

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Kate Bush, "All Systems Go," ArtForum, October 2003.

## ALL SYSTEMS GO

KATE BUSH  
THE ART OF ROE ETHRIDGE



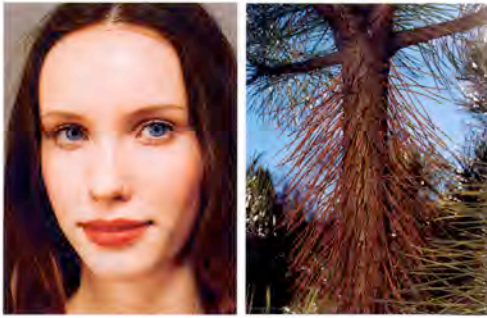
Spread: Roe Ethridge, *Pigeon*, 2001, color photograph, 30 x 38".  
Above: Roe Ethridge, *New York Water (White Pine Camp)*, 2000, color photograph, 30 x 50".

Next model Sabrina, all perfect skin and luscious lips, as luminous as the glossy surface of her photograph. "Party Til You Puke" rocker Andrew Wilkes-Krier, bloodied and haloed like some contemporary Antichrist. UPS deliveryman Fergus Rave perched on the back of his truck. A postcard-perfect moonlit forest. A young pine tree. Leigh Yeager. A holiday home in the Catskills. A cable TV repairman on the job.

Looking for the ties that connect the diverse photography of young American artist Roe Ethridge is a little like groping for Ariadne's mythical thread—until one understands that the seeking is essentially its point. As technically adept as a commercial photographer yet as

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Clockwise from above left: Roe Ethridge, *Next Model Sabrina*, 2006, color photograph, 30 x 24"; Roe Ethridge, *Young Pine (Winter)*, 1999, color photograph, 38 x 30"; Roe Ethridge, *Junction*, Atlanta, 2003, color photograph, 27 x 33".



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thoughtful as a Conceptualist about photography's role and meaning in the modern world, Ethridge believes the ubiquity of the photograph and the instantaneity of its transmission and reception in this age of increasing "ecstatic communication" is to be embraced rather than mourned. In his work there appears no cause and no ending, no discrimination between editorial and art, between document and construct, between technology and affect. "The Bow" was the title of his 2002 solo exhibition at Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York, and the image could serve as the leitmotiv of Ethridge's work: the world as a ribbon perpetually folding back on itself, in which a web of descriptions and digressions radiate out from every object and where the photographer's contribution is to bind together in provisional yet meaningful relation those—as Robert Bresson expressed it—"various bits of reality caught."

After earning a BFA at the Atlanta College of Art, where, like so many photography students in the '90s, he fell under the sway of the Düsseldorf school, Ethridge tried out a systematic approach, the cold, observational logic of which seemed to make sense to a young photographer growing up in the rational, corporate environment of a town like Atlanta. A series of carefully described pictures of grassy patches next to highways—near freeway exit ramps and on medians—ensued, in which a Becher-style methodology was married to New Topographic understatement. But the impulse to shape the world to a predetermined photographic order, a form of stable compactness, came to feel inadequate to him, in the face of the multiplicity of the photographable, the fluidity of the medium, the rapid rhythms of contemporary life, and the changing sphere of '90s photography. The desire grew to rattle the discipline, to "get the typologies wrong," as he says, to release himself into a more hyperactive form of production, which, without forsaking the concrete descriptive capabilities of photography, could also embrace its aleatory or involuntary possibilities—the natural "serendipity" of the medium, he calls it. "I like to keep the series short and linked," he says. "And then there are these one-offs—travel pictures, pictures from a job, pictures of food—that aren't part of a series but which become their own group."

First pursuing photography as an artistic practice and only later as a profession (his first commercial assignments came in 1998 in New York, where he's now based), Ethridge reversed the career development of his more established contemporaries Wolfgang Tillmans and Juergen Teller. Like them, however, he incorporates images born from a commercial context into his art, to the point where the boundary between high and low forms becomes increasingly diffuse and increasingly

