

Reconsidering the Photography of Ralph Burns

Looking at the photographs of Ralph Burns in his light-filled Asheville studio—including the images of a Santeria healer in Cuba, a street preacher in Boston, Billy Graham at a podium in Asheville, a woman immersed in the River Jordan, Elvis pilgrims gathered in the Meditation Garden at Graceland, a Muslim woman kneeling in prayer in Israel—you are struck by the range and the depth of his vision. This is, unquestionably, serious art, by a serious photographer, one who is based in the South yet open to the larger world. Writing in 1996, and underscoring this point, Burns described his process of working on the *North Carolina To Israel Photographic Project* of that year. “I wandered across much of Israel and Palestine looking for the heart of my project, but always with a feeling of disharmony...I wandered where I found myself, passing not untouched between the furies and lamentations, humbled by the complexities and ambiguities, wondering at times whether life was not some grim mistake. I held tight to my own heart but to little avail...and each day since I have had to fight that sense of doom which seemed to be hiding between the stones and lurking beneath the beds of that unyielding and embittered land I fell so in love with.”ⁱ

Burns, who has worked in this downtown Asheville studio since 1977, is recognized for his black-and-white photographs, presented in a social documentary style, created with a 35 mm camera and printed by his hand. These images reflect his awareness of the traditions of documentary photography, including the works of Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, Russell Lee, Margaret Burke-White and a generation associated with the FSA and the era of the Great Depression, when photographers gave us direct and iconic depictions of life in America. Burns has photographed extensively across the American South, his native region, and has traveled and photographed as well in countries including Mexico, Cuba, Israel, India and Thailand. Writing about his photographs included in an exhibition at the Asheville Art Museum in 2007, the museum’s curators noted that, “Burns has returned again and again to themes of loss, ceremony and regeneration. Much of his work focuses a critical and compassionate eye on people whose devotion borders on the obsessive, whether Fundamentalist Christian pilgrims or fans of Elvis Presley.”ⁱⁱ

Burns was born (1944) and raised in metropolitan New Orleans, where the world of the spirit, as well as the interchange between the living and the dead, is integrated into daily life, as is particularly evident during Mardi Gras, All Souls Day and St. Patrick’s Day, at jazz funerals and in voodoo ceremonies (the grave of Marie Laveau remains a major tourist destination). He grew up in Gretna, on the West Bank, and crossed the Mississippi River to the city of New Orleans daily, riding on the Jackson Avenue ferry as part of his journey to study at Jesuit High School. Later, during his college years, he spent countless hours immersed in the intellectual ambience of the historic Napoleon House in the French Quarter, where academics and writers regularly gathered for conversation and drinks in the 1960s. His first photograph, as he recently recalled, was taken at the age of 13, near his Gretna home, using a Brownie camera to make a self-portrait, an act of photographic self-examination that continues to interest, and amuse, him today. In addition to the

culture and traditions of New Orleans, he was strongly influenced by his mother's roots in Acadiana and the unique Cajun culture of Louisiana.

New Orleans is a highly visual city, one where photography seems to be in the air, a natural part of the environment. Walker Evans, Fonville Winans, Eudora Welty, Clarence John Laughlin, Ralston Crawford, Elliott Erwitt, Herman Leonard and many others created notable images there. Robert Frank created his iconic photograph of a New Orleans streetcar (*Trolley-New Orleans*), published in *The Americans* in 1958, a scene of daily life in a segregated Southern city that was striking, yet familiar, to Ralph Burns, who rode the city's segregated streetcars and buses to Catholic high school every day.ⁱⁱⁱ In May of 1960 (when Burns was sixteen) photographer William Claxton drove to New Orleans in a "rented 1959 Chevrolet Impala," and photographed jazz musicians, members of the city's marching bands (the Tuxedo Brass Band, the Eureka Brass Band and the George Williams Brass Band), jazz funerals, Creole club celebrations and the city's cemeteries, then published these images in *New Orleans: Jazzlife, 1960*. Claxton later described the city he discovered. "Arriving in New Orleans, Louisiana, for the first time in May of 1960 was like seeing the back lot of a large movie studio. With its motley assortment of architecture, stone and brick-paved streets, one could be in Paris, Madrid or Boston...[it] is a melting-pot of many cultures, whose cuisine, religions (mainly Catholic and Baptist), arts and entertainments are as varied as the settlers living there."^{iv}

