

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Amy Ontiveros, "In Conversation: Roe Ethridge," The Brooklyn Rail, April 1, 2017

INCONVERSATION

ROE ETHRIDGE with Amy Ontiveros

There's an ineffable freight to the irresistible mastery of Roe Ethridge, whose twenty years in the public eye have afforded constellations of the most seemingly unrelated and pensively lush orchestrations, delivered with irony, buoyancy, sentiment, and transparency. The balance he's struck between commercial and art worlds has granted both fluidity and unexpected challenges that lift and shift the images we understand as being incestuously born from two who are one. Born and raised in America.

In the wake of his major survey at Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati (*Roe Ethridge: Nearest Neighbor*, October 7, 2016 – March 12, 2017), and his sixth exhibition at Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York (*Roe Ethridge: American Spirit*, February 23 – April 8, 2017), Ethridge is in the midst of what he described to me as his "super synthesis," a post-retrospective blaze. Through lines, sight lines, and lifelines emerged among the sixty-five judiciously selected works, tracing back to the late '90s, that comprise his first solo museum show in the U.S, and that according to Ethridge, fueled the matrix concentrate currently on view at Andrew Kreps. In the gallery, thematic hues familiarly differ from image to image—a pixelated flight of ten emoticon-esque basketballs against a turquoise background; a Southern belle in billowing silk politely grasping her fingers, beaming; a soft-focused outlook over the pine covered Rockies—yet, the light of two decades stealing into *American Spirit* casts a new tone, so subtle it may seem to exist only in the mood of the viewer. There's an optimistic warmth that enwraps the almost fractal Pic n' Clips—



Roe Ethridge, *Refrigerator*, 1999. C-print. 30 x 24 inches. Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Ethridge's newest series—that expose not only his temperament or vision, but also his being in new ways. They embark on embodiment—of personal history—and environment—in which multiplied narratives operate—in an almost chance operation play.

Walking with me through *American Spirit*—retold as pointing to cigarettes, Alfred Stieglitz, our contemporary moment—Ethridge talks about aesthetic guidance, learning to dribble between his legs, and the pleasure of delving into the dumb, impossible center of things.

Amy Ontiveros (Rail): I've been thinking about this show and your work in relation to the peripheral.

Roe Ethridge: I was just saying that in a meeting today when I was explaining the Pic n' Clips to some people at Tiffany's! But go on!

Rail: No, you go on! And I'll find something I want to read to you.

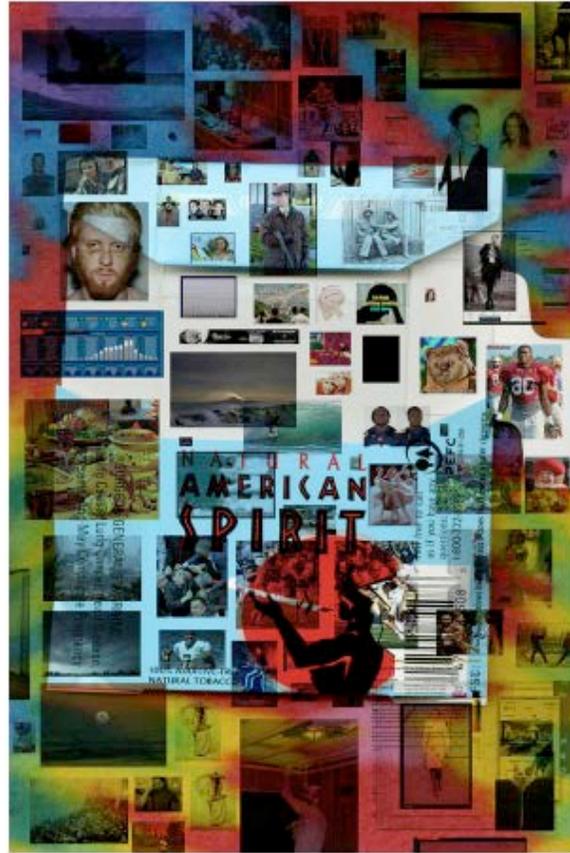
Ethridge: I had never said the word periphery before, but it just came to me as I was speaking about how the works got started. The process of telling Josef [Roe's assistant] at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, "There are 1,200 pictures, put them on twelve panels, and do it by the end of the day. Just fill those suckers up." And that way it wouldn't be about trying to make something aesthetic, it would just be like GO. It's like Sol LeWitt giving instructions, but for a *random* result—intentional, but random. But it's not completely random, because the images are already organized into these folders I keep; it's like my mom's coupon drawer—out-of-date inventory—but it's all selected by me, or in the case of the coupon drawer, by my mother. Whether they get used or not is not the point; it's the point that she picked them and put them somewhere. There are thousands of little pictures of pork loin, or cans of beans, and the coupons aren't even good anymore. But they're still in there.

