

ORDINARY UNCERTAINTIES

**William Eggleston: Democratic Camera—
Photographs and Video, 1961–2008**

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“Democratic” is a word often associated with William Eggleston’s work but as one English wit barked after hearing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939, “All the Isms are Wasms.” Granted, the term “democratic” when applied to art is often a specious appliqué—democratic as opposed

to what ... Orthodoxy? More often than not, it is more banter than belief and simply a catchall for something too idiosyncratic to place rationally.

Fittingly, Eggleston’s long years of work have been collected in a catalog retrospective, *Democratic Camera—Photographs and Video, 1961–2008*. The survey of his career begins with his astute and vibrant early readings of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s photographs and the kinship inspired by Robert

Frank’s seeming informality—this at a time when Frank’s work was hardly understood and critically under-valued—, a reception Eggleston himself would later endure. This ground is covered superbly in an accompanying essay by Thomas Weski that provides a nearly pitch-perfect narrative sounding to Eggleston’s work. Weski adds a solid grounding to Eggleston’s more intuitive approach while chronicling his experiments with color and technique, which transformed the perception of photography during the 1970s.

Indeed, one concerned with lineage could retreat straight back in time to Walker Evans. One could argue that the photographer’s sometimes shared cultural geography was more superbly mined by Evans simply because he understood it better—that is to say, more directly. For Evans, the image was freighted and demanded of the viewer a certain emotional response. Eggleston, by contrast, is distanced yet more familiar, with a savant’s acuity for detail and composition. Unlike Evans, Eggleston isn’t interested in authorship of the documentary sort, but rather, the unformed intersections of light and color that his camera captured and saved.

Elisabeth Sussman puts Eggleston’s video work into context and takes a well-deserved look back at *Stranded in Canton* (1974). As Sussman aptly points out, the video “enlarges our sense of Eggleston’s vision, extrapolating him to some extent from where he fits neatly in the now-

standard photographic history and contextualizing him as well into a broader history of time-based art, particularly direct cinema” (22).

In the early 1960s, Eggleston began taking color photographs and soon after developed relationships with other photographers such as Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand. As Eggleston said, “Those few people I sought out—it’s almost but not quite like saying they’re heroes; it’s more like seeking out your fellow, kindred spirits” (9). The catalog samples his earlier black-and-white work, usually untitled, to great effect. Here one sees the direct connection to Evans and also the points of departure. In one of the photographs, an untitled work from the early 1960s, a young boy stands at the edge of a long, sweeping donut-shop floor, more pensive-looking than his age demands, and a woman (cropped across the shoulder) stares out from the picture with what one imagines is disapproval. What is evocative, indeed compelling, is the geometry of the photograph—everything wide open in front of the boy while the woman is trapped behind the counter; however, nothing is implied and that “openness” could never be construed as possibility. In fact, it seems optimism is out of the question. Instead, what is left for the viewer to deconstruct is a world of neutral possibility.

From a series of hundreds of photographs that Eggleston took on road trips and later collected, “Los Alamos” (2003), one notices the full roar of color at work. A car with elongated fins sits chained to a telephone pole and in its unmoving wake is a trail of fast food debris, soda and beer cans, and a piece of cardboard with the General Electric logo on it, placed like a shield below the bright red tail lights of the car. The photograph is cropped across the back end of the car, framing the debris as exhaust. The lank chain does nothing to dispel that notion and, oddly, its own inertia anchors the photograph’s “movement.”

In another photograph from the “Los Alamos” series, a row of dolls are arranged on the hood of a car. Eggleston avoids the cliché of the set-up by conjuring the wind out of the stillness of the deep blue sky in the photograph’s background and sending it whipping through the arrangement. What ensues for the viewer is the sense of a madcap joy ride taking place, and the dolls, in that instance, come alive, clutching at each other for balance or on the verge of toppling over. Some are already down and in “danger” of slipping off the car’s hood. One looks away, marveling at all this held up and thrown into motion by the sky looming up behind them.

Not surprisingly, Weski quotes Eggleston as saying in regard to his work, “There is no particular reason to search for meaning” (12). The pictorial logic for Eggleston, it seems, is secondary to the visual coherence. That coherence is personal, an exchange between the machine and the artist, between technique and vision. It is a somewhat modest guide to immense achievement.

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