

Permanent Collection work:

Clarence John Laughlin
The Auto Eroticists, 1941
gelatin silver print
Gift of David B. Devine
6.386.1986

Essay by student, Anne Sowers, Spring 2001

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The Auto-Eroticists by Clarence John Laughlin

Clarence John Laughlin (1905-1985) was an American photographer most famous for his work in and around the South; more specifically Louisiana, in all its glorious rural decay. As a concerned human being living in the early twentieth century and witnessing the virtues and vices of industrialization as they developed, Laughlin was much affected by changes in the social and cultural climate. Scholars have remarked that his work reflected "a Proustian obsession with time and its passage, and implicit in that, a preoccupation with death."¹

Laughlin was working with the juxtaposition of text and images at a time when the field of photography was opposed to "heavy-handed" artistic license in the form of titles or captions. Having begun his career as a writer rather than as a photographer, his involvement with words and deeply symbolic images never waned, despite unfavorable professional criticism.

Admittedly possessed of extreme romanticism, Laughlin's *Poems of the Interior World* (originally titled *Poems from the Burning Cities of Our Time*) is a series containing 284 total images that revolve around the illustration of moral certainties. He never fully completed the set

¹ Ellenzweg, Allen. "Clarence John Laughlin at Robert Miller." *Art In America*. p.127

and some scholars claim he was plagued by an inability to match words with images in this particular project.² Shortly after Hitler's invasion of Poland, Laughlin summoned all of his anti-militaristic tendencies and set about trying to fix onto film images of what he perceived to be America's growing "cultural devitalization."³

The Auto-Eroticists, made in 1941, is but one example of the series a scholar has deemed "the manifested agonies of an individual artist as well as prophetic harbingers for the fate of mankind, which is what Laughlin consciously intended them to be."⁴ *The Auto-Eroticists* features a faceless, genderless allegorical figure set amidst a room full of ruins. Although no scholarly study analyzes this particular photograph or even claims it as part of the *Interior World* series, even the amateur eye surveying his groups of work can place it correctly. It is extremely characteristic of many of the other *Interior World* photographs, some of which feature the same scene of the veiled figure in a room; the only change is a shift in pose upon the pile of rubble.

Naomi Rosenblum, photography historian, describes Laughlin as a neo-Romantic fascinated with the unreal aspects of reality. Other scholars claim he is simply a Symbolist. This piece appears to be a perfect example of both possibilities in that it showcases a neo-Romantic sense of wonder and sensuality within a scene, and yet it fully complies with the Symbolist agenda of entertainment and stimulation for the viewer.⁵ The ambiguous subject matter coupled with the strange title are both vague and compelling, suggesting a disillusionment with society but offering no specific cause or resolution. The composition is an interesting use of a (presumably) female body, heavily veiled, with the only bit of bare skin granted us being a hand,

² Davis, Keith F. *Clarence John Laughlin: Visionary Photographer*. p.24

³ *Ibid.*, p. 19

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26

⁵ Rosenblum, Naomi. *A World History of Photography*. p. 297

which is planted atop her head in a strange gesture of self-absorption - a particularly compelling notion given the title of the photograph.

Given his moralistic tendencies, it would be easy to impose a pedantic framework onto Laughlin's depiction here, but the exact meaning he had in mind can never be known as the captions for his *Poems of the Interior World* series were never finished, including this one. Laughlin apparently attempted the captions for the pictures, but as of 1968 had completed nothing more than some rather instructive text with which he was quite unhappy, aiming as he was for a prose poem style that eluded him.⁶ Rather interestingly, one scholar reveals that Laughlin's ultimate goal was to turn this series into an experimental film as he strongly felt it was his most important piece of work and the place where his "overriding preoccupations came together most eloquently."⁷

Therefore, Laughlin's *The Auto-Eroticists* is a haunting, ethereal combination of words and an image that marks his early and yet unrequited idealism regarding photography. The artist had his highest hopes for the *Poems of the Interior World* series (of which this image is clearly a part), and yet never completed the project to his satisfaction. Like most of the other photographs in the series, *The Auto-Eroticists* is a "symbolic manifestation pointing to unconscious fears or dreams"⁸ present in American culture, circa-World War II, that remains, through chance and, perhaps, also the intent of the artist, largely a mystery to the viewer.

⁶ Leighten, Patricia Dee. "Clarence John Laughlin: The Art and Thought of an American Surrealist." *History of Photography*. p. 144

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131

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