

Memphis Beau

William Eggleston, one of America's most important photographers, is a southern gentleman whose private world is straight out of Faulkner. And like Faulkner's, his hard-edged portraits of a fading South have occasionally put him at odds with the locals.

RICHARD B. WOODWARD reports from Memphis as Eggleston's work goes on show at New York's Museum of Modern Art

Meeting William Eggleston—shy and well-mannered son of the South, descendant of planter aristocracy in the Mississippi Delta, fifty-two years old, and father of three—it's hard to believe the stories told about him could be true. Tall and thin and pale, with the devilish good looks of a silent-film star, he seems like a charming ghost. A cigarette held in long fingers, and dressed in what could be called his uniform—knee-high Austrian safari boots, khaki pants, starched white shirt, beige scarf—he could be an English colonist in East Africa, circa 1930, a member of Isak Dinesen's decadent set.

Most critics and curators agree that Eggleston, one of America's great living photographers, has had an enormous influence on the medium. "He's the beginning of modern color photography," says John Szarkowski, the Museum of Modern Art's recently retired director of photography.

"There are three photographers—Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, and Eggle-

ston—who have shown me the images of my lifetime," says Walter Hopps, founding director of the Menil Collection. "And of the three, Bill is the only one with ambitions for photography that go beyond the making of a single perfect picture, who keeps his work centered on turf, as though the center of the cosmos were the Mississippi Delta."

David Byrne, who invited Eggleston to the set of his pseudo-documentary, *True Stories*, is one of many who began photographing under his spell. "His work doesn't show the usual visual hierarchy," says Byrne. "He's not judging 'ugly' or 'beautiful.' He sees without prejudice, in all senses of the word."

But Eggleston's stature as one of the world's most distinctive picture-makers is matched—and in some quarters surpassed—by a reputation for outlandish behavior and substance abuse on a Hunter S. Thompson scale. The stories have common themes—alcohol, drugs, women, and guns—and tales of dissipation are reported by anyone who has spent much time with Eggleston, especially on his home ground in Memphis, Tennessee.

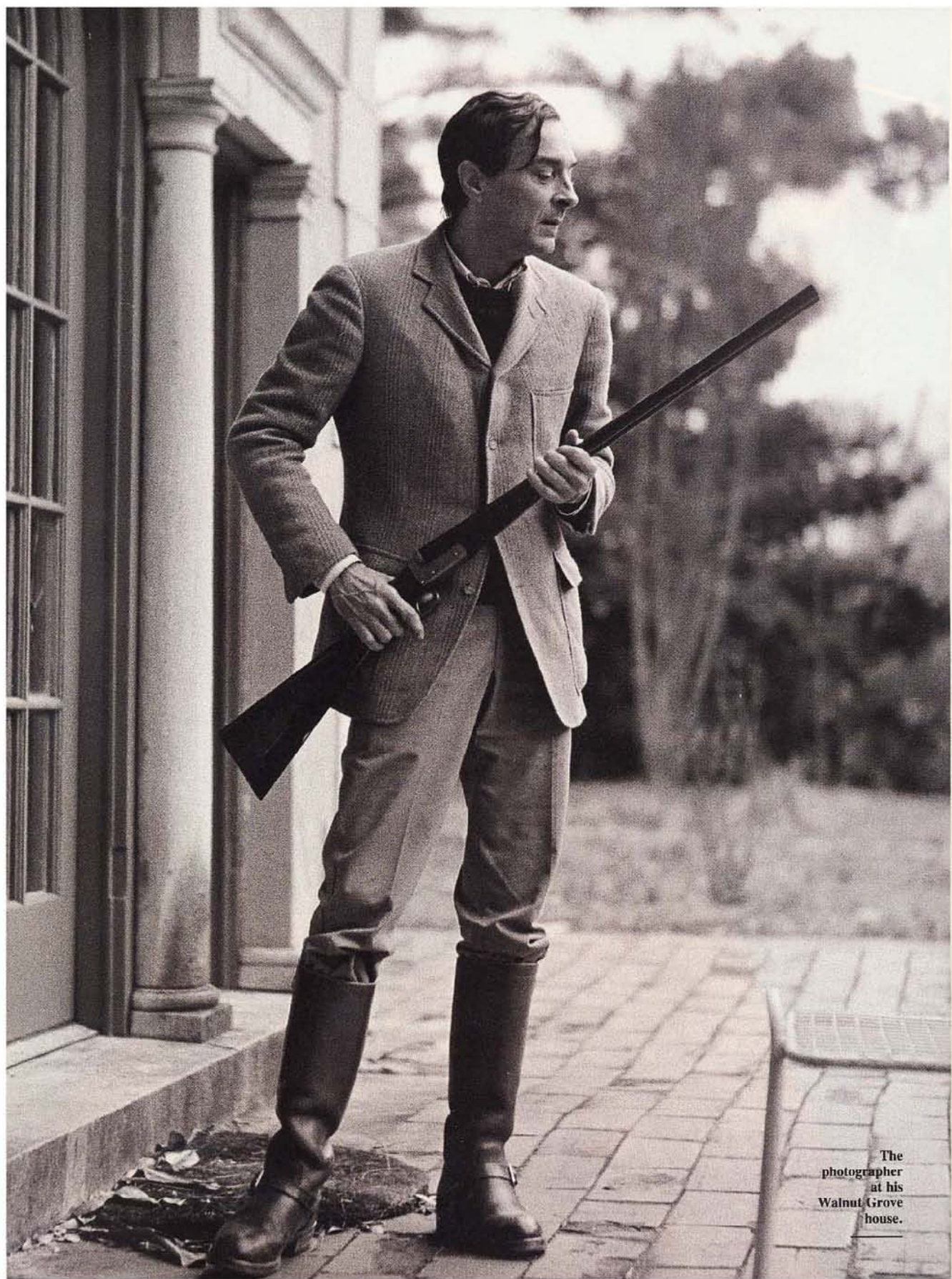
He keeps up two large homes there, one with his wife, Rosa, in east Memphis, known as "the Walnut Grove house"; the other with his girlfriend, Lucia Burch, near the heart of the city,

