

Thomas Merton, Photographer

Anthony Bannon

The presence of Thomas Merton as a photographer is far more substantial than as a curious anecdote to a mainline career as a spiritual and political thinker. His photographs have been published in several compendia of what I might call pretty pictures, and they have summoned peripheral respect. I would like to push that on by some distance and nominate a selection of tough-minded pictures he made that stake out a territory truly Merton's own. Admittedly, he took some photographs that look a lot like other fine photographers' images. Nothing wrong with that. Artists often copy artists and build upon others' work. Artists tough it out, working through the problems and persuasions of the art that came before theirs, and by those means enter into a domain of expression truly their own.

Merton only photographed seriously for a very short period of time. But in those several years, he established a remarkable ability to create some haunting, often profoundly affecting photographs. They are preserved in the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine College in Louisville, Kentucky – thirteen hundred of them in all. I was curious about these pictures, so I made the pilgrimage, and found, with the skilled and learned assistance of Paul Pearson, the director of the archive, that the best among these Merton pictures are images of enduring spirit, pictures of time and of hope, little dramas at the borders of understanding. And

while most of Merton's pictures are skilled, many are commonplace. While others take your breath away. I think he was just getting started when he so untimely died.

Merton had always made photographs; back at least to his college days. But beginning around 1965, he focused upon making images that would serve as more than just a record. Perhaps he was tiring of words. Whatever, these images, made late in his life, express a rich interior vision, an awareness tuned right into the language of the camera and into the wonders of light and shadow – an awareness built upon a learned foundation of Zen, and a desire, several of his friends have advised,¹ to travel a new road toward contemplation.

Merton's interest in Eastern thought during this period of time – and his conversations with the photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard, who lived in nearby Lexington; and with the minimalist artists Ad Reinhardt and poet Robert Lax, both colleagues at Columbia University – also compel reference to Zen thought. It is an approach that is useful in understanding the contemplative quality of Merton's images. Many of them are aggressive in their directness, almost confrontational. They are not the standard pretty pictures. Their forthright, wordless quality strips away the illusionistic role of the photograph and forces awareness of it just as a photograph, sidestepping considerations

of symbolic representation, or conventional exposures for such as a record of place, person or event. The dark central figure in Figure 1, likely the end of an open car and the beginning of the next railroad car in a rail yard,² summons Ad Reinhardt's celebrated essay, 'Art-as-Art,' which, in a decidedly Zen spirit of the Sutra on Emptiness, details, 'The one thing to say about art is its breathlessness, lifelessness, deathlessness, contentlessness, formlessness, spacelessness and timelessness. This is always the end in art.'³ For those who know Reinhardt's black on black paintings, this mantra makes perfect sense.

Merton had a fascination with the 'fantastic and strange',⁴ and these are qualities manifest in this image from the rail yard, which is not just a little foreboding, filled as it is with the unname-

able. He enjoyed the 'haunting' qualities, 'the out of the way stuff' when making his photographs, selecting such subjects, he confessed, as 'sides of barns, tall weeds, mud puddles and junk piles'.⁵ But even more to the heart of the matter, is this quotation, written when Merton considered another fine object of art and contemplation – an ancient, giant statue of Buddha. On his last journey in Asia, Merton declared essential qualities of both art and spiritual experience. The sculpture of the Buddha, he said, proposes an 'inner clearness,' that calls the viewer out of the 'habitual, half-tied vision of things'. And, finally, there remains, 'no puzzle, no problem and really no "mystery."... everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.'⁶

