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>> IN PLAIN SIGHT

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILLIAM EGGLESTON BY JOHN HOWELL

The first time I saw William Eggleston, he didn't see me.

It was the mid sixties, in Memphis, his hometown, where I was a college student. The places were the Beatnik Manor and the Bitter Lemon, the midcity ground zero of bohemian Memphis. The Manor, a run-down old house, was a crash pad and after-hours party spot, and the nearby Bitter Lemon (opened and run by Manor dwellers) was first a folk, then a psychedelic ice-cream parlor, coffeehouse, and art gallery. This ad hoc cultural complex was the 24/7 laboratory for the Memphis version of sixties counterculture. And a motley crew it was: bearded art-school teachers and long-haired students, preppie slummers (like myself) and runaways, big bikers and exotic

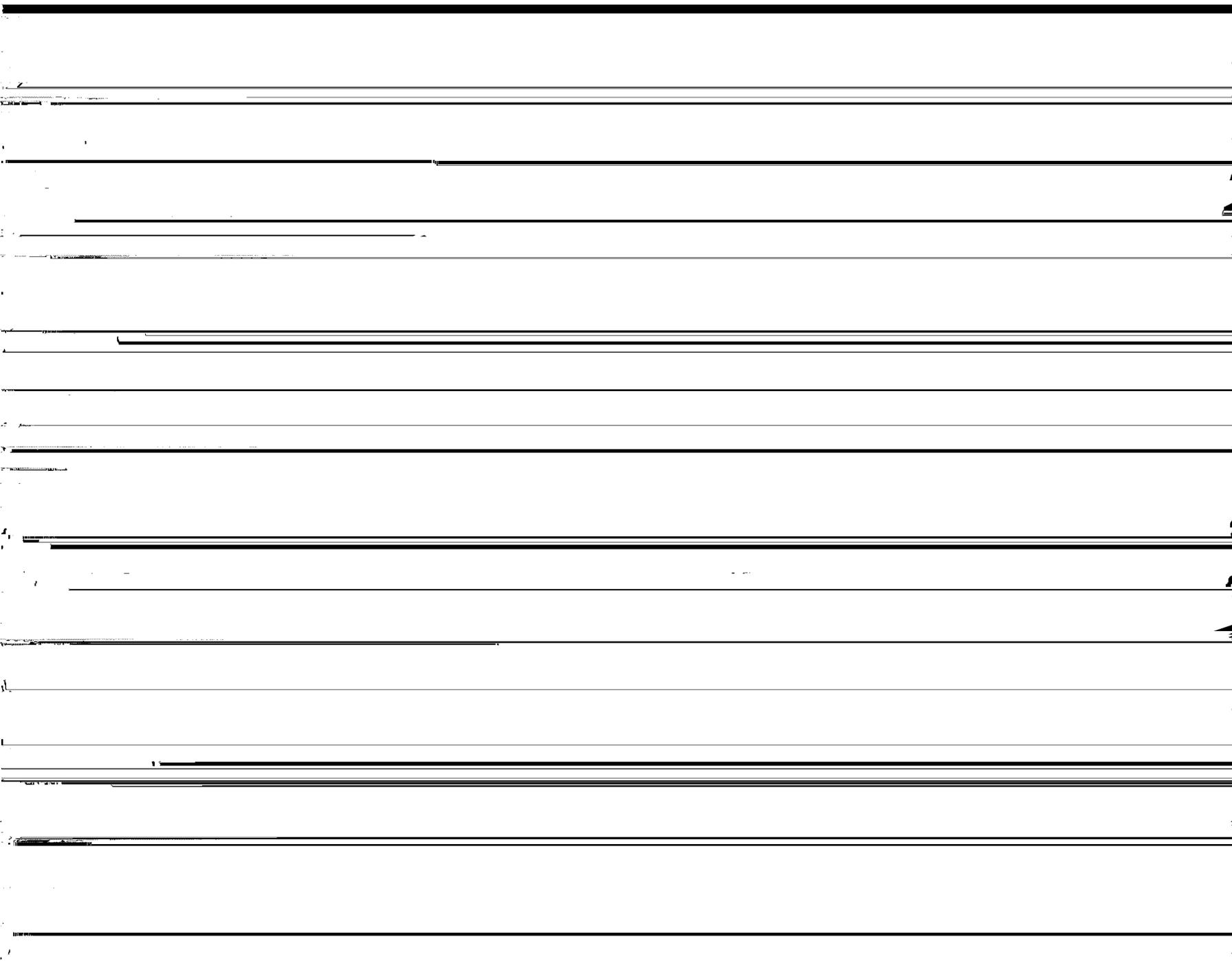
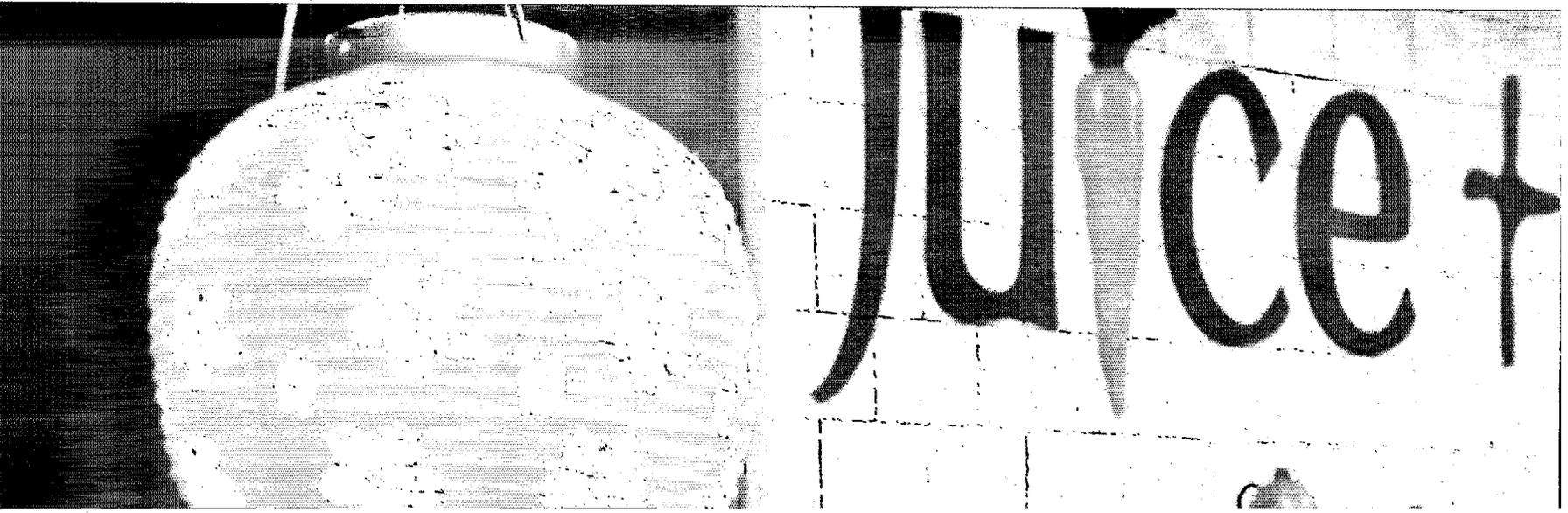
dancers, old black blues singers and young white folk singers, Yankee culture-mongers and drug-addled drifters. What this polyglot crowd shared was a desire to be different in response to seriously changing times. (Dylan had played Memphis by then.) We didn't know it then, but we were deculturalizing.

