



**ARTIST**

Raymond Meeks

**TITLE**

New Year, Oregon, 2/3

**DATE**

2012

**DIMENSIONS**

11 in H x 7.5 in W

**MEDIUM**

Gelatin Silver Print

**IMAGE NOTES**

14 x 11 paper size

**CATALOGUE NUMBER**

2012.473

**CURRENT LOCATION**

1620-33B

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**RAYMOND MEEKS**

**BORN**

1963

**BIRTHPLACE**

Columbus, OH

**GENDER**

Male

## CITIZENSHIP

United States

## CULTURAL HERITAGE

European-American

## LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2012

Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery, 2014

Raymond Meeks: Where Objects Fall Away Fine Print Program, 2015

## LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

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## BIOGRAPHY

In the words of artist and publisher Raymond Meeks, "I continue to be inspired by collaboration with writers of poetry and short fiction and the merging of visual and word narratives. Recently, I've focused my efforts towards making artist books and a collaborative journal, orchard, which presents a visual conversation with fellow artists." Meeks has collaborated with artists Deborah Luster, Wes Mills, and Mark Steinmetz. His books and pictures are housed in numerous public and private collections, including the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, George Eastman House, Corcoran Gallery of Art, and the Howard Stein Collection.

## ESSAYS

Today we must find out where molasses comes from. Is there a well out back with a sticky pulley system, or is there a thicket of purulent brown berries we will mash in a jar—Wait— but what about pumpkins, my daughter says. She says, When I stand in a field of pumpkins, I hear the molasses slowly leaking out of them. This is true. The things of the world are true. Except for its puddles, which surge up into darker waters: Here we are, sailing our shallop in their shallows. Now here we are, riding the caddis fly around the water's edge. Now my daughter is older. It is not so wet today. Time for hide and seek. Is this the cabinet she's curled in—No, she is gone— Where are you?—I'm outside!—Oh, outside— look in the weeds, the trees, in the crook of the house. Outside! She must have stepped out of the present moment. The gas meter ticks. Now I am unhooked from the moment too. I begin writing its elegy. I use molasses as the emulgent. Then the dog calls us both back to the things of this world. He is her horse. Now he is our priest. We bow our heads, we begin our peccavi. Dear Lord, I have known joy—My daughter turns to me. Her eyes have changed to golden beads. I see you have seen joy too. She gives an elegant equine shudder and closes her lids over the beads. Yes, it is terrible. Now her eyes are hers again, now she is telling me about the time the flowers all died: The flowers were having a wedding. They dressed all in lace. The wedding was called Lovelily in Lace. They were so happy they had to be picked and rushed to the hospital. Now it is time for my daughter to leave this house. The tendrils of roses on the wallpaper are peeling themselves off. Our contemporaneity, sweet person, was constant fibrillation. Now you are outside the room, and I am outside the moment. It is good to be outside the moment. Very good to be safely inside autumn, and, in the palm, a photograph book of summer. The ducks, the goldeneyes, are departing overhead. Emulously, the denim butterflies fly off too. It is not the case anymore, right now, but still I like to say it: The world is true. Darcie Dennigan Darcie Dennigan is the author of two poetry collections, Madame X and Corinna A-Maying the Apocalypse. Her work has won fellowships from the Poetry Society of America, Poets Out Loud, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and Rhode Island State Council of the Arts. — Raymond Meeks lives in Providence, RI, and completed his residency at Light Work in June 2012. [www.raymondmeeks.com](http://www.raymondmeeks.com) Raymond Meeks's work in photography is an extension of his life and family. It stays with viewers because of this inherent honesty and his way of uncovering simple beauty in the things around him. Since 2000, Meeks has produced over twenty publications, of which twelve have been self-published and distributed. Many of Meeks's books can be difficult to find, yet to view any one book will be a memorable, emotional experience for most. For this exhibition at Light Work, we are lucky to exhibit more than fifteen books, including his Orchard collaboration (published by Silas Finch) with other artists. The exhibition spans Meeks's career and explores his relationship to the photobook and its form. SL: I have always found your photographs to be delicate, personal, and immensely moving, in particular, within the pages of your books. It's clear there is a love of the book form on your part. When did your relationship with the printed page begin? RM: There were formative years, like many children growing up and immersing in folktales and stories, but I reconnected when we had our children and began amassing a collection of children's illustrated storybooks. A few illustrators of children's books ignited my imagination for what pictures could convey in terms of narrative, especially Lisbeth Zwerger. This was also at a time when I was making photo-essays for magazines where art directors were providing license to present an edit and create a visual story. SL: What was the first book you made of your own pictures? What is it like, looking through it now? RM: The first book was the roof of my dog's mouth is black [2000], which evolved into the title Nazraeli published in 2005, sound of summer running. These are photographs of family life and atmospheric environments surrounding our home in Montana. As I revisit this book, I'm reconnected with how vital and inspired I was as a photographer, where visually, so much was new and undiscovered photographically, for me. I took risks and allowed for mistake and chance happenings with the camera and in the darkroom. I had eight or so cameras that were always within reach by the back door, resting atop washer and dryer or folding table in our laundry room. So, visually, I often felt as though I were encountering a fresh perspective and way of seeing. It was also a time, in terms of subject, where we experienced so much of life through the unadulterated eyes of children. This sense of wonder carries throughout the book, still. SL: That's another thing I admire about you and your work . . . Your pictures feel as though they were made because you couldn't help yourself—you reached for the nearest camera, and what we see is the result. The images are careful and beautiful but also immediate, almost necessary. That sense of wonder runs through everything. RM: While making individual pictures or editing and sequencing them for a book, I'm not especially aware of a sense of "wonder," though I attempt to weave a balance of pictures that might contribute toward ambiguity with others that are solidly anchored in time and place. I also work with a variety of lenses, cameras, and formats, encouraging me to make a picture while keeping me somewhat off-balance and excited about looking through a ground glass. If there is a sense of wonder, perhaps it comes from the similar sense I feel at having moments revealed through a viewfinder or from under a dark cloth. SL: How did you happen upon the idea of working your images into existing books? Where would you find those books? RM:

