

Thomas Merton's Ghostly Camera:
Existential Struggle in Pictures

Conor Lauesen Ph.D.
Stanford Art & Art History
Cmlauesen84@alumni.stanford.edu

To summon the heavens (Fig. 1): in the late 1960s mystic photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard began to create portraits of his friend, Trappist monk Thomas Merton. These twin pictures of Merton looking upward, mesmerized by the sky above and immersed in an ecological maze begin our historical tale (Fig. 2).

Writing about the photographer Meatyard in one of his many private journals Merton dotingly noted, “[He] does marvelous arresting visionary things, [the] most haunting and suggestive, mythical photography I ever saw.”¹ In these tandem aloof portraits—here as rustic local and secular monk—vertically-minded Merton nearly exudes the picture’s frame, his own akin preternatural tendencies and singular artistic vision in rhyme with the world.

This project explores the photographic work of Thomas Merton—most especially his small compendium of pictures made during his final trip to Asia (Fig. 3)—to uncover a kind of *restless meditative aesthetic* across his oeuvre. As a primary method of historical excavation, I look closely at three disparate sets of Merton’s overlooked poetic images: scenes of quotidian rural landscapes (Fig. 4), monastic interiority (Fig. 5), and Buddhist Angkor Watt ruins (Cambodia) dovetail to create a haunting prism of real-world *otherness*.

Placed in juxtaposition and situated alongside his often highly regarded poetry, I suggest Merton’s photography—most especially this tripartite sphere of nonsite places—unveil an extremely private cynosure of relentless searching and personal reckoning (Fig. 6). An uncanny religious scene from the monastery at Gethsemane, in this picture a Latin icon rests trapped below a hovering candlelight altar: Merton’s camera appears to breathe some phenomenological spatial drift across the scene.

Writing about affectation and visibility, the praxis of Shawn Smith’s *At the Edge of Sight* is helpful when she proposes to ‘engage the dynamics of seeing and not seeing, of seeing the unseen, and of seeing that we don’t see that photography sets forth...not to establish a method exactly, but a means of approach, a sensibility towards the revelations and limitations of photography.’²

In this kind of way, instead of merely Zen tableaux and quasi-divinely inspired visions of order, I suggest a thick tension ripples throughout his best pictures (Fig. 7).

While two recent monographs have each addressed the silence in Merton’s ‘contemplative’ pictures (*A Hidden Wholeness* and Dr Paul Pearson’s *Beholding Paradise*, 2020), my interventions purport to push this aesthetic dialogue further. More specifically, I posit the auto-anxiety wrestling inside Merton’s optical lens bespeaks his own ongoing spiritualized-creative struggles, and honest attempts to live a devout life as Trappist practitioner, anti-nuclear activist, sublime poet and man of love.

¹ Thomas Merton in Brian Sholis, *Kentucky Renaissance: Lexington Camera Club and Its Community, 1954-1974*. Yale University Press. 2016.

² Shawn Smith’s *At the Edge of Sight* Duke University Press. 2017. P. 16.



Figure 1. Ralph Eugene Meatyard.
'Untitled' 1967-68.



Figure 2. Ralph Eugene Meatyard.
'Untitled' 1967-68.



Figure 3. Thomas Merton. 1968.

