



Wildly Strange

THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF RALPH EUGENE MEATYARD

From the Harry Ransom Center Collection

MARCH 7–JUNE 21, 2015

This exhibition is organized by the Blanton Museum of Art in collaboration with the Harry Ransom Center.

Cover: *Untitled*, 1960, Gelatin silver print, 7 1/4 × 8 in., Guy Davenport Collection, Harry Ransom Center © The Estate of Ralph Eugene Meatyard

Notes

The author is grateful for the cooperation of Christopher and Diane Meatyard, who thoughtfully responded to research queries in preparation for this essay and permitted the reproduction of these photographs.

¹ Ralph Eugene Meatyard, "The Effect of Abstract Shapes," unpublished lecture notes for a Free University interest group, University of Kentucky, [1970], Meatyard Archive, Lexington, KY. Quoted in Christopher Meatyard and Diane Meatyard, "The Photography of Ralph Eugene Meatyard," in *Caught Moments—New Viewpoints* (London: Olympus Gallery, 1983), unpaginated. Meatyard is listed as coordinator of the interest group "sur-REAL PHOTOGRAPHY" in *The Free University Catalog*, no. 3 (January 1970), University of Kentucky Student Center Records, 7.9, University of Kentucky Special Collections.

² Van Deren Coke, *Creative Photography—1956* (Lexington: University of Kentucky in association with the Lexington Camera Club, 1956); and Minor White, "Ten Books for Creative Photographers," *Aperture* 4, no. 2 (1956): 58.

³ Ralph Eugene Meatyard, interviewed by Nathalie Andrews, Louisville, KY, 25 February 1970, transcript, Oral History Center, University of Louisville Archives and Records Center, Louisville, KY.

⁴ James Baker Hall, "The Strange New World of Ralph Eugene Meatyard," *Popular Photography* 65, no. 1 (July 1969): 120.

⁵ Ralph Eugene Meatyard, interviewed by Arnold Gassan, Athens, OH, 25 May 1969, audio recording M484:1, Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY.

⁶ Meatyard, interviewed by Andrews, 1970.

⁷ Davenport recorded his first meeting with Meatyard in his notebook on 3 May 1965: "Then to Ralph Eugene Meatyard's—strange curious photographs! Chills, looking at them." Guy Davenport Papers, Notebook 22, Harry Ransom Center.

⁸ Hugh Kenner, "The Distance From Normal: Ralph Eugene Meatyard's American Gothic," *Art & Antiques*, February 1987, 100.

⁹ See Meatyard, interviewed by Gassan, 1969, and Hall, "The Strange New World," 121.

¹⁰ Guy Davenport, "Tom and Gene," in *Father Louie: Photographs of Thomas Merton by Ralph Eugene Meatyard*, ed. Barry Magid (New York: Timken, 1991), 32.

¹¹ Meatyard, interviewed by Gassan, 1969.

¹² Wendell Berry, "Note," in *Ralph Eugene Meatyard* (Lexington, KY: Gnomon Press, 1970), unpaginated. The title of the present essay is drawn from Berry's text.

¹³ Meatyard, "The Effect of Abstract Shapes," [1970].

¹⁴ Guy Davenport to Hugh Kenner, 16 June 1972, Hugh Kenner Papers, 42.4, Harry Ransom Center.

¹⁵ Guy Davenport, 7 May 1972, Guy Davenport Papers, Notebook 30, Harry Ransom Center.



Fig. 3: *Motion-Sound #28*, 1968–1972, Gelatin silver print, 6 3/4 × 6 3/4 in., Photography Collection, Harry Ransom Center, Purchased with funds provided by the Charles and Elizabeth Prothro Endowment in Photography © The Estate of Ralph Eugene Meatyard



Fig. 1: *Occasion for Diriment*, 1962, Gelatin silver print, 7 1/4 × 7 1/4 in., Guy Davenport Collection, Harry Ransom Center © The Estate of Ralph Eugene Meatyard

On the Verge of Surprise

Jessica S. McDonald
 Nancy Inman and Marlene Nathan Meyerson Curator of Photography
 Harry Ransom Center

As the leader of an informal course called “sur-REAL PHOTOGRAPHY” at the University of Kentucky in 1970, Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925–1972) warned participants not to “confuse a creative picture with the dictionary.” He argued that “creative pictures” must be experienced “emotionally, without expecting a story, information or facts.”¹ His choice of the term “creative” was critical; Meatyard and his mentors were invested in photography’s status as an independent art and deliberately distinguished their work from commercial and documentary photography. They claimed their territory in exhibitions such as *Creative Photography—1956*, organized by Van Deren Coke, and in the pages of *Aperture*, where Minor White identified the creative photographer as one “who quietly persists in using the camera as a way of communicating ecstasy.”² For his own extraordinary photographs, Meatyard created dramatic scenes with elaborate sets, characters, and props in and around Lexington, Kentucky, starting in the mid-1950s. Now understood as precursors to the staged and performative images that proliferated in the 1980s, Meatyard’s constructed tableaux were radical in his time.

Meatyard described his working process in an interview in 1970, stating simply, “I first find the background, whatever it might be, and then I put what I want to in front of it.”³ The backgrounds that he found include abandoned buildings resigned to decay or demolition, weathered paint and peeling wallpaper, and dense, dark forests. In front of these backgrounds he orchestrated scenes composed of doll heads, pieces of broken mirror, and one or more of his three children, performing as he directed. The children are at turns vulnerable, sinister, forlorn, and monstrous. In *Occasion for Diriment* (fig. 1), their ecstatic flailing and primitive chest beating give away the joke in the title—the term “diriment” describes a condition under which a marriage may be nullified. Meatyard called some of these vignettes “Romances,” adopting the definition American satirist

Ambrose Bierce provided in his *Devil’s Dictionary*: “Fiction that owes no allegiance to the God of Things as They Are.”

