

# The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

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COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILLIAM EGGLESTON

AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Photographs by William Eggleston, one of the most accomplished photographers now working in color, will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from May 25 through August 1. The exhibition of approximately 75 prints has been selected and installed by John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography, who is also the author of a fully illustrated monograph, William Eggleston's Guide,\* the Museum's first publication on color photography. The exhibition and publication have been made possible by grants from Vivitar Inc. and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Unlike most of their predecessors, whose color work has been either formless or too pretty, a new generation of young photographers has begun to use color in a confident spirit of freedom and naturalness. In their work the role of color is more than simply descriptive or decorative, and assumes a central place in the definition of the picture's content. These photographers work not as if color were a separate problem to be resolved in isolation, "but rather as though the world itself existed in color, as though the blue and the sky were one thing," Szarkowski writes.

For Eggleston, as for others in the new generation of color photographers, color is "existential and descriptive; these pictures are not photographs of color, any more than they are photographs of shapes, textures, objects, symbols, or events, but rather photographs of experience, as it has been ordered and clarified within the structures imposed by the camera."

Eggleston, who lives in Memphis, Tennessee, finds his private, even insular subject matter in the commonplace realities of that city and its environs. Pre-

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\*WILLIAM EGGLESTON'S GUIDE by John Szarkowski. 112 pages, 48 color plates. \$12.50. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Distributed to the trade by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London.

occupied with such personal experience, Eggleston is essentially a romantic in the Wordsworthian mode. While his photographs comprise a remarkable and surprising commentary on contemporary American life, his work is more the engagement of a personal vision than a social document.

These photographs are clearly fixed facts of the real world impartially recorded by the camera, but they are something more as well. Relatives and friends, houses in the neighborhood, local streets and country roads, strangers, dining rooms and unusual souvenirs are seen by Eggleston's camera "in a manner that is restrained, austere, and public, a style not inappropriate for photographs that might be introduced as evidence in court," but their "lean, monocular intentness fixes the subject as sharply as if it were recalled from eidetic memory."

"Reduced to monochrome," Szarkowski writes, "Eggleston's designs would be in fact almost static, almost as blandly resolved as the patterns seen in kaleidoscopes, but they are perceived in color, where the wedge of purple necktie, or the red disk of the stoplight against the sky, has a different compositional torque than its equivalent panchromatic gray, as well as a different meaning. For Eggleston, who was perhaps never fully committed to photography in black and white, the lesson would be more easily and naturally learned, enabling him to make these pictures: real photographs, bits lifted from the visceral world with such tact and cunning that they seem true, seen in color from corner to corner."

Eggleston has made his pictures a deeply felt expression of self, of his vision and intentions. In Szarkowski's estimation, these photographs are perfect: "irreducible surrogates for the experience they pretend to record, visual analogues for the quality of one life, collectively a paradigm of a private view, a view one would have thought ineffable, described here with clarity, fullness, and elegance."

William Eggleston was born in 1939 in Memphis, Tennessee, near his family's cotton farm in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi. His interest in photography began while he was attending Vanderbilt University and was pursued desultorily until about 1962, when he discovered the work of Cartier-Bresson. Since the late sixties most of his work

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has been in color. Eggleston was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in photography in 1974 and a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in 1975. In 1974 he was Lecturer in Visual and Environmental Studies at Carpenter Center, Harvard College. 14 Pictures, a portfolio of dye-transfer prints, was privately published in 1974.

The prints in the exhibition were made, under Mr. Eggleston's supervision, by Berkey K + L Color Labs, New York, and the K & S Photo Labs, Chicago.

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Additional information available from Bruce Wolmer, Assistant, and Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53 St., New York, NY 10019. Phone: (212) 956-7295; 7501.

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