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## The Sacred in the Mundane

Bruce Wrighton

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Wrighton: The Sacred in the Mundane  
*The Sacred in the Mundane*  
Bruce Wrighton



*Yonda's pub (circa 1985), Johnson City, New York*

Lynne Schneider, Art Editor, *Harpur Palate*:

Tom Costello, a gaunt, gray-haired man, settled a flat, heavy black box on my desk. "You have to take a look at these," he said. "Pat Flery gave them to me a long time ago. They've been resting in my attic since Bruce died."

Bruce Wrighton won Kodak's "Top 100 New Photographers" award in 1988, a month before he passed away at age 38. Binghamton's Roberson Museum mounted a 130-piece solo show of his work in 2003 and the Laurence Miller Gallery in Manhattan displayed his work in 2006. Before I spoke with those who knew him, before I heard about his work with the SUNY Binghamton Archaeology Department—his painstaking developing process, his beat old station wagon always overloaded with photography equipment and his dawn and dusk rambles—I opened the box of his pictures. I agreed with Mr. Costello. You have to take a look at these. . . .



*Sullivan's Hotel—colloquially known as Swat's (circa 1983), Binghamton's Southside*

## Wrighton: The Sacred in the Mundane



*Dormition of the Virgin Mary Orthodox Church (circa 1985), Binghamton, New York*

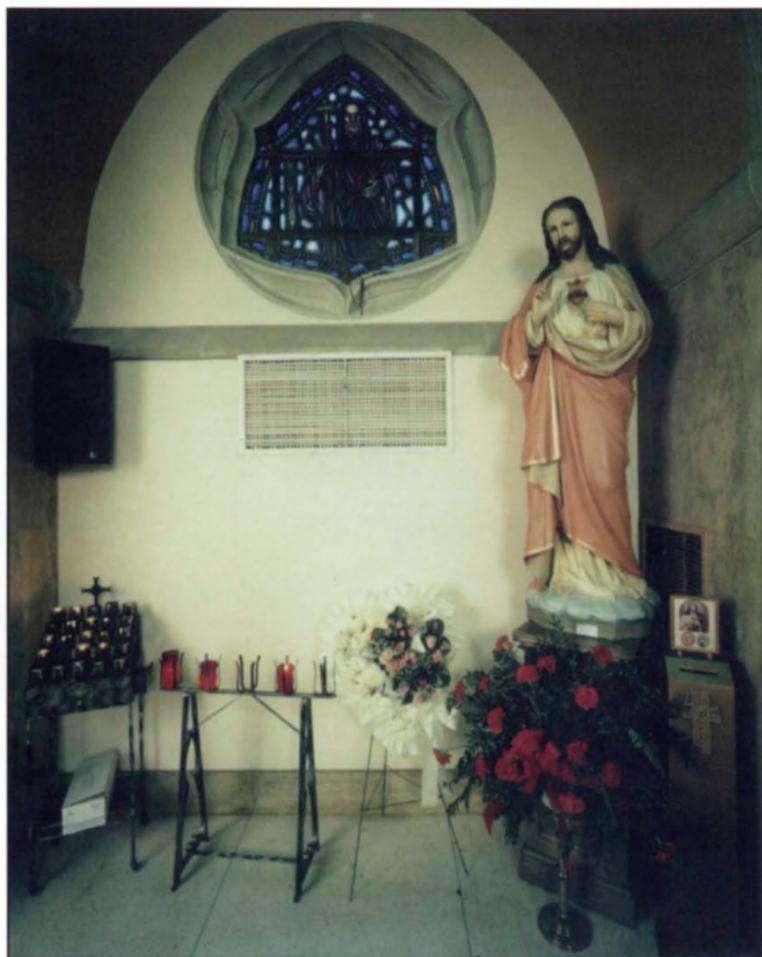
Patricia Flery, Bruce Wrighton's widow:

Bruce was meditative. He had to be, using that large-format camera—you know, a great big box on a tripod with a black cape that covered his head and blocked out the light. Taking pictures with that camera requires long, patient exposures. Bruce took his time—to take the shots, to look. He was very interested in the way the human spirit expressed itself in every setting, how the relics of a bar spoke to the spirituality of the patrons. In a way, Bruce felt that those local, corner joints were places where people might find communion and also leave the world for a little while, much as they do in church.



*Living room altar (circa 1986), Johnson City, New York*

Peter Klosky, Director of Exhibitions and Acquisitions, Roberson Museum: Bruce's portraits, landscapes, interiors and architecture were all intimate images of personalities, whether there were people in them or not. I like to think Bruce even took portraits of architecture. And there are few artists who capture the bizarre humor of the [Binghamton] area—maybe Rod Serling in *The Twilight Zone* . . . or Ron Gonzalez.



*St. Cyril & Method (circa 1985), Binghamton, New York*

Ronald Gonzalez, Sculptor, Professor of Art at Binghamton University: Bruce was the quintessential 20th-century photographer—one always felt the eye of the artist behind the photograph. Lugging that big black box all over, taking time to set up every shot, he was always looking. He understood the history of his craft, from *camera obscura* forward. He appreciated the Renaissance origin of his art. Bruce was old-fashioned in all the right ways, an ancient photographer of the modern urban still life.



*Tailor's shop (circa 1985), Binghamton, New York*

Ronald Gonzalez, continued:

Bruce was drawn to people he couldn't be, fascinated by lives he didn't live, interested in something deeper than his own experience. He was the most open man—open-minded, open-hearted . . .

The tragedy of his dying so young is partly that he was just beginning to get a lot of things off the ground, to see where he wanted to go with his art and to start moving into those ideas.

And I miss him. I miss seeing him around town at dawn and dusk, hunting for light. I used to stop over at the Archaeology Department, where he had a darkroom. No matter how busy he was, he stopped work, stepped outside, sat under a tree or something, and took the time.

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*Living room altar (circa 1985), Binghamton, New York*

Thomas F. Costello, poet and entrepreneur, brother-in-law of Bruce Wrighton: Bruce was the second best cook in Binghamton, and he bore an uncanny resemblance to Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, except for the eyes—Bruce’s eyes were round and open, the most open eyes you ever saw. But mostly, and first of all, you’d remember how warm and kind and generous he was. Remember that and then you can look at his work as he did, and you can laugh—as he did—at the sudden irony of life. Look at his work and you look through his eyes . . . You see, he was a frightened man. Still, he was never afraid of looking deeply at the paradoxes of his art, death, faith—he paid extraordinary attention to icons, to rituals, to people living their faith. He needed their faith as a bulwark against his fear—and then suddenly, for him, it wasn’t just *looking*.



*Lydia Wrabitski's bedroom rushnik (circa 1985), Binghamton, New York*

Thomas F. Costello, continued:

Ronnie's sculptures, some like the dried and blackened remnants of living things, might even remind you of his cancer—but *who wants to remember?* In a few months only, Bruce withered to bones. I wrapped my arms around his body not an hour before he died and held all that what was left of him, his light remains. He was looking up at me, his face green like a lizard, blue eyes turned to gold. Then red and black . . . his amazing eyes.

Not long after, Pat put that black box in my hands—in the face of death, maybe you need a kind of erasure and then later you can start to remember again. I brought you Bruce's pictures now because they shouldn't sit in the attic any longer.