

Reeves, Emma. "Roe Ethridge," The Journal, Entry 23

ROE ETHRIDGE

INTERVIEW BY EMMA REEVES
SELF-PORTRAIT BY ROE ETHRIDGE

IT TOOK PHOTOGRAPHER ROE ETHRIDGE SEVERAL MONTHS OF CONSTANT REJECTING, REINSTATING AND REARRANGING TO FINALIZE THE FOLLOWING SEQUENCE OF IMAGES. FROM PRODUCING HIS FIRST SELF-PUBLISHED BOOKS TO HAVING HIS WORK FEATURED IN THE WHITNEY BIENNIAL, ETHRIDGE HAS ALWAYS LOVED AND LABORED OVER THE JUXTAPOSITION OF IMAGES, A CENTRAL ISSUE IN HIS WORK. FOR *THE JOURNAL*, WHILE GOING ON HOLIDAY AND MOVING TO A NEW STUDIO, HE PRODUCED A BODY OF WORK BY CREATING NEW IMAGES AND RE-EVALUATING UNPUBLISHED ONES FROM HIS ARCHIVES.

I get the feeling that you don't necessarily like being interviewed that much. Is that because you think that people should let the work speak for itself?

No. I think that people should speak for their work! I am just not very good at it. I agonize over it. But I think that this interview process will be easier than writing something in response to an e-mail interview.

I notice that there has been quite a bit written about your work. It must be odd to read articles where people make assumptions about your influences. Someone said that your photos looked like Vermeer.

Did someone say that? Wow, that's nice.

Yes! But unless you have specifically sited your influences, isn't it weird to read things people say?

The funny thing is that my influences are always changing, they are not set.

Do you have a stock of images, a repertoire that you pay homage to?

Yes, there are certain things: from the compositional touchstones of Outerbridge, palette considerations, anything from Dutch masters, a dusty painterly palette... to Eggleston, that early color photography...

But that wasn't a specific choice was it? That was a by-product of the quality of the film. It wasn't him creating it.

Absolutely. And the same goes for the output, whoever is printing Egglestons prints now is also changing the way that they look.

It's not empirical, now, is it? Especially with digital. With digital you are the master creator on that.

Yes, these shots here in the portfolio are shot with a Mark II, which used to be the standard digital camera, using a 400mm lens, kind of like a sports photography lens. As you may also have read, I really like specialized equipment.

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Yes, I know that you used a telescope for the photographs you took of the moon. You include one in this portfolio.

Yes, it was essentially a 2000mm lens on a 6x7 camera. But this is something that is easy to travel with. Without this lens, there is no way I could make an image like the ones in this piece of the sun going down. And just to fuck with the pre-sets that digital gives you, I used a star filter to give it that extra little churchy glow.

It does look religious! You can just see the words "See the Holy Light" printed on the bottom right!

Yes, you nailed it there! I spent the better part of my youth in Methodist Youth Fellowship, we went to Sunday school, and church every Sunday. In the sanctuary there were no images. The stained glass was abstract, everything was wood panels and austere. But in Sunday school rooms or Youth Fellowship rooms there would be images like this, inspirational stock photos with Bible verses on the image. You don't realize until after you have taken the picture and you think, "Oh God! that looks like that Sunday school poster!"

How about your still life with skull? It looks like a *memento mori*.

"Death of the Skull" maybe. I am a little tired of the skull in art, but I couldn't resist this. I did turn it upside down as a desperate attempt to do something else with it. There are these funny vessels here, Japanese pottery and the skull itself. And also this rock, I guess somebody put it there, a reef rock that has salt spears shooting out. [This image was edited out of the final portfolio.]

How far does it go, your setting up of the image for these kinds of *tableaux*?

If it is a still life situation I almost always have to mess with it.

Are you enhancing something that exists already or actually starting from scratch, getting people to find props, building sets?

I used to do that when I first got out of art school, trying to make these *tableaux* that were fully realized from a sketch book and a script, like "we need plaid wallpaper, a mirror and a guy holding eye drops!" That was one of the scenarios. So I built this thing in the studio and it took a long time and I was under the influence of Jeff Wall, Greg Crewsdon—you know, that kind of stuff. It is hard to do by yourself, you really need some specialists, set-builders. I didn't have the follow-through for that. Or the patience. In fact, I didn't even have that ability! Especially when you are shooting with the 4x5, you really see everything and that was before everybody was into re-touching. Eventually I was able to liberate myself from the stranglehold of the *tableau* and start taking pictures of things in situ.

