



Teske, Edmund (1911-1996)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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In a career that spanned over sixty years, American photographer Edmund Teske created a distinct and inventive body of work that embraced multiple styles and subjects, from somber urban vistas to intimate, often eroticized, portraits. Although primarily self-taught in the photographic process, Teske's sophisticated experiments with darkroom techniques, such as solarization, layered negatives, and composite printing became his signature distinction.

Noting that Teske considered himself a "poet with a camera," the curator and writer Julian Cox observed that Teske's "subject matter--sometimes abstract, often homoerotic, and always lyrical and poetic--opened up new areas for photographers to explore."

Similarly, Lee Witkin, a photography dealer who has exhibited many of Teske's works, heralded him as "one of the forgotten greats of American photography," and observed that "his photographs are poems of his life--fragments of the far past combined with yesterday and today."

Edmund Teske was born on the near South Side of Chicago, Illinois on March 7, 1911, the first of three children to German Lutheran immigrants, Rudolph and Olga Teske.

When he was a young child, his family moved out of the city to a small farm a few miles outside of Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin. His father attempted to raise cows and chickens, and grow wheat, potatoes, and cucumbers. The work, however, turned out to be much more strenuous--and much less prosperous--than expected, and within a short time the family moved back to Chicago.

Teske recalled taking his first photographs at the age of seven, capturing images of his parents and assorted aunts, uncles, and cousins at a family picnic, using his mother's Eastman Kodak box camera.

"And lo and behold," he remarked many years later, "the entire objective world was boiled down to where a child could get a deeper sense of it. There was Aunt Tina, the duchess of the family, and I had her where I wanted her--right in the ground glass of my big box camera. That started that: From then on, I was a snap shooter."

He attended Madison Elementary School on Chicago's South Side where his interest in photography was further encouraged by one of his teachers, Mabel A. Morehouse. Not only did Morehouse instruct her

students in basic photographic techniques, but also inspired them to approach their work creatively.

Teske soon became obsessed. He set aside other childhood interests, such as printmaking and playing the saxophone and the piano, to pursue his hobby of photography almost exclusively.

He gradually became uninspired by his academic studies and dropped out of high school in 1927, just two semesters short of graduation. Nonetheless, Teske remained an avid reader, and was particularly interested in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Carl Jung, and Sigmund Freud. His greatest admiration, however, was for the poetry of Walt Whitman.

As Julian Cox notes in his monograph on Teske, "It was especially in regard to the expression of his own sexuality that Teske gleaned much from the poetry of Walt Whitman, who openly acknowledged the potential for same-gender affinities. Teske sensed that he was inherently drawn to both men and women and believed that the overlapping masculine and feminine attributes in the individual should be honored, and explored, rather than denied."

Soon after leaving school, Teske found employment at Mandel Brothers department store in downtown Chicago. In the evenings, he took drawing and painting classes at the Huttle Art Studio.

Motivated by his art classes, Teske set up a darkroom in the basement of his family's home. He later described the excitement of experimenting with photography as "like sitting down at the piano and getting lost in the musical composition."

In 1933, Teske became friends with Edwin Boland, a Chicago photographer who produced images of openly eroticized male nudes. Teske recalled that Boland "was very much into the wonder and the beauty of the athletic male being, and he emulated the beauty of the male form as it was emulated in ancient Greece."

Teske was captivated by Boland's bold themes and subject matter, and began experimenting in homoerotic imagery himself. In the basement studio of his family's home, Teske took his first male nude photographs. His 1933 study of two friends, Harry Gillies and Raymond Hammond, demonstrates, as Julian Cox notes, "an unabashed enjoyment of the nude male form." Cox further observes that "the twinning of nude figures immediately heightens the picture's homoerotic appeal" and "both men are self-consciously posed in profile to vaunt their angular facial features and taut, muscular physiques."

In addition to Boland's work, the art of a number of prominent contemporary photographers, including Man Ray, Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Alfred Stieglitz, also inspired Teske. In fact, in the spring of 1936, Teske took a train trip to New York City, principally to meet Stieglitz at his gallery, An American Place. It was an experience that Teske later described as "formative."

He also met Stieglitz's wife, the painter Georgia O'Keeffe, at the gallery. "I met her briefly in a silent moment," he remembered, "that has expanded into an eternity. [To] have O'Keeffe look at you and smile opened the doors into the creative realms of being."

Later in 1936, at the age of 25, Teske was invited by the celebrated architect Frank Lloyd Wright to stay at his Wisconsin studio, Taliesin North, as a photographer and archivist for the Taliesin Fellowship program.

