

High Museum brings midcentury photography master from the shadows

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By Howard Pousner - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Wynn Bullock typed out an Albert Einstein quote he appreciated on an index card he used as a bookmark that could have served as a career leitmotif for the California photographer. “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious,” it read, in part. “It is the source of all true art and science.”

The subject of a major retrospective opening Saturday at the High Museum of Art, Bullock was an artist with a scientist's sensibility, inspired by physics and philosophy among other intellectual pursuits, using his camera to explore the seen and unseen world around him.

Though considered a master of mid-20th-century photography, Bullock is not as well known today as his contemporaries and friends Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and Harry Callahan, the breadth of his career having slipped into the shadows since his 1975 death. The 108-image show “Wynn Bullock: Revelations,” the most comprehensive assessment of his output in nearly four decades, seeks to remedy that.

The exhibit, which will tour to the University of Arizona's Center for Creative Photography and other stops, coincides with a gift of more than 100 vintage prints to the High from Bullock's estate. These permanent collection additions ensure that the High will become the largest repository of the innovative modernist's work in the eastern U.S.

Here is a look at a half-dozen images from the exhibit, representing different stages in the creative evolution of the mystery-embracing photographer:



“Early Solarization,” 1940

Bullock became inspired by the bold picture-making of Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy while pursuing an early career as a concert singer in Europe. He followed his own experimental muse as a photography student captivated by the power of light at the Los Angeles Art Center School, where he enrolled in 1938 at age 36.

“I love the way that his reversal of tones (lends) this almost porcelain-like appearance to the flesh,” High Museum photography curator Brett Abbott said of these evocative hands that seem to float in an otherworldly realm. “And there's something really beautiful and delicate and mysterious to it, even in this very early picture.”



“Let There Be Light,” 1954

Hanging low over the water, the glowing sun illuminates the still-darkened West Coast landscape in this majestic image, a poem of light. Like the rising sun, the photographer's fame climbed after this picture was prominently featured in Edward Steichen's renowned exhibition “The Family of Man,” which debuted in 1955 at New York's Museum of Modern Art before touring the world for eight years.

At MOMA, the curator displayed it in a four-panel, 10-by-12-1/2-foot reproduction. “Let There Be Light” originally had a different title but was renamed after Steichen paired it with a passage from the Bible.



“Erosion,” 1959

Then a commercial photographer shooting for the Big Sur Guide and other tourist publications, Bullock found this scene along shoreline-hugging California Route 1. It spoke more to the art photographer inside, the one seeking to capture compositions that show more than normally meets the eye.

To Abbott, “Erosion” represents one of Bullock's signature images, setting him apart from contemporaries Weston (who was “interested in creating a landscape of geometric form and structure”) and Adams (who was “interested in a landscape of drama”). Bullock was “really much more interested in what's going on under the surface of things - the idea that there's more to the Earth and the universe than the eye readily perceives,” Abbott said.

The photographer once wrote, “Mysteries lie all around us, even in the most familiar things, waiting to be perceived.”

On ArtClix, the High's exhibit-tour smartphone app, his daughter Barbara Bullock-Wilson calls “Erosion” “one of his most powerful and eloquent reflections of this belief.”



“Color Light Abstraction 1076,” 1963

“That's a photograph?! I thought it was a painting. What's it a photograph of?” That's the reaction that Bullock's daughter, Bullock-Wilson, said she frequently fields when viewers first lay eyes on one of the photographer's series of color light abstractions.

They were an obsession of his from 1959 to 1965, when few photographers were working in color, especially in this highly abstract way, and when the advent of Photoshop was still decades away.

To execute them, Bullock created an apparatus in which he would place refractable materials on shelves of glass that he lit from different angles. Strange and beautiful optical shapes and effects emerged, some such as this one, appearing like something out of a sci-fi flick.

“What excited him most was the potential to visually and aesthetically explore the phenomenon of light,” Bullock-Wilson said, “not as an illuminant, but as a universal force in its own right.”



“Sea Palms,” 1968

This photo's title, like the image itself, is an act of deception. What at first glance may seem to be mature palms punctuating a fog-filled, rocky gorge are in fact kelp plants clinging to tidal rocks as waves wash over them.

Bullock achieved this disorienting twist of perspective and scale by experimenting with intermittent, lengthy exposures.

“We think of photography as a slice of time,” Abbott said. “This is actually *slices* of time in a single image.”

It graces the cover of the 208-page hardcover exhibition catalog (University of Texas Press, \$65).



“Rock,” 1971

Late in his career, Bullock developed an interest in finding faces in inanimate objects, including in this rock submerged in water. On one eye-catching wall in the exhibit, Abbott has grouped these intriguing images - some haunting, the next cartoony - which had not been given much attention or been much published prior to the “Revelations” exhibit and book. “I think they're really wonderful,” Abbott said.

EXHIBIT PREVIEW

“Wynn Bullock: Revelations”

Opens June 14, runs through Jan. 18. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays (until 9 p.m. Fridays), noon-5 p.m. Sundays. \$19.50; \$16.50, 65 and over and students; \$12, ages 6-17; free, 5 and younger. High Museum of Art, 1280 Peachtree St. NE, Atlanta. 404-733-4200, www.high.org.

California College of the Arts professor and photographer Chris Johnson will speak about Bullock's work at 7 p.m. June 19 in Hill Auditorium. Free, but RSVP suggested: 404-733-5000, www.high.org.

BULLOCK ON NATURE

“Whenever I have found myself stuck in the ways I relate to things, I return to nature. It is my principal teacher, and I try to open my whole being to what it has to say. I don't want to tell a tree or weed what it is. I want it to tell me something and through me express its meaning in nature.”