known as "the Midtown house." This delicate arrangement has existed, each woman aware of the other, for more than ten years. Anyone wishing to track down Eggleston has to call both houses, and, more often than not, no one at either place will have any idea where he is.

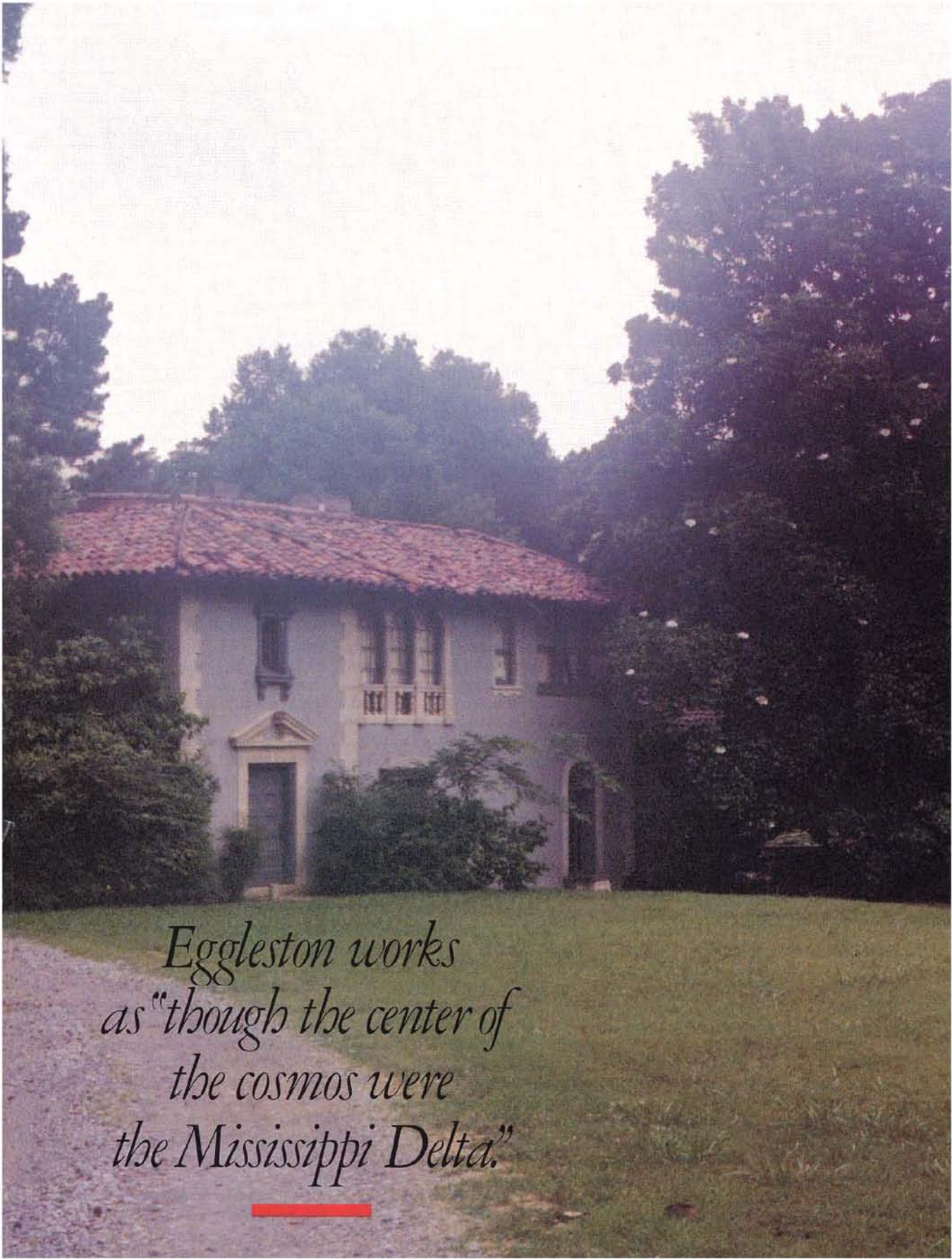
For the first two days of my visit in April, Eggleston seemed so reluctant to talk about himself that it was painful to ask him anything. At our first meeting, in the bar at the Peabody Hotel in downtown Memphis, he sat with his head turned at a ninety-degree angle, staring off through his cigarette smoke and sipping at a glass of whiskey as he answered each question slowly and softly throughout the afternoon. He was gracious, if remote, in discussing photography and music, his childhood in Mississippi, and adulthood in Memphis.

