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## galleries

## The snapshot art of Eggleston

by Steven Winn

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Some of Eggleston's photos (a gray shot of a swimming pool seen through a wire fence, a black woman by the side of a road), framed and hung on a museum wall, are so plain and undistinguished that they seem more political or conceptual gestures than aesthetic ones. If the camera has recorded it, the artist (and the museums which sanction the show) seem to say, then the image has all the validity and authority of an "art" photo, which, after all, has only recently acquired the status and respectability of a painting or sculpture.

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"East Memphis"—color photograph by William Eggleston at the Modern Art Pavilion.

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Color in these and many of his photographs highlights the troubling ambiguities in Eggleston's work. Art photographers have traditionally avoided color, partly for technical reasons (it is difficult to reproduce what you see, color prints fade over time) but more importantly for aesthetic reasons. In their attempts to legitimize photography as an art form, they have sought the finest renderings of light, composition, texture and volume the medium would allow, while, by avoiding color, they have purposely eschewed the idea of creating the image most faithful to nature. That "documentary" aspect of photography was left to the profane efforts of photo-journalists, police photographers, even the weekend amateur at the family picnic with his Polaroid. It seems odd that a medium which comes closest to the centuries-old ambition of imitating nature should, in its development as an art form, find its practitioners so anxious to limit that very richness.

And we have been well trained to see the art photograph as a separate, pristine entity, having scarcely a thing in common with the working photographs we encounter every day. Eggleston, like other photographers working in color, has blurred conventional distinctions, readily and willingly introducing the elements of the profane along with what had long seemed its carrier: color. In some cases (a great brown dog lapping from a muddy pool, white plastic bottles scattered across a bare patch of gravel beneath a cloud-studded sky), he seems to be after a Cézanne-like color architecture. Elsewhere, color seems to confound and overcome him, needlessly decorating or even undercutting a formal composition.

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Writing of this development in a recent issue of "The New Yorker," Janet Malcolm saw the new wave of avant garde "snapshot school" photographers embracing this new consciousness as "a repository of the revealed truth about photography's proper purposes and future directions." If photography is truly to expand as an art form, the argument goes, then photographers must come to terms with its terrifyingly complex potentials, its deceptive verisimilitude as well as its inescapable formal aspects. (One might even argue that Szarkowski, simply by the act of mounting photography shows at the prestigious Museum of Modern Art, is still milking the sacred cows of the past.) As Malcolm says, "the photographer has never had it so hard. Caught between the dead hand of traditional art photography and the shaking, fumbling one of the snapshot school, he may well despair."

That, certainly, helps explain the tension, unevenness and excitement of William Eggleston's work. To approach his photographs as you would a conventional museum show is a mistake. It is likely you have snaps in your family album at home that are all the equal of some of Eggleston's photos at the Pavilion. And that's precisely what this is all about: a museum show that, perhaps, ought not be one, works that draw on accident as well as formal intention, a question, finally, about the nature of photography itself. Can an art form that appropriates life so immediately survive its own considerable demands on itself? □



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Page 76 The Weekly September 29 - Oct 5, 1976



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Sunday, October 24, 1976

The Seattle Times, B 19

# Photographers lack snap at Modern Art Pavilion

The Seattle Art Museum Modern Art Pavilion has once again mounted a clutch of shows at once to fill those cavernous white spaces at Seattle Center.

This time, the shows feature a sculpture-minded painter, Dennis Ashbaugh; three photographers, William Eggleston, Christopher Makos and Philip Tsiaras, and a group show of 25 Northwest jewelers and silversmiths. That's a lot of seeing under one roof.

With the exception of the jewelers, this batch of shows is distinguished by a bad case of the dulls.

Ashbaugh works in the Constructivist tradition, really a form of sculpture in which space-dividing geometric forms are assembled in a sort of three-dimensional analog to Cubist faceting. Probably the most noted American Constructivist is Alexander Calder, whose motor-driven sculptures and mobiles are squarely in the Constructivist tradition.

Ashbaugh's immense paintings are flat-surfaced constructions six inches deep, formed of slashing diagonals and jutting rhomboids, bolted together, softened by circular forms.

The predominant color is an unmodulated absorbent black, with soft-edged accent areas of raw pink, red or green brushed frugally near edges.

For some reason, Ashbaugh's paintings were deemed of sufficient interest to merit a solo exhibition at New York's Whitney Museum last year. They are undeniably aggressive, and show precise planning and construction, but appear unexciting and derivative.

**THE SHOW'S** three photographers differ markedly in approach.

Eggleston has the greatest reputation, having been awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in photography in 1974, and in 1975 a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. His exhibition is made possible by grants from the N.E.A. and Vivitar, Inc.

Eggleston's color photos capture persons and scenes in Mississippi, and the environs of his home in Memphis, Tenn. Their content is no more interesting than a stranger's family album, documenting people and places of surpassing dullness.

The photos are noteworthy for their excellent composition, clarity and fine attention to detail.

Prints for the show were selected by John Szarkowski, director of the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Photography. Szarkowski's introduction to the show's catalog emerges as a fascinating essay on color photography without making a particularly strong case for Eggleston. Szarkowski accurately describes Eggleston's work as "a series of



Visual  
Arts

by DELORIS TARZAN



Andy Warhol, photo  
by Christopher Makos

sections, each slightly askew, seems mere gimmickry.

Tsiaras, who is both photographer and poet, has a display of photos relating to motion, some showing blurring, others the same object in a moved position.

The modest-sized images are competent and clear, but appear to be little more than a series of photographic exercises.

**THE JEWELERS** and silversmiths' show, organized by the Museum's Pacific Northwest Arts Council, is the most fetching part of the Pavilion's current display.

Crafts workers from Washington, Oregon and Montana are represented, in as many styles as there are artists.

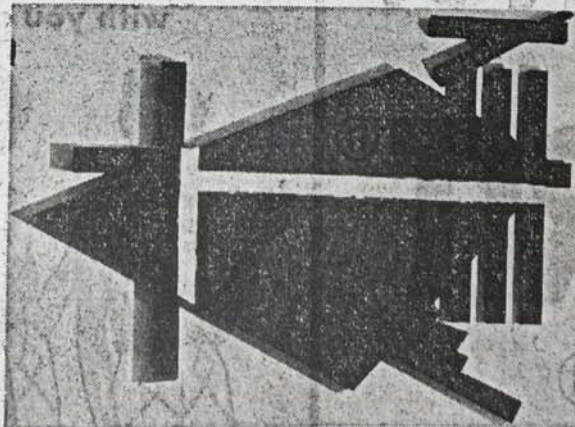
There is a sort of Art Nouveau sensibility to many of the pieces, with tendriling organic forms. Others feature barbarian-scale beads, or delicate enamel work.

The show also is an opportunity to see the work of some of the area's fine silversmiths, too rarely on view.

All of the exhibitions will be on view until the end of the month.

lence." But in fact it is precisely the feeling of passion or involvement that is missing from his shots. The only knife evidenced is in the disjoining of figure segments in his portraits.

Makos' photo portraits of Warhol, Halston, Pat Loud and other celebrities are interesting for their pronounced black-and-white values. But the slicing of the full-length figures into three or four



"Chowchila Green," by Dennis Ashbaugh



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Szarkowski points out that most color photography falls short of excellence by being either formless or pretty; that photographers have found it too difficult to see simultaneously both the blue and the sky.

