

Modern Painters  
Winter 2016/2017

# BLOUIN modern painters

ART / ARCHITECTURE / DESIGN / PERFORMANCE / FILM

WINTER 2016/2017



ROE ETHRIDGE  
suburban surreal

LAWRENCE WESCHLER  
on Robert Irwin

KATI HECK  
an exclusive project

+ Babirye Leilah, Jeff Koons,  
Matthew Angelo Harrison



Exactly

Wrong

*Roe Ethridge* talks about narrative, effortlessness, and Sunshine Noir

BY TAYLOR DAFOE



Celine Bracelot  
for Gentlewoman,  
2014. C-print,  
43 1/2 x 34 1/2 in.

ANDREU STEIN GALLERY, NEW YORK

**R**OE ETHRIDGE'S IMAGES LOOK simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. Combining the disparate languages of various types of photography—stock, advertising, family—the artist has developed a seductive, nuanced, and often humorous aesthetic wholly his own. In his pictures, famous models—such as Gisele Bündchen, Pamela Anderson, and his favorite muse, Louise Parker—get the same treatment as his wife and kids, not to mention a jam jar or a peeing pig. Yet these photos constantly subvert our impulse to sketch narrative connections between images.

The artist's first solo museum show in the U.S., "Nearest Neighbor," opened at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Indiana in October as part of the FotoFocus photography biennial. The show, on view through March 12, 2017, features more than 50 photos from the last 17 years of Ethridge's career, as well as new sculptural and video works—largely new mediums for Ethridge. On the occasion of the show's opening, Ethridge sat down to discuss the new works, and the ongoing influence of film, family, and friends.

*Looking over the past 15 years of your work, I realized how difficult it is to talk about it in any general sense. Every picture is so different. Even the way you work varies: using large-format cameras, digital, instant film, all the way down to iPhone screenshots. Is that something you think about, collapsing the high and lows of the medium? Or is it just about using any tools available to make a good picture?*

It's more of a discovery than an illustration. In the end it does atomize the image. In 2000 I was in a show at Andrew Kreps, and that was the first time I had really given up on doing a thesis-based project. I decided to just do a series that was short and get it out the door. Additionally, there were outtakes from commercial shoots and other pictures that were too good to be discarded or discounted. For me, it's like a musical instruction in service of the image and the show: It's about the sound that these pictures make together.

*Often you work with a large production team or with recurring models that bring a lot to the images themselves; at other times you have printed screenshots taken by your daughter. What does the collaborative process mean to you?*

