. For him the aesthetic question and his personal resolution of it were central. Now fully freed in his own mind from the tyranny of optical realism, he could begin to return focus and the sharp edge to his pictures on his own terms. The "Zen Twigs" (plates 15, 25, 35, 75) and certain other images (for example plate 73) plot his use of "no-focus" as an element within his image making.

17 "No-Focus" (n.d.) unpublished manuscript in the Meatyard archive. See also Meatyard's discussion of "no-focus" in his oral history interview, transcript pp. 14 -16.

Toward the end of his life, Meatyard had evolved some sixteen different themes he was pursuing photographically. Each nourished and refreshed the others. In the final two years of his life, aware that he was dying of cancer, he had so orchestrated his sensibility that he could, on the one hand, adopt a rigorously formal and sharp-focused style in the Lucybelle Crater series and at the same time pursue a "camouflage" series where figures in the woodland fight with blotches of sunlight for recognition and where focus seems almost irrelevant (plate ?? add 107 Aperture or similar? Substitute for 2nd hubcap plate 52? Or trees/fence plate 76?). He had mastered his visionary genius: like the most accomplished of musicians, he could compose in any key. Indeed, he could and did invent new approaches to visual harmony in photography.

Throughout his life, Meatyard viewed himself as following in the tradition of those he called "the earliest and most sincere workers of the camera,"¹⁸ —Stieglitz, Weston, Strand—the tradition of "straight" photography. Meatyard made "straight" photography a credo, but for him it represented not an aesthetic choice, so much as an obligation owed to the medium. Images might be out of focus, multiply-exposed, blurred, but whatever the effect, it had to have been achieved in the camera in the moments of exposure. Why? Because for Meatyard the camera was a theater in which he enacted his search for truth. The scene might be staged, filled with props; that did not matter. The moments of creation were moments of performance, and for Meatyard—as for Boleslavsky—they required the highest integrity. Only that integrity of intention, that connection with "believability," could achieve full artistic freedom. And freedom of vision is what Meatyard sought. It is the claim he makes for the breakthrough he felt he had made in No-Focus: "It is an art of visual acrobatics which result in acrobatic emotions and

18 Beumont Newhall, "New Talent in Photography USA," *Art in America*, vol. 49, no. 1, (1961): 56.

misgivings."¹⁹ Like a Socrates, Meatyard harries us with insistent questions in his search for truth, raising doubts and misgivings rather than offering assurances. In the end, for Meatyard, the sanctity of "straight" photography contains and resolves these perceptual acrobatics. We are left with powerful works of imagination which suggest that, as in Poe's "Purloined Letter" or in Maeterlinck's *L'Oiseau bleu*, both the dream and the fact of truth lie before us, available in plain sight.

—James Rhem
Copyright © 1999

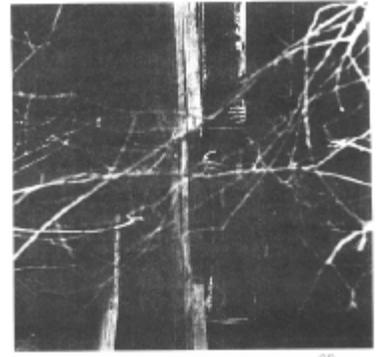
19 Ralph Eugene Meatyard, "No-Focus," unpublished manuscript c. 1961, Meatyard Archive.



