

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



William Eggleston, Head in the Clouds

*The photographer will be signing copies of his new book, **At Zenith**, tonight at the Gagosian Shop in New York City*

Fan Zhong



At Zenith I, 1979-2013

Although he is a man of remarkably few words, William Eggleston most resembles the gallant Southern rascal of his reputation when he is reclining, his legs scissored, a rapt audience before him—in other words, when it looks as if he is about to spin a great yarn.

So the Memphis photographer sat, last week, before an expectant huddle of family members and advisors, in the private library of Gagosian Gallery's Madison Avenue offices in New York. Upstairs in the gallery, "At Zenith," a show of Eggleston's photographs of the cerulean sky first taken during the late '70s, but little seen since, had just been installed. (The exhibition opened on Saturday, October 25.) Easing into a sofa, Eggleston, 74, noted his pleasure at the way the pictures looked on the walls, but otherwise appeared very comfortable saying very little. A photographer of the everyday epiphany, Eggleston is also a master of the excruciatingly grand pause.

At last, he announced, “I’ll see my great friend Ed Ruscha tonight.” Later that evening, Ruscha was to be honored at the Whitney Museum’s annual gala, where he singled out Eggleston for an unofficial “suave man award.” For Eggleston, that was something of a life achievement honor. His persona as a rakish Southern gentleman of enormous persuasion—on the art world, on photographers and filmmakers, on women throughout his life—was formed early on.

On this afternoon, Eggleston was dressed in a navy-blue suit, white shirt, gleaming black loafers, and an extra-wide striped prep tie that he’d flipped about his neck with nonchalant élan, like a scarf. His silvery hair was neatly slicked back. “If I was as dramatic-looking as Bill Eggleston,” Ruscha once remarked, “I’d probably do nothing but photograph myself.”

Eggleston first turned his camera heaven-wards while driving under the big Southern sky, on a 1978 road trip from Georgia to Memphis with the music writer Stanley Booth. “I just looked out the window,” Eggleston said, pointing his index finger towards the ceiling, “and there it was!” Initially, he shot the passing clouds from the car with a Polaroid camera. “They looked like frescoes,” he said. The overhead shots he subsequently took with his Kodak while prone on the ground have the same painterly quality that made Eggleston’s color photography so pioneering early on. These cloud pictures were first collected in 1979 in *Wedgewood Blue*; the series has now been collected into a new volume from Steidl, *William Eggleston: At Zenith*. (Eggleston will be signing copies tonight at the Gagosian Shop.)

The book is dedicated to John Szarkowski—the late MOMA curator who first exposed Eggleston’s radical work to an art world that had previously regarded color photography as a commercial vulgarity—and opens with a W.B. Yeats poem. Eggleston’s son Winston, arriving with a galley of the book, implored his father to read the passage aloud for his audience. “You have such a great voice, Dad.”

Eggleston made a brief show of protest—his eyes are not so great, and he did not have his reading glasses on hand—but soon he picked up the book. He cleared his throat, and began: ““Had I the heavens’ embroidered cloths/Enwrought with golden and silver light ...”” As he continued on, Eggleston’s previously matter-of-fact voice took on a roguish warmth, as if he were regaling an entire Memphis bar with a story he knew was bound to kill.

“... I have spread my dreams under your feet/Tread softly because you tread on my dreams,”” he finished, his eyes crinkling, and the room broke into applause.

“At Zenith” runs through December 21, 2013, at Gagosian Gallery, 980 Madison Ave in New York. William Eggleston will be signing copies of the book Monday, October 28, from 5 – 6PM at Gagosian Shop, 976 Madison Ave in New York.