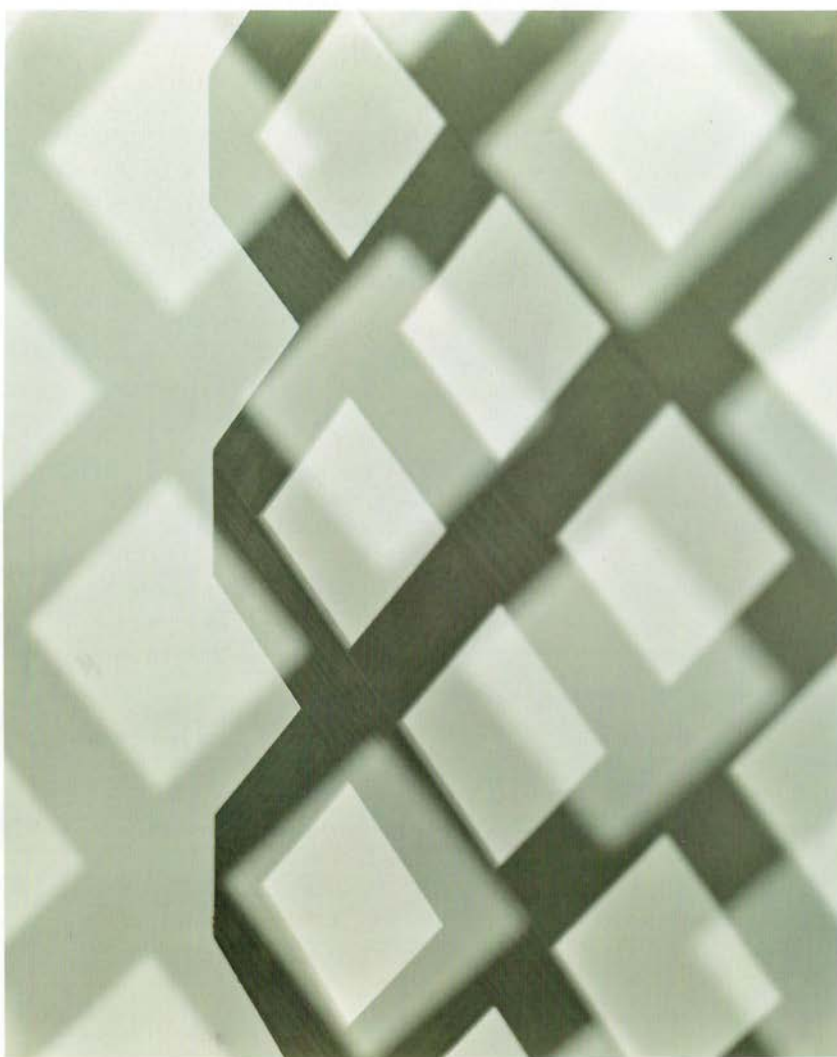
I've always been jealous of collaborative teams. It's really the best way to work. There are pictures I make from the classic photographer-alone-with-a-camera setting, but less and less so for me now. Though, in the end, I'm in the executive position—it's my ass on the line.

*Yet it doesn't seem like you are a Stanley Kubrick type, an artist who oversees every meticulous detail of the production process. There's a capriciousness to much of your work, as if it was the product of chance, and you went with it.*

I think that feeling of effortlessness is what I'm going for. But that



NYPD Officer  
Damon Ruta (Ret.),  
2006, C-print,  
40 1/4 x 32 1/2 in.



*Double Lattice,*  
2008. C-print,  
50 x 40 in.

**“There are pictures I make from the classic photographer-alone-with-a-camera setting, but less and less for me now. Though, in the end, I’m in the executive position—it’s my ass on the line.”**

sure as shit isn’t the way the thing arrives, you know? I often feel like I’ve taken the long way. Maybe I aspire to be that effortless. But it’s not something I really think about, like, “Oh does it look effortless right now?”

*Your photographs have a cinematic quality, but they resist the narrative interpretations that we all have a tendency to engage in.* In a basic way, I feel that what keeps it from being cinematic is the vertical, portrait format. Because of the large-format camera, I’m very trained in the idea of the compositional image. It has as much to do with the history of images as it does with the cinematic. It reminds me of the Lewis Baltz quote about photography occupying a narrow but deep area between cinema and literature. I always loved that. I don’t know exactly what he’s talking about, but I like the idea of the narrow, deep divide.

*As a photographer, do you ever feel like you are working in a secondary medium within the fine arts?*

Not really. I think about that when we talk about the art market. There’s always that conversation about “editions.” But, you know, that abstract painting show had 20 of the same painting in it. That sounds like sour grapes and I hate getting bogged down in the market conversation, but it is a reality. For me, there was some coming to terms with that cyclical thing that happens for both the medium and one’s personal reception. I’m well aware of the vampiric qualities of the art world: They always need new blood. I’m 47 years old, and I’ve had some good exposure. I don’t want to whine about how photography isn’t respected. It’s what I love to do; it’s what I always wanted to do,

and now here I am doing it, and I feel very fortunate.

*There’s an end-of-summer feel to a lot of your work—which, too, is cinematic. Where does that come from?*

I can’t remember where, but I read someone talking about the Sunshine Noir as a film genre.

