

variations on the photographic arts

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A. D. Coleman
**A Form of Joy:
Photographs of
Wynn Bullock**

David Vestal
**Insights in
Photo History**

Lloyd Chambers
**Fast Lenses/
Selective Focus**

Wendy Erickson
Kelly Wunderle
**On the Surface:
Alternative Papers**

Assembling a Fantasy
Maggie Taylor

CRAIG BARBER
A Visual Diary
through a Pinhole

JOHN BONATH
Intelligent Collage

DOUGLAS CAPRON
Visions in Ice

MICHAEL POLIZA
Photographing the Wild



Child in Forest, 1951

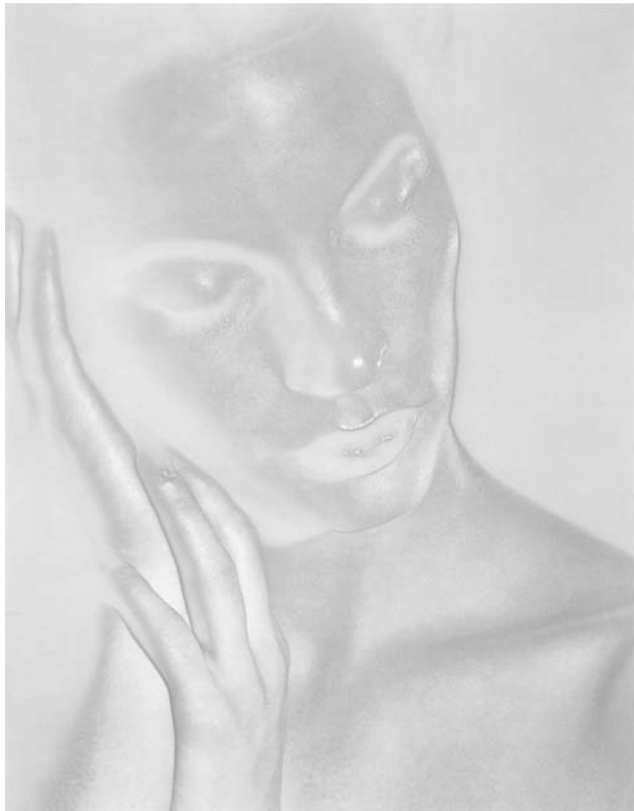
A Form of Joy:

The Photographs of Wynn Bullock

A. D. Coleman

In Wynn Bullock we have the curious case of a recognized American master photographer whose work is included in over 90 major museum collections around the world, who received substantial critical acclaim during his lifetime, who published numerous books, whose name appears in all the standard histories—and who has slipped, at least temporarily, into obscurity. The time is surely ripe to rediscover and reconsider him.

Born in Chicago, Illinois on April 18, 1902, Bullock grew up in California, where his family had moved during his childhood. He came to photography a mature adult, after a successful career as a concert singer that brought him success on Broadway and the opportunity to pursue musical studies in Paris. During the course of his time in Paris in the late 1920s, he found himself inspired by the work of



Solarized Head, 1940

the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, especially the painter Paul Cézanne, as well as by the work of the Hungarian artist/photographer László Moholy-Nagy and the American artist/photographer Man Ray. This stimulated him to buy the first of several cameras and begin to photograph avocationally.

Bullock continued his musical studies and hobbyist photography in Milan, Italy, and Berlin, Germany in 1930. Returning to the U.S. from Europe in 1931 to manage his wife's family business matters in West Virginia during the Great Depression, he studied law for a short period. During that time, the realization that, as a vocalist, he would never be more than an interpreter of the music of others led Bullock to decide to give up his singing career. He relocated to California in 1937, entering law school once again—but only briefly. Instead, he elected to focus on a career as a photographer.

Attending the Los Angeles Art Center School, Bullock studied under Edward Kaminski, an important photo-educator who influenced several generations of photographers and with whom he developed a close relationship. Kaminski's teaching emphasized process experimentation of all kinds. (Todd Walker studied with Kaminski from 1939-41. Lee Friedlander was another of Kaminski's students, from 1953-55.) Bullock graduated

in 1940; he recalled subsequently that his first exhibition, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1941, consisted entirely of "the work that had been rejected by the [Art Center] school, except Kaminski...It was all solarization and experimental work."

In 1940 he also studied with Alfred Korzybski, the founder of the discipline known as general semantics, whose ideas on the relationship between language, thought and perception—including visual perception—greatly affected Bullock's evolving philosophy. "At forty-two I decided to become a photographer because it offered a means of creative thought and action," he would later say. "I didn't rationalize this, I just felt it intuitively and followed my intuition, which I have never regretted."