Growing up in this urban environment, perhaps it was inevitable that Ralph Burns would discover photography there. After graduating from Jesuit High he enrolled at the then-new campus of Louisiana State University in New Orleans (LSUNO), opened in 1958 by LSU as the first integrated campus in the state (today it is the University of New Orleans).^v He recently recalled that he discovered the photographic process on this campus, while working as a writer for his college paper, *Driftwood*, when the staff photographer invited him to watch the development process in the darkroom. It was a revelation to Burns. He immediately realized that photography offered a new creative path, one that "could be poetic," and was based on a systematic development process that he could master. His interests shifted from writing to photography, and he began to explore the "creative power of the camera." After graduating from LSUNO with a degree in political science, he served in the Air Force during the era of the Vietnam War. He took his camera with him. When his Air Force service ended in 1972, he traveled extensively through Europe and India, using his camera to document the discoveries associated with his explorations of a wide range of new cultural environments. During the early 1970s, photography was just beginning to be accepted as an art form and collected by museums, including the New Orleans Museum of Art. In 1979, after Burns had moved from the city, New Orleans photographer Joshua Mann Paillet opened a Gallery of Fine Photography in the French Quarter (now regarded as a leading national photography gallery).

Determined to become a documentary photographer, Burns settled in Asheville in 1975, living and working in a downtown environment that was very different than the one he sees today. He studied photographers and photography, and read the contemporary photo magazines and monographs of the day, admiring the work of Diane Arbus, Robert Frank,

Mary Ellen Mark, Lee Friedlander, Gary Winogrand and Danny Lyons. One photograph by Mary Ellen Mark made a lasting impression on him, encouraging him on the path he was exploring. 1976, the year of the American Bicentennial, when American history and culture were widely celebrated (and often rediscovered), was also a significant year for photographic exhibitions and projects across the nation. One of the most controversial exhibitions of the year was devoted to Memphis-based photographer William Eggleston, who was given the first one-man color photography exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, accompanied by a publication, *William Eggleston's Guide*. Now regarded as a milestone in contemporary photographic history, at the time it was an exhibition that inflamed a number of New York critics and photography collectors (who were stunned by his seemingly mundane Southern subject matter), yet inspired many others (including a number of emerging Southern photographers).

Settling into Asheville as these issues unfolded nationally, Burns and his wife Brigid, also a photographer, initially worked in a space on Wall Street, then moved to Walnut Street in 1977, where they built a darkroom and studio, operating as Iris Photographic Printworks. Ralph photographed and documented the city of Asheville during those transitional years (photographs that are little known and rarely seen today). In time, Ralph and Brigid started selling photographic supplies and developed film for customers in their lab, establishing the foundations of the business that has evolved into today's Iris Photo + Digital Imaging. In 1979, they initiated a long-running series of photographic exhibitions, featuring photographers such as Jill Boniske, John Scarlata, Frank Hunter, Roger Manley, Tim Barnwell, Linda Foard, Steve Mann, Randall Tosh, Clinton Smith and others. An ambitious exhibition, *The Italian Eye*, including the works of fifteen contemporary Italian photographers, was presented there in 1980; it was also exhibited in Milan, Mexico City and New York City. In addition to exhibitions, they offered a range of educational programs and musical performances to the public, creating, in essence, their own photographic arts center in downtown Asheville.

While running their growing photographic business and maintaining his activities as a gallery curator, Burns slowed the pace of exhibiting his own art photographs but he continued to take photographs, advancing his concept of working in photographic series and extended projects. The first of these, and his longest running series, extending over two decades, is the Graceland project, *How Great Thou Art* (1978-2008). Begun one year after the death of Elvis Presley (and three years after he moved to Asheville), this became Burns' most recognized work, nationally and internationally. It is also work that has been regularly misinterpreted, especially by those who regard his photographs as an outsider's cynical and ironic documentation of the annual rituals of Elvis's perceived low brow fans in Memphis. At first, as Burns has explained, he was "drawn to Graceland not for Elvis but for the event itself, for the photographs that I sensed waited there, for the wonderful strangeness of it all, for the new myth...So I went, an unwitting pilgrim to the nascent shrine." He discovered, however, that it was considerably more than he had anticipated and returned there regularly, discovering a community of believers at Graceland. "So I go back and stand by the grave and watch people, some of whom are now my friends, and talk with them about their lives and ease into their feelings and ask them why and try to make some sense of it all and inevitably wonder about them and about me and about us

and wish that I had answers and that I knew more about this incredible love and pain and worship spread so easily before me.”^{vi}