By the third day of my visit, I had met Rosa and Lucia, both of them understandably cool about a journalist in their midst. Neither woman would talk about him ("Someone would have to twist my arm," Rosa told me), and Eggleston has taken some delight in their uneasiness. "Lucia thinks it's 'so common' that I'm talking to you," he says, mocking the idiom.

I am less concerned about getting to the bottom of his complicated ro-



The
photographer
at his
Walnut Grove
house.



*Eggleston works
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mances, however, than I am about why he is asking me to transport him everywhere, to the corner store for a pack of cigarettes, to the pharmacy for a mysterious elixir, back and forth between Midtown and Walnut Grove. As we drive south on the legendary Highway 61, tobacco and cotton fields on either side, the sight of a police car that is slowing traffic prompts an answer.

"There are two bench warrants out for my arrest," he says with a grimace. "For not going to court, you know." The first contempt citation, he says, arose from an arrest after he became "militaristic" in a restaurant. He doesn't remember much. "I don't know what I was on, but I caused a real disturbance," he says. The second, after a D.W.I., has landed him in deep trouble. He needs to locate that judge who's a friend of the family. "I've really got to do something about that," he says gravely, as if he's suddenly remembered to fix a leak in the shed roof.

The door opened on his criminal past, with Eggleston neither boastful about it nor particularly contrite, I want to know if it's true that he was arrested once for firing a gun in public. "No," he says, annoyed. "Who told you that?" I say that I heard the story, and others like it, from several Memphis sources. "No," he repeats, adding helpfully, "I've fired guns in the house."

I had noticed two panes were gone from the floor-to-ceiling stained-glass window over the landing at Walnut Grove. But you can't always be sure with Eggleston which house he is talking about, so after a long pause I ask.

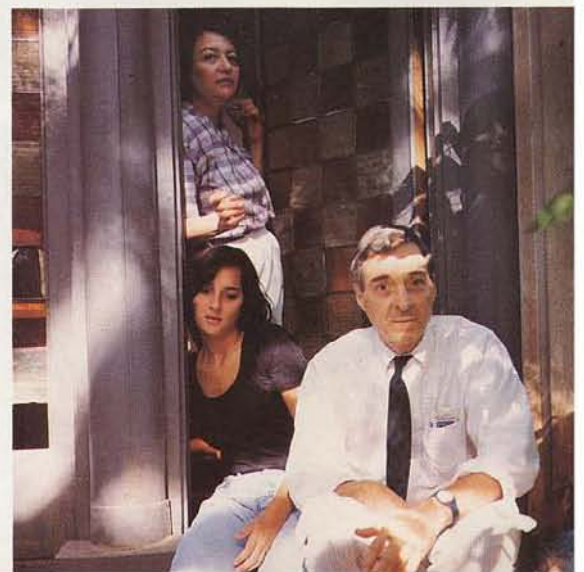
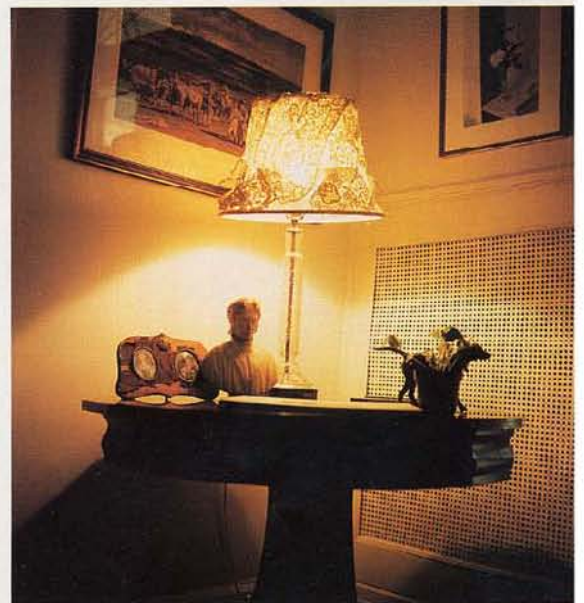
"Both houses," he says brightly. "Lucia and I have shot at each other lots of times. She once aimed a .410 shotgun at me. Those pictures of mine hanging on the walls aren't there just because she likes them. They're covering up bullet holes, some of them."

