

# GITTERMANGALLERY

## Ralph Eugene Meatyard

September 8 - October 28, 2023

Gitterman Gallery is proud to present an exhibition of vintage black and white photographs by Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925–1972). The exhibition will open on Friday, September 8th and continue through Saturday, October 28th.

This exhibition brings together a selection of rare figurative works, most of which include masks, one of the artist's most recognizable motifs. Masks have long associations to the surreal and the macabre but Meatyard also employed them to obscure the identities of his subjects. This approach elevated his images from the specific to the universal. Though an optician by trade, Meatyard was close with an important Kentucky literary circle and enjoyed friendships with writers Wendell Berry, Guy Davenport, Thomas Merton and Jonathan Williams. Intuitively, Meatyard understood the importance of narrative in images and, perhaps even more importantly, he understood how ambiguity in images opened up possibilities to engage the viewer. The exhibition features three sequences of images from 1968-69. Each of the sequences bears a nonsensical title, once again offering the viewer a chance to employ their own imagination to determine the meaning of each work.

Meatyard's experience as an optician gave him knowledge about lenses and vision that informed his work as a photographer, as did his interest in philosophy, especially Zen. Spirituality underlies his often haunting and complex imagery.

Meatyard was born in Normal, Illinois in 1925. After a brief stint in the navy following high school, he received his optometry license through the G.I. Bill and then joined an optical firm in Lexington, Kentucky, which happened to also sell camera equipment. It was there that Meatyard bought his first camera in 1950 in order to photograph his newborn son. In 1954 Meatyard joined the Lexington Camera Club, where he met the photographer (and later to be curator) Van Deren Coke. Coke encouraged Meatyard to use photography as a means of deeper personal expression. Meatyard also attended workshops and connected with renowned photographers of the time, including Minor White, Aaron Siskind and Henry Holmes Smith. When he opened his own optical shop Eyeglasses of Kentucky in 1967, he covered his walls with up-and-coming photographers' work.

Tragically, Meatyard died from cancer in 1972 at the age of 46.