

Thomas Merton: Photographer

by

Paul M Pearson

Thomas Merton showed little interest in photography until the final years of his life. On a visit to Germany as a teenager he had bought his first camera, a Zeiss, which he subsequently pawned as his debts grew at Cambridge University¹ in the early thirties. In 1939 he visited an exhibit of Charles Sheeler's at the Museum of Modern Art, which he found "dull."² Then, from the late fifties onwards Merton had contact with some eminent North American photographers beginning with Shirley Burden. Burden had provided photographs for a postulant's guide, *Monastic Peace*, for the cover of Merton's *Selected Poems*, and had undertaken a photographic study of the monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani, *God Is My Life*, for which Merton wrote the introduction. When Merton was considering a photographic study of the Shakers, it was to Burden he turned.

In 1963 John Howard Griffin, with whom Merton had already had contact in relation to Civil Rights, wrote requesting permission to "begin a photographic archive of Merton's life and activities." When Griffin visited Merton to photograph him he recalls "Tom watched with interest, wanting an explanation of the cameras – a Leica and an Alpa." According to Griffin Merton remarked on his friendship with Shirley Burden and also with Edward Rice, a friend from his days at Columbia, before stating "I don't know anything about photography, but it fascinates me."³

It is a little unclear when Merton began taking photographs himself at the Abbey of Gethsemani. On October 10th 1961 he records having taken "half a roll of Kodacolor at the hermitage" wondering "what earthly reason is there for taking color photographs? ... or any photographs at all."⁴ Yet, just a few months later in January 1962 Merton records taking photographs at Shakertown, finding there "some marvelous subjects."

Marvelous, silent, vast spaces around the old buildings. Cold, pure light, and some grand trees ... How the blank side of a frame house can be so completely beautiful I cannot imagine. A completely miraculous achievement of forms.⁵

Merton was obviously pleased with his results that day as in a later journal entry he says he is planning to have enlargements made of some of his photographs of Shakertown, describing it as "very satisfying."⁶

¹ Mott, Michael. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 83.

² Merton, Thomas. *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, edited by Patrick Hart, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 68.

³ Griffin, John Howard. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 37.

⁴ Merton, Thomas. *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, edited by Victor A. Kramer, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 169.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁶ Merton, Thomas. *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, edited by Robert E. Daggy, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), 23.

Certainly by 22nd September 1964 Merton had regular access to a camera and records in his personal journal

Brother Ephrem has fitted me out with a camera (Kodak Instamatic) to help take pictures for a book Dom James wants done. So far I have been photographing a fascinating old cedar root I have on the porch. I am not sure what this baby can do. The lens does not look like much – but it changes the film by itself and sets the aperture, etc. Very nice.⁷

Just two days later Merton continues

After dinner I was distracted by the dream camera, and instead of seriously reading the Zen anthology I got from the Louisville Library, kept seeing curious things to shoot, especially a mad window in the old tool room of the woodshed. The whole place is full of fantastic and strange subjects – a mine of Zen photography. After that the dream camera suddenly misbehaved.⁸

and Merton records that the back of the camera would not lock shot. Two days later he writes again

Camera back. Love affair with camera. Darling camera, so glad to have you back! Monarch! XXX. It will I think be a bright day again today.⁹

In his journals Merton records occasional access to a variety of cameras belonging to his visitors – Naomi Burton Stone's Nikon,¹⁰ John Howard Griffin's Alpa,¹¹ even on one occasion a "Japanese movie camera" which he described as "a beautiful thing."¹² In August 1967 Merton refers in passing to taking some pictures of roots, this time with a Rolleiflex. However in January 1968 Merton fell and thought he might have broken the Rolleiflex so that the back was letting in light. He immediately wrote to John Howard Griffin to take up an offer he had made to loan Merton a camera. In his letter Merton describes the kind of camera he would need:

Obviously I am not covering the Kentucky Derby etc. But I do like a chance at fast funny out of the way stuff too. The possibility of it in case. But as I see it I am going to be on roots, sides of barns, tall weeds,

⁷ *Ibid.*, 147. A number of the photographs in this exhibit were taken by Merton using this Kodak Instamatic - # 1, 6, 12, 15, 18, and 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁰ Merton, Thomas. *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, edited by Christine M. Bochen, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), 221.