It is assuredly true that Eggleston avoids both pitfalls. But his photos are, at base, dull.

Neither the inside of an oven or a shower stall, nor shoes shoved under a bed nor a car parked in front of a strange house is calculated to captivate the average viewer, no matter how fine the color or composition.

Szarkowski sees the shots ultimately as "perfect: irreducible surrogates for the experience they pretend to record, visual analogs for the quality of one life... a view one would have thought ineffable, described with clarity, fullness and elegance."

*De gustibus non est disputandum.*

**MAKOS** is a photographer in vogue with artists of the Pop movement, most notably Andy Warhol. Makos' subjects and style are said to record and comment on Pop culture. If so, it is a rarefied aspect of that culture — the facade of the Givenchy boutique in Paris; St. Marks' Square in Venice; Egypt, camels and assorted celebrities.

Makos works in snapshot style, often juxtaposing two similar shots to suggest a third idea. He makes most effective use of double images when they are seen as two surfaces of a mirror held together.

Makos has been quoted as saying, "The camera is a knife and photography is an act of vio-



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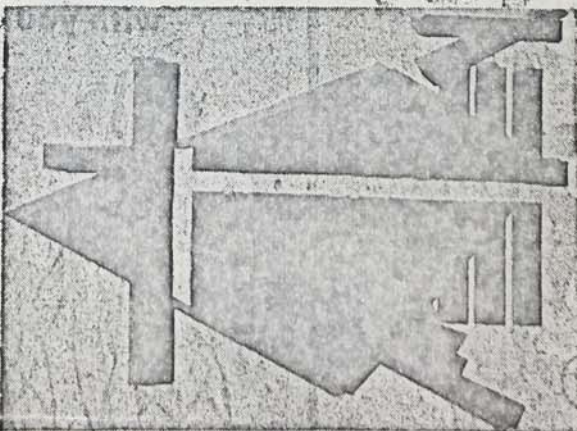
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MAKOS is a photographer in vogue with artists of the Pop movement, most notably Andy Warhol. Makos' subjects and style are said to record and comment on Pop culture. If so, it is a rarefied aspect of that culture — the facade of the Givenchy boutique in Paris; St. Marks Square in Venice; Egypt, camels and assorted celebrities.

Makos works in snapshot style, often juxtaposing two similar shots to suggest a third idea. He makes most effective use of double images when they are seen as two surfaces of a mirror held together.

Makos has been quoted as saying, "The camera is a knife and photography is an act of vio-

"Chowchila Green," by Dennis Ashbaugh



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Seattle Post-Intelligencer, Sun., Oct. 10, 1976

H5

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BY R.M. CAMPBELL  
P-I Art Critic

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Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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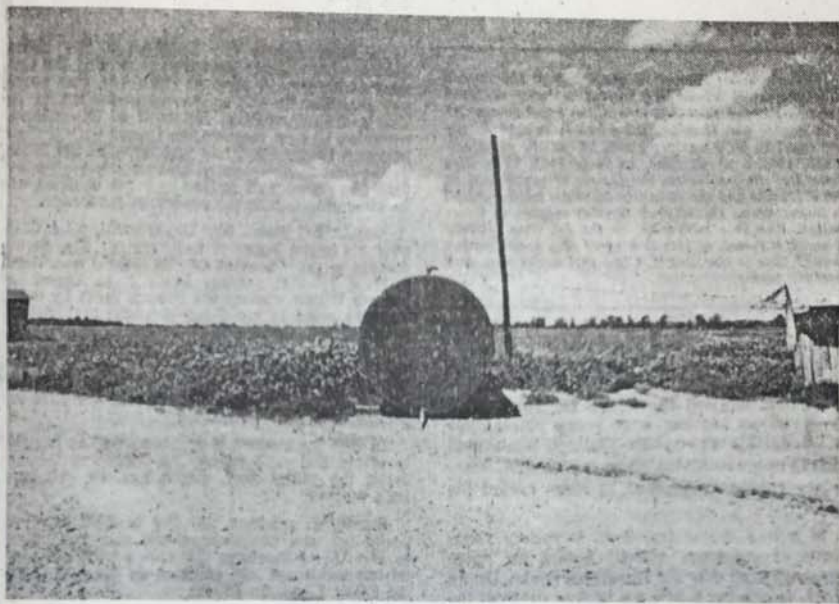
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H5

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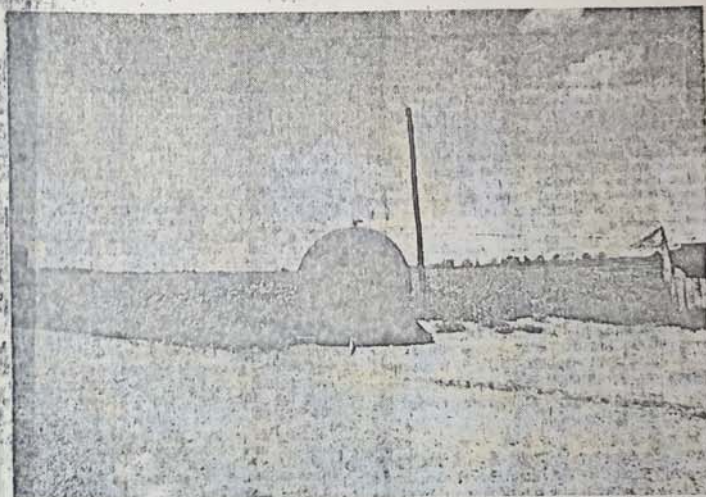
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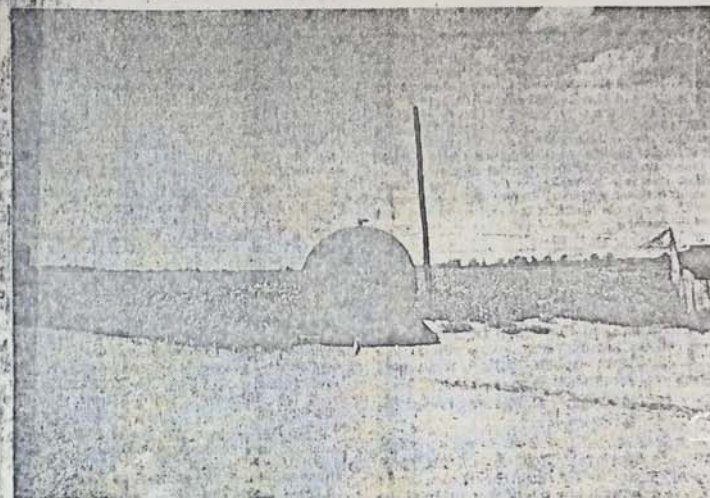
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Talaras' photographs are small and concerned with motion. There is much concentration on the effect of speed, the blurring of values, the force of energy. Muybridge, however, did much better. The photographs are more idea than art.