At the time, I was a wide-eyed, eighteen-year-old voyeur, fascinated enough to visit but spooked enough to stand back from the action. I was there, but kept myself invisible. In the midst of this scene, a very visible man appeared one night in a traditional Southern white suit, iconic in his impeccable Delta cotton-planter style. As the evening went on, it became clear that this improbable figure was perhaps the **(continued on page 7)**











(continued from page 2) freest spirit in a psychic free zone filled with many others working very hard for that status.

"Who," I recall asking someone, "is that?"

"Bill Eggleston," was the answer. "He takes pictures."

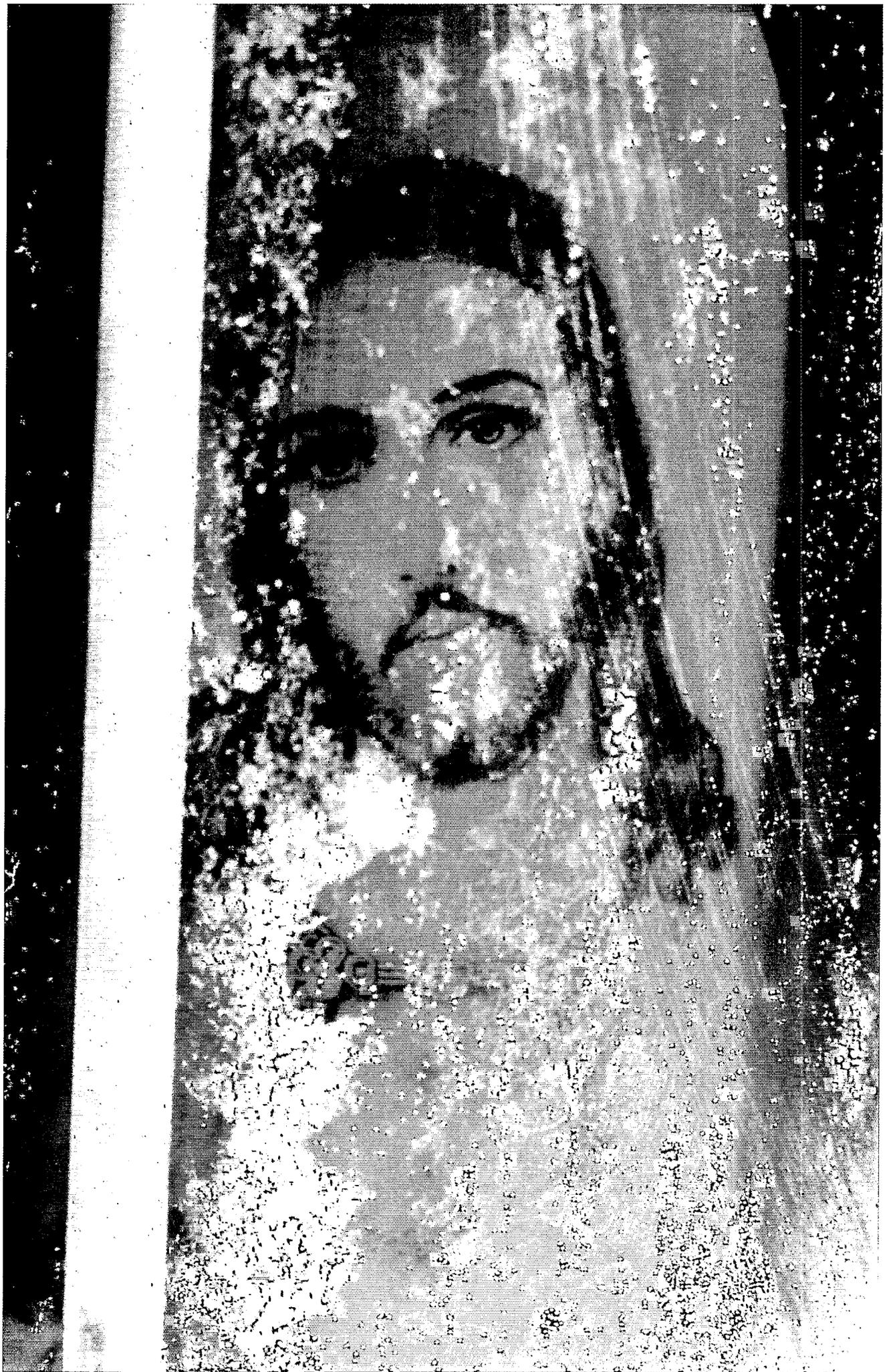
The second time I saw Eggleston, in 1989, he didn't see me—or anyone really, because he wasn't looking. About twenty minutes into *Great Balls of Fire*, the bio-pic about rock madman Jerry Lee Lewis, there's an at-home moment where Lewis's relatives gather around the piano to admire his playing.

Peeking over the heads of several extras in the brief scene is Eggleston (a friend of Jim McBride, the director), dressed in a fifties argyle sweater-vest and looking like Mr. Rogers's weirder twin. Everyone in this basic reaction shot looks down, toward the piano; Eggleston alone turns his head to his right and looks away. Then, a couple of minutes later, Alec Baldwin (as Lewis's cousin/evangelist Jimmy Swaggart) and Dennis Quaid (as Lewis) argue about God, the Devil, and rock 'n' roll. Perfectly framed between them, seated on a chair in front of a window, with white crepe curtains above his head—floating above it like a celestial shroud—sits Eggleston, his eyes closed as if in private reverie. His presence is centered in the shot but he's a sunken figure, seen at waist level behind the two principals, a ghostly one-man chorus, elevating the ersatz theological debate to its properly Manichean heights by his silent, unseeing witness.

Over the years, as I lived in New York and moved in art circles, I followed Eggleston's career as it exploded into sight with the now-legendary 1976 Museum of Modern Art show of "perfect" (according to then-curator John Szarkowski) color photography, and kept up with his work through the infrequent but always revelatory gallery shows that followed. I also learned more about Eggleston the man from the official biographies, as well as scraps of Memphis gossip. I learned that he was the only son of an upper-class Mississippi Delta family (born in 1939). That he was ill-educated formally but a formidable autodidact, who had taught himself classical music and jazz, video filmmaking and photography (inspired at an early age by

All photographs *Untitled*. PAGE 2: 2000; PAGE 3: Santa Monica, 1999; PAGE 4: Berlin, 2001; PAGE 5: 2000; LEFT: Memphis, 2000; PAGE 8: California, 1999–2000; PAGE 9: Arizona, 1999–