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irrelevant. Art photographers have long had a relationship with commercial practice, but where the pattern is usually to underplay the non-art roots of their work in order to release it more fully into art, Ethridge is unusual in his enthusiasm for photography's double life, which distinguishes it from painting or sculpture. "New York is the Hollywood of print publishing," he says. "The status of photography is different. I see myself on both sides; there's a mutual attraction. Everything seems to end up in a magazine sooner or later." He's a throwback, perhaps, to an earlier history, particularly the decades of the 1920s and '30s, when "avant-garde artist" and "commercial photographer" were not viewed as incompatible positions, when figures like Kertesz, Moholy-Nagy, Paul Outerbridge, and Man Ray moved between art and advertising with equanimity and when avant-garde photography was as much formed by the languages and technological developments of the new commercial media as it was reflective on them. Ethridge, in keeping with the times, hesitates to make any avant-gardist claims for his photography, and while his experience in the commercial world injects his work with the slick of technical modernity, the affiliation is more important for him as a conceptual maneuver than as a formal one. Again, he apprehends the promiscuity and the elasticity of photography: its enviable ability to shift contexts without losing its legibility. He speaks of "the feeling of slippage in my work, the plastic capability of the image. It's the same image whether it's illustrating a text or has a caption, on the walls or on a bus stop. I like the fact that photography is ubiquitous and polymorphic, that it can be for the specialist or the dilettante or sometimes both at the same time." Hence, there is no contradiction in Ethridge's dramatic portrait of Andrew WK existing simultaneously as an album cover and an artwork, or in the evolution of an editorial assignment for the *New York Times Magazine* (to photograph the furniture designer Roy McMakin at work) into a forthcoming book, *The Jones's*, a long photo-essay on interior space and the American vernacular.

If commercial photography is about the stimulation of desire in the service of consumption, then Ethridge plays with this dynamic in two seemingly unrelated series: a group of effortlessly beautiful pastoral landscapes made in upstate New York, which he says



Roy Ethridge, *The Pink Bow*, 2002.  
color photograph, 24 x 30"

relates more to the imagery of covetable real estate than traditions of the Romantic or picturesque, and a sequence of portraits of young models (2000–2001). No system embodies the capitalist logic of perpetual cycles of novelty and obsolescence as much as the fashion industry, and Ethridge's stream of impossibly gorgeous pubescent faces captures the rapaciousness of the business's requirement for "new faces" while hinting at the models' own rapturous seduction of the camera in pursuit of a successful career. "What I was interested in was a kind of in-betweenness—in-between desires, ours and theirs, *Lolita*-ish." The narrative of seduction in Nabokov's novel twists and turns around the fact that while Humbert Humbert attempts to debauch *Lolita*, she manipulates him. And *Lolita*, who adores candy bars and jukeboxes, is a "disgustingly conventional little girl," Humbert realizes, even

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Excerpted from top left: *Ree Ethridge, Leigh Fregge, 2003, color photograph, 43 x 32"*  
*Ree Ethridge, Moon, 2003, color photograph, 50 x 43"*  
*Ree Ethridge, Pigeon, 2001, color photograph, 38 x 30"*  
*Ree Ethridge, Car Cannon, 2002, color photograph, 50 x 40"*

as he imagines her to be a seductive nymphet. The fashion photograph, too, with its manufactured femininities and faked perfections, manipulates us while we feverishly consume its spectacle. Ethridge's portraits are, cleverly, perfect and imperfect at the same time, in a way that makes us aware of the moment of our own seduction. These girls, with their dewy eyes, immaculate complexions, and fixed smiles, are unreal to the point of being Stepfordian, and yet closer inspection reveals that the perfect surface is flawed—a blob of congealed mascara, a smear of lip gloss, a slightly bloodshot eye. Fantasy subsides, and you're left looking at a teenager in a mask.

When Ethridge jettisoned a systematic approach to photographic depiction, paradoxically he freed himself to address the system as a subject in his art. He recognizes that the contemporary world is defined less by the objects it produces than by underlying networks and circuits, by the hyperkinetic systems of production and distribution that propel those objects out and around the world; in his view photography also is less a medium of fixed or static representation than a constantly motile carrier of information. For Ethridge, the exhibition itself becomes—in a way analogous to the pages of a magazine—a containing structure in which to temporarily map and order images in terms of their interrelationships rather than their singular meanings. This thinking was behind his teasing juxtaposition of shots of UPS couriers, the young models, and pine trees in a 2000 exhibition at Andrew Kreps. "UPS is important because of what happens today with catalogues," he says. "You put the clothes on the model, take the picture, produce the catalogue—presumably from pine trees—and mail it out. We order the clothes off the Internet, and it comes by UPS. Everything is working. Everything is involved in production and distribution. It's the natural order today." The theme of functioning interconnection resurfaces later in *Junction, Atlanta, 2003*, where the figure of the freeway interchange, seen from the air, is mapped out like some gigantic graphic flourish. An exurban site outside his native Atlanta, it is known as Spaghetti Junction, or, because of its frequent traffic snarls, Malfunction Junction, a dizzying nexus of routes and exits that swoop past one another in what once must have felt, in some near-distant past, a logical move on the part of the planners. Bathed in a light that causes stars to burst from the glinting glass and metal of the flowing traffic, this three-dimensional crossroads seems both modern and archaic, a monument to society's indomitable impulse to keep things moving.