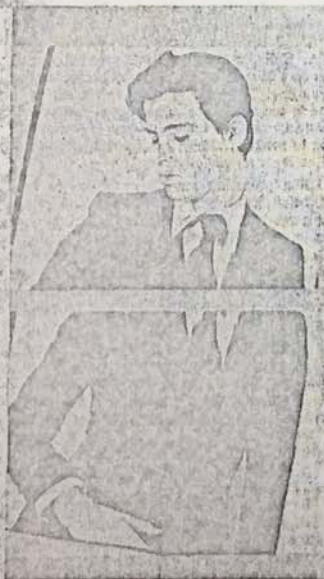
The paintings of Dennis Ashbaugh are large and dramatic, in a sense sculptural because they are three-dimensional, but still retain the essential properties of painting.

The paintings are few but large, rather geometric in manner, mostly black with only suggestions of color to relieve the monotony. A young New York artist, Ashbaugh has had exhibits in California museums, galleries in New York, California and Sweden and last year had a one-man show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Ashbaugh's work has been compared to that of the Constructivists of the early 1930s — a movement which was international in scope but the dominate style of Russian art in the early part of the century. It was a style that "inspired esthetic innovations as well as doctrinaire political motives."

Camilla Gray has referred to the "horizontal, static, heavy machine-rhythm of the Constructivists," a description which could easily apply to Ashbaugh's work. The design of the work is eminently clear, the form precise, the physical presence dominating.

Ashbaugh is carrying forth a tradition — political and esthetic — but one which does not have the potency to make it a wholly valid statement today.



'Punk,' photograph by Christopher Makos



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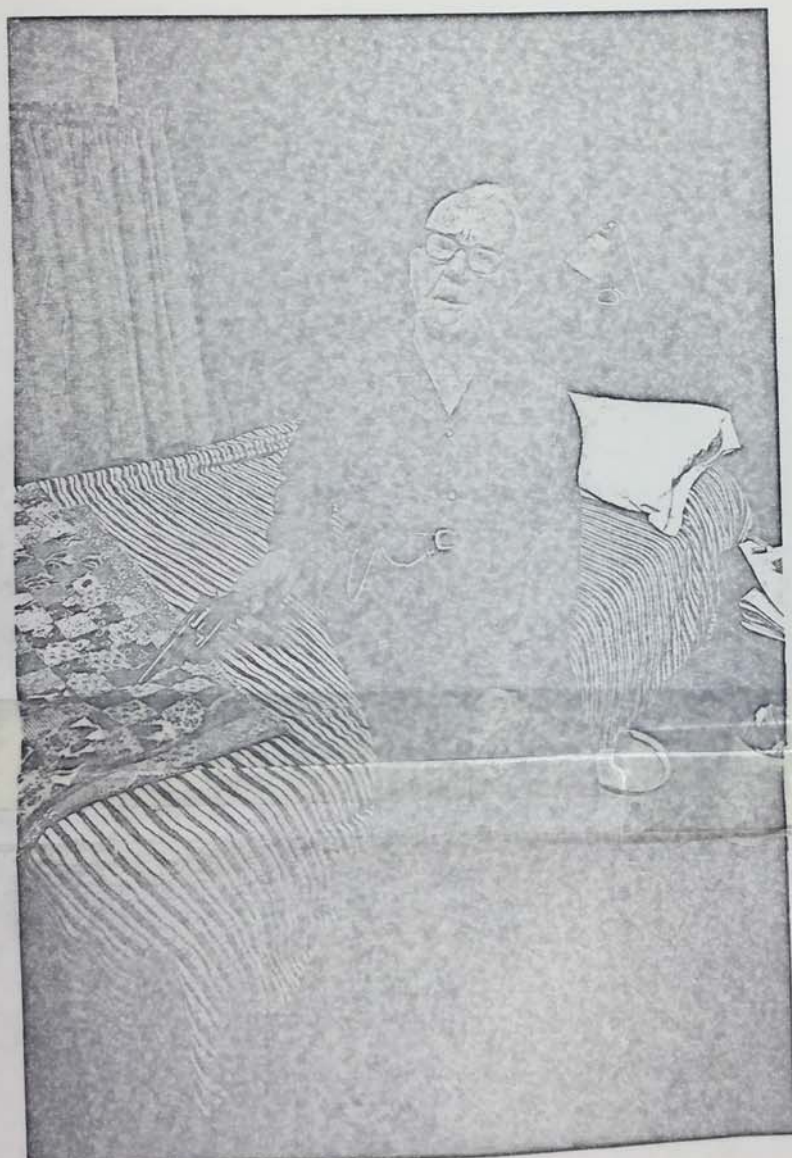
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*Art Forum, November 1976*

## HOW TO MYSTIFY COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY



William Eggleston. Morton, Mississippi, color photograph.

MAX KOZLOFF

Had they been shown in a gallery, William Eggleston's color photographs would not have raised special problems. Nowadays it's quite normal that dealers imagine photos of all kinds to be art, worth a try in an increasingly sporty market. Eggleston's images—dye transfer prints that have been made from slides—represent a large genre whose trademark is the very averageness of its subjects. We are not certain what these pictures tell us of suburban life around Memphis and northern Mississippi, circa 1970, but they describe it unexceptionally well. They are neither quite casual nor overtly tendentious. They have the snapshotter's typical focus on a center of interest, an object or a person, but they exhibit a bit more range in the trivialities they permit. While in theory a jigsaw puzzle (uncompleted), or the image of a ham dinner may turn up in the family carousel, Eggleston appears to know they are the sort of thing most likely to bore the family, and therefore solicit our interest by default. On the other hand, an old man sitting on the bed for his portrait holds a large, shiny revolver, but God forbid we should be encouraged to draw any specious conclusions, say, about Mississippi violence. Well, such images, fragments as are all photos, are not obliged to spell out meanings if the photographer doesn't want them to. And Eggleston's dwell with such conventional un insistence on this fact that they're maddening, in a low-level modish way.

But the experiences to be gotten from photos, or rather the expectations they generate, are entirely affected by the context in which they are seen. Come upon in a camera club or photo class, Eggleston's works would seem to display the normal peculiarities of their medium, eliciting a random bliss here, yawns there. There would have been no reason to discuss them. But they were presented as a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art. They have, therefore, been exposed to a large public by a very prestigious institution. Nominally, such exposure imposes the greatest possible social weight on the scale of artistic significance, and one wonders why a previously unknown and not conspicuously talented photographer is thought to deserve this attention.

MOMA has every right now, as it did in the past, to sponsor vernacular things. These may well have esthetic merits no less than works of art have social allusions, and the museum needs only to clarify its emphasis. In the area of photography, one remembers MOMA's "One-Eyed Dicks," a continuously projected film of still photographs taken by triggered, automatic cameras during bank robberies, 1970, and "From The Picture Press," 1973. On both occasions the official hope was to expand the public's consciousness of (non-art) photo traditions.

In practice, though, the bank photos were considered "neutral," and there were no wall captions for the news pictures. The museum simply imposed its context on the original ones. One noticed the general avoidance of information that would explain how these images guarded property and manipulated news; surely the most interesting things about them. These factors, to be sure, concern only the historical values of the material and its effect on people's lives, whereas



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William Eggleston: Southern Enclave of Memphis, Union photograph.

the museum wanted us to see them as objects appropriate for detached contemplation, the stuff of poetry unmoored in time. Photo "poetry" can be appreciated but not analyzed, and as it's deceiving and fictive, it cannot be instrumental in any social purpose. (I) Eggleston makes free with vernacular idiom, but is definitely not seen to practice it. And so the show is pure esthetics, with the gloves off. Indeed, John Szarkowski writes that these pictures seem to him "perfect," that they're "irreducible surrogates for the experience they pretend [my italics] to record."

