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ARTNEWS

A Pleasure Cruise: An Interview with Roe Ethridge

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Roe Ethridge, Gisele on the Phone, 2013, C-print, 34 7/8 x 45 3/4 in.
COURTESY THE ARTIST, ANDREW KREPS GALLERY, NEW YORK, AND GREENGRASSI, LONDON

In a 2007 self-portrait that was recently on view at the Whitney Museum in New York, Roe Ethridge appears, close-up, sporting a white ship captain's hat, a solid beard, longish hair, and a shy smile. Giving a little wave to the camera, he is the guy who, in the midst of a relaxing afternoon boat ride, reveals that he has a few extra bottles of liquor onboard, and that, yes, he has already poured one into that potent punch you have been enjoying. Also, there is a weird and excellent beach a little off the beaten path that he would like to take you to. Goofy and a little odd, he is keeping everything nice and convivial and off kilter.

Over the past two decades, Ethridge has, not unlike some mischievous patrolman in a far-off port of call, taken a peculiar tour through various genres of photography, making ingenious tweaks all along the way. He shoots beautiful things quite regularly—a plate of ice-cold oysters, little purple flowers, and, very often, attractive women—but even when he is not, he finds a way to add dashes of cliché-free sex and glamor through lighting or color or cropping. Fuzz consumes rotting strawberries in a bowl of fruit that somehow still looks good enough to eat. A mud-covered tire sits atop the freshest grass you have ever seen. He makes images that are ineluctably alluring, but his touch is elusive.

On a crisp fall day last year, Ethridge, looking roughly how he appears in that self-portrait, was sitting at a computer in his studio on the parlor floor of a charmingly dilapidated brownstone in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn, working on a few different projects—the hang of “Nearest

Neighbor,” his current survey at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati; some very weird new sculptures; and videos for Sportmax and China Vogue. He pulled up that last project on a screen for me and hit play.

In the minute-long video, a model walks on a treadmill in front of a green screen, which shows her first in a barren desert, holding two large Louis Vuitton suitcases, and later riding a stationary bike next to a rather ferocious-looking lion. Vuitton cases and a giant Tootsie-Roll spin in the air, and pixelated videogame graphics appear. A whimsical score plays as an old-timey announcer declares, “Adventure—it takes guts to go where no one else goes!” The model gives a wholesome smile as the video cuts to black.

“I’m just in love with it, man,” Ethridge said, quietly brimming with excitement. “I can’t fucking get over it, I’ve watched it so many times, and I’m just like: yes.”

Ethridge is a rare creature, prized by both the most august art institutions and the wealthiest fashion companies, and seemingly fulfilled working with either one. He was born in 1969, but has the sensibilities of artists a generation younger.

“They’re amuse-bouche kind of things—but they’re so fucking fun,” he said of these short video projects. “I get so much out of it. The satisfaction is almost guaranteed.” Part of the joy in working on advertising projects, he said, is that after shooting the footage, he provides ideas to the editor and the videos “always get messed up. By the time they hit the small screen, somebody at the company has like kind of messed it up.” He let out a mirthful little laugh. “The first thing that comes back—oh my God, it’s just so much better than it should be. Those are the moments that I really love.”

In the finished China Vogue piece, there would seem to be all sorts of little errors—the green screen revealing itself, some odd color shifts, and a few bugs in the audio, to say nothing of the fact that the model is paying visits to rather inhospitable places. “There’s a travel theme, that was the idea for that issue,” Ethridge explained. “The underside of it was just sneaking in some of that apocalyptic landscape, so there’s a little bit of commentary—just subliminal.”

It is a kind of send-up of big-budget destination fashion shoots, while still being a fairly satisfying fashion shoot. It shrugs off categories. “It’s not really an artwork,” Ethridge said quickly, still a little high from watching the video, “but it’s not really—whatever. What difference does it make? You know, it’s like, Look at that thing!”

Two weeks ago, Ethridge opened his sixth solo show at Andrew Kreps in Chelsea, “American Spirit,” which includes photographs of a white Jasper Johns flag, American Spirit cigarettes, and a poster for the 1985 Rose Bowl. (There is also a snap of Cookie Monster, eyes spinning in front of a big pile of cookies, which is shaping up to be one of the most memorable images of 2017.)

