

ENDLESSLY THE SAME AND ENDLESSLY DIFFERENT

Ralph Eugene Meatyard's seminal body of work, *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*, first published in 1974, arguably remains the most direct and effective critique of family photography within our culture. As David Levi Strauss has said: "In its forthrightness and its Gothic loopiness, it manages to illuminate two truths simultaneously: That we are all the same, really; and that we are all different, under the masks".¹ With his distinctive use of masks, poses and captioning, Meatyard exposes and challenges the conventions and rituals associated with family photography to this day. The first version of *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater* appeared two years after Meatyard's premature death and, although it gained great acclaim and helped establish his place within the history of photography, it was nonetheless, far from the book that Meatyard himself had originally visualized.² His idea for the volume was very particular and specific. In order to emulate the format of the traditional family album, he planned on reproducing the seven-inch square photographs on black pages, with his handwritten captions in white beneath each one. The captions were individually written, specifically for each of the sixty-four images, which were precisely sequenced throughout. However, the photographs in the 1974 version were printed oversize, on white portrait-format pages, and the hand-written captions were not included, except for the very first and last images. Recent research has revealed that several of the plates were also printed out of sequence.³ In 2002, art historian and Meatyard scholar James Rhem published a revised edition of the series *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*, reconstituted the way Meatyard intended. The sixty-four images are preceded by a selection of Meatyard's earlier works and three critical essays that support and contextualise the *Lucybelle Crater* work.



. Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Lucybelles Crater and her editorial friend's symbolic son, Lucybelles Crater* (1971)

Meatyard's critique is most obviously and profoundly expressed through the use of masks within the series. Plate 46 within the album, *Lucybelles Crater and her editorial friend's symbolic son, Lucybelles Crater*, depicts a masked woman sitting beside a masked child on some concrete steps in a suburban front garden. The woman, whose hands and body appear quite youthful, sports the mask of an ugly old woman. The grotesque features of the 'old hag' completely conceal the woman's real face and, likewise, the large, translucent 'old man' mask, whilst offering us a glimpse of the young face beneath, also successfully obscures the child's identity and gender (although the caption beneath the image suggests that the child is male).

These are the two masks that appear repeatedly, obscuring the faces of each pair of subjects, in every one of the black and white photographs that make up *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*. However, whilst the opaque hag mask presents a fixed, unchanging persona to be accepted (or denied) throughout the series, the semi-transparent old man mask forms a quasi-barrier that both reveals and conceals the identity of its wearer. The majority of these posed pictures take place in middle-class, suburban, outdoor domestic spaces, predominantly gardens and front porches; and in all but the very last image, the wearer of the hag mask, Lucybelle Crater, remains the same. As with all masks and, it could be argued, all posed photographs, the true face is hidden and an alternative is presented, frozen and alien. Within the realms of photography, as Marianne Hirsch has commented, “the mask is a metaphor for the photograph’s power to conceal, for the frustrations of the photograph’s surface”.⁴ She goes on say that the mask may also be seen as a “metaphor for the semiotic lenses or screens through which we read photographs, and through which the images themselves are constructed as objects of social meaning”.⁵ As Meatyard said in an artist’s talk in 1972: “The mask is no man...everybody has a mask on”.⁶

Rather than see Meatyard’s masks as macabre or grotesque, we might view them as an extension of what is in every photograph, even the most mundane family snapshots. As Elizabeth Siegel has recently remarked, the Meatyards did not keep a separate, conventional family album. Unlike any other ‘Normal’ family,⁷ of the many images that Meatyard made of his wife and his children, up to and including the *Lucybelle Crater* photographs, few if any, depict “the typical smiles and staged perfection of the American snapshot”.⁸ Nonetheless, as Siegel goes on to state, “they

remain as records of a photographer's loved ones even as he aimed for universality".⁹



Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Lucybel Crater & 20 yr old son's 3 yr old son, also her 3 yr old grandson - Lucybel Crater*, (1971)

In an essay that directly addresses the act of posing in Meatyard's work,¹⁰ Fulya Ertem analyses another image in the series. Plate 4, *Lucybel Crater & 20 yr old son's 3 yr old son, also her 3 yr old grandson - Lucybel Crater*, again depicts a masked woman crouching next to a masked child, this time in an autumnal, suburban landscape. As Ertem points out, the slightly exaggerated, strained intimacy the woman seems to be attempting to establish with the child is reminiscent of, and consistent with, the poses often made by "family members in album

photographs”.¹¹ This photograph particularly seems to be addressing the moment of being photographed, the moment of facing the camera in which the subject automatically adopts a pose and constructs an artificial self-image or identity. The masks therefore emphasize the disingenuousness of facing the camera in the photographic moment, highlighting the fact that the posing subject presents *artificiality* at the moment of the pose. Indeed, posing is an act of image creation, an act in which the subject attempts to project a particular self-image, and by posing, endeavors to correspond to, and unite with, the image that one has of oneself. As Ertem remarks, “at the heart of the act of posing lies the desire to appropriate one’s image, to frame one’s subjectivity in order to be looked at (and thus approved or constituted) by the social gaze”.¹²