Wright's studio in Spring Green, Wisconsin was established as a community dedicated to stimulating individual growth and development in all the arts, but particularly architecture. The Taliesin Fellowship was designed to foster an exploration of the connectedness of different forms of artistic expression.

As he recalled, "Mr. Wright looked at my folio of photographs and said . . . 'Let's keep Teske here to do portraits of us all.'"

Teske created a photographic workshop within Taliesin to document the daily activities of the Fellowship and of Wright's many architectural projects. Wright also encouraged Teske to explore the different relationships between architecture and photography.

Teske was open about his attraction to other men during his stay at Taliesin and his sexuality appeared never to have been met with censure or disapproval by Wright or the other members of the Fellowship. In fact, as two recent biographers of the architect have noted, "[Wright] was undeniably drawn to gay men, and felt comfortable with them."

Teske remembered attending a Halloween party at Taliesin; he was dressed in a conventional tuxedo while his lover at the time, a male apprentice, came dressed in a long gown of cream-colored Spanish lace. "He made a more beautiful woman than he did a man," Teske later recalled. The two men were dancing in the Taliesin living room when Wright tapped Teske on the shoulder. "I stepped aside," Teske said, "and turned the Spanish prima donna over to [Wright], and he danced with her."

Reflecting on his experiences many years later, Teske said, "My photography is a summation of my life experience," of which, "Frank Lloyd Wright and Taliesin are the dominant chords, the dominant intonations."

Teske worked at Taliesin for two years and then eventually moved back to Chicago. However, in 1939, Teske was in New York, working as an assistant for the famed photographer, Berenice Abbott. Abbott is perhaps best known for her photographs of New York City architecture, as well as for her memorable images of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men in Paris and New York.

Shortly after his return to Chicago from New York in 1940, Teske attended classes and taught informally at the New Bauhaus (later renamed the Illinois Institute of Technology), a design school founded in 1937 by the Hungarian painter and photographer László Moholy-Nagy, who was a strong advocate on the integration of technology and industry into the arts.

One of the most admired photographs that Teske took during this same period was a black-and-white portrait of his boyfriend, Richard Soakup. In the photograph, Soakup, bare-chested and grease-covered, emerges from a dark interior, an automobile in the background, which he has clearly just been repairing. The natural light is focused on Soakup's tousled, curly blond hair and smooth chest. As Julian Cox notes, "although Soakup is engaged in labor usually associated with men, the intimate image has a soft, almost

feminine, quality to it."

Teske also commenced on a series of photographs that he later called "Portrait of My City," which documented urban scenes of Chicago. He captured images of steel mills, storefronts, industrial buildings, and makeshift shanties.

Teske believed that photographing such quotidian objects could elevate them and reveal their larger significance, explaining, "Their emotional value is physical--being strong in structure and movement--and sensuous in textural rendition. They are experienced rather than recognized."

With the entrance of the United States into World War II, Teske was drafted at the beginning of 1942 and summoned for a physical examination prior to his induction into the Army. He failed the medical exam, rejected on the grounds of "asocial tendencies, psychoneurosis, and emotional instability"--coded medical terms, perhaps, to indicate someone as unselfconsciously attracted to men as Teske.

His considerable photographic skills and experience were noted, however, and Teske was appointed by the War Department as an Assistant Photographer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at the Rock Island Arsenal in Illinois.

Although Teske found the work tedious, it provided him with financial security and the means to undertake his own photography after hours. Teske also found himself in a predominantly all-male environment with the independence to continue to pursue his interest in same-sex relationships and homoerotic imagery.

For example, he befriended two young men whom he met at the Rock Island Arsenal. They both offered to pose nude for his camera. Teske took a series of nudes of one of these young men, and his photographs convey a distinct interest in the sitter's muscular body and a keen appreciation of the nude male form.

In early 1943, Teske was able to leave his position at the Rock Island Arsenal, and "terribly undone by the Chicago winters," he decided to move to Los Angeles. On his drive out to the West Coast, he visited and photographed the winter home of Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin Fellowship in Scottsdale, Arizona.

He was initially drawn to the romantic allure of Hollywood, and even toyed with the idea of becoming an actor. He found employment at Paramount Studios in the still department, but stayed "just long enough to know that wasn't what to do."

The wealthy oil heiress Aline Barnsdall invited Teske to visit Olive Hill, her 36-acre site in Hollywood that she had intended to establish as an arts and theater complex.

Unfortunately, the project was never completed, but Teske eventually took up residence in a separate studio space on the site, adjacent to the landmark Hollyhock House, which Frank Lloyd Wright had designed for Barnsdall.

