Gene's Friend

Cranston Ritchie

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Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.
-Thomas Gray

By James Rhem

Like many servicemen, Cranston Ritchie returned from World War II eager for life. He'd been wounded, received the purple heart, been the last man to parachute from a downed bomber, hiding during the day behind enemy lines, traveling at night living on apples until he made his way back to allied lines. And now he was ready to live again. He wasn't alone: a lot of men felt that way. The "baby boom" soon followed their return and about the same time, the "photo boom." For Cranston Ritchie and many other returning servicemen photography offered a new democratic, yet very personal, mode of expression and exploration. For some it became a hobby, a pastime to soothe and distract the spirit; for others, like Ritchie and members of the now-famous Lexington Camera Club, it became much more. For Gene Meatyard, the club's most well-known member, photography threw open the door to realizing his identity as one of the twentieth century's most important photographic artists, but he didn't see himself as being alone on this path.

While Meatyard rose to the pinnacle of recognition, he was and, indeed, saw himself as part of a community. He'd had a mentor in Van Deren Coke, and he, in turn, became a mentor both to the club in general and more particularly to several of its most talented and like-minded members. Early in his career those members included Cranston Ritchie and Dr. Noble Macfarlane. The three often went photographing together in the late 1950s, and they also met at Meatyard's house to view each other's work and discuss philosophical and theoretical ideas in relation to photography. The demands of medicine eventually eclipsed photography in Macfarlane's life, but Ritchie continued.

Sadly, cancer took Ritchie at the age of 38. A little knot the size of a grape and sore to the touch appeared on his right hand. It turned out to be a malignancy. Doctors then thought if the arm were removed above the elbow, the cancer might be stopped from continuing to his lungs. It wasn't. After five surgeries, each an effort to stop the cancer's spread, Ritchie died the day after Christmas in 1961. Ten years later, the camera club mounted a small exhibition of Ritchie's photographs which had been donated to the University of Louisville by his widow, Martha. For the show, a very brief biographical note had been typed up and passed to Meatyard for review. When he read it, Meatyard took pencil in hand and added a long note which he ended by writing, "He will certainly be recognized in years to come as an outstanding individual photographer as many of the 19th century men are being recognized today."

Fig. 1: *Untitled*, n.d., Gelatin silver print, 6¾ x 7½ in., Cranston Ritchie Collection, University of Louisville Photographic Archives

Fig. 2: *Leaves*, 1959, Gelatin silver print, 7½ x 9¼ in., Cranston Ritchie Collection, University of Louisville Photographic Archives

The note, the exhibition and the body of Meatyard's own photographic work suggest that his relationship with Ritchie went beyond mentor/mentee, settling into the respectful friendship of fellow artists. For example, in the note he added, Meatyard describes two approaches to making a photograph "that were uniquely and peculiarly [Ritchie's] own." In the first, with his camera set at a slow shutter speed, Ritchie would rack the lens forward during the exposure, creating a dynamic zoom effect in the final image. In the second, with his camera mounted on a tripod, again set with a slow shutter speed, he would pan while sometimes also racking the lens forward. Interestingly, while Meatyard once said in a speech to the camera club in Louisville that he'd developed fourteen different ways to move the camera during exposure, none of his photographs show him using these two. This was Cranston's innovation, and Gene respected it as his. In the year following Ritchie's death the camera club's members' show of 124 prints included 40 by Ritchie in tribute to "his contribution to fine photography." Meatyard did not exhibit in either of these shows, perhaps in deference to his friend and fellow artist.

Fig. 3: Cranston Ritchie in military uniform, ca. 1941

Ritchie was involved with photography for only five years, a third of the years Meatyard enjoyed before his untimely death, and despite the two past efforts showcasing Ritchie's work, he will most likely continue to be remembered primarily as the man with the prosthetic arm standing alongside a dressmaker's form and an empty mirror in one of Meatyard's most frequently published photographs. But in a thoughtful study of the several hundred Ritchie prints in the University of Louisville's archive, one can begin to see emerging the individual talent that Meatyard saw.

