

BRIAN ARNOLD

Book Review: *ciprian honey cathedral*

ciprian honey cathedral by Raymond Meeks. MACK Books, 2020. 96 pp./\$65 (hb).

ciprian
joy torn stitches

memory rich
memory healed

awoken

tumbling house
broken

—Raymond Meeks (after Nick Cave)



IMAGE 1. From *ciprian honey cathedral* (2020) by Raymond Meeks; courtesy the artist and MACK

In an interview in the brilliant 2007 documentary series produced by the BBC, *The Genius of Photography*, Robert Adams compares the work of photographers with

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IMAGE 2. From *ciprian honey cathedral* (2020) by Raymond Meeks; courtesy the artist and MACK

that of composers, painters, and philosophers. All these other artists, Adams explains, have the privilege of drifting off into abstraction, while photographers have to accomplish the same things by living and working in the world as it is today. He says photographers have to discover meaning while making pictures in dilapidated streets and while breathing dirty air, and thus perhaps accomplish something much more meaningful as a result.¹

This is the perfect place to start thinking about *ciprian honey cathedral*, the latest book by artist Raymond Meeks. This book is a lovely meditation on love in such a world, one clouded with painful memories, broken homes, and longing—but also a love richer because of all this pain. This is a deeply moving book in which some of the elusive feelings of memory and longing are given visual form, expressed in a deeply crafted photographic palette.

Since the 2004 release of *The Photobook: A History, Vol. 1* by Gerry Badger and Martin Parr, a tremendous amount of photographic history and criticism has focused on books. And with this has also come a renaissance in bookmaking, with new publishers of photo books emerging around the world. Anyone familiar with these discussions probably knows something about the work of Meeks, a prolific photographer and bookmaker who has produced more than twenty books to date. Born in Ohio in 1963, Meeks has

1. For this particular reflection by Adams, see (starting around 57:30), *Genius of Photography: Vol. 4, Paper Movies*, BBC, 2009; <https://archive.org/details/tGoPhoto/BBC+The+Genius+of+Photography+-+o1xo4+-+Paper+Movies.mp4>.

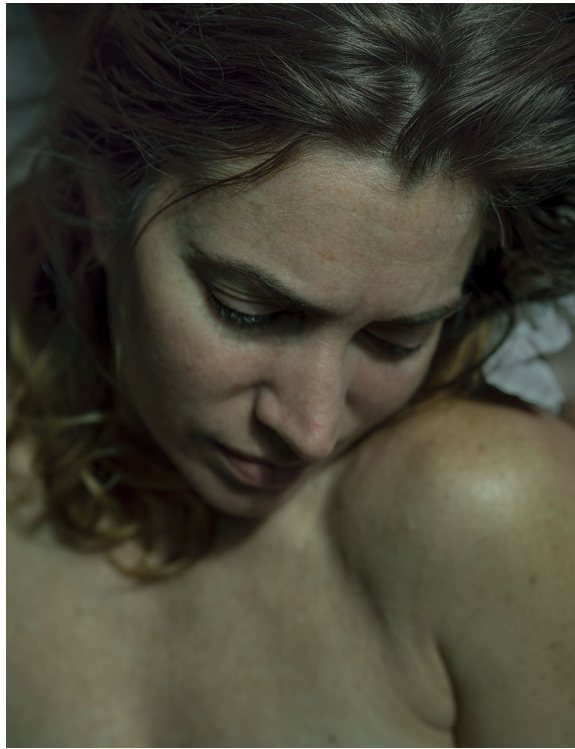


IMAGE 3. From *ciprian honey cathedral* (2020) by Raymond Meeks; courtesy the artist and MACK

created a body of work that explores memory, home, family, and the complex poetry of daily life. His pictures are developed with a unique technical aptitude: using traditional black-and-white photographic materials, Meeks creates photographs that are characterized by rich, muted tones and colors that are both descriptive and emotionally evocative.

Despite his prolific output, I must confess that I know more *about* Meeks's work than of his work itself. So many of these books are printed in small editions, are difficult to find, and are too often out of my price range. Having seen a few of these, however, I understand Meeks's books to be beautifully designed and executed, superlative in both the visual sensibility of the photographs as well as in his understanding and interpretation of the book form. With all of this in mind, I was delighted to learn of his new book with MACK Books; I understood MACK could bring the sort of craftsmanship necessary for his work, and yet also do it in a large enough print run to make the book more affordable and accessible.

The title of the book—*ciprian honey cathedral*—is somewhat enigmatic. *Ciprian*, or more typically *Cyprian*, refers to the island of Cyprus, though it can also be another name for Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty. The book centers around photographs of Meeks's partner, Adrianna Ault, all depicting a subtle and profound intimacy, and suggests that the love we find in our daily lives is much more substantive than one that is more mythic and intangible.



IMAGE 4. *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1971* by Emmet Gowin; courtesy the artist.

