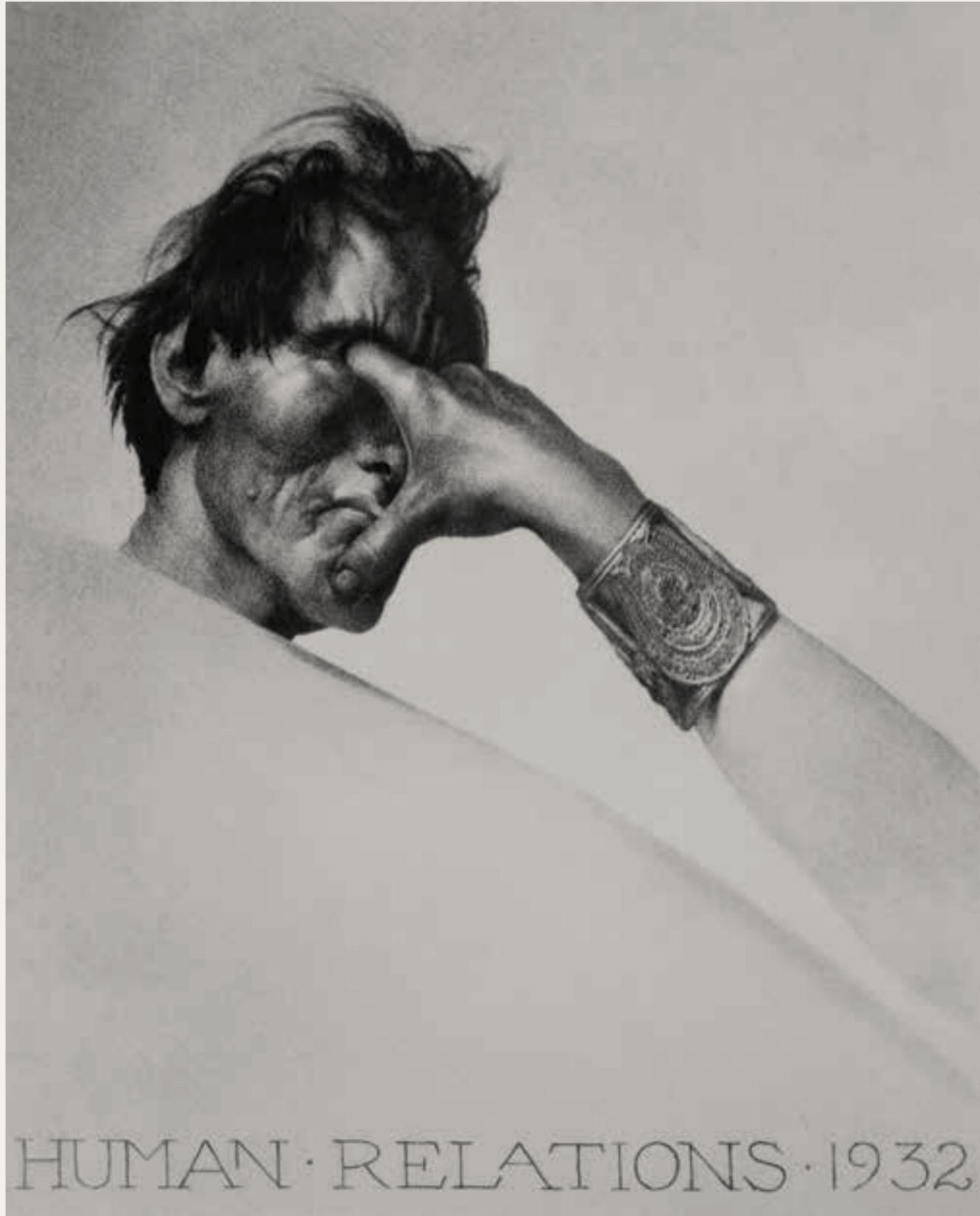


AMERICAN
GROTESQUE



AMERICAN GROTESQUE

THE LIFE AND ART OF WILLIAM MORTENSEN

EDITED BY
Larry Lytle AND Michael Moynihan

INTRODUCTION BY
Michael Moynihan

ESSAYS BY
Larry Lytle, William Mortensen AND A. D. Coleman



FERAL HOUSE
2014



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Tantric Sorcerer

Silver gelatin print, Abrasion-Tone Process, Metal-Chrome
George Dunham model; n.d., circa 1932
(CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY)

HERALD OF THE AMERICAN GROTESQUE

MICHAEL MOYNIHAN

No matter how hard we may wish to avert seeing it, the grotesque lurks nearby to impress our gaze, distress our state of mind and scratch away at sterile surfaces to reveal the horror that lies beneath.

It requires honesty to acknowledge that the grotesque invades each of our lives, and that the best way to handle it is to come to grips with its essential power. Perhaps we should simply admit that the grotesque *intoxicates*—both attracting and repelling all at once.

The task of interpreting the grotesque usually falls to artists: writers, singers, painters, printmakers and, in increasing prominence over the last hundred years, photographers and filmmakers. It should come as no surprise that the word “grotesque” has its origins in reference to visual art. In the late fifteenth century, on the Esquiline Hill of Rome, the remnants of a magnificent building complex were accidentally discovered when a bit of the ground above it gave way. The ornamented, cave-like space was called a *grotta* or grotto, and the fanciful depictions of hybrid human, animal and vegetal forms that decorated its walls and ceilings were labeled *grottesca*, or “grottoesque,” by the Renaissance Italians. These rooms were the vestiges of the *Domus Aurea*, Emperor Nero’s Golden House, a pleasure palace that had been condemned and buried with embarrassment by the emperors who succeeded him. It is fitting that the grotesque was first



Renaissance “grotesque” decoration,
Palazzo Assessorile of Cles, Trento, Italy.
Photograph by Resettimapiu.



ABOVE LEFT: Hieronymus Bosch, Christ Carrying the Cross, oil on wooden panel, ca. 1515.



ABOVE RIGHT: Albrecht Dürer, Cain Kills Abel, woodcut, 1511.

glimpsed in a sunken chamber lost to sunlight, and originally built by a suicidal tyrant famed for his excess and cruelty.

Renaissance painters soon began imitating the ancient art form they spied by torchlight on those underground walls, and a genre was reborn. The parameters of what was labeled “grotesque” slowly widened, and over time they darkened too: the word came to encompass all manner of disturbing, distorted and diabolical images, as it still does.

Many of the greatest European painters have incorporated the grotesque in their work: Bosch, Dürer, Breughel, Goya and countless other artists. Major art movements—Romanticism, Symbolism, Expressionism and Surrealism—regularly explored both real and unreal aspects of the grotesque as well. Thus grotesque visions have multiplied over the centuries, and museums now abound with them.¹

Although America can claim a titan of grotesque literary expression in Edgar Allen Poe, American visual artists by and large avoided similar themes until well after the Second World War. There were exceptions to this rule, however, and they largely emerge from the magical medium of film: motion pictures and still photography.

Tod Browning (1880–1962) made dozens of films utilizing grotesque themes, and took the latter to a high art in *Freaks* (1932). Less well known are the photographers.² Francis Bruguière (1879–1945) created an array of expressionist and multiple-exposure experiments, many with deliberately perverse qualities. The work of Lejaren à Hiller (b. John Hiller; 1880–1969) centered on elaborately staged tableau

¹ A remarkable survey of grotesque themes in European art and literature over the last two millennia is Umberto Eco, ed., *On Ugliness*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Rizzoli, 2007).

² Larry Lytle deserves the credit for situating the following figures—Bruguière, Hiller and, most importantly, William Mortensen—as the first American visual artists to consistently work in the realm of the grotesque.



ABOVE LEFT: Pieter Breughel the Elder, The Fall of the Rebel Angels (detail), oil on wood, 1562.



