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William Eggleston: 21st Century

Replacing the familiar strident colours with ominous washed-out tones, William Eggleston's latest works reveal an artist still evolving at the age of 70

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William Eggleston's *Untitled (Newspaper on Ground, Grass, California, 2000)*: 'More muted tones point towards pure abstraction.' Photograph: Eggleston Artistic Trust

In her illuminating introduction to [William Eggleston's](#) book *The Democratic Forest* (1989), Eudora Welty writes that his photographs "focus on the mundane world" and that "there is especial beauty in his sensitive and exacting use of colour, its variations and intensities". This remains the case.

Now 70, Eggleston's eye is still drawn to the everyday, and he still renders it as if he were a visitor from Mars. And yet what you sense here, in the 22 new photographs on display at Victoria Miro, is a tentative reinvention. Eggleston is a master of vivid, sometimes garish, colour, though the lurid oranges, reds and yellows no longer shock the eye like they used to. What intrigues more here is his deployment of more muted tones that, in certain photographs, point towards a move into pure abstraction.

In one of the more striking images he renders the interior of a freezer as a deathly place, the ice layered in folds of pale colour and spread like fur around rusting pipes. The bags of "Purity Party Ice" at the bottom of the composition are a typically surreal detail but everything else about the photograph suggests impurity. The prevailing tone is unsettling-going-on-ominous. I was reminded of Luc Tuymans's paintings in which people and places have been drained of colour and, by extension, of life.

The use of muted colours as a tonal device continues in a photograph of a tiled restroom in which the light that filters through the opaque curtains lends everything an unreal pinkish hue. As is the case in many of his photographs, one is initially taken aback by the skewed point of view – was he standing on a chair? – but, again, what most intrigues here is the absence of that intensity of colour that Welty pinpointed as Eggleston's formal signature. One wonders whether the abiding subtext of these new pieces is mortality and, in particular, his own encroaching old age.

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The painterly aspect continues with *Untitled* (Clouds, Santa Barbara, 2000), in which a wisp of white evaporates forever into a sky as deep and darkly blue as the ocean. Eggleston has photographed clouds before, usually by simply pointing his Leica at the sky, but this image seems to echo both impressionist and classical painting. The white streaks of cloud in the background seem like brushstrokes.

Next to it, another photograph of another, altogether paler sky contains what at first glance appears to be a floating Santa Claus. He hovers blissfully above the flat roof of a store called Hub Cap City and a road sign advertising "Donuts". Here the established iconography of American street photography that Eggleston initially drew on and subverted is rendered even more surreal. The floating Santa is actually a sticker on a dusty window pane through which Eggleston has captured – and created – this surreal tableau.

In the bottom right hand corner, Eggleston also captures the initials AL and BL, which have been smudged on the dirty glass, the only evidence of any human activity. The poetry of mundane reality is, as ever with Eggleston, in the details. Here, too, though, it seems as if he is recording the inconsequential marks and traces left behind by the departed.

Elsewhere the terrain is more recognisably Egglestonian. It strikes me that no one does corners quite like him. In one street corner scene he crops the image where the street might disappear into the distance the way it would in, say, a Walker Evans street corner scene. Instead he draws the eye to a forlorn telegraph pole that slices the garish red and yellow wall in the background, wires falling from its apex like thin fairground streamers. In one of several strange interiors he homes in on the corner of a grimy kitchen. Here the photograph has been cropped right down the centre of the doorframe, the glimpse of a sun-dappled yard outside lending the cluttered interior an even more sordid feel. This is ultra-realism, Eggleston style.

The strangeness of William Eggleston's way of seeing remains unsurpassed, then, even if we have almost grown used to it in the years since it cut a swathe through the black and white world of early 70s photography. If the more tonal and abstract works on display here are anything to go by, Eggleston is still dancing to his own dissonant tune, and his eye for the extraordinary that lurks in the ordinary still surprises.