

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Gil Blank, "Roe Ethridge: Nice Machine," Whitewall, 2008.

## ROE ETHRIDGE: NICE MACHINE

BY GIL BLANK

YOU HAVE TO FEEL JEFF WALL'S PAIN WHEN HE laments, speaking of the art of the last quarter century, that "everything is possible, everything is great." His reading can be extended to include not only the perceived sunsetting of Modernism, but also its subsequent and predominantly rhetorical critiques, as both have been met with an opening of floodgates. This is a time — however fleeting it might eventually come to be seen in retrospect, as will any sunset euphoria — during which any degree of personal obsession is indulged as a valid indicator of meaning, or as sufficient material for the construction of a universe, so long as the production values involved are justifiably awe-inspiring.

Yet if nothing is forbidden, neither is any outcome guaranteed. Rather than sanctioning total abandon, Wall's anxiety could be understood as insisting on the disenchanting determination to persist in the creation of a body of work at once engaged with the social reality of the time — the medium of photography as such being inherently representational — yet *sui generis* in its greater structure as an oeuvre. If individual examples of photographic depiction seem exhausted, there is yet the possibility that a nimble rearticulation of the same material's breadth might instead yield a viable enactment of one unique model — indeed, only one of a conceivably infinite variation — of experience's naturally fractious and nonlinear character.

So it is that if you never experience much of a barrier-to-entry to a Roe Ethridge photograph by itself — if you not only sense its instantaneous visual "hit," but then, too, recognize its roots, however ambiguous, in the artifacts of the wider common culture — you might still wonder what exactly he intends by the larger accumulation of them in the magazine stories and personally assembled books he's known for. Viewed in succession, Ethridge's images function according to neither the classical formulation of the photo series as journalistic essay, nor Conceptualism's alternate inversion of seriality as antiformal evacuation. Instead, they loosely coalesce into something like a makeshift code, or the spasmodic transmissions from a broken-down satellite, tumbling anarchically off course and into empty space — *Is anyone out there?*

Rockaway, NY, Ethridge's latest book and his first published by Steidl, takes as its namesake the denuded town-as-reliquary of Robert Moses' derailed ambitions for the modern urban utopia. Rockaway is also the stand-in for heroic failings and foreclosed possibilities: Its Shore Front Parkway — the name of which is a contradiction as indicative of the bureaucratic effort at construction as the road it identifies — was part of Moses' grand technocratic design to unify and mobilize all usable space on Long Island. The Parkway, its municipal supporting funds long since terminated and its length forever truncated to a total of twenty-seven hundred yards, was soon enough renamed by locals with a resonance equally totemic, if somewhat less deterministic, as "The Road to Nowhere." It lies a few blocks south of the house Ethridge rents and often photographs from. He talks of Rockaway as "a place that seems a bit of a border town: loose zoning laws, weird crimes, housing projects, and a generally sketchy vibe." In the larger repertoire of photographic types, Rockaway is far shy of bearing the mantle of the essentializing landscape paradigm. It is not a place so much as a placeholder, an interstitial place-of-no-place.

Just as certainty is never fully achieved, neither is its visual representation, and you can suss Ethridge's natural inclination toward indicators of transition across the range of his work. His Polaroids, for example, function as subsets of both photographic technique and degrees of flux. Most anyone can understand that sense of desire that comes with waiting for a Polaroid's image to chemically form in your hands — the rubbing, the waving, the blowing on that small bit of plastic, anything to make the wanted projection materialize as you so need it to do. A tangential subject in these images becomes that state of desire itself, as Ethridge first makes a digital scan of a unique Polaroid, then reprints it at a larger size as a standard photographic print, and in multiple. Any pretense that the Polaroid may have suggested about its physical status as a unique or genuine aspect of knowledge is vacated. Reprinted and redistributed yet again in a different form, such as Ethridge's book, or this magazine, the image, its attendant memory, and its meaning are repeatedly dislocated and atomized in a way that is uncannily most like the dynamic mental processes by which we as humans unmake (or, just as easily, resynthesize) the fabric of our experience.

The anomie intrinsic to photographic depiction, in which any recognizable experience can be separated by an infinitely thin margin from its meaning or fixity, then, makes everything so depicted into a readymade. Consider likewise that professional models are human readymades, machines for splitting our psychic perceptions of ourselves. Models (as opposed to people, including those who on certain days might work as models) exist to be photographed, transfixed in mute stasis, and as such are vehicles of intentional dissonance. (Desirable as this dissonance is intended to be, it follows that the model-viewer relationship is fundamentally sadomasochistic.)

Another doubling-and-splitting thus occurs, similar to that of the Polaroid re-photographs, in Ethridge's practice of using pictures of professional models interchangeably with pictures of other types of people (or perhaps even tripling, or quadrupling: One such person-type Ethridge consistently photographs happens to be his wife, whom he also photographed during a period in her previous job as a professional model, including one such image of her holding a Polaroid camera, and so on, and so on). The cognitive instability of any subject when rendered photographically is compounded by its conflation with similar and arbitrary subjects, by the splicing of person with model and with wife, not to mention with packaged fruit and middle-class housing. A normative function of exchange is induced among phantom visual indicators, cut free of their conditioned meanings: workers and sharks, sharks and the boat they came in on, an apple and cigarettes, and the mail-order catalogues that prefigured your desire for them all to begin with.

The aleatory totality of Ethridge's oeuvre becomes an engine for un-knowing, and by dint of necessary self-reliance when facing down that void, an engine for becoming. That Ethridge takes as a primary subject of his exercise the continually shifting states of existence, correlated photographically as transition, reinforces the study of his oeuvre as a modeling of cognition and a proving ground for a disillusioned will to independence. To view the pictures — to participate in the real-time inductive orchestration of their meaning for yourself — is to be part of a continually renewed undertaking not dissimilar from that which Ethridge sets up as both the ongoing task and simultaneous depiction of his own life-process.

Rockaway, NY will be published by Steidl/Mock in 2008.

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