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Ralph Eugene Meatyard

Gitterman Gallery 170 E. 75th St. Through Nov. 19

A koan is a Zen riddle, the answer to which—if, in fact, there is an answer—is largely immaterial. Its function is to sharpen perception, the adept's awareness of his environment, its particularities and what they portend. Ralph Eugene Meatyard's photographs are visual koans. An optician in Lexington, Ky., Mr. Meatyard (1925-1972) read widely, including philosophy and especially Zen. His friendships with Wendell Berry, Guy Davenport, Thomas Merton and Jonathan Williams, particularly sophisticated writers in the Lexington area, and his encounters with Minor White, Aaron Siskind and Henry Holmes Smith, prominent photographers of the time, were also formative. And he seems to have had an intuitive feeling for the uncanny.

About half of the 29 small-format black-and-white prints at Gitterman are pictures of Mr. Meatyard's sons, but the boys are posed in abandoned houses, barns and factories. They are frequently hidden in the shadows, and what they are doing there is unclear. If more than one child is in an image, the relationships between them are ambiguous. In one picture a young boy neatly dressed in short pants sits in a decaying building wearing an adult rubber mask and playing with a small naked doll. Like the masks used in Japanese theater, this one makes its wearer a fictive character, but no less real for that. The pictures of nature reference Zen drawings with selective focus and the moon, and a shot of a field of wildflowers is lovely in its straightforward simplicity.

—William Meyers