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In our current content-neutral age, art with inherent intellectual or aesthetic meaning risks being labeled trite or sentimental, and few contemporary artists are willing to subject themselves to ridicule in order to make something of substance.

REVIEW

Fortunately, writer/philosopher/artist Thomas Merton wasn't afraid to speak up for what he believed in, and the exhibition of his photographs currently on display at the Lubeznik Center for the Arts is an example of art so meaningful that it's almost dizzying.

A Trappist monk at an abbey in Kentucky, Merton wrote more than 70 books of essays, poetry and social criticism before his death in 1968; his most well-known work is his autobiography, "The Seven Storey Mountain." Merton also was a photographer, and the photographs at the Lubeznik address his fascination with Zen Buddhism, part of an interest in Eastern religions that the Catholic monk developed late in his life.

On a philosophical level, the photographs speak to Merton's interpretation of Zen, and the curators of the exhibition have paired each photograph with a relevant excerpt from Merton's writings. All of the subject matter — man-made objects, buildings, landscapes, natural forms — there-



The Merton photography exhibition at the Lubeznik also includes this portrait of the photographer, writer, philosopher and Trappist monk.

fore takes on significance beyond their obvious contents.

The richness of Merton's photographs, however, lies in their layering of meaning, and the pictures have much more to offer than a literal or textual explanation. There is the prevalence of transition in the photos: Often the viewer peers out from a darkened interior that constitutes the inscrutable foreground of the picture into a bright, beckoning vista. Dim, shadowy barns open, via doors

and windows, onto brilliant meadows and fields, and in "Wooded Glade," the viewer stands in a murky forest, looking through an opening into a sunlit clearing.

The photographs are at once simple and delightfully well-considered in their composition. In the more natural pictures, a repetition of elements — rocks, trees, roots, sky — creates patterns and textures, but it is in the man-made compositions that everything

On exhibit

"A Hidden Wholeness: Photography by Thomas Merton" continues through Feb. 26 at the Lubeznik Center for the Arts, 101 Avenue of the Arts (101 W. Second St.), Michigan City. Hours are from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. CST Tuesday through Friday and 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. For more information, call (219) 874-4900.

clicks. Juxtapositions of simple shapes and lines, of light and shadow, are in asymmetrical balance, and the most stripped-down compositions are the strongest.

In "Window in Side of Barn" (the photographs' titles are their most obvious attributes), a small rectangular window sits in the middle of the frame, surrounded by an expanse of corrugated metal siding. The picture is all lines: the vertical corrugation, a horizontal seam in the siding, the sides of the rectangle.

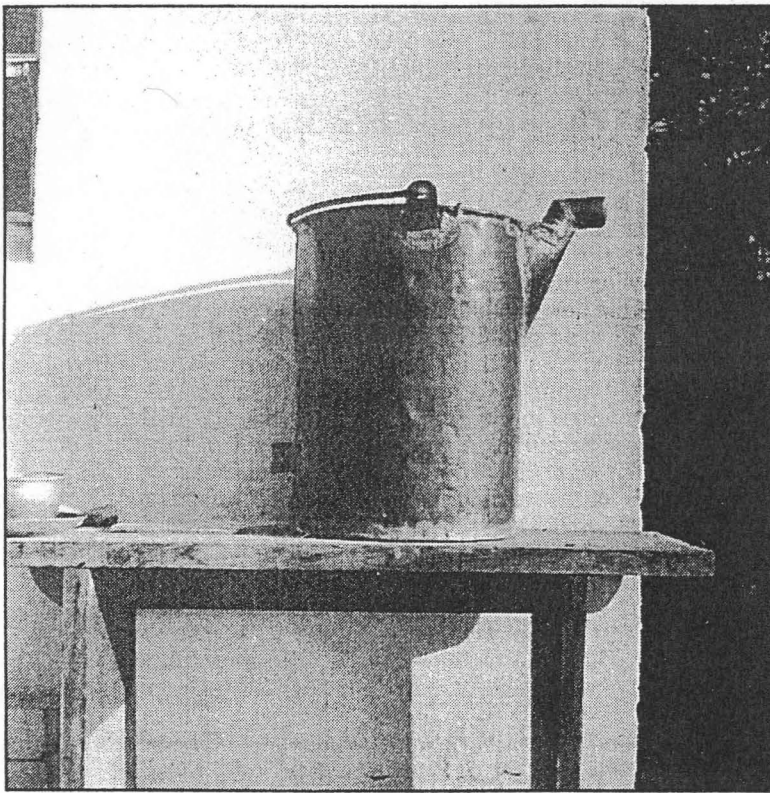
"Watering Can at Hermitage" is more complex; if one were to draw a diagram of the photo, which shows a watering can sitting on a table next to a wall, one would discover a drawing much like the rectilinear compositions of the painter Piet Mondrian.

Merton's goal for the photographs was one of spiritual and intellectual transcendence, but they function on an aesthetic level so pure as to be visually transcendent as well. That's almost too much to expect from photographs and an achievement not often seen these days.