ABOVE RIGHT: Francisco Goya, Buen viaje (Bon Voyage; Capricho no. 64), aquatint, 1797–1798.

scenes—some of which, such as his commissioned series on *Surgery through the Ages*, deftly combine frightful and erotic elements.³

The most dedicated early twentieth-century American visual pioneer of the grotesque is undoubtedly William Mortensen. During his early career in Hollywood in the 1920s and '30s, Mortensen began a systematic exploration of deliberately grotesque themes and visions that remains unparalleled. While Mortensen produced a body of work that ranges from professional portraits (he shot many of the great cinema stars of his day) and sundry character studies to sensuous nudes, the grotesque became a defining element of his most compelling work and therefore serves as the thematic cornerstone for this book.

American Grotesque consists of five distinct sections. The journey begins with Larry Lytle’s biographical essay, exploring every period of Mortensen’s photographic development as well as the various creative streams and controversies in which he immersed himself. This is followed by Mortensen’s most important manifesto, “Venus and Vulcan: An Essay on Creative Pictorialism,” in which he lays out his personal philosophy and approach to the creation of photographic art. In the next section, “A Glossary of Mortensen’s Methods,” Larry Lytle provides an overview of the various technical processes that Mortensen invented or improved, mastered and subsequently promoted and taught. The intricate and time-consuming nature of these techniques reveals the level of craftsmanship and obsessive energy that Mortensen invested in rendering his artistic visions.

³ More grotesque than any of his actual photographs is Hiller’s notorious advice regarding artistic techniques: “If a man wants to strangle his wife and throw her in the kitchen sink, let him do it any way he wants to. If he’s doing it awkwardly, or not the way I’d do it, all right—it’s a good job so long as he gets her into the sink, completely strangled.” See Barbara Green, “Lejaren à Hiller,” *The Camera*, vol. 65, February 1943, 20–24; here at 24.



ABOVE LEFT: Olga Baclanova in *Tod Browning's Freaks* (1932).



ABOVE RIGHT: A still from Francis Bruguière's film *The Way*, 1923–1925.

“A Mortensen Gallery of Grotesques” forms the main visual section of the book and comprises more than 100 photographs, many of which have never been published before. The gallery is divided into five thematic divisions—“Propaganda,” “The Occult,” “Character Portraits,” “Nudes” and “Beautiful Girls into Crones”—which offer an organizational structure and hint at the breadth of Mortensen’s outlook both within and beyond the concept of the grotesque.

The pictures collected under the rubric of “The Occult” are of particular interest, for they represent our attempt to reassemble the images Mortensen created for his planned “Pictorial History of Witchcraft and Demonology.” As he once explained:

A very fruitful field for grotesque art is afforded by the manifestations of witchcraft and demonology. Fear, secrecy, and converse with evil powers, were characteristic elements of this mysterious cult which is as old as man. These elements are of the very substance of the grotesque . . . but little has been done with it by photographers.⁴

Mortensen abandoned his Witchcraft project in the mid-1930s, but before doing so he had allegedly created well over 100 images. All of those that have surfaced are collected here.

In Mortensen’s mind, the grotesque had essential value for “the escape it provides from cramping realism.”⁵ His “ends-justify-the-means” philosophy regarding art (he was willing to use any and all techniques of photographic manipulation to obtain the picture he desired)—together with some of his kitschier works in the realm of nudes and sentimental character portraits—are what earned him the condescension of the f.64 Group, a rising faction of artist-photographers spearheaded by Ansel Adams. Their condescension soon turned to dismissal and even outright

⁴ *Monsters & Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft, 1936), commentary to *Preparation for the Sabbot*. The book is unpaginated.

⁵ *Monsters & Madonnas*, commentary to *The Pit and the Pendulum*.



ABOVE LEFT: *Lejaren à Hiller*, Etienne Gourmelen, *Plague & Prejudice*, from *Surgery through the Ages* (published 1944; images ca. 1920s to 1930s).



ABOVE RIGHT: *Lejaren à Hiller*, Gabriele Ferrara, *Monk Surgeon*, from *Surgery through the Ages*.

hatred. The new reigning gods had found their anti-Christ, whom they consigned to oblivion at the first opportunity. Some of that saga is told in the final section of *American Grotesque*, where we reprint A. D. Coleman’s classic essay “Conspicuous By His Absence: Concerning the Strange Disappearance of William Mortensen.” Here Coleman lays out the process by which Mortensen and his work were deliberately deep-sixed by the new gatekeepers of art photography. Coleman’s writings on this topic, and his inclusion of Mortensen in his seminal 1977 volume on *The Grotesque in Photography*,⁶ represent the initial volleys in the battle to give the artist his proper due.⁷

In his 1934 collection entitled *Monsters & Madonnas*, William Mortensen declared: “Those who turn away from the grotesque are losing the richness and completeness of artistic experience.”⁸ The present volume aims to replenish that lost richness straight from the source, at the same time as it provides a long-overdue retrospective of this unsung herald of the American grotesque. †

⁶ A. D. Coleman, *The Grotesque in Photography* (New York: Summit/Ridge Press, 1977). The book rightly bills itself as “A first collection of photographers whose fantastic visions of life are as revolutionary as those of the Impressionists.”

⁷ Outside the circles of art and photography, however, Mortensen’s work *had* been exerting some unexpected supernatural influences at the same time he was disappearing from public view. For more on this reception, see my essay “Infernal Impact: *The Command to Look* as a Formula for Satanic Success” in the new Feral House edition of William Mortensen, *The Command to Look: A Master Photographer’s Method for Controlling the Human Gaze*.

⁸ *Monsters & Madonnas*, commentary to *Preparation for the Sabbot*.



Woman of Languedoc
Slightly off-register two-color pigment print, circa 1935.
RALPH HOSENPUD COLLECTION

A GLOSSARY OF MORTENSEN'S METHODS

LARRY LYTLE

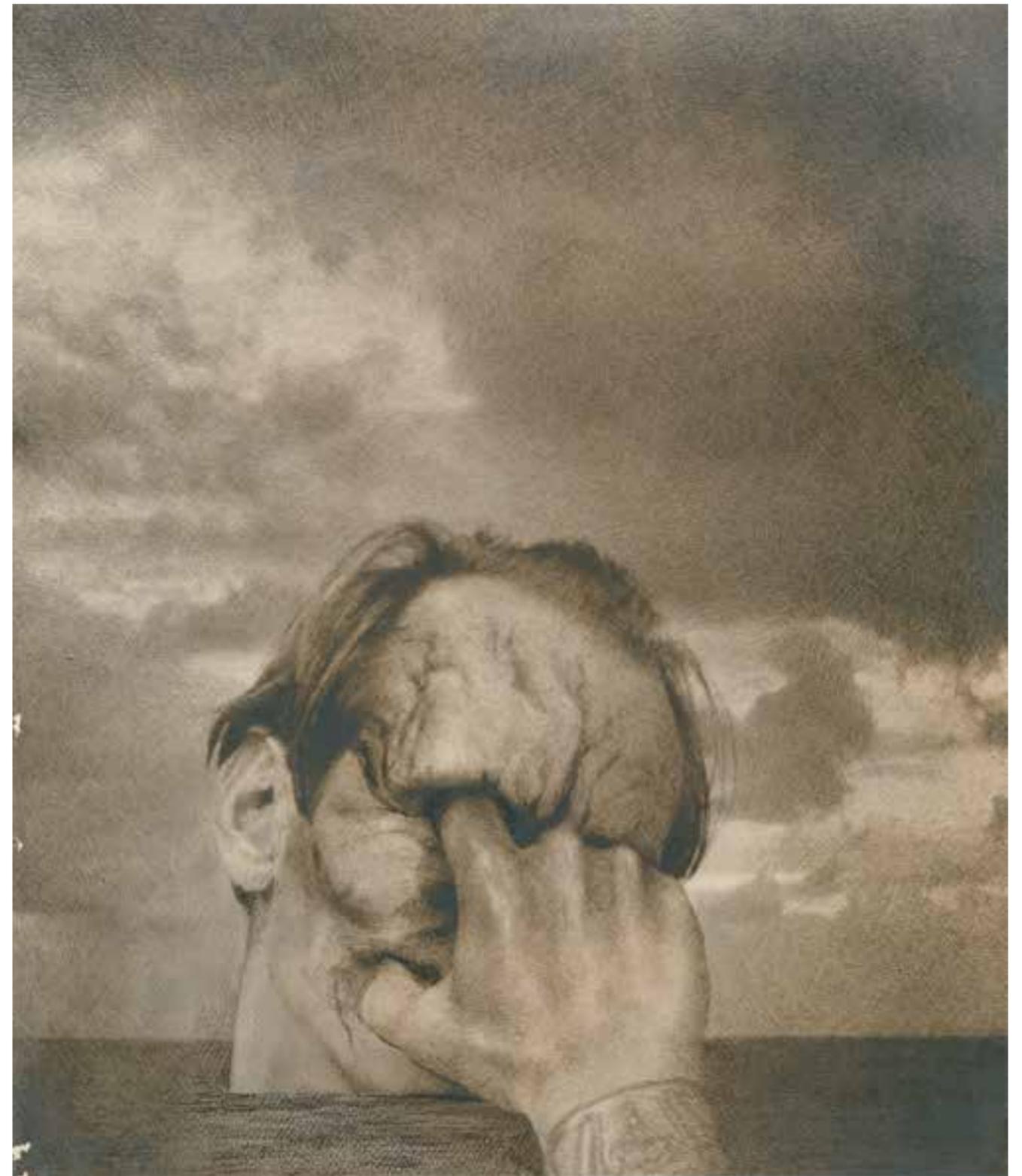
William Mortensen's images are more than mere photographs. He believed that the "end justified the means" and what an image communicated was ultimately far more important than any processes used in its making. That being said, the look of a Mortensen photograph was the result of a series of carefully crafted constructs and interventions. The modifications took place at every phase of a picture's creation: during the photo shoot; in the development of the negative; as part of the process involved in making the print; and on the surface of the final print itself. Mortensen utilized photography as his main image-creating tool but he also used drawing, etching and painting to complete the finished picture. These techniques were ingeniously combined to make a photographic print that was in some ways akin to a material-based trompe l'oeil. However, his overall method often put him in the disadvantageous position of having to defend his work as photographic. The fact that Mortensen utilized such a wide array of processes to produce his photographs also likely explains why he typically referred to them as "pictures."