The Bechers bequeathed to photography a form of restrained authorship based on the predetermined selection of strictly delimited, typological subjects in

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which meaning emerges from the description of differences observed among more or less similar things. By the early '80s, with the arrival of the Pictures generation and appropriationists such as Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, the possibilities for authorship were restricted even further: In a postmodern world supersaturated with imagery, the only conceivably radical act was to acknowledge the impossibility of photographic originality and to merely select and incorporate images that were already in circulation in the wider culture. The subject of photography shifted from the phenomenological world to the medium itself as a system of representation. For a photographer of Ethridge's generation, in a world ever more choked with ever faster-flowing imagery, the philosophical dilemma remains, but the strategy is different. In rehearsing photography's repertoire of subjects, genres, styles, and techniques—

rephotographs of professional astronomical pictures, Ethridge felt it was important that he author his own source images of the moon (which he did, from the roof of his home in Brooklyn, using an eight-inch Meade LX90 telescope), that he strive to make original photographs of an unoriginal subject. Ethridge's "moons" are then digitally repeated, twice or more, within the frame of a single photograph—rather like the sequential chronophotographs of Muybridge or Marey—in order to suggest the trajectory of the moon's movement across the night sky. "The moon moved through the frame in a perfectly straight line," Ethridge says. "It struck me as sort of ancient and invisible at the same time." Nineteenth-century photography's other great achievement was the documentation and analysis of bodies in motion. The *Pigeon* photographs, 2001–2002, relate back to Marey and his study of flying birds as

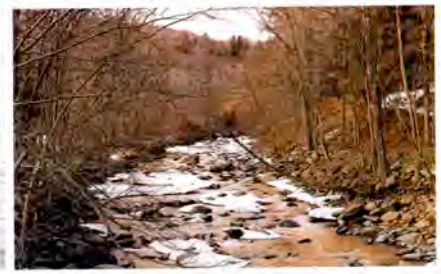
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astrophotography, motion photography, editorial and fashion photography, portraiture, and landscape, for example—Ethridge moves through photography's own internal "typologies" in a way that acknowledges the putative redundancy of the medium while simultaneously reclaiming a space for artistic maneuver. Ethridge sees reengaging with the range of subjects that now reside within the popular culture of photography as a conceptual gesture, a kind of post-appropriative act that recognizes the impossibility of absolute originality while still investing in photographic authorship. The act acknowledges art as one more system among many systems under capitalism, in which the dynamic of production and distribution is more meaningful, ultimately, than notions of innovation or transformation. As Ethridge expresses it: "Images are redundant. I am implicating myself as part of that redundancy."

As early as 1839, right at photography's inception, François Arago dreamed of using the new medium to penetrate the farthest reaches of the visible universe by photographing the moon (Daguerre took one that same year). Since then, the moon has become one of the most photographed of all subjects: a staple earner in picture libraries and image banks around the world, a stock image. For Ethridge, part of photography's fascination is that an image so ubiquitous, so redundant, can continue to have currency. Whereas Thomas Ruff's "*Sterne*" (Stars) series, 1989–92, is composed of

well as to popular wildlife photography (specifically to the work of Crawford H. Greenewalt, an amateur ornithologist who specialized in photographing hummingbirds against monochromatic backgrounds). A bird in flight is a mass of volatility, yet Ethridge's pigeons are still as statues, petrified in the arcing light of the flash that they trigger as they fly through a laser beam. Their beating wings are, in one instant, made monumental—as temporarily monumental and as eternally dynamic, that is, as the photograph itself. □

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Left: Roo Ethridge, *Untitled (Brooklyn)*, 2003, color photograph, 33 x 27". Right: Roo Ethridge, *New York Water (Catskills)*, 2001, color photograph, 32 x 50".