

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



William Eggleston: American epic

By Mark Holborn

After 35 years since William Eggleston's colour works were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Mark Holborn charts the full extent of the photographer's achievement



Untitled, 1971-1974. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

Nearly 25 years ago I was travelling through Hale County, Alabama, with my friend the artist William Christenberry. It was where he'd grown up and he knew each family and every mile of it. Here in 1936, James Agee and Walker Evans produced *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a portrait of white sharecroppers written in Agee's almost Biblical prose accompanied by Evans's black and white photographs. The book, though controversial in Hale County, was a primary source for Christenberry's uncovering of his roots, just as Evans's formal and often directly frontal photography of the south – its storefronts, shacks, churches and gas stations – shaped Christenberry's vision through the viewfinder of his large camera. I even found one of Evans's discarded boxes of early Polaroid film in a crumbling building that had belonged to a palm reader. In this part of

the country, the kudzu weed was so virulent that abandoned cars were discovered in the undergrowth decades later. It all looked like a Walker Evans photograph, except the earth was red. I saw Christenberry in Washington, his home town, last spring. He confessed to a profound depression. The south that had nourished him had altogether vanished.

Christenberry had first introduced me to William Eggleston in the mid-1980s when Eggleston had been in D.C. for a show of his dye-transfer prints of Elvis's Graceland. Eggleston had asked me to come over to see him. I think he had something he wanted to show me. From Birmingham, Alabama, I flew into Memphis, where Eggleston was waiting. We drove to a house in midtown that looked like an antebellum hunting lodge where he was living with his friend Lucia Burch. After climbing the steps of the front porch, I entered a large hall with a grand staircase. A dining room to the left was filled with a piano and other keyboard instruments, the dining table scattered with family silver. Vintage Leicas were arranged on the shelves. The floor of the drawing room to the right was covered with Chinese rugs. An old reel-to-reel tape recorder stood on a trolley. "It belonged to Elvis," muttered Eggleston, "but he couldn't handle the controls." Two vast speaker columns, built to Eggleston's own design, dominated the room. He demonstrated their power and clarity with Baroque music. He had a passion for Bach organ pieces. On the floors of these elegant rooms were stacks of colour prints. "You might be able to help me with this," he said. "This is The Democratic Forest."



Eggleston Artistic Trust
Untitled, 1971-1974. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

The actual extent of *The Democratic Forest* was then uncertain, but he estimated there were more than 10,000 photographs so far. In fact, it never had a finale. It was truly endless and there was nothing it could not accommodate, hence the title. He explained, “I had been working down in Oxford or Holly Springs one day and that night, at the bar, somebody asked me what I’d been photographing and I told him, ‘Oh just dirt by the side of the road. I’ve been photographing democratically.’” You had to figure out the forest for yourself. He knew he had a title – a kind of banner around which he could rally these seemingly disparate bodies of work. The first impression was of diversity, not just of scale. My role became that of a translator. I had to crack its code – to uncover its shape.

I returned weeks later to begin the editing of these sprawling stacks into a single publishable sequence, which in those days meant about 150 photographs. The music played and I spread out the pictures on the floor of the hall. Eggleston oversaw proceedings from the stairs above, smoking and smiling. There were defined passages in various cities including Dallas, Miami and Berlin. I started, as I always do, in search of openings and endings. I tried to create a pastoral overture with the photographs of the Tennessee landscape and country roads. The photographs seemed lyrical and easily accessible, but Eggleston stopped me at one point as I looked at a picture of a road and told me this was a “bee’s-eye view”. He had halted the car and raised his arm above the roof to make the exposure, imagining he was revealing an insect’s perspective on the scene. Even the simplest pictures could disclose layers of further complexity. The sequence ended in a plane over St Louis at night with an abstraction of electric light, which seemed appropriate for an artist in endless flight.

When I had a finished dummy, we wondered about a text and I asked Eggleston to suggest a writer. Without hesitation he said “Eudora Welty”. She was the greatest living writer in the south and provided a link back to the world of Faulkner. She also understood and made photographs. She still lived in the house in which she had grown up in Jackson, Mississippi. Nervously, I called her and made an appointment. We borrowed a blue Cadillac and headed down Highway 61.