Paul Pearson has well noted through essay and exhibition Merton's citation of

Figure 1

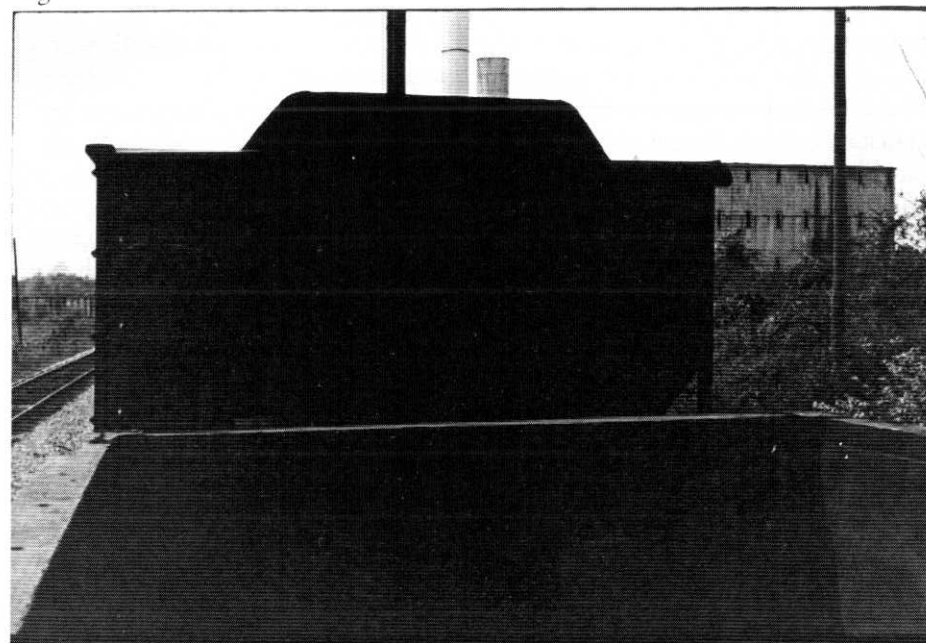




Figure 2

Zen tradition in his photography. Pearson quotes the artist in his essay that is a part of the essential compilation by Bonnie Thurston, entitled *Merton & Buddhism*, published in 2007 by Fons Vitae in Louisville. Merton wrote: '...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.'⁷ Still, we may be lulled, if not pleased in our appreciation of art by the easy, the sanguine, the seen-before images in Merton's body of work. This is one choice for the viewer. It comforts, reaffirms, stabilizes. And like anyone learning a language, Merton as artist, and we, too, as viewers, establish our vocabulary this way, through the paradigms, the

dictionaries of achievements of the masters. Great artists copy their forbearers, and Merton, even though not well schooled in the art of photography, was a quick study and well enough aware to fall in line and work through his aesthetic understanding by copying pleasing, expressive pictures made previously and successfully by others.

But at his best, Merton used black and white tonality to change the world as we see it to a photographic world of abstract patterns of light and dark, within an abstracted, frame edge to frame edge approach that calls attention to texture and subtlety. Look at Figure 2, for instance; nothing to do with the world of ocular vision. The eye just doesn't see this way. The eye scans to bring out the highlights,

darting between light and shadow, integrating the view into a mental picture of the whole. This is photographic vision, the mark of a skilled cameraman. It is an image that lives in the shadows.

Permit an aside here: I'll wager Merton must have appreciated that the legacy of the shadow is based in a language of love, as one person traced the cast shadow of the beloved's face. This was believed to be the most truthful of all expressions, an immediate expression from the nature of things. One's soul could be made manifest in this shadow, and just that idea fuelled the practice of creating a cut-out silhouette, a popular parlor game in the second half of the eighteenth century – a time just yearning for the ultimate shadow box: the photographic cameras of Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot. The shadow was a metaphor for the soul, for psyche, and it was stretched in time to suggest a darker magic of psychic truths, even of evil, and served, thereby, as a rich platform for meanings – and for ambiguity. For Carl Jung, the shadow lies beyond the threshold of everyday awareness. It is a complex and many faceted symbol, large enough to hold components of evil and the repressed. But lest one gets caught in negativity, Jung reminds us that the shadow stands for the whole unconscious – for all that we do not directly know; indeed, all of our previous experience, the totality of those unspoken anchors dragged along with one's life.

Fittingly, then, a strong dialectic of black and white reappears in Merton's work, the play of light against dark, of presence and absence, self and other, the thing and its trace, the object and its abstraction, the difference.

The meditative practice of drawing out a person from darkness to light is like the drawing out of an image, whether photographically, or in charcoal, or in a print. The implied transformation of the thrown or projected shadow image is essential to the photograph, which holds the trace of light reflected from the represented thing, etched into the light sensitive emulsion of film negative, which ren-

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ders light as darkness, and as a shadow. The notion of the photograph as transformation, then, as shadow itself, fits Merton's work like a glove, holding that time and place from 1967, when the photograph was created: the light reflected from the subject thrown to the camera; the shutter opened, and the film negative exposed and the image impressed. And we now see, in our time, what we know was a direct impression of forty-one years ago, and we hold it in our eyes, now in our time. This time tunnel is a remarkable magic.

Once the shutter is opened, and light permitted into the darkened chamber of

the camera, the film is impressed, and then is carried outside of its camera for development, and is imprinted for distribution and sharing. But this very process of making a photograph climbs over and out of one reality and into another, transcending, overstepping bounds, indeed abstracting the reality observed, pressing it into another form, the film form, a two dimensional trace of a three dimensional experience. This passage from light to dark to light again, this shift from one state to another, echoes the language Merton used to describe meditation and contemplation.

