

William Eggleston

2¼

12 April–1 June 2019
24 Grafton Street, London

Private view: Thursday 11 April, 6–8 PM



William Eggleston, *Untitled*, c. 1977
Courtesy Eggleston Artistic Trust and David Zwirner
© Eggleston Artistic Trust

David Zwirner is pleased to present *2¼*, a series of square-format colour photographs from the 1970s by American photographer William Eggleston. On view at 24 Grafton Street in London, the show marks the artist's first presentation at the gallery's UK location and his second solo exhibition with David Zwirner since joining the gallery, in 2016.

Over the course of nearly six decades, Eggleston has established a singular pictorial style that deftly combines vernacular subject matter with an innate and sophisticated understanding of colour, form, and composition. His vividly saturated photographs transform the ordinary into distinctive, poetic images that eschew fixed meaning. A pioneer of colour photography, Eggleston helped elevate the medium to the art form that it is recognised to be today. He took the *2¼* photographs in California and throughout the American South following his groundbreaking solo show *Color Photography by William Eggleston* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1976. Curated by John Szarkowski, this exhibition would come to herald the medium's acceptance within the art-historical canon.

The works in the *2¼* series are notable within Eggleston's oeuvre for their distinct format. He shot the photographs using a two-and-one-quarter-inch medium-format camera, resulting in images that exist between the registers of portraiture and landscape, dissolving the boundaries between the two. The individuals, cars, parking lots, and local stores and businesses that the artist depicts in the series speak to the uniformity of postwar material culture while revealing the distinct character and idiosyncrasies of the people and places that populate the American landscape. Through Eggleston's lens, a rusted-over Cadillac dealer's sign becomes both a potent emblem of industrial decline and a lushly toned formalist colourscape of rich blues and bronzes. Vermeer-like, Eggleston exhibits a sensitivity to the powerful yet diffuse light that permeates these spaces. Several images from the series capture cars parked in litter-strewn lots, immersed within this special saturated glow. As Agnès Sire notes, 'The light of the South is explosive, despite being treated [by Eggleston] in a very uncommon manner, as if cleansed of expressionistic shadows.'¹

Many of the images in *2¼* were first published as a monograph of the same title by Twin Palms in 1999. Several were also included in *Cadillac*, a portfolio of thirteen chromogenic prints that Eggleston produced the same year. The exhibition at David Zwirner follows recent presentations of the artist's work in the

¹ Agnès Sire, 'The Invention of Language', in *William Eggleston: From Black and White to Color*. Exh. cat. (Göttingen: Steidl, 2014), p. 14.

David Zwirner

UK, including *William Eggleston: Portraits* at the National Portrait Gallery, London, in 2016, and *William Eggleston* at Tate Modern, London, in 2013.

William Eggleston was born in 1939 in Memphis, Tennessee, where he lives today. *William Eggleston: The Democratic Forest*, an exhibition of works drawn from the artist's encyclopaedic project, marked his first solo show at David Zwirner New York in 2016.

Since the 1970s, Eggleston's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at prominent institutions worldwide. Important solo presentations were held at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, in 1990; Barbican Gallery, London, in 1992 (travelled to Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark; Museum Folkwang, Essen; and Fotomuseum Winterthur); documenta IX, Kassel, in 2002; and Museum Ludwig, Cologne, in 2003 (travelled to Museu Serralves, Porto; Nasjonalmuseet – Museet for samtidskunst, Oslo; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Albertina, Vienna; and Dallas Museum of Art). In 2008, a major career-spanning survey, *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Videos 1961–2008*, was organised by the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and Haus der Kunst in Munich; it subsequently travelled to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Art Institute of Chicago; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, among others.

More recent solo exhibitions have included those held at Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, in 2009 (travelled to Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, and Hasselblad Foundation, Gothenburg, Sweden); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2013; and Foam Fotografiemuseum, Amsterdam, in 2017. In 2018, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York presented *William Eggleston: Los Alamos*, a solo exhibition featuring a landmark gift to the museum by Jade Lau of the artist's notable portfolio, *Los Alamos*.

Eggleston received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1975 and has been the recipient of numerous notable awards, including the International Center of Photography Infinity Award for Lifetime Achievement (2004) and the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, République Française (Order of Arts and Letters of the French Republic) (2016), among others. The Aperture Foundation honoured Eggleston in October 2016. Work by the artist is held in major international museum collections.