Art & Galleries

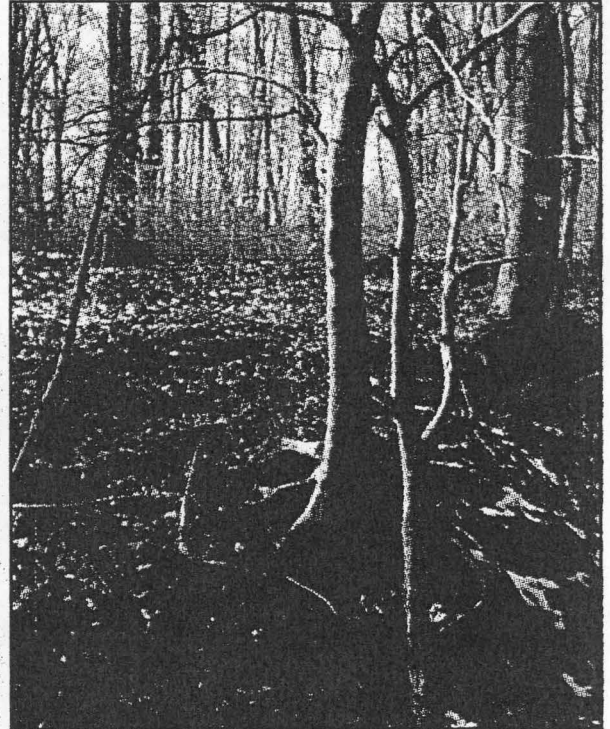
Sunday, January 29, 2006

Transcendent images

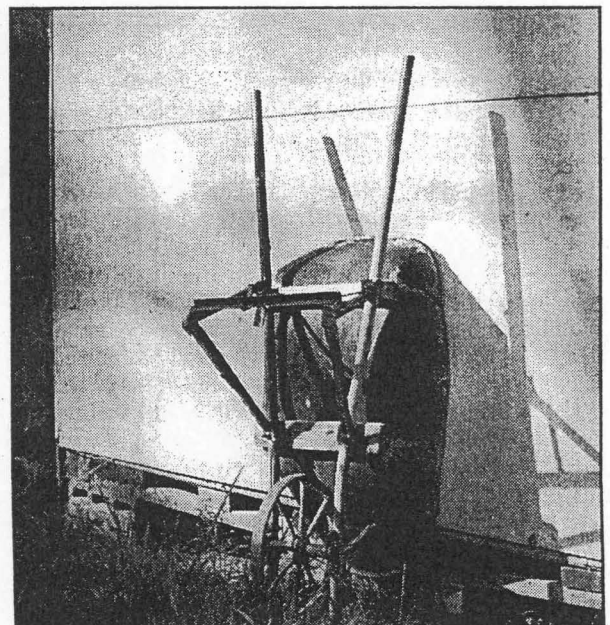


Tribune Photos/SHAYNA BRESLIN

"Watering Can at Hermitage" is featured in the exhibition "A Hidden Wholeness: The Zen Photography of Thomas Merton" through Feb. 26 at the Lubeznik Center for the Arts in Michigan City.



"Bare Woods" is one of the photographs in the Merton exhibition, which concentrates on the Trappist monk's interpretation of Zen. The curators of the exhibition have paired each photograph with a relevant excerpt from Merton's writings.



"Wheel Barrow at Hermitage" is featured in "A Hidden Wholeness: The Zen Photography of Thomas Merton."

Merton photography
'almost dizzying'
on aesthetic and
intellectual levels

MICHIGAN CITY — Baskets, wheelbarrows, blossoming branches, barn doors and windows, roots, watering cans, wooded glades, shadows, silhouettes, and bark — Thomas Merton captured all these images on film. Many of those images from the celebrated spiritual author are now on display in Northwest Indiana.