Mortensen's use of drawing was done in the traditional manner and applied as part of the paper-negative process. The etching was a hybrid version done directly on the surface of the print via the Abrasion-Tone process. He took what was a common method for retouching prints and negatives—scraping away the surface to eliminate unwanted detail—and refined it using the tip of a razor blade, which he wielded much like an etching needle. The use of painting occurred in conjunction with his Metal-Chrome process, which necessitated coloring in areas of the print with toner and dye. A finished print could demand some or all of these processes in concert. The completed photograph might take the form of a silver print, a bromoil print or transfer, or a pigment print. These were all processes that Mortensen was familiar with and felt comfortable using.

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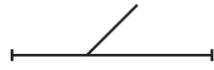
PROPAGANDA

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+
M



Untitled (Human Relations study 1)
Toned silver gelatin print, Abrasion-Tone process, Texture Screen
George Dunham model; n.d., circa 1932
CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY, THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

W



THE OCCULT

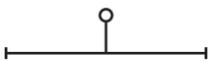


M



Untitled (staked witch scene)
Silver gelatin print, montaged effect
5 Unidentified models, Myrdith Monaghan
hugging the post; n.d., circa 1927
HEREWARD CARRINGTON ESTATE

W



CHARACTER
PORTRAITS



M



Untitled (Wescosco)
Print of unknown type or process
Possibly Fay Wray and Quenton Bredt models;
n.d., circa 1924
QUENTON BREDT COLLECTION

W



NUDES



M



Vanities (also titled Mutual Admiration)

Bromide print

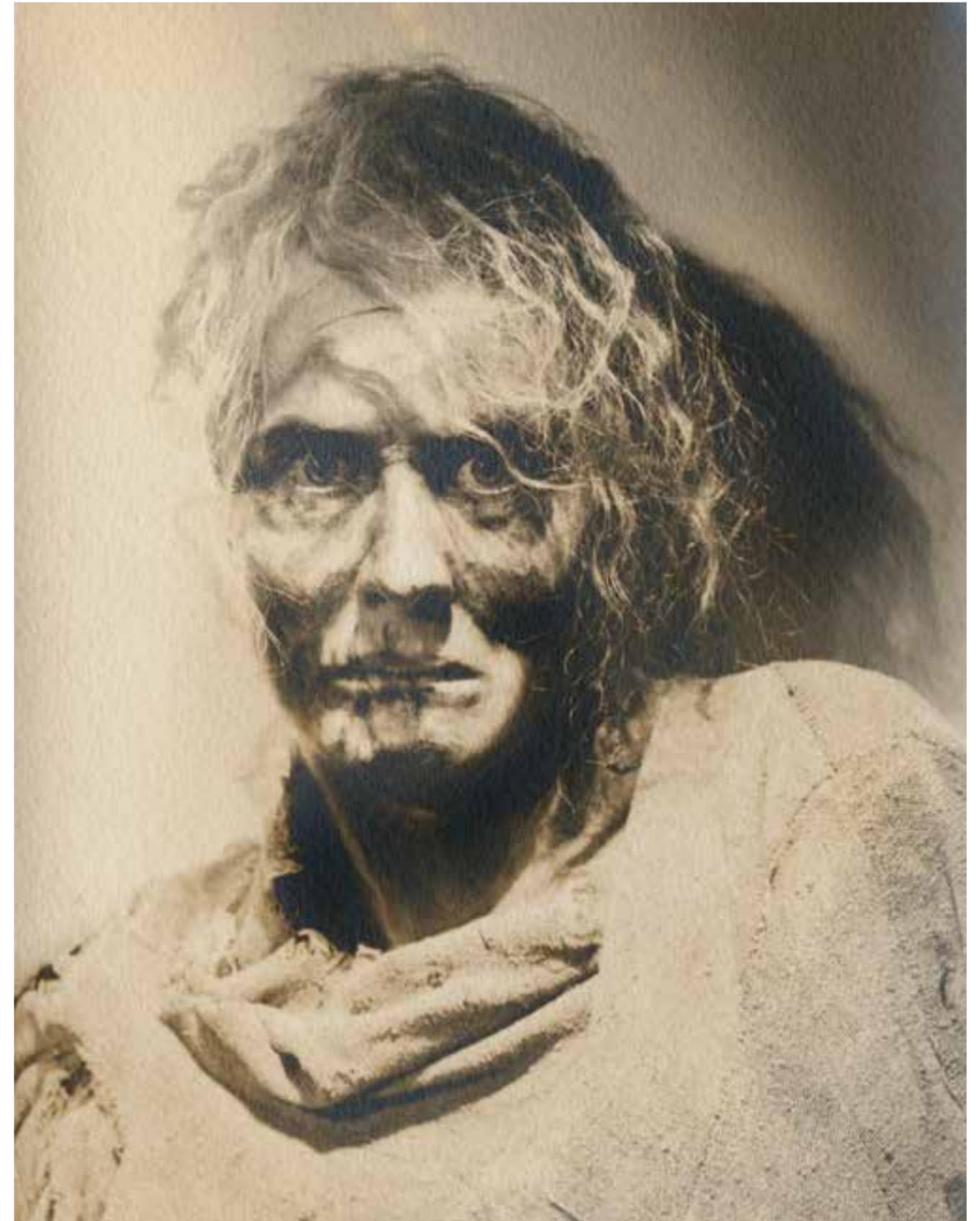
Unidentified model; n.d., circa 1925

CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY, THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

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GIRLS INTO CRONES

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Untitled
Silver gelatin small proof print
Unidentified model, possibly Myrdith Monaghan; n.d., circa 1926
CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY, THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA



Mortensen self-portrait, The Quest for Pure Form. Probably a silver gelatin print with little or no control. This was the illustration for Mortensen's article, "Come Now, Professor!" that appeared in Camera Craft magazine, February 1940.