Rail: And there's a system too I imagine.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Ethridge: There are multiple systems! With these, I just started talking about them as these peripheral things, like works in progress, or mistakes that get made. Like the portrait of Larry [Gagosian], the reason it's in the Pic folder isn't because it's a portrait of Larry, but because it's a portrait of Larry that somehow got fucked up. It has this little pixel blur on it that was an accident, and usually if you're a tidy photographer, you throw that one in the garbage to save space for other things, but it was too good. So I put it in the Pic folder as a way to put it away. Half of the pictures in these things are from commercial works, some of them are utter failures that never saw the wall, never got printed, and some of them I just loved. Some of them are my kids' drawings.



Roe Ethridge, *Pic n' Clip 9*, 2017. Dye sublimation print on dibond. 72 × 48 inches. Edition 1 of 5, with 2 APs. Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

After Cincinnati, and seeing *Refrigerator* (1999) with the vernacular photos on it next to the model prints grid, I felt like, fuck yeah dude—there is some reason here, aesthetic guidance. It's not just random. There's a trajectory that connects those works. So these Pic n' clips are like peripheral inventory, or a peripheral autobiography.

Rail: Incredible how things digest over time, lay stagnant, and are channeled in these unexpected moments.

Ethridge: I've been thinking a lot about this metaphor of the earthquake recently, because of all of the wholistic changes that have happened in my life. There's the incremental motion that you don't see for years. Like with an earthquake, there are plates pushing against each other, and then they pop, and there's a six-inch gap in the sidewalk all of sudden, and you're like, 'Holy shit, that really is crazy how that happened.' But really it's been happening for a long time.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Rail: It's subterranean. I want to read you this passage I've kept in my peripheral, and that despite my so-far futile search for the author, is maybe as poetic here as it is anonymous:

There is a need for the peripheral to witness relationships between two elements. Two jets passing in the sky, their proximity strikes me, but as they move away from one another, it's difficult to see their relationship with one another in the same frame. To move between them describes only a conceptual relationship. We must widen our peripheral and focus not so intently to be able to see how things engage with one another as being the most important example of our existence.

Ethridge: Wow, that is fucking heavy.

Rail: It is! That there is activity happening outside of our frame of vision that we are actively engaging with, whether consciously or not, I think is meaningful here. Can you tell me about the architecture of the rooms in Cincinnati, and your thinking about sight lines? And also how that manifested here at the gallery?

Ethridge: In Cincinnati, sight line was one of the main buzzwords. There, how you enter and exit these rooms felt so important; and it wasn't about the typical notion of flow. I wanted the container. Here at the gallery, for example, I wanted the experience of these three images together, but when I tried putting all three in one room, it became this sort of ghetto cul-de-sac.

Rail: When we engage with a specific sight line, maybe the peripheral is still a part of your visual experience, and as you change your position, you're always looking within that specific context.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Installation view: *Roe Ethridge, American Spirit*. Andrew Kreps Gallery, February 23 - April 8, 2017.

Ethridge: That's so rad. Makes me think about the musical aspect of it. I've often referred to my work as a fugue with overlapping voices, or in the case of Bach's Goldberg Variations, they're like a teaching tool in a way, so that you can learn how to invert a line of music, or play it backwards. It's like bilateral thinking, when you're using both hands that are playing different things. There is this randomness and chance, where notes are harmonious and disharmonious at the same time. So I've loved that metaphor for what I get off on in terms of putting pictures together, but more and more there's a sound that they make together, and having them in a room is like containing those sounds.

Installing these shows, I would square up on these works, but you're right, I *am* getting it all in there. I guess because they are American enough, or they hold you off enough, or are depersonalize enough, you're maybe allowed to take in the peripheral. Like the early REM albums where you couldn't really hear what Michael Stipe was saying, because it's kind of buried in the music. It's like a time-release vitamin—you're not going to get it all at once. That's a goal for sure. But you have to process over time. Time is the gift.

Rail: Are politics present in this space, in your space?

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Amy Ontiveros, "In Conversation: Roe Ethridge," The Brooklyn Rail, April 1, 2017

Ethridge: For sure! I would say that politics were always part of it, but it was more like reconciling with the fact that my identity was generic: a Southern, suburban middle-class white male. When I went to school, identity politics were such a prevalent part of that environment that it forced me to reflect on who I am, and drove me towards thinking, maybe it's an American thing, or, maybe it's a current thing. But my notion of identity brought me home to the suburbs—the ahistorical places that were so cookie-cutter like, but were the place of identity too. Or the resistance to one. What home meant was a repressive, methodist, sort of right-in-the-middle life. Everything right down the middle. So I was kind of reconciling with that, with this feeling of: I'm a crazy rebel artist and no one can tell me what to do. But I also don't want to ruin my family's reputation, you know, wrecking the car, which I did many times. I was the problem and the solution. But, I think that is a tale that many people could tell, whether they're middle-class suburban people, or anyone. If you act right, everything's fine.