Driving through the Mississippi Delta was for me a revelatory moment. I entered a landscape I had dreamt of for years. I had been across the country but no view had touched me like this sun-drenched plain. I think it was still spring and the unsparing heat of high summer was yet to come. The highway was a two-lane straight line with the river hidden behind the levees to the right. Eggleston’s well-known photograph of the girl in the lime-green dress standing by the road beneath rolling clouds was taken along this route. From the car, the delta looked just like that photograph. Perhaps by this stage he had shaped my own view to such an extent that it was as if the barriers that separated

the photograph and the subject were down and I had entered photographic space. His view takes you over. Once you are in it, it seems so obvious. Later we made further trips to the delta towns, Clarksdale and Greenwood. We paid visits to his home town and family. We got lost on the back roads, but this time we drove straight. We had a mission. Miss Eudora got half way through the dummy and then announced she was tired. "What would you like?" she asked. "About 3,000 words," I answered without thinking. "Fine," she said. "Thank you." I left her house stunned. We headed back and I went straight to the airport. Within 48 hours I was clutching the dummy in an elevator going up to Doubleday's New York offices to see Jackie Onassis. At MoMA, across the road from the office tower, was the Andy Warhol retrospective, where moments before, I had seen a multitude of grieving Jackies in silkscreen prints. I entered an empty room and she was standing with her back to me gazing out of the window. She turned, and apart from the heavy necklace concealing ageing skin, she looked timeless. We went the whole way through the dummy, pausing only slightly at the Dallas section, including a picture of the Book Depository building. "I'll take 20,000 copies," was her response. I thought it couldn't get any better.

In New York that year, I saw John Szarkowski, the MoMA curator who had famously exhibited Eggleston in the 1970s. He congratulated me on the book. This was welcome, like receiving a papal endorsement, but I already knew the book was important. The artist also knew. Months later, the book started to appear on the remainder stands and I realised that Jackie Onassis's acquisition had been a little too enthusiastic. I was mocked for my folly and continued to suffer, while pundits talked of *William Eggleston's Guide*, the MoMA catalogue from 1976, as the only book worth bothering with. I knew they were wrong. What tiny fraction of the artist's work had they actually seen? Irving Penn once told me he had passed stacks of remaindered copies of his first book, *Moments Preserved*, and wept.



©Eggleston Artistic Trust
Untitled, 1973. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

Eggleston is now in his seventies and the world has changed. In 1992, his elder son William Jr initiated the establishment of the Eggleston Artistic Trust in Memphis. Over the past decade, his younger son, Winston, now the trust's director, painstakingly arranged for the scanning of all his father's pictures. Winston's huge endeavour lays the ground for a systematic examination of the progression of the work – a far cry from the stacks that first greeted me in Memphis.

Since the 1990s Eggleston has been widely, though one could suggest inadequately, exhibited. I organised an early but incomplete retrospective at the Barbican in London in 1992. At the time, Eggleston was strongly resisting the label of “southern artist” and I chose to follow the early portfolios and dye-transfer prints with work from Africa, Egypt, Germany and England. I didn't have the space to show a single photograph from *The Democratic Forest*. There has been a major show at the Cartier Foundation in Paris, which came to London. It was much lauded by David Lynch, a big admirer. In some ways the work remained as enigmatic as Lynch himself. They were both from the same brilliant and eccentric tribe, or so it seemed. There was even a retrospective at the Whitney. But every view was incomplete. The full context has never been established. Eggleston was not the heir to Walker Evans. He consciously used that frontal formality sparingly. He admired Henri Cartier-Bresson greatly, but for all his European sensibilities, he remained inescapably of the south. He pioneered video, but even the many hours of his black and white footage have yet to be edited to his own satisfaction. The whole narrative of his work is only beginning to be told.

Individual works in the photography market have broken through the million-dollar threshold for some time now. Andreas Gursky was at the forefront with all the digital possibilities at his disposal. Eggleston, however influential he was on a younger generation, was of the pre-digital age. His work originated on film. He was a virtuoso with the f-stop. Yet of the line of American photographers who were championed by Szarkowski, including Diane Arbus, Eggleston was the one who could most readily transcend the line that separated the photography world from the wider world of contemporary art and its market. It is not such a long step from, say, Ed Ruscha to Eggleston. There was still a limited supply of materials for dye-transfer prints, which the Egglestons wanted to use carefully. In Paris last year, the Gagosian Gallery successfully showed a small group of new Eggleston dyes taken from *Election Eve*, his series made in Georgia on the eve of the Carter presidential election in 1976 and originally published in 1977. Meanwhile, examples of his dyes from the 1970s were cropping up at Paris Photo for hundreds of thousands of dollars.



