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Altering Perceptions

Capturing beauty and terror, renewal and decay.

By WILLIAM MEYERS

Wynn Bullock: Revelations

High Museum of Art

Through Jan. 18



'Let There Be Light' (1954). *Bullock Family Photography LLC*

Atlanta

'Revelations,' the name of the Wynn Bullock retrospective at the High Museum of Art, is something of a pun. This is the first large-scale exhibition of Bullock's work in 40 years, so the show is intended to make him known—to reveal him—to a new audience. But, also, Bullock was committed in his photography to showing—that is, revealing—things beyond ordinary perception.

Two of the photographs by Bullock at the High were in "The Family of Man," the exhibition that opened at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955 and became the most successful photographic exhibition of all time; the catalog has sold more than four million copies and never been out of print. One of Bullock's pictures is above the title of the catalog with "And God said, let there be light Genesis 1:3" as its caption. "Child in Forest" (1951) accompanies the prologue by Carl Sandburg. When "The Family of Man" was later displayed at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, visitors voted "Let There Be Light" their favorite of the show's 508 pictures.

Bullock always gave his photographs simple descriptive titles; it was curator Edward Steichen who gave "Let There Be Light" (1954) its biblical name. The picture, taken at night, shows a twisting stream leading to the sea. The moon that lights this dark scene is reflected on the waters and gives a primordial cast to the image, a portent of forces at work in the pitch-black areas at either side of the print. "Child in Forest" is set in a clearing in the woods with trees and ferns in the background; the foreground is covered with redwood sorrel, and a naked girl-child lies face down in it. What is she doing there? Is she asleep? Hurt? Has she been abused? Is she dead? The juxtaposition of the naked child and the primeval setting creates a tension between beauty and terror.

The child was then 6-year-old Barbara Bullock. I happened to be at the High when she was talking to a flock of docents about her father's work, and this picture elicited many questions. The family was on a motor trip and had stopped at a roadside picnicking area. Her dad walked into the forest, found the clearing about 100 yards in, and called Barbara to pose. It took Bullock a while to set up his 8-by-10-inch view camera, and there were nettles on the ground, so Barbara's mother put down a towel to protect her. Bullock took four slightly different exposures and at one point between shots Barbara had a sensation that the power of the earth was entering into her, an experience she still remembers. Likewise, in discussing another picture, she said her father "believed rocks were as alive and vibrant as anything organic." And Bullock's pictures of rocks do endow them with personality, if not exactly vitality.

Barbara is largely responsible for "Revelations." In 2008, her husband, Gene Bullock-Wilson, called the Getty Museum in Los Angeles to ask if they held any of her father's work. Brett Abbott, then an associate curator, picked up the phone because the secretary was out. He found that the Getty had only one print, met Barbara, and the result was that the Getty acquired 12 more prints. Three years ago, soon after Mr. Abbot became curator of photography at the High, Barbara suggested that the time was right for a major show, and he agreed. Mr. Abbot curated "Revelations," organizing the 108 prints by theme and hanging each group in a different arrangement; he also edited the catalog and wrote its concise essay.

Wynn Bullock was born in Chicago in 1902. He was studying music in Europe in the late 1920s when he discovered modern art and photography; he was 27 when he bought his first camera. Back in the U.S., he managed his wife's family's properties during the Depression, but photography drew him, and in 1938 he enrolled in the Art Center School in Los Angeles. His talent was recognized immediately. He divorced, served in the Army, married again, relocated to Santa Maria, Calif., and pursued his photography career. Bullock was a colleague of the great West Coast photographers, and his work was exhibited regularly until his death in 1975. One reason he was lost sight of afterward was that he had shied away from publicity.

Bullock was a student of modern science and philosophy. He read about quantum mechanics, semantics and Einstein's theory of relativity, and tried to incorporate what he learned in his photography. When Edward Weston photographed the beach at Point Lobos, he sought modernist patterns and design; when Ansel Adams photographed there, he tried to imbue his pictures with a sort of pantheistic reverence for nature. Bullock at Point Lobos, in "Girl on Beach" (1968), for instance, tried to capture the cosmic significance of the tides. For "Sea Palms" (1968), rather than use one long exposure to show the movement of the water, he uncovered, covered and uncovered his lens repeatedly to take not a slice of time, but a considerable chunk.

To further alter perception, Bullock sometimes made negative prints or showed them upside down. The processes of decay and renewal fascinated him. He took many pictures looking through windows and doors. It was the possibility of another world beyond the portal that interested him. "Erosion" (1959) is a picture of an embankment that is being worn away; the shrubs above the embankment are visible, but so are their roots that would ordinarily not be seen. Barbara and her younger sister, Lynne, figured in many pictures, the presence of innocence in the physical world.

Bullock took transformative close-ups of rocks, wood, bark, plants and, sometimes, of unidentifiable objects. The inside of "Half an Apple" (1953) fills the print, revealing the seeds, the texture of the flesh and how the stem is attached. It is only one of the many revelations on view at the High.

Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. His photo book "Outer Boroughs: New York Beyond Manhattan" will be published by Damiani in February 2015.