Roe Ethridge, *Model Prints and Pickles and Roe*, 2014.
Dye sublimation print on aluminum. 49 1/2 × 33 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

Rail: People have referred to some of your recent works, specifically here with the Pic n' Clips, as collage. How does that term resonate with you?

Ethridge: It doesn't really hit the right spot for me, but I have heard that from several people I respect. I don't know if it's collage. I feel like it's montage, but in a kind of ecstatic digital Photoshop world. Montage has been a trajectory in the work since, you could say, the refrigerator photo from '99. It's *not* a collage; it has randomness and intent, but is only something that could only happen over time. It couldn't exist with a singular voice, and each element has its space—unless it *doesn't*.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Amy Ontiveros, "In Conversation: Roe Ethridge," The Brooklyn Rail, April 1, 2017

Rail: I'm thinking of Jean Arps's collages from the early 1900s.

Ethridge: The chance operation, dropped paper works? I'm a fan of those.

Rail: Exactly. For me, generally collage is defined by an intention to create a new whole based on individual elements, but in your works there's also an equity and importance of the individual elements, and of the unanticipated relationships. For instance, I'm not looking at this only as a forest; it's also all about the trees. *Is there a whole you're consciously creating?*

Ethridge: I guess what happens a lot with things that I like is that they have understood parts—like talking about language, you see the T but you don't say the T. Or a silent GH. To me, the whole spreads into a feeling, or mood, or spirit. You sense it, but it's not reasonable, and it's not a thing to figure out.

Nick Guagnini recommended reading R.D. Laing, a psychiatrist and poet from the 60s. It's prosaic, *really* ordinary sounding, but also one of those things that as soon as you read it, you *know*. In the same way, if you try to remember the first time you saw nature, it wasn't like, "What is this?" You knew... It's already in you.

Rail: Who was it that said nature is the only true model of good sense? To segue, you played football... Thinking about athletes' bodies, you work so hard to learn to operate so many parts of your machine unconsciously. Thinking about this moment as a reflective time for you, do you see yourself now operating in new or different ways? Anything that is now second nature, or has opened up realms you couldn't access before?

Ethridge: I've honestly thought a lot about these YouTube videos of Steph Curry practicing like a motherfucker. He's dribbling two balls, and you know how hard it is to do that, but he's doing it with an almost zen approach—he's not sweating. He's in another place.

Buddhists talk about practice. I don't really like the word in relation to artists, but I can say, as a commercial photographer, there's something that makes sense about it. These repetitive things that you do over and over again. I used to feel like I was taking days off of my life. It was so scary, so stressful; I felt so completely overwhelmed. You could ask most commercial photographers, Do you ever get nervous? And probably some say no, but some I've heard stories from, some big-time commercial photographers, would go puke in the bathroom. It's a performance. And it's not pass or fail, it's survive or fail. Sometimes you win and

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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get a great picture. It takes so much just to get it done, it's so fucking hard, and then all of a sudden something changes and it's easier. It's like the Steph Curry thing; eventually your fingers know what it feels like if the ball's going to bounce left or bounce right. You're micro-controlling it without thinking about it. And now on a commercial shoot, so often—and because of the time I've invested, and I know the crew—I act like I'm dribbling the ball through my legs. And I pass the ball to the set guy, and pass the ball to the lighting guy, and he passes it back to me, and I take the picture. It's just this flow that couldn't have happened before; it only happened through practice! Now I can honestly say, it's not every time that I still get nervous and sweaty and stinky, and horrified, and oh my god, people are going to see this. This is terrible! But I think there's something in that. And maybe it circles back again to nature, and sitting with discomfort—the harmony and disharmony. And being OK with it. It's maybe not even being ok with it; it's like, OH SHIT this is gnarly, you know, this is really *bad*. I am *failing*. And having to face that rather than fail in private... There's something in that sort of public failure that's inevitable, in that practice keeps you hungry, or keeps you humble, or maybe both.

Rail: It must be so stressful to be in the center of all that. I believe in Japanese literature, there is this understood impossibility, in many ways, of describing the nature of *something* by pointing to it directly. Instead, by describing its environment, everything that surrounds it, and how it behaves, we can intimate its complexities through its relationships to other things. And this show, to me, is almost like creating a circle of mirrors to reflect an invisible thing at its center as well.

Ethridge: That's so beautiful. It's funny, I feel like I am such a numskull. Maybe it's an American problem, but I enjoy delving into the dumb, impossible center of that, and again, the middle-class, Methodist, middle-whatever—I get some sort of anarchic pleasure in that.