58



55



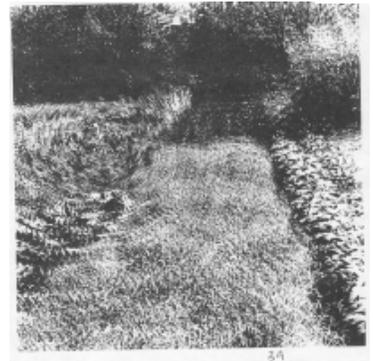
40



10



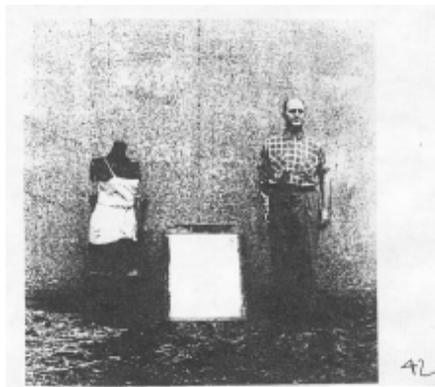
77



34



23



42



67



28



15



73

Meatyard Biography

1925. Ralph Eugene Meatyard born May 15 to Ralph Maynard and Ruth Lucile Meatyard in Normal, Illinois, the first of two children. (His younger brother Jerry would go on to become a college art instructor.)

1943. Graduates from University High School, a special school run by Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois although the family now lived in nearby Bloomington. Acted in stage plays throughout high school, was a member of the chess club as well as the school's band and orchestra. Shows his eccentric originality by playing accordion in both of these ensembles. He enters the U.S. Navy's pre-dentistry program at Williams College where his interest in drama outweighs his interest in dentistry and is dropped from the program.

1944. Transferred by the navy to the hospital corps at Camp Perry, Virginia where he sometimes acts as a translator in dealing with German prisoners of war.

1946. Discharged from military service. Marries Madelyn Orlean McKinney, and begins apprenticeship training as an optician in Chicago. Becomes a licensed optician. Works briefly at the Gailey Eye Clinic in Bloomington, Illinois.

1950. Enrolls for one semester at Illinois Wesleyan University on the GI Bill. Takes survey courses in philosophy, economics, and history. First child, Michael, born. Leaves school and moves to Lexington, Kentucky to work for the large optical firm, Tinder-Krauss-Tinder. Buys a Bolexy 35mm camera to photograph his child.

1950-1954. Snapshots from this period show an experimental bent. In addition to the usual records, Meatyard's earliest work shows an interest in decay, dolls, double-exposure, blurred figures and perceptual disorientation.

1954. Begins to study photography seriously. Joins the Lexington Camera Club, an organization with an unusually strong interest in fine-art photography. Van Deren Coke — who later becomes a distinguished art historian, curator and photographer — is a member of the club. Meatyard begins taking private classes with Coke. Simultaneously becomes a member of the Photographic Society of America (PSA), a less fine-art oriented organization. He exhibits for the first time nationally in PSA group shows in 1954. The same year he exhibits in a group show at the University of Kentucky Art Gallery organized by Coke called "Focus on Lexington and Fayette County." The show emphasizes discovering the unseen possibilities of the familiar, a theme Meatyard seizes and transforms in his work from this point onward.

1955. Second child, Christopher, born. Purchases a Rolleiflex (6x6cm) camera. Joins with Van Deren Coke in a project to document the residents of Georgetown Street, an African-American neighborhood in Lexington. The project becomes a joint exhibition.

1956. Along with Ansel Adams, Minor White Aaron Siskind, Harry Callahan, Ruth Bernhard, and Edward Weston shows work in an exhibition called "Creative Photography" organized by Coke.

In the summer, he and Coke attend a seminal workshop at Indiana University organized by Henry Holmes Smith. Faculty include Aaron Siskind and Minor White. Coke leaves Lexington to begin work on a degree in art history at Indiana University. Meatyard assumes a leadership role within the Lexington Camera Club. He conducts a workshop for the club based on his Indiana experiences, and, like Coke before him, begins a series of private classes for especially talented and interested club members.

1957. Ends his PSA membership. Travels to New York for the opening of a two-man show with Van Deren Coke at Roy DeCarava's "A Photographer's Gallery." The show is favorably reviewed in the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice*. On his return to Lexington, Meatyard intensifies his

experimentation in image making. He creates abstract expressionist paintings on glass and photographs them under different lighting conditions. In the winter, he arranges dead birds and other objects in trays of water in his backyard, adds paint to the water, swirls it around, and photographs the results as they freeze. He makes a variety of other paintings, sometimes (but not always) photographing the result. He begins his "Light on Water" photographs which continue throughout his career.