Founded in 1992, the Eggleston Artistic Trust is dedicated to the representation and preservation of the work of William Eggleston and is directed by his sons, Winston Eggleston and William Eggleston III.

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NY CULTURE

When William Eggleston Colored Reality

By LANA BORTOLOTT

March 3, 2013 9:11 p.m. ET

If the new exhibit of William Eggleston's work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art recaptures some of the photographer's most iconic images—a child's deserted tricycle, a rooftop sign advertising "Peaches!," a bare light bulb hanging from a crimson ceiling—it also reminds visitors that great American color photography is a relatively recent phenomenon.



William Eggleston's 'Untitled (Memphis),' from 1970, on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as part of a new exhibit devoted to the photographer. *WILLIAM EGGLESTON/THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART*

The 36 dye-transfer prints that make up "At War With the Obvious: Photographs by William Eggleston," created mostly in the 1970s, showcase a complex color process with early roots in the film industry—one that had applications primarily in advertising and other commercial work after it was adopted by Eastman Kodak in 1946. But the prints, recently acquired by the Met, also bolster the museum's collection of modern photography.

The new exhibit marks the first time these images have been shown as an ensemble, and includes the 14 dye-transfer prints that made up Mr. Eggleston's first color portfolio in 1974. "I wanted to acquire a set of pictures that would be used not just monographically, but be integrated into the Met's larger collection," said Jeff Rosenheim, the curator who purchased and organized the collection for the museum. "Beyond the medium of photography, Eggleston fits perfectly into many constellations of art."

Most of the images were made during color photography's infancy in the fine arts, when it had few fans and even fewer masters. Unstable and impermanent, with a tendency to fade, color shots typically sold for less on the market than black-and-whites. "It was clear among art photographers there was prejudice against color," said photographer Stephen Shore, now the director of Bard College's photography program. Along with Mr. Shore and Joel Meyerowitz, Mr. Eggleston was among a handful of photographers seeking ways to elevate the color medium, which had been utilized mostly at the cinema and in graphic arts.



Met curator Jeff Rosenheim, who organized the show *NATALIE KEYSSAR FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

For Mr. Eggleston that eventually became the dye-transfer print, said his son, Winston, who manages his father's trust. "He

always loved Technicolor, with its exaggerated colors—it really clicked with him," Winston Eggleston said. "Dye transfer was a really turning point for him. It was the ultimate print."

As Mr. Eggleston came to adopt it in the '70s, the dye-transfer was unmatched in its nuance and beauty. But it was so complex and time-consuming that it usually required the aid of professional laboratories. The process created red, green and blue color separations called matrices on specialized gelatin-coated film, which were soaked in organic dyes of yellow, magenta and cyan. The matrices, provided only by Kodak until it halted production in 1994, were meticulously aligned over special paper and rolled, transferring the dye to paper. A 16-inch by 20-inch print could take several days to make and cost more than \$100 in materials.

Mr. Eggleston was a rare devotee of process, producing the saturated, lush and velvety images that became his signature. "It wasn't his intention to make prints with dye transfer; he just thought there was a better way to reveal his intentions," said Mr. Rosenheim. "It's the observation of the artist that makes the picture great, and the dye-transfer process is a revealing tool [for] his observation of how extraordinary this world is."

"At War With the Obvious," which runs through July 28, can be seen, then, as presenting two sorts of relics, both with lasting and ephemeral qualities: the dye-transfer print, and the bygone American South, where the Memphis-born artist, who is 73, still lives. (Mr. Eggleston declined to comment for this article.)

Though not meant to be nostalgic, his chronicle of daily life around the Mississippi Delta offers a window into an era if not frozen in time, then at least stalled by it. Here, an old farm truck ("Untitled, 1974"), aglow in the late afternoon sun, looks like an heirloom from the 1940s. Elsewhere, a decommissioned gas station and a pale yellow wooden snack bar beneath a jaunty string of colored lights are closed down—for the season or forever?

Many of the images have a painterly quality, such as the long-view shot of condiments on a diner table, due in part to the hand-crafted feel of the dye-transfer process, but also because the subjects themselves are made less mechanical through Mr. Eggleston's idiosyncratic eye. The occasional portrait here and there keeps the show from seeming like a visitation to a ghost town.

Even when people aren't in the images, there's a sense of someone just having left the frame: a child's abandoned tricycle, an empty shower or an open oven door. Conversely, images that do include humans give the impression that they're not really there in spirit—that something just outside the frame has their attention. For Mr. Rosenheim, himself a Southerner, the images are poetic, replete with simple pleasures.

