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Master of Colour William Eggleston Wins Outstanding Contribution Award Shunned in the 60s as banal but now revered by everyone from David Lynch to Juergen Teller, this Pioneer of Distrubing Colour Photography to be Honoured at Sony World Photography Awards

By Sean O'Hagan



Hair raising... Detail from William Eggleston's Untitled, 1965-1968, from Los Alamos

William Eggleston, whose colour photographs were dismissed as "banal" by critics when first exhibited at MoMA in New York in 1976, is to receive the Outstanding Contribution to Photography Award at this year's Sony World Photography Awards. Now recognised as one of the pioneers of colour photography, Eggleston, 73, has been named a major influence by maverick film-makers like Sofia Coppola and David Lynch, and younger photographers from Juergen Teller to Andreas Gursky. The British photographer, Martin Parr, once described him as "the supreme colourist of America photography."

Born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1939, Eggleston began photographing the world around him in the mid-1960s. By the early 1970s, he was using a dye transfer printing process to obtain highly saturated colours more often seen in American magazine adverts of the time. Eggleston's vivid colours and odd camera angles were too much for contemporary critics, who also failed to find the mischief in the title of his MOMA catalogue: William Eggleston's Guide.

In retrospect, Eggleston's great gift was to distil the tensions of his southern aristocratic upbringing – and the bigger tensions of a riven America – in photographs that were familiar and alien, everyday yet oddly unreal. He was not a social documentarian, more an outsider with a brilliantly skewed vision. One of his most famous images, Troubled Waters, is of a neon

Confederate flag reflected in a pool of water. Another shows a child's anorak hanging on a hook, its pointed hood redolent of a Ku Klux Klan robe. His most iconic photograph is Greenwood Mississippi, 1973, otherwise known as the Red Ceiling. A bare lightbulb hangs from a crimson backdrop bisected by white wires that snake out from the centre like arteries. It disturbs not just in the almost vulgar intensity of its redness, but in its suggestion of something awful looming just outside – or below – the frame.

In the years since that iconoclastic and groundbreaking MOMA show, Eggleston's world has become almost familiar, so pervasive has his influence been on popular culture – whether advertising, fashion photography or film-making. But his vision remains singular and enigmatic. "I am at war with the obvious," he once wrote, and his greatest images attest to that defining statement of intent.

- Eggleston will be honoured at the Sony World Photography Awards Gala Ceremony in London on Thursday 25 April. A selection of his works will be on show at Somerset House in London from 26 April to 22 May.