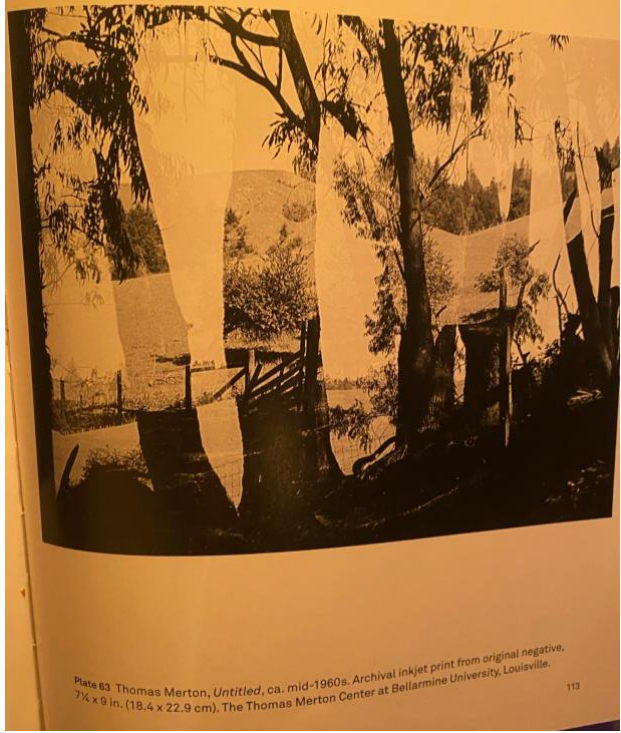


Plate 63 Thomas Merton, *Untitled*, ca. mid-1960s. Archival inkjet print from original negative, 7¼ x 9 in. (18.4 x 22.9 cm). The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville.

Figure 4. Thomas Merton.

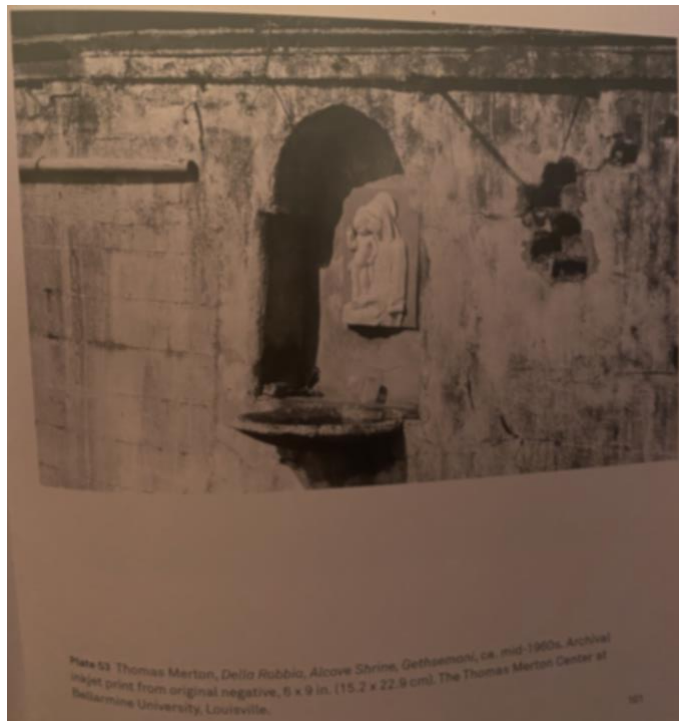


Plate 64 Thomas Merton, *Dello Rabbio, Above Shrine, Gethsemani*, ca. mid-1960s. Archival inkjet print from original negative, 6 x 9 in. (15.2 x 22.9 cm). The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville.

Figure 5. Thomas Merton.

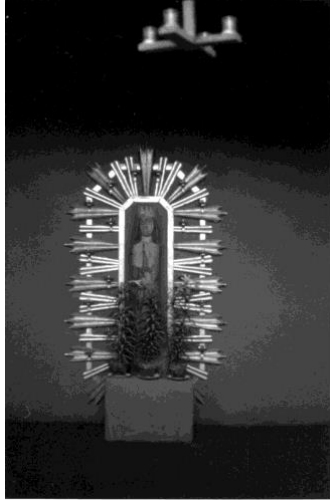


Figure 6. Thomas Merton.

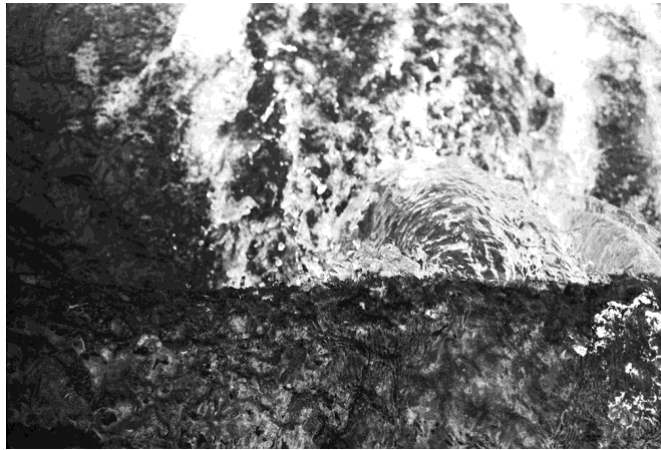


Figure 7. Thomas Merton.



Figure 8. Thomas Merton.

