

The photograph that inspired me

by Helen Trompeteler

Untitled (Memphis, Tennessee), 2000, William Eggleston

While professionally I specialise in photographic portraiture and admire many photographs, I have chosen William Eggleston's study of a view from a shop or diner window to the street outside, as seen and partly obscured through a pair of window blinds. Why can I so clearly remember the sensation of first encountering a print of this on display over a decade ago? How did this photograph change how I viewed photography while reinforcing my ideas on the medium's traditions and power?

When considering the original impact of this photograph, I was struck by the pure immediacy of the connection I felt with the photographer. The framing places the viewer directly behind the counter, where the photographer was taking in every detail in such a vivid and intense way that this intensity is transferred as if we are sharing an experience with him. This reaction does not happen so perceptibly when viewing many photographs, and the composition is a contributing factor. A strong three dimensional impact is created by using a framing foreground, middle distance and long distance view of the street outside. A much greater factor is Eggleston's delicate but masterful use of colour to produce a heightened emotional response. Here the enveloping use of heavily saturated golden yellow across three quarters of the frame evokes comfort and a southern heat which becomes seductively tangible.

This photograph is representative of Eggleston's sublime skill in extracting compositions from a universal vernacular which awakes the viewer's senses to our everyday surroundings. By encouraging us to look at the familiar in new ways which are unfamiliar and sometimes even strange, Eggleston creates an inherent tension in his work. Yet the commonness of his subject matter also creates a sense of calm and belonging, which is perhaps why I find his images so transfixing. This photograph introduced me to Eggleston's craft of capturing the beauty in the arrangements of lines, shapes, and patterns found in everyday urban landscapes. The isolation of such parts of everyday reality in order to create abstract compositions resonates within a wider context of twentieth century modern art.

My personal responses to this photograph are anchored within an appreciation of Eggleston's contribution to the history of photography. His landmark 1976 exhibition at MoMA under the curatorship of John Szarkowski validated colour photography as a high art form. His use of colour to record

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everyday objects, interiors and landscapes moved the medium away from its previous commercial associations with advertising and the elite magazines of the 1950s such as *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *House & Garden* and *Glamour*. Eggleston's 'democratic camera' directly continued the traditions of photographers who preceded him such as Walker Evans, who greatly elevated the status of the everyday in his photography, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, who in his formative years travelled widely to countries including Africa and Mexico. Eggleston employs the examining eye of such photojournalists he admired, but rather than investigate foreign countries and cultures, he became an explorer of his own environment. His legacy is undisputed and can be seen in a generation of photographers including Joachim Brohm, Peter Fraser, Paul Graham, Volker Heinze and Martin Parr.

Eggleston's vision as illustrated by this photograph continues to inspire me. Through his gaze every detail is given meaning, the mundane becomes beautiful, and the ordinary becomes extraordinary and deserving of our celebration. This for me personally, is a reminder of the true potency and beauty of photography. So much so that when carrying a small Kodak camera around with me in my bag, it is this photograph and Eggleston's work in my thoughts, reminding me to stop during my daily life to take in the world around me.

To view the image go to <http://bit.ly/N9Ccnh>

Helen Trompeteler is Assistant Curator of Photographs at the National Portrait Gallery, London. She has contributed research to exhibitions including forthcoming *Man Ray Portraits* (NPG, 2013) and curated displays including *Spotlight on Peter Rand* (NPG, 2012), *Mick Jagger: Young in the 60s* (NPG, 2011) and *From Where I Stand: Photographs by Mary McCartney* (NPG, 2010). www.camera-portraits.com