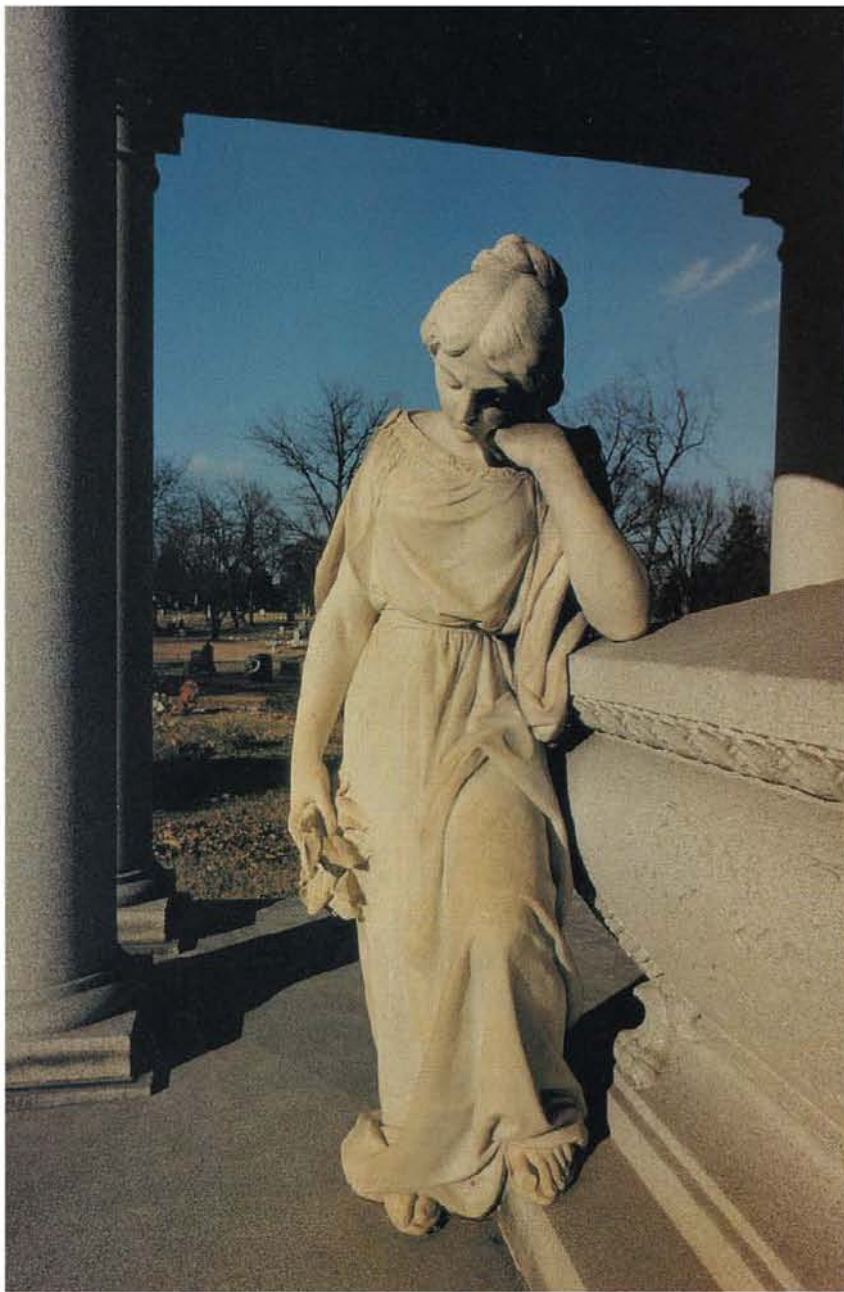
It is typical of Eggleston to be offended at the suggestion that he had done in public what a southern gentleman, like himself, has the good manners to keep private. And the more one knows about him, the more an exchange

The house at Walnut Grove (left).

Right, top to bottom: two cockatiels at the Midtown house Eggleston shares with Lucia Burch; Civil War memorabilia in the Midtown house's front hall; Eggleston, his wife, Rosa, and his daughter, Andra, in Walnut Grove.

Photographs by MAUDE SCHUYLER CLAY





*Eggleston is
"of a generation that's living
on the crack of history."*

of gunfire between consenting adults seems nothing much to be ashamed of. A gothic celebration of absurdity, along with a penchant for violence, can be found in many of his pictures as well. Like Faulkner, he has shot holes in the fine plaster walls of the Old South, and documented a land of shopping centers and suburban tract homes that many of his neighbors would rather ignore. He has a shared history with the people and sites he portrays. And Eggleston's eye, without losing sight of the grotesque, forgives; he finds amazing harmonies in the most unlikely places.

As Eudora Welty writes in her introduction to his recent book, *The Democratic Forest*, "We have become used to what we live with, calloused (perhaps in self-protection) to what's happened to the world outside our door, and we now accept its worsening. But the Eggleston vision of his world is clear, and clarifying to our own. . . . What is there, however strange, is accepted without question; familiarity will be what overwhelms us."

William Eggleston is an artist who has traveled from infamy to immortality with few watering holes in between. His sensational one-man debut at the Museum of Modern Art in 1976 incited the kind of vicious scorn that rarely unites the art world anymore. Art critic Hilton Kramer fumed that the pictures were "perfectly boring." Owen Edwards in *The Village Voice* found in the work "little more than glossy pretension." Gene Thornton, the photography critic at *The New York Times*, reported it as "the most hated show of the year."

"There wasn't any positive feedback," remembers Walter Hopps, Eggleston's longtime friend and supporter. "I hadn't seen anything so inflammatory since Warhol in '62 and '63. It was horrible. They called it 'cracker chic.'"