¹¹ Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 37.

¹² Merton, Thomas. *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, edited by Patrick Hart, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), 6.

mudpuddles, and junkpiles until Kingdom come. A built-in exposure meter might be a help.¹³

In response Griffin loaned Merton a Canon F-X which he described as “fabulous” and “a joy to work with.” Merton continues

The camera is the most eager and helpful of beings, all full of happy suggestions: ‘Try this! Do it that way!’ Reminding me of things I have overlooked, and cooperating in the creation of new worlds. So simply. This is a Zen camera.¹⁴

Generally Merton’s preferred photographic medium was black and white, though a number of photographs in the collections at the Thomas Merton Center are in color. Merton never did his own developing or printing, this was generally done for him either by Griffin, his son Gregory, or by other friends. Griffin recalls that he and his son were frequently bewildered by the pictures Merton selected from contact sheets to be enlarged. “He ignored many superlative photographs while marking others” wrote Griffin,

we thought he had not yet learned to judge photographs well enough to select consistently the best frames. We wrote and offered advice about the quality of some of the ignored frames. He went right on marking what he wanted rather than what we thought he should want. Then, more and more often, he would send a contact sheet with a certain frame marked and his excited notation: ‘At last – this is what I have been aiming for.’¹⁵



Sadly, none of those original contact sheets have survived. They would have provided a fascinating insight into Merton’s photography.

In January 1967 Thomas Merton began to develop a friendship with another local photographer, Ralph Eugene Meatyard who, through his photographs, has left us an intriguing photographic record of Merton. In his personal journal Merton recorded the visit of Jonathan Williams, Guy Davenport and Meatyard¹⁶ and in particular his excitement at Meatyard’s work:

The one who made the greatest impression on me as artist was Gene Meatyard, the photographer – does marvelous arresting visionary things, most haunting and suggestive, mythical, photography I ever saw. I felt that here was someone really going somewhere.¹⁷

¹³ Merton, Thomas. *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, edited by Robert E. Daggy, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), 140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁵ Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 90.

¹⁶ Writing to Bob Lax he referred to them as “three Kings from Lexington.”

¹⁷ Merton, *Learning to Love*, 186.

Later writing about Merton and Meatyard, Davenport described Meatyard as “one of the most distinguished of American photographers,” part of the Lexington Camera Club with members such as Van Deren Coke, Guy Mendes, James Baker Hall and Robert C. May. Meatyard, was a professional optician, who bought his first camera to photograph his young son in 1950. In 1956 his photographs were exhibited with those of Ansel Adams, Aaron Siskind, Henry Callaghan and other modern masters. That same year he attended a photography workshop where, working with Henry Holmes Smith and Minor White, he became interested in Zen. Davenport describes Meatyard’s work as “primarily an intricate symmetry of light and shadow. He liked deep shadows of considerable weight, and he liked light that was decisive and clean.”¹⁸ Words equally applicable to many of Merton’s photographs.

From their meeting in January 1967 until Merton’s death the following year Merton met Gene Meatyard numerous times and exchanged a brief but steady correspondence of over sixteen letters. During this time Meatyard took over one hundred photographs of Merton, some of the most enigmatic taken. These photographs capture both the paradox of Merton and Meatyard’s surrealistic vision – Meatyard realized with Merton that he was

photographing a Kierkegaard who was a fan of Mad; a Zen adept and hermit who drooled over hospital nurses with a cute behind ... a man of accomplished self-discipline who sometimes acted like a ten-year-old with an unlimited charge account at a candy store.¹⁹

For Merton his photography, as his writing, became a way for him to explore and express his relationship with the world. In a journal entry from December 1963 Merton reflects on a saying of Merleau-Ponty: “I am myself as I exist in the world.”²⁰ This leads him to question the position he had been taking, of being himself by withdrawing from the world, and stating that he agrees profoundly with Merleau-Ponty providing that the world he is referring to is not one of “delusions and clichés.” He writes that “to withdraw from where I am in order to be totally outside all that situates me – this is real delusion.” Merton’s description of his camera as a “Zen camera” fits very well with the Zen koan-like nature of this insight.