Poor fellow! You turn to the essay written on him by the director of the Museum of Modern Art's photography department, and you discover that Eggleston has been mystified practically out of existence. MOMA waits years for the funding of its first book devoted to a color photographer (*William Eggleston's Guide*), and what is the public told of the individual so elaborately honored? That he's 37, born in Memphis, has gotten through local high schools, attended but apparently not graduated from Vanderbilt and "Ole Miss," and discovered the work of Cartier-Bresson in 1962. Oh yes, he has said that his pictures were based compositionally on the Confederate flag. As any kind of backgrounding on an important artist, this is, of course, sensationally irresponsible and derisory. If you want to learn about the artist's class origins, intellectual outlook, creative development, professional contacts, even the identity of subjects that reappear and have

personal meaning—things that actually matter—you're out of luck.

But all these omissions serve Szarkowski's validatory purpose to keep his artist out of reach, even if, or rather precisely because, that weakens the public's grasp of the intentions of the work, such as they are. I, for one, would like to know if there is anything to his affinities with Meatyard, Gossage, and Gowin, Southern photographers whose coherent black and white work suggests a demonic element in everyday life. And what of the way Eggleston causes naked lightbulbs and old shoes to loom in the frame, or tends occasionally to drench everything in the covertly expressionist hues of green and red? But to have recognized the input of conscious styling would have undermined the qualities that make these pictures "irreducible surrogates for the experience they pretend to record."

Everything in Szarkowski's text is designed to teach that the content of photographic images is untouchable, that no matter how fertile his own speculation about, say, a '56 Buick parked at the boundary of suburb and country, "verbal descriptions are finally gratuitous." To prove this, dialectical issues are introduced only to be cancelled: the artist's impulse is hermetically diaristic but his style is "not inappropriate for photographs that might be introduced in court," yet "a picture is after all only . . . a concrete kind of fiction, not to be admitted as hard evidence . . ."

Throughout he works to sidestep critical analysis through a rhetoric of personal modesty and respect for obviously ambiguous but ineffable statement. "The pictures mean precisely what they appear to mean," and whatever follows from that, he says, is any fool's guess. On the other hand, "Form is perhaps the point of art," and "Whatever else a photograph may be about, it is inevitably about photography." One would have thought that such a belief would permit him to discuss Eggleston's historical contribution to the art, but on the contrary, "the pictures reproduced here" may be "no more interesting than the person who made them . . . which leads us away from the measurable relationships of art-historical science toward intuition, superstition, blood-knowledge, terror, and delight."

He might just as well have mentioned faith, for it's on that basis we have to distinguish the intelligence and intensity of Eggleston's color from that of the ubiquitous amateur. Since the Memphian's palette closely resembles the amateur's, being "extraneous" and/or "pretty," as any fool can plainly see, perhaps there should be some reasoning as to what "artistic" color is. The curator takes a stab at it: after great trials, ambitious color photographers now realize that "the world itself existed in color, as though the blue and the sky were one thing." I should have thought this was no momentous discovery, but I can almost sense the part it will play in the legitimations to come. ■



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# Questions to Ask before Buying a Camera

# camera 35

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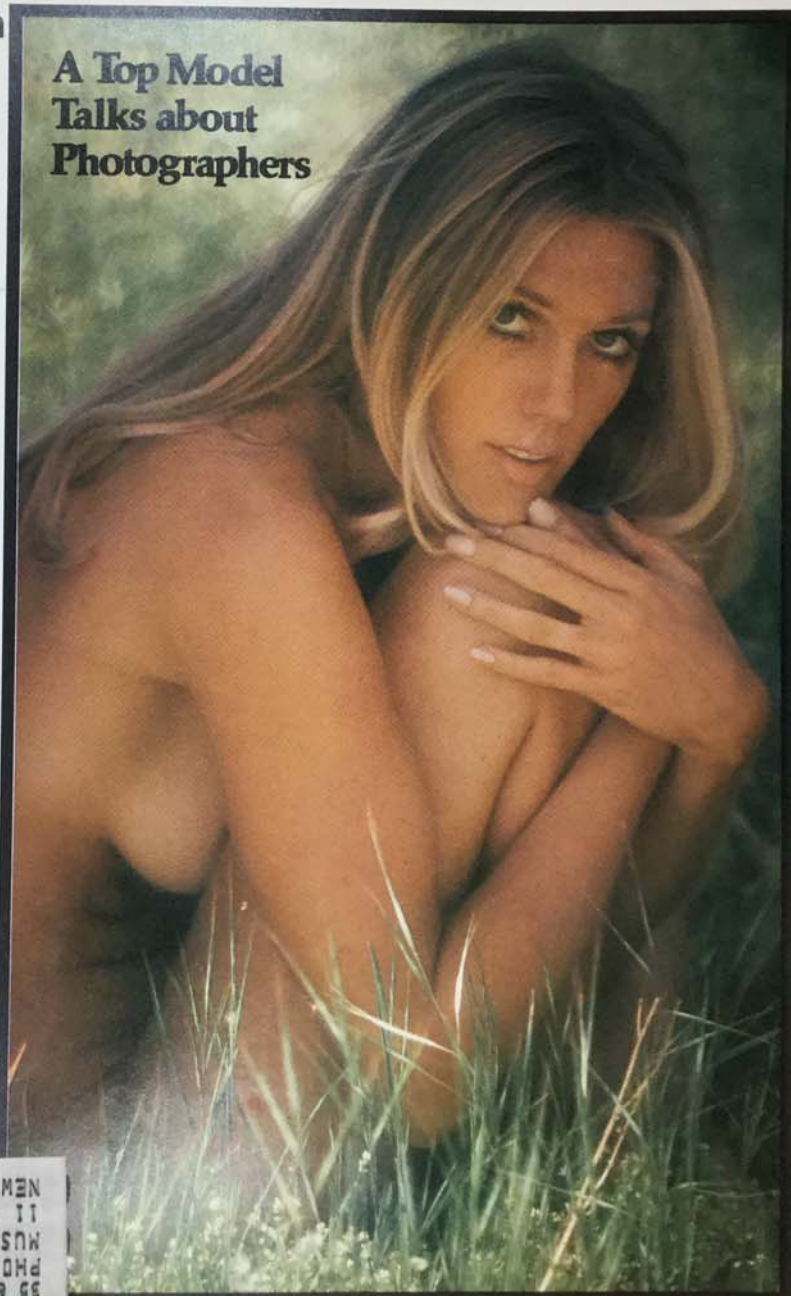
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**Why the Museum  
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Rendering of  
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**A Top Model  
Talks about  
Photographers**



Photograph by KEN BIGGS

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## East: Michael Edelson MOMA Shows Her Colors

"... most recent shows at the Modern are just that—showy ... better suited for a circus tent than a museum wall."