The 75 photographs shown, edited from 375 pictures shot primarily between 1969 and 1971, and then further edited to 48 pictures for the accompanying book, *William Eggleston's Guide*, were so devoid of normal artistic affection that almost everyone was baffled or enraged. The subjects were simple to the point of inscrutability: a tricycle seen from ground level; the tiled walls



*This page: inside
the Midtown house.
Opposite:
a photograph by
Eggleston published
in *Faulkner's
Mississippi*.*

of a shower; the inside of an oven; an evening meal set for one; and an eerie cast of characters, some of them lost in America, others just hanging out.

Most shocking of all, everything was in *color*. Nearly all serious photographers up to that time had preserved their most lasting thoughts in black and white, where the chromatics of the natural world could be reduced to a narrow band of grays. Unreliable until the technology improved in the sixties, color was chosen mainly to punch up a scene—garishly, for effect, by artists of questionable character. Walker Evans summarized the matter for many: "Color photography is vulgar."

Eggleston's color was different. The subjects in his photographs were rendered with a palette so ordinary it was startling. The ham, baked potato, and iced tea on the dining-room table were laid out as nothing more than another heavy, lonely, southern meal. The shower's green tile had the faded grottness of something used every day for years—the way all showers look after a while. Everything seemed as foreign and yet perfectly plain as a family album found in the drawer of a peculiar neighbor. There was also something disturbing suggested by the images, something ominous. The empty shower brought to mind a torture chamber; a blood-red ceiling exploded like a violent hallucination; the open black oven could have been a suicide's last glimpse of the world.

Now, fifteen years after his scandalous premiere, Eggleston has been embraced by critics and museums. *The Democratic Forest* (1989), his first commercially published book since the MOMA show, was one of the best-received collections of the year. Andy Grundberg, photography critic of *The New York Times*, dubbed Eggleston "one of the medium's rare geniuses." In a show that opens on September 26 at the Museum of Modern Art, he will be presented as the key figure in the eighties movement away from street photography and toward personal documentary. In February he will receive a three-hundred-picture exhibition at London's Barbican Centre; van Gogh will be on one floor, Eggleston on the other.

Anyone who spends time with Eggleston exhausts much of it waiting around for him. Born and married into wealth, he has never held a job or met a deadline in his life. He keeps to his own schedule, erratic and nocturnal, and what an art dealer calls his "rock 'n' roll time" has become increasingly hard to synchronize with anyone else's watch. He never would have appeared at his MOMA opening had not friends, who noticed after an hour that the honored artist of the evening had not arrived, retrieved an inebriated Eggleston from his hotel room.

His complex personal life is reflected by surroundings of glorious ruination. A soft-green 1956 Bentley Continental convertible, badly in need of restoration, sits in the garage at Walnut Grove. Scattered around the large rooms of the house, constructed along the lines of an Italian villa, are back issues of *Artforum* and assorted antique cameras. A rare, superb 1957 bottom-loading Canon sits in a fruit bowl; a silver Leica in a plastic bag hides among cereal boxes in the pantry. Stacks of photos lie on the floor and on tables; more bulge from cabinets and drawers. And arrayed on an Oriental rug at the foot of the stairs (*Continued on page 238*)

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(Continued from page 220) in the huge sunken living room are six antique shotguns. He never really explains why.

Walnut Grove also features a Japanese baby grand and a harpsichord missing several strings; the Midtown house has a nine-foot Baldwin concert grand. Waiting for him downstairs at Midtown one evening, I stumbled through a few bars of a Bach fugue. When he came down half an hour later, he played back the phrases, transposed to another key, adding flourishes of his own. Self-taught, he doesn't

read music well. But he improvises easily on a classical repertoire. "I'm also transcribing some Beethoven symphonies for fun," he told me.

Eggleston's handling of a gun or a camera or stereo speakers (both homes have state-of-the-art models he designed himself) is something to see. "When you give him a piece of equipment he feels it all over," says the photographer Lee Friedlander. "He's like a blind man." Coming downstairs from his nap at one point, he breaks open a shotgun for my inspection. In

a few seconds he has disassembled the firing mechanism and handed me each tiny part. "I like the technology of guns," he says. "The precision."

His taste in music and his technical sensibility, like his formal clothes, are out of sync with his delinquent nightlife. But together with the well-deserved reputation for drunken unseemliness (he casually figures he's been jailed about a dozen times) are a modesty and a sweetness that allow Eggleston's friends to overlook his obvious shortcomings. Missing from both his

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houses are copies of his own books. Astonishingly generous and forgetful, he has given away limited-edition portfolios, prints, and expensive cameras to girlfriends or to people he brings back from the bar. After a night of hell-raising, he will clear his head in the morning and photograph flowers.

Even his longtime friend the novelist and historian Shelby Foote, who is rarely at a loss for words, can't resolve the contradictions. "Bill is a mystery, a specter, a true original," says Foote. "He is very southern, from good people, conscious of all the amenities. But he's an artist and, in the South, that introduces complications."