1958. In the early months of the year, Meatyard keeps a diary recording his continuing experiments in image making as well as thoughts on photography, his students' progress, and his search for his own stance as an artist. Later in the year, he abruptly halts his photographic work for three months, shaken by the challenge to photography he feels in his encounter with sharp-edged, abstract, collage paintings by Frederic Thursz has given rise to in him. He reviews his photographic work, invents "No-Focus" photography as an answer to the challenge, and resumes his work. Applies the "no-focus" technique in a series of images known as "Zen twigs."

1959. Third child, Melissa, born. First one-man show at Tulane University in New Orleans. A portfolio of Meatyard's photographs and an article on him by Van Deren Coke appear in *Aperture*. He is included in "Sense of Abstraction," a show at the Museum of Modern Art curated by Nathan Lyons.

1961. Meets poet, photographer and publisher Jonathan Williams. Beaumont Newhall includes Meatyard in "New Talent U.S.A." in *Art in America*. Suffers a heart attack, discovers he has gout, remains bed-ridden for six weeks and inactive for six months.

1963. Meets author, poet, critic, professor of literature Guy Davenport.

1966. Meets Wendell Berry, James Baker Hall, and Jonathan Greene, all poets living in the area and part of the circle sometimes called "the Kentucky Renaissance."

1967. Meets Thomas Merton, Trappist monk, writer, poet in January. In the spring he resigns from Tinder-Krauss-Tinder, takes a long trip with his family to Chicago, Rochester, NY, Boston, and New York City where he photographs various literary figures including Louis Zukofsky. On his return to Lexington, opens his own optical shop, Eyeglasses of Kentucky. Begins a series of tightly registered double-exposures which he calls "Motion-Sound" images. Continues the series into 1972. Evidence suggests he also begins conceptualizing the Lucybelle Crater series in 1967. In addition, during this year he begins a series of hiking and camping trips with Wendell Berry to photograph the Red River Gorge south of Lexington in preparation for their book, *The Unforeseen Wilderness*.

1968. Organizes "Photography 1968" the first of three large shows which exhibit the work of major national figures such as Minor White and their students together with the work of members of the Lexington Camera Club. Each show (the others were in 1970 and 1972) reaches out to photography schools from the east coast, the Midwest, and the west coast, striving for the broadest display of creative photography in the United States.

1970. Jonathan Greene's Gnomon Press publishes a monograph on Meatyard and work begins on an *Aperture* monograph on him to be edited by James Baker Hall. Meatyard learns that he has terminal cancer.

1972. Meatyard, who greatly enjoyed horse racing and betting on the races, dies at home in the early hours of Sunday, May 7 after having watched Riva Ridge win the Kentucky Derby on television the previous afternoon.

Bibliography

Monographs and Major Exhibition Catalogues

1970. Ralph Eugene Meatyard

Ed. Jonathan Greene with notes by Arnold Gassan and Wendell Berry, Lexington, Kentucky: Gnomon Press, 1970.

1971. The Unforeseen Wilderness: an Essay on Kentucky's Red River Gorge.

Text by Wendell Berry; photographs by Meatyard. Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1971. Reprinted by North Point Press, Berkeley, California, 1991.

1974. Portfolio Three: Ralph Eugene Meatyard

Limited edition portfolio of ten Meatyard images. Introductory text by Van Deren Coke. Louisville: Center for Photographic Studies, 1974.

1974. Ralph Eugene Meatyard

Edited and with a prose poem text ("Emblems & Rites") by James Baker Hall and a "Reminiscence" by Guy Davenport, this work appeared both as a double issue of *Aperture* magazine (Vol. 18., Nos. 3 - 4) and as a monograph for general sale. Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1974.