Teske was quickly embraced by the artistic and bohemian communities in the city, and began hosting informal gatherings on the sprawling grounds of Barnsdall's estate. His guests often included such artists as the photographer Man Ray, bisexual writer Anaïs Nin, gay film director George Cukor, the actor Joel McCrea and his wife, the actress Frances Dee, and the architect John Lautner, who had also been a member of Wright's Taliesin Fellowship in Wisconsin during the 1930s.

In 1945, Teske met writer Christopher Isherwood, who introduced him to the Hindu philosophy of Vedanta, which emphasizes the unity and connectedness of all things in the universe.

Subsequently, Vedantic thought, as well as Hindu mythology and symbolism, became a profound influence on Teske, leading him to explore the possibilities of merging multiple images in a single photograph and introducing symbolism into his work.

For example, he printed the same image of a naked male lying on his back with his genitals exposed and overlaid this image with a series of other images that included human faces, landscapes, interiors, or completely abstract subjects.

He also began experimenting with other darkroom techniques, such as solarization, the process by which some of the tones in a photograph are reversed by overexposure to light. He created a new process that was later known as duotone solarization, which Julian Cox has defined as a technique that "yields unique prints with reversed light and dark tones and unusual color effects in shades of mostly red or brown."

In 1950, with his Olive Hill studio scheduled for demolition, Teske rented a house in Topanga Canyon, in the Los Angeles area. He became friends with the blacklisted bisexual actor Will Geer (who would later play the beloved grandfather on the 1970s television series *The Waltons*). Teske joined Geer's theatrical group, Theatricum Botanicum, and used Geer as a subject for numerous photographic portraits until the actor's death in 1978.

Teske also became friends with the openly gay experimental filmmaker Kenneth Anger. In 1954, Teske photographed Anger on a bluff in Topanga Canyon and overlaid the image with an engraving by Gustave Doré illustrating John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Teske then created solarized and negative print variations, further abstracting the photograph and suggesting a mystical or spiritual otherworldliness.

Teske also collaborated, uncredited, with Anger on his short film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954).

In 1956, Teske had a small role as a painter in the biographical film *Lust for Life*, about the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh (played by Kirk Douglas), directed by Vincente Minnelli.

Teske's influence on other photographers grew in the 1960s when Robert Heinecken, the American photographer and conceptual artist, who taught at the UCLA Art Department and founded the department's photography program, invited him to join the UCLA faculty.

"He stood out in my mind," Heinecken later explained, "as an individual who had very valuable things to talk to young people about in terms of life experience as well as photography. He is completely unique, which is why I thought he would be effective. And he was."

Teske met Jim Morrison, lead singer for the rock band The Doors, in early 1970. Teske instantly became entranced by the singer's masculine beauty and the "poetic spirit of his nature." He embarked on a series of informal portraits of Morrison and his girlfriend Pamela Courson. Teske's photographs later appeared on The Doors' 1970 compilation album *13* and the group's final studio album *An American Prayer* (1978), as well as in a book of Morrison's poetry, *The Lords and the New Creatures* (1970).

In 1990, Teske was shot at, and nearly killed, by an unknown assailant as he stood in the doorway of his studio, where he had lived for more than thirty years. He survived the attack, but the left side of his face was permanently disfigured.

From then on, Lawrence Bump, his longtime assistant, and Nils Vidstrand, a former photographic model and student, became his full-time caretakers.

"Nils is a dominant element in my work," Teske said in an interview. "He's like Apollo beautiful. Part of my mission is to bring forward the beauty and the wonder of all things, particularly the male, because in our time and place, and for the past hundred or more years, the beauty of the male has been put down."

Tragedy struck again for Teske, on January 17, 1994, when he was nearly killed by the powerful Northridge earthquake. Although his residence and studio space collapsed, covering him with debris, he survived.

Teske continued to take photographs until his death on November 22, 1996, of a heart attack.

During his last few years, he enthusiastically worked on a book project to be called "Emanations," a six-volume collection of his life's work. The unfinished book is now part of the Edmund Teske Collection at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles.

Teske exhibited extensively in his lifetime, including at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Art Institute of Chicago; Pasadena Art Museum; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

A monograph on Teske's work, *Images from Within*, was published in 1980. In 1993, the J. Paul Getty Museum featured his work in the solo exhibition *Being and Becoming: Photographs by Edmund Teske*, and in 2004, the Getty presented a major retrospective of his work, *Spirit into Matter: The Photographs of Edmund Teske*.

The art critic A.D. Coleman has observed that, "Suffused with lyric mysticism, the photography of Edmund Teske is directed toward a spiritual investigation of the photographer's own psyche. Dream, memory, sexuality and nature are among the primary components."

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