There are a few used book stores in Missoula, Montana—small shops that weren't too overwhelming in terms of the number of books, which made it easier to identify a story that interested me, perhaps an obscure volume of poetry or instruction guide. Sometimes I'd choose a book for the linen or endpapers with unique markings. I find the process of merging with an existing work, or a piece that has a history, much more engaging than a blank sheet or canvas. On a few occasions, I discovered books with a narrative that echoed or paralleled, in some loose way, a series of pictures that I'd been working with, and I find it completely liberating to engage in the process of deconstructing and repurposing the materials, obscuring text, and constructing something new. SL: How do you approach editing and constructing a sequence on the printed page? RM: I begin by developing an image archive which may pull from numerous bodies of work and time periods to explore a theme or subject from numerous points of view. I begin researching and listening for a title, which is essential in determining which pictures in the archive might fill a role that follows the title. In the case of *pretty girls wander*, which was self-published in 2011, my son helped me choose the cover portrait of my daughter in which she is looking directly into the camera, in this sense, confronting the viewer. The remaining pictures are more passive, voyeuristic, so it felt important and empowering to position this portrait as an introduction to the book. A friend offered the title and from there, the remaining edit and sequence followed. The book is spare and explores place or, rather, the lack of place as part of what constitutes identity. An adjoining neighborhood near my home in Portland, where every house in a two-block area was either raised and stilted or in the process of being elevated to position on trailers and moved to an area south of Portland. Through the various portraits of my daughter, we explore the notion of wanderlust at a time when she was to graduate high school and felt an uncertainty about her future and, for the first time in her life, was without a solid "home" foundation and family structure. SL: I recently saw Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* in the theater, and was thinking about how the cast had to make a commitment to a twelve year project, and trust in that process. I heard that Linklater's daughter, Lorelei, who plays the older sister Samantha, didn't want to be a part of the film at some point—probably around the age where being a part of whatever dad is doing isn't very cool. How does your family, in particular your son and daughter, feel about being so central to your work and books? Has the camera ever been pushed away? RM: I've tried to maintain an agreement of sorts between us, which creates challenges when the subject is aware of the camera and the subject is your child, who wants to give you something. I saw *Boyhood*, as well. With my son, in fact. He's still so interested and engaged with books and photography while he studies filmmaking at NYU. And my daughter continues to work with me on freelance basis. That said, they might offer you a different response, if asked how they feel about being so central to my work. I have such strong affinity and love for what I do that I wanted to share in the process with them and include them whenever it felt possible or relevant. SL: You've collaborated with a few artists for your Orchard Journal series of books, including Deborah Luster, Wes Mills, and Mark Steinmetz. What was the impetus for these projects, and how does this collaboration work? RM: I had self-published three or four books over a year period, just previous to beginning work on Orchard, and was concerned about saturating an audience and also, with the ability to self-publish, I felt I was running the risk of broadcasting ideas with little resistance. I think there's inherently greater strength in a small collective: a "we" in lieu of "I," both in terms of collaborative making and in representing a more widely universal theme. I thought of Orchard as a platform for "call and response" dialogue between myself and another artist whose work I greatly admired and as an experiment in not knowing what outcome we might achieve together, though trusting in a thread that initially drew me to them and their work. Each collaborative journal functioned differently, and I'm currently engaged in a collaboration where I'm working directly with a fellow artist, Mo Costello. Mo's practice involves assimilating tendencies and behaviors of her photographic subjects directly into her practice, almost as an act of compassion and to gain understanding. I've been photographing scraps of clothing, napkins, food, various liquids, and Mo, as she moves about space in the act