*Like Chinatown? Which is a really bright movie for being so dark.*

Yeah, like *Chinatown*. I think that’s something that’s really appealing to me. When I was in school, it was a time when David Lynch was one of the most influential visual artists, and I was majoring in video then. It was the ‘90s, so we were watching *Twin Peaks* on Tuesday nights, and then watching *Twin Peaks* again in class and just marveling at how great it was. So that notion of the suburban (and me having grown up in the suburbs as well, near Miami and Atlanta), that idea that there are things that hide what is primal, scary, or even terrifying behind their exterior—that was there when my aesthetic was being developed.

*Did you have a hand in selecting the photos for “Nearest Neighbor?”*

Yeah, together with the curator, Kevin Moore. It was a conversation. The metaphorical idea of the department store kept coming back: there is an introduction, which is kind of the like the greatest hits, then the show is broken down into “departments:” industry, melancholy, etcetera. It’s like when you walk into a department store, there’s all the cool stuff, then there’s all these other parts of the store organized by group. Walking up to the fourth floor of the CAC, there’s this long wall with a run of seven or eight images. That feels like the key sequence. It



**“That *Twin Peaks* notion of the suburban—that things are hiding what is scary or even terrifying behind their exterior—was there when my aesthetic was being developed.”**



Valerie Sipp,  
2003-06, C-print,  
36½ x 29½ in.

OPPOSITE:  
Thanksgiving 1984  
(table), 2009,  
C-print, 34 x 45 in.



Chanel Tennis  
Shoes, 2013.  
C-print, 44 x 33 in.

www.chanel.com



Oysters, 2005.  
C-print,  
25½ x 31½ in.

felt very natural to have that kind of stuff there without asking questions like, "What does it mean?"

*What about the sculptures you made for the exhibition?*

The idea was in part to make a brass bin. Initially I thought I would put a bunch of framed photographs in there, kind of like a record-store bin, so you could see multiple images in sequence. I have this unexplainable penchant for Judd-like forms, but I'm not trying to have a dialogue with Minimalism at all. It became a question of, How do I bring this back into my milieu, into my thing? I also used the sculptures to do a series of photographs. Late in the day the sun would bounce off of one side of the bin, and there would be light bouncing off the brass. You'd get these crazy beautiful still lifes.

*It sounds like you're thinking of the objects photographically, which is interesting. It seems to me that a lot of photographers that transition to sculpture do so through investigating the formal properties and objecthood of the photographic print.*

For me it was certainly important. You are making this flat work, but it's a large, heavy, framed object. At a certain point I was struggling with how to address the problem of the frame. I wanted the photographs to work on a domestic scale. There was something about a walnut frame and a 30-by-38-inch rectangle—you can hang that in your house. There's a sculptural consideration to that.

*Is this the first time you've shown actual sculpture?*

Actually, for my first show in New York with Anna Kustera gallery, in 1998, I showed a couple of sculptural installations. After that, I decided I needed to figure out photography. I did one more show at Anna Kustera, which was called "Neutral Territory," and it was pictures of trees on highway medians, a series I started in Atlanta, and then I moved up here and shot on I-95 and I-85. When I finished that body of work, I was so tired, and I thought would never do another thesis-based project after that. I need that novelty or discovery or feeling where I don't know if I'm right. My favorite Warhol quote is "When you do something exactly wrong, you always turn up something." For me, those are words to live by. After that, in my first show with Kreps, the work became fugue-like—different voices and types of imagery, all at once.

*What's behind the title of the CAC Cincinnati show?*

I have always loved the nearest-neighbor function in Photoshop. If you're enlarging a very small JPEG, Photoshop will fill in pixels to expand the image. Enlarging a small digital image is crap no matter what—it tries to soften everything, faking it to look like a real image. But with nearest neighbor you can preserve hard edges, which just means you that use the square pixels. The result becomes gridded and cubic. I love that visual treatment of the image. MP