Separating the degenerate gentleman from the provocative artist is a daunting task. Eggleston likes to rattle people's cages. Tom Young, an artist and old friend, tells about photographing with him a few years ago in Dallas. "He was taking pictures on someone's front lawn and this elderly woman came out, quite upset, and wanted to know what he was doing. He said he had just bought up all the property in the neighborhood and he'd have her out of there in a week."

Sometimes Eggleston parades around Memphis in a black SS overcoat. Mark Holborn, the English editor who put together *The Democratic Forest*, tells of the afternoon, after a gun fair, Eggleston pulled into a gas station in his Nazi getup. He waited for the attendant to approach the car and notice the SS insignia and the backseat, which was filled with every kind of firearm imaginable, including a few hand grenades, before saying with a smile, "Fill 'er up." Then he drove off to see his mother. "Had to show Mother," Eggleston explains to me.

The social movements that have transformed the country since the sixties, such as civil rights and feminism, seem to have barely grazed his consciousness. He sees nothing wrong in taking an assignment in South Africa and can identify to a disturbing degree with the Afrikaners. "It's no more segregated than the world I grew up in," he says. "Most of the violence is black-against-black, anyway." When I object to this canard, he quickly retreats. "I know," he says, shaking his head. "It's a complete mess."

When it comes to politics or money, Eggleston is hopeless. But he is also sensitive enough to know how much he has been marked by birth with the values of a white, high-born southerner. His work is

shot through with ambivalence about his surroundings. Like Faulkner, he refuses to apologize for the life of his ancestors, even though he knows that it's doomed and, in many ways, justly so.

"He's of a generation living on the crack of history," says Holborn. "It's like Russia in 1861, after the emancipation of the serfs, when the estates were breaking up. The plantation families Bill knew as a child have moved, their houses are mortgaged. He knows his children will never live as he does, partly because of the way he's behaved. There's a lot of despair in Bill. He's living with a lot of pain."

Born in Memphis in 1939, Eggleston grew up a two-hour drive away, in Sumner, Mississippi, a small town dominated by the courthouse where his grandfather Judge Joseph A. May presided for three decades. Eggleston's father, a native of the Delta, married Ann May, a daughter of the judge. Trained as an engineer at Rice University but given a farm to run by his father-in-law, he tried his hand at cotton, and failed. (The Mays' ancestral plantation, Mayfair, is the opening picture in *The Democratic Forest*.)

Eggleston describes his father, who died in 1965, as "a particularly good-natured man." His mother, eighty this year, is "very hard for an outsider to figure out," says her son. "She can put on a completely different façade at will." Walter Hopps says that she "is very much a lady. But she also looks as if she could have led a regiment of the Confederate Army." (Eggleston's mother and both his sisters live in Memphis.)

An unusual child and adolescent, "very brilliant, very strange, separate from his confreres," according to his mother, Eggleston loved to play the piano, draw, build electronic gadgets. He was always visual rather than verbal—"I can't write a word," he says; "I buy postcards and then I never know what to do with them"—and he went through a phase when he cut out anything green from books and magazines. "I liked that color green that you used to see in comic books when someone is handed a dollar—that green."

He had a sense of distance from his environs early on. An audiophile as a teenager, he would place hidden microphones around the house. Caldecott Chubb, a former benefactor and now a Hollywood producer, says Eggleston once played him a secret tape of a drunken family conversation at a Thanksgiving meal; Eggleston had bugged the lamp over the dining-room table. "He played it as some kind of evidence," says

Chubb, "as something funny and terrible, like a flood or a volcano, that he was observing from far away. Bill can be cruel."

At fifteen, after his father had a stroke, he was sent away to the Webb School in Bell Buckle, Tennessee, a place for sons of the southern upper class and an institution, according to Eggleston, with a totally undeserved reputation for learning. "It had a kind of Spartan routine to 'build character,'" he says. "I never have known what that was supposed to mean. It was so callous and dumb. It was the kind of place where it was considered effeminate to like music or painting."

Atypical of the southern male, Eggleston doesn't gamble, hunt, or follow sports. "The problem with hunting is the company," he says. "There are a lot of just outright assholes." He proudly claims never to have done a push-up in his life. "To watch three straight hours of football on TV, that's my idea of hell," he says. "Sitting in a bus station, looking at people for three hours—that's enjoyable."

Never academically inclined, he attended Vanderbilt University in Nashville for a year, Delta State College in Cleveland, Mississippi, for a semester, and ended up at the University of Mississippi in Oxford for about five years, failing to graduate. "I went to class, but I never saw the point in taking a test," he says. "I still don't."

Somewhere along the way, however, he found himself as an artist. During his first year of college, a friend had bought him a Leica. A "perfect picture" he took of the Parthenon in Nashville and the discovery of Cartier-Bresson's book *The Decisive Moment* hooked him on photography. At Ole Miss he had his first art classes, a liberating experience, and in 1959 he met Tom Young, a visiting painter from New York, who introduced him to Abstract Expressionism.

Young was impressed by Eggleston's photos and offered some advice. "He was doing interesting imitations of Cartier-Bresson, but I told him he was missing what was around him. And he said, 'I don't particularly like what's around me.' I said that could be a good reason to take pictures. And he said, 'You know, that's not a bad idea.' Bill doesn't always have a great respect for things, so he can see them for what they are."