Meatyrd’s use of masks seems to reflect the derivative and duplicative nature intrinsic to the pose, as well as its alienating aspect. Ertem employs Craig Owens’ position, claiming that by freezing one’s body, the posing subject replicates the appearance of a photograph, emphasising the properties of photographic representation by allowing oneself to become part of the construction. “What do I do when I pose for a photograph?” Owens asks. “I freeze... as if anticipating the still I am about to become; mimicking its opacity, its still-ness; inscribing, across the surface of my body photography’s ‘mortification’ of the flesh”.¹³ Joanna Lowry has also written very eloquently about ‘performing our identity’ in the moment of the pose:

It is when we present ourselves to the camera that we become aware of the need to make ourselves into a picture and to take control of the account of our soul. Much academic interest, then, has focussed upon the notion of the pose; upon the way in which, when we are photographed, we become complicit in the discourse of photographic representation, gathering our selfhood together, performing our identity, presenting ourselves to the camera, holding ourselves steady in a mock tableau that mimics the stasis of the photograph itself.¹⁴

The emulation that occurs during posing is not then just the imitation of an image of oneself as

one sees oneself, but also the conscious act of becoming a photograph, a frozen image, assuming something other, something rigid, something dead. “In that sense we can also consider the act of posing as an act of alienation from the self”.¹⁵ This is the estrangement that Barthes talks of in *Camera Lucida*, when he says: “I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing’, I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image”.¹⁶ The pose is therefore inherently paradoxical in that it both constitutes and spurns the feeling of subjectivity.

In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art...and each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of unauthenticity, sometimes of imposture (comparable to certain nightmares).¹⁷

The ‘suffering’ in front of the camera that Barthes describes comes from his feeling that, at the moment of posing, he is a multitude of subjects at once, none of which he recognises as his real self. On this basis, Ertem argues that although the pose is an attempt to ground subjectivity, the conversion of one’s body into something very different from what one experiences as the self, such as a photograph, constitutes a paradox because the posing subject, whilst attempting to reach a more stable, definite and recognizable sense of “self”, is nevertheless experiencing the opposite of this desire, and is conversely reminded of one’s own plurality and difference. Therefore, the paradox of the pose is that in the attempt through posing to establish a self-image that fleetingly protects the subject from an awareness of its own plurality and fluidity, “the posing subject is constantly reminded of the impossibility of such protection”.¹⁸

The most direct reference within the work is in the use of the name *Lucybelle Crater*, which it seems Meatyard adapted from *Lucynell Crater*, the name of both the mother and daughter characters in a Flannery O'Connor story, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, first published in

1948. Rhem has said that Meatyard is known to have “been an admirer of the Southern short story writer”.¹⁹ Much like O’Connor’s duplication of the name *Lucynell Crater*, *Lucybel Crater* is given by Meatyard to every person depicted in the album and is far too similar and distinctive to have been a coincidental choice. Rhem also notes that it was likely to have been the speculation about names and identity suggested in O’Connor’s story, rather than the storyline itself, that was most intriguing to Meatyard.²⁰ O’Connor’s choice of name for both the mother and daughter in her story is poignant, as subsequently, is Meatyard’s. As M. Kathryn Shields suggests in her 2004 article,²¹ the name *Lucynell Crater* seems to be a playful merging of names that is a tendency of people from the Southern states. The word ‘crater’ generally refers to a depression or hole in the ground, something that could be seen as a deformity or blemish on the earth’s surface. Lucynell Crater, the daughter character, is described by O’Connor as “slow”,²² a label that is confounded by the fact that we do not know her real condition. We are informed that she is completely deaf, again belying the comprehensive presence of sensory experience. O’Connor’s emphasis seems to reflect the daughter’s inability to speak. Rather than Meatyard’s ironic version of the name (which also plays on the idea of a Southern *belle*), O’Connor’s ‘knell’ signals a silence instead of the ringing a bell would typically sound. As Shields points out, in the place of a “significant event or presence”, there is “an absence”.²³ Such a void might apply to both the daughter’s mental state and the emptiness of the familial relationship between her and the mother.