1974. The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater

Sequenced by Meatyard before his death, the volume appeared posthumously with texts by Jonathan Greene, Ronald Johnson, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Guy Mendes, Thomas Meyer, and Jonathan Williams. Millerton, New York: The Jargon Society, 1974.

1976. Ralph Eugene Meatyard: A Retrospective

Exhibition catalogue with an essay by Van Deren Coke. Illinois State University, Center for the Visual Arts Gallery, College of Fine Arts: Normal, [Illinois] 1976.

1977. The Photographs of Ralph Eugene Meatyard

Exhibition catalogue with an essay by Susan Dodge Peters. Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts: 1977.

1983. Ralph Eugene Meatyard: Caught Moments—New Viewpoints

Exhibition catalogue with introduction by Martin Harrison and an essay by Christopher and Diane Meatyard. Olympus Gallery: London: 1983.

1991. Ralph Eugene Meatyard: American Visionary

Exhibition catalogue edited by Barbara Tannenbaum with texts by Tannenbaum, David Jacobs, Wendell Berry, and Van Deren Coke. Akron [Ohio] Art Museum, New York: Rizzoli: 1991.

1991. Father Louie: Photographs of Thomas Merton by Ralph Eugene Meatyard

Includes essays by Guy Davenport and Christopher Meatyard, correspondence between Merton and Meatyard, a preface by Barry Magid, and a reprint of Meatyard's eulogy for Merton. New York: Timken Publishers, 1991.

1996. Ralph Eugene Meatyard: In Perspective

Edited and with a text by Christopher Meatyard and commentary by Filippo Maggia. Udine, Italy, Art&/Edizioni delle Arti Grafiche Friulane: 1996.

Exhibitions

Selected One- and Two-Person Shows

- 1956.** A Photographer's Gallery, New York (with Van Deren Coke).
- 1957.** Tulane University, New Orleans.
- 1958.** Carl Siembab Gallery, Boston. University of Florida, Gainesville.
- 1959.** Arizona State University, Tempe.
- 1960.** El Mochuelo Gallery, Santa Barbara, California.
- 1961.** University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
- 1962.** J. B. Speed Museum, Louisville, Kentucky (with Walt Lowe).
- 1963.** Quivira Gallery, Corrales, New Mexico. (with Van Deren Coke).
- 1970.** Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago. (Selections from *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*). Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester. (Travelling exhibition; toured very widely in the United States).
- 1971.** Colgate University, Hamilton, New York.
- 1972.** Focus Gallery, San Francisco. Matrix Gallery, Hartford, Connecticut.
- 1973.** Witkin Gallery, New York.
- 1974.** Carl Siembab Gallery, Boston. J.B. Speed Museum, Louisville (with Henry Holmes Smith).
- 1975.** Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts.
- 1976.** Olympus Gallery, London. Prakapas Gallery, New York.
- 1977.** Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York (with William Wegman). Hewlett Gallery, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh.
- 1978.** "Southern Vision," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (with Clarence John Laughlin).
- 1979.** "Ralph Eugene Meatyard: An American Visionary," Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio. (Toured nationally.)
- 1993.** "Ralph Eugene Meatyard," Lisbon, Portugal.
- 1994.** "Ralph Eugene Meatyard," Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.
- 1995.** "Ralph Eugene Meatyard," Museo Alejandro Otero, Caracas, Venezuela.
- 1996.** "Ralph Eugene Meatyard" Gallery 292, New York City.
- 1998.** "Ralph Eugene Meatyard: Master Prints" Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York City.

Collections

George Eastman House, Rochester, NY; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Art Institute of Chicago; Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena, CA; Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY; University of California at Los Angeles; University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NB; University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM; University of Louisville, Louisville, KY; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA.

Films

1974. "Ralph Eugene Meatyard 1925 - 1972" by Martha Chute, Stanley Majka, and Guy Mendes. Produced by Kentucky Educational Television, 1974 (Includes interviews with Guy Davenport, Bob May, Minor White.)