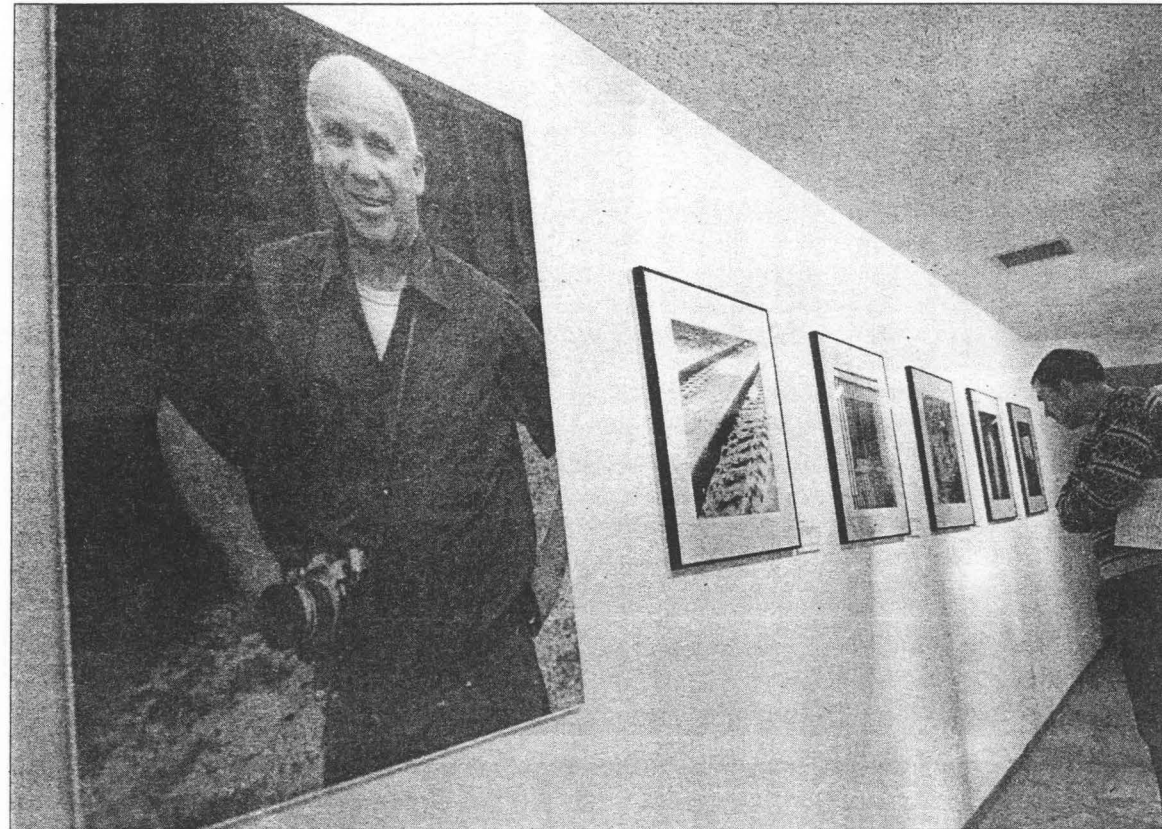
Merton, who spent 27 years as a Trappist monk of the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Ky., became known worldwide for his writings and his reflections on contemplation and social justice. Despite following a monastic life, he amassed writings numbering more than 60 volumes.

Thirty-five samples of his black and white photography are currently on display at the Lubeznik Center for the Arts.

Whether it was his photography, poetry, journals, or other writings, Merton “spent most of his life commenting” about “life itself in all its power,” said Benedictine Sister Suzanne Zuercher, a psychologist and author who has written on Merton.

For Merton, she added, “Life is not a finished product...life is always going on.”

On Dec. 10 — the anniversaries of Merton’s entrance into monastic life (1941) and also of his accidental death (1968) — the art gallery hosted “Celebrate Merton” celebrations. The Saturday afternoon program included the opening



Dennis Richardson from LaPorte looks over the photographs of spiritual writer Thomas Merton during the opening exhibit of his works at the Lubeznik Center for the Arts in Michigan City on Dec. 10. (Karen Callaway photo)

of the exhibit, a film biography on Merton, and commentary from people touched by Merton and/or the monastic life.

“To appreciate Thomas Merton, you have to understand the classic model of the monk,” said Benedictine Father Keith McClellan, administrator at Notre Dame Parish. He explained that the classic monk’s life was one of penance — a vocation of public prayer, for and with the Church, aimed at crushing the ego. There was no “self” in the classic model of the monk, Father McClellan said. Merton,

he added, confronted some of these monastic issues.

Merton, Father McClellan said, challenged the concept of monastic vs. Trappist, a life of piety, silence, and no academics. He also challenged self-actualization vs. self-denial, as well as living in a community vs. being a hermit.

According to Father McClellan, Merton also raised the issue of engagement with the world or flight from the world.

“He answered these questions,” Father McClellan said. “There is no peace in the world unless we deal with that

inner life.”

The priest also noted Merton’s belief in dialogue on ecumenism and interracial matters — “the importance of full human development...to be fully human. God calls you every moment of your life, not just once.”

Merton spoke out against racial injustice and the nuclear arms race, while he promoted contemplation and non-violent civil rights. He is also well read by Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Deacon Mark Plaiss attributed Merton’s widespread popularity to his ability to “talk

about [God and church] without coming across as a holier-than-thou guy. He’s a regular guy.” Plaiss, the head librarian at the Northern Indiana Educational Foundation, noted that Merton and *Chronicles of Narnia* author C.S. Lewis “speak the same language.”

Known as a poet and writer, Merton was also a skilled calligrapher, pen and ink painter, and photographer. His influences included Islam and Zen Buddhism.

The photography on display at the Lubeznik Center is either of nature or still life. Beside each photo is a brief comment by Merton.

Sister Suzanne Zuercher, who first read Merton during her novitiate, noted that as Merton was struggling with the mystery of life, “in his stories we find our stories. He comments on life in a way that touches us all.”

She added that Merton’s art was the “path by which he saw his limitations. He photographed whatever crossed his path. His contemplative view of reality was things as they are. [His photographs] spoke eloquently to him of his creation. They follow God’s plan.”

If You Go

“A Hidden Wholeness: The Zen Photography of Thomas Merton,” is on display through Feb. 26 at the Lubeznik Center for the Arts, 101 Avenue of the Arts (W. Second Street), Michigan City.

For hours, call 874-4900 or visit www.lubeznikcenter.org.