Every personal diary, just because it is an attempt at one-to-one communication, is not significant to all as it may be to its author and peripheral participants. Photographically, these sort of diaries are called snapshots. One need not go into great descriptions of the panic we have all felt at those moments when the proud fathers begin to unravel the limitless folds of plastic from their wallets in order to display a contemporary pantheonic frieze of the latest born. John Szarkowski, director of photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art describes the photographs of the recent William Eggleston exhibition "as pictures, however, these seem to me perfect ..." Szarkowski is right. The images are perfectly questionable as serious examples of contemporary color photography. On top of that, they're just plain dull.

And what is best described as a sneaking suspicion as one walks through the exhibit becomes an absolute conviction as one looks at the much-touted first color photography book published by the MOMA. The lengthy introduction by Szarkowski, part of which is used as the exhibit's wall label, certainly qualifies him as the W. S. Gilbert of contemporary photographic prose. The words are generous and significantly long to be impressive, much as those used by a thesis writer, but the soundness and eventual conviction are hopelessly lacking. At one point Eggleston is called a romantic (by very questionable concepts of romanticism) and yet in the next paragraph he is, we are told, unlike romantics. Szarkowski's sweeping statements are best described as questionable if one seriously

wishes to consider the source, since there can be hardly any other conceivable reason. Examine the remark, "Considering the lack of enthusiasm and confidence with which most ambitious photographers have regarded color, it is not surprising that most work in the medium has been puerile." Puerile! Why then was Haas exhibited at the MOMA some years back? What about the work of Samaras, Hiro, Sennett, Turner, Glinn, Krims, Hidalgo, Kaleya and all the others? The childishness lies not in the work of contemporary photography but in both Szarkowski's seemingly uninformed mind and Eggleston's passé imagery.

I do not intend in this space to combat Eggleston about the validity of America being a wasteland landscape. In fact, in many areas of the U.S., especially in the South where he works, this might be very, very true. However, his method of informing me of this through his photographs is, at best, old hat. I, personally, am very tired of seeing white plastic bottles on rich soil, repetitive houses, repetitive houses with autos and close-ups of showers, ovens and the like. This is not to say that the essential concept of vision of this sort of America is used up; Eggleston is the one who is used up before he even took up the camera. Musically speaking, Romeo and Juliet is the source of operas by Gounod, Delius and Bellini, a ballet by Prokofiev and an oratorio by Berlioz. That's off the top of my head without resorting to reference books, so there must be much more. The point is that each composer brought something fresh and new to the story. Eggleston is, at most, melba toast. And a very thin diet for the eyes and mind at that.

Despite the glamour and *bon vivant* atmosphere of the opening that night at the MOMA, the Eggleston exhibit is unimportant in the scheme of things except when considered in terms of its failure. Surely, Szarkowski considered long and hard before deciding on Eggleston as the big color show. However, in light of what Szarkowski has been selecting to hang at the Modern, the recent show takes on importance. It appears that Szarkowski is either hooked onto a certain kind of photography or is determined to make his mark in photographic history. We are all prone to this temptation but most do succeed at avoiding the bite of the neon apple. Under the banner of reality, Szarkowski seems committed to a quality of ugliness. Even ugliness can possess a strange and convincing beauty if it has depth. Bacon's paintings are a perfect example. But most recent shows at the Modern are just that—showy ... better suited for a circus tent than a museum wall. Szarkowski may be committing himself more to the chronicles of photographic history than he realizes.

The boredom in Eggleston's images lies in persistence of repetition and lack of insight. The mythology of the contemporary snapshot frame calls for an undisciplined formalism that these images lack even if viewed with the most generous eye. The use of color aggravates the situation because the color is not used with any great intelligence. It takes no great mind to place a complementary blue in a red scene despite the claims of Szarkowski. Since so few people shoot black-and-white snaps these days, the color there only accentuates the absolute ordinariness of con-



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Even as weak as the form and shape might be in Eggleston's photographs, I find him more closely aligned with the pop syndrome. One might call him a Pop Photographer. Instead of painting Campbell Soup cans, he is photographing shower stalls. Much of contemporary painting confronted with the dynamism of sculpture and photography has resorted to this nonsense of glorification of form and shape at the cost of content. That's fine for the palsied brush, but hardly appropriate for the bold contemporary camera. We in photography are not yet that anemic that we must resort to such intellectual artifice and visual wash. Obviously,

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One might find Eggleston's images revealing if one just arrived from outer space. That idea poses a rather interesting question. Where have Eggleston and Szarkowski been all these years?



## East: Michael Edelson

Upper left: Shower.

Above left: Black Bayou Plantation near Glendora, Mississippi.

Above right: Crenshaw, Mississippi.

Below: Huntsville, Alabama.

Photographs by William Eggleston



**THE REMAINDER OF THIS PUBLICATION HAS NOT BEEN SCANNED.**



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Camera, October 1976

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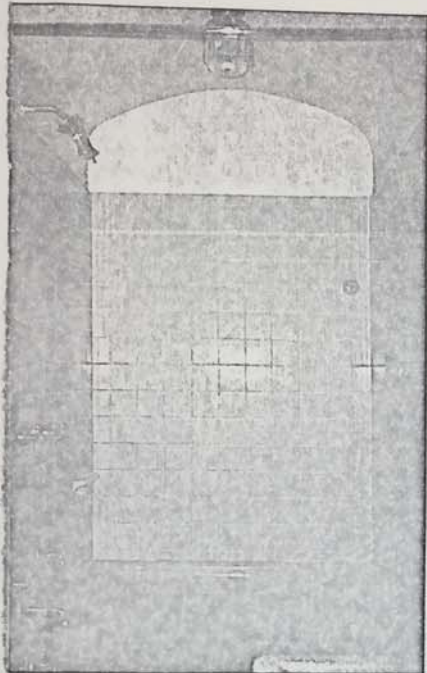
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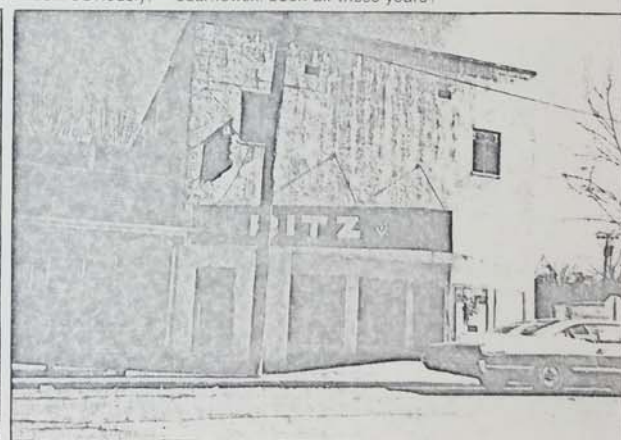
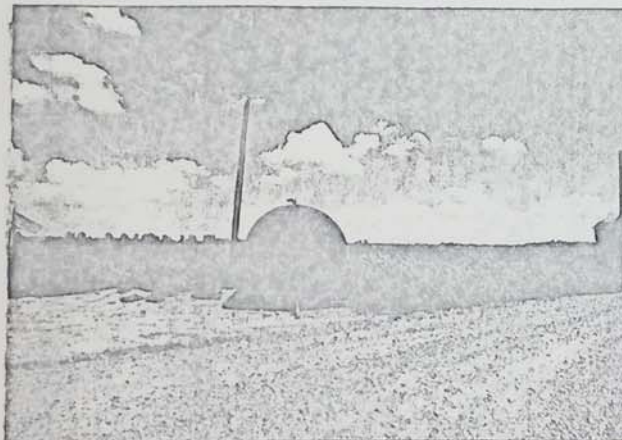
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THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, MAY 28, 1976

# Art: Focus on Photo Shows

By HILTON KRAMER

**H**ISTORIC breakthroughs are not, alas, what they used to be—at least in the world of art. Take the exhibition of photographs by William Eggleston that opened this week at the Museum of Modern Art (through Aug. 1). We are invited by John Szarkowski, director of the department of photography at the museum, to look upon this as a very significant event. To underscore the point, the museum has prepared a poshy, hard-cover book of 112 pages (\$12.50, M.I.T. Press) to accompany the show—a fairly unusual procedure for the first solo exhibition by an artist few people have ever heard of. In his text for the book, Mr. Szarkowski throws all caution to the winds and speaks of Mr. Eggleston's pictures as "perfect."