Typically the cover of a book functions like a sign or an advertisement, perhaps highlighting an iconic picture from the project to lure readers in. This book, however, uses the cover as part of the narrative. This cover is printed with a collage poem inspired by the 2016 song “Rings of Saturn” by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. This enigmatic text, printed under the veil of a transparent dust jacket, sets the stage for the narrative to follow. This collage poem is full of rich phrases and impressions that create a feeling of confusion and disconnect, yet are still anchored in love: *joy torn stitches*, *distant eggs turning/burnt/honey*, and *she’s meant to be and this is what she is*.

More than just this collage poem, the cover offers us other hints about the story to come. The dust jacket is printed on transparent PVC, with the text printed on the linen cover of the book (although this isn’t immediately apparent, and might require a closer inspection). The back of the book has two photographs printed on the transparency itself, with more fragments of the poem beneath. The combined effect, layered and transparent, functions like a veil: revealing, obscuring, and hinting, and ultimately preparing us for the elusive and intangible narrative at the heart of the book.

The photographs map out a liminal space that we can feel even if we can’t touch, suggesting the surface of things is like the veil of the cover, hinting at the emotional realities of memory, longing, and our shared need for intimacy. The pictures juxtapose images of Ault (made largely while she was sleeping or was just waking) with domestic scenes (pictures of piled dishes, blistering paint, abandoned homes, gutters hanging



IMAGE 5. From *ciprian honey cathedral* (2020) by Raymond Meeks; courtesy the artist and MACK

loosely from the roofs of empty homes, and overgrown brush). In this body of work, Meeks uses both color and black and white, each expressed with an astute technical understanding: although predominantly black and white, Meeks uses color photographs in small clusters to syncopate the flow of the book.

It is easy to imagine pictures of a waking person as being slow and unexpressive, as many typically feel at such a time, but not so here. Ault's skin is real enough to touch, both strong and soft: the pores of her back visible beneath disheveled wisps of hair, the bones of her shoulder clearly defined. Other times she is obscured behind a houseplant, or shielding her eyes beneath her arm. Always, however, she appears unguarded and trusting, as though believing that the camera is part of a caring connection. It is difficult not to compare these photographs to some of the other great bodies of work photographers have made about their lovers or wives, the first to come to mind being Emmet Gowin's remarkable photographs of his wife Edith. Unlike Gowin, whose pictures of Edith show us the mythical realities of intimacy, grounded in a lifetime of love and fertility, Meeks's photographs of Ault show something much more humble and ordinary, a vernacular of intimacy such as I know to be part of my own daily life. (Although I do believe a photograph of Ault with flowers in her hair and her cheek turned to face the camera is a direct and deliberate reference to a famous picture Gowin made of Edith.)



IMAGE 6. From *ciprian honey cathedral* (2020) by Raymond Meeks; courtesy the artist and MACK

Juxtaposing these photographs with pictures of concrete slabs and precariously stacked dishes seems incongruous, but is made whole and resolved with smart sequencing: a two-by-four wedged beneath a rain gutter isn't too different from a shoulder pressed against a cheek, and slabs of concrete can look something like the vertebrae of a spine. The photographs of these spaces are always empty of people, although the carpet left outside and the paint flaking from the walls are clear signs of life within them. Just so, in the pictures of Ault she is always alone and isolated in the frame. The combined effect is powerful, articulating a lonely, desperate feeling in such a way that we can easily understand that that which is isolated in the frame is really the photographer himself, and living amid ruins of a confusing life, the intimacy we see in Ault is a reprieve, or perhaps better an anchor that keeps the photographer (or the reader) from being totally lost.

The influence of the New Topographics photographers is enormous, really an essential part of what we know of photography today. Writer Vince Aletti describes Meeks as a part of a post-New Topographic movement in photography, as part of a generation of photographers that emerged at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Aletti suggests that these photographers employed a visual vernacular to record an unexpected beauty in broken places and that Meeks "finds a certain harsh beauty in its wastelands that allies him with the best of the New Topographics crew."² In *ciprian honey cathedral* Meeks tempers these pictures of mundane or forgotten places

2. Vince Aletti, "Photo Books," *Photograph Magazine*, January/February 2014, <https://photographmag.com/issues/january-february-2014/photo-books>.



IMAGE 7. From *ciprian honey cathedral* (2020) by Raymond Meeks; courtesy the artist and MACK

with the shelter we all seek in our intimate relationships, in the temporal beauty and peace of our sleeping lovers, in a place of reprieve beneath the surface of realities that confound and trouble us so much.

Good books of photographs are tactile, and are about more than just the image. The object itself conveys meaning through the touch of good paper on your fingers, the smooth and rough quality of the linen. All of this is essential in *ciprian honey cathedral*. Not only because the book is a pleasure to hold, but that this also again helps to convey the substance of the narrative. Creating a photographic story that depicts elusive feelings of memory and longing, there is something reassuring in *holding* these feelings, making them feel like my own. And *ciprian honey cathedral* is a book I plan to hold time and time again. ■

BRIAN ARNOLD is a photographer and writer based in Ithaca, New York. He works with the Southeast Asia Program at Cornell University, and is currently finishing a new book called *A History of Photography in Indonesia: Essays on Photography from the Colonial Era to the Digital Age* (forthcoming from Afterhours Books, 2021).