

FotoFocus Talk Spotlights Lexington's Photographic Heritage

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Wendell Berry with Nip and Jed - Photo: Guy Mendes

If the assault of Mitch McConnell ads has you thinking Kentucky must be the most hopelessly unprogressive state ever, a FotoFocus Biennial-related lecture last Sunday provided another take on the Bluegrass State.

The speaker, who also presented slides, was the veteran Lexington photographer Guy Mendes, who with Carey Gough has the exhibition *Blue Roots and Uncommon Wealth: The Kentucky Photographs* at Over-the-Rhine's Iris BookCafe, 1331 Main St., through Jan. 25. His presentation, organized by Iris' photography curator William Messer, was at Mr. Pitiful's bar, close to Iris.

Mendes, active in Kentucky arts, public television production and higher education since the late 1960s, has been collected by Ashley Judd, Willie Nelson, Maker's Mark (he's very proud of that) and the New Orleans and Cincinnati art museums, among others. At Mr. Pitiful's, he made a compelling case for Lexington as a center for progressive creative thought — in photography, especially — that has had a broad influence on our times.

As a college town (University of Kentucky), Lexington maybe has been better known for its basketball than its radicalism, but Mendes made it seem like it could hold its own with Berkeley, Calif., Ann Arbor, Mich., or Madison, Wis., in any history of counter-cultural hotspots.

His presentation focused on a group he became part of in the late 1960s, the Lexington Camera Club, active from the 1950s to the early 1970s (and recently revived). While, like other camera clubs it attracted its share of hobbyists, it also had stalwart support from open-minded professionals with an experimentalist bent.

Mendes mentioned and showed slides of work from the Camera Club's first golden era. The accomplishments of these now-deceased members was impressive — Van Deren Coke (who went on to become director of the George Eastman House); Robert May, who specialized in multiple exposures; James Baker Hall, a poet (and former state Poet Laureate) and photographer whose haunting series of images featuring collaged family photos may have been a way to deal with his mother's suicide when he was a child.

One Camera Club photographer, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, has become recognized since his 1972 death as one of America's most memorable — and spookiest. His black-and-white shots of children and adults wearing masks in strange settings are still unsettling.

Lexington was restive in the anti-Vietnam War days, and Mendes published an underground newspaper called *Blue-Tail Fly* and was involved in protests. And as he became friends with local writers Wendell Berry and Ed McClanahan, his literary and photographic worlds began to merge. (Both still are active today.)

In Mendes' show at Iris, those two figures are in probably the two most striking photographs. One is a 2012 portrait of Berry, on a farm in Henry County, with his horses Nip and Jed grazing behind him. It's sheer happenstance, but the horses' placement is such as to create the illusion is that their heads extend from his shoulders. Messer refers to them as "horse angel wings," and it's a great tribute to Berry, an environmentalist as well as a writer. The photo gives the elderly man a heavenly glow.

McClanahan is involved in the weirdest photograph in the show — 1972's "The Fabulous Little Enis & Go Go Girls of Boots Bar." This photo (in a tarted-up version) accompanied McClanahan's article about this colorful musician in *Playboy*. It depicts the left-handed, backwards-holding guitarist Little Enis and a chorus line of scantily clad women outside the bar.

The late Carlos Toadvine's stage name "Enis," Mendes told his audience, was a play on the nickname given to Elvis Presley as "Elvis the Pelvis" — you get the point. Mendes said Enis was a fabulous guitarist but the working-class Boots Bar was a tough place for scruffy, hippy-looking artists like McClanahan and himself in 1972. On their first visit there, McClanahan and Mendes, were greeted by a flying beer bottle. (On the Internet, there is a photo of long-haired college-age young men admiring Little Enis' act, so maybe the bar got a little safer with time.)

The Iris show also features color photographs of Kentucky music-related sites by Gough, who considers Mendes a mentor.

Lexington's impact on the arts is fascinating in other ways, too. The writer Bobbie Ann Mason attended UK, as did the great character actor Harry Dean Stanton. (There is now a film festival there in his honor.) Walter Tevis based his novel *The Hustler* on a pool hall there. Punk icon Richard Hell was born and raised there, as was Cincinnati artist/composer Jay Bolotin.

There must be something in the bluegrass. It's captured in Mendes' photographs.