CONSPICUOUS BY HIS ABSENCE: CONCERNING THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF WILLIAM MORTENSEN

A. D. COLEMAN

Let us begin with a context, and a time frame. It is January of 1934. We are in a terrain whose boundaries are defined by the readership and editorial staff of a magazine called *Camera Craft*. Published out of San Francisco, *Camera Craft* (hereinafter referred to as CC) is at this time the official organ of the Pacific International Photographers' Association, an organization whose aesthetic tendencies are what is generally understood to be "Pictorialist."¹

CC's editorial torch has just recently changed hands. Departing is Sigismund Blumann; replacing him is George Allen Young. The reasons for this transition are not made clear within the pages of the magazine—no swan songs, no heralding trumpets. Yet, though there is no reason to suspect that a revolution has taken place, there's no avoiding a feeling of the changing of the guard, and no denying a sense that Blumann is—in the several meanings of the word—relieved by his own departure.

Something has been happening in West Coast photography of late. It is of obvious significance, and Blumann takes his editorial responsibilities seriously enough that he's not only given it space in the magazine² but has even spoken out in defense of its right to exist. Yet he has little sympathy for it as imagery; it goes against his taste patterns, which by now are firmly entrenched. He's tried to write about this internal schism in his column, "Under the Editor's Lamp," but it doesn't emerge too clearly.

¹ At the end of the period we are exploring—in April of 1942—*Camera Craft* will merge with, and be subsumed under the logo of, another publication, *American Photography*.

² Edward Weston, "Photography—Not Pictorial," *Camera Craft* 37:7 (July, 1930), 313–20.

On the one hand, he is capable of generosity:

This man [Edward Weston] has evolved a photographic art of his own. It is not greater, it is not less than the pictorialism which deals with other forms of beauty. He is a poet who tiring of songs to gods and fancies in stars and skies determines to make his epics of cosmic stars and the material of which heavens are made. A Materialist who belies crass materialism by extracting the beauty, the poesy, out of realities.³

On the other hand, he can be driven to sarcasm by the same stimuli:

do not be discouraged when you see a photograph of a dissected cabbage or a distorted gourd, or the sexual organs of a flower, or a landscape as black as interstellar space. You may not understand it. Neither do the ultramodernists. They shun understanding. They merely feel. . . . There may be beauty and inspiration in the heart of a cabbage, in fact there is when it is properly pickled and cooked. There may be ecstasy [*sic*] in the stamen and pistils of a flower with the petals chopped off. Your coarse sensibilities may not respond to them but do not despair . . .⁴

His ambivalence finds its fullest manifestation in a review of the work which provokes it. This essay is, perhaps consciously, Blumann's valedictory. Certainly it is a poignant confession by a man painfully aware that the world is passing him by. Its emotional and intellectual complexities reveal themselves best in the reading of the full text. But consider these excerpts:

We went [to the f.64 Group exhibit] with a determined and preconceived intention of being amused and, if need be, adversely critical. We came away with several ideals badly bent and not a few opinions wholly destroyed. We were not amused, we could not criticize adversely. . . . classic forms of beauty have been, to us, inalienable from the pursuit of art. The f.64 Group have shown that there is something to say in a 1933 way that still may react on the cultivated senses as expressive of the beautiful. . . . Sentimentalists that we are, we shall never forgive these fellows for shattering out pet traditions. On the other hand, we are grateful to them for chastening our over-sure spirit. The Group is creating a place for photographic freedom. They are in a position to do so for *not one of them but has made a place for himself in the hitherto accepted Salon field and not one of them but could make real pictures again if he wished. In fact we are certain that outside of the wholly legitimate showmanship that actuates and entertains their mood in this f.64 business, they are still making real pictures, surreptitiously*

3 Sigismund Blumann, "Edward Weston in Three Paragraphs," *Camera Craft* 38:1 (Jan., 1931), 34.

4 Blumann, "Art and the Camera," *Camera Craft* 39:9 (Sept., 1932), 390.

if not openly. For us the destruction of an older taste will be like unto a surgical operation. So thickheaded are our sort. . . . Now, right now, we will concede Weston's greatness in his field. We consider the field small. We estimate lowly the highest achievement in portraiture of Gourds and Peppers.⁵

Self-evidently, these are the words of a man who has no heart for refereeing the battle-royal which is brewing. But his successor, George Allen Young, formerly the book review editor, takes on that task with gusto. First, he remodels the arena: Volume 40, no. 9 (September, 1933), wherein he assumes the editorship, is radically redesigned: a sparser, cleaner layout, more "modernistic" in tone, is established. Aside from this, there is only one hint of what is to come—a brief notice that one member of the f.64 Group, Ansel Adams, is offering in "his new gallery at 166 Geary St., San Francisco," a series of classes and "General lectures in which Mr. Adams will trace the development of photography with the idea of establishing an aesthetic rational [*sic*] as the basis for future progress."⁶

Yet shortly thereafter—and, unquestionably, at Young's instigation—the battle is joined. Within the next few issues of *CC*, Young introduces his readership to the two principal combatants. One of these is the aforementioned Ansel Adams, at that time a comparative unknown. The other, already a photographer of international reputation, is William Mortensen.

Who is William Mortensen? You might well ask. And, until quite recently, you could have searched all the standard histories of photography in vain for an answer.⁷ William Mortensen (1897–1965) is—among many other things—one of photography's object lessons in how individuals become lost to history.

History—which is, after all, a highly subjective human systematization of coincidence, a Monday-morning-quarterbacking of chaos—often disposes of its protagonists arbitrarily and uncharitably. For centuries after his death Shakespeare was treated as a minor

5 Blumann, "The F.64 Group Exhibition," *Camera Craft* 40: 5 (May, 1933), 199–200. Italics mine.

6 *Camera Craft* 40:10 (Oct., 1933), 437.

7 In fact, as of 1979 it was only in Arnold Gassan's blessedly unstandard and long since out-of-print *A Chronology of Photography* (Athens, Ohio: Handbook Co., 1972) that I was able to track down any direct reference to Mortensen. Gassan wrote (p. 95): "Camera Craft, a west coast magazine, also supported this new aesthetic movement [f.64] in photography, and published a long dialogue of letters between Weston and William Mortensen, the last of the great manipulators of the pictorial tradition." And, further on (190–91): "The last protagonist of the gum print and manipulated image was the photographer William Mortensen, whose marvelous and horrible combination prints were published from the early 1930s late into the 1940s. A vivid dialogue between Mortensen and Weston was published at length in the editorial columns of *Camera Craft*, a magazine published in Los Angeles." Unfortunately, there's quite a bit of factual inaccuracy even in these brief statements: the magazine was not based in Los Angeles, Weston was only one of the f.64 spokesmen, and the main body of the dialogue took the form of articles, not letters. (For more recent appearances by Mortensen in history texts, see the Postscript to this essay.)

Elizabethan playwright. Charles Ives was, until quite recently, pigeon-holed as an uninfluential eccentric. *Moby Dick* was for decades dismissed as an obscure novel about the whaling industry. There are cultural cycles of appreciation and disregard under which all creative works are subsumed.

There are also those creators who shun the spotlight, choosing to work reclusively; those who fail to find it, never gaining recognition during their lifetimes; and those—the true naïfs—who have no concern that fame or fortune might in any way be connected with their obsessive endeavors.

But one of the most curious aspects of the mysterious disappearance of William Mortensen is that he vanished not after his death, nor as a consequence of his own reticence or failure to find an audience. Rather, he disappeared from photographic history at the peak of his creative life and the height of his fame and influence, and certainly not by his own volition.

Even a cursory look at the man's career makes it clear that the photographic historians of his time—among whom, in English, we must number primarily the husband-wife teams of Helmut and Alison Gernsheim and Beaumont and Nancy Newhall—could not possibly have been unaware of Mortensen's photography, his writings, or his influence on the field. Born in Utah, Mortensen studied painting with George Bridgman, Robert Henri and George Bellows at the Art Students League in New York City after World War I. In the early 1920s he moved to Hollywood and turned to photography, rapidly earning an international reputation as both a picture-maker and a writer. Between 1932 and 1955 he founded and ran the Mortensen School of Photography in Laguna Beach, California, where approximately three thousand students passed through his courses; his images were exhibited and reproduced widely, both here and abroad; and he published a total of twelve books, scores of magazine articles, and a steady stream of letters to the editors of various photography periodicals.