Perfect? Perfectly banal, perhaps. Perfectly boring, certainly. A perfect example of what, for Mr. Szarkowski and many like-minded connoisseurs of contemporary photography, is now *à la mode*. But this is not, of course, what Mr. Szarkowski means by "perfect." He means that Mr. Eggleston's pictures achieve a rare degree of excellence and originality, and that—to put the matter mildly—is something about which opinions will differ.

What does make this show unusual, if not exactly historic, is that it is the museum's first major exhibition of photographs in color. The book, "William Eggleston's Guide," is likewise the museum's first publication on color photography, with 48 plates—more than half the exhibition—printed in color. Even the text is printed on paper that is the color of a green bathroom shower in one of Mr. Eggleston's pictures.

As color is now one of the "hot" problems in this medium long dominated by black and white images, it would be news indeed if Mr. Eggleston's pictures were the masterpieces they are claimed to be. In my opinion, they are not.

That bathroom shower is an index to the kind of subject Mr. Eggleston favors. He likes trucks, cars, tricycles, unremarkable suburban houses and dreary landscapes, too, and he especially likes his family and friends, who may, for all I know, be wonderful people, but who appear in these pictures as dismal figures inhabiting a commonplace world of little visual interest. The locations are Memphis, where Mr. Eggleston lives, and Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, where his family's cotton farm is.

The use of color, alleged to lend a special distinction to these pictures, is, to my eye at least, similarly commonplace. It varies from being obviously pretty (a bright blue pickup truck seen through the growth of wisteria in bloom) to being obviously austere (the gray-black-off-white tones of the interior of a household oven). Mostly it is postcard bright, in the outdoor daylight pictures, or ponderously atmospheric, in the interior shots.

There is no great formal intelligence at work in these pictures, either, Mr. Szarkow-

Vivitar Inc. and the National Endowment for the Arts—that has to be seen to be believed.

What a relief it is to turn from these pictorial banalities to the work of a genuine imagination! Clarence John Laughlin, whose exhibition of photographs called "The Transforming Eye" is now at the International Center of Photography, Fifth Avenue at 94th Street (through June 6), is not a discovery, of course. He is one of the great classics of American photography—

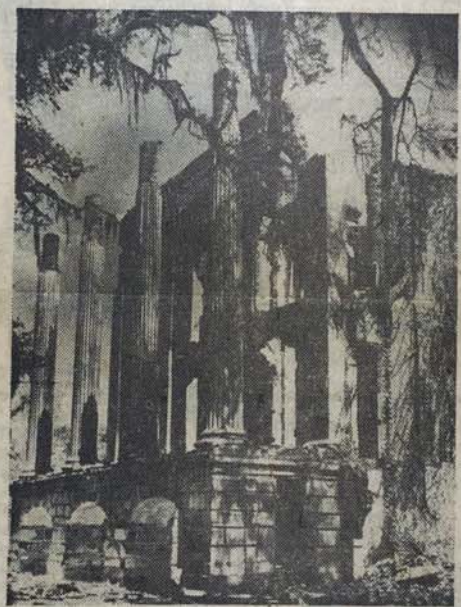
accomplishments of our time.

Mr. Laughlin has long been a resident of New Orleans, and some of the enchantment of that magical city has found its way into his pictures. Some of the romance of Surrealism—especially the romance of the unconscious—has deeply affected his art, too. The result, whether his pictures are "straight" or elaborately composed of separate, incongruous images superimposed to form a haunting evocation of an interior universe, is a feast for the eye.

New Orleans provides Mr. Laughlin with some of his most bizarre "straight" pictures. (With cemeteries and architectural ornament like New Orleans's, who needs embellishments?) So do the decayed and abandoned Louisiana plantation houses of a few decades ago that he made one of his photographic specialties. These pictures alone would guarantee Mr. Laughlin a place among the classics.

But his other specialty is what he calls the "visual poem"—a term he reserves for a particular category of picture but that I would apply to all of his "invented" images. These range from synthetic landscape fantasies ("Passage to Never Land") enveloped in a macabre, painterly light, to pictures in which a figure standing beside a doorway filled with debris, say, peers at us through an elaborate oval picture frame ("The Ego-Centrics"). We are in a world of deliberate, devilish symbolism in these pictures, and their sheer visual power is extraordinary.

It says something about the force of Mr. Laughlin's imagination that even his architectural photographs often look as if their subjects have been invented in the darkroom. He is an original, a romantic of the generation—I often think of Martha Graham when I see his pictures—that looked upon the pictorial specifications of the world we inhabit as a key to an inward, infinitely absorbing universe of poetic implication.



"The Shadows Fall," by Clarence John Laughlin

ski makes much of the fact that Mr. Eggleston places most of his subjects plunk down in the center of his pictorial space, or just off center, as if this were some remarkable esthetic feat. It is not.

The truth is, these pictures belong to the world of snapshot chic—to the post-Diane Arbus, antiformalist esthetic that is now all the rage among many younger photographers and that has all but derailed Mr. Szarkowski's taste so far as contemporary photography is concerned.

To this snapshot style, Mr. Eggleston has added some effects borrowed from recent developments in, of all things, photorealist painting—a case, if not of the blind leading the blind, at least of the banal leading the banal. For purely negative reasons, this is a show—made possible, as they say, by grants from

an artist with an almost feverish gift for invention. Working within the traditional limits of the black-and-white print, he achieves an extraordinary visual poetry—an art of the fantastic that is one of the special

## Bolshoi Theater Gets Lenin Honor

MOSCOW, May 27 (AP)—The Bolshoi Theater, 200 years old and sparkling with new trimmings, received the Order of Lenin yesterday a top Soviet honor.

An ornate and stately building in the heart of Moscow, the Bolshoi is one of the few legacies left of Czarist days, and now one of the proudest ornaments of the Soviet regime.

Along with the theater itself, 957 performers, or almost the entire "creative collective" of the Bolshoi, won

Soviet decorations, a list of names that filled two full pages inside the newspaper *Sovetskaya Kultura*.

Home of some of the great ballets and operas of the classical repertory and some of the classic performers of our time, the Bolshoi continues to present much of its prerevolutionary program, augmented by productions glorifying Communist achievements.

