

High colour

William Eggleston changed the face of photography with his startling shots of seemingly ordinary American life. In a rare interview, he talks to Lucy Davies about his extraordinary vision – and how Quaaludes and bourbon informed it



Photographs by William EGGLESTON Portrait by Jake RANFORD

ABOVE: Untitled, c. 1966-71. OPPOSITE: William Eggleston



BELOW: Untitled, 1973 – one of these two friends, Lesa (on right), was a cousin of Eggleston's. OPPOSITE: Untitled, c. 1983-86 – a portrait of the photographer's son Winston



It happens to be silent-movie day on William Eggleston's preferred TV channel when I arrive at his apartment in midtown Memphis. Earlier, he tells me, he'd been watching one about Napoleon, though the face on screen now belongs to Gloria Swanson, her vast eyes flittering and blinking, in a thousand tiny adjustments.

To the score of tiptoeing oboes and yearning strings, smoke from Eggleston's American Spirit cigarettes, most burnt black to the filter, rolls sluggishly towards the open window. Five floors below, the virgin forest and glittering greensward of Overton Park unspool into the afternoon sun.

Eggleston – the scion of cotton-growing aristocracy in the Mississippi Delta, the legendary artist who is considered the father of serious colour photography – will be 80 in July. He is thin but not weedy, and tall. Later,

I ask how tall, apropos of chat concerning his dislike (putting it mildly) of 'blue jeans' (his term; accent on the blue) – a garment he is, he says derisively, 'several notches above wearing'. He would look ridiculous, he insists. 'Not that I don't now.'

Ridiculous is not a word you would ever use to describe this eyeful of a man, or his attire. Eccentric, perhaps, if you take into account the silver-top walking cane ('It doesn't have a dagger inside,' he says, apologetically), and a pair of gold opera glasses on the sofa beside him. 'For watching television,' he says, noticing me looking at them, though I think he is joking.

In person, he is genteel and precise, if sometimes ill at ease, apt to pull down an iron curtain of silence when the mood takes him. His shirt is crisp and ferociously white; his shoes are polished and show not a crease or

a scuff. His suit trousers (formerly Savile Row, though these days more likely to be by his friend Stella McCartney) are cut to perfection, cloaking a pair of long, elegant legs. He wears his pink polka-dotted navy silk bow tie undone, as is his custom.

Over the years, Eggleston has been likened to the rakish Rhett Butler from *Gone with the Wind* (released the year he was born, in 1939) and Basil Rathbone (the same tight jaw and piercing eyes). There's a dash of Gregory Peck, too, particularly in the eyebrows, which, once Eggleston is a bourbon down, begin to leap around his forehead in the manner of air quotes. 'If I was as dramatic-looking as Bill Eggleston,' his friend the pop artist Ed Ruscha once remarked, 'I'd probably do nothing but photograph myself.'

We have met, ostensibly at least, to talk about some



of his early photographs, which are about to be exhibited at David Zwirner in London, the dealer to whom he defected from Gagosian three years ago.

The pictures, from a series titled *Two and One Quarter*, have been culled from many thousands he made between 1966 and 1971 with a Hasselblad camera (he usually favours a Leica, though owns practically every film camera ever made). They range all over the US, but were chiefly taken in and around Memphis and the Delta, where, bar a stint in New York's Chelsea Hotel in the 1970s and trips to Europe and the Far East, he has lived most of his life.

Eggleston and I look through the proof prints together. 'Let me tell you a story I think you'd like,' he says, remembering the dancer Marcia Hare, whose breeze-blown hair and heavy-lidded eyes gaze up at

us from the table. She's the one he later photographed stretched out on the grass in a flower-sprigged dress, like some exquisite Pre-Raphaelite corpse. Hare was on Quaaludes at the time, a fashionable sedative that Eggleston and his friends were devoted users of in the 1970s. If you've seen Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*, it's the drug that renders Leonardo DiCaprio unable to speak or walk.

'She called 'em bluebirds,' Eggleston continues, in a sonorous baritone that rumbles around his ribcage. I didn't know what they were, but I said, "Yayess." Back then, I used to think I could dance, but I took that capsule and I couldn't even stand up. Marcia, she used to take them all day long.'

He raises the brimful tumbler of bourbon in his hand. 'This is my drug now, and I don't do anything else. Years ago I tried a little of everything under the sun – a little morphine, but mostly Quaaludes. You shouldn't think of them as like heroin or opium. They just get you high for a while.'

Then: 'Hey kid,' pointing to my glass, 'you having one more?'

