

THE COLORS OF LIFE MUNDANE

*The Met exhibition,
“William Eggleston: Los
Alamos,” is the first time
when this groundbreaking
work is being shown in
entirety in New York City*

By Archana Khare-Ghose

William Eggleston
(American, born
Memphis, Tennessee,
1939), “Memphis,” 1965-
68. Dye-transfer print,
12 X 17 3/4 in (30.5 X 45.1
cm). The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New
York, Promised Gift of
Jade Lau



Jeff Rosenheim,
curator in charge of the
Met's Department of
Photographs

COURTESY, THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



William Eggleston (American, born
Memphis, Tennessee, 1939), "Louisiana,"
circa 1971-74. Dye-transfer print, 17 11/16
X 12 in (45 X 30.5 cm). The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York, Promised Gift
of Jade Lau

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Rough data available on the internet shows that about 350 million photos are uploaded to Facebook accounts daily. It's a mind-numbing figure but not truly surprising given how important images have become as a means of communication between people today.

What really is amusing is the plebeian nature of these photographs. There's nothing special about most of them — a pet cat sleeping snugly on a sofa, tea cup stains on a newspaper

(or next to an iPhone, perhaps), a book by the fireplace, a dog crossing a street, a tree without leaves, someone's mom laughing at something she saw on her smartphone...

In posting such images, the everyday photographers in all of us unwittingly follow in the great tradition of the visual vernacular as perfected by Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson and William Eggleston, to name a few. These are freeze frames of commonplace moments that are destined to assume their fullest significance on hindsight — when that



“THERE ARE COUNTRIES THAT MAY NOT HAVE FAST RAIL OR ROAD SYSTEMS BUT PEOPLE HAVE SMART PHONES THAT THEY ARE MAKING IMAGES WITH, AND SHARING GLOBALLY. OUR JOB AS A MUSEUM IS TO BUILD AUDIENCES FOR THESE IMAGES”

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William Eggleston (American, born Memphis, Tennessee, 1939). "Memphis," circa 1965-68. Dye-transfer print, 17 11/6 X 12 in (44.9 X 30.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Promised Gift of Jade Lau

William Eggleston (American, born Memphis, Tennessee, 1939), "Memphis," circa 1971-74. Dye-transfer print, 17 11/6 X 12 in (44.9 X 30.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Promised Gift of Jade Lau

age has passed, when the time they existed in has disappeared into history, and been replaced by newer looks, newer ways.

One such photograph — of a young supermarket employee pushing shopping carts on a glowing evening in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1965 — brought American photographer William Eggleston into sharp focus on the world photography stage. But when this photograph, along with the others of the genre, was shown in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1976, shock was the reaction that the work received. The reason: Eggleston had tread a new path with color as opposed to the established norm — and standard — of black-and-white photographs of the time.

The image of the grocery store employee, as part of a portfolio titled "Los Alamos" donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Jade Lau, is on view at the museum through May 18. "Los Alamos" comprises 75 dye transfer prints from color negatives made between 1965 and 1974, and the series has never been shown in entirety in New York City before.

Jeff Rosenheim, curator of the exhibition "William Eggleston: Los Alamos," agrees that it was Eggleston's groundbreaking use of color that had stunned the practitioners and connoisseurs of fine art photography.

Speaking to ART+AUCTION, Rosenheim said, "When the photographs first emerged, the reaction was not so much on the subject or the

style... The real reason 'color' was not one of the criteria of standard for fine art photography until then. The established photographers were making the same photographs of the streets in the same style and with same motifs. I don't know why it was believed that Eggleston was doing something different. I grew up feeling that he was in the tradition and not against it."

Rosenheim, curator in charge of the Met's Department of Photographs since 2012, has organized many major exhibitions for the Met and other institutions, including a major retrospective of Walker Evans in 2000, an exhibition of Diane Arbus' work in 2005, the 2013 exhibition "Photography and the American Civil War," and a major retrospective of Irving Penn's photographs on the centennial of his birth last April.

The "Los Alamos" images, Rosenheim said, were about one artist who picked up his camera and some film and set out to explore the world. "He explored himself at the same time, and the culture in his immediate area — the South and South-West." In doing so, he documented the mundane for a time in the future, when the mundane itself would no longer remain the same.

Just a little over four decades since "Los Alamos", the medium has not only become highly democratic but also multi-generational, as Rosenheim said, with almost everybody with a smart phone able to make color-saturated images and share them across a wide

THE GALLOPING OF TIME AND TECHNOLOGY HAVE IN TURN BANALIZED THE PERCEPTION WITH REGARD TO COLOR IMAGES



William Eggleston (American, born Memphis, Tennessee, 1939), "Memphis," 1965. Dye-transfer print, 17 11/6 X 12 in (45 X 30.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Promised Gift of Jade Lau

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William Eggleston (American, born Memphis, Tennessee, 1939), "Mississippi," circa 1971-74. Dye-transfer print, 17 11/6 X 12 in (45 X 30.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Promised Gift of Jade Lau

William Eggleston (American, born Memphis, Tennessee, 1939), "Memphis," circa 1971-74. Dye-transfer print, 17 11/6 X 12 in (45 X 30.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Promised Gift of Jade Lau

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range of platforms. The galloping of time and technology have also in turn banalized the perception with regard to color images.

Rosenheim calls it a culture of media transformation. “When the computer age dawned, it was inevitable that some time in future, the images would be exchanged electronically,” he said. “You don’t even have to print a photograph now. It’s like being your own agency, very much like a publisher of your own book, which was not possible a few decades ago.”

The question is no longer about what is an image and how it is being understood across language barriers, but how to manage the constant bombardment of these images, “to sift wheat from the chaff” as Rosenheim said. It is about building an audience while meeting the constantly changing demands of the medium.

“People often ask me if there is an increased audience for photography shows,” he said. “Yes, we are getting larger. And there are fewer people walking in with cameras. What really excites me is the fact that due to smart phones, photography has become truly widespread. There are countries that may not have fast rail or road systems but people have smart phones that they are using to make images and share globally. And our role as a museum is to build audiences for these images.” He added that the Met started showing fine art photography about 100 years ago, but the engagement with the medium and the audience has constantly evolved with each passing year.

A new look at Eggleston’s work, which has been shown by all major New York venues in some form or the other, then, is very much in the scheme of things. ▣

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