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Point and Place: William Eggleston's Vibrant Spaces

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Eggleston Artistic Trust/Cheim & Read, NYC
Untitled, circa 1975

After having spent some hours at the Whitney Museum among William Eggleston's photographs, I couldn't stop my mind's eye from framing each passing place as an interesting photograph. I was in a taxi on the way to the airport and thinking hard about walking straight to the duty-free shop to see what they had in the way of cameras. But in the end, I knew better than to waste my money. I've been around images long enough to know what illusions they can work. And having memorized Henry James's caveat to writers--"The art of representation bristles with questions the very terms of which are difficult to apply and to appreciate"--I recollected in time that it applies to the art of the camera as well as to that of the pen. Most people realize there's more to, say, making music than just wanting to; you need some technique to mediate your desire. Writing seems a bit more available because, after all, language is everybody's tool kit. But photography is even more seductive. Hasn't the technique been built into the technology? Just point and shoot.

Calling his grand and gorgeous retrospective at the Whitney "Democratic Camera," Eggleston might seem to imply that anybody can do it. (The exhibition can be seen there through January 25; it then travels to the Haus der Kunst in Munich, where it will run from February 20 to May 17.) Well, maybe anybody could have made these pictures--anybody, as long as he was born in 1939; raised in Mississippi (in the town where Emmett Till was later lynched) as the asthmatic scion of a wealthy old planter family; developed an early affinity for art and music, and for the gear associated with it (cameras, audio equipment); passed through Ole Miss and various other Southern universities without bothering to take a degree; discovered Henri Cartier-Bresson's *The Decisive Moment* at just the decisive moment when he was still young enough for the book to have the deepest and most unprepared impact yet mature enough to be able to start reacting constructively to it; set up house in Memphis (where he was born); and developed his art in relative isolation yet remained savvy enough to know that when the work was ready, the only thing to do was to take a suitcase full of prints to New York to lay before MoMA's legendary photography curator John Szarkowski. Anybody could have made them, that is, who was William Eggleston.

Eggleston not only makes it look easy, as natural as opening your eyes, but seems to have come upon his

art all at once. That's not to say he never made any apprentice work, only that it had almost nothing in it of what we'd now recognize as the Eggleston eye, and that while there was a transitional period between apprenticeship and fully achieved mastery, it happened in the blink of an eye. "When we met, over forty years ago," writes music journalist Stanley Booth in the Whitney's exhibition catalog, "Eggleston...was already, in his early twenties, reputed to be a 'serious' photographer." Maybe that was the problem: Eggleston's black-and-white photographs of the '60s don't wear their seriousness lightly enough. Some of them are closer to a documentary style than his later pictures were. In others one does see him reaching out for the more oblique, more mercurial sense of what a picture can be, of densely encapsulating lived experience, that would soon be his. His gaze is drawn to the same kinds of places and people one will glimpse in his mature work, but we don't experience them as concretely as in the images he would soon begin making in color. There are intimations of that mature oblique texture in an untitled image taken in 1968 in Memphis: on an eerily empty suburban street, a man stands at the side of the road, one hand bent at an odd angle as if he were pushing off from a nonexistent pole that he'd been holding on to the night before--the gesture points against the direction in which he appears to be fitfully moving. He casts a long shadow on the lawn behind him--as the photographer does across the road that separates them. It's as if the cold morning light of de Chirico's "metaphysical" piazzas had been translated to the New South.