Burns discovered deeper meanings in the feelings and emotions shared by those who make the pilgrimage to Graceland, often annually, where they demonstrate their appreciation for the complex, contradictory and still iconic figure who touched them (and so many others) on profound levels--a Southern figure who crossed (then merged) traditional boundaries (secular/religious, black/white, gospel/blues)--a hip-shaking rocker who was mobbed by female fans, yet always expressed his love for his mother, just as he loved traditional Southern gospel music. Burns' treks to Memphis and Graceland produced a wide range of images over the years, many focusing upon the crowds who convene there--outside the gates, in front of the house and especially in the vortex of the Meditation Garden (built by Elvis in 1965), containing the graves of Elvis Aaron Presley, Gladys Love Smith Presley (his mother), Vernon Elvis Presley (his father) and Minnie Mae (Hood) Presley (his grandmother). One of his best-known photographs was taken near Graceland, and features a blanket-covered Elvis figure in a Memphis motel room, with a cigarette-smoking woman seated nearby who observes (protects?) a form that could simply be an Elvis mannequin, or as readily a religious icon (like so many others Burns has seen and photographed in Mexico, Cuba and Israel). A related photograph, taken outside Graceland, depicts a man carrying a large statue of Elvis, an object that could just as readily be one of the religious icons seen at pilgrimage centers.

During the 1990s, while *How Great Thou Art* achieved growing national recognition (and new photographs were added to the series) and his Asheville photo business evolved, Burns expanded his travels and the scope of his subject matter, although a number of continuing themes--depicting religious events and spiritual gatherings--unify these works. This is evident in his 1992 series, *Tent Revival*, devoted to a revival in Naples, North Carolina, including the image of a boy staring up, beyond an apocalyptic hand-painted mural on a revival trailer, as the message “Prepare To Meet Thy God” looms over him. This is a charged yet poignant photograph (one that serves as this exhibition's signature image). After opening a major selection of works in a presentation of *How Great Thou Art* at the Blue Spiral 1 Gallery in Asheville in 1994, he traveled to Boston and photographed an animated preacher (*Street Preacher*) working on Boston Common, and in contrast, a much younger Boston figure in a parallel religious mode (*Child Proselytizer*). That year he traveled to nearby Union, South Carolina, to photograph the public gatherings and offerings made to the sons of Susan Smith, who were drowned by their mother, followed by major media coverage and the appearance of significant crowds of mourners (*John D. Long Lake*). In 1995, after ongoing media accounts of miraculous apparitions in Conyers, Georgia, attracted thousands of pilgrims, he went there and created photographs including *Marian Apparition Site*.

With these diverse projects as prelude, in 1996 he was awarded a two-month residency grant (along with Linda Kroff, Roger Manley and Susan H. Page) to live and work in Israel and to create works for an exhibition, *North Carolina To Israel Photographic Project*. As he explained, his “proposal was to photograph Israel as the modern manifestation of the ancient human dream of transcendence and well-being; Israel as an

intense and complicated dreamscape of love, worship, ritual and loss; Israel as the elevated stage upon which humans attempt to placate their long inner night.” He discovered, once there, that pain “was everywhere and seemed to exist in everything,” and began to wonder, as he photographed, if he “had fallen into the wrong place, not into the Israel of my dreams but rather into some Faustian mischief.” His photographs, including *Yeshiva Student*, *Feast of Lag b’Omer* and *Dancing on Roof of Synagogue*, convey the complexity, mystery and intense emotionality he discovered there, and suggest the attraction Israel and its people continue to hold for him to the present day.

The following year, he returned to Conyers, Georgia, where he photographed the ongoing events there (*Marian Apparition Site*, 1997), and traveled to the nation’s capital for events organized by the “Promise Keepers,” who assembled on the National Mall. As a result, he produced a series of photographs titled *Prayer Teepee, Promise Keepers* (1997) depicting events (including the laying on of hands) presented in these teepees. Early in 1998, his works were included in the *Evicted Sentiments* exhibition at SECCA in Winston-Salem, where he was shown with fellow Southern documentary photographers including Debbie Fleming Caffery, Tom Rankin, A.J. Meek, Rob Amberg, Paul Kwilecki, Elizabeth Matheson and John McWilliams. In 1999, he took a series of photographs in a New Orleans cemetery (long one of his favorite subjects and locations, going back to his earliest years in photography), creating images including *Burial*.