Those books included his magnum opus, *Monsters & Madonnas: A Book of Methods*, an oversize volume with excellent reproductions of many of his images accompanied by explanations of his aesthetic and his techniques. *The Command to Look*, a more compactly sized but not dissimilar monograph, went through several printings. There was also a series of smaller “how-to” treatises: *Projection Control*, *The Model*, *Pictorial Lighting*, *Flash in Modern Photography*, *Mortensen on the Negative*, and others. This series of instructional books was, from the standpoint of contemporary pictorialism, what Ansel Adams's volumes on craft were in relation to the so-called “purist” aesthetic: the invaluable codification and clear exposition of hermeneutic principles.⁸

⁸ The influence of Mortensen's approach to craft—including his impact on photographers who worked in other than pictorialist modes—has never been effectively traced. For example, W. Eugene Smith certainly knew of Mortensen's printmaking strategies; four of Mortensen's instructional volumes on technique, plus copies of his two monographs, *Monsters & Madonnas* and *The Command to Look*, were in Smith's personal library when he donated his materials to the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, Arizona. It seems entirely possible that Smith was affected by aspects of Mortensen's understanding of the relationship between negative and print, perhaps even by the look of Mortensen's prints themselves.

Mortensen's books reached a large audience. Most of them were serialized first in *CC*; during the course of any such serialization the magazine almost invariably sold out its press run, as proudly apologetic notes from the editor indicate. The book versions sold equally well, usually going into multiple printings and/or revised editions.

Many of the books were published under the imprint of the Camera Craft Publishing Co., and there is reason to believe that the financial survival of *CC* during this period was largely attributable to Mortensen's writings. This in turn suggests that the availability of *CC*'s editorial columns as a forum for the imagery and ideas of the f.64 Group also might have been due to Mortensen—that, in effect, he provided the staging ground on which their verbal and visual duels took place.

On the basis of these facts alone, Mortensen's place in the contemporary history of photography would seem to be assured, his right to that place secure and inarguable. When we add to that his eloquent, elegant and indefatigable championing of the pictorialist stance—under the constant fire of such “purist” big guns as Adams, Weston, Willard Van Dyke, Roi Partridge, John Paul Edwards and Nancy Newhall—in a controversial public debate which stretched over a decade, his absence from the history books reveals itself to be the consequence not of inadvertent oversight but of deliberate omission. As such, it is a serious breach of the responsibilities and ethics of historianship.

The frequently proffered justification for Mortensen's erasure is that purism was waxing and pictorialism on the wane during this period. That is true, but insufficient as an explanation—and considerably disingenuous as well. In fact, though nominally pledged to the impartiality of scholarship, both the Gernsheims and the Newhalls were highly biased in their approach to photography's history. They shared an intense attitudinal and aesthetic commitment to advocacy of the “straight/purist” stance; their distaste for any form of “manipulated” imagery was repeatedly made clear. (The Newhalls, in addition, were already becoming entangled in elaborate personal and professional relationships with members of the f.64 Group, particularly Weston and Adams.⁹ To their discredit, they allowed their prejudices and allegiances to overrule their obligations to the discipline of historianship.

Mortensen must have seen it coming. As an isolated occurrence, he might have been able to discount Ansel Adams's omission of his work—and, indeed, of all contemporary pictorialist work and most earlier pictorialist achievement—from “The Pageant of Photography,” a large traveling exhibit which Adams curated in 1939–1940. After all,

Nor was that influence restricted to photographers of Mortensen's generation and the generation after that. Even a younger documentarian like Henry Gordillo has spoken of the impact of Mortensen's prints on his own way of seeing. See A. D. Coleman, “Outsider, Insider: Henry Gordillo,” *Review: Latin American Arts And Literature* 38 (July–Dec., 1987), 76.

⁹ See the interviews with Gernsheim and Newhall in Paul Hill and Thomas Cooper, *Dialogue with Photography* (New York: Farrar/Straus/Giroux, 1979). See also my essay, “Making History,” *Camera* 35 24:9 (Sept., 1979), 14–15; reprinted in my book *Tarnished Silver: After the Photo Boom* (New York: Mid-march Arts, 1996), 108–12.

“Purism” as such was relatively new as a movement, and its historical roots had never yet been traced in exhibition form. Also, Adams was a practitioner, and from practitioners of a medium one expects credos and grinding axes, not overviews and eclecticism.¹⁰

Adams’s rationale for this exclusion of the pictorialists was dispassionate in tone.¹¹ However, Adams’s antipathy to Mortensen ran deep, with an extremely personal undercurrent. Briefly put, he wanted him dead, and said as much on several occasions. In a recently unearthed, previously unpublished letter to Mortensen—apparently intended as part of their debate, but not printed at the time—Adams waxed positively vitriolic, concluding that “How soon photography achieves the position of a great social and aesthetic instrument of expression depends on how soon you and your co-workers of shallow vision negotiate oblivion.”¹² In 1937, replying to a letter from Edward Weston in which Weston notes, “Got a beautiful negative of a fresh corpse,” Adams in his autobiography proudly indicated that he wrote back, “It was swell to hear from you—and I look forward to the picture of the corpse. My only regret is that the identity of said corpse is not our Laguna Beach colleague [William Mortensen]. I am convinced there are several stages of decay.”¹³ Years later, he would describe Mortensen as “the anti-Christ.”¹⁴

Indeed, Adams’s vendetta pursued Mortensen even beyond the grave, and well into the terrain of outright censorship and blackmail. In correspondence with this author, Therese Thau Heyman, Senior Curator of Prints and Photographs at the Oakland Museum in California, confirmed that in December of 1980 Adams—then at the height of his fame and financial success—had demanded that a small Mortensen exhibit scheduled to run concurrently with Adams’s traveling retrospective at the Oakland Museum be closed to the public during his opening; otherwise he would withdraw his own exhibit. “Ansel Adams had his own list of ‘enemies,’” wrote Heyman, “and Mortensen was still there and not to be removed by time and his own very evident successes.”¹⁵

¹⁰ The problematics of f.64-style “purism”—including the frequent contradictions between theory and praxis—are sketched nicely in Michel Oren, “On the ‘Impurity’ of Group f/64 Photography,” *History of Photography* 15:2 (Summer 1991), 119–27.

¹¹ Adams, Ansel, “The Pageant of Photography,” *Camera Craft* 47:9 (Sept., 1940), 437–46.

¹² The letter was first published in *Obscura* 1:2 (Nov.–Dec., 1980), 17–21. Although that magazine dated it “ca. 1933,” it is a direct response to articles published by Mortensen in *Camera Craft* in June and July of 1934; thus it was most likely written in August or September of 1934. It was subsequently reprinted in *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1985), 113–15.

¹³ *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*, 244.

¹⁴ Ruth Teiser and Catherine Harroun, *Conversations with Ansel Adams* (Berkeley, Calif.: Bancroft Library, 1978), 121. Adams also used this term to describe Edward Steichen during the uproar surrounding Steichen’s post-World War II supplanting of Beaumont Newhall at the helm of the Museum of Modern Art’s Department of Photography. The implication that there was something Christ-like about practicing “straight” photography surely merits some analysis.

¹⁵ Letter to the author, 5 June 1984. Heyman subsequently organized the fine traveling exhibition “Seeing Straight: the f.64 Revolution in Photography,” whose catalog texts (*Seeing Straight* [Berkeley, Calif.: The Oakland Museum, 1992]) touch briefly but accurately on the interaction between the f.64 group

But the handwriting was already on the wall by 1940. Mortensen’s work and name—and the works and names of virtually all pictorialists—had already been conspicuous by their absence from the mammoth exhibit, “Photography 1839–1937,” curated by Beaumont Newhall for the Museum of Modern Art in 1937. Mortensen was not even mentioned in the catalogue to that show,¹⁶ nor in any of its subsequent versions as it developed into the infrastructure for Newhall’s *History of Photography*.

