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September 2 to September 23 1989

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A Demonology of Vision

Ralph Eugene Meatyard,
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"He turns my vision against my reason. Or he [Meatyard] requires my belief to venture off in the direction of the incredible. [His] pictures invite us to live on the verge of surprise, where fear accompanies delight."

Wendell Barry

Ralph Eugene Meatyard was only 46 when he died in 1972. But he left behind a rich legacy of photographic work. The photographs shown at Galerie Samuel Lallouz constitute a compelling and comprehensive overview of that legacy. Each work exhibited here is a shaman's rite of disclosure. Here is an uncompromising look at the dark side of vision. If our observing is more often than not accompanied by a nagging sensation of being unsettled or even by outright fear, this attests to the strength of these metaphoric images which hover between a visionary world and the world of the visible, affording us the promise of unwelcome revelations.

There is a hidden alchemy in these photos: the transformation of one very ordinary world into its demonic opposite, in which the most ordinary persons are decked out in grotesque masks. This spotlights psychic travails and transformations in the life-world, effectively securing our empathy through unsettling and unlikely fictions. Meatyard's masked figures and spectres act as harbingers of our own rediscovery of the self. This is a transformative vision in which we learn something about our innermost fears and most pressing anxieties in this late-twentieth century world. Each image, then, is a felt condensation of our concrete, lived experiences, however fictional it may at first seem.

I am reminded somewhat of the work of photographer Larry Fink who, in his *Social Graces* series, also seized upon the grotesque, although in Fink's case the fictions are far more literal, if also, and paradoxically, more covert. In Fink's case, the grotesque is found in that split second when the mask of civility or ordinariness falls and the shutter clicks — but is the mask really falling or is the photographer inventing a grotesque fiction for a subject of abiding normalcy? In other words, chances are that one is being offered not a revealing portrait but a clever, subversive fiction. In Meatyard's case, and particularly in his last series, *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*, he has his subjects don actual masks. But instead of creating a fiction, he gives birth to a feverish reality. A reality that we would perhaps not care to know, so unsettling and horrific it seems. The irony here may be that, as the truism says, one is most nearly oneself when wearing a mask.

On the other hand, Meatyard's blurred subjects do not seem to be just blurred subjects. They take on an eerie resonance, like couriers from another world or spectres caught on the threshold of assuming form. These are macabre ghosts, phantasmal harbingers of some other unwelcome state of being; they are adamantly not friendly spirits or harmless poltergeists. They have a dark essence, a menacing ethos, a malign equivocality.

Meatyard loved masks. The mask both disfigures the self and transfigures the commonplace. Ambiguity and metamorphosis reign supreme here as Meatyard invests vision with a demonology that is simply incommensurable, revealing that the visual world is riven with uncertainties and hostile presences, forever lurking on the periphery of our seeing, perhaps seeking some convenient way of ingress. His work flourishes within the visual system's ambit of felt tensions and the psyche's unending anxiety.

It is revealing that Meatyard was trained and worked for many years as an optician. He had first-hand knowledge of all the idiosyncrasies of sight — all its deficiencies were his province, correcting those weaknesses was his job — but he was in full command of his own optic, and subjecting the throughput of that optic to the rigors of his creative imagination was his vocation.

Here is no safe, ordered world of Platonic forms, but fragments from the dark side of the psyche. And the photographs plunge us into this ambiguous realm wherein *exorcism* is the operative principle. The ghosts that haunt these silver prints clamber up with unseemly haste from the cellars of our own uncertainty as to what it is we are in fact seeing, and we have this ineradicable feeling of being ill at ease, if not of catharsis. Here is a shadow-show of the most unsettling sort, one that does not resolve at some point into comforting images but continues to confront us, head-on, with our own capacity for horror and doubt. The horrific transformation of the steadfast human form into a demonic blur taxes our stamina and undermines all the comforting truisms we have been taught about vision.

Van Deren Coke, writing on Meatyard in *Aperture* magazine 30 years ago, wrote: "We find years of myth and madness, where signs and symbols transcend language barriers as the commonplace is raised to the monumental." This early assessment seems a fitting *coda* for our reflections on this photographer's haunted — and haunting — vision.

Meatyard held that the camera is, at base, an unsophisticated instrument which "reflects passively without a conscience." It is a fitting testament to his considerable achievement that, in these photographs, he has supplied it with that conscience.

James Campbell