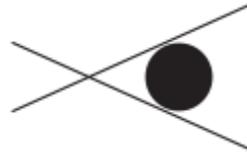


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Roe Ethridge is a Good Southern Boy

The influential photographer, who once worked for JCPenney's, riffs on nostalgic Americana.

By William J. Simmons



Roe Ethridge, *Me and Auggie*, 2015

Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

Few contemporary photographers are as productively resistant to categorization as Roe Ethridge, which likely made Kevin Moore's task of curating Ethridge's mid-career retrospective a herculean task. *Roe Ethridge: Nearest Neighbor*, currently on view at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, brings together the wide range of his enigmatic pictures in an unconventional manner with little discernable organization. This suits Ethridge's characteristically paradoxical style—a combination of deadpan and emotional imagery that is neither documentary nor romantic, but sometimes a bit of both. I recently spoke with Ethridge about the multifaceted roots of his practice and his interests in classical music, David Lynch, Andy Warhol, and Lee Friedlander.

William J. Simmons: I'd be interested to hear about your relationship to conceptualism versus your relationship to documentary photography, and how this plays out in your current exhibitions.

Roe Ethridge: I'll go back to this critical moment of me coming out of art school in Atlanta. At that time, I would have called myself a Conceptual artist using photography, even though going further back to when I started, all I wanted to do was be a photographer. During that time in the early 1990s, I was exposed to the Düsseldorf School through Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky—the Becher students. It was clarifying. It eliminated some of the things associated with being in the South—romantic subjects, selective focus. Or maybe I was exhausted by the dampness, and the rot, and a romantic re-envisioning of a Walker Evans black-and-white, large format photograph. Even with William Eggleston, who was coming through as an influence, I was trying to hold off the seduction of the 35mm that you hold to your eye. I wanted to do something more structural. There was something about those Thomas Ruff portraits and buildings that made so much sense to me.

But I think my first loves were Lee Friedlander and Andy Warhol. Only recently have I been able to let those two names come out together. That almost tells the whole story right there. It's Lee Friedlander and Andy Warhol—this droll, dry mirror but with composition and content. There's some concept, there's some color, there's an eye. You can see the two trajectories, and they overlap in the concrete poetry that happens in a Friedlander photograph or Warhol's Brillo boxes.

After getting my BFA, I started assisting catalog photographers in Atlanta. That's the big photo industry there. I wanted to work in that industry, and I liked that it was the lowest common denominator form of photography, where the aesthetic was only 5 percent of it. The pragmatics of getting it done in a day, or getting the lights so you could see no shadow on the bra, were more important.



Roe Ethridge, Nancy with Polaroid, 2003–6
Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

Then I moved to New York and started working almost immediately as a commercial photographer. I kept wondering, When are they going to ask me for my license? I'm going to get in trouble! [Laughs.] But I never did. The New York Times sent me checks, and I thought, Oh my God. I just paid my rent as a photographer in New York. I was showing my

work, and, at the same time, I was doing this commercial stuff and I realized that sometimes the commercial images were just so much better than my own ideas. I began to see myself as an editor, like Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, with their processes of selection and appropriation.

At the same time I was reading Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman*, which is about a dude from the South who is going to Princeton. He's from the South. He's around New York. I could relate to that notion of being a "good southern boy" in the biggest, baddest city. So the character in the story keeps going into these fugue states, which I guess was a thing that happened to people more often in the forties and fifties than it does now. It's characterized by far flung travel in an amnesiac state. He kept waking out of this state on a Civil War battlefield in Virginia. At the time I was reading the book, I was going to Lexington, Virginia, to visit friends. I was homesick for Atlanta. So, in this Walker Percy book, he's talking about the fugue as a mental state. It turns out a fugue is also a musical composition that Bach pioneered.

Glenn Gould famously played Bach's Goldberg Variations. Basically, it's two keyboards and he's playing two at one time. The music, ironically, is the length of a pop song! You start off with a run, a line of notes. So one hand is playing one line of notes, and the other hand is playing another line of notes. And it goes through these variations fifteen times. The keyboards are playing over each other, and there's this harmony and disharmony. It seems like some things are left to chance and some things are quite intentional, and for me, getting to that place of the musical definition just made everything click. I thought, That is what I'm doing. That's what I'm up to. It's more about that sound, the harmony, and disharmony, rather than making meaning or illustrating a thesis. It's synesthesia. It's a feeling. It's a sound. It's a vibration. It's not a project. And so all of those things are coming into my young thirty-ish mind at the same time.

