

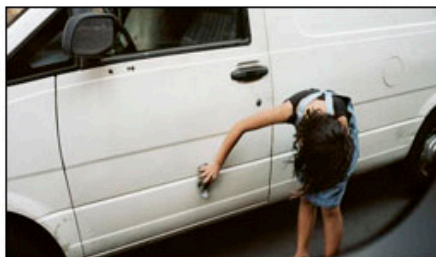
William Eggleston: 21st Century, Victoria Miro, London

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To his army of fans, William Eggleston is a photographer who can do no wrong. And ever since *William Eggleston's Guide*, his landmark show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1976, Eggleston has also been admired by practitioners in every discipline of photography as a liberator, because he showed that they could get huge credit for doing very simple things if only they could do them well enough.

He is regarded as having spearheaded two quite separate tendencies. He worked from the outset almost exclusively in colour, radical at a time when pretensions to artistry were assumed to be confined to black-and-white. He also worked in a loose, informal way which seemed deliberately to reject the old certainties of "the view". Eggleston's subject matter was often banal, and his compositions were loose enough to look haphazard. Entire genres of subsequent photography take their DNA from those two tendencies.

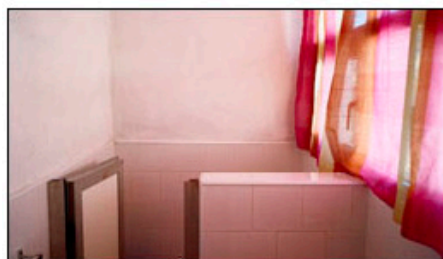


Covert surveillance: Detail from William Eggleston's 'Untitled (Woman Wiping Van, Queens, New York)' (2002)

Eggleston resisted labelling, yet we can see that he sat at a fascinating intersection where pop art and a kind of documentary and art photography all met. One of his most famous images, "Greenwood, Mississippi" (1973), is a view of an electric light fitting on a blood red ceiling, with white wires snaking towards its ceiling rose. Everybody remembers the colour, and the strange viewpoint by which Eggleston's camera is too near the ceiling. But not everybody recalls that on a wall in the lower right corner are illustrations (in primary colours, naturally) of sexual positions. No caption other than the place name: Eggleston was happy to leave the interpretation to others.

This master has a new selection, accumulated over the past 10 years, showing simultaneously at Cheim & Read in New York and at Victoria Miro in London. Enough of the new pictures are weaker than the miracles his fans expect to diminish the show a little. Some very close-up images – a woman crying, a discarded newspaper in the grass – don't work well. They are not scenes so much as *objets trouvés* and provide correspondingly less space for the imagination to roam. Similarly, a few near-abstract views – a wandering cloud, a windscreen in a car-wash – offer plenty of space, but no real guidance as to what we might be pointed towards. But there is a red dumpster against an orange wall that is a miracle of witty colouring. Some of the boxes in the skip are vivid purple and green. Like several other pictures, the dumpster image trills good-natured pleasure at the colours the world flings about.

All of this is pleasant enough. It shows an artist neither on great form nor badly out of it. Eggleston is a quick hunter-gatherer of images and the slightly wobbly imbalance of his compositions is far subtler than at first appears – as demonstrated by the legions of photographers who have tried to do something similar and fallen only into ponderousness or meaninglessness.



Detail from Eggleston's 'Untitled (Bathroom with Pink Curtain, Cuba)' (2007)

Two flashes of genius lift the show. "Untitled (Bathroom with Pink Curtain, Cuba)" (2007) is just a study of the draught shifting a curtain, with a diffused light giving a gentle glow to tiled walls. Somehow, out of very simple elements, Eggleston has made something very moving. It's a photograph of the process of memory, a picture of what this scene will look like when remembered. Hard fact (structure, surface, fittings) is washed in the twin elements of light and the artist's skill to make something much richer. The only photographer I know who has consistently worked in this same area is the absurdly underrated Bernard Plossu. He is a traveller and, like Eggleston, he often photographs scenes he seems already to

have left as he makes the picture.

There is another. "Untitled (Woman Wiping Van, Queens, New York)" (2002) is a little street view of a woman stooping down to clean the flank of a white van. Her pose is a bow, shielding her from the camera and somehow reverential towards her work. It's classic Eggleston; with just a hint of covert surveillance in the ghost of the wing-mirror (or is it a the shape of car window?) in the near foreground to remind us that Eggleston has often photographed from within the discreet shelter of cars. I couldn't put my finger on why I was so drawn to this picture. But I got it in the end: the van is white. It's almost a black-and-white picture, except made on colour film. The great colourist, now in his seventies, has at last discovered that white can be one of his colours, too.