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REVIEWS

WILLIAM EGGLESTON: DEMOCRATIC CAMERA



In 1976, when William Eggleston was launched upon a rather unsuspecting audience with a major one-person show at New York's Museum of Modern Art, his work was savaged by critics and widely disparaged by the general public. The complaint—that his pictures were too casual, banal, and vulgar—gives some sense of just how outré the show must have seemed, concurring as it did with one of the great nadirs in American culture: a bombastic bicentennial year of tall ships, corporate rock, streakers, and *The Donnie and Marie Show*. It has taken nearly a third of a century for Eggleston to undertake another major museum survey—perhaps evidence of his notoriously reclusive nature. The show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, which includes some 150 works, is a healthy reminder of why he is so important to any consideration of contemporary art, and a testament to how very prescient his lowbrow tendencies were.

Now that Eggleston's wanton inclusiveness has infected the gaze of shutterbug aesthetes everywhere, it is easy to locate him among that generation (including Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, Stephen Shore, and Garry Winogrand) who would—following Walker Evans's *American Photographs* and Robert Frank's *The Americans*—take the next measure of our national experience. An artist's artist, Eggleston has an uncanny capacity to transform the quotidian into the transcendent; this is widely cited by many of the most prominent photographers today, including Nan Goldin, Ryan McGinley, Juergen Teller, and Wolfgang Tillmans. He has

also deeply informed auteur cinema, from John Huston through Gus Van Sant, Larry Clark, David Lynch, Sofia Coppola, and Harmony Korine. But while *Democratic Camera* leaves no doubt about Eggleston's greatness, it is difficult in any summation to explain *what's* so great about his work. Maybe the problem lies in his own precept that pictures "defy words."

Loving Eggleston—as easy for some of us as falling off a bar stool—seems to be about embracing his affections, which are shamelessly many and remarkably appreciative of how things *are* rather than how they could or should be. A man who has photographed most anything anywhere, he offers a stunning clarity

that, though redolent of the romantic, is incapable of sentimentality. His work speaks to a humanist faith (though with the heart of a true atheist), and levels an abiding sense of understanding toward his subjects—and a refusal ever to know better than they do. Steeped in bourbon and nicotine, his photographs careen through the commonplace with the heat of a no-holds-barred bender and the cold sweat of an unholy hangover. You don't just end up enthralled by what this man has seen, but are mesmerized by the way he sees things, how unspoken quotients of insanity, desperation, mortality, and abandonment suffuse the mundane and are then in turn diffused by a glorious sense of wonder. It's like every picture wants to tell us a story but can't remember a thing beyond the intensity of their single moment (he is amply beholden to Cartier-Bresson): every detail all the more acute for the blackout or sunstroke that surely followed.

A dandy, decadent kid of Southern landed gentry, Eggleston is imbued with all the genteel graces and irascible personal demons our Southern Gothic imaginations might ascribe to the grand cotton plantation of his grandparents. He is of that old-school bohemianism in which the fearsome specter of luxurious idleness proffers its own manic motivations and cannot be tarnished by the squalor it abuts. There is a charismatic force of style and personality here whereby

THIS PAGE: *Untitled (Peaches)*, 1973; OPPOSITE: *Untitled*, 1975. Both photographs by William Eggleston.

Peaches, collection of Winston Eggleston; Unlabeled © Eggleston Artists Trust; Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

the artist's eccentricity can mine from the lowest moments of our everyday ennui episodes that are sublime.

Eggleston is singular in having taught us to see in color—an extremely difficult lesson thirty years ago, at a time when fine-art photography was the province of black-and-white only. The Whitney exhibition is primarily a riotous celebration of how his dye-cast transfer prints (a prohibitively expensive technique borrowed from the world of high-end advertising) bring about a supersaturated derangement of perception that makes even the most trivial artifacts of daily being look patently over the top.

We all now see the world much as Eggleston always has, and a slew of similarly keen eyes are trained upon a similar lexicon of meaninglessness. The brilliance of his work from the 1960s and '70s seems almost dulled by his equally compelling (though less shocking) pictures of the past twenty years—to the point where it is not easy to separate our appreciation of that earlier work from a kind of collective nostalgia. As such, the inclusion in the show's ramshackle installation of Eggleston's enigmatic video

Stranded in Canton was a great surprise. Shot in 1973–74 on a newly purchased Sony portable video camera, and later distilled from its original thirty hours down to a more manageable seventy-six minutes, *Stranded* is an almost anti-photographic experiment in what happens when you lose the decisive moment. The video is an epic binge, featuring a collection of outrageous freaks on copious quantities of booze and pills. Luridly episodic (a gun emptied into the ceiling, the head bitten off a chicken, and just enough melodramatic queens and borderline rednecks to obviate any linearity), it makes Robert Frank's 1959 *Pull My Daisy* seem Disneyesque. We see Eggleston not so much as the local denizen offering us a back-roads tour of his beloved landscape but for what he will always be—the consummate outsider. 🍷

—Carlo McCormick

William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961–2008 was presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, November 7, 2008–January 25, 2009. It is on view at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, until May 17, 2009.

