

WILLIAM EGGLESTON

William Eggleston's professional career has been extensively documented, and it takes minimal effort to discover the litany of his accomplishments. The most famous is his landmark solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1976, which catapulted him into history as the first photographer to show color work at MoMA. A museum could be established from the works and books Eggleston has produced over his five-decade career, and he has received numerous high-profile commissions, including assignments for *Rolling Stone*, Coca-Cola, and Paramount Pictures. He has also worked with the film directors John Huston (*Annie*), David Byrne (*True Stories*), and Gus Van Sant (*Easter*). In his heyday, his outfit included Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus, John Szarkowski, and Walter Hopps. Finally, his groundbreaking use of color negative film earned him the moniker "Father of Color Photography," a title he has not refuted. Simply put, Eggleston is the real deal.

The irony here is that despite how vigorously his work has been studied and all the accolades, Eggleston actually prefers not to discuss his career or the whole of his work, let alone talk about individual images. This makes him a bit of an enigma and often leaves his followers and critics feeling empty-handed. His photographs, or his use of color and composition, have forever changed the way people understand art, but Eggleston has very little interest in intellectualizing what he does. When asked to explain his practice, he is quick to add, "I'm photographing life to date." There is a degree of art-world masochism that does not allow this type of answer to suffice, something Eggleston believes is "stupid."

Eggleston's work has no pretensions. The experience of looking at his photographs is like receiving a straight answer when you need it the most. They are honest, consistent, and organic, and they cut through much of the art world's posturing and elitism. They are the difference between a spinach salad and a double bacon cheeseburger — Eggleston's photographs are good for us.

On Christmas Eve, just as he was preparing for a solo exhibition at Victoria Miro, London, and Cheim & Read, New York, we spoke to Eggleston via telephone about his work, career, friends, and the relationship between photography and blue-collar labor.

BY AMANI OLU



William Eggleston
Untitled [Supermarket Boy with Carts] from the Los Alamos Portfolio
1965–74

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William Eggleston
Untitled (Woman in a diner) from the Los Alamos Portfolio
1965–74

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William Eggleston
Untitled (Memphis)
1970

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William Eggleston
Untitled (Frontier Sign) from *Lost and Found*
1965–74

DYE-TRANSFER PRINT

20 X 16 INCHES

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WHITEWALL: *The subject matter of your work has been described as “mundane” and “banal.” I always thought these adjectives were problematic. Did you ever take issue with how your work was being described?*

WILLIAM EGGLESTON: I wouldn’t use those words if I were you.

WW: *They’re not necessarily my words, just what I’ve read.*

WE: Those words no longer offend me; I just don’t agree and think they’re stupid.

WW: *They’re stupid?*

WE: Yes. As one goes over it, they don’t describe what I do. I don’t know what else to say, except for what I said originally: It no longer offends me in any way, except for the kind of stupidity it takes for one to write that down on paper.

WW: *Okay, so what do you do?*

WE: I’ve been asked this a lot of times, “William, what do you do?” The best way I can put it is that I’m photographing life to date. Does that make sense to you?

WW: *Yes, sir, it does.*

WE: You don’t have to call me “sir.” I haven’t been knighted yet.

WW: *Okay. Do you think your pictures would be as successful in black-and-white?*

WE: Yes, but I have a peculiar understanding of composing in color, and I think I should continue to put that to use, so I very rarely photograph in black-and-white. Unless the subject is so obvious that it might need it, but that is almost never.

WW: *Last July I curated an exhibition titled “After Color,” which essentially examined how today’s generation of photographers use black-and-white photography after the rise of color. As the “Father of Color Photography,” what are your thoughts on black-and-white images today?*

WE: Well, nowadays there’s not that much of it that I see — and I don’t get to see everything that is in black-and-white — that feels like the great master, Lee Friedlander. All of his work was in black-and-white. He’s so brilliant, so good that his pictures look like they’re in color. He’s that great.

WW: *Anyone else?*

WE: Unfortunately, people who work in black-and-white are mostly dead now. My friend Gary Winogrand and people like that.

Robert Frank is still around. I don’t know what he’s doing. I miss him.

WW: *I won’t make the mistake of calling you a “Southern photographer,” but I am curious to know how much of your identity is tied into your photographs.*

WE: Well, I think it’s woven completely through what I do, and I don’t call it Southern. I have a weird attitude about that expression because there’s so-called art that is Southern, which is rather repugnant, if that makes sense to you.

WW: *It does.*

WE: I don’t see much of it, and I don’t hang out with people doing that stuff down here.

WW: *What was it like meeting John Szarkowski and Walter Hopps for the first time?*

WE: Oh, delightful. Without saying three words, we immediately got along as people who believed in each other.

WW: *Rumor has it that you simply walked into MoMA with a suitcase full of pictures to meet John Szarkowski. Is this true?*

WE: No, no, no, it was not that way a bit. I was directed to meet him by some mutual friends. People like Joel Meyerowitz said, “You should meet John Szarkowski.” “But who is that?” And he said, “Well, over at MoMA he’s the key figure in photography.” And I said, “Well, I’m glad you told me. I’ll call him up,” and I did. He even said, “Please come over,” which I did. I can’t explain much further how we all got together, but we certainly did. We were all, I put it to someone, I think it was David Lynch, “We were a small club,” and he [David Lynch] said “No, a big club,” and I said, “No, you’re wrong, very small.”