One sees in Eggleston's early color photographs, from around 1969 on, several such scenes of isolated individuals in wide, inhospitable landscapes--the yawning sense of existential disconnection built on an elementary tension between the figure's verticality and the picture's horizontality. Speaking of his childhood, Eggleston recently said, "I never had the feeling that I didn't fit in. But probably I didn't." That's the kind of person these images seem to be about: someone who is detached from his or her environment without realizing it. Szarkowski wrote in his introduction to *William Eggleston's Guide*, the book that accompanied the exhibition he curated at MoMA in 1976, "The pictures reproduced here are about the photographer's home, about his place, in both important meanings of that word. One might say about his identity." Eggleston has always denied being a "Southern artist" and rightly points out that he travels widely and has made many fine images elsewhere. His is certainly not the "Gothic" South of Faulkner and McCullers, whose photographic offspring might be Ralph Eugene Meatyard. But he's as Southern in his rejection of identification with the South as he is in his evident fascination with its landscape and the people who have made and marred it: they are all here, black and white, rich and poor, not as exemplars of any societal or political problem but all affected by a similar unease with their place. Eggleston once said that the compositional basis for his pictures is the Confederate flag. It's a shocking statement, or it would be if it wasn't more likely that he was making a joke at Szarkowski's expense, the latter having relayed to him MoMA director Alfred Barr Jr.'s observation that Eggleston's images typically "radiate from a central, circular core." But it encapsulates, in any case, the tension between Eggleston's evident formalism and the intense if inexplicit psychosocial unease his imagery embodies.

Eggleston is the opposite of a documentarian because he uproots his images from their anecdotal context. What is left after this removal? A structure of feeling. A good example of this is in a picture called *Sumner, Mississippi, Cassidy Bayou in Background*, circa 1970. In terms of color, it's one of the most restrained photographs Eggleston has ever made: pure russet autumn. The ground, here in Eggleston's hometown, is covered with dry leaves bedded on their own shadows. Although the camera's viewpoint is downward-looking, so that there is no horizon and therefore the sky is unseen, the day must be overcast; the sallow light seems to be draining right out of the scene. In the background, on the other side of the water, are some houses, but their distance emphasizes the feeling of isolation. In the central foreground stands a middle-aged white man in a black suit, hands in his pockets. There's a grim, somewhat lost look on his face. To the right, just behind him, stands a black man wearing a white jacket and black trousers.

His hands are in his pockets too, but his posture is a little more relaxed than that of his white counterpart; and his facial expression is clearer, his thoughts seemingly turned less exclusively inward. To the left is a white car with the driver's-side door open. Through the glare on the windshield one can just make out its driver's head and a hand on the steering wheel. There's no road to be seen, so one might wonder what a car is doing here.

Eggleston has mentioned that this picture was shot at a funeral--which isn't surprising but hardly seems to explain anything. More to the point is how locked into place these people are by the checkerboard alternation of white and black--white car, black suit, white face, black trousers, white jacket, black face--which stands out so forcefully against their gloomy russet surroundings. Eggleston neither turns the scene into abstraction for its own sake nor uses it as the occasion for a sanctimonious comment on race relations--saying that our differences are transcended in the face of death, for instance, or on the contrary that our differences stubbornly maintain themselves even in the face of death, both of which would be jejune. Any clue that this is a cemetery, or any detail that would tend to make the image into a memento mori, is out of the picture anyway. Part of the power of an image like *Sumner, Mississippi* comes from Eggleston's refusal to editorialize or to simplify. The viewer's attention is forcefully drawn to its formal structure, but there's no leaving it at that; likewise, though we are not invited to moralize about the social condition of the people who inhabit this place, not for a moment are we allowed to stop thinking about it. The image draws these two aspects into a knot that only tightens as we try to wriggle out of it.

Even when Eggleston does seem to be editorializing, he probably isn't. In this sense, knowing something about the man who made the pictures is most valuable for what it tells you about how *not* to interpret them. Consider a picture from around 1983-86 of a little boy poring over a gun magazine, surrounded by a beatific light that comes near to forming a halo around his head. The irony of this angelic child being corrupted by America's gun culture is patent--until one sees the title, *Winston*, and realizes that this is the photographer's son; in which case the magazine could well be Eggleston's too, and so one's reflexive sense of irony has to evaporate, leaving one with an image that is far more disquieting than it would otherwise have been.

