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MUSEUMS

## A Photographer of Unsettlingly Mundane, Lynchian Images

Roe Ethridge combines a commercial photography practice with his personal life to create diquieting images.



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Roe Ethridge, detail of "Double Jess Gold" (2015) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

CINCINNATI — In his [1996 article](#) about David Lynch's movie *Lost Highway*, David Foster Wallace offers the following definition of the term "Lynchian":

An academic definition of Lynchian might be that the term "refers to a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former's perpetual containment within the latter." But like postmodern or pornographic, Lynchian is one of those Porter Stewart-type words that's ultimately definable only ostensibly-i.e., we know it when we see it.

I recently spent some time as at [FotoFocus 2016](#), a Cincinnati-based photography biennial now in its third installment. There will be more to say about FotoFocus overall — it features over 60 exhibitions and 100 events during its monthlong run — but at this point I'm prepared to deem the work of [Roe Ethridge](#) — who as part of the biennial is having his first major solo museum exhibition at the [Contemporary Arts Center \(CAC\)](#) — Lynchian in nature.



From left to right, FotoFocus Artistic Director Kevin Moore, Roe Ethridge, and Andy Harman at the opening night panel discussion, with Ethridge's "Nancy with Polaroid" (2003-06) in background

Ethridge combines a commercial photography practice with his personal life to create initially innocuous but ultimately unsettling images. His family and the material culture of his daily life act as his subjects as often as the models and props in his highly stylized studio shots, which are created in a team effort with production and set designer Andy Harman and the models

themselves, including Louise Parker, a photographer in her own right. These two, along with a number of Ethridge's others interlocutors, were on hand with the artist for a panel discussion during the opening reception for the exhibition, titled *Nearest Neighbor*.

Whether as a function of his commercial photography practice or the selfsame aesthetic that drives it, Ethridge's work has the feel of stock imagery — if David Lynch were to curate a portfolio for Getty Images. A glamour shot of Chanel No. 5 perfume, with a yellow jacket perched just in front of the bottle at image center; Parker in a striped and collared shirt, her icy, Teutonic features obscured by a fleshy-looking bubble of gum; two action shots of pigeons in mid-flight; a pair of images titled “Thanksgiving 1984” (2009) that captures an oddly stiff, nearly Technicolor, and intensely retrograde portrait of domestic celebration. “Thanksgiving 1984” stands as a midpoint in this mid-career survey, which includes sculptural and photographic works from 1999 through 2016; these two pictures, of a garishly perfect holiday dinner spread and an eerily Stepford-like teenage girl at the table, are a neat case study in the Lynchian aspects underpinning Ethridge's compositions.





Roe Ethridge, detail of "Thanksgiving 1984 (table)" (2009)



Roe Ethridge, detail of "Thanksgiving 1984" (2009)



“A publication asked me to make a picture of Thanksgiving, and I remembered Thanksgiving, 1984, when my aunt and uncle and cousins came to Atlanta, from Tallahassee,” said Etheridge during the opening night panel. “A female cousin was, like, five years older than me, and I got a weird sort of feeling and sort of got a crush on my cousin. And being from the South, it was like, this is really wrong. I know I’m not supposed to do this.”

In the exhibition, shots like these, which are produced in a controlled studio environment, are disrupted by candid counterpoints — for example, “Durango in the Canal, Belle Glade, FL” (2011), a photograph of a rental car that ended up underwater after being left momentarily unattended by Etheridge. The multilevel layout and the CAC’s odd, Escheresque floor plan lend themselves to an interpretation of the exhibition as a walk through Etheridge’s psyche: the wide-open ground floor is dominated by more polished works, glossy and accessible; the upper floors feature sculptural elements interspersed with domestic imagery, as the architecture fragments into a sequence of intimate, telescoping galleries.



One of the Ethridge children documenting a document of herself

Appropriate, then, that I encountered Etheridge's two children, supervised by his wife, Nancy, as they were watching a video work that lies in the deepest recess of the psyche-gallery. Both the Ethridge children are preternaturally blonde, and the older — an ebullient girl of perhaps eight or nine — began emulating her father, attempting to capture a still from the video with the blue Instax Mini that she carried throughout much of the opening. Watching the young Ethridge attempt to document a mediated life document made by her father, which includes video footage of herself and her brother, created a sense of extradimensional subtext so intense, I had to wonder if I had entered the Black Lodge of Etheridge's psyche. It was an indisputable case-in-point for FotoFocus 2016's theme, "The Un-Document," a term coined by Artistic Director and Chief Curator Kevin Moore.





Roe Ethridge, detail of "Chanel No.5 with Yellow Jacket" (2008-13)

Despite an open demeanor in conversation, it's difficult to pin down the degree to which Ethridge feels for his subjects — a detachment that's quite Lynchian, when one considers that his wife and children are among them. There is a sense of everything as fair game, everything as material, with even the human subjects he's close to acting as stock-image proxies: portraits of his wife, Nancy, convey no greater intimacy than those featuring Pamela Anderson or Gisele Bündchen. Cameras have historically created distance between artist and subject — the lens literally mediating between them — but in hearing Ethridge speak about his process, I found it difficult to discern whether he employs the camera to take a step back from moments that would otherwise be emotionally overwhelming or as his entry point for engagement with the world. The assortment of candid images taken at moments of high human drama — like a magic-hour still life of cigarettes and apple shot during his Montauk honeymoon — suggest that, as with many photographers, Ethridge is instinctively driven to capture life, both good and bad. But whether that impulse represents a drawing close to life or a moving away from it remains unclear. Among Ethridge's commercial work are assignments for *VICE*, and there's definitely an air of self-satisfied white fraternity among his entourage, with Parker as the white-blond center of a crew of blue blazer-wearing art bros.

“Nearest neighbor” is a photographic term for an image that’s been resampled by changing the number of pixels. Ethridge’s pictures reach toward each other with thin, intuitive strands of association, their connections never explicit but acceptable, inasmuch as we can accept our own internal leaps of intuition and logic; yet throughout his work there is an unshakable sense of tampering, of mediation, of manipulation. Ethridge frequently collects his exhibitions into art-book form, creating open-ended photo narratives offered entirely without text; it would be interesting to generate tags to enable the sorting of his image inventory (e.g. “pearls and melting brie,” “blonde with affected posture,” “redhead smokes marijuana from wooden pipe”). To be as widely applicable as possible, stock imagery must necessarily be vague and open to interpretation. Ethridge’s ability to convert the most intimate details of his own life into such generic terms and “near neighbors” — so close, but so unreal — is, in the end, the most Lynchian aspect of all.





Roe Ethridge, "Apple and Cigarettes" (2004-06)

*Roe Ethridge: Nearest Neighbor continues at the Contemporary Arts Center (44 E 6th Street, Cincinnati) through March 12, 2017. It is part of FotoFocus 2016, which continues at venues around Cincinnati through October 31.*

*Editor's note: The author's lodging and travel expenses were paid for by FotoFocus 2016.*