In Darjeeling, just a couple of weeks before his death, Merton struggled with the Mountain Kanchenjunga. In Kanchenjunga Merton saw an answer to his questions, the mountain holds paradoxes together. It has a side that is seen and a side that is not seen, it is a “palace of opposites in unity,” “impermanence and patience, solidity and nonbeing, existence and wisdom.” Developing his reflection on the mountain Merton added:

¹⁸ Meatyard, Ralph Eugene. *Father Louie: Photographs of Thomas Merton*, (New York: Timken, 1991), 34.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁰ Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 48.

The full beauty of the mountain is not seen until you too consent to the impossible paradox: it is and is not. When nothing more needs to be said, the smoke of ideas clears, the mountain is SEEN.²¹

This is similar to Merton's vision of photography and, as he tries to capture images of the mountain with his camera, Merton writes:

The camera does not know what it takes: it captures materials with which you reconstruct not so much what you saw as what you thought you saw. Hence the best photography is aware, mindful, of illusion and uses illusion, permitting and encouraging it – especially unconscious and powerful illusions that are not normally admitted on the scene.²²

Words reminiscent of Meatyards understanding of Zen and his way of dealing with illusion by his frequent use of masks in his photographs, most noticeably in his collection *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*.

In *A Hidden Wholeness* Griffin describes Merton's vision of photography: His vision was more often attracted to the movement of wheat in the wind, the textures of snow, paint-spattered cans, stone, crocuses blossoming through weeds – or again, the woods in all their hours, from the first fog of morning, though noonday stillness, to evening quiet.

In his photography, he focused on the images of his contemplation, as they were and not as he wanted them to be. He took his camera on his walks and, with his special way of seeing, photographed what moved or excited him – whatsoever responded to that inner orientation.

His concept of aesthetic beauty differed from that of most men. Most would pass by dead tree roots in search of a rose. Merton photographed the dead tree root or the texture of wood or whatever crossed his path. In these works, he photographed the natural, unarranged, unpossessed objects of his contemplation, seeking not to alter their life but to preserve it in his emulsions.

In a certain sense, then, these photographs do not need to be studied, they need to be contemplated if they are to carry their full impact.²³

From these comments by Griffin, and through looking at Merton's photographs it is clear that Thomas Merton used his camera as a contemplative instrument and he photographed the things he contemplated.

Thomas Merton's initial reaction to photography was negative as seen by his comments about taking photographs at the hermitage. Very quickly Merton's view of photography changed. As he discovered contemplative photography, and how to

²¹ Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 286.

²² *Ibid.*, 284.

²³ Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 49-50.

use a camera as a contemplative instrument, he produced images which had the same effect as his later drawings and anti-poetry. The media and advertisers used images manipulatively to sell a story or an object. By contrast, Merton's images have nothing to sell, they cause us to pause, to stop, to see, to see what is right in front of us every day. Merton's discovery of the medium of photography in the sixties was used by him in a similar way to his calligraphies and his anti-poetry. The words of his poem "In Silence" serve to illustrate this well:

Be still
 Listen to the stones of the wall.
 Be silent, they try
 To speak your

Name.
 Listen to the living walls.
 Who are you?
 Who
 Are you? Whose
 Silence are you? ...

"I will try, like them
 To be my own silence:
 And this is difficult. The whole
 World is secretly on fire. The stones
 Burn, even the stones
 They burn me. How can a man be still or
 Listen to all things burning? How can he dare
 To sit with them when
 All their silence
 Is on fire?"²⁴

²⁴ Merton, Thomas. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, (New York: New Directions, 1977), 280-281.