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## Finding Peace in Black & White

### Ron Durham Exhibits Photos From Abbey of Gethsemani

By Lew Moores: The Sunday Challenger – October 17, 2004

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**Covington** – Ron Durham was there when clouds gathered overhead and bathed the Abbey of Gethsemani in a veil of showers, there when light streamed through stained glass windows and when Brother Raphael clasped his hands as he sat in the sanctuary of the monastery that was founded 156 years ago and is the home of 65 Trappist monks.

He was there with a camera when an enormous sky – the heavens – dwarfed the statue on St. Joseph Hill on the monastery

grounds. He caught these images on film – 25 in all – and is currently exhibiting them at the gallery he owns, Eine Kleine Photograph, located at 610 Main Street. The exhibition runs through the month.

Mostly landscapes, shot at different times of day – some representing the Liturgy of the Hours – the photos are of different locations in and around Gethsemani, a monastery founded near Bardstown in 1848, the oldest Trappist monastery in the United States. It is a place of quiet solitude, peaceful with a pocket of buildings, gardens, grounds and woods that inspires contemplation.

“It is as if the Trappist who runs the computers at the Abbey today and the Trappist who left Melleray on foot in October 1848 are one and the same monk,” writes Diane Aprile, author of *The Abbey of Gethsemani, Place of Peace and Paradox*.

#### More Than Pictures

“The point of the show is to give a sense of the life there at Gethsemani,” said Durham, who has been taking retreats at the monastery since 2000. “If you go to Gethsemani, the sense you have when you’re there is the sense you should get when you see these images.”



The photographs are shot using black & white infrared film, all sepia-toned. The effect is actually a brown and white image that reveals the textures of surfaces. It’s a style Durham developed through experimentation, and it has become his signature style.

Brother Raphael was made available to Durham to help the photographer with his work. The monk was waiting at the gate when Durham arrived back in August. Brother Raphael is 80 years old, lean with close-cropped hair.

"He looks like what a monk ought to look like," said Durham. And yet, in the two images of Brother Raphael it is difficult to discern any facial features. It is a deliberate technique, says Durham: "By recognizing who it is (it) becomes a distraction."

Jay Pettit has been to Gethsemani on retreat, including visits with Durham. "There's a kind of a rhythm or a flow to life at the Abbey," said Pettit, who lives in Florence. "And maybe because I'm familiar with it, I felt I could feel the flow or feel through the photography. There's another element I was looking for. It's an element of transcendence, and I found it in quite a few shots. If you have a photograph that by its combination of shadow and light, line and texture, takes you through the photograph, then it gives you a sense of feeling of that essence which is transcendent of the place."

#### **'A Sense of Solitude'**

Tony Russo has been to Gethsemani often and is coordinator of the local chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society, a group that meets and studies different aspects of the life of Gethsemani's most notable resident. Merton gained an international reputation as a writer and poet.

"Anybody can go take pictures of Gethsemani, but you have to have something going on to be able to do it the way Ron did it," said Russo, who just recently met Durham and lives in Cleves, Ohio. "There has to be something inside you. Something deep."

Russo says Durham has captured Gethsemani. "This is a man who knows Gethsemani," said Russo. "He knows what it is all about. What the photos remind me of is something Ansel Adams said: 'Sometimes when I come to a place, a photograph is waiting for me to take it.' Like I said, anybody can take a picture of Gethsemani. But there has to be something going on inside you, where you can connect up with the sacred, that's the silence and what some people call God." "I'd like for someone who's been there to look at these pictures and say, 'I know this place.'" Said Durham, as he walked through his gallery. "There's a sense of being on your own here, a sense of solitude. All problems lose their importance when you've been there a few days."