

Modernist Wynn Bullock's Scenes of the Unreal, at the High

Posted: July 15, 2014

© BURNAWAY / Atlanta, GA

BY AMANDA ARNOLD



Wynn Bullock, *Child in Forest*, 1951, gelatin silver print, 7½ by 9½ inches. Collection High Museum of Art, Atlanta. © Bullock Family Photography

Midway through the “[Wynn Bullock: Revelations](#)” exhibition at the High Museum of Art, you’ll spy *Child in Forest*, a landscape image made in 1951 and featuring the doll-like nude figure of the artist’s young daughter lying face-down in an epic bed of clover shrouded by redwoods.

According to its subject, Barbara Bullock-Wilson, whom I was lucky enough to meet at the exhibition opening, the photo was taken one afternoon while the family was on a road-trip in their home state of California. After pulling over for a picnic, Bullock [1902-1975]—who often toted his camera along on family outings—climbed through a hole in a barbed wire fence and soon stumbled upon this lush forest scene. He thought placing a young child in this ancient landscape setting would be interesting, Bullock-Wilson says, so she disrobed and snuggled down into the bed of clover. At first she was uncomfortable—redwood needles were prickling her bare skin, she recalls—so her mother brought her a blanket to lie upon (though it’s hidden in the photograph). But she quickly warmed to the experience.

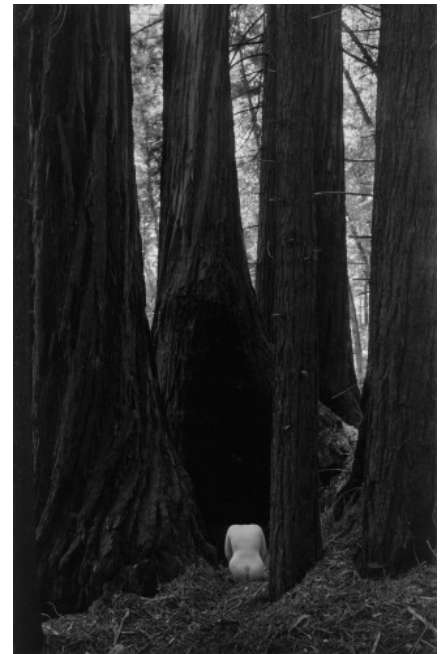
“It was so quiet and peaceful, and I could smell the earth,” she recalls fondly. “I felt the thrum of the energy of the forest coming into my body. It was a wonderful experience, and for Dad it was an interesting [study] in contrast.” A few years later, the photo was selected for the pivotal 1955 “[The Family of Man](#)” photography exhibition held at New York’s Museum of Modern Art.

This juxtaposition of the stark white human figure with the dense, rugged setting of trees and rocks is found throughout many of Bullock’s landscape works. Adding a nude to his nature scenes allowed him to contrast not just textures, and darks and lights, but places in time. The pale, marblelike human figures featured in these photos seem at once part of nature yet also completely alien to it, perhaps because they are so comparatively young. *Nude Torso in Forest*, for example, features a woman with milky smooth skin sitting among ancient redwoods with cragged bark.

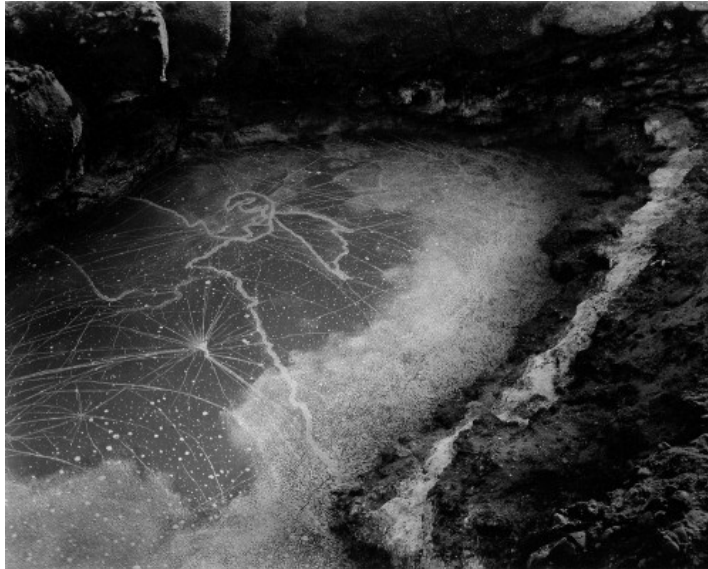
Throughout Bullock’s work, beginning with his early solarization portraits, in which the tones are flipped, he attempts to inspire new perceptions of reality. “I love the medium of photography, for in its unique realism, it gives me the power to go beyond the conventional ways of seeing and understanding, and say, ‘This is real, too,’” [he once said](#). In an untitled work from 1972, for example, the viewer perceives a woman lying in the gritty sand of a desert or beach. Yet the smooth, placid look of the sand and the way her feet disappear into its depths inspire an alternate perception: that the stretch of sand is actually the surface of a body of water, with the woman floating on top. The shadowy contours of the model’s figure mirror the shadowy contours in the dunes behind her, linking—but at the same time contrasting—her vulnerable body with the worn landscape, whittled by wind and time.

One of the nicest things about this particular selection of over 100 of Bullock’s work is that it’s so thorough, chronicling every phase of his exploration into photography, rather than focusing strictly on his landscapes. One room features his 1960s exploration into color and light, while the beginning of the show features his early light abstractions and solarization works, which reflect his initial interest in artists like Man Ray, whose images he discovered while spending time in Paris. By including these periods of his work, one sees that while he was a West Coast photographer and good friend of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, his sensibility was borne out of and eternally colored by the avant-garde.

Bullock was also intrigued by science, including Einstein’s theory of relativity and the space-time continuum. *Point Lobos Tide Pool* (1957) highlights the role of science in his work—and the idea that the macro and the micro mirror one another—as the photo captures what looks like a galaxy in a tide pool. It also demonstrates his approach of waiting for nature to reveal itself to him rather than imposing his own perceptions. “He did one exposure, and a gust of wind came and wiped the galaxy away,” Bullock-Wilson remembers.



Wynn Bullock, *Nude Torso in Forest*, 1958, gelatin silver print, 9½ by 6¼ inches. Collection of Barbara and Gene Bullock-Wilson. © Bullock Family Photography.



Wynn Bullock, *Point Lobos Tide Pool*, 1957, gelatin silver print, 7½ by 9 ½ inches. Collection Center for Creative Photography. © Bullock Family Photography.

Bullock made images right up until his death, and his last body of work, featured as a blocked series in the rear of the gallery, was photographed at home even as he succumbed to cancer. The images are close-ups of household objects made out of materials like wood and clay, in which we see hints of the human visage—an eye, nose, lips, skull. The last photograph he made, according to Bullock-Wilson, is one titled simply *Wood*—a close-up of a 1-inch driftwood section of his coffee table in which we perceive the shadowy facial expression of an aged man. The fact that this work was the last he made before his passing is just so fitting, Bullock-Wilson says. “It was as if he was melting back to nature.”

“Wynn Bullock: Revelations” is on view at the High Museum of Art through January 18, 2015. The show was organized by High photography curator Brett Abbott in collaboration with the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson.

Amanda Arnold is an Atlanta-based writer and editor whose pieces on travel, lifestyle, food, photography, and other topics have appeared in a variety of online and print publications, including *Forbes.com*, *Forbes Travel Guide*, and *HowStuffWorks*.