With few photographic precedents to draw from, Meatyard’s fictional scenes were informed by his expansive library, with volumes on Zen philosophy, surrealism, modern painting, and art theory, and works by Henry James, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and Flannery O’Connor. These literary and philosophical keystones, together with Meatyard’s unsettling iconography, made his work appealing to writers, especially those outside the mainstream. The intrigue surrounding the photographer was enhanced by his seemingly bizarre work habits. James Baker Hall, who would be poet laureate of the Commonwealth of Kentucky in 2001, offered this lively account of Meatyard’s modus operandi in 1969:

A business man 5½ days a week, Ralph Eugene Meatyard photographs on weekends, following his demon around backyard and garage, into abandoned houses, up and down the back roads of central Kentucky, with some of his handsome family usually in tow for models, his car trunk full of props—ghoulish masks, artificial flowers, dismembered dolls, and maybe a rubber chicken or a dead possum to hang on a flowering tree like an ornament.⁴

Importantly, Hall and other writers readily accepted the possibility that just as language is capable of much more than communicating facts, photography can also be employed to create new worlds.

Meatyard’s indifference to photographic convention belied his mastery of technique. His use of blur and multiple exposures was carefully controlled, and he identified light as the “demon” of Hall’s 1969 depiction.⁵ Just as light lured Meatyard into the settings for his photographs, it mapped a path in each picture for the viewer’s eye to follow. The mask appeared in many of Meatyard’s photographs, playing a similar role. A principal function of the mask was to level identity and suggest universal experience, but it also acted as a “billboard,” Meatyard explained, to attract viewers and draw them further into the picture.⁶ Meatyard hoped to show viewers that if they paid close attention, they might begin to *see*.

It seems appropriate, then, that in 1950, Meatyard had moved from Illinois to Kentucky with his wife Madelyn to work as an optician. Jonathan Williams, the famously itinerant poet and proprietor of the Jargon Society, introduced Meatyard to poet, critic, and professor Guy Davenport in May of 1965.⁷ They came to share many friends, including Williams, Hall, Wendell and Tanya Berry, and Jonathan Greene. Meatyard grew especially close to Thomas Merton, the poet, activist, and Trappist monk living nearby at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Between 1965 and 1972, there were frequent gatherings at Davenport’s apartment, the Meatyards’ home, the Berrys’ farm, and Merton’s hermitage. They talked about politics, religion, and art; viewed slide shows, books, and prints; and listened to Meatyard’s collection of rare jazz recordings. Meatyard often brought along his own photographs but said almost nothing about them. In 1987, scholar Hugh Kenner recalled that Meatyard “would turn up with a box of prints and deal them out in front of you one by one till it felt like reading Poe nonstop.”⁸

Meatyard became part of a vibrant literary circle in which each member seems to have been nurturing a “little magazine” or underground press sustained primarily through the contributions of the other members. Meatyard’s photographs frequently appeared in these publications, presented not as illustrations but as self-contained visual poems. In 1967 he traveled east to photograph writers he had encountered in print or in person, a project exemplified by the portraits of Louis Zukofsky in his New York apartment (fig. 2). Some of Meatyard’s peers felt that these photographs dramatically obscured or even violently obliterated the subject.⁹ Davenport, in contrast, saw evidence of the photographer’s deep engagement with his subject’s poetry and found the portraits revelatory, writing, “Zukofsky’s layered text turns up as double exposures in the portraits, as oblique tilts of the head, as blurred outlines.”¹⁰

Meatyard relished such contradictions, and believed that

photographs could simultaneously trigger competing emotions. In 1969, when asked about the sense of terror his work could convey, Meatyard answered that he aimed for something more “akin to a *shiver*, and pleasurable as a shiver sometimes is.”¹¹ The essayist and environmentalist Wendell Berry similarly described Meatyard’s work as an invitation “to live on the verge of surprise, where fear accompanies delight.”¹² In 1968 Meatyard began a collaborative project with Berry, aimed at convincing the United States Congress to halt the construction of a dam that would flood the Red River Gorge. Published alongside Berry’s text in *The Unforeseen Wilderness* (1971), Meatyard’s photographs revealed a landscape of both magnificent beauty and threatening power. Convinced that photographs “must be felt in a similar way as one listens to music,” Meatyard simultaneously began work on his *Motion-Sound* series (fig. 3).¹³ The series brilliantly joins the dark and disorienting Red River Gorge landscapes with the fragmented double exposures of the writers’ portraits. This peak of productivity came just before Meatyard learned he had terminal cancer.

Gene Meatyard, as his friends would all remember him, died on May 7, 1972. After helping the Meatyard family review years of his work, Davenport wrote Kenner of “the wildly strange pictures” Meatyard had made in the last decade of his life.¹⁴

Art history is populated with figures that were ahead of their time, too wild or too strange for assimilation into any prevailing contemporary narrative. *Wildly Strange* owes a debt to many writers, especially Davenport, who traced Meatyard’s impact in journals, correspondence, and publications. Davenport also preserved the photographs Meatyard gave him, and it is primarily these photographs that constitute the present exhibition. The day Meatyard died, Davenport wrote in his notebook, “What shall I do for a friend now that Gene is gone? He was a rare being, a great artist, a man who knew how to live.”¹⁵ Davenport has enriched our understanding of Meatyard as an artist and as a man in ways the author may never have imagined.



Fig. 2: [Louis Zukofsky], 1967, Gelatin silver print, 7 1/2 × 6 3/4 in., Guy Davenport Collection, Harry Ransom Center © The Estate of Ralph Eugene Meatyard