All of a sudden, I was like, I'm a photographer, but I'm also an editor. I'm also a lousy conceptual artist or whatever! [Laughs.] I'm a colorist. I'm a pictorialist. I'm a commercial photographer. Suddenly I was allowed to do all of that stuff at the same time.



Roe Ethridge, *Coke Bottles*, 2015

Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

Simmons: That is almost made literal in your 2016 book, *Neighbors*, where it starts out in the way that you might assume a normal photobook would, but then you have a movement between those categories, as you described, and a rejection of hierarchies. The images are very disparate. So is this project an illustration of that elimination of hierarchies?

Ethridge: I suppose so, although I don't like the idea of an illustration.

Simmons: Well, maybe not an illustration, but a literalization.

Ethridge: Let's look at it this way: This is, as far as Kevin Moore and I were concerned, a thematic survey show. It may not seem quite so because there is so much disparate imagery. In *Neighbors*, "Nearest Neighbor" is just a middle section of the book. I was really trying to avoid having this survey show act as the final word. The idea of the book was to problematize the finality of a retrospective and, in a poetic way, to talk about other aspects of what I'm doing as an artist, photographer, father, and storyteller. There were also very grounded things like the kids and me on a walk, and the animals at the sanctuary—two very childlike, very earthbound, things. So there's a constant juxtaposition.

As far as the salon aspect of the layout, and the hierarchies of it, it was very quickly arranged, on purpose, so that it wouldn't get a chance to get too organized, though we had already done a layout of the show and knew what images would go into which rooms. So the spreads do relate to the groupings of the images.



Roe Ethridge, Thanksgiving 1984 (table), 2009
Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

Simmons: Your discussion of music and improvisation reminds me of the scene where they discuss the tritone in Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac*, and in some way, André Breton's

notion of convulsive beauty—the obsolete train that can no longer make noise and steam. Do you consider yourself a composer?

Ethridge: Photographic images started working like songs for me. The white cube and the white wall created this place sequencing. That sequence is a lot like writing music—what song follows what, or what sounds follows what. I played in bands in my twenties. I can sort of read music, but it's mostly self-taught. I mean, I played trombone in sixth grade. [Laughs.] That was embarrassing. It sucks to carry a trombone home in sixth grade.



Roe Ethridge, *Durango in the Canal*, Belle Glade, FL, 2011
Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

Simmons: That reminds me—I'm interested in hearing more about your relationship to nostalgia.

Ethridge: Well, I think there's a difference between the romantic or nostalgic and the personal. I'm interested in weird America, David Lynch, German objective photography. How am I going to talk about the suburbs and my generic whiteness without coming off like a total dick? I need to address this identity. It's a problem. It's like a vacuum—the script that I was handed by my family and that particular southern Christian “good boy” bullshit. It is such a bad script! I'm so glad that it didn't happen. But I'm also reconciling with that identity. It's part of the work in a way, too, but I think I'm talking about the mall, and not

the country. I'm talking about working at JCPenney's as a senior in high school, and then assisting catalog photographers making JCPenney's catalogs. That's a weird serendipity. One of the structural models that we were working with on the show was the notion of the department store.

Simmons: No wonder you brought up David Lynch!

Ethridge: There's the hardware store in the beginning of *Blue Velvet*! It's kind of like a pastiche of a Norman Rockwell, but it scares the fuck out of you, or it makes you cry. *Blue Velvet* is effective in a way, because it is stylized with nostalgic Americana. Then Lynch brings in other things that juxtapose with it and put these themes in stark relief.



Roe Ethridge, Refrigerator, 1999

Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

Simmons: This feels like what you are doing. You can either resist nostalgia or radically choose to fall into it. A lot of your images are intensely emotional, and affecting, and beautiful. But at the same time, you leave room for people to view them ironically.

Ethridge: You have to decide what kind of person you are. I'd like to help people understand the work, but by letting it float, there's a risk that's interesting to me. It's like seeding for the future, and I love that—the idea that it will unfold over time or open up to you on a third read or later when you look at it again.

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Roe Ethridge: Nearest Neighbor is on view at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, through March 12, 2017 and is part of the FotoFocus Biennial, a regional, monthlong celebration of photography and lens-based art in Cincinnati, Ohio.