Merton was also skilled at creating a stilled life image, one caught in a stasis of time, like a little death, a vision often between things, dying to one thing, giving way to another, a rock against growing things, a counter pose between this and that, a proposition of change, a place where media mix. These are not moving pictures. They are singularities. A look here, then there. A penetrating gaze. A stilled life. These pictorial sentences do not flow together. They hang out there in space, awaiting our completion, requiring our collaboration to bring in these fragments from another side of consciousness. Merton seemed to like to catch and take hold of the gap between things, and in that unnamed place, as if between the lines of a metaphor, or in the midst of a syllogism, or at the bend of an edit in film, the artist delivered an opportunity for new meanings. These meanings, of course, are finally created in the mind of the viewer, who reconciles the difference between the previously perceived reality and the illusion at hand.

Let's take a break now for another parenthetical idea: photography is one of the most powerful communicating systems, because it employs three different categories of signification, three different types of signs that fit with the categories Merton ascribed for contemplative practice. 'Contemplation cannot be taught,' said Merton. 'It cannot even be clearly explained. It can only be hinted at, suggested, pointed to, symbolized.'⁸ Keep these three roles in mind: suggesting, pointing, and symbolizing.

This is fascinating - that Merton would turn to photography, and make an image of tire tracks in the snow. (Figure 3, reproduced on the cover of the Journal.) Why would he do that? Well, a photograph in its way is like a tire track, or like a death mask, or a fingerprint, collecting the light from the scene in precisely the same arrangement of detail to represent, suggest or infer. And, in that light, how fascinating that Merton would make this image of a tire track in the snow. This tracery in semiology is called an iconic sign, which provides added fascination in the light of Merton's interest in religious iconography, icons of a different sort.

Photography also functions as a symbolic sign, where the sign is clearly different from that which it represents. Words, letters, are symbolic signs. A rose standing for the idea of love is a symbol, or even one of Merton's more conventional pictures of craggy roots and dark forests. Finally, the photograph can act as a pointer, the other sign that Merton mentioned in speaking about contemplation - signifying by pointing toward something - like the index finger highlighting and pointing the way toward a subject in a PowerPoint presentation. In this respect,



Figure 4

many of Merton's pictures offer a rhetoric of comparison and contrast, a counterpoint that sums up both sides of a dialectic, an antithesis - for example of rock and wood - that moves toward the concept of the whole, moves in from edges of the frame to announce a connection, rather than a separation, and stakes out an intellectual or spiritual territory, and declares a behavior, a point of view, a way of being in the world.

Writing about the contemplative life in *The Inner Experience*, Merton declared: 'All that we can do with any spiritual discipline is produce within ourselves some-

thing of the silence, the humility, the detachment, the purity of heart, and the indifference which are required if the inner self is to make some shy, unpredictable manifestation of his presence.'⁹ One sees these attributes in the best of Merton's photographs also.

Some photographs are noisy. His are silent. Some are brassy; his seem humble. Some are prurient. Others are pure. And the best of Merton's pictures are indifferent and detached.

Finally, they are just what they are.

Flimsy, slight, fragments upon paper. Humble, purely simple, silent. They are not the same as what they represent. They are something separate, something different, just simply photographs.

Roger Lipsey and Bonnie Thurston, writing in *Merton & Buddhism*, infer striking conjunctions with the nature of the photograph, although they write about

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Merton's other art, namely prints and poems. But their thinking about these other forms, which Merton created in the same end-of-life period, leads toward photographs as a particularly appropriate medium for contemplative thought. Lipsey in his deft essay, 'Merton, Suzuki, Zen, Ink: Thomas Merton's Calligraphic Drawings in Context,' discusses the artist's apology for his visual art, a powerful aesthetic understanding in which Merton argued against extending interpretation too far from the art work itself, cautioning about moving too far into connotation. 'Until they [the audience] can be content to accept the fact that the picture is simply itself, there is no point in trying to explain it, especially if the explanation seems to indicate that it is something else.'¹⁰