Mortensen’s elimination from Adams’s survey was part and parcel of this purist purge, therefore; and the announcement (also in 1940) of the foundation of the Museum of Modern Art’s Department of Photography, with Newhall as its director and Adams as its consultant, made that purge the official policy of the contemporary art establishment. With the publication of Nancy Newhall’s 1941 diatribe, “What is Pictorialism?”—a baby-with-the-bathwater dismissal of all pictorialist images, techniques, and theories—one hardly needed a weatherperson to know which way the wind blew.¹⁷

If I have not yet addressed Mortensen’s imagery directly, it is not out of equivocation over its significance but rather out of ignorance. I have seen, all told, perhaps one hundred and fifty of Mortensen’s images. I’ve encountered no more than seventy-five in the form of original prints (many of these from a portfolio which sold, upon issuance, at the price of \$10 for twenty-five signed prints!). The others I’ve experienced in the form of reproductions: fine ones from *Monsters & Madonnas*, mediocre halftones from *CC* and the technical book series, and slides. Given both his prolificacy and his concern with the expressive quality of the original print as a crafted object, this slight acquaintance hardly qualifies as the basis for a balanced and thorough assessment of Mortensen’s *oeuvre*. My impressions, at this point, run as follows:

The level of craft—that is, Mortensen’s ability as a printmaker—was consistently high and frequently virtuosic. If one accepts the stylistic parameters, techniques and materials which he elected to utilize (among them gum, bromoil and bromide prints; the use of paper negatives; combination printing, easel tilting; and the inclusion of hand-drawn elements in the final image), one must acknowledge that his mastery of these is self-evident. On the level of craft alone he was the model for his generation of pictorialists; and the current generation’s pictorialists, who are busily reinventing these methods, could save themselves much time and trouble by looking to a man who quite literally wrote the book on this branch of photographic printmaking.

and Mortensen. Typically, Adams dodged considerably in rendering his own account of this act. In the brief passage of his autobiography in which he discusses Mortensen specifically (pp. 112–13), he describes their exchange of opinions in *Camera Craft* as “one of the fiercest verbal battles in photographic history.” He then goes on to say, presumably describing the Oakland Museum incident, “A few years ago I was not overjoyed to find an important museum showing a major retrospective of my work in their main gallery simultaneously with a Mortensen retrospective on an upper floor. Caveat emptor!” Indeed.

¹⁶ *Photography 1839–1937* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1937).

¹⁷ *Camera Craft* 42:11 (Nov., 1935), 653–63.

Mortensen worked exclusively in the directorial mode, staging the events he photographed (mostly in the studio), creating *tableaux vivants* that involved scenarios, actors, props, costumes, makeup, careful posing and controlled lighting. Perhaps this came out of his early professional background—he began his career as a still photographer on Hollywood sets. (His credits include heading the still units for *King Kong* and Cecil B. DeMille's *King of Kings*.) Certainly it was his predilection, and he was aware of it as an issue for any photographer who works with human subjects. "The posing of a model," he once wrote, "involves delicate psychological problems. The status of the photographer is somewhat that of a stage director."¹⁸

Given a penchant for the staged event and the flair for the *mise en image*, joined to a romantic sensibility, it seems inevitable that his energies were concentrated on the creation of symbolist allegories. This in itself should not be too problematic for contemporary audiences; we have, after all, managed somehow to come to terms with such diverse romantics and symbolists as Minor White, W. Eugene Smith and Duane Michals in our own day.

The images of Mortensen's which appear to be least accessible to today's audience—and to which I find I have most resistance—are those whose subject matter predates photography itself: those based on Greco-Roman myth and medieval history. I'm not sure why that should be so. Contemporaries of Mortensen's—not only in literature (Pound, Eliot, Joyce, O'Neill, Graves) but in dance (Graham), sculpture (Moore), and the other media—could use those same subjects as resonant, evocative reference points.

That may be because, for Mortensen's generation, education generally included an exposure to what were called "the classics." Thus, if only because they had cultural currency, those symbols still had potency. But that does not hold true for my generation, nor for the ones immediately preceding and following it. Perhaps it's that they were never formally transmitted to us as culturally essential parables and archetypes. Perhaps World War II forcibly imposed new myths of Europe over the old. Or perhaps the temporality of the photographic image, and our cultural commitment to it as documentation, will simply not submit to such willful and flagrant anachronism.

In any case, these images of Mortensen's are the most difficult for me to integrate into my relationship with his work. They comprise a considerable segment of his *oeuvre*. Among these I find the comedic ones least effective. But, along with his romanticism and his classicism, Mortensen has a Gothic mood: an obsession with the grotesque and, I suspect, a belief in evil as an actual presence in the world.

It is this turn of mind and eye which, for me, redeems much of his most classicist imagery: *Johan the Mad*, *Lucii Ferraris* and *Death of Hypatia*, for example, have no trouble standing by themselves as images, stripped of titular connotations. They are highly stylized, to be sure—declaredly and emphatically so, like all Mortensen's work.

¹⁸ "Venus and Vulcan: An Essay on Creative Pictorialism, Part III: Selection and the Function of Control," *Camera Craft* 41:5 (May, 1934), 206–7.

Here, however, the decadence of his visual style amplifies the grimness of his themes.

Madness, death, corruption, torture and occultism are recurrent motifs in Mortensen's *oeuvre*, so much so that I'm led to believe his attraction to historical milieu stemmed more from those concerns than from any longing for the past. Those motifs persist even as his settings become more contemporary; thus the ominous *Caprice Vennois* shares with *The Kiss* an Art Deco angularity in composition which heightens the erotic suggestiveness of both.

When Mortensen addressed the attitudes and issues of his own time, his satire—no doubt because it was more pertinent—became more pointed and more effective. At the peak of the debate in *CC*, for example, he offered up a wonderfully sarcastic image, *The Quest for Pure Form*, a visual spoof of the f.64 philosophy. (Apparently no print of this is known to exist, but a reproduction accompanies Mortensen's acid rebuttal¹⁹ of Roi Partridge's pretentiously titled and inadequately argued credo, "What is Good Photography?"²⁰)

A number of Mortensen's images are blunt and enormously powerful political statements. *Human Relations 1932* and *Steel Stocks Advance* are excellent examples of his polemics. I believe they deserve to stand with the work of John Heartfield and Mieczyslaw Berman. Like Heartfield and Berman—though not as single-mindedly political as they—Mortensen was not afraid of making images whose frank purpose was persuasion. Indeed, the differences between Mortensen's attitude toward the concept of propaganda and Adams's—as illustrated in the following quotes—seem paradigmatic of their conflict, and speak eloquently of the distance between their positions.

These two statements were made in 1934, shortly after the debate began. Coincidentally, both came in the April issue of *CC*. Appearing simultaneously in the magazine at that point were the contestants' opening arguments, in the form of two series of articles. Adams's were collectively entitled "An Exposition of My Photographic Technique," while Mortensen's were portions of "Venus and Vulcan: An Essay on Creative Pictorialism."

