

WILLIAM EGGLESTON

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KBr

Fundación **MAPFRE**

Barcelona Photo Center

MYSTERY OF THE ORDINARY

In the evening, the shadows of the plants grow mysteriously along the wall of the house. In front of this theatre of shadows is a metallic-lilac Cadillac on whose lustrous paintwork dance the waning rays of the sun. The brick-covered window box, the shrubs planted inside it and the plaited straw shutters of the windows round off with their rusty tones this visual composition, from which at the same time emanates a mysterious calm.

When photography was in its infancy, the skies were grey. Art photography had to be done in black and white to be considered as such. Although the first colour film went on sale in 1935, until the 1980s colour photography remained the preserve of advertising. It was despised as vulgar, unartistic and commercial. As early as the 1960s, however, the photographers of the New Color Photography movement began to investigate the possibilities it offered. In 1976 John Szarkowski, director of the photography department at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, organised the first colour photography exhibition of the institution with seventy-five photographs by William Eggleston (Memphis, 1939), produced using the dye-transfer copying technique. This now legendary exhibition was accompanied by the first colour monograph by a photographer, *William Eggleston's Guide*, which has since been considered the reference basis for the study of the author.

Eggleston recognised early on the unmistakable power of colour and its painterly quality. Through this medium he learned that he could reproduce the motifs of everyday life and the simplest scenes and transform them into something else, turning the banal into the transcendent. A bouquet of blue flowers at the door of a house, a façade with coloured tiles, a ceiling painted red.... The very intensity of colour itself called for analysis, although Eggleston was not interested in revealing beauty within the everyday, but rather in bathing the trivial, such as food in the freezer, or ketchup bottles on a bar counter, in a cryptic and mysterious light: colour was not only used to imitate human vision. For the artist, colour photography was a

way of constantly verifying what was around him – what is around us – as if he could not rely solely on his gaze. These pictures are, in many cases, veritable compendiums of the history of American design, significantly related to the collective identity of post-war America. The images of gas stations, bars, hamburger joints, automobiles or motels that the photographer portrays evoke the unique character of the landscape of the American South and offer a sociological meditation on the way of life of its inhabitants. The artist's gaze is democratic, all the elements that organise the composition are of equal importance, and his images create a feeling of seeing "everything" at the same time.

His early work reflects the influence of Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson, two of the great photographers who gave narrative and documentary images the status of subject matter. Eggleston's early work was in black and white, but his use of colour quickly led him to establish a very different emphasis, alien to both Evans's emotional imagery and Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment". He did not ennoble what he depicted, nor was he interested in fixing moments in time. Rather, one might say that time had stood still long before he came along and took the picture. He was not interested in irony or complicity; what his images show is in fact a visual account of deterioration.

This exhibition is as much a monograph as it is a retrospective. It brings together several crucial elements of Eggleston's work, which he refined during his many stays in different countries around the world. Despite having achieved great success in the United States from the outset, his reception in Europe was slow, and this is the first exhibition of this kind to be held in Spain on the author.

Along with his major series, the show's itinerary includes for the first time several works from *The Outlands*. The exhibition, curated by Felix Hoffmann, has been organised by the C/O Berlin Foundation in collaboration with the Eggleston Artistic Trust and Fundación MAPFRE.

BEFORE COLOR

1963–1968

William Eggleston began his career in photography by investigating the possibilities of black and white, which he would later use alongside colour. This exhibition offers for the first time the possibility of comparing the results of both methods. The photographs presented here were taken between the mid and late 1960s, although the prints were made later. The black-and-white output was first published in 2010 by Steidl under the title *Before Color*.

LOS ALAMOS

1965–1974

“While driving through New Mexico in 1973, William Eggleston stopped at Los Alamos, the forested site of the atomic bomb’s clandestine development. He chose Los Alamos as the title for a sprawling body of work then nearing completion: approximately twenty-two hundred images photographed between 1965 and 1974. This title cloaks with some irony Eggleston’s ostensible subjects, yet acknowledges his belief in the aesthetic consequences of his private quest.

The photographs that make up this selection from *Los Alamos* begin at the beginning, with the first color photograph Eggleston made, of a grocery clerk pushing shopping carts; include the center of his world – Memphis and the Mississippi Delta; trace his travels west from New Orleans to Las Vegas and southern California; and end on the Santa Monica Pier.

That day in New Mexico, passing through the piñon woods of the Jemez Mountains, past the guard gates of the National Laboratory, Eggleston turned with a small smile and said, ‘You know, I’d like to have a secret lab like that myself’. It seems clear from the investigations collected in *Los Alamos* that he already had found the key to his proper place of research.”

Walter Hopps, introduction in *William Eggleston: Los Alamos*, Scalo, Zurich–Berlin–New York, 2003.

THE OUTLANDS

1969–1974

This project, published as a book for the first time in 2021, comprises a selection of Eggleston's early works. Among them are some of the colour slides that the artist made between 1969 and 1974 and which he showed to John Szarkowski, the director of the photography department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who used them as material for his 1976 *William Eggleston's Guide*. Forty-seven years later, Szarkowski's selection, at the time controversial and revolutionary, retains its revelatory power intact.

This work takes an in-depth look at the geography surrounding Memphis, Tennessee. The series begins almost at the same exact spot of the street outside Memphis where Eggleston made one of his most famous photographs in 1971 – an old white and green tricycle in front of a typical American suburban house – and continues along the back roads leading to the old Mississippi, where the artist spent his childhood, en route to New Orleans. What is revealed in *The Outlands* is a sublime use of pure colour, which seems to float over the forms captured by the camera, as if slightly detaching itself from them. At the time, Eggleston photographed a world that was already vanishing. Today, this latest selection of his colour work allows us to witness a great American artist in the process of discovering just how far his visual language could go, as well as providing us with an unforgettable document of the deepest American South in transition.