A lot of your work is details of things, closing in on something that exists naturally so, in a way, you are still recomposing it by the way you frame it.

Yes, that's right. Just like with the church poster theme. I have recognized this as something I enjoy and can do, and something that is a natural extension of the process of the large format, too.

Let's look at the *journal* portfolio again.

Yes, in the series of sunset images, there are these little sequential, temporal things happening with the sunset, I like the first two because they are a pair and the next two because they are a pair, too. Do you see that little airplane there coming towards you in one of them? I dropped that off the edge there just to fuck up the whole pair. This is the first 10 pages—it's like a flick book. There was another image, another plane that I took out because it seemed too much. On the page it is back to back, they are literally touching, another kind of juxtaposition. [In the final printed portfolio Roe has removed several more of the sunset images.]

This is a process you enjoy.

Oh yes! Controlling the layout, or manipulating or guiding the layout, has become a crucial part of the work for me. It is another kind of composition. Working with such generic subject matter it helps to juxtapose it. People might not get it unless it has this kind of rhythm!

Do you get that kind of freedom when you do editorial work?
Not usually.

But you're not moving away from editorial photography. It seems that you see the validity in it.

For sure. Editorial work bumps you off of your preconceived idea of place or an over-determined idea of say, Rockaway Beach. I said [to an editor] that I was interested in coastal locations and then I was sent to Cumberland Island and Mumbai [on assignment]. I would never have put that together! There is a boat picture in the Whitney at the moment that was shot through the window in the Taj Mahal Hotel where [*The New York Times*] put us up. It is a tourist boat that the Indians on holiday use to visit these islands. It was a double whammy: the tourists in the Taj Mahal watching the tourists in the harbour. In a case like this, for *the journal*, I kept coming back to the name "the journal." It seemed to allow me to be somewhat more diaristic, the project could be open in this way.

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That's funny because that is exactly what Juergen Teller said. He kept thinking about his work for the magazine as being a "journal." Let's look at more images in the sequence.

This is early on in the layout, and there are a couple of other things that I have to shoot. There is a plan for a still life here, a picture of another picture. It is someone else's picture. There is a grocery store in Williamsburg called Tops, and if you go in there is a grid of 50 grocery still lifes of products that are on sale for two or five dollars or whatever. The woman who works there as the manager does all the photography herself. She's an amateur photographer and they are really amazing! There is an artistry to them. I have admired them for a long time. They are not just cut and dried things on white pieces of paper, they are seasonal indicators. But it is very vernacular and the outputs are oversaturated Epson prints, made at home. I thought, well maybe I could get her to set something up for me. I met her and talked to her. I did an earlier series of catalogue photos, a similar kind of vernacular still life photography, and laid them on lightboxes—the series is in my book *Spare Bedroom*. So the plan is to do something similar, but instead of the print being laid on a lightbox it will be taped to that white plastic lattice stuff that is so ubiquitous. When the light comes through, my hope is that it will become very optical, a way of transforming this thing in a loving way.

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Vernacular imagery is everywhere.

I am interested in these categories of images, a specialized kind of image-making, like the pigeons in flight or the moons. Through this you find freaks, people who are so into specialist amateur photography.

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A lot of it is unchampioned.

Yes! Because so much is horrible. In fact, when I was growing up my dad was an amateur photographer. He photographed "pretty ladies" and fireworks. He won second place at the county fair for some fireworks pictures. Oh, and dilapidated barns.

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William Christenberry photographed dilapidated barns too.

Yes, but Christenberry's images looked like artwork! My dad's work is sentimental.

Sentimental? Is that something you are afraid of?