Adams's comments on the issue of "Propaganda" come in a discussion of "The Photo-Document." After predicting that this will be "one of the most important phases [*sic*] of photography," and particularly praising the work of Dorothea Lange, Adams cautions:

One danger confronts the development of the photo-document—the danger of it becoming a tool of obvious propaganda. All art is delicate propaganda of some sort, but I do not feel that direct propaganda succeeds except in the injury to the aesthetic potentials. Perhaps one might say that the objective attitude admits delicate and suggestive propaganda which does not intrude on the aesthetic aspects, while the uncontrolled subjective attitude, without the vital check of taste, admits blatant and obvious propaganda. Comment is legitimate in art, but comment, motivated by reform or personal advantages,

¹⁹ "Come Now, Professor!," *Camera Craft* 47:2 (Feb., 1940), 68–72.
²⁰ *Camera Craft* 46:11 (Nov., 1939), 503–42.

blends dubiously with aesthetic purpose. Art interprets; it cannot attempt prophecy, or motivate the social aspects of the world and still preserve its aesthetic integrity. In the social-constructive sense it is of immense value through subtle and significant comment on the contemporary scene.²¹

Mortensen—who, no less than Adams, appreciated the work of such “documentarians” as Lange and Atget²²—responded in a different vein to this subject. In speaking of different kinds of “picture minds,” he came to what he called “the didactic, propagandizing type,” of which he wrote:

Ideas, not sensations, are its basic materials, and the art-form is strictly subordinated to them. Two things mark the propagandist—the fact that he is obsessed by an opinion, and that he wishes to persuade you to a course of action. How shall he persuade you? Quiet speaking and subtle reasoning are of no avail. Paradoxically enough, propaganda, though dealing with ideas, must express itself in terms of action and emotion. Because of their direct sensory appeal, pictures are perhaps the most effective form that propaganda can take. Propaganda of this type impinges upon our minds at every waking hour . . . But provinces less limited than [advertising and political cartoons] are open to the propagandist. The whole human comedy is his. Joining with the sardonic amusement of the ironist or the moral indignation of the satirist, he may castigate human absurdities, obscenities and brutalities, and seek the reform of humanity by revealing to it its own depravities. Goya’s *Disasters of War* and *Caprichos* belong to this high type of propaganda. So do Daumier’s drawings of the law courts. Pictures such as these are not purely “pictorial” in their appeal, and frequently carry a literary appendage in the form of an ironic title. But considerations of pictorial purity did not deter Daumier and Goya, nor will it discourage any modern propagandist with an idea worth expressing.²³

Here we have the essences of the differences between the two men, and between the two photographic attitudes they embody. For Adams, propaganda—the active attempt to persuade—is close to sin, a taint tolerable only if “delicate and suggestive,” requiring even then the presumably objective “vital check of taste” (whatever that might be). For Mortensen, propaganda is assumed to be forceful, and is merely another of the options open to the picture-maker. The purist posture is inhibitive and exclusionary; it narrows the range of choices. The pictorialist stance is embracive and inclusionary; it encourages enlargement of the vocabulary.

Which of these two positions has more relevance to the questions

21 *Camera Craft* 41:4 (April, 1934), 180.

22 “Notes on the Miniature Camera, Part III: Outdoor Portraiture,” *Camera Craft* 42:1 (Jan., 1935), 3.

23 “Venus and Vulcan: An Essay on Creative Pictorialism. Part II: Sources and Uses of Material,” *Camera Craft* 41:4 (April, 1934): 160–62.

facing photographic image-makers today? Which of these two approaches to craft is more contemporaneous? Which of these two men made images more in touch with their own time—a time when this country was in a state of economic collapse, Hitler had come to power in Germany and World War II was imminent?

Adams—who, aside for the perfunctory images of the Manzanar internment camp for Japanese-Americans, never addressed what Oliver Wendell Holmes called “the actions and passions of his own time”—is usually thought of as the more “modern” of the two; whereas Mortensen, who often directed his imagery toward socio-political issues, has been largely dismissed as antiquated. Within a formalist frame, Adams can perhaps be thought of as the more contemporary; within a humanist frame, Mortensen might well emerge as “more in touch with his time.”

But there are no easy answers to these questions. There may be no answers at all. Our individual tastes and sensibilities may pull us in one direction or another, but it would be foolish to dismiss either of these photographic philosophies as insignificant or inferior, since they represent one of the quintessential dichotomies of photographic theory and practice, and are most meaningful when considered dialectically, in relation to each other. For that reason alone it seems clear that the injustice done to the work and memory of William Mortensen has also been a profound disservice to all involved in the study of photography’s history. To rectify this, we need the following:

- First, a definitive exhibit and monograph on Mortensen’s imagery, to establish its scope, its volume, its issues and its relevance to the field today;²⁴
- Second, a critical biography tracing the man’s development as a photographer and connecting his work, his teachings, his life and his times;
- Third, a reassessment, by practitioners, of his principles of craft, to determine their pertinence to contemporary photographic image-making;
- Fourth, the republication of the complete purist-pictorialist debate from *CC*, accompanied by analyses and discussions of the theories and attitudes represented therein, reconsidered from a variety of standpoints.
- Fifth, the republication of all of Mortensen’s tutorial texts.²⁵

Without these, the history of photography in our century will assuredly be incomplete.²⁶ But worse than that, we will have lost a teacher who wrote, in 1934, that

Photography, like any other art, is a form of communication. The artist is not blowing bubbles for his own gratification,

24 Such a retrospective project, I’d propose, should include not only a presentation of Mortensen’s own images expansive enough to encompass his oeuvre but also a survey of work by those who considered themselves his disciples, such as the Spanish master José Ortiz-Echagüe.

25 As of this writing, none are listed as available in *Books in Print*.

26 I do not mean to imply by any means that Mortensen’s inclusion alone would complete that history. His exclusion is emblematic of longstanding prejudice against those who’ve chosen to work directorially and/or to explore so-called “alternative processes.” The absence of Blacks and the under-representation of women are among the systemic biases that still demand corrective scholarship.

but is speaking a language, is *telling somebody something*. Three corollaries are derived from this proposition.

- a. As a language, art fails unless it is clear and unequivocal in saying what it means.
- b. Ideas may be communicated, not things.
- c. Art expresses itself, as all languages do, in terms of symbols.²⁷

And, perhaps even worse, we will have lost an open-minded thinker who, prophetically, urged photographers to “take unto themselves soap-boxes and proclaim their opinions. Let verbal brickbats fly freely and sound body blows be given and taken. Perhaps the resultant tumult will serve to rouse the art of photography from its drowsy contemplation of its own umbilicus, and persuade it to get up and go places. Perhaps the salons may be inspired to seek other meat than a monotonous succession of safe and sound banalities. Perhaps photographic degrees may come to be given on the basis of merit—and no other.”²⁸

It’s been fifty years since William Mortensen was exiled from the history of his own medium. Isn’t it time we welcomed this black sheep back?

POSTSCRIPT: HISTORY OF A FOOTNOTE

My awareness of the elimination of William Mortensen from the history of photography began in the late 1960s. Reading my predecessors and colleagues, I found frequent reference—usually brief and superficial—made to the “purist-pictorialist debates” of the 1930s and ’40s. But, while the “purists” were identified and quoted (often at length) as a matter of course, the “pictorialists” involved were never allowed to speak for themselves; invariably, their positions were synopsisized and paraphrased. Even more significantly, they were never even named. The battlefield smelled of scorched earth; salt crystals crunched underfoot. I was intrigued.

The issue was not merely the accuracy or inaccuracy of the historical record in regard to a closed chapter. As a working critic, I found myself observing and discussing the emergence of a generation of photographers and artists who were busily resurrecting and/or reinventing the pictorialist approaches to praxis. If I could uncover no discussion of the accompanying theory, presumably they couldn’t either, which meant that none of us had a dependable sense of lineage or precedent for what was being generated. This seemed unhealthy for all concerned.

So, somewhere around 1974, I hied myself to the annex of the New York Public Library on West 43rd Street, where back issues of old periodicals like *Camera Craft* are stored. The Annex is one of those repositories whose dust motes are imbued with mysteriously soporific qualities. There I dug out, traced, read and photocopied the entire published debate between Mortensen and his adversaries. It opened my eyes and kept me awake.

²⁷ “Venus and Vulcan, Part 5: A Manifesto and a Prophecy,” *Camera Craft* 41:6 (July, 1934), 310–12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 310.

I didn’t consider myself a scholar at that juncture, much less an historian. However, I’d always been a close reader of footnotes, having learned early on in my encounter with scholarship that they’re often where the real action is. So, in an essay that I published in 1976 in which I made reference to Mortensen and this debate, I stated that Mortensen “was actually purged from the history of photography in what seems a deliberate attempt to break the [pictorialist] movement’s back.”²⁹ A footnote to this passage read as follows:

From the first one in 1937 to the most recent of 1964, no edition of Beaumont Newhall’s *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present Day*—the standard reference in the field—so much as mentions the name of William Mortensen. It will be instructive to see whether the forthcoming edition—a major revision supported by the Guggenheim Foundation—rectifies this omission.