Some of his very early work reflected a popular amateur snapshot ethos. Indeed, in 1959 he won a prize for a picture of a local pet store owner on the street with a chimpanzee. Quickly, however, Ritchie began making a different sort of photograph. When I interviewed Ritchie's younger brother Bernard in 2002 he recalled Cranston's excursions with Meatyard as a twist on a familiar Kentucky activity: "They'd go out like a couple of hunting buddies would go out with their guns. They'd get their cameras, and they'd go out to the cemetery or small creeks. They found all kinds of weird things." Understandably, some of Ritchie's images echo some of Meatyard's -- a blurred

figure in the landscape, for example. But overall, a key difference between Meatyard's sensibility and Ritchie's emerges. Where Meatyard famously explored realms of surreal drama, posing his children and dolls and other family members in mysteriously evocative settings, Ritchie was drawn to the evocative mysteries of geometry and pattern. Pattern dominates everywhere in Ritchie's photographs. Even an image featuring the silhouette of a child that initially seems to echo Meatyard differs from him in its insistence on a vertical, planar geometry as its fundamental drama.

Very early in his career, Meatyard made hundreds of exposures of abstract patterns found in close-up details of gravestones. These patterns were organic rather than geometric and focused more on decay than growth. Ritchie's abstract patterns, when not geometric, tend to focus on generative life processes -- a vine climbing a tree trunk, the cracks in drying mud. An image of snow on a stack of pipes combines the two responses to processes of building and renewal.

In their hours together in cemeteries, Ritchie and Meatyard did naturally concern themselves with the subject matter all around them, but they approached it somewhat differently. If Meatyard's images take note of mortality as a process of decay, Ritchie engages the loss of identity. In one of his photographs of three gravestones, for example, two of the stones stand veiled in shadow while the third, in sunlight, has been broken in half. None of the names remains readable. In another image, a waving flag denotes the deceased's service while blocking his name from view.

Both Meatyard and Ritchie smoked, but only Ritchie made use of the habit in his photography. At times he stood back in one of the dark abandoned buildings they'd visited and photographed the pattern of smoke from his cigarette as it curled in the air. Meatyard never did this, perhaps another act of deference to his friend's originality. One thing they seem to have shared, however, was a sense of humor that enjoyed playful relationships between words and pictures. For example, on view here in a photo of Gene standing near an old building, the slope of his shoulders and jaunty angle of his head and hat share the angle and gesture with the roof and trusses -- the "hat" -- of the building. In another image, a large saw hangs in a closet; a hat hangs there as well. It is an image of what they "saw," a "hat saw" perhaps in some dialects. Finally, it's easy to image the two friends standing in one of the abandoned buildings they visited, looking down at the ash-covered grate in an old fireplace and one saying to the other: "That'd make a 'great' picture." One finds this kind of embedded humor frequently in Meatyard, and it's here in Ritchie as well.

Meatyard was typically astute in identifying Ritchie's zoomed and panned images as among his strongest. An antebellum house, a pattern of shadows, a pattern of leaves, a frieze depicting a Civil War battle, all benefit from his camera zooming to meet them visually, as does a portrait of Meatyard's son from Ritchie's panning across his face.

Fig. 4: *Colonial House*, n.d., Gelatin silver print, 7¼ x 8½ in., Cranston Ritchie Collection, University of Louisville Photographic Archives

We can't know how fully Cranston Ritchie's artistry would have flowered or what shape his sensibility would have assumed had he lived longer. But he was eager to find out. As his brother Bernard recalled, "He went about these pictures as if he knew he wasn't going to be around that long. He would work way up into the wee hours of the morning and wouldn't hardly get any sleep, and have to go to work the next day. He was so crazy about it."

At the end of his life, Ritchie was working as a photographer for the Kentucky Fair and Exposition Center, skillfully operating his camera with his prosthetic arm. He lined his den, floor to ceiling, wall to wall with his images, and he gave many of his photographs away to friends. As Bernard remembered, "People didn't appreciate his blurred ones too much, and when people would get one of his and turn it around puzzled, Cranston would be amused." In addition to their passion for making images, Ritchie and Meatyard shared a genial confidence in their work.

Today, we may share Cranston's amusement at his friend's puzzlement just as we continue to regret the early loss of his budding talent.

James Rhem is the author of ***Ralph Eugene Meatyard: The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater and Other Figurative Photographs*** *(DAP, 2002).*

Cover: *Untitled*, n.d., Gelatin silver print, 7½ x 9¼ in., Cranston Ritchie Collection, University of Louisville Photographic Archives

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