"They are off-kilter and banal, and yet full of intention and simple observation," he said. "You don't have to have an intellectual interaction with the images. It's the poetry of the everyday."

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William Eggleston: American epic

By Mark Holborn September 14, 2012 9:24 pm

After 35 years since William Eggleston's colour works were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Mark Holborn charts the full extent of the photographer's achievement



©Eggleston Artistic Trust
Untitled, 1971-1974. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

Nearly 25 years ago I was travelling through Hale County, Alabama, with my friend the artist William Christenberry. It was where he'd grown up and he knew each family and every mile of it. Here in 1936, James Agee and Walker Evans produced *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a portrait of white sharecroppers written in Agee's almost Biblical prose accompanied by Evans's black and white photographs. The book, though controversial in Hale County, was a primary source for Christenberry's uncovering of his roots, just as Evans's formal and often directly frontal photography of the south – its storefronts, shacks, churches and gas stations – shaped Christenberry's vision through the viewfinder of his large camera. I even found one of Evans's discarded boxes of early Polaroid film in a crumbling building that had belonged to a palm reader. In this part of the

country, the kudzu weed was so virulent that abandoned cars were discovered in the undergrowth decades later. It all looked like a Walker Evans photograph, except the earth was red. I saw Christenberry in Washington, his home town, last spring. He confessed to a profound depression. The south that had nourished him had altogether vanished. Christenberry had first introduced me to William Eggleston in the mid-1980s when Eggleston had been in D.C. for a show of his dye-transfer prints of Elvis's Graceland. Eggleston had asked me to come over to see him. I think he had something he wanted to show me. From Birmingham, Alabama, I flew into Memphis, where Eggleston was waiting. We drove to a house in midtown that looked like an antebellum hunting lodge where he was living with his friend Lucia Burch. After climbing the steps of the front porch, I entered a large hall with a grand staircase. A dining room to the left was filled with a piano and other keyboard instruments, the dining table scattered with family silver. Vintage Leicas were arranged on the shelves. The floor of the drawing room to the right was covered with Chinese rugs. An old reel-to-reel tape recorder stood on a trolley. "It belonged to Elvis," muttered Eggleston, "but he couldn't handle the controls." Two vast speaker columns, built to Eggleston's own design, dominated the room. He demonstrated their power and clarity with Baroque music. He had a passion for Bach organ pieces. On the floors of these elegant rooms were stacks of colour prints. "You might be able to help me with this," he said. "This is *The Democratic Forest*."

The actual extent of *The Democratic Forest* was then uncertain, but he estimated there were more than 10,000 photographs so far. In fact, it never had a finale. It was truly endless and there was nothing it could not accommodate, hence the title. He explained, "I had been working down in Oxford or Holly Springs one day and that night, at the bar, somebody asked me what I'd been photographing and I told him, 'Oh just dirt by the side of the road. I've been photographing democratically.'" You had to figure out the forest for yourself. He knew he had a title – a kind of banner around which he could rally these seemingly disparate bodies of work. The first impression was of diversity, not just of scale. My role became that of a translator. I had to crack its code – to uncover its shape. I returned weeks later to begin the editing of these sprawling stacks into a single publishable sequence, which in those days meant about 150 photographs. The music played and I spread out the pictures on the floor of the hall. Eggleston oversaw proceedings from the stairs above, smoking and smiling. There were defined passages in various cities including Dallas, Miami and Berlin. I started, as I always do, in search of openings and endings. I tried to create a pastoral overture with the photographs of the Tennessee landscape and country roads.

The photographs seemed lyrical and easily accessible, but Eggleston stopped me at one point as I looked at a picture of a road and told me this was a “bee’s-eye view”. He had halted the car and raised his arm above the roof to make the exposure, imagining he was revealing an insect’s perspective on the scene. Even the simplest pictures could disclose layers of further complexity. The sequence ended in a plane over St Louis at night with an abstraction of electric light, which seemed appropriate for an artist in endless flight.

When I had a finished dummy, we wondered about a text and I asked Eggleston to suggest a writer. Without hesitation he said “Eudora Welty”. She was the greatest living writer in the south and provided a link back to the world of Faulkner. She also understood and made photographs. She still lived in the house in which she had grown up in Jackson, Mississippi. Nervously, I called her and made an appointment. We borrowed a blue Cadillac and headed down Highway 61.