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# Art: Focus on Photo Shows

By HILTON KRAMER

**H**ISTORIC breakthroughs are not, alas, what they used to be—at least in the world of art. Take the exhibition of photographs by William Eggleston that opened this week at the Museum of Modern Art (through Aug. 1). We are invited by John Szarkowski, director of the department of photography at the museum, to look upon this as a very significant event. To underscore the point, the museum has prepared a poshy, hard-cover book of 112 pages (\$12.50, M.I.T. Press) to accompany the show—a fairly unusual procedure for the first solo exhibition by an artist few people have ever heard of. In his text for the book, Mr. Szarkowski throws all caution to the winds and speaks of Mr. Eggleston's pictures as "perfect."

Perfect? Perfectly banal, perhaps. Perfectly boring, certainly. A perfect example of what, for Mr. Szarkowski and many like-minded connoisseurs of contemporary photography, is now a la mode. But this is not, of course, what Mr. Szarkowski means by "perfect." He means that Mr. Eggleston's pictures achieve a rare degree of excellence and originality, and that—to put the matter mildly—is something about which opinions will differ.

What does make this show unusual, if not exactly historic, is that it is the museum's first major exhibition of photographs in color. The book, "William Eggleston's Guide," is likewise the museum's first publication on color photography, with 48 plates—more than half the exhibition—printed in color. Even the text is printed on paper that is the color of a green bathroom shower in one of Mr. Eggleston's pictures.

As color is now one of the "hot" problems in this medium long dominated by black and white images, it would be news indeed if Mr. Eggleston's pictures were the masterpieces they are claimed to be. In my opinion, they are not.

That bathroom shower is an index to the kind of subject Mr. Eggleston favors. He likes trucks, cars, tricycles, unremarkable suburban houses and dreary landscapes.

The use of color, alleged to lend a special distinction to these pictures is, to my eye at least, similarly commonplace. It varies from being obviously pretty (a bright blue pickup truck seen through the growth of wisteria in bloom) to being obviously austere (the gray-black-off-white tones of the interior of a household oven). Mostly it is postcard bright, in the outdoor daylight pictures, or ponderously atmospheric, in the interior shots.

There is no great formal intelligence at work in these pictures, either. Mr. Szarkowski

Inc. and the National Endowment for the Arts—that has to be seen to be believed.

What a relief it is to turn from these pictorial banalities to the work of a genuine imagination! Clarence John Laughlin, whose exhibition of photographs called "The Transforming Eye" is now at the International Center of Photography, Fifth Avenue at 94th Street (through June 6), is not a discovery, of course. He is one of the great classics of American photography—

accomplishments of our time.

Mr. Laughlin has long been a resident of New Orleans, and some of the enchantment of that magical city has found its way into his pictures. Some of the romance of Surrealism—especially the romance of the unconscious—has deeply affected his art, too. The result, whether his pictures are "straight" or elaborately composed of separate, incongruous images superimposed to form a haunting evocation of an interior universe, is a feast for the eye.

New Orleans provides Mr. Laughlin with some of his most bizarre "straight" pictures. (With cemeteries and architectural ornament like New Orleans's, who needs embellishments?) So do the decayed and abandoned Louisiana plantation houses of a few decades ago that he made one of his photographic specialties. These pictures alone would guarantee Mr. Laughlin a place among the classics.

But his other specialty is what he calls the "visual poem"—a term he reserves for a particular category of picture but that I would apply to all of his "invented" images. These range from synthetic landscape fantasies ("Passage to Never Land") enveloped in a macabre, painterly light, to pictures in which a figure standing beside a doorway filled with debris, say, peers at us through an elaborate oval picture frame ("The Ego-Centrics"). We are in a world of deliberate, devilish symbolism in these pictures, and their sheer visual power is extraordinary.

It says something about the force of Mr. Laughlin's imagination that even his architectural photographs often look as if their subjects have been invented in the darkroom. He is an original, a romantic of the generation—I often think of Martha Graham when I see his pictures—that looked upon the pictorial specifications of the world we inhabit as a key to an inward, infinitely absorbing universe of poetic implication.



"The Shadows Fall," by Clarence John Laughlin

ski makes much of the fact that Mr. Eggleston places most of his subjects plunk down in the center of his pictorial space, or just off center, as if this were some remarkable esthetic feat. It is not.

The truth is, these pictures belong to the world of snapshot chic—to the post-Diane Arbus, antiformalist esthetic that is now all the rage among many younger photographers and that has all but derailed Mr. Szarkowski's

an artist with an almost feverish gift for invention. Working within the traditional limits of the black-and-white print, he achieves an extraordinary visual poetry—an art of the fantastic that is one of the special

## Bolshoi Theater Gets Lenin Honor

MOSCOW, May 27 (AP)—The Bolshoi Theater, 200 years old and sparkling with new trimmings, received the

Soviet decorations, a list of names that filled two full pages inside the newspaper Sovetskaya Kultura.



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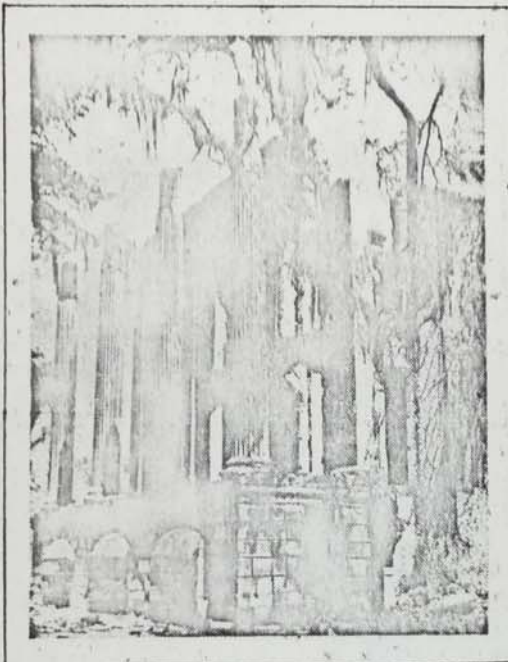
That bathroom shower is an index to the kind of subject Mr. Eggleston favors. He likes trucks, cars, tricycles unremarkable suburban houses and dreary landscapes, too, and he especially likes his family and friends, who may, for all I know, be wonderful people, but who appear in these pictures as dismal figures inhabiting a commonplace world of little visual interest. The locations are Memphis, where Mr. Eggleston lives, and Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, where his family's cotton farm is,

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The truth is, these pictures belong to the world of snapshot chic—to the post-Diane Arbus, antiformalist esthetic that is now all the rage among many younger photographers and that has all but derailed Mr. Szarkowski's taste so far as contemporary photography is concerned.

To this snapshot style, Mr. Eggleston has added some effects borrowed from recent developments in, of all things, photorealistic painting—a case, if not of the blind leading the blind, at least of the banal leading the banal. For purely negative reasons, this is a show—made possible, as they say, by grants from

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An ornate and stately building in the heart of Moscow, the Bolshoi is one of the few legacies left of Czarist days, and now one of the proudest ornaments of the Soviet regime.

Along with the theater itself, 957 performers, or almost the entire "creative collective" of the Bolshoi, won

Soviet decorations, a list of names that filled two full pages inside the newspaper Sovetskaya Kultura.