In fact, none of the books on the history of twentieth-century photography refers to Mortensen. If this could be considered even an oversight, the only questions it would raise would concern standards of scholarship. Since it cannot be construed as anything less than a conscious choice, however, the issue is not only competence but professional ethicality.³⁰

The essay was well received, as was a book-length critical survey I published the following year in which I discussed Mortensen’s work at somewhat greater length and reproduced a number of his images.³¹ But when after a few years I could discern no effect traceable to these efforts on the field’s attention to Mortensen, I began to feel an obligation to undertake the task of setting the record straight myself. So, upon being asked in 1978 to provide an essay on Edward Steichen for a multi-author critical anthology, I used the opportunity to pressure the project editor into commissioning a piece on Mortensen as well. Once he agreed, I dusted off my photocopies and notes and set to work.

The original version of this essay was drafted in 1978–79. But the anthology never appeared, because its putative publisher went broke. However, while that version of this essay was in the making I was contacted by Deborah Irmas, who informed me that a Mortensen retrospective exhibition, co-curated by Irmas and Suda House, was just then being assembled; supported in part by the National Endowment of the Arts, it would travel around the country, beginning in 1980.³² I was particularly

²⁹ “The Directorial Mode: Notes Toward a Definition,” *Artforum* XV:1 (Sept., 1976), 55–61. Reprinted in A. D. Coleman, *Light Readings: A Photography Critic’s Writings, 1968–1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979; 2nd rev. ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998). For this footnote, see *Artforum*, p. 59, and/or *Light Readings*, p. 256.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, *Artforum*, p. 61; *Light Readings*, p. 256.

³¹ A. D. Coleman, *The Grottesque in Photography* (New York: Ridge Press/Summit Books, 1977), 149–50; 162–65.

³² Titled “The Photographic Magic of William Mortensen,” this exhibit of some 72 prints—the same show to which Ansel Adams objected so vehemently, as indicated in note 15, above—toured for several years under the aegis of the Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies. This project also included a small but handsomely produced catalogue of the exhibit. Further information

gratified that, in conversation and correspondence with me, as well as in subsequent public lectures, Irmas credited that footnote of mine from 1976 with sparking her initial interest in pursuing her investigation.³³

My own argument's first public presentation came when, frustrated by my inability to find an editor willing to publish it, I used it as the text for a lecture under the auspices of the Friends of Photography at the Asilomar Conference Grounds, Pacific Grove, California, on July 12, 1981. This was an act of deliberate provocation: aside from the "master workshop" that I was teaching there, the occasion was a fully orchestrated f.64 hagiography, including a Beaumont Newhall workshop, pilgrimages to the sacred shrines at Point Lobos and visits from Charis and Cole Weston.

Newhall, who was in attendance at the Asilomar presentation of this text, understandably took exception to much of it. In an animated dialogue between us that took place during the subsequent question-and-answer period (videotaped for posterity by the staff of the Friends), Newhall announced, unbidden, that he was well aware of my 1976 footnote. He went on to indicate that he found Mortensen's work to be "perverse," and that it was his history of photography and he could disinvite whoever he pleased. Then he noted that he was in the midst of the Guggenheim-funded revision of his history; therein, he stated with typical generosity, he was at last going to mention Mortensen—"but only to dismiss him!"³⁴

Indeed, close reading of that edition discloses the following passage:

The charter members [of Group f.64] formulated an aesthetic that in retrospect now appears dogmatic in its strict specifications: any photograph not sharply focused in every detail, not printed by contact on glossy black-and-white paper, not mounted on a white card, and betraying any handwork or avoidance of reality in choice of subject was "impure." It was a violent reaction to the weak, sentimental style then popular with pictorial photographers in California, as seen particularly in the anecdotal, highly sentimental, mildly erotic hand-colored prints of William Mortensen.³⁵

about the making of this exhibit and its reception can be found in the issue of *Obscura* cited previously.

33 I would like to thank Ms. Irmas for sharing with me some of the imagery and information she uncovered in her researches, which included lengthy interviews with Mortensen's widow, Myrdith.

34 In conversation with me after the session broke up, Newhall told me that Adams's how-to books "owed a debt to Mortensen that had never been acknowledged," and suggested that I look into it. I put the thought aside until, in conversation with the researcher Matt Cook in November 1993, I learned that Adams's technical treatises, and the "zone system" in particular, drew heavily on several articles published in *U.S. Camera Annual* in the early 1940s, on the subjects of "Constant Quality Prints" and "Constant Quality Negatives." The author of those articles was one John L. Davenport—who, in turn, apparently learned much from Mortensen. In a letter to Mortensen dated 16 November 1935 that's in the archives at the Center for Creative Photography, Davenport, after asking Mortensen's advice on a number of technical questions regarding development and other issues, concludes by saying, "Congratulations on your book. [Either *Projection Control* or *Pictorial Lighting*, given the letter's date.] It will be a landmark in photography."

35 Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present Day* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 188–92.

Mortensen's work goes unillustrated in that volume, and none of his books are listed in Newhall's bibliography.

And since then, what? A version of the 1981 incarnation of my essay—revised, cut, and retitled without consultation with the author—subsequently appeared in *Camera Arts*, in early 1982.³⁶ More recently, Mortensen received shrift that's just as short and not much more sympathetic than Newhall's from Naomi Rosenblum's 1984 entry into the lists of single-volume histories of the medium.³⁷ A year before his death in 1993, Newhall would repeat almost verbatim that slightly inaccurate description (Mortensen did not hand-color all his prints), from the 1982 edition of his *History*, in his prefatory note to the catalogue for the "Seeing Straight" exhibit.³⁸ As for Helmut Gernsheim, the volume of his revised history covering the period in question has yet to be published.

As I write this, in the fall of 1993, none of the projects I proposed have been undertaken.³⁹ I suspect it will require a generation of historians of photography who are not emotionally committed to the purist approach to praxis to realize them; and it will take a full-scale reassessment of the international pictorialist movement from 1925–1950 to establish the true scope of Mortensen's influence on world photography.⁴⁰ But I would like to think that, however grudgingly, he's been allowed to return to the fold.⁴¹ †

36 A. D. Coleman, "Disappearing Act," *Camera Arts*, Jan./Feb. 1982, 30–38; 108.

A short but useful essay by Irmas accompanied this version of my own text.

37 Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography* (New York: Abbeville, 1984), 565. Rosenblum does include one illustration, a reproduction of *L'Amour* (p. 568).

38 *Seeing Straight*, viii. Aside from that, the catalogue's text deals evenhandedly and accurately (though not extensively) with Mortensen.

39 However, the Center for Creative Photography—initially created at the instigation of Adams, as an archive fit to house his own work—has augmented its not inconsiderable holdings of Mortensen material with Deborah Irmas's donation of her own material on the subject. This includes virtually the entire Mortensen estate, which Irmas acquired from Mortensen's widow, Myrdith. Research of the kind I've described is certainly now feasible. And Mortensen's oeuvre is thus preserved in an institution sparked by Adams; indeed, it sits in the same temperature- and humidity-controlled storeroom, breathing the same air. Wherever he may be, I suspect that Adams is "not overjoyed" by this clearly poetic justice.

40 I know of no such study now underway. But microstudies such as "California Pictorialism," a substantial survey (with accompanying catalogue) curated in 1977 for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art by the late Margery Mann, are laying the groundwork for it. Meanwhile, an unpublished Master's Thesis by Edward Montgomery Clift, "The Manner of Mortensen: Aesthetic Communication and The Construction of Metaphysical Realities" (The Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1992), explores the issues from a somewhat different perspective. Clift is a former student of this author.

41 This was this essay's first publication in its full intended form. Some necessary updating was incorporated into both the body of the text and these footnotes. The reader interested in pursuing these matters further is advised to see also my essay "Beyond Recall: In the William Mortensen Archive," in a special 1998 Mortensen issue of *The Archive*, the journal of the Center for Creative Photography. This issue contains considerable other significant Mortensen-related material.