Arts
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Portraiture | Anonymous subjects of the American photographer William Eggleston are named and brought to life in a revealing new show. By *David Chandler*

In living colour

Is there anything new to say about William Eggleston, now so widely known as the godfather of American colour photography? A new exhibition of his photographs at the National Portrait Gallery suggests there is. By focusing only on Eggleston's pictures of people, 100 of which feature in the show, it cuts against the grain of previous retrospective exhibitions to cast new light on his life and work. Indeed, this is Eggleston's very intimate world as it has never been seen before.

Eggleston began making photographs during the early 1960s in and around the city of Memphis, Tennessee, where he was born in 1939. The new exhibition begins there, with some of his earliest black and white experiments on the city streets, and with photographs taken at his grandparents' home in the small town of Sumner, Mississippi. But the show concentrates on his seminal colour photographs from the late 1960s and 1970s, the audacious intensity of which still has the capacity to stop you in your tracks.

It was Eggleston's landmark exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1976 that announced the artist's radically offhand style and his concern with what the show's curator John Szarkowski called, in a beautifully measured phrase, "private, even insular subject matter". But over the years the exact nature of Eggleston's complex, inward-looking world, especially the names and stories of the people who drift in and out of the frame, has been only hinted at.

Eggleston has never encouraged narrative readings of his pictures. Instead, in that blank, insistent use of the word "Untitled", he has directed us away from any social or symbolic interpretations and towards the compound qualities of the photograph itself. The power of Eggleston's attention has always felt like a spell ready to be broken by too much information.

Crucially, in the new NPG show, and for the first time, Eggleston has agreed to the names and biographies of family members and friends being included in the gallery labels. In the process, that long-held sense of insularity begins to open up, and the atmosphere of Eggleston's work subtly shifts. Now the photographs and their captions often invite us to trace the narrative threads of personal relationships, and an anecdotal, diaristic tone begins to undercut the floating anonymity of the pictures and the irreducible intent of Eggleston's mesmerised stare.

We discover, for example, that the elderly woman in a patterned dress, sinking into the equally vivid floral cushions of a rusty garden lounger, is in fact the exquisitely named Devoe Money. The gallery label tells us more: "Devoe Money was distantly related to Eggleston on his father's side." "She was a swell, wonderful person," Eggleston recalls, "very smart, too . . . She was not a rich lady. She didn't inherit a lot. I remember she was active in the little theatre there in Jackson. But there's no money in that."

Clockwise from main: untitled works by William Eggleston taken in 1974 (Karen Chatham, left, with the artist's cousin Lesa Aldridge); 1965; 1969-70 (the artist's uncle with his assistant, Jasper Staples); c1970 (Devoe Money); 1960s; c1971 (Eggleston's wife Rosa and their children)
Wilson Centre for Photography/Eggleston Artistic Trust

Here on the gallery wall, unusually, we find a candid glimpse of Eggleston's world and the echo of his soft, halting Southern speech infusing our time of looking with a sly comedy. It's distracting for the Eggleston aficionado. But we can also enjoy the seduction, as another, more enveloping spell is deftly cast.

There is tension here, too, because even though, with these new revelations, Eggleston is obliging an institution whose interests revolve around biography, identity and celebrity, his photographs of people rarely comply with the expectations of a traditional portrait. One of Eggleston's most influential ideas has been his determination to "photograph democratically", to refine a way of seeing in which everything, however commonplace, however banal, becomes a perfectly viable and equally interesting subject for a picture. According to Eggleston's democratic camera, people are no more or less important than the spaces and things that surround them: a parking lot, a blood-red ceiling, or a swathe of lime-green leatherette.

While it's clear from this exhibition that Eggleston is drawn to strong characters, what matters more to him is what people might look like in a photograph. A person's clothes, their hairstyle, their skin or glistening sweat, are just as likely to provoke Eggleston's selective fascination. Expressions and body shapes matter to him more as form woven into the patchwork details of place, as with his picture of Devoe Money. Or they become signs of unspecified irony and tension, as in the equally famous photograph of two men — one white, one black — standing in a Sumner park, its tension not entirely diffused by the knowledge that this is the photographer's uncle, Adyn Schuyler, and his assistant/driver, Jasper Staples.

And then, of course, there is the sheer fact of colour. Disregarding the spurious link between black and white and authenticity that still dominated the vanguard of documentary photography in the 1960s, and immersing himself in the ordinary, Eggleston was able to reflect how that great chromatic decade permeated far beyond Haight-Ashbury and Madison Avenue into the fabric of American culture. While black and white paradoxically abstracted and aestheticised reality, colour came with its own vernacular authenticity, revealing what Eudora Welty called "the grain of the present".

Colour could be raw, shocking: cruelter than black and white, yet also more voluptuous. Eggleston intuitively grasped how colour could resonate with psychological intensity, and among his pictures of people are some of the simplest yet most powerful of his colour studies. A woman in a bright yellow dress, for example, stands awkwardly, as if suddenly conscious of her own luminosity in that drab suburban street. And, in a beautiful, haunting portrait of Eggleston's wife Rosa and their children, the colour saturation of crimson and navy against an autumnal landscape turns the picture into a weird domestic apparition, spatially and emotionally displaced.

At the centre of *William Eggleston: Portraits*, the artist's video *Stranded in Canton* casts its own silvery glow and contorted soundtrack around the rooms of the exhibition. Made in 1973-74 during wild nights spent in the bars and clubs of the Mississippi basin, from Memphis to New Orleans, and full of sashaying movement and leering faces, it is Eggleston's artistic alter ego, a visceral reality check to offset what photographer Lewis Baltz called, the "ineluctable alienness" of Eggleston's suburban visions: "inviting on their surface, but ice cold at their heart, like images from another planet".

If the photographs in the exhibition register the artist's exacting cast of mind, in *Stranded in Canton* we feel his manic physical presence — the body moving behind the camera, simultaneously part of the action and apart from it, rolling and tumbling but committing everything to memory through the lens.

Its rich biographical textures may significantly alter our understanding of Eggleston's photographs of people, but what emerges most clearly from the NPG's fascinating exhibition is a more rounded, more tangible impression of the artist at the height of his powers. Given that its rationale has depended so much on Eggleston's help and his blessing, it feels like the artist — now in his late seventies — is looking back and taking stock; this show could even be seen as a form of tentative self-portrait.

'William Eggleston: Portraits', National Portrait Gallery, London, to October 23, npg.org.uk

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