Home of some of the great ballets and operas of the classical repertory and some of the classic performers of our time, the Bolshoi continues to present much of its prerevolutionary program, augmented by productions glorifying Communist achievements.

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World War II portraits by Mike Disfarmer—"an outstanding discovery"

## PHOTOGRAPHY VIEW

GENE THORNTON

# Photography Found a Home In Art Galleries

**H**urricanes, deaths, discoveries and several conflicting trends marked the year in photography as seen from New York City. In the museums and galleries a growing number of important shows crowded the calendar, some of which created heated controversy. The likelihood of the photographic scene this year makes it easy to cite ten outstanding events and developments.

First on my list was the striking presence of photography in major art galleries that formerly showed only painting and sculpture. In the fall of 1976 Knoedler, Marlborough and Sidney Janis each opened the season with big exhibitions of photographs. Since none of them showed photographs as recently as three years ago, this says something about the new position of photography among the arts.

I'd put second on my list the opening of new galleries devoted exclusively to photography. In New York City these included the Rinhart Gallery, 818 Madison Avenue, opening with a show of photographs by Timothy O'Sullivan; Images, at 11 East 57th Street, which specializes in color photography; and the Marcuse Pfeiffer Gallery, 825 Madison Avenue, opening with a Weegee exhibition.

I'd put as third and fourth the evidence of two opposing trends. One is the renewed attention to human interest photography, as seen in Knoedler's opening exhibition, devoted to the works of veteran Life photographer

Alfred Eisenstaedt; Marlborough's large show of pictures of low life in Paris in the 1930's by Brassai; and Sidney Janis's display of Duane Michals's photographic portraits and narrative sequences.

The contrary trend, fourth on my list, is the movement towards formalistic photography, most evident at The Museum of Modern Art. For several years now the Modern has assiduously courted the kind of photographic formalism that is the antithesis of human interest photography. In 1976 the courtship was consummated with two big exhibitions featuring two different kinds of formalistic photography. The current (through February 6, 1977) Harry Callahan exhibition exemplifies the older type, which was invented by Paul Strand in response to the challenge of modern painting. In the older formalism, rocks, roots and other bits of nature are framed and printed in such a way as to emphasize their abstract shapes and colors. Callahan practices a peculiarly refined and elegant version of this.

A newer kind of photographic formalism was exemplified by the snapshot-like work William Eggleston showed in his summer exhibition at the museum. Eggleston, like other young formalists, has abandoned the tenuous connections the older formalists had with School of Paris painting to find inspiration in the photographic process itself. The theory is that photographs that look like photographs are better than photographs that look like paintings, and that photographs that look like snapshots or police lineup mug shots or 19th-century commercial record shots or some other form of vernacular photography are the best of all, especially if the photographs they look like were made by someone with no artistic pretensions whatsoever. Eggleston's photographs strongly resemble the color slides made by the man next door; and his show at the Modern was the most hated show of the year.

Fifth on my list is another trend, observable outside the Modern and those three major art galleries: the growing interest in the turn-of-the-century pictorialist photographers, whose soft-focus tonalism was once anathema to sharp-focus

Continued on Page 39

NYT  
12/26/76



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The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY	Collection:	Series/Folder:
	MoMA Exhs.	1133.27

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Continued from Page 29

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An outstanding discovery makes the sixth item on any list. The works of Mike Disfarmer, a small-town portraitist from Arkansas whose style-less pictures of small-time cotton farmers and their families, taken during the years of the Second World War, can stand comparison with the works of August Sander, Diane Arbus and Irving Penn. So far Disfarmer's photographs have been seen in New York only in a new book, "Disfarmer: The Heber Springs Portraits, 1939-1946" (Addison House, \$22.50).

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Continued on Page 39

NYT  
12/26/76



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The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY	Collection:	Series/Folder:
	MoMA Exhs.	1133.27

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Continued from Page 29

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The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY	Collection:	Series/Folder:
	MoMA Exhs.	1133.27



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Continued on Page 39

NYT  
12/26/76



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	MoMA Exhs.	1133.27

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**Memorandum**

To John Szarkowski

From Bruce Wolmer

Date

Re

Review from Print  
Collectors Newsletter

Nov/Dec 76



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	MoMA Exhs.	1133.27

MacGillivray, Caroline H. *Escher's Symmetry: The Periodic Drawings of M. C. Escher*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1976. 84 pp. 42 illustrations including 12 in color. \$15.00. Art and science? This book is written by the professor of chemical crystallography at the University of Amsterdam. The drawings tessellations in question can be and are used as a visual guide to the mathematical laws of symmetry, and even further they are based on the laws of crystallography. (Escher of course did not know this.) Escher fills two-dimensional space. The two Escher rules are: without recognition there is no meaning and without shade contrast there is no visibility. Shading is a necessity; a logical means of visualizing the adjacent components of patterns. The text is divided into three sections: patterns with classical symmetry, patterns with black-white symmetry, and patterns with polychromatic symmetry. With each plate the patterns group symbol is given, the meaning of the symbol is briefly explained, and the principles of symmetry in di-periodic arrays are pointed out in a logical order in non-mathematical language. With a little assistance the reader is to work out the lattice and symmetry. Escher's fantasy logic rewards in the unraveling.

Mortimer, Ruth, Compiler. *Harvard College Library Department of Printing and Graphic Arts Catalogue of Books and Manuscripts, Part II: Italian 16th Century Books*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974. 2 vols. 840 pp. Over 1,300 illustrations. \$75.00. The fruit of over seven years of research by Ruth Mortimer, these two volumes catalogue Harvard College Library's 16th-century Italian books, with the emphasis placed on book production after 1520. Listed alphabetically according to author, each of the 559 entries describes the physical makeup of the book, printing history, binding, leaf size, and gives references. All title pages as well as many other prints are reproduced. Subjects are as varied as the interests of the Renaissance men who read them: Dante to Palladio's *Quattro libri dell'architettura*, missals to lace-pattern books. A valuable sourcebook for 16th-century books in Italy as well as all Europe, influenced by the vast Italian book production.

Rotzler, W. *Photography as Artistic Experiment*. Garden City, American Photographic Book Publishing Co., Inc., 1976. 92 pp. 83 illustrations. Paper \$5.95. An excellent survey of innovations in photography for art, touching on the 16th-century camera obscura, concentrating on such early practitioners as Talbot, Cameron, and Muybridge, and linking artists of the 20th-century to the experiments of the 19th-century predecessors. Plates are well selected, including interesting shots by E. L. T. Mesens, Francis Bruguière, John Heartfield, Anton Bragaglia, and Paul Citröin. Translated from the German edition of 1974 for the *Photography: Men and Movements* series.

Rubin, William, and Lancher, Carolyn. *Andre Masson*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976. 232 pp. 201 illustrations including 24 in color. Cloth \$20.00, paper \$8.95. Carolyn Lancher writes, "No true history of Surrealism in painting could be constructed without an account of the role of André Masson; yet both Masson's life and his art stand outside the confines of any collective identification. The thread unifying his efforts... is his undeviating fidelity to the dictates of his inner being—however variable or contradictory." Masson is consistently paradoxical. This book, a result of the Museum of Modern Art's Masson show last spring, confronts and discusses the thematic, technical, and qualitative fluctuations of the artist's long career. Rubin paraphrases Masson:

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