'One more,' I say, though it will end up being two. I'm beginning to understand what it might have been like to be in Eggleston's coterie in his 'Wild Bill' days. It's not easy to turn this man down, mostly because when the spirit moves him, he's such an enchanting company.

'Are you going to be hungry?' he asks suddenly. 'Because we can order in. I'm suddenly very rich: Zwirner paid me \$300,000 yesterday because he'd sold a print.'

'Which one?'

'I don't know!'

Eggleston is still taking photographs, though he hasn't taken one today yet. He likes it best when he can be in the passenger seat of a car while someone else is running errands, 'doing what they have to do, so I can just take pictures'.

There are three things viewers usually note when confronted with Eggleston's photographs. First, their ordinary subject matter. Second, their undertow of menace or morbidity. Third, their vibrant, enriched colour, which he achieved via a printing process called 'dye transfer'.

In his pictures, he isolates things we would not commonly look twice at, such as an open freezer, ceiling cables trailing towards a light bulb, or heated hair rollers on top of a lavatory. Simple, you think. Then: too simple, as if maybe you are being tricked. From then, the picture begins to unfold and unfold again. It teems with possible narratives and questions. Questions to which it might be better not to know the answer.

'Everyone, including me, has at one time or another wanted to do that sort of Eggleston picture, but never succeeded,' Eggleston's friend and fellow photographer Juergen Teller (who, in 2007, persuaded Eggleston to pose for a Marc Jacobs campaign, lying on a bed with Charlotte Rampling) has observed. 'It's totally about how he sees things in his mind's eye.'

That 'mind's eye' has puzzled and enraptured critics ever since Eggleston's breakout 1976 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Today, the show is revered as a seminal moment in the history of colour photography, formerly the preserve of shiny-suited types from Madison Avenue. Daring to put colour photos on museum walls sent art types into fits. The *New York Times* called it 'the most hated show of the year'.

The exhibition was the brainchild of MoMA's visionary curator of photography, the late John Szarkowski, on whose desk Eggleston had emptied out his suitcase-



ful of prints in 1971. Was John first to understand how you saw? 'Uh-huh, and some people he introduced me to: Diane [Arbus], Lee [Friedlander].'

Arbus was a particular friend. 'When she killed herself, it was a shock, the last thing I expected, because she was nothing but delightful to be around. I really admired her work. I'd try to drop by and say hello, and she'd show me things. She's a good example of "they just don't make 'em like that any more".'

Born into wealth – his family owned cotton plantations in Tallahatchie County, where his 'granddaddy' was a local judge, in Sumner – he has never had to worry about money or, indeed, do anything he didn't feel like doing. 'Your nonchalance,' I say, 'did you have it as a child? Were you confident in your opinions even then?' 'Yes, Miss Lucy,' he says, suddenly in full Southern mode. 'Well put; that's exactly right.'

His cousin, the photographer Maude Schuyler Clay, remembers him as 'The most interesting man in the whole family... an introvert with an interest in electronics, a kid who built a set of 6ft-high speakers and drove around town in a Ferrari.' His mother described him as 'very brilliant, very strange, separate from his confrères'.

Though his grandfather took snaps, and though Eggleston was given a Brownie Hawkeye when he was 10, he says he was 'not even slightly interested in photography' back then. Instead, aged four, he taught himself the piano. 'Like Mozart,' he says, though his true hero is Bach. A garishly coloured poster of the German composer is pinned to the wall in the apartment.

'For the first year, I would get so mad,' Eggleston says, explaining how he learnt piano, 'because I knew exactly what I wanted to play – the music was near me, if you like – but I didn't know which notes to hit. My mother would have to soothe me. Then, out of the blue, I worked it out. I guess I'm lucky that way.'

I ask if it was like that for him with a camera – that he knew the kinds of pictures he wanted to take before he was able to make them. 'Not so much,' he says. 'With a camera, it really does all the work. You just hit the button.' As if taking photographs that now sell for more than half a million dollars each (as his picture of a child's tricycle did at Christie's in 2012) were the easiest thing in the world.



It wasn't until he was 18 that a friend at Vanderbilt University, Tom Buchanan, persuaded Eggleston that his twin obsessions of electronics and music might mean he had an affinity for photography. Buchanan made him buy a Beauty Canter, the Japanese version of a Leica, and for a time Eggleston fell headlong for the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans and Robert Frank, though what he ended up producing was nothing like theirs at all.