Driving through the Mississippi Delta was for me a revelatory moment. I entered a landscape I had dreamt of for years. I had been across the country but no view had touched me like this sun-drenched plain. I think it was still spring and the unsparring heat of high summer was yet to come. The highway was a two-lane straight line with the river hidden behind the levees to the right. Eggleston’s well-known photograph of the girl in the lime-green dress standing by the road beneath rolling clouds was taken along this route. From the car, the delta looked just like that photograph. Perhaps by this stage he had shaped my own view to such an extent that it was as if the barriers that separated the photograph and the subject were down and I had entered photographic space. His view takes you over. Once you are in it, it seems so obvious. Later we made further trips to the delta towns, Clarksdale and Greenwood. We paid visits to his home town and family. We got lost on the back roads, but this time we drove straight. We had a mission.

Miss Eudora got half way through the dummy and then announced she was tired. “What would you like?” she asked. “About 3,000 words,” I answered without thinking. “Fine,” she said. “Thank you.” I left her house stunned. We headed back and I went straight to the airport. Within 48 hours I was clutching the dummy in an elevator going up to Doubleday’s New York offices to see Jackie Onassis. At MoMA, across the road from the office tower, was the Andy Warhol retrospective, where moments before, I had seen a multitude of grieving Jackies in silkscreen prints. I entered an empty room and she was standing with her back to me gazing out of the window. She turned, and apart from the heavy necklace concealing

ageing skin, she looked timeless. We went the whole way through the dummy, pausing only slightly at the Dallas section, including a picture of the Book Depository building. “I’ll take 20,000 copies,” was her response. I thought it couldn’t get any better.

In New York that year, I saw John Szarkowski, the MoMA curator who had famously exhibited Eggleston in the 1970s. He congratulated me on the book. This was welcome, like receiving a papal endorsement, but I already knew the book was important. The artist also knew. Months later, the book started to appear on the remainder stands and I realised that Jackie Onassis’s acquisition had been a little too enthusiastic. I was mocked for my folly and continued to suffer, while pundits talked of *William Eggleston’s Guide*, the MoMA catalogue from 1976, as the only book worth bothering with. I knew they were wrong. What tiny fraction of the artist’s work had they actually seen? Irving Penn once told me he had passed stacks of remaindered copies of his first book, *Moments Preserved*, and wept.



©Eggleston Artistic Trust
Untitled, 1973. Courtesy of Gagolian Gallery

Eggleston is now in his seventies and the world has changed. In 1992, his elder son William Jr initiated the establishment of the Eggleston Artistic Trust in Memphis. Over the past decade, his younger son, Winston, now the trust’s director, painstakingly arranged for the scanning of all his father’s pictures. Winston’s huge endeavour lays the ground for a systematic examination of the progression of the work – a far cry from the stacks that first greeted me in Memphis.

Since the 1990s Eggleston has been widely, though one could suggest inadequately, exhibited. I organised an early but incomplete retrospective at the Barbican in London in 1992. At the time, Eggleston was strongly resisting the label of “southern artist” and I chose to follow the early portfolios and dye-transfer prints with work from Africa, Egypt, Germany and England. I didn’t have the space to show a single photograph from *The Democratic Forest*. There has been a major show at the Cartier Foundation in Paris, which came to London. It was much lauded by David Lynch, a big admirer. In some ways the work remained as enigmatic as Lynch himself. They were both from the same brilliant and eccentric tribe, or so it seemed. There was even a retrospective at the Whitney. But every view was incomplete. The full context has never been established. Eggleston was not the heir to Walker Evans. He consciously used that frontal formality sparingly. He admired Henri Cartier-Bresson greatly, but for all his European sensibilities, he remained inescapably of the south. He pioneered video, but even the many hours of his black and white footage have yet to be edited to his own satisfaction. The whole narrative of his work is only beginning to be told.

Individual works in the photography market have broken through the million-dollar threshold for some time now. Andreas Gursky was at the forefront with all the digital possibilities at his disposal. Eggleston, however influential he was on a younger generation, was of the pre-digital age. His work originated on film. He was a virtuoso with the f-stop. Yet of the line of American photographers who were championed by Szarkowski, including Diane Arbus, Eggleston was the one who could most readily transcend the line that separated the photography world from the wider world of contemporary art and its market. It is not such a long step from, say, Ed Ruscha to Eggleston. There was still a limited supply of materials for dye-transfer prints, which the Egglestons wanted to use carefully. In Paris last year, the Gagosian Gallery successfully showed a small group of new Eggleston dyes taken from *Election Eve*, his series made in Georgia on the eve of the Carter presidential election in 1976 and originally published in 1977. Meanwhile, examples of his dyes from the 1970s were cropping up at Paris Photo for hundreds of thousands of dollars.