I can't say that it is terrifying to me. It is employed passive-aggressively. It inundated my life growing up in the South. The house that I grew up in had been decorated by this Southern interior decorator, so every surface was covered in pattern. It was so new that it wasn't even about nostalgia, it was terrifying. My dad, being the sort of photographer he was—pretty ladies, sunsets, his kids—he wanted to know how to operate the machinery. A really weird thing happened this past weekend. My parents were in town, up from Atlanta to see the baby, and we were looking through my book *Rockaway, NY*. There is a picture in there of a girl untying her bikini top and my mom was like, "Oh, that is just like your picture, Roy!" That's my dad's name, Roy. And I was like, "What picture?!" He explained that he was doing a picture with a model and he had asked her if she would untie her top and she started untying her top! So I must have seen the photo growing up, but I don't remember it. It was really remarkable. It is also a continuing process of discovery. I find that I take a picture and my dad says, "Oh, that's the same as mine!"

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I guess, in a way, you are exploring clichés. And your father, as an amateur photographer, will have wittingly or unwittingly explored the same sort of clichés.

Yes, this is true. But is it my investigation of clichés that is guiding this correspondence between our photos? Or am I being influenced by the memory of my father's pictures?

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So in a way it is an evolution, a regeneration of your own images?

For the past few years I have been thinking about this process in certain terms. I have been keeping it to myself because I couldn't own up to the word, but I consider it a fugue. A fugue is a type of composition—Bach has become synonymous with it, and there is the Glenn Gould "Goldberg Variations," a contemporary revisiting of it. It is very formal and seems a bit like an exercise, but actually it's extremely improvisational. It is a system that necessitates improvisation. The way I heard about the word is in this Walker Percy book, *The Last Gentleman*. The main character is from the South and moves to New York. He has a series of breakdowns and goes into a "fugue state," an antiquated term for mania and disassociation from reality. I read this in 1999 or 2000 and I thought that this is exactly what I want to do with images in terms of sequencing. At that point photo books weren't totally ubiquitous like they are now, so it would have been more of a dream to be able to do 32 pages in a magazine like *the journal*.

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Your first books were things that you produced yourself. You didn't have a publisher, did you?

No. That was the goal. Once I started thinking that I couldn't get fully invested in competing with painting by making giant mural prints and that I wasn't interested in adhering to the typological systematic, which I was too hyperactive for, I needed to be confused and find new things, or at least be lost and find myself somewhere else.

And I presume that if one of the only things you do in order to understand your own process is gallery shows, it must get frustrating?

Yes! Plus, with photography you can have more or less the same show in the two or three places. It feels like there is a lot more on the line with a book, you know. It has posterity and it costs a lot of money, especially if you are producing them yourself!

How many copies did you produce of the first books?

Spare Bedroom was an edition of 1,000. And *Orange Grove* is a 16-pager, an appendix to the Basel "Statements" show in 2004. I think we did 2,000 of those. *County Line* was pretty much a straight catalogue for ICA Boston and my galleries, Andrew Kreps and Greengrass in London. Those were all self-published, and there was also *Apple and Cigarettes* that Gagolian Gallery published.

Now that you are working with Steidl, does it feel different?

Well, the stress of self-publishing probably takes years off your life! A lot of the prints in *Rockaway, NY* are so much nicer than they could ever be as C-prints! Whatever the secret formula is, it really works. I don't know how Steidl does it.

Are there more books coming?

Yes, that is the plan. I have been focusing on this piece for *the journal*, which is like a sketchbook. We are doing the interview now, but I still haven't figured out the sequence of the images at all.

Why don't we do another interview then, a follow-up when you have finalized the portfolio? Yes, I like that. It is like that durational idea, the temporal side of things.

I am sure that many things will change.

At the moment my working title is something that I haven't said out loud to anyone but my wife. Let's see... It is "The Rising, Falling and Sour Mash." That's it. I was telling you about the fugue before. A fugue is generally comprised of short pieces of music. The basic idea is that you have a sequence of notes that you play, and the next piece will take that sequence of notes and perhaps invert it from the middle, and the middle notes will be on the end and so on. So you have these variations. The really masterful thing that Bach does is he overlaps so you have these competing sequences that harmonize and de-harmonize. I think a lot of artists work in this way naturally. It creates a sort of internal infiniteness. It is a little bit daunting to try to control, but maybe that is the challenge. I was thinking about it when I was getting a whiskey the other night. There's this explanation of sour mash, a process of making whiskey. What they do is they take the dregs of one cask and put them into the next one, so that it becomes a signature flavor. It's like the way a fugue works. Somebody told me that baguettes are so good in Paris because they use the same yeast over and over—it is 400-year-old yeast. They've kept it for so long.

