



White, Minor (1908-1976)

by Ray Anne Lockard

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One of the most influential photographers of the second half of the twentieth century, Minor White was also a renowned teacher, critic, editor, and curator. A homosexual at a time when homosexuality was strictly forbidden in this country, White's sexuality was troubling to him. Nevertheless, he expressed it in his work.

Given the homophobic times in which he lived, however, it is not surprising that he suppressed the photographs of male nudes that he created early in his career.

Early Life

Minor Martin White was born on July 9, 1908 in Minneapolis to Charles Henry White, a bookkeeper, and Florence Martin White, a dressmaker. He became interested in photography at the age of ten when his grandfather, an amateur photographer, gave him a box Brownie camera. Two years later, when his grandfather died, White inherited the older man's photographic equipment.

White graduated from high school in 1927 and entered the University of Minnesota, where he became aware of his sexual orientation. His homosexuality was a source of torment for him, and it also disturbed his parents when he told them of his feelings.

At the university, White also learned the rudiments of photography, wrote poetry, and, after a hiatus in his education, obtained a B. S. degree in botany, with a minor in English, in 1934.

Becoming a Photographer

Shortly after graduating from college, White purchased a 35 mm Argus camera and traveled to the West Coast. He worked at the Beverly Hotel in Portland, Oregon as a night clerk from 1937 to 1938 and began his career in photography.

While in Portland, White lived at the YMCA. He was active in the Oregon Camera Club and spent his time photographing, exhibiting, and teaching photography to eager students.

In 1938 White was chosen as a creative photographer for the Works Progress Administration. His assignment was to photograph the Portland waterfront and the city's nineteenth-century iron-façade buildings, which were beginning to be demolished.

White also arranged two exhibitions for the WPA during that time. One was on early Portland architecture; the other, on the Portland waterfront.

In 1940 the WPA sent White to teach photography in its Art Center located in La Grande, Oregon near the Idaho border. He later directed the Center and wrote art criticism for local exhibitions while he was there.

White returned to Portland in 1941 with the intention of establishing a photography business. In the same year, he participated in the *Image of Freedom* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Recognizing the high quality of White's work, the museum acquired some of his images for its permanent collection.

White's first one-man exhibition of photographs taken in Eastern Oregon was held at the Portland Art Museum in 1942. His photographs were also published in *Fair Is Our Land*, edited by Samuel Chamberlain during that year. In addition, the Portland Art Museum commissioned White to photograph the Dolph and Lindley houses, two historical residences in the city.

The Army Years

White served in the U. S. Army Intelligence Corps from 1942 to 1945. He participated in the battle of the Philippines and was awarded a bronze star. He took some portraits of soldiers in his unit stationed in Hawaii. He also completed a book-length manuscript entitled "Eight Lessons in Photography," an exercise that anticipated his later career as teacher.

Prior to joining the Army, White had seriously discussed the Catholic faith with a good friend in La Grande. In the army, in 1943, he was baptized by a chaplain. This was an important step on a wide-ranging spiritual search that lasted throughout White's lifetime, one that would lead him to Buddhism and mysticism. During these years, he continued to wrestle with his homosexual feelings.

The New York Years

After being discharged from the Army, White moved to New York City where he studied aesthetics and art history with Meyer Shapiro at Columbia University from 1945 to 1946.

In New York, he met Beaumont Newhall, curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art and his wife, Nancy. The Newhalls introduced White to photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz, Berenice Abbott, Henry Callahan, Edward Steichen, Paul Strand, and Brett and Edward Weston, among others.

A meeting White had with Alfred Stieglitz in which the two artists discussed the older photographer's theory of Equivalents was a seminal event in White's life, especially as this meeting was coupled with viewing a retrospective exhibition of Edward Weston's work.

The California Years

In 1946 White accepted an invitation by Ansel Adams to become his assistant on the faculty of the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. He remained on the faculty until 1953. During his six-year career there White discovered that he and Adams shared the same approach to aesthetics and photographic technique. They became close friends and also shared a friendship and many discussions about photography with Edward Weston.

A small group of photographers, including the Newhalls, Dorothea Lange, and Barbara Morgan, met at Adams' house, where they decided to found a photography magazine that would publish and discuss serious photography. White became the editor of the newly founded *Aperture* quarterly in 1952. Modeled after Stieglitz's publication *Camerawork*, *Aperture* continues today. It did more than any other publication to improve the quality of photographic publishing in the last half of the twentieth century.

His Photographic Sequences

Meanwhile, in the immediate post-World War II years White struggled with one of his photographic sequences. Entitled *Second Sequence / Amputations*, the series was completed in 1946 and was scheduled

for exhibition at San Francisco's Palace of the Legion of Honor. The exhibition was, however, canceled because White refused to exhibit the pictures without the accompanying poetry that he had written, which the museum decreed was too personal and insufficiently patriotic.

White's first encounter with censorship did not prevent him from continuing to create work out of step with his times. However, it may have made him increasingly self-conscious about the homoerotic content of many of his images and it may have led him to think of a divide between work that was for public exhibition and work that was for his personal enjoyment and fulfillment.

White's 1946 groupings of photographs in a non-narrative form attempted to depict the private emotions of the individual soldier and the ambiguity of post-war patriotism. Despite the cancellation of the Palace of the Legion of Honor show, within a short time White exhibited a sequence entitled *Song without Words*. It was circulated around the country by the American Federation of Arts. It and related sequences were White's attempts to suggest obliquely the emotional turmoil he felt over his love and desire for men.