WW: *In a three-year period you received a NEA grant, a Guggenheim Fellowship and a solo exhibition at MoMA. Some of your interviews suggest that you were indifferent to your success. Where you ever excited about the recognition you were receiving?*

WE: To be honest, it was new to me, since I’d come up from the middle of a desolate countryside.

WW: *Over the course of your career, you didn’t seem to be all that impressed with the art world. Is this true?*

WE: I didn’t think about it like that. The art world is crazy. I grew up way out in a pretty desolate cotton plantation down in Mississippi where you don’t see or hear much about art, therefore don’t write much about it, but somehow it turned me on, I suppose

“THE ART WORLD IS CRAZY. I GREW UP WAY OUT IN A PRETTY DESOLATE COTTON PLANTATION DOWN IN MISSISSIPPI WHERE YOU DON’T SEE OR HEAR MUCH ABOUT ART”



William Eggleston
Untitled (Woman wiping van, Queens, New York)
2002

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William Eggleston
Untitled (Greenwood, Mississippi)
1973

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William Eggleston
Untitled [Glass in Airplane] from the Los Alamos Portfolio
1965–74

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William Eggleston
Untitled (Man outside building with light in his eyes)
1999

PIGMENT PRINT

22 X 28 INCHES

EDITION OF 7

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William Eggleston
Untitled (Peaches!)
1971

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"I'M JUST A PLUMBER OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND I LOVE IT. I THINK IT IS THE THING TO DO RIGHT NOW. I DON'T KNOW WHAT WILL COME NEXT. I CAN'T PREDICT THE FUTURE"

you can say, and I had no problem learning about it right away.

WW: *Were you into the New York art scene?*

WE: I was once a part of it, overseas and SoHo, but basically, I still loved it down here, so I kept up with as much I could in my own way.

WW: *Shortly before your solo exhibition at MoMA, you were commissioned by Rolling Stone to photograph the Jimmy Carter family in their hometown of Plains, Georgia, just before the presidential election of 1976.*

WE: Yeah, that was only a suggestion from a person who worked there at the time, nothing serious about that, except for the work, which was quite silly.

WW: *Those pictures didn't contain any images of the Carter family. Instead, they depicted woods, ditches, gas station pumps, and shacks around the Georgia countryside.*

WE: The place was empty. Carter was out on the campaign and the only person I met, which was quite briefly, was his mother. We sort of held court in the town square, but I didn't know her very well.

WW: *Was Rolling Stone upset about not getting any pictures of the family?*

WE: I never had any further connection with *Rolling Stone*.

WW: *They didn't say, "Hey, you know, Bill, where's Jimmy? Where's his wife?"*

WE: Never.

WW: *You never heard from them?*

WE: No. I like his [Jimmy Carter] running. I think he was a nice gentleman, still is. Like I said, he wasn't there; he was out on the campaign trail around the country getting elected. I didn't know what to think. I didn't think any about it. I just took pictures of what I saw there, pretty much that simple.

WW: *I want to talk about photography. Are you a photographer or an artist who uses photography, or is this a silly distinction altogether?*

WE: It doesn't seem silly to me a bit. I would say both. I think they're interchangeable. I think, fundamentally, if one is smart enough he can be both. But I think if you're not smart

enough you can't be both.

WW: *You have a forthcoming solo exhibition at Cheim & Read in New York and Victoria Miro in London. How is this new work different from what you have done in the past?*

WE: Not any. It looks the same to me. I have presented pictures I made a long time ago, and, let's say, pictures I made last month. I don't know if I'm unique this way, but I can't tell the difference.

WW: *Do you have any advice for emerging photographers who can only dream of having a career such as yours?*

WE: I recently had a discussion up at Yale, and from the audience I had several questions, which were about the same thing, and the only reply I could think to say is what the world needs is another photographer, which means the opposite.

WW: *Should Yale students drop out of school and become mechanics, carpenters, et cetera?*

WE: I don't think of myself any other way than that. I'm just a plumber of photography and I love it. I think it is the thing to do right now. I don't know what will come next. I can't predict the future.

WW: *Is there any conflict in your work?*

WE: What do you mean?

WW: *What are you trying to resolve?*

WE: I would answer that by saying absolutely no conflict. It's what I do.

WW: *What do people continually get wrong about your work?*

WE: I don't know.

WW: *When you read interviews and essays, what is something that is never accurate?*

WE: Well, generally speaking, there are multiple reads; I get tons of articles and things. They don't make too much sense to me. The images are self-explanatory. I don't pretend to write or much talk about what you're asking. I don't know how to respond, and I really don't respond.

WW: *Are your photographs true?*

WE: Yeah. Why not? How can I say no to that?



William Eggleston
Untitled (Huntsville, Alabama)
1970

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