

# CHEIM & READ



## The American Dream by Night

By NOLA TULLY

Seeing William Eggleston's "Nightclub Portraits," on view for just one more day at Cheim & Read, is like watching film segments flashing before a white screen. There are 37 black-and-white prints, each the same size (38 inches by 26 3/4 inches), each framed in the same black frame, hanging equidistant from one another across a horizon

### WILLIAM EGGLESTON: NIGHTCLUB PORTRAITS, 1973

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line of the gallery walls. These faces against black backgrounds, many of them never exhibited before, loom larger than life and demand our attention. Made with a 5-by-7 camera and strobe flash, in juke joints and clubs around Memphis in 1973, there is a strange truth to them. There are no gimmicks, no props, just the photographer, his cam-



William Eggleston, "Untitled" (1973).

era, and his instinct for lighting.

The portraits convey a sense of spontaneity. An attractive woman with wavy black hair is caught mid-sentence; a stu-

dious blonde, loosely clad in a striped halter top, shows the enamel chipped off her front tooth; a man scratches his nose in the dim light of the bar. Mr. Eggleston successfully illustrates the collision of self-destruction and self-promotion in this social landscape. His subjects take themselves seriously — and as a result, so do we. The mod brunette with false eyelashes and a butterfly necklace looks upward commandingly. The hip guy with the shades, the only black man in the exhibit, looks like someone who could teach us a thing or two about cool. In some images, though, a figure looms at the edge, delightfully tempting the viewer outside the frame. This sense of not getting the whole picture makes the images more alluring.

Raised in the land of Faulkner and Elvis, Mr. Eggleston has an eye for the strangeness of the American dream. According to one story, Mr. Eggleston took his film to a processing lab, where he became enamored of the amateur photography, which led him to perfect the snapshot composition. His interests in guns and music seem to jibe with his predilection for precision. In the portrait of a man in a Southern bow tie, his brow knitted, his mouth open as if witnessing some unsavory event, we see the flesh on his forehead folded over, each pore of his skin illuminated by side light.

After Mr. Eggleston's groundbreaking color show at MoMA in 1976, his photos were spurned for their banality. Yet his method liberated the medium from formal constraints, and he exists in our lexicon somewhere between Walker Evans and Robert Frank. In an interview in *Frieze* magazine, Mr. Eggleston was asked if he had a trick to getting his subjects to pose. "Usually, what I'll say is, [in an overtly upbeat, ingenuous voice] 'May I take your picture? I'm from Memphis!' I have found that this always works." Mr. Eggleston offers little explanation, but goes on to suggest that his interviewer try it sometime.

*Until tomorrow (547 W. 25th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-242-7727).*