'What I set out to do was produce some colour pictures that were completely satisfying,' he once told another friend, the music journalist Stanley Booth (the story is relayed in Booth's forthcoming book, *Red Hot and Blue*). 'My first tries were ridiculous... I'd assumed that I could do in colour what I could do in black and white, and I got a swift, harsh lesson.'

Booth is privileged. Normally, Eggleston loathes talking about photography. 'The graphic image and words, well, they are two very different animals,' he told me.



FROM TOP: Untitled, c.1966-71. A c.1995 portrait of Eggleston by Eamonn McCabe

Elegant deflections such as these are his stock in trade, but he is known, too, for dangling journalists from a thread, one of whom, so the lore goes, he met at the door with a gun (firearms are a passion and he owns hundreds). His late wife, Rosa, was his partner in crime, casually remarking to another interviewer that Eggleston was colour-blind.

'He damn dropped his glass!' barks Eggleston, clearly amused. 'We'd fixed him a nice bourbon and it was in shards. She had a great sense of humour. You'd have liked her.' He tells me he once bought her an enormously expensive bottle of aged whisky, 'and she took a sip, and said, and I quote verbatim, "Bill, what is this shit?"'

He and the Mississippi Delta princess knew each other from childhood and drove matching powder-blue Cadillacs. 'I've always liked fast cars,' says Eggleston. 'I had a lot of them. Though I don't right now.' According to Booth, who I call to corroborate a couple of tales, that's because 'he's been busted so many times for drunk driving, he's never going to drive again.'

Though Rosa and he were married for 50 years, Eggleston also kept house with Lucia Burch, his mistress, in midtown Memphis. Her attorney father's clients included Jimmy Hoffa, the labour-union godfather, and Martin Luther King; he also had a pet python. There were other liaisons - none serious.

'Bill is a strange bird,' says Booth, when we speak, 'but he's also one of the sweetest people I've ever known.' Tales of their exploits in the dive bars of Memphis are legion. 'He can be kind of wild when he takes the notion,' Booth admits. 'It's amazing that Bill and I are alive at all.'

Back in Eggleston's apartment, we're deep in chat about quantum physics, books about which fill a lot of his time these days, as does lying on the bed 'having thoughts about them'. Eggleston is telling me about his theory that 'the Big Bang is the first instance of a thing being recorded, much in the same way as a camera records a moment in time,' which, in the fug of smoke and bourbon, makes beautiful sense.

Then: 'Where is Mr Percy?'

'I've given him the night off,' shouts Eggleston's assistant, Lesley, from the kitchen (she and his other assistant, Alexandra, take turns each evening to keep

him company when he drinks his prescribed daily ration of Jack Daniel's). Percy is her dog, a fluffy-tailed Australian Shepherd. 'If he walks by here,' rues Eggleston, gesturing at the coffee table, 'he whisks every damn thing off.'

'What does he do on his night off, anyway?' Eggleston shouts back, winking one of his amber-encircled, watery grey eyes in my direction. 'Go out dancing?'



COURTESY OF EGGLESTON ARTISTIC TRUST AND DAVID ZWIRNER. © EGGLESTON ARTISTIC TRUST. GETTY IMAGES



Eggleston and Percy [the Austrian Shepherd dog] seem to have taken a shine to each other. 'I tell you, he understands English'

He and Percy seem to have taken a shine to each other. There is some talk of his coming to the opening party at Zwirner next month. 'I tell you, he understands English,' says Eggleston. 'Two nights ago I was playing the piano [He has a Bösendorfer Grand in his apartment. Installing it required the removal of one of the walls] and I said, "Percy, go play that piece." Later, I heard this strange sound, someone hitting three or four notes at the same time with his fist. Percy was up there, making no sense, musically speaking.

I suppose it might have made sense to him.'

I leave Eggleston settling in to watch *Casablanca*, one of his favourite movies, on his TV. 'They don't come finer than that.'

Outside, the world doesn't look quite the same as it did. I'm not the first to observe that if you spend time with him, you begin to catch a clumsy version of how Eggleston sees, and how painful that might sometimes be. His music-producer friend, the late Jim Dickinson, once said that he thought that might be why Eggleston

drank. 'He wants to get loose of himself... What you're trying to do is communicate this thing in your head that won't leave you alone, but most people are never going to understand it. It's never going to work, but you can't stop doing it.'

Eggleston would probably take a different view. As he once told Booth: 'It doesn't come out worth a damn if you're not having a good time doing it.' ●

William Eggleston's pictures will be exhibited at David Zwirner on 19 April-1 June (davidzwirner.com)