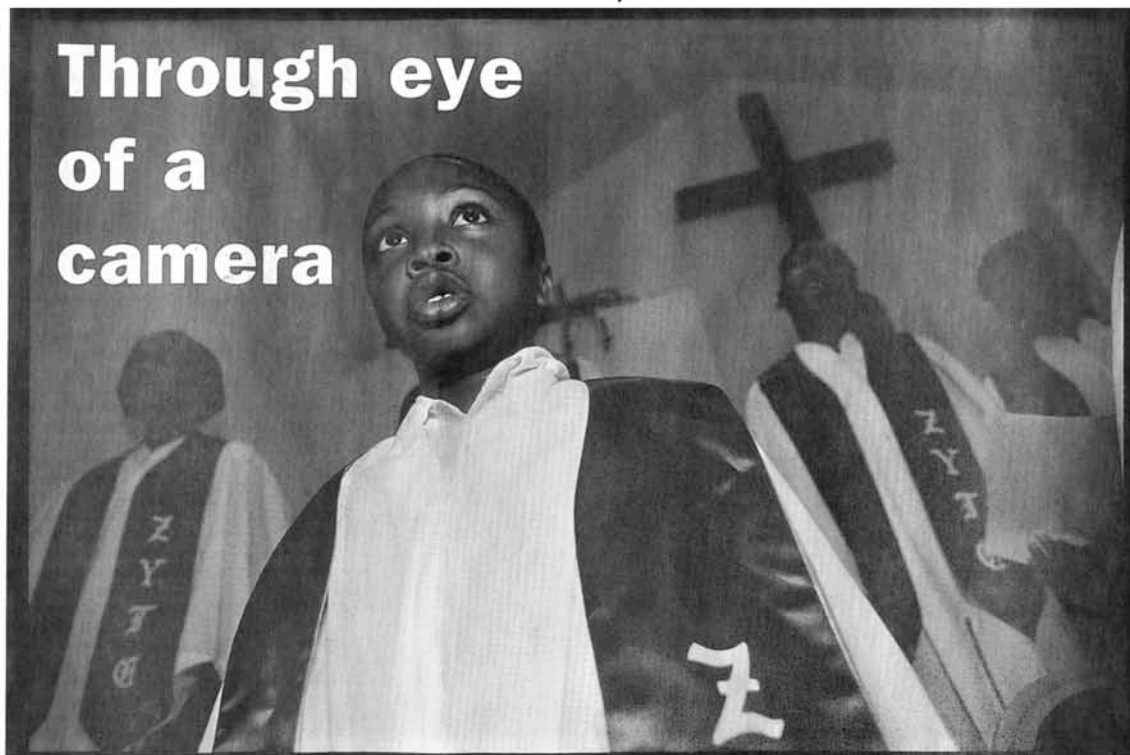


# The Daily Progress

February 10, 2005

Charlottesville, Virginia



Through eye  
of a  
camera

## He preserved a place in time

In 1966 when Life magazine was among the most popular publications in America, it commemorated its 30th anniversary with a special double issue that subsequently became a memorable celebration of photography.

Life viewed photography as a major medium that makes us "spectators in the lives of others by becoming a record of existence that recalls fragments of time ... touching and tangible statements of life in a particular place." Life praised photographers for "what they found meaningful and for how they interpret the richness or the paucity of their lives [and] who it is they love."

Those long-ago editors at Life would have found much to admire in Kendall Messick's mesmerizing photographs of several generations of African-Americans who reside in the small village of Corapeake, N.C. Barely 10 miles south of Suffolk, the village is near the Dismal Swamp. He not only peered into the residents' lives but into their souls as well.

### Art World



Ruth Latter

Forty-three of Messick's superb black-and-white prints — many with images that are more than life-size — are presented at the University of Virginia Art Museum through Feb. 27. All

have the impact of an emotionally riveting visual poem.

