

My best shot

Photography

Interview

## Roe Ethridge's best photograph: his car being pulled from a Florida canal

Interview by [Ben Beaumont-Thomas](#)

'It's like the opening shot in a film noir, but it was just stupid old me, embarrassing my family again'



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'Quiet menace' ... Durango in a Canal, Belle Glade, FL. Photograph: Roe Ethridge

This was taken in Belle Glade, a small agrarian town in Florida where my parents were high-school sweethearts. It's all sugar cane fields round there and they're basically dissolving back into the earth, causing the town to fall apart. There's no good news really: Belle Glade has been in decline since the 1980s, when it had the highest incidence of Aids per capita in the US, thanks to the number of Haitian refugee farmers living there in abject poverty.

It was July and they were burning the leaves off the sugar cane. Just being outside was a pretty intense experience: it was raining ash. I was trying to take photographs of these 18-wheeler sugar cane trucks and, to keep my sanity, I'd decided not to leave the car. But it wasn't working, so I got out and took a shot.

As I turned back round, I saw my car rolling away. I grabbed the door, but it was going too fast and just plopped down into this canal. I was screaming "Fuck!" and thinking: "Right, as I'm probably going to have to buy this rental car, I'd better start taking some pictures." In the end, some family friends helped me pull it out.

**There are no guardrails, just fields with canals all around. Even the sheriff's car went in one time**

It's like the opening shot in a film noir: a car being pulled from a canal. But there's a self-deprecating side to it, too. People ask: "Did someone die?" No, it was just stupid old me, embarrassing my family again. It happens all the time down there. There are no guardrails, just 100-acre cane fields with canals all around. Even the sheriff's car went in one time – and sometimes people do die.

There's something surreal about the water, the way it's spilling out of the window. It's distressing. And that piece of newspaper hanging off the headrest looks like a person wearing a hat. Overall, the shot has a kind of quiet menace, like a David Lynch film,

where the beautiful or banal has something sinister underneath. This image ended up in my 2014 book *Sacrifice Your Body*, which takes its title from a phrase a group of mothers would scream out at my high-school football games.

I placed this alongside much more composed images in the book. I have a fugue-like approach to arranging images. Musical fugues contain multiple voices – take Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, with its two melodies running in harmony and disharmony. It’s very formal, yet has an unexplainable emotional side. This is how I tell the truth in a photo book, with mayhem towards the orderly sequence or the well-behaved image.

I’m that adolescent that’s having “Sacrifice your body!” yelled at them, rebelling against the mother of photography, pissing people off and making a mess. It’s like one of my favourite Andy Warhol quotes: “I’m trying to do it exactly wrong.”

## **Roe Ethridge’s CV**



Ethridge. Photograph: Billy Farrell/BFA/Rex/Shutterstock

**Born:** Miami, 1969.

**Studied:** Florida State University and the Atlanta College of Art.

**Influences:** Lee Friedlander, Andy Warhol, Thomas Struth, Edouard Manet, Henri Matisse, Jeff Wall and Gregory Crewdson.

**High point:** “Being on the cover of Artforum in 2003.”

**Low point:** “I’m sure there was a young photographer looking at the cover of Artforum saying: ‘Screw you, Roe Ethridge.’”

**Top tip:** “If you’re just doing strategy, you’re probably not making art.”

- Roe Ethridge’s Nearest Neighbor is at the Contemporary Arts Centre, Cincinnati, until 12 March.