

VICE

PHOTO

THE GROTESQUE EROTICISM OF WILLIAM MORTENSEN'S LOST PHOTOGRAPHY

By: Larry Lytle



Mortensen with Electric Bromoil Apparatus, *Mortensen works on a print of his paramour, actress Jean Harlow*

*Editor's note: One of the most exciting inclusions in the **VICE 2014 photo issue** is a pair of **images by William Mortensen**. Don't feel bad if you haven't heard of him—he was written into a footnote by the “straight photography” school of the 1950s, and referred to as “the*

*Antichrist” by Ansel Adams, a tag that stuck after Anton LaVey dedicated The Satanic Bible to him. Primarily known as a Hollywood portrait artist, he developed a myriad of pre-Photoshop special effects to craft grotesque, erotic, and mystical images. This fall, Feral House will release **American Grotesque**, a monograph on his occult photography. The book is edited by **Larry Lytle**, a fine artist and photo instructor in LA. Larry knows more about Mortensen than anyone, so we asked him to tell us a bit about his first encounters with this forgotten master.*

I've always left myself open to the possibilities afforded by chance encounters. This is a key lesson I teach my students: be prepared to open doors, even when there may be tigers lurking behind. There's an equal chance that a fair lady or handsome lad will be there to greet you instead. It all depends upon your outlook.

In 1980, I'd travelled with some students on a field trip to the municipal art gallery at Los Angeles' Barnsdall Park. There were two shows hanging in the cavernous space; we were there to see a large and comprehensive retrospective of the well-regarded LA abstract painter Lee Mullican.

By chance, the smaller exhibition—tucked away at the opposite end of the gallery—was another, though belated, retrospective of a photographer named William Mortensen. I'd never seen his work, and couldn't have guessed that my brief time spent with this extraordinary imagery wou



ld affect my life so profoundly.

The Mark Of The Devil, an image from Mortensen's "Witchcraft and Demonology" series

Mullican was a living painter at the height of his popularity. Mortensen, on the other hand, was long dead and, though once famous, his achievements had been consigned to the purgatory of deposed art stars. Yet it was Mortensen's photographs rather than Mullican's paintings that haunted me. Perhaps I was there on a day when Mortensen, a ghostly Lazarus, was wandering the gallery. It's possible, because that traveling show was the beginning of his artistic resurrection.

Mortensen's unfamiliar and challenging images stuck with me. As a neophyte, the photography I'd been exposed to was typically Ansel Adams-esque representations of the world. I was attending California State University, where I'd finally found a teacher, Jerry McMillan, whose ideas about photography were revelatory. McMillan espoused the sacrilegious notion that a photograph had possibilities beyond the well-chewed cud of photographic fodder, and could instead thrive in the rarified air of conceptual art. And so I'd been reveling in the photographic constructs of Les Krims, Jerry Uelsmann, and Robert Heinecken, to name a few. It shocked me that Mortensen's work, which seemed so conceptually contemporary, had been done a lifetime before.



Untitled (Experiment), one of Mortensen's many unpublished experimental images

Part of the reason his work has stayed with me is the *trompe l'oeil* effect created by his technical processes. These were photographs; the labels next to the frames said so. But without that information, one really couldn't tell if they were drawings or etchings. They seemed to be both and yet were neither. It wasn't until some years later that I came to understand that the images were a confluence of complex but photographically generated elements. It was the combination of those difficult and arcane techniques that so well served the singular and outré constructions of Mortensen's pictorial narrative.

I held on to the memory of Mortensen's work over the months and years after my initial exposure to it. About five years later, another encounter with chance offered itself. I was at my favorite used bookstore and stumbled upon a color reprint of Mortensen's fabled 1936 book *Monsters & Madonnas*. This was a version produced in 1967 two years after his death. On the back flyleaf, I saw to my delight that there were more Mortensen books waiting to be discovered. With *Monsters & Madonnas* as the beginning of my collection, I began a concentrated effort to obtain all nine of his books and acquire all of his articles printed in the myriad photographic magazines of the period. (There are just over a hundred Mortensen articles, with no complete list available, it's difficult to know when you've truly found the last one.) I became a ubiquitous presence at paper and ephemera conventions,

and doggedly attended events—such as Photo LA—to pester every seller and dealer for Mortensen books or prints for sale.



In Off for The Sabbot, Mortensen shows us the uncomfortable task facing a witch riding her broom

As my collection of his writings grew and I religiously read them all, I still didn't know much about him. His life remained a mystery. I had absorbed A. D. Coleman's essay about Mortensen's relegation to the backwater of photo history by the Newhalls, Adams and the rest, and, thus understood why there was little mention of him in photo history books. I'd even tracked down the booklet printed by Deborah Irmas and The Los Angeles Center for Creative Photography, who had put together the show that I'd seen. However, when I found any biographical information, the sources repeated the same story line, which came from the brief autobiographical section in Mortensen's book *The Command To Look*. Beyond those slim facts there seemed to be nothing more. William Mortensen appeared to be more myth than man.

My mission became clear—I needed to find out about the life of this artist whose writings and photography had so deeply affected me. While working on my own photographic career I put aside time to travel to those places where I hoped he had left something of himself: Park City and Salt Lake City, Utah, where he was born and then raised; Hollywood, a few miles from my home, where he honed his early photographic skills; Laguna Beach, California, where he lived and taught in his latter life; and finally, Tucson, Arizona, where his archive resides at the Center for Creative Photography.



Mark of the Borgia, *the fate of an unfortunate who defied the powerful family*

In the past couple of decades since that 1980 exhibition, I've devoted much time, research, and thought to Mortensen's life and work. In a nutshell this is what I've discovered.

He was a trained and talented artist who had initially wanted to be a painter, then a print maker, but who ultimately fell under photography's spell. A canny showman, he observed Hollywood's PR machinery, and understood that he could control how others perceived him. He used this knowledge to become an art celebrity.

During the 1930s, through the popularity of his books and articles (which were coauthored with his brilliant friend and model George Dunham), along with his photographic imagery, he

became one of the most sought-after photographers and writers about photography. He was also an astute businessman who parleyed his fame into a series of Mortensen-approved and branded photographic products, one of the first artists to do so.



A Family Xmas 1914, done about 13 years after the war, finds Mortensen at his most grotesque and sardonic

Although his imagery was grounded in the 19th century romanticism of Symbolist art, Mortensen had a modernist sensibility for line and composition, and a postmodernist's interest in the symbolic nature of photography. He was the first American visual artist to thoroughly explore grotesque imagery. He pushed the bounds of commonly accepted photographic subject matter, which enraged his foes and ensured his obscurity by the purveyors of photographic history. Happily, however, all of these factors also meant that Mortensen's work would have importance long after his death. Although the forces of photographic change savaged him in the mid 20th century, his unique vision and methods foretold the momentous upheavals facing photography at the turn of the 21st century.

Because of that chance encounter in a gallery three decades ago the course of my life changed. I've learned much about myself, about photography and about the world of William Mortensen. There are many doors for us to open. We need only turn the handle and push.