Through a Lens, Darkly

PART SOUTHERN GOTHIC, PART SURREAL, THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF CLARENCE JOHN LAUGHLIN IS ON DISPLAY AT THE HIGH MUSEUM, BY SARAH E. FENSON

CLARENCE JOHN Laughlin considered himself a writer first and a photographer second. Though he never made it past his freshman year of high school, a passionate love of literature passed down from his father stayed with him throughout his life, greatly informing his photography. As a young man he wrote poems and stories inspired by the French Symbolists, and after he picked up the camera, he described image-making as his “visual poetry.”

Like Southern Gothic literature, Laughlin’s work grew beneath the looming phantom of the postbellum American South. Laughlin, who was born in Louisiana, moved with his family to New Orleans in 1910 after they were left penniless from a failed rice-growing venture. By 1930, Laughlin had taught himself how to use a camera and made his first photograph in December of that year. From then on the decaying antebellum architecture and lost grandeur of the city became his primary muse. The artist had brief dalliances in New York
working for Vogue magazine and in Washington, D.C., as an assistant photographer at the National Archives, but ultimately it was New Orleans that commanded his attention—and more than 2,000 of his negatives. He returned to his beloved French Quarter in 1946, and in 1948 he published his first photography book, *Ghosts Along the Mississippi*, an acclaimed study of antebellum plantation houses.

A preoccupation with Romanticism, the natural landscape, ruins, dark humor, and the occult, coupled with his experimentation with double exposure, collage, camera-less photography, and other cutting-edge techniques, landed Laughlin the epithet "the father of American Surrealism." But lest there be any confusion, Laughlin was never directly affiliated with the Surrealists, though he did correspond with Man Ray. He also corresponded with several Modernist photographers, including Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston, and borrowed elements from modernist photography, such as strong compositions and highly glossy printing techniques. In fact, it can be argued that what makes Laughlin’s work so captivating is that it starts in the same lane as his Modernist peers, but then veers wildly in its own unchartered direction.

“Strange Light: The Photography of Clarence John Laughlin” is on view at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta through November 10. The museum boasts the largest and most important monographic holdings of the artist’s work. As such, the show features 80 of Laughlin’s most significant photographs taken between 1935 and 1965.

“From allegorical social commentary, to expertly constructed narratives, to bizarre material experimentation, Laugh-
Clockwise from top left: The Flower of Life, 1933, printed 1973, gelatin silver print; Figure with Iron Flames, 1940, printed 1981, gelatin silver print; Black Flames in the Sand, 1952, printed 1979, gelatin silver print. Opposite: The Enigma, 1941, gelatin silver print.

lin's effort to access a higher artistic potential for photography is evident throughout his career," says Gregory Harris, the High's associate curator of photography. "His desire to push the limits of photographic possibility paved the way for generations of artists and the growth of the medium into a tool of magical potential."

One standout of the exhibition is The Enigma, a 1941 gelatin silver print. The photograph takes an upward look at a vine-covered colonnade that might well belong to an Ancient Greek temple—the ruins of another fallen civilization—or the piazzas to nowhere in Giorgio de Chirico's paintings. The majestic Corinthian columns are instead the sole remains of Windsor Plantation of Port Gibson, Miss. The once-great house suffered two burnings—one during the Civil War, the other, under mysterious circumstances, in 1890. Through Laughlin's lens, the clouds above form a question mark, making the home's unknown plight more acute. In his caption for this photograph, the artist wrote, "From the cores of the brick columns young trees sprout, the whole structure suggesting an incredible upsurge of Classical civilization, somehow completely lost in time and space."

The Bat (1940, gelatin silver print) pictures Laughlin's wife, Elizabeth Heinzen, though her visage is completely obscured by draped black cloth. Laughlin took the exceedingly Gothic, German-Expressionist-esque image amidst the catacombs in the Metairie Cemetery in New Orleans, with symbolic meaning in mind. Of the work Laughlin elegantly wrote, "In the abbey of make-believe, the image of hypoc-
Clockwise from top left: A Living Glimpse Out of the Past, 1939, gelatin silver print; A Fragment of Desire: Woman as a Sex Object, 1941, printed 1981, gelatin silver print; The Bat, 1940, gelatin silver print; Moss Fingers, 1946, printed 1947, gelatin silver print.

risy appropriately appears concealing its head as with those who hypocritically hide their heads from the facts they don't want to acknowledge."

Laughlin was a master at using the female figure to Surrealist effect. Works in the show such as Figure with Iron Flames (1940, printed 1981, gelatin silver print), and A Fragment of Desire: Woman as a Sex Object (1941, printed 1981, gelatin silver print) showcase how his use of double-exposure and collage techniques created deus ex machina-like presences, as if the South had become the terrestrial intermediary to Mount Olympus.

Elegy for the Old South (No. 2) (1941, gelatin silver print with collage) is perhaps Laughlin's most surreal yet most socially critical work. Resembling a sort of phantasmagorical advent calendar, the image depicts a plantation house with twenty negative prints collaged on top of it. The house's window frames and columns are overlaid with colorized images—clouds, a plow, a hand, a crypt—that recall the plantation's history of slavery. Created in the era of William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams, the image shows both the dreamy eeriness and the mad chaos of the South. **30**