White's Style

White had been interested in the theater throughout his life, beginning in high school, and it was natural that he sometimes worked as a photographer for theater groups. The influence of theatrical work can be seen in much of his photography in his dramatic compositions, expressionistic lighting, and the manner in which he revealed the character of his models.

More than any other photographer of his time, White attempted to explore the depths he perceived beneath the surfaces of things and within his models. He avoided the pictorialism of photographers such as F. Holland Day or the surrealism of artists such as George Platt Lynes, but he attempted to infuse into his photographs a spirituality that might transform the worldly and the carnal.

White's Nudes

An early sequence that White entitled *The Temptation of Saint Anthony Is Mirrors* serves as an example. Consisting of nudes and portraits of a model named Tom Murphy, the sequence is one of White's most evocative. It was also the first time he allowed himself to portray the nude male body.

A famous image from the sequence simply entitled *Tom Murphy* (1947) illustrates White's theatrical lighting, as well as his need to closet his homosexuality and to transform the carnal into the spiritual. The model is depicted seated on the beach, feet and hands pushed flat on a piece of textured wood. A beautifully formed piece of driftwood is artistically placed to rise up through the bend in the model's left leg to rest on his right shoulder. The wood covers the model's genitals, but it also makes a telling statement about what is unrevealed and forbidden.

The subject of the photographer's gaze is concealed but the subject of the photograph is definitely declared. Murphy's head is buried in such deep shadow as to appear decapitated. He was the "hidden" subject of four other male nudes in a group that White created during 1948.

By 1950 the photographer was working with another young man. In the *Fifth Sequence / Portrait of a Young Man As Actor*, White worked in collaboration with the sitter, Mark Adams, who was also an artist and amateur actor.

Although his male nudes are an important achievement, they were not shown in public until the important 1989 exhibition entitled *Minor White: The Eye That Shapes*.

Post-War Success

The first post-war exhibition held of White's photography was at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1948. A variety of exhibition venues began to open to White during the 1950s. He directed *How to Read a Photograph* at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1953 and became Assistant Curator at the George Eastman House, a photography museum in Rochester, New York, during the same year. White served as curator of exhibitions there for four years and also edited *Image Magazine*.

Among the shows he directed during these years were *Camera Consciousness* (1954), *The Pictorial Image* (1955), and *Lyrical and Accurate* (1956). A large exhibition of his own work, *Sequence 13: Return to the Bud*, was also presented at Eastman House in 1959.

Distinguished Teacher

White taught photography part-time at Rochester Institute of Technology in 1955. In 1956 he resigned his position at George Eastman House to become a full-time lecturer in photography at Rochester, a position he held from 1956 to 1964.

During this time White also began to conduct workshops throughout the country, a practice he would continue for the rest of his life. As a teacher White influenced several fine contemporary photographers, including Paul Caponigro, Walter Chappell, Nathan Lyons, and Jerry Uelsmann, among others.

In Rochester White further developed his interests in mysticism and Eastern philosophy and the teachings of Gurdieff. He would later take these ideas into the classroom and use them to teach his students how to clear the mind and become fully present to a photographic subject.

In 1962 White was a founding member of the Society for Photographic Education and three years later he was made visiting professor in the Department of Architecture at MIT. White was promoted to a tenured professorship in 1969 and continued to teach and organize exhibitions there until 1974.

The year he received tenure, White also saw the publication of the first monograph of his photographs, *Mirrors, Messages, and Manifestations: Photographs and Writings 1938-1968*. The volume accompanied a major traveling exhibition of White's work that originated at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1970, a year in which he was also awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and began the Hotchkiss Workshop in Creative Photography in Connecticut.

White's Last Years

Although he was diagnosed with angina as early as 1966, White lived an extremely active life. While he curated exhibitions and taught at MIT, he also created his own work, conducted workshops, and gave seminars across the country. The pace was grueling and it began to affect his health.

White retired from the faculty of MIT during 1974 in an effort to reduce stress, but was also appointed Senior Lecturer and became a Fellow of the MIT Council of the Arts in 1975. He resigned as editor of *Aperture* the same year but also saw the first substantial exhibition of his photographs tour Europe.

White loved his work and accepted offers to lecture at the Victoria and Albert Museum, teach some classes in England, and participate in a symposium at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Finally, however, he suffered a heart attack that hospitalized him for several weeks.

But even the heart attack failed to stop his work. When he recovered, he became consulting editor of *Parabola Magazine* and received an honorary doctorate of Fine Arts from the San Francisco Art Institute.

He continued to work selectively until he died of a second heart attack in Boston on June 24, 1976.

A Closeted Life

Throughout his life White maintained a careful silence about his homosexuality. Painfully conscious of his need to maintain his career, especially his teaching career, which could have been destroyed by a whiff of scandal, he refused to exhibit photographs that were sexually explicit. Even the male nudes that he created but failed to exhibit were portrayed in a way that kept the model's identity in the shadows.

In spite of the psychological and emotional toll such closeting exacted of him, White was able to create art of a very high order. A deeply religious man who made a spiritual journey of his whole life, White made his art an integral part of that journey. One of the greatest photographers of the twentieth century, he was also one of the century's greatest teachers of photography.

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