Bearing in mind Szarkowski's perception of the importance of place in Eggleston's work, it's probably natural to think of him as essentially a photographer of landscapes and interiors, for whom the human figure is secondary. And he does not discourage this notion. "Generally, to me, people, human beings, are not terrifically interesting to look at in photographs," Eggleston once told me. "It's what they do that's more interesting." But that statement is partly belied by what's on view at the Whitney. Many of his strongest images, especially early on, are of people, and what's interesting is how they're not doing anything. Arguably, it's through this approach that he swerves away from his great precursor, Cartier-Bresson. For the Frenchman, shooting pictures at an oblique angle to the depicted scene was a way of creating strong diagonals that give his images their dynamism, and this compositional dynamism expresses what the people in the picture are doing. Eggleston's diagonals--the crossed bars of his imaginary Confederate banner--tend to fix his people in place, evoking an enormous and vibrant space but one in which they seem at little or no liberty to move around. They are pinned down by history, geography, class, race, circumstance--and we can see their discomfort about that.

After the mid-1970s, people start to become scarcer in Eggleston's images. Everything else that speaks of their presence and their passing becomes Eggleston's focus--their houses, fields, cars, roads, stores, coffee shops. What brought on this change? It's curious that at the end of the '60s and in the early '70s, when Eggleston took many of his most famous images, he did not yet know how to realize them. The prints he derived from color negative film dissatisfied him, lacking color density and nuance. In color slide film he

discovered a saturation he thought he could work with, but he couldn't print the results. In 1974 he began using the dye-transfer printing process, typically used only for high-end commercial work, which allowed him to exercise an extraordinary degree of control over color. "By the time you get into all those dyes," Eggleston has said, "it doesn't look at all like the scene, which in some cases is what you want." It might be said that all the color pictures made by Eggleston until 1974 were made, unknowingly, for a process he didn't yet know he could use--like an eighteenth-century composer writing for the harpsichord music that might have been better realized on the piano. But having discovered the process and used it to find the hidden depths in his existing imagery, he let the medium direct him to change his focus; from the mid-'70s on, Eggleston exhibits a new absorption in the surfaces of things. A kind of Pop sensibility enters his work, for instance in the visual glut of hyped-up acidic color in an untitled still life, circa 1983-86, of an outdoor lunch setting with a roast chicken, corn on the cob and all the trimmings set out on a checkered tablecloth. Finally, in many of his images from the past decade, it is neither person nor place nor thing but rather the effigy of a human presence that fascinates him--an eerily synthetic-looking statue of the Virgin Mary, for instance, in *Untitled (Orange County)*, circa 1999-2001, or the TV image of a man as reflected by night in what is presumably a hotel window in *Untitled (Kyoto)*, 2001. Eggleston's work of the past three decades is as good as that of anyone alive, with the sole exception of the man who made the breakthrough work of the late 1960s to the mid-'70s that has seared itself into the mind of anyone who's ever seen *Eggleston's Guide*.

And that includes the images without people. Just try forgetting *Greenwood, Mississippi, 1973*--which everyone calls "The Red Ceiling." There hasn't been a surface that red in art since Matisse's *The Red Studio,* but if anything, the Eggleston is even redder. (Eggleston disproves Matisse's idea that "the quantity of color was its quality"--that to increase the surface area covered by a given color is to increase its intensity; the peculiar sense of concentration and density conveyed by Eggleston's red could not have been extended to the scale of Matisse's painting, or of the similarly scaled photographs that some photographers have been producing in recent years.) This is another Confederate flag composition, yet at the center is not a person but a bare light bulb hanging from a garishly painted ceiling; all the more piercing in its misery. This is a transfixing, beautiful picture of a hideous place. Who could exist in such a room? A clue is supplied by the top of a poster that can be glimpsed at the bottom right corner: it seems to show a correlation between astrological signs and certain sexual positions. So this might be a brothel. Someone might have spent many a dreary working hour staring at that ceiling, and maybe no one else ever gave it a glance until this photographer showed up. As usual with Eggleston, the fact, or possible fact, remains unembroidered with commentary. As with all his best pictures, this one puts the viewer in the middle of a life one might never have chosen for oneself, which could remind us that the person whose life it is might not have chosen it either.

About Barry Schwabsky

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