Within the gothic short story, the mother tries to persuade a passing one-armed stranger, Mr. Shiftlet, that he should marry her innocent daughter. She suggests that as a cripple, unlikely to be generally accepted in society, he could not hope to find a better situation than marrying Lucynell and gaining a “permanent home”.²⁴ He replies, “The body, lady, is like a house: it don’t go

anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like an automobile: always on the move”.²⁵ Shields recognises that the penultimate fate of Lucynell, at the hands of her mother's matchmaking, “foregrounds the split between mind and body” emphasising “the importance of a permanent home”,²⁶ both of which are central to Meatyard's philosophy and his image-making. As Rhem points out at the beginning of his essay that proceeds the revised version of the *Lucybelle* book:

The idea of family unites *Lucybelle* and the photographer not just in the first and last images, but throughout. It envelops and gives significance to the figures who pose beside her. They are both concrete and symbolic family, and the book's formal structure demands that they be understood as something other than bit players in an open-ended, unanchored fiction. Just as *Lucybelle* has metaphorical significance, so do the figures with whom she's paired.²⁷

Meatyard's use of repetition; both that of the name *Lucybelle Crater* and of the two masks (and his disregard for family members' individuality), reflects his interest in the universal experience of life rather than the specifics of individual identity. Family albums rely on the repeated representation of recognizable figures such as father, mother, sister, brother, uncle and aunt; and although these individuals appear to be different (and *are* in fact different) in each of our own family albums, their universal labels remain constant. The masks that Meatyard employs reduce the differences between family members to a matter of perspective. By simultaneously exaggerating and eliminating family resemblance, and presenting the unfamiliar in familiar ways, and a way which becomes familiar through repetition, the images that make up the album exist in a space between fact and fiction.

The *Lucybelle Crater* series uses the repetition of the same two masks, and repeated views of those masks on subjects in repetitive, replicated locations, as a seductive device for altering our conception of the commonplace and usual. As Rhem points out, during Meatyard's

correspondence with Jonathan Williams in July 1971, he indicates an affinity with a statement on the dust-jacket of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* which states: "... the complete characters of individuals [are] reflected not in the words and thoughts... but in the MOVEMENT of words and thoughts, 'endlessly the same and endlessly different'."²⁸

Although Meatyard began this series before he learned he had terminal cancer, the majority of the images were made during his two-year battle with the illness. As previously stated, the series comprises of sixty-four square-format black and white photographs, each depicting of a pair of people. In every single image apart from the very last, the artist's wife Madelyn appears wearing the hag's mask, alongside a family member or close friend wearing the translucent old man's mask. Meatyard himself poses in the first and the last of the images, as the male relative Lucybelle at the start and as *the* Lucybelle herself at the very end. In this final photograph, stick-thin through illness, Meatyard dons a woman's dress and the hag's mask, whilst his wife, in an ultimate reversal of roles, wears a man's trousers and shirt and plays the male relative in the old man's mask.

¹ David Levi-Strauss, in Andrew Roth (ed.), *The Book of 101 Books: Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century*, (New York: PPP Editions/Roth Horowitz, 2001), p.230

² Ralph Eugene Meatyard's *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater* was first published in 1974 by the Jargon Society, two years after his death from cancer. Although the publication was compiled by friends and family with the best intentions, due to budget constraints, the inclusion of well meant personal tributes and the omission of most of the captions Meatyard had written, it was far from the book that he intended.

³ Discussed by James Rhem, *Ralph Eugene Meatyard: The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater and Other Figurative Photographs*, (New York: DAP/Distributed Art Publishers, 2002), p.6

⁴ Hirsch, *op cit.*, p.85

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.85

⁶ Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Talk for the Society for Photographic Education, Louisville, March 1972, cited by Rhem, *op.cit.*, p.40

⁷ Ralph Eugene Meatyard was born in the town of Normal, Illinois, USA, in 1925.

⁸ Elizabeth Siegel, 'The Universalizing Mask', in Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Dolls and Masks*, (Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2011), p.128

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.128

¹⁰ Fulya Ertem, 'Re-Thinking the Act of Posing in Ralph Eugene Meatyard's *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*', *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi*, 46:1, (2006), pp. 153-164

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.154

¹² *Ibid.*, p.155

¹³ Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, (University of California Press, 1994), p.210, cited in Ertem, *op cit.*, p.156

¹⁴ Joanna Lowry, 'Still video portraits and the account of the soul', in David Green and Joanna Lowry (eds), *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*, (Brighton: Photoforum/Photoworks, 2006), p. 66

¹⁵ Ertem, *op cit.*, p.156

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (London: Vintage Books, 1993), p.10, also cited in Ertem, *op cit.*, p.156

¹⁷ Barthes, *op cit.*, p.13, also cited in Ertem, *op cit.*, p.156

¹⁸ Ertem, *op cit.*, p.157

¹⁹ Rhem, *op cit.*, p.39

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.124 (n.36)

²¹ M. Kathryn Shields, 'Stories These Masks Could Tell: Literary References in the Photographs of Ralph Eugene Meatyard', in *Mosaic*, 37:4 (December 2004), p.98

²² Flannery O'Connor, 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own', in *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, [1948], (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1983), p.42

²³ Shields, *op cit.*, p.98

²⁴ O'Connor, *op cit.*, p.62

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.63

²⁶ Shields, *op cit.*, p.100

²⁷ James Rhem, *Ralph Eugene Meatyard: The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater and Other Figurative Photographs*, (New York: DAP/Distributed Art Publishers, 2002), p.6

²⁸ Ralph Eugene Meatyard letter to Jonathan Williams, August 18, 1971, cited by Rhem, *op cit.*, p.40-41 and p.124 (n.31)