That same year, as the new millennium approached, his photographs were included in a European exhibition, *Heaven—an exhibition that will break your heart*, presented in the Dusseldorf Kunsthalle and at the Tate Gallery Liverpool. After reading the *Time* magazine article devoted to this exhibition, one might conclude that Burns had been far ahead of the art world in his focus on Graceland and its pilgrims, as suggested by the show’s curator, Doreet LeVitte Harten. “It was clear: there’s a godlike relationship with pop celebrities...And when they die, they assume the role of martyrs. I went to Graceland, and I couldn’t believe it. So many people who believe Elvis is not dead, and ascribe healing powers to him.”^{vii} While his photographs were exhibited internationally, and he explored ongoing and new photographic projects, Burns also taught photographic workshops and served as a photography instructor at nearby Penland School (1992-2004).

During the past decade, his career has been marked by a series of journeys notable for documenting world religions and spiritual practices (and rituals), suggesting the larger context in which the *How Great Thou Art* series should be considered. In 2002, he traveled to Thailand, where he created the image *Buddhist Student*. In 2003 and 2004 he explored patterns of contemporary life and spiritual gatherings in Cuba and Mexico (both are countries he visits regularly, intrigued by the people and cultures he discovered on his journeys there). A major religious theme developed in both countries, evident in photographs like *Feast of San Lazaro* in El Rincon, Cuba (2003); the *Feast of Nuestra Senora de Caridad* in Mexico City (2003); the *Feast of Nuestra Senora de Caridad* in Santiago de Cuba (2004); and *Santeria Healing* (2004), a ritual he documented in Havana, but might have been able to discover in his native New Orleans, a city long connected to the people, culture and spiritual practices of Cuba. The most recent photograph included in this exhibition, titled *Easter*, was taken in Mexico in 2009.

Building upon his earlier photograph of the Billy Graham crusade in Asheville and the tent revival in Naples, North Carolina, Burns continued to document religious gatherings and events in North Carolina, as evident in photographs such as *Cane Creek, Yancey County, NC* (2006), depicting a boy in an immersion baptism in Cane Creek. Here we sense that the photographer is both documenting the event and somehow involved in the emotion and intensity of that moment. Burns eschews the use of long lenses and shooting photographs from a distance, preferring to be close to his subjects, engaging them, and drawing upon the emotion and energy of the moment. Here he documents the trust, the faith, the sense of engagement and spiritual release (a release into something larger than self, into something that engulfs the young man). Many of his photographs attempt to document this sense of spiritual engagement and his subject's intended path toward transcendence, one of Burns' continuing interests and subjects.

This exhibition is Burns's first one-man show in Asheville since 1994 (when he exhibited at the Blue Spiral 1 Gallery), and in Western North Carolina since 2005 (when he exhibited at Brevard College). As such, it offers viewers (many new to Burns and his work) an opportunity to reflect upon his photographs, and his career of more than 35 years in Asheville and North Carolina. It is being presented at Pink Dog Creative, a significant new addition to the city's River Arts District (opened in 2011), developed through the notable vision and efforts of Hedy Fisher and Randy Shull. This exhibition also offers the opportunity to ask why we don't know more about Ralph Burns and his work, an individual who is such a central figure in the city's creative community. This reconsideration, it seems to this observer, is long overdue. One can't help wondering, considering the state of our nation and the world today (including ongoing events in Israel, Mexico and Cuba), how his work will continue to evolve in the coming years. Despite the public response to the recent deaths of Whitney Houston, Michael Jackson, Amy Winehouse and others, for example, what may be more striking is the lasting emotion and loyalty devoted to Elvis Presley, as still evident at Graceland so long after his death. *How Great Thou Art*, indeed, and how timely Ralph Burns was in photographing and documenting a phenomenon that continues, seemingly unabated, well into the 21st century.

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ⁱ Ralph Burns, *Artist Statement*, in The Israel/North Carolina Cultural Exchange, *North Carolina To Israel Photographic Project* (Asheville: Asheville Art Museum and The Light Factory, 1997), 49-50.

ⁱⁱ Asheville Art Museum, *Ralph Burns*, in *Make It New, Western North Carolina Artists Exhibition 2007* (Asheville: Asheville Art Museum, 2007), 10.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Frank, introduction by Jack Kerouac, *The Americans* (Paris: Robert Delpire, 1958).
- ^{iv} William Claxton and Joachim E. Berendt, *New Orleans, Jazzlife, 1960* (Koln: Taschen, 2006), 13.
- ^v See Robert L. Dupont, *On Higher Ground, The University of New Orleans at 50* (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2008).
- ^{vi} Ralph Burns, (gallery guide) *Love Me Tender: Images from Graceland* (Asheville: Asheville Art Museum, 1990).
- ^{vii} Jordan Bonfante, "Heavenly Bodies," *Time* (November 1, 1999), 74.