of making. It's taken me out of my prescribed way of photographing and approaching my work, which is also what I was after when I conceived Orchard. SL: It's a wonderful process with beautiful outcomes so far. I look forward to seeing the next one soon. I'm curious, do you keep up with what's going on in the photobook world these days? There are so many books being made! What have you seen lately that really struck you? RM: I've been living in rural Upstate New York and have been out of the loop with new photobooks, though I recently saw the Michael Schmidt book *Natur* and am, once again, astounded by his way of seeing and how easy he makes narrative sequencing look. Also published by MACK Books, Joanna Piotrowska's *FROWST*, which is so unsettling and inviting as a family album. I keep coming back to it, as much for how it's sequenced and designed—the placement of images all formatted alike, but assuming different sizes and positioning throughout. The paper quality, printing, and size of the book are just right. I also like what Etudes Studio is doing with their blue books series. I'm aware of how easily influenced I can be by too much observing of what others are doing and tend, more often, to lower my head and try to make work that energizes and excites me in new ways. SL: I appreciate that approach. Most of your own books have been self-published, and now many of them are sold out, and rather hard to find—in fact, in working on your exhibition at Light Work, we had to work with one of your collectors who lent a few of them that you don't even have on your bookshelf. What has been your approach to getting those out into the world, especially early in your career as an artist and book maker? Do you entertain the idea of republishing titles to make them more widely available, or are you always moving forward, on to the next thing? RM: I just recently made a second edition of *pretty girls wander*, though it was just an edition of forty books. They require lots of handwork and are expensive to print and produce. Publishing this second edition does require moving backwards, in a sense, to revisit past work. I prefer moving forward, though often while paying attention to what came before. With this in mind, I sometimes bring pictures from a past narrative forward and fold these into a new sequence. The books we self-publish are thirty to sixty pages. I think of these as chapters, especially as the narrative combines autobiographical elements of an evolving story. SL: What's in a title? RM: For me, a title might offer an initial impression of what a book has to offer, and, in the editing process, establishes the meter which allows me to determine which pictures contribute to a narrative. There were times when I'd been making and gathering pictures for many months, sometimes years, without any real direction toward making a body of work with a common thread and then stumbled upon a title that suddenly provided the structure and framework for a sequence of pictures. I find it necessary that a title allude or point toward an idea while still allowing for ambiguity and, perhaps, mystery. Where objects fall away is a book we repurposed from a monograph of a Cy Twombly painting. Our German shepard had recently died, and, while I hadn't imagined making any sort of book of pictures to honor his place in our life, this book with details of the Twombly painting—often of a floral nature—seemed a fitting resting place for a series of photos my son and I edited. The book title is excerpted from *The Inhabitants* by Wright Morris: "My cane has a carved head of a dog, smooth hollow sockets are his eyes. Walking, I keep my fingers there. I can feel him check me at a rise and lead me where objects fall away." I had planned to include the verse in the book, and this excerpt seemed a fitting title and suggested, for me, a finality as well as continuum. SL: This exhibition at Light Work is sort of like a retrospective of your relationship to the book form as an artist. How will it feel for you to step into a room and see such a display for the first time? RM: I can only imagine. I have little retrospective sense of my work and am always surprised when I'm asked to present books at the number of volumes we've made and the experiences represented in the books. I sometimes tend to be critical of individual pictures or particular sequences that are housed in some of the books, so I'm hoping this show will allow me to pause and appreciate the collective efforts; that I'll notice the hands of my children and the generosity of those with whom I've collaborated. In this sense, it could be quite overwhelming, emotionally, since my work tends toward autobiography. It's still why I photograph, to make a record or reference of a time and experience and to share this as a universal way of connecting.