Bullock founded Arrow Photo, a photography supply and finishing business in Santa Maria, California which he owned from 1943 until 1952. In 1946, he obtained the photo concession at Fort Ord, a military base, and moved to the Monterey Peninsula, where he continued to earn a living as a commercial photographer until 1967. He also pursued his own goals as a creative photographer, experimenting continually. (For his technical innovations in photography, he was awarded patents in the U.S., Canada and Great Britain.) In 1948 he met Edward Weston, who along with Ansel Adams had spearheaded the Group f/64 and pioneered modernist "straight" or "pure" photography in the U.S. starting in the 1930s. This friendship lasted until Weston's death in 1958 and deeply influenced Bullock's work as a photographer.

To those who know Weston's work and compare it to Bullock's, this may seem a peculiar sense of kinship; their differences were at least as notable as what they shared. They had in common a reverence for the natural world, and a belief that it would reveal its complexities and mysterious order to the patient observer (including the observer with a camera). They had no interest in scientific description; they sought to register the spirit of their subjects on film. As Bullock put it, "I didn't want to tell the tree or weed what it was. I wanted it to tell me something and through me express its meaning in nature."

They also believed that photographic film and paper could serve as effective vehicles with which to discover and communicate to others the secrets of the visual world, a conviction they centered around the large-format 8x10-inch camera, black & white sheet film, and the interpretive gelatin-silver print made from that film. By the time Bullock began his work in photography this

*Color Light Abstraction 2029, 1960**Nude Photogram, 1970*

set of ideas about the medium had become a powerful paradigm. Some practitioners used smaller cameras, a few used larger ones, but at mid-century in post-World War II America this belief system had become widespread among photographers. Bullock brought to this conception of photography as a tonal art form the eye and ear of a trained and gifted former musician.

Where Weston and Bullock diverged was in the range of latitude they allowed themselves for exploration within those parameters. Weston, like Adams and most of the Group f/64 “purists,” rejected all experimental darkroom procedures for film development and subsequent print-making; for them, even such purely photographic techniques as photomontage and solarization were anathema. This was the American version of modernist photography, with strict rules regarding photographic practice.

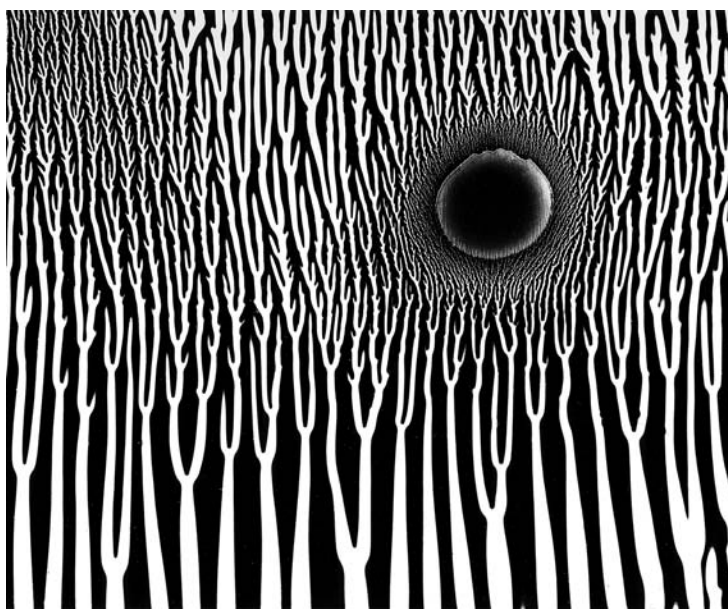
Bullock, by contrast, had absorbed from Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray (and perhaps from his mentor Kaminski) a more open-ended, European version of photographic modernism. One might consider Bullock a West Coast counterpart to Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925-1972), the Lexington, Kentucky-based optician. A generation younger than Bullock, Meatyard died prematurely, but his productive years are almost coterminous with Bullock’s, his range of intellectual interests as wide (and overlapping), his explorations of the medium’s possibilities as diverse.

Like Meatyard, Bullock felt no inhibitions about investigating photography’s inherent capacities. He accepted

photomontage, solarization, the photogram, light drawing, the negative print, the blur resulting from long time exposure and even the creation of a synthetic negative for the production of prints as legitimate methods, seeing each as part of the medium’s inherent and distinctive assortment of tools, materials and processes. His ability to reconcile both these approaches to photographic praxis, the European and American versions of modernism, has few parallels in the field. The consequent breadth of his investigation of the medium makes him one of the most experimental photographers working in the U.S. in his time.

And though Weston and Adams would try their hands at color photography before abandoning it, Bullock would pursue it energetically in a series of color abstractions that only now, more than three decades after his death, have begun to make their presence known. For these color works Bullock constructed small assemblages of colored glass objects in his studio, illuminating them in different ways and then photographing not the objects themselves (with few exceptions) but the colored light effects they generated. He also changed instruments for this project, choosing to register the images with a 35mm, tripod-mounted Exakta camera loaded with Kodachrome color slide film, which yields a direct color transparency.

Bullock made few prints from his transparencies, finding the papers then available for color printing unsatisfactory. (The limited-edition digital prints made from his transparencies and issued recently by his estate are the first versions of these works to become widely available).