Bill met Rosa, the daughter of a family with thousands of acres in the Delta, when he was seventeen and she was thirteen. As a teenager, she spent weekends at his parents' house in Sumner. According to friends, they remain bound by ties of family, land, progeny, and local history that

ney, Larry Sultan, and Nan Goldin. "Photography has shown us the life of the street and the private life of the poor," he says. "But the social relationship between photographer and subject was not level. With Eggleston, it's level. The work that's in the *Guide* is the first attempt to photograph from the inside."

Mark Holborn, who is organizing next year's Barbican retrospective, is Eggleston's new "patron," a job with unique risks. "It can be very entertaining, very romantic, and then very dangerous," he says. Once, on a visit to Memphis, he was talking on the phone when Eggleston shot it off the wall. But like so many people, Holborn forgives the insanity.

"People feel lucky to know Bill," says the writer Stanley Booth. "Everything he has ever done he's done because he has to. He's wild as a goat, and he loves to play the outlaw, the scaramouch. But when he's dead—and contrary to the way he acts, Bill won't live forever—there will be those thousands of prints."

Eggleston seems to have cut a wide swath through the female population of Memphis. "There are young women all over the city with Egglestons on their walls," says Maude Clay. "He gives

them photographs whenever he has to apologize for one of his transgressions."

He may have met his match, however, with Viva, the actress-writer-Warhol creation who calls Eggleston "an exaggeration of the worst in every man." They were introduced in New York just before his 1976 MOMA show. "I remember I went up the stairs to this apartment uptown to meet Bill," she says, "and he was playing the piano, music wafting down. He claimed he had composed the music for me—although he'd just met me." The evening concluded in the gutter outside Elaine's. "He was white as a sheet from some combination of pills and alcohol, and he started throwing up when we got outside," she says. "He had his hand on my arm and he kept saying, 'Honey, you sure are a strong woman.'"

Asking one about the other provokes lots of exasperated laughter, as though each had never had more trouble or more fun with anyone else. "She's totally impossible," says Eggleston. "She's the sort of person, if you're with her at a dinner party, she's liable to say to the hostess, 'My girlfriend says your husband has a really big cock.'"

They would travel around the South by car, listening to his *Gone with the*

Wind sound track (one of his musical phases) and stopping to take pictures. Viva's young daughter would come along, too. At the lectures he gave at colleges in the wake of his MOMA show, Viva heckled him from the audience. "He loved it that I would ridicule everything," she says.

But after a couple of years it became clear to Viva, as it does to every woman who falls for Eggleston, that he had no intention of divorcing his wife. Caldecott Chubb remembers one evening at the Chelsea Hotel when Viva would not let up on the subject of marriage. "Bill was drunk and he just looked at her and said, 'Honey, you're a six-part fugue and even Bach never wrote more than five.' Which didn't mollify her a bit."

"If a man is as creative and sensitive as Bill, everyone allows him excess insanity," says Viva. "Someone should take those guns away from him. You have to treat him like a two-year-old."

In the late 1970s she left New York briefly for Los Angeles, largely to get away from him. He rented a place for her there, visited a few times, but the relationship had run its course. "He still calls me constantly and tells me he's in love with my twenty-year-old daughter," says Viva

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nervously. "He'll call up and say, 'Where's my bride?'"

"I miss him a lot," she says, sighing deeply. "Today, everything's more vulgar, stupid, money-oriented. You miss Bill more because he's just the opposite. I never felt crazy around Bill. . . . Tell him to call me, O.K.?"

Eggleston's eccentric double life is documented in a series of black-and-white videotapes that he shot in 1973 and 1974 around Memphis, Mississippi, and New Orleans. He calls the tapes "Stranded in Canton," named after a character in New Orleans who riffs on this phrase in a long rambling monologue. The eight hours of partially edited material, never publicly available, offer the most extended view of the aberrant world he inhabited. Caldecott Chubb lent me a copy; Eggleston couldn't find his.

It was a time, he says, when "the drug culture in Memphis was moving from an interesting phase [LSD] to an uninteresting one [Quaaludes]." Eggleston, who was never an acidhead, differed with the hippies of that day not so much over their drug policy as their dress. "I was older and I liked suits and ties," he says. "I couldn't stand hippie clothes." He is also quickly bored by what he calls "socialist talk."

But throughout the seventies and to this day, Eggleston has been partial to pills. He is on a first-name basis with George Nichopoulos, better known as "Dr. Nick," who kept Elvis doped with barbiturates. "Percodan was my drug of choice," confides Eggleston. According to Chubb, he and Eggleston routinely mixed Quaaludes and alcohol—a toxic cocktail. "If there were any retribution in this world, we'd both be dead," Chubb says. "But as they say, Bill was 'born to be hung.'"

Eggleston denies rumors that he shot heroin. He rolls up his sleeve for me one morning to prove he has no track marks. "Look," he says, proud of a vein at his elbow that's as fat as a night crawler. "That's a perfect vein. Junkies go crazy when they see this."