Even at its most bizarre, or most ironic, Ethridge’s photos radiate a strange and sincere Americana. His Cincinnati show has a few choice examples—a Thanksgiving table loaded with all the fixings, a primly dressed young woman apparently speaking at that same table, a huge pumpkin (a sticker, actually), an archetypal Santa Claus, and a tangle of highway overpasses in Atlanta, which is where the artist grew up and went to college.

A copy of William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931) was sitting on a quilted leather couch in Ethridge's studio, and I asked him if he sees his photos as somehow Southern. "I'd say it's got to be there," he said, after thinking for a moment. "Maybe it's more suburban than Southern exactly." Indeed, even when darkness creeps into his work, which is rare, a hazy, halcyon suburbia provides levity. As a white Dodge Durango SUV drowns in a Belle Glade, Florida canal, hazy sunlight cloaks the scene. Ditto for the fresh-faced young redheaded woman (named Sarah Beth, as per the title) smoking a bowl in a 2006 Ethridge classic.

And football, that all-American game so ingrained in Southern culture, has repeatedly appeared in Ethridge's work, perhaps most notably in his last show at Kreps, in 2014, "Sacrifice Your Body," which had images of a rubber yellow ball stuck in a bush, and two more, nearly identical, of a model gamely cradling a pigskin, pretending to run in front of a backdrop of footballs.

Ethridge played for years. "And then I fractured a vertebra in my back, so I literally did sacrifice my body," he said. He started out as a defensive back, and later became a wide receiver, one of the men who usually starts at the side of the field and sprints at the snap, trying to avoid the defense and catch a pass. "I loved it," he said, grinning a bit through his beard. "I loved hitting people, smashing into people."

However, when he was forced to end his career, "I didn't miss it that much and was happy to close the book and move on," he said, "but it was difficult for my mother."

"After that," he added, "it was pretty clear what I wanted to do."

Ethridge didn't actually take one of the newest works in the Cincinnati show, which is a 2015 portrait of his daughter Lee Lou that is slightly tilted, even more tightly cropped than his self-portrait as a seafarer. Mysteriously, it appears as if it's being viewed on an iPhone, with the time and battery life all visible. "Auggie, my son, took the picture of her, and then she later zoomed in and made this crop and did a screenshot of it," Ethridge explained. "And I was like, Ugh, that's great. She angled it! She tipped it and did it!" And so he printed it up on aluminum, titling it Lee Lou Screenshot.

In other recent works, he has arranged photos—some shot by him, others plucked from the internet—in grids or collages, offering up compendia of images flowing through his life. That informal, almost chaotic network of pictures and files is about as far as you can get from the tightly controlled environment of high-end fashion shoots, which typically involve a huge crew, a dedicated location, and a strict timetable. "It really reminds me of being in a band because your camera now is tethered to the computer, so when you're shooting, it's coming up," he said of those situations. Not that long ago, a photographer would be looking at Polaroids on set, making adjustments as he worked, but now the shots pop up on a screen as he takes them. "Now everybody can see it," he continued. "You're exposed, in a way. You're vulnerable." He seemed completely fine with that dynamic, though, even a little excited by it.

At other times, of course, Ethridge gets to work alone, on the hunt for something interesting to take a picture of, in the role of the "troubadour photographer," as he put it. From 2005 to 2010, he worked on a commission for Goldman Sachs, to provide 25 images of the construction of its new headquarters in Downtown Manhattan. They are some of his most straightforward works—tender and, in some cases, moving. He shows the men at work on the building, moving iron and glass; the raw, scuffed concrete trading floor, before the room was finished; and Hillary Clinton

speaking to Hank Paulson at the groundbreaking, her manicured hand touching the back of her hair as the then-Treasury Secretary seems to be trying to move around or away from her.

The only time that Ethridge even gave a hint of anything less than cool equanimity was when he was discussing that project. “Before the crash,” he said, “I was really bitter about it because I felt like, I’m so cheap, I’m so stupid for doing this so cheaply. And then 2008 happened, and it was like, Whoa, this context has shifted. This is big—it’s not just anonymous whatever. This is fucking crazy. I’m in the midst of it. Total serendipity. It has nothing to do with intention.

“So much of it—” he cut himself off. “I feel like that’s almost like one of the key lessons of photography. You’ve got to get yourself into a position for things to happen.”