Photogram, 1970

Perhaps due to his disappointment in the available means for printing color works, Bullock envisioned and experimented with the possibility of projecting them, potentially with musical accompaniment. He never fully materialized such a presentation.

Bullock concentrated on this investigation of color to the exclusion of virtually all else from 1960-64, then returned to working in black & white. In the late 1960s he changed instruments once again, taking up the recently introduced Rollei SL66 2-1/4 single-lens reflex, which gave him the ability to hand-hold his camera while providing a large enough negative to satisfy his demands as a printmaker.

His ceaseless experimentation notwithstanding, the work of Bullock's that first brought him to wide attention from the general public built on the newly established model of the Group f/64. When visitors entered the monumental exhibition curated by Edward Steichen for the Museum of Modern Art, "The Family of Man," which opened in New York in January of 1955 before starting its world tour, the first two images that greeted them were by Wynn Bullock: "Let There Be Light" from 1954 and "Child in Forest," made in 1951. Produced in multiple copies, the show traveled internationally, touring for seven years in multiple sets throughout 38 countries. An estimated nine million people attended those various showings, well into the 1960s.

Those two Bullock images became the first two images in the accompanying catalogue, undoubtedly the most widely distributed and best-loved book in the history

of photography. This did not bring him wealth, but it established his reputation as a photographer on a par with Weston and Adams, ensuring a level of recognition that made it possible for him to exhibit, publish, teach, write and offer public lectures about his work and his complex theories of photography. ("Let There Be Light" was voted the most outstanding image in the entire exhibition by the 65,000 visitors to its presentation at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC in 1956.)

Unquestionably, Bullock achieved his goal of forging a distinctive body of germinal work in the medium to which he had devoted the second half of his life. His influence on the field has proved profound, and enduring. Ansel Adams said of him, "His eye has sharpened mine. His sympathies and empathies with the world have strengthened mine. Because of Wynn Bullock's work, I understand more of photography, more of art, and more of the human spirit," Jerry Uelsmann wrote, "Wynn Bullock is a uniquely gifted man whose personal photographic search has produced images that expand not only the possibilities of photography, but of life itself."

Illness made it impossible for Bullock to photograph or print during his last two years. Instead, between 1973 and 1975 he spent his time reading deeply in philosophy—Korzybski, Hegel, Lao Tzu—and probing in new writings his understandings of the creative process itself and the concepts of space, time and event as they related to photography. Through his photographic researches, his study of Eastern and Western Philosophy, and his own meditative practice he had come to inhabit what anthropologists call an animate universe—a cosmos in which everything is alive. "My thinking," he declared, "has been deeply affected by the belief that all things are some form of radiant energy. Light is perhaps the most profound truth in the universe." Photography, which takes light as its raw material, had evolved for him into a doorway opening onto the universal mysteries.

Wynn Bullock died of cancer on November 16, 1975, in the midst of that decade's "photo boom." His work has not benefitted notably from the heightened status of photography as a creative medium in the subsequent decades—no full-scale retrospective, no substantial critical reconsideration. Yet attention seems, at long last, to have begun to return to this germinal figure, thanks in no small part to the determined efforts of his daughter, Barbara Bullock-Wilson, and her husband Gene. (Barbara is the child in Bullock's iconic "Child in Forest.")

In the spring of 2010, the first showing of Bullock's "color light abstractions" took place, at the Center for



Photogram, Self-Portrait, 1973

Photographic Art in Carmel, CA—a show that has since traveled to the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, AZ, and will make other stops as well. Even more significantly, the University of California, Santa Cruz simultaneously announced an initiative “to preserve and share the Bullock Family Photography Archive as a core part of the UCSC University Library Special Collections and Archives.” The goal: to raise \$3 million to enhance the UCSC Library’s Photography Collection, the bulk of it earmarked for the acquisition of 450 vintage B&W prints by Bullock, 500 prints by his wife Edna (who began photographing only after his death, and had a substantial 20-year career of her own), and their daughter Barbara Bullock-Wilson’s extensive research files on her parents’ work, plus papers, memorabilia and other invaluable material.

“Creativity is an ode to life,” Bullock wrote toward the end of his life. “It is not a form of entertainment. It is a

form of joy.” Perhaps the time is ripe at last to take the full measure of the distillations of his joy that he left behind.

Note: For information regarding the University of California, Santa Cruz archive initiative, contact Astrid von Soosten, Director of Library Development, phone: (831) 459-5870, e-mail: avs@ucsc.edu.)

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A. D. Coleman has published 8 books and more than 2000 essays on photography and related subjects. His work has been translated into 21 languages and published in 31 countries. Coleman’s widely read blog “Photocritic International” appears at photocritic.com. Since 2005, exhibitions that he has curated have opened at museums and galleries in Canada, China, Finland, Italy, Rumania, Slovakia and the U.S. In 2010 he received the J Dudley Johnston Award from the Royal Photographic Society (U.K.) for “sustained excellence in writing about photography.”

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