Like it's been re-invested.

Yes, and some of the images in this story will be like sour mash. This gradient image is the cover of *Rockaway, NY*. And like any other amateur photographer, I have been shooting cloud pictures for years and those are here, too.

It is also the sour mash of your father isn't it?

Yes! Totally. The sour mash of my dad!

Are these black and white pictures shot out of a window also part of a series?

Yes. I have recently moved into a new studio and these are a view from the window, looking at the Williamsburg Bridge and my bank. They're scanned Polaroids. I have really been enjoying doing these.

What about the fact that Polaroid cameras and film have been discontinued?

Well, now I have an excuse for doing it over and over, until it runs out. Let's ride it out to the end. That's another thing that I find interesting: the relic, something becoming a relic. The whole street in Rockaway where our house is is surrounded by a four-lane highway and all this urban planning, and the house is becoming a relic. It kind of feels like an accurate reflection of what's happening. Whether it is Polaroid or America, Americana. Innocence lost!

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Second Interview - 10 days later

It seems like you have changed the layout so many times. How many sequences of images have you created in order to get to the final sequence in *the journal*?

There are 18 variations, or rather, attempts.

Is it the introduction of new images that knocks others out of the layout?

I think that with this project I was grappling with trying to establish some sense of continuity without knowing what that is, thinking that maybe I will find that thing I am looking for in the structure. Once we knew we were going to shoot these still lifes, then I knew more. Then in the midst of this process, around version 10, one of the owners of Marlow and Sons Restaurant here in Williamsburg mentioned an image that I had taken for him of oysters.

Did the inclusion of that image make you review the skull image we talked about, the one that is no longer in this sequence?

I showed it to a friend of mine and he wasn't sure. I think it also had to do with the ubiquity of the skull iconography, which we talked about before. It became a distraction.

Did the moon image replace it?

I suppose that something like the moon is frequently visited iconography for me anyway. This one is recovered from the archive. It is the very first print I made from those moon pictures and I think it's the best one. I don't know why I couldn't see that before.

Is it a cyclical thing then? Creating something new and then also returning to the first of something? Is that part of your fugue?

I suppose so. It's more like that is a part of my work and it makes sense to refer to it in terms of a fugue.

Tell me about the most recent images.

The baby picture is recent. It is really cute. She is looking a little cross-eyed with a gecko hand. That was on the plane. The port is St. Martin, shot from the plane. And this is in Canada, on a part of the Columbia River that is more like a lake. A frozen marina. I really liked it as a set-up for the next image that followed. It is re-photographed photo. As I told you, when I was working on the Rockaway book, I kept finding that I had too many double-page spreads and I wanted to have more things page-right. This became the solution, putting two pictures in one. For so much of the stuff, even though there are systematic things that help determine the logic or the sequence of the pictures, it still comes down to a feeling. You are still making decisions, your subjectivity comes into it and it has to feel right. You can't just be abiding this systematic logic all the time.

Why did you remove some of the sunsets from the piece?

I wanted to see where I could reduce things. I remember telling you about working with pairs. The pair theme was, in my mind anyway, concise. After that it felt like I could move on to *the journal* part of it, the travel/document/part of it. So there are two blank pages for a chapter break. Do you think that *the journal* will be OK with printing two blank pages?

I would imagine so. They respect the contributors' layouts at *the journal*.

There are always these different rationales, things that seem reasonable to me. As I was going through it, I was questioning the content of the image, the iconography—what is this picture doing next to this other picture? Eventually it came to a place where a few things were just set, they were in the right place, and I filled in things around them. Then one of the late discoveries was putting things together in the second section by color—a warm to cool gradient, if you like. And yesterday I thought, now that I have had a chance to sit with that, I need to switch a few images. So I warmed up some areas and cooled down others.