Untitled (The Red Ceiling), 1973. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

When Eggleston first used the dye-transfer process he was able to achieve unparalleled colour saturation and a special intensity, which gave the colour a sense of dimension or substance. The commercial implications were enormous since the process offered stability. These pictures were not about to fade on some collector's wall. The museums could make acquisitions. But printing technology has changed radically. Eggleston began to have some new digital options tested and by scanning both the original negatives and positives he was able to see a marked new clarity and definition. This in turn allowed him to increase the scale to what he viewed as an optimum width for a horizontal of about 60in. Thirty-six of these large prints came straight on to the market in a sale at Christie's in New York this March. They made nearly \$6m. Despite murmurings in the photography world, Eggleston was indeed crossing over to another market.

Meanwhile, there had been changes at the Eggleston trust. Winston's brother, William Jr, re-entered the operation. Over a year ago, he brought me to his home in Los Angeles, where he had installed a superb editing room with a large screen and a direct link to Winston's archive. With Eggleston himself staying out in LA, we began to systematically review the work starting with the chromes, the transparencies that Eggleston had packed in a suitcase and presented to Szarkowski in the mid-1970s. A three-volume set of the chromes was about to be magnificently printed by Gerhard Steidl in Germany. Still we found more pictures of quality that had slipped the net. We aimed to get to the vast pastures of The Democratic Forest but on William Jr's insistence we remained firmly systematic and chronological. The photographs in Eggleston's guide selected by Szarkowski were consistent in that they often tended to be constructed around a single subject in the centre of the frame from which diagonals spread to the corners. The guide included the girl in the lime-green dress and views of suburban Memphis, but did not include what was to become one of his most famous pictures, The Red Ceiling, a study of a light bulb connected by white cables across a field of red. This astonishing image

hovered on the line between its depiction of a pendulous, even phallic, bulb, and pure abstraction. The photographs from the guide, though sometimes charged and resonant, are more literal representations – a child’s bike, a burning barbecue. Their power is derived from their obvious familiarity. The Red Ceiling is not familiar. It is disorientating, if not menacing.

The next series we viewed was Los Alamos, a loose set of more than 2,000 photographs taken on the road from the south to New Mexico and as far as Santa Monica, between 1966 and 1974. Eggleston’s companion on several of these trips was the curator Walter Hopps. They had reached the gates of the Los Alamos nuclear laboratory but no further. They referred almost jokingly to these pictures as “The Los Alamos series” and it stuck. Some 70 photographs from Los Alamos were produced in a series of portfolios more than 10 years ago, but since Hopps’s recent death, a further box had come to light. We were viewing the series in its entirety for the first time. Scenes of the old world – the gas station, the wooden barn and the small town main street that Walker Evans would have cherished – gradually gave way to views of the parking lots of the new south and finally to purely abstract frames. This was clearly the stepping stone to the complexity of The Democratic Forest. We sequenced a series of 360 photographs and called the Gagosian Gallery. They immediately saw the logic of the progression. We began to make the first sorties into The Democratic Forest, which finally amounted to more than 12,000 pictures. Steidl flew in and offered three volumes for Los Alamos on the spot. He has now committed to six volumes for a sequence of 900 photographs from The Democratic Forest. This huge work will finally have a context and may yet be viewed as a masterpiece – a great American epic.



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Untitled, 1971-1974. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

As the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles prepares for a big show of 37 prints from Los Alamos in the new, large format at the end of the month with their own accompanying catalogue, and Steidl's volumes are at the bindery, the Rose Gallery in Santa Monica, which has been so supportive of the Eggleston enterprise, is preparing another show of new dyes for the following month. Tate Modern will be exhibiting Eggleston rooms next year and this month a further selection of more than 20 prints, many of them from Los Alamos, will be shown at the Barbican. A methodical process is now in motion. Though never fully appreciated for years, the fruits of these solitary explorations by Eggleston in a vanishing world will now be seen as a single heroic progression from the mundane to the profound. There is no precedent.

William Eggleston "Los Alamos" will be exhibited at the Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills, CA, September 27 to November 10; "Los Alamos Revisited" will be published by Steidl in October, £220; "New Dyes" is at the Rose Gallery, Santa Monica, CA, October 13 to November 24; a small group of Eggleston prints will be at Victoria Miro, Frieze Masters, Regent's Park, London, October 11-14