

By **EVAN GILLESPIE**
Tribune Correspondent

MICHIGAN CITY

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.

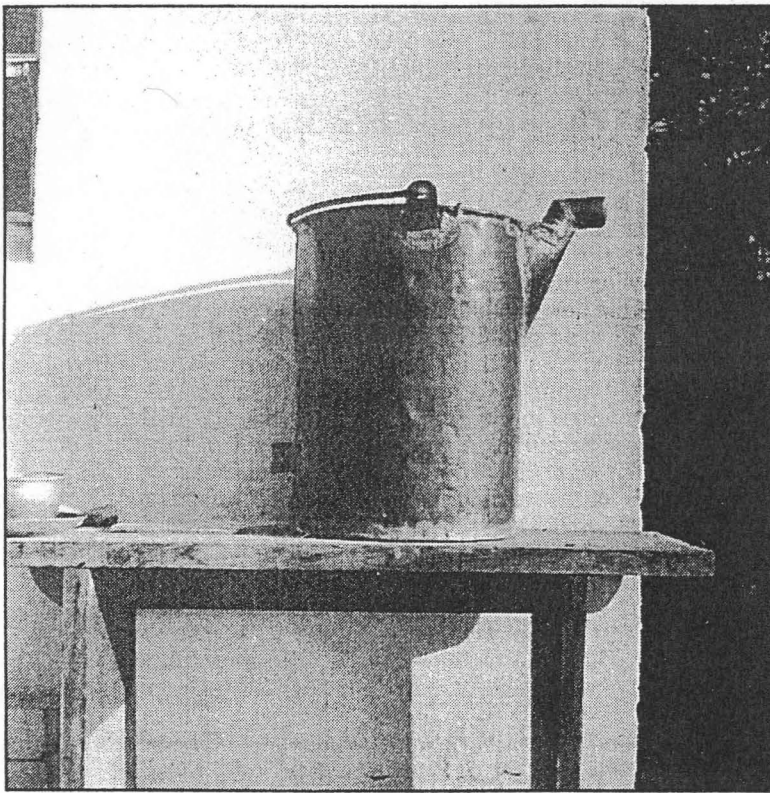
"Watering Can at Hermitage" is more complex; if one were to draw a diagram of the photo, which shows a watering can sitting on a table next to a wall, one would discover a drawing much like the rectilinear compositions of the painter Piet Mondrian.

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

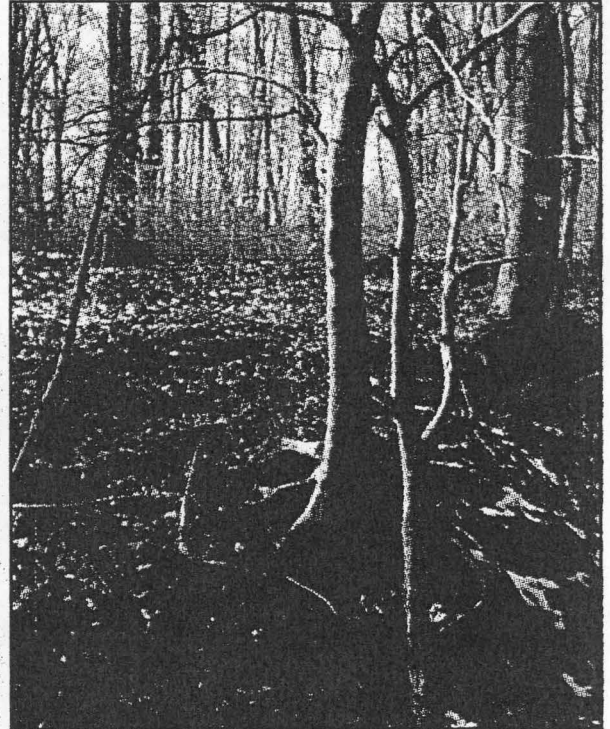
Sunday, January 29, 2006

Transcendent images

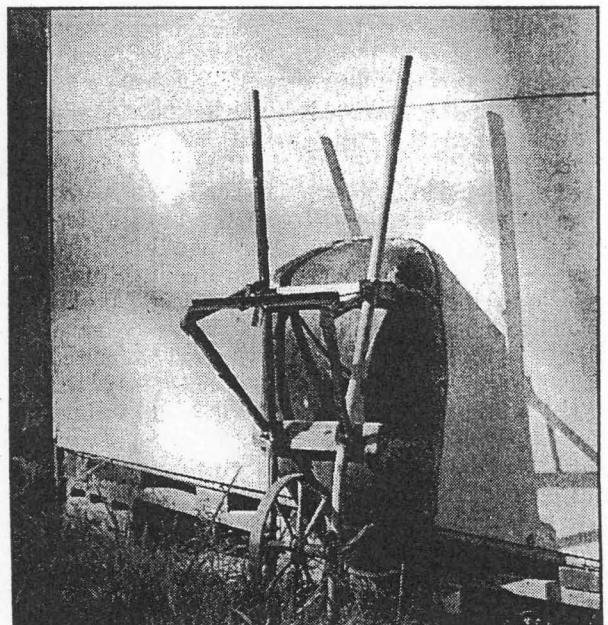


Tribune Photos/SHAYNA BRESLIN

"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
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