

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Pasquariello, Lisa, "Roe Ethridge," Contemporary, Issue 67



ROE ETHRIDGE

LISA PASQUARIELLO

COMPARE two of Roe Ethridge's best-known images: one a self-portrait in which the New York-based photographer sports a nastily swollen black eye, the other his image of American rock singer Andrew Wilkes-Krier, blood running out his nose, down his chin and neck. The juxtaposition indicates less an affinity for gore or violence (most of Ethridge's work is gentler) than it measures how far contemporary photography has travelled from conceptual art's hand-wringing inquiries into the medium's truth-telling abilities. The wound in the self-portrait is an actual one (the result of a rock-climbing mishap), but appears fake on the otherwise clean-cut young artist; the musician's blood looks as if its about to seep through the luminous surface of the C-print, but this shot was staged.

The question of whether or not the photograph dissembles – it does and it doesn't, and this is no longer as compelling a concern as it once was – is one of several photographic distinctions thankfully bypassed in Ethridge's work. Hierarchy or consistency of subject matter is another: working in small series since graduating from Atlanta College of Art with a BFA in 1996, Ethridge has shot still lifes, landscapes, portraits and motion photography; pictured the man-made and the natural; mined the personal (his parents' home) and the universal (the moon). 'Photographies' describes his practice better than 'photography'; saying he wants to 'get the typologies wrong,' the artist's gimlet eyes have surveyed fashion models and package delivery drivers, floral arrangements and refrigerator doors, pigeons and pine trees. Working mainly in large format, with a 4 x 5 view camera, Ethridge infuses the conceptualist's inclination for



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Left: Marilyn, Inc. Model Tomara, 2000. Above: Young Pine (Winter), 2000

the quotidian with the technical precision of the Düsseldorf school. In a recent series on transportation infrastructures in Atlanta, the highway does double duty: in one image it serves as a pictorial vector of onrushing perspective, while in another its criss-crossing whorls form a geometric abstraction. Nature appears as well, but often denaturalised: we realise on a double-take that the bucolic black-and-white landscapes of the 'New York Water' series (2001) were in fact executed in colour, and the 'Pigeons' series (2001–2) recall the stop-motion chronophotographs of Étienne-Jules Marey, minus any contextual grounding: the birds are pictured isolated, suspended in flight, against a white studio backdrop. [A further note on the unnatural: Ethridge rented the trained pigeons from Universal Studios in Florida.] A more recent series of astrophotographs, taken from the roof of the photographer's Brooklyn apartment with an eight-inch Meade LX90 telescope, shows its subject digitally repeated a few times in a diagonal line across the expanse of the image, rendering the moon strangely preternatural and all the more distant.

Ethridge's 'Models' series (2000–1), in which the languorous beauties' empty gazes are perfectly matched by a deadpan photographic frontality, makes explicit reference to the worlds of fashion and merchandising. Like Philip-Lorca diCorcia and Juergen Teller, Ethridge also does commercial projects, although his career trajectory was in reverse: he trained as an art photographer and only later took on commercial work. Here, too, Ethridge seems effortlessly versatile, photographing for magazines (including the *New York Times*), advertisements and posters, book jackets and album covers (the Andrew Wilkes-Krier portrait appeared on the cover of the musician's *I Get Wet* release), and collaborating with the media-blurring artist collective Fischerspooner. The withering of limits between fine and commercial art, or elite and mass culture, inaugurated by pop is now complete, the idea of such distinctions moot in a contemporary culture saturated (ecstatically or not) with infinitely multiple images, in which art is fashionable and fashion arty. The ability of his photographs to exist in multiple contexts, Ethridge says, is their 'great' feature but also their 'burden' – images that might belong to several discursive categories do not anchor comfortably in any one. Yet this heterogeneity functions, in Ethridge's practice, to engender new and fortuitous linkages, as the artist explained about an exhibition of his work in 2000, which featured the seemingly disparate subjects of UPS men,

fashion models and pine trees. 'You put the clothes on the model, take the picture, produce the catalogue – presumably from pine trees – and mail it out,' he said, noting the metonymy. '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.'

Yet despite this 'natural order' – of the photograph's spiralling diffusion through spectacle culture, its utter consumability and reproducibility – Ethridge demonstrates, as one critic writes, the possibility of 'reclaiming a space for artistic manoeuvre'. Indeed aspects of his photos strike one as Barthesian punctums, that 'element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me' – the incongruous double strand of faux pearls draped on model Nancy (2000), or the presence in *Refrigerator* (1999) of his mother's outmoded sunglasses and deceased dog – irruptions that suggest, in our post-conceptual, image-glutted world, a persistence of lyricism and even beauty.

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Refrigerator, 2000