The videotapes have a dazed quality, long stretches of time when not much seems to be happening. The influence of *cinéma vérité*, and of Garry Winogrand's photos of bodies crowded together, can be felt. Most of the footage seems as personal and unknowable as a demented home

movie. Scenes vary crazily in feeling: an episode of swooning tenderness with two of his children, Andra and Winston, relaxing dreamily in front of the camera, is intercut with aimless anecdotes told by lecherous old raconteurs; a drunken party in a bar, featuring someone's off-key rendition of an obscure country ballad called "Love for the Asking," is followed by a man pissing outdoors and sticking a beer bottle up his behind. There are murky bits of sudden violence: a geek bites the head off a chicken and drinks its blood in front of a cheering crowd on a street in New Orleans; a man fires a gun in a room full of people and then smashes out the camera's light. The filmmaker watches all without judgment.

Tedious as much of the video is, it also shows a fearless naturalism—a belief that by looking patiently at what others ignore or look away from, interesting things can be seen. In need of further editing, it's part of something larger in his life—another chapter in the southern novel he has been making since the late sixties.

During my visit, Eggleston was on one of his periodic "cleanup" campaigns. The many trips to the pharmacy were, he told me, to pick up medication to combat alcoholism. He sounded serious about reforming. Because he prints almost everything he shoots, his processing bills alone run into the tens of thousands of dollars every year (he never develops or prints his own material but relies on specialists). Last year he had to sell "a BMW and some Mercedes," reducing himself to a pair of old Cadillacs.

His real concern, however, seems to be the belated realization that his work has been seen and appreciated by too few. The book published last year, *Faulkner's Mississippi*, with a text by Willie Morris, is Eggleston's most openly sumptuous and accessible. He notices the nondescript poetry of roadways, boarded-up buildings, and flowering shrubs. A police cruiser viewed through a filthy, upstairs window could be the opening scene of a short story. Behind a grand piano topped with candelabra comes a blast of sunlight through a rickety shutter. The golden, stifling southern sun embraces nearly every picture.

The connections between Eggleston and Faulkner made the project inevitable. When Eggleston's mother was young, Faulkner's brother took her flying in his plane, and Eggleston himself is a dear friend of Faulkner's niece. And both artists have enjoyed unsavory reputations. "Respectability destroys one," said Faulkner, whose Delta neighbors never

understood his books or his behavior. Eggleston feeds local resentment by turning up half-crocked at receptions and shunning other photographers. He also shows signs of abusing his gifts. When I was with him, he began to photograph one evening in a restaurant without using the viewfinder; he claimed he didn't need to look anymore. "There's a feeling that he's laughing at the whole game," says Pete Ceren, who teaches photography in Memphis. "There's a pride in seeing what he can get away with. The medium isn't treated with respect."

The aloofness that Faulkner's friends understood as a mask for shyness also applies to Eggleston. "He drinks to screw his courage to the wall," says Maude Clay. "I don't know why he's so damn shy, but he is." Eggleston identifies with Faulkner's ugly drinking habits. "I'll wake up some days and think, I'm gonna get drunk today," he says. "It's not just, I think I'll have a cocktail before dinner. Faulkner took drunk the same way."

But the strongest link between writer and photographer comes from the modern light they have thrown on a region of America that, until they came along, was content to imagine itself still living in the time of Sir Walter Scott. The weird currents that suffuse Faulkner's novels pulse through Eggleston's pictures. *Red Ceiling*, perhaps his most reproduced image, was taken in the room of a good friend who was later murdered, his house burned down. His kinky sexual habits supposedly incurred the wrath of his neighbors. The case was never solved.

Willie Morris has written that Eggleston's "depiction of the rural Southern countryside speaks eloquently of the fictional world of Faulkner and, not coincidentally, the shared experience of almost every Southerner. Oftentimes lurid, always lyrical, his stark realism resonates with the language and tone of Faulkner's greatest work, invoking the mythical cosmos of Yoknapatawpha County. . . . The work of Bill Eggleston would have pleased Bill Faulkner. . . immensely."

As you drive south down Highway 61 with Memphis behind you, the road flattening out in every direction to the horizon, you understand how few of the usual visual props Eggleston has to work with. Like a Dutch landscape painter in the seventeenth century, he has to contend with country that lacks towering buildings, masses of people, mountains, or forests—any of the elements that artists have always relied on.

For years, Eggleston's notoriety as a

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wastrel prevented sober assessments of his massive output. But there has been a gradual realization that even his most offhand pictures are highly organized, the colors and perspectives thought-out, the meanings as odd and rich as a good poem. His latest books, made up to some degree

from photographs he took years ago, reveal him to be more of a romantic than a satirist, a landscape artist of deep originality. His roaming eye, which sees pictures in the bare sky or in the weeds beneath his feet, from a child's view and through a lens, darkly, is engaged in a lifelong project to map the world—its ceiling fixtures, mud puddles, and parking lots.

In the afterword to *The Democratic*

Forest, Eggleston discusses a trip on a back road in Mississippi, a typical day of photographing among some dead leaves: "It seemed like nothing, but of course there was something for someone out there." Eggleston doesn't try to hype what he sees. He photographs what's there, what no one else would even think to look at, and, better than anyone else, he makes something out of almost nothing. □