

photograph (photographmag.com)
November/December Issue

photograph



Roe Ethridge, *Me and Auggie*, 2015. Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, and
Greenerassi

FEATURE

Roe Ethridge: It's Personal

By Lyle Rexer

At a time when youth and age seem to be blending in terms of fashion, food, films, and music, the photographs of Roe Ethridge have opened an old-fashioned generation gap. Several years ago, I ended a lecture on recent photography with a group of pictures by some 20-something photographers, mostly former students of mine, and all influenced in one way or another by Ethridge's photographs. Subjects included swans, plastic surgery, and forlorn window treatments. The audience was filled with avid photographers – artists and professionals – as well as academics, most of a certain age. One of them spoke for many when he said: "Why include these photographs in a serious presentation? They are bad pictures of bad subjects."

It was a classic case of the desire to shoot the messenger who brings (apparently) bad news. And the news about photography delivered in such series as Ethridge's *Rockaway, NY*, 2008, did indeed seem to be downright nihilistic to a generation of photographers still having trouble absorbing the success of, say, Cindy Sherman or Christopher Williams. Few, if any, of the photographs in the series could stand alone as expressive, formally motivated, meaning-bearing communications. They desperately needed each other because, in a sense, they were all variations on a theme: the exhaustion of photographic genres. Ethridge appeared to ransack all of the genres, from sentimental snapshots to commercial portraits, all the "vernacular" uses of photography that have by now generated a tide of repetitive, forgettable, if not instantly disposable pictures. His photographs seemed to hover at the edge of parody, without ever declaring their intentions. The most memorable image for me was the most banal: mall signage. Utterly plastic and generic, a collection of corporate logotypes and industrial colors, it seemed to spell the end of American photographers' fascination with the complex expressiveness of roadside and streetside advertisements.

There was also the giant photograph of a pumpkin sticker, displayed in MoMA's New Photography 2010 exhibition.

The Samuel Beckett-like “we can’t go on/we’ll go on” atmosphere of the work, perceived as an immobilizing irony, probably explains why Ethridge, born in 1969, is only now having his first solo museum exhibition in the United States, at the [Contemporary Arts Center](#) in Cincinnati (through March 12). Or perhaps it was the commercial sheen of so many of the pictures. As Kevin Moore, the artistic director of the Cincinnati biennial FotoFocus (which ran for the month of October), who curated the exhibition, *Roe Ethridge: Nearest Neighbor*, points out, “These photographs do not perform like an Alec Soth documentary project. They traffic in low forms of photography; in a sense they deliberately lower the bar on ideas about quality and content.”

They certainly seem to. Ethridge came of age during two crucial developments in photography: the acceptance of work by the so-called “pictures generation” of photo artists, with their supreme awareness of photography as a mass medium, whose usages are social, economic, and political far more than aesthetic; and the birth and expansion of the internet, whose ubiquity now largely determines how we perceive photographs. They aren’t even “sad bits of matter hanging on a wall,” as photographer Vik Muniz described works of art in his 2005 book *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer*. In digital space, they are fungible in size, color, and clarity, immaterial in iteration, and discontinuous in their messaging. No need to cite the overwhelming rate of photographic production, but for someone who clearly likes photographs and the odd things they do (and is fascinated by the fact that he likes them), the question for Ethridge seemed to be: how to make photographs that communicate your sense of things amidst the generic and fabricated clichés of visual culture.

No wonder, as Moore has said, young photographers “study” his pictures. It’s their challenge especially. Not Eggleston, not Ghirri, not Guido Guidi, all of whom might be influential, but Ethridge above all has given them permission, and the inspiration, to stop worrying and explore photography. Don’t worry about the clichés and mistakes and inappropriate subjects (least of all those) and the blurring of boundaries between commercial and so-called personal work, but embrace and enjoy the artificiality of the medium, its manipulation of appearances, and perhaps most importantly, the peculiar occasions for beauty it promotes. A corollary might be, don’t place inordinate emphasis on any single image, for the process of making pictures, allowing them to talk to each other and to modify your practice, is closer to lived experience than attempting to perfect each one as a definitive statement about something.

In the Cincinnati exhibition, Moore has emphasized this by grouping the photographs to highlight their narrative character, especially Ethridge’s ability to connect disparate materials and experiences. “In some sense I am trying to show how these photographs replicate a thought process,” he remarks. That sort of narrative – loopy, puzzling, but never quite arbitrary – animated *Rockaway, NY*, which looked in presentation (at Andrew Kreps Gallery) like a group show. It was even more extreme in Ethridge’s 2014 exhibition (also at Andrew Kreps) and book *Sacrifice Your Body*. The content of these photographs was by turns kitsch-allegorical, fashion-driven, and cinematic. There were discarded outtakes from a Chanel shoot, staged images of an SUV being hauled out of the water, two pictures of the same peewee football balanced on the edge of a porch. Most complex was a set up still life of plastic skeleton parts and a skull wearing a Florida State baseball cap, posed against a backdrop of curtains depicting “oriental” scenes. Like much in the project, this memento mori represents elements from Ethridge’s youth and his memories of south Florida, where his grandmother lives. No need to delve into the fact that he himself played football to see that his attitude toward it and all of south Florida is ambivalent.

And personal. The most telling aspect of Ethridge's work, and I suspect the deeper source of its appeal to younger photographers, is his increasing willingness to put himself and his experience into the picture, using friends, family, and autobiographical elements even if it courts obscurity. You can't expect a photograph of a crumpled Corona six-pack carrier to convey exactly what you might have experienced, but in the context of companion pictures, a broader, fugitive sense of the ongoing narrative that is you emerges. The series *Shelter Island* (2016), for example, is a kind of family summer vacation album, with pictures of his children, his wife, someone holding a crab against a bright orange backdrop. "Personal but ordinary" is how Ethridge describes them. The insertion of a super-kitschy photograph of Pamela Anderson eating grapes, shot for a professional assignment, feels like a throwback in its deliberately jarring tone and in its heavy-handed symbolism about the end of summer.

What Kevin Moore calls "the collapse of the personal and the professional" in these photographs, the incongruous treatment of intimate subjects as glossy, designed, and stage-managed events, is in part what discomfits viewers of a certain age. There is supposed to be a firewall between what you do for a living and what you live and burn to do. In practice, however, photography was never quite that way. The search for a sense of identity, meaning, and personal truth is carried out among all the images you make, among all the images you see that are making you. And in the edit, life becomes for the moment comprehensible.