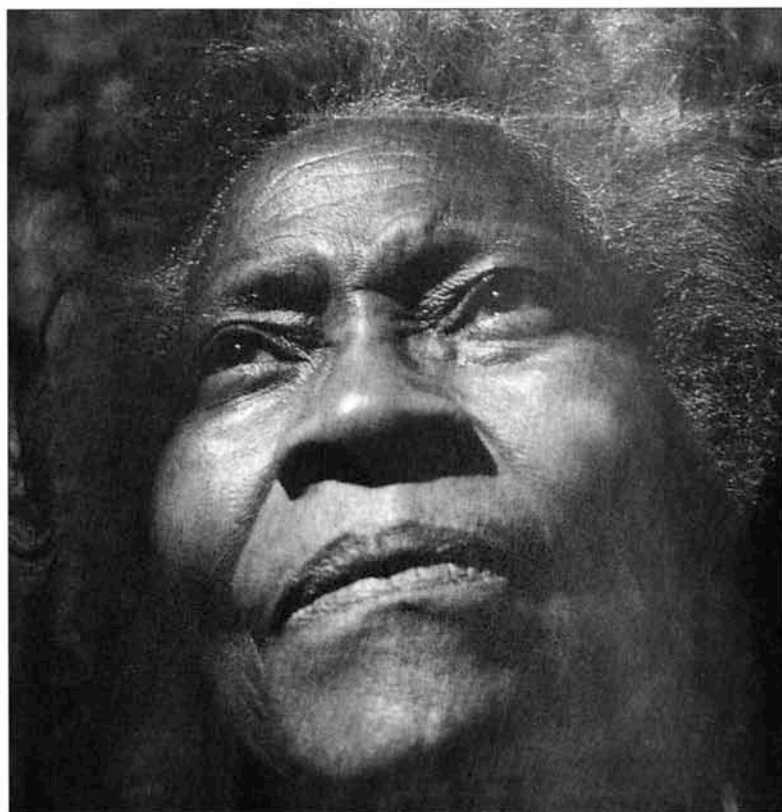
Several years ago, while a student at Wake Forest University, Messick was told by a favorite friend about that close-knit community, which included many descendants of African slaves. Over a period of seven years, he drove to Corapeake

from his home in Long Island to listen to their stories and to observe their lives. Their recollections were similar to those of his grandfather, who had been a white farmer in a western region of North Carolina.

"I had visited my grandfather often while I was growing up," Messick said. "He told me stories from his childhood of hardships and families."

Gifted artists have made photographic records and interviews for posterity to better know and

See CAMERA on D2



"Aunt Sarah" is one of the people Kendall Messick photographed during his visits to Corapeake in North Carolina.

# Camera

Continued from D1

understand people who once lived in a particular place in a significant segment of time. Many have equaled the sensitivity with which Messick portrayed the dwindling population of that impoverished North Carolina town. But few, if any, have surpassed him.

In his writings on Indian metaphysics, P.B. Mukharji said, "Without a photographic record of our lives, we may be insignificantly engaged in leaving perishable footprints on the passing sands of fleeting time."

Presented in black and white without the embellishment of gorgeous colors, Messick's prints emphasize the drama and emotions on faces and forms. Light becomes a benediction, an inexhaustible token of life, a symbol of goodness within that wards off evil spirits. Moreover, it is widely believed that nothing malevolent can enter where a light burns and that God surrounds himself with light.

Many of the figures and



"Grace" by Kendall Messick is among the works on display at UVa.

images in these photographs appear to be caressed with light, as if embraced with a perpetual blessing.

A great photographer anticipates a magical moment. In one of his many unforgettable prints in the show, Messick focused on a soldier who had presented our nation's flag, carefully folded, to the daughter of a World War II veteran at her father's funeral. As the soldier leaves and walks toward the blinding sunlight, all of the

mourners are fixated on him. They appear mesmerized, as if experiencing an enchanting moment. They follow his departure, as if awed and consoled by the brief appearance of God's messenger.

In several church-day scenes, faces as weathered and creased as the Earth's topography smile beneath flamboyant hats.

One marvelous silver gelatin print presents the life-size image of an incredibly angelic

choirboy. We can almost hear his impassioned hymn.

Beneath each photograph in the show, Messick has printed the subject's comment. "I'm still here," boasted a woman a few years older than the past century. "The Lord keeps me here."

A picturesque presentation of an old wooden cottage, almost totally hidden by masses of overgrown vines and weeds, bears this message by former occupant Cleophus Harrell: "All 11 of us was born in that same slavery-time house. The roof had holes in it and you could see the stars as you went to sleep." Another printed memory reveals that they had to attend school until they were old enough to plow.

Since those photographs were made over the past decade, some people have moved away, others have died, the most weather-ruined cottages have collapsed and antiquated vehicles and signs have disappeared.

The show includes various memorabilia and an almost hour-long film the photographer and filmmaker made concerning this project, which covered

seven years.

Of particular interest is an assemblage that Messick created along a gallery wall. It is a reconstruction of a crumbling wall in one of the Corapeake homes he had photographed. Portions of old newspapers had been pasted to the wall in a futile attempt to keep out chilly drafts. Three shabby suit jackets, circa the 1940s, that are way beyond repair hang from wire hangers, as they appear in a photograph in this show.

"My stories are human stories," Messick said. "They form a universal portrait of rural life. My only hope is that in viewing this exhibition, people will recognize the importance of listening to and recording the stories of their elder family members."

Now a resident of New Jersey, Messick said he still returns to Corapeake to photograph the funerals at the people's request.

Viewing hours at the Art Museum, on Rugby Road near the Rotunda, are 1 to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday.

*Ruth Latter has won numerous state and national awards as The Daily Progress art critic since 1964.*