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SURREALISTIC, EERILY BEAUTIFUL PORTRAITS BY ENIGMATIC PHOTOGRAPHER

RALPH EUGENE MEATYARD SHOWCASED AT THE ART INSTITUTE

Ralph Eugene Meatyard: Dolls and Masks on view July 2 through September 25, 2011

Highly original and deeply emotional, photographer **Ralph Eugene Meatyard**'s use of staged scenes foreshadows the work of many contemporary artists, such as Francesca Woodman, Cindy Sherman, Sally Mann, and Justine Kurland. His unorthodox, surrealistic, yet eerily beautiful images are now showcased in a new exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. ***Ralph Eugene Meatyard: Dolls and Masks***—on view **July 2 through September 25, 2011**, in **Allerton Gallery 1**—presents more than 50 black-and-white works by one of the most enigmatic photographers of



our time. Drawn from the photographer's estate, this focused exhibition—containing works made before his iconic 1972 project *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*—examines dolls and masks across different bodies of work as a window onto his larger practice. This exhibition is the first major Art Institute showing of Meatyard's work.

Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925–1972) has been on the fringes of photographic history—so much so that he once inserted one of his own prints into a personal copy of Beaumont Newhall's seminal *History of Photography*, which had not included him. And yet his impact on photographic practice, belatedly recognized, has been significant. Born in Normal, Illinois in 1925, Meatyard served in the U.S. Navy and studied at Williams College and Illinois Wesleyan University. In 1950, he moved to

Lexington, Kentucky, and went to work at Tinder-Krauss-Tinder, an optical firm, which also sold cameras and other photographic equipment. That same year he bought a camera to photograph the first of his three children. Meatyard spent the rest of his life in Lexington, where he eventually worked as an optician at his own shop, Eyeglasses of Kentucky, and photographed in his spare time. His membership in the Lexington Camera Club in 1954 led to an enduring friendship with his photography teacher, Van Deren Coke. In 1956, summer workshops at Indiana University brought him into contact with such influential photographers as Henry Holmes Smith, Aaron Siskind, and Minor White. These interactions paved the way for Meatyard to launch his own photographic vision. Solo and group exhibitions soon followed across the country.

The photographs of Ralph Eugene Meatyard not only defy convention, but they are also rich in literary allusion. A voracious reader, he found a likeminded community of writers and poets in Lexington, including Wendell Berry, Guy Davenport, Jonathan Greene, and James Baker Hall. Meatyard's works have been called visionary, surrealistic, and meditative. Fascinated by the uncanniness of ordinary life, he was known to cast all three of his children—as well as his wife, Madelyn—as regular actors in his photographic stagings that often involve masks and abandoned spaces. His familiar, slightly disturbing, and deliberate images search for inner truths rather than ephemeral surfaces. Meatyard produced his culminating series, *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*, just before his untimely death from cancer in 1972. Conceived as an extended family album, the *Lucybelle* pictures feature Madelyn Meatyard posing with different friends or relatives in disfiguring masks and gained acclaim for the disquieting combination of the banal with the extraordinary.

Yet even before the *Lucybelle* series, during the immensely fertile period of about 1959 through the late 1960s from which this exhibition is drawn, Meatyard played with the tropes of dolls and masks, often photographing his wife and children with these props in landscapes and abandoned houses. These pictures put an uncanny spin on family photographs, exploring the contrasts between youth and age, childhood and mortality, intimacy and unknowability. For Meatyard, dolls and masks were not macabre or grotesque. Dolls represented a physical human presence, whether employed in a scene alongside people or instead of people. He used masks to universalize his sitters rather than make individual portraits, leveling identity so that viewers could approach a picture with a shared sympathy. Ultimately, Meatyard's photographs remind us that we all wear masks; we put them on as we encounter each other and, most of all, we wear them before the camera.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Meatyard family has pledged a significant gift of photographs from across Ralph Eugene Meatyard's career to the Art Institute. These photographs will join strong holdings of Meatyard's teachers Aaron Siskind and Minor White, as well as photographers he subsequently influenced, such as Cindy Sherman. "We are delighted to add these remarkable photographs to the collection, and it is fitting that Ralph Eugene Meatyard, an Illinois native, will now be so well represented at the Art Institute," said Elizabeth Siegel, associate curator of photography and curator of the exhibition. Several of the pledged works will be on view in the exhibition.

Following the Art Institute's presentation, *Ralph Eugene Meatyard: Dolls and Masks* will travel to the De Young Museum, San Francisco (October 8, 2011–February 26, 2012) and the Philadelphia Museum of Art (May 19–August 5, 2012).

Ralph Eugene Meatyard: Dolls and Masks is accompanied by a fully illustrated, 144-page catalogue published by Radius Books, with essays by Elizabeth Siegel, and historian of photography Eugenia Parry. *Ralph Eugene Meatyard: Dolls and Masks* is organized by the Art Institute of Chicago.

IMAGE: Ralph Eugene Meatyard. *Ambrose Bierce*, 1964. © The Estate of Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

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10:30 am–5:00 pm Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday

10:30 am–8:00 pm Thursday

10:30 am–5:00 pm Saturday, Sunday

FAMILY FREE WEDNESDAYS BEGIN JUNE 1, 2011. The museum is free to all the first and second Wednesdays of every month.

Closed Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day.

ADMISSION

Adults \$18.00 Includes all special exhibitions

Children 14 and over, students, and seniors \$12.00 Includes all special exhibitions

Chicago residents receive a \$2.00 discount with proof of residency

Children under 14 always free

Members always free

Free Evenings are free to all. City of Chicago residents with Chicago Public Library cards can borrow a "Museum Passport" card from any library branch for free general admission to the nine members of Museums in the Park, including the Art Institute of Chicago.