

THE PERSONAL EYE
Photographs by Clarence John Laughlin

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That the camera, normally, can capture only the visible surface of a phenomenon on film, is not to be denied. It is the realistic tool of technique which, generally, holds fast only the immediately perceptible. So it is strange, therefore, from this viewpoint, to find the sober scientist - such as a doctor of medicine - taking the trouble, exactly like the inspired artist, to let the long invisible be recognized in the photograph. The inquiring doctor, representing the body's interior, becomes thereby, in a sense, super-photographic. But when we turn, further, to the creative phantasts of the camera - those who expose psychic interiors - we can only think them flatly anti-photographic - if we wholly accept the limited concept of photography mentioned above.

Let us speak, in reference to these latter, of a particular representative of the creative phantasts - of Clarence John Laughlin. It is almost as if he were raging against the apparently inflexible instrument, the camera - which humanity so justly praises and loves. Now, one can in many ways express this impulse to present more than the evident reality - that is, to penetrate, to augment, to interpret it. One can put to use many, and various, photographic means, those in the light before the camera; and those in the shadows of the darkroom. For example, as the sensitivity and grace of Cecil Beaton decades ago was able to do, one can build up an improbable, surrealistic world before the camera and photograph it charmingly. One can, like the great Man Ray, work with solarization, granulation, negative prints. And it is amazing how the facade of all men and things begins to be transparent, if one uses the quite simple means of double exposure.

And with this we are already speaking of Clarence John Laughlin. This extraordinary, complex man is an Outsider, one who meditates with the camera. He lives and works in New Orleans (USA). It can be that this already says much about him. Long before we had the so-called "garbage-can philosophers" and "misery photographers", Laughlin pursued the secretly decaying background of his city, so pregnant with the past. Secluded courtyards, iron balconies, - the unusual mixture of America, France, and the black continent in the yesterday of a present-day city - occupied him even unto dreams. And these nocturnal hallucinations he was able by day to hold fast, and to give form to, in photographs. He is, in a sense, the Baudelaire of the camera. He discovers the secret and the ambiguous; revivifies what has for a long time been under dust, what has died, and vanished. Ghostly, sometimes melodramatic, and, in his apothetically contrived poses occasionally close to trumpery - and yet not trumpery - all this lives on in his pictures. Bizarrerie, the macabre, the singular meanings in even commonplace objects - all these elements form a second, secret face behind his work, from which it derives its intensely personal emphasis. Laughlin fits into no "school" of photography. Some have misunderstood him; most have ignored; others have taken cognizance of him with a certain coolness and reserve. But Laughlin has remained one who walks alone - a night wanderer in New Orleans - the New Orleans of the broad river, of negro life and song, of a dramatic past. The past which breathes in his imposing book of photographs - "Ghosts Along the Mississippi" - where he has sought out the old, fallen and forgotten mansions of Louisiana, and preserved them in their poignant decay.

This, then, is Louisiana - on a broad, fabled stream; with magically naive gravestones, and one-time lordly mansions now like classic mausoleums that have been overrun by nature, and are as if consumed by time. Remains of once aristocratic coaches, empty window frames, crumbling stuccoed walls, facades that once were, and which still tower like grandiose unreal scenery in the present. All this Laughlin has traced out and explored; alone, lonely, with no other "commission" than that of his love for this land, his home.

This poet with the camera, with the burning affection for that which once was, and which is testified to by his singular ability to project himself backwards in time, is a master, and a mystic, of the camera. Although I once met him in California, and learned to esteem him through a short meeting, I know little more of him than just what his pictures say. I don't know where and how he began, with what camera he works, which film and developer he uses. Does it matter? Here is a non-conformist, a documentor of the transcendental, a photographer of tragic architecture and revealing still lifes - who makes a place for death and eternity in our visual consciousness - and imparts to it, in his photographs, spiritual life and touching permanence.

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Clarence John Laughlin was born in 1905 at Lake Charles, Louisiana, and lived until he was seven on a plantation near New Iberia. He then moved to New Orleans with his family. Between 1936 and 1941, while employed as Civil Service photographer with the U. S. Engineers Office in New Orleans, he made about 4,000 negatives of the ironwork designs, the statues and the old buildings of New Orleans. Later he worked with Vogue Studios in New York City and with the U. S. National Archives in Washington, D. C. In November, 1942, he enlisted in the Signal Corps and spent nearly four years in the Army, three of which were with a unit of the Office of Strategic Services specializing in color photography. Following his discharge in 1946, the photographer returned to New Orleans to work on his book, Ghosts along the Mississippi which deals with the Louisiana plantations.

Clarence John Laughlin's work has been shown in more than 80 one man exhibitions in this country and France and is represented in many private and public collections. He has been the subject of many publications, the most recent being The Era of Sentiment and Splendor in Life Magazine, October 21, 1960.