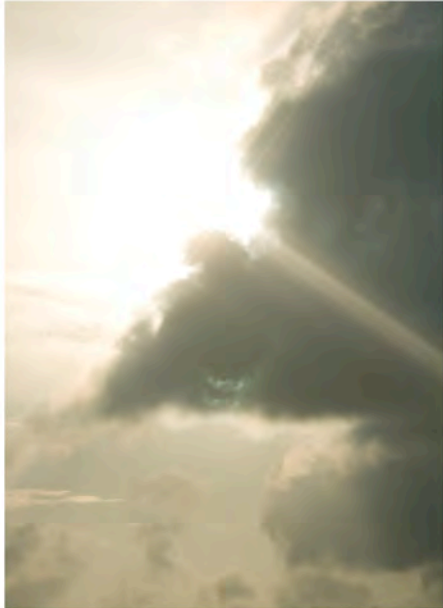
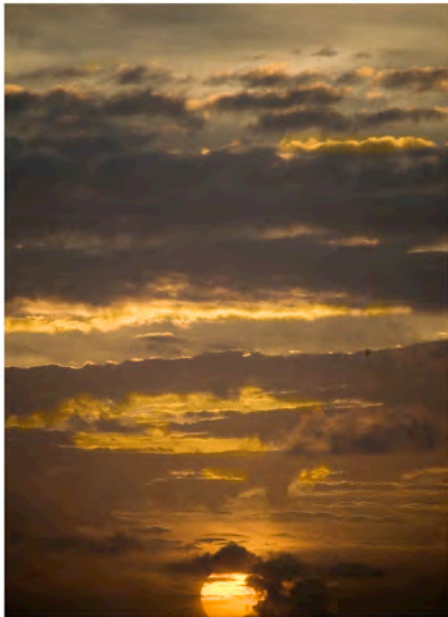
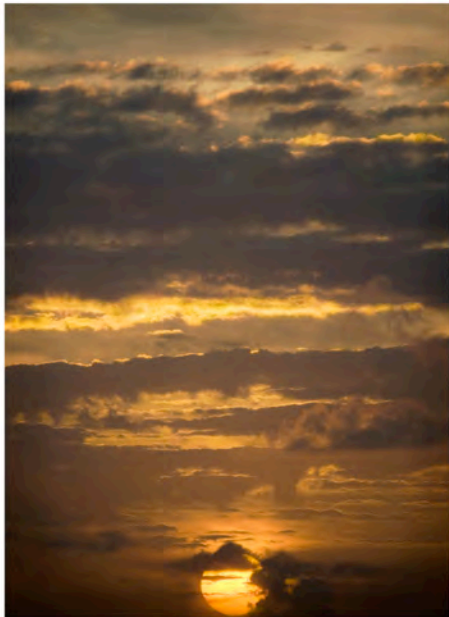
Are you still photographing this view from your window?

Yes. Besides it being black and white and a Polaroid, it was also one of the first pictures we took here, so it is kind of like an artifact.

Do you get the sense that until things are published, they do not exist?

No, they do exist. But I think it is when they get sequenced that they have purpose.

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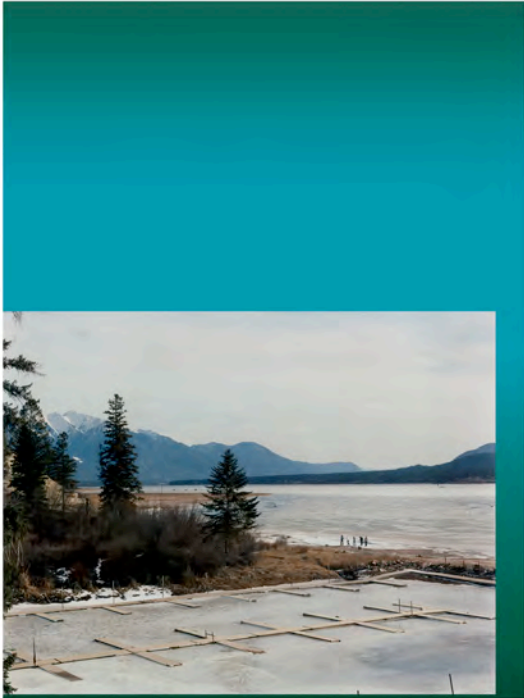
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