Consider Figure 4, a tough-minded composition and textural range, with an encroaching shadow overtaking from the

left. Bonnie Thurston, in her essay about Merton's poetry, 'The Light Strikes Home' writes that, 'In Merton's later poetry' – written at the same time Merton was making these photographs – 'In Merton's later poetry, his study of Zen manifests itself in a preference for the concrete, for the truth found in experience rather than in abstraction or speculative thinking.'¹¹ And what better way to champion the concrete than through the photograph and its verisimilar integrity – particularly photographs of explicitly modest, remarkably denotative things. Figure 5 illustrates a remarkable still life, aggressively askance, angles and shadows fighting one another, competing on multiple planes, like Zen calligraphy. Lipsey quotes Merton, writing about his calligraphy. It is as an expression that, 'is able to suggest what cannot be said, and, by using a bare minimum of form, to awaken us to the form-

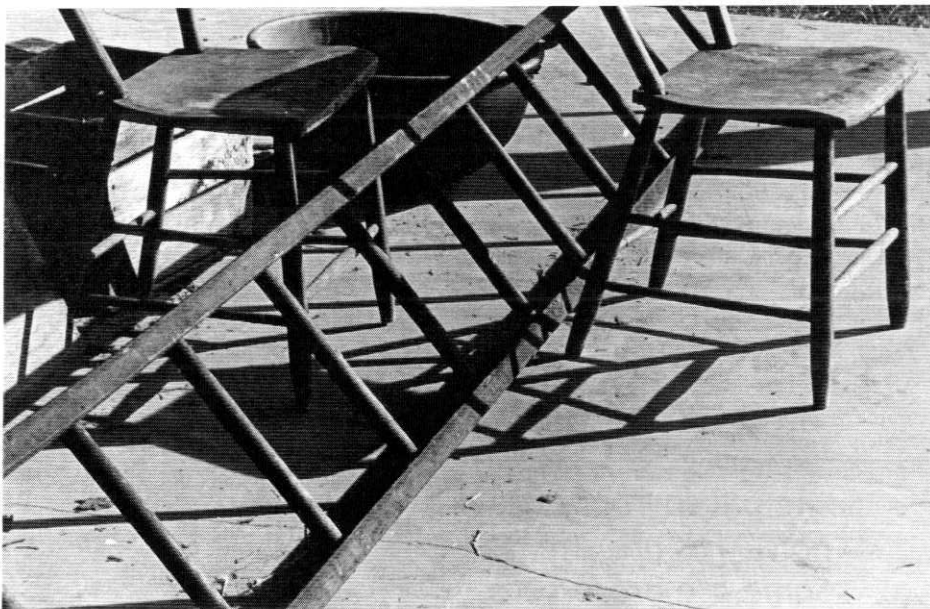


Figure 5

less. Zen painting tells us just enough to alert us to what is not and is nevertheless 'right there'. Zen calligraphy, by its peculiar suppleness, dynamism, abandon, contempt for "prettiness" and for formal "style" reveals to us something of the freedom which is not transcendent in some abstract and intellectual sense, but which employs a minimum of form without being attached to it and is therefore free from it.'¹²

Merton makes the point again and again: the Zen preference for the tangible; the artist's taste for unique expression; his felicity with the temperament of the photograph, and his readiness for the silence of nothing.

Finally, this is Merton, from his essay on 'Sacred Art and the Spiritual Life' in *Disputed Questions*: '...in an age of concentration camps and atomic bombs, religious and artistic sincerity will certainly exclude all "prettiness" or shallow sentimentality. Beauty for us cannot be a mere appeal to conventional pleasures of the imagination and senses. Nor can it be found in cold, academic perfectionism. The art of our time, sacred art included, will necessarily be characterized by a certain poverty, grimness and roughness which corresponds to the violent realities of a cruel age.'¹³

Notes

1. Gratitude to Brother Patrick Hart and Brother Paul Quenon, for their consultation on this hypothesis.
2. See the photograph of Merton, joyfully climbing on the side of a coal car in *A Merton Celebration: Tributes from Friends of the Poet-Monk*, edited by Deba Patnaik (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1981), p.99.

3. Ad Reinhardt, 'Art-as-Art,' from *Esthetics Contemporary*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989), p.206.
4. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), p.147.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), p.140.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journals of Thomas Merton*, edited by Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1975), p.236.
7. Quoted on p. 187 from Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), p.284.
8. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), p.6.
9. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience*, edited by William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003), p.7.
10. Lipsey quotes (p.160) Merton's letter to Margaret Randall, who published a suite of Merton's drawings.
11. *Merton & Buddhism*, p.211.
12. This quotation on p.165 in *Merton & Buddhism* originates in Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p.6.
13. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Mentor-Omega, 1965), p.130.

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