Untitled (The Red Ceiling), 1973. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

When Eggleston first used the dye-transfer process he was able to achieve unparalleled colour saturation and a special intensity, which gave the colour a sense of dimension or substance. The commercial implications were enormous since the process offered stability. These pictures were not about to fade on some collector's wall. The museums could make acquisitions. But printing technology has changed radically. Eggleston began to have some new digital options tested and by scanning both the original negatives and positives he was able to see a marked new clarity and definition. This in turn allowed him to increase the scale to what he viewed as an optimum width for a horizontal of about 60in. Thirty-six of these large prints came straight on to the market in a sale at Christie's in New York this March. They made nearly \$6m. Despite murmurings in the photography world, Eggleston was indeed crossing over to another market. Meanwhile, there had been changes at the Eggleston trust. Winston's brother, William Jr, re-entered the operation. Over a year ago, he brought me to his home in Los Angeles, where he had installed a superb editing room with a large screen and a direct link to Winston's archive. With Eggleston himself staying out in LA, we began to systematically review the work starting with the chromes, the transparencies that Eggleston had packed in a suitcase and presented to Szarkowski in the mid-1970s. A three-volume set of the chromes was about to be magnificently printed by Gerhard Steidl in Germany. Still we found more pictures of quality that had slipped the net. We aimed to get to the vast pastures of The Democratic Forest but on William Jr's insistence we remained firmly systematic and chronological. The photographs in Eggleston's guide selected by Szarkowski were consistent in that they often tended to be constructed around a single subject in the centre of the frame from which diagonals spread to the corners.

The guide included the girl in the lime-green dress and views of suburban Memphis, but did not include what was to become one of his most famous pictures, *The Red Ceiling*, a study of a light bulb connected by white cables across a field of red. This astonishing image hovered on the line between its depiction of a pendulous, even phallic, bulb, and pure abstraction. The photographs from the guide, though sometimes charged and resonant, are more literal representations – a child's bike, a burning barbecue. Their power is derived from their obvious familiarity. *The Red Ceiling* is not familiar. It is disorientating, if not menacing. The next series we viewed was *Los Alamos*, a loose set of more than 2,000 photographs taken on the road from the south to New Mexico and as far as Santa Monica, between 1966 and 1974. Eggleston's companion on several of these trips was the curator Walter Hopps. They had reached the gates of the Los Alamos nuclear laboratory but no further. They referred almost jokingly to these pictures as "*The Los Alamos series*" and it stuck. Some 70 photographs from *Los Alamos* were produced in a series of portfolios more than 10 years ago, but since Hopps's recent death, a further box had come to light. We were viewing the series in its entirety for the first time. Scenes of the old world – the gas station, the wooden barn and the small town main street that Walker Evans would have cherished – gradually gave way to views of the parking lots of the new south and finally to purely abstract frames. This was clearly the stepping stone to the complexity of *The Democratic Forest*. We sequenced a series of 360 photographs and called the *Gagosian Gallery*. They immediately saw the logic of the progression. We began to make the first sorties into *The Democratic Forest*, which finally amounted to more than 12,000 pictures. Steidl flew in and offered three volumes for *Los Alamos* on the spot. He has now committed to six volumes for a sequence of 900 photographs from *The Democratic Forest*. This huge work will finally have a context and may yet be viewed as a masterpiece – a great American epic.



©Eggleston Artistic Trust
Untitled, 1971-1974. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

As the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles prepares for a big show of 37 prints from Los Alamos in the new, large format at the end of the month with their own accompanying catalogue, and Steidl's volumes are at the bindery, the Rose Gallery in Santa Monica, which has been so supportive of the Eggleston enterprise, is preparing another show of new dyes for the following month. Tate Modern will be exhibiting Eggleston rooms next year and this month a further selection of more than 20 prints, many of them from Los Alamos, will be shown at the Barbican. A methodical process is now in motion. Though never fully appreciated for years, the fruits of these solitary explorations by Eggleston in a vanishing world will now be seen as a single heroic progression from the mundane to the profound. There is no precedent.

REVIEW: WILLIAM EGGLESTON – “Before Color” (2010)



By Doug Rickard

William Eggleston is a “Southern” artist.

Without a deeper explanation, this statement itself could mean a few things. If you look at the body of his work on the whole, the majority of it (almost all) is set within the Southern environs of the US... places like Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky and Arkansas. Also, he was born in the “South” and still residing there. Surely, that makes him largely “Southern”. Additionally and importantly, you could look at his work as “Southern” from a standpoint of “feel”... the nuances, the point of view, the character.

All of these things are accurate but it even goes deeper than that. William Eggleston can't actually separate himself from his "South". The "South" is embedded into him so deeply that it has become something of a stamp or a mark. This embedding is so pronounced that this "Southern" is in a sense woven in to his pictures, whatever the subjects are. This is really what I mean by the statement, "William Eggleston is a 'Southern' Artist." It simply means that he himself is the "Southern" in the phrase "Southern Artist".

Another statement.

William Eggleston is a "color" photographer.

Here there is also a bit of room for interpretation. Eggleston is linked so profoundly to color photography that the simple uttering of his last name immediately brings to mind the word "color" and even a visual on a certain type of color. His body of work to date and the significant recognition that he has received (deservedly so) comes exclusively from these color pictures. After all, his color pictures largely transformed the sensibilities of the art world and how it would relate to color photography, for good.

Now, under the context of these two Eggleston ideas of "Southern" and "color", we look at the book, *William Eggleston: Before Color*, which is, surprisingly, a black and white book, but not surprisingly, set in the "South".







The history of the “South” and what it is to be “Southern” cannot easily be separated from its horrific legacy of abject cruelty and malevolence against African Americans... of slavery, lynching, segregation, Jim Crow laws and lasting prejudice. In this sense then, to be a “Southern” artist is to have then at least a partial association with these things. When I say association, I do not mean that Eggleston is a believer and a

proponent of these abhorrent actions and mindset. I am sure that he is not. I simply mean that by reflecting these environs in such an atmospherically complex and “pure” way, the artist is then also representing the ugliness and legacy of this place for all to see. One simply can’t separate “Southern” from this history. It is the massive elephant in the room at minimum and at maximum, it is much of what it is to be “Southern”.

William Eggleston: Before Color is then surely a tour into this menace and heinous history and into the “Southern” legacy. In fact with the absence of color in this work, it is a significantly stronger embodiment of this history and of this malice. Although 90% of the book is absent of African American subjects, one can’t help but “feel” them in almost all of the pictures. The photographs, mainly consisting of white Memphis residents in the 1950-60’s, and their homes, cars and places, are also then filled by a default and implication with blacks. There is also a palpable undertone and a foreshadowing of the socio-economic decay that will fall on to this city and much of the South. As you look at the pictures, you “see” what “they” have done and the legacy that has been created, what has and what will occur. The atmosphere is dreary and ugly, there is no “Southern charm”. In photographs of newly constructed houses for example, through Eggleston’s gaze, the places are already giving hints to coming decay. It is as if the legacy has become an omen and what has been reaped, for generations now, everyone will sow.

Because of the “Eggleston color legacy”, one might assume that the absence of color diminishes the work and the strength of Eggleston as an artist. It does not. It is largely up to the viewer to disassociate themselves from their own deep mental ties to Eggleston and his “color”. Not an easy task, but entirely possible. I would not though say that the absence of “Southern” environs does not diminish Eggleston as an artist. It does. Eggleston as a “Southern artist” can’t and should not project his “South” on simply anywhere (Berlin, Moscow, Mexico City, etc). To be a “democratic” photographer (taking pictures of anything with equal merit) might suggest this approach relating also to geography but I would put forth that Eggleston is more accurately a “Southern Democratic Photographer”. There is no need then for him to show anything or anywhere else. He is the singular master of this domain.

Bravo to **Steidl** and Eggleston – this is a tour de force of legacy, sinful deeds and menace. Eggleston here is at his earliest and surprisingly, at an equal to him at his best.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

January 8, 2009

Born of Willful Passivity: The Art of William Eggleston

By Richard B. Woodward

The photographer William Eggleston has always depended on the kindness of editors. This shy, dissolute Southern cavalier (soon to be 70 years old) has almost never held a job or selected his own work for a book or an exhibition. It's as though reading a storyline into the tens of thousands of images he has shot around the world since the 1960s were superfluous or vulgar, something for others to bother with.

At the beginning of his career he left that task to two of the most capable minds in American art: Walter Hopps, who discovered him in 1970 when he was director of the Corcoran Gallery; and John Szarkowski, who as director of the Department of Photographs at the Museum of Modern Art gave Mr. Eggleston a one-man show in 1976 that changed the course of photography as an art.

That controversial exhibition and its peculiar catalog, "William Eggleston's Guide," legitimized color photography, overturning a hierarchy that had favored black-and-white since the medium's invention. Unlike artists of earlier generations, Mr. Eggleston did not use color for freakish or decorative effect but with a natural ease, "as though the blue and the sky were one thing," in Mr. Szarkowski's appreciative phrase.

Editing Mr. Eggleston is vital, and this function, even before the deaths last year of Messrs. Hopps and Szarkowski, had passed in this decade to the German curator and writer Thomas Weski. Deputy director of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, he organized "Los Alamos," the sprawling 2003 exhibition of photographs that Mr. Eggleston took around the U.S. between 1964 and 1974, and he is co-curator, with Elizabeth Sussman, of "Democratic Camera," the retrospective now at the Whitney Museum through Jan. 25.

Mr. Eggleston's temperament is that of a boulevardier. His books seldom have a single theme and never feature a group of identifiable characters. They don't even confine themselves to a single city, state or country. Instead, his international oeuvre -- mainly shot with small-format cameras in available light -- consists of tiny epiphanies that correlate only if you want them to. The seeming randomness of the artist's attention, as much as the color, is what baffled many viewers back in 1976.

What were the connections, if any, between places and people? Did the dog sipping from a puddle in the road have anything to do with the naked man standing in a red room with graffiti on the walls? Were the green-tiled shower and the interior of the oven in the same house? (I once asked Mr. Eggleston if he had ever photographed methodically. "I've taken a few stabs at it and it's just not me," he replied.)

Mr. Weski and Ms. Sussman have kept things loosely chronological but not imposed too much order. A room of his grainy black-and-white photos from the 1960s conveys ambiguous reactions to his native South undergoing suburbanization. Another room features a legendary black-and-white video he made in 1973-74. "Stranded in Canton," as he titles it, offers a peek at the artist's bizarre and fluid social world and his nonjudgmental attitude toward what his camera sees. Shot mainly at night in New Orleans, it has appearances by Delta bluesman Furry Lewis, a man biting the head off a chicken, and numerous rambling monologists.

The rest of the show is color, done with the fresh, restless eye for which Mr. Eggleston is renowned. He should be a hero to any artist opposed to the pompous or monumental. During the '70s and '80s he looked at things few had noticed before -- the objects that collect under a bed, the strange emptiness of a suburban garage, an evening meal set for one -- and he discovered therein unique harmonies and discontinuities that only a color photographer could grasp.

Many photographers since Walker Evans have focused on decaying structures and mourned the replacement of the ramshackle cabin with the new mall. Mr. Eggleston shares that sensibility. But when he switched to color in the late '60s and early '70s, first with transparencies and then with print film, he also recorded the wide range of hues unique to the industrial age: the faded paint of automobiles and storefronts, the many shades of gray and brown in cement and macadam, the bold solids and stripes of manufactured clothing.

Against these synthetic dyes, he has often contrasted a girl's red hair or dark skin, a scruffy patch of grass, a pattern of sun across a sink, a startling blue sky. Such combinations of manmade and natural color exist everywhere and help to define the look of our time, even if most of us have failed to pay attention.

Looking inside a freezer, he finds that ice has a lavender tinge. A woman's hand stirring a drink aboard an airplane seems to turn it into gold as sun through the window strikes the glass. Many artists have fallen for early morning dappled light. But in his photograph of a phone off the hook on a flowered sheet, the sun at that hour gives extra temporal mystery to a scene of a conversation interrupted for reasons we are not privy to.

Some curators have overstressed Mr. Eggleston's fondness for dye-transfer prints. He likes the process for its relative permanence and the intensity of its color compared with chromogenic prints. But a case in a room to the right has a selection of his small "drug-store" prints from the early '70s, so called because they were not processed professionally. They demonstrate the same nosiness about the edges and corners of experience, the same sensitivity toward many kinds of light. These are the prints that first showed Messrs. Hopps and Szarkowski Mr. Eggleston's talent.

Mr. Weski has relied heavily on the edits of his predecessors. But he and Ms. Sussman have chosen well from a vast output and established moods for different rooms. They don't oversell the series taken at Elvis's Graceland in 1983-84 and they keep to a discreet minimum Mr. Eggleston's digital lightjet prints, taken in this decade. The catalog is well worth having, both for the essays and for the photographs of the artist as a dashing young man.

To younger photographers and film directors working in color, few artists have been more important than Mr. Eggleston. He seems not to judge the world he sees or to impose his will upon it, and he realizes that he makes it only a little better by photographing it. A rare and willful passivity has always been one of the secrets of his greatness and strength.

Mr. Woodward is an arts critic in New York.

The Museum of Modern Art

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COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILLIAM EGGLESTON
AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART



Photographs by William Eggleston, one of the most accomplished photographers now working in color, will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from May 25 through August 1. The exhibition of approximately 75 prints has been selected and installed by John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography, who is also the author of a fully illustrated monograph, William Eggleston's Guide,* the Museum's first publication on color photography. The exhibition and publication have been made possible by grants from Vivitar Inc. and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Unlike most of their predecessors, whose color work has been either formless or too pretty, a new generation of young photographers has begun to use color in a confident spirit of freedom and naturalness. In their work the role of color is more than simply descriptive or decorative, and assumes a central place in the definition of the picture's content. These photographers work not as if color were a separate problem to be resolved in isolation, "but rather as though the world itself existed in color, as though the blue and the sky were one thing," Szarkowski writes.

For Eggleston, as for others in the new generation of color photographers, color is "existential and descriptive; these pictures are not photographs of color, any more than they are photographs of shapes, textures, objects, symbols, or events, but rather photographs of experience, as it has been ordered and clarified within the structures imposed by the camera."

Eggleston, who lives in Memphis, Tennessee, finds his private, even insular subject matter in the commonplace realities of that city and its environs. Pre-

(more)

*WILLIAM EGGLESTON'S GUIDE by John Szarkowski. 112 pages, 48 color plates. \$12.50. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Distributed to the trade by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London.

occupied with such personal experience, Eggleston is essentially a romantic in the Wordsworthian mode. While his photographs comprise a remarkable and surprising commentary on contemporary American life, his work is more the engagement of a personal vision than a social document.

These photographs are clearly fixed facts of the real world impartially recorded by the camera, but they are something more as well. Relatives and friends, houses in the neighborhood, local streets and country roads, strangers, dining rooms and unusual souvenirs are seen by Eggleston's camera "in a manner that is restrained, austere, and public, a style not inappropriate for photographs that might be introduced as evidence in court," but their "lean, monocular intentness fixes the subject as sharply as if it were recalled from eidetic memory."

"Reduced to monochrome," Szarkowski writes, "Eggleston's designs would be in fact almost static, almost as blandly resolved as the patterns seen in kaleidoscopes, but they are perceived in color, where the wedge of purple necktie, or the red disk of the stoplight against the sky, has a different compositional torque than its equivalent panchromatic gray, as well as a different meaning. For Eggleston, who was perhaps never fully committed to photography in black and white, the lesson would be more easily and naturally learned, enabling him to make these pictures: real photographs, bits lifted from the visceral world with such tact and cunning that they seem true, seen in color from corner to corner."

Eggleston has made his pictures a deeply felt expression of self, of his vision and intentions. In Szarkowski's estimation, these photographs are perfect: "irreducible surrogates for the experience they pretend to record, visual analogues for the quality of one life, collectively a paradigm of a private view, a view one would have thought ineffable, described here with clarity, fullness, and elegance."

William Eggleston was born in 1939 in Memphis, Tennessee, near his family's cotton farm in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi. His interest in photography began while he was attending Vanderbilt University and was pursued desultorily until about 1962, when he discovered the work of Cartier-Bresson. Since the late sixties most of his work

has been in color. Eggleston was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in photography in 1974 and a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in 1975. In 1974 he was Lecturer in Visual and Environmental Studies at Carpenter Center, Harvard College. 14 Pictures, a portfolio of dye-transfer prints, was privately published in 1974.

The prints in the exhibition were made, under Mr. Eggleston's supervision, by Berkey K + L Color Labs, New York, and the K & S Photo Labs, Chicago.

Additional information available from Bruce Wolmer, Assistant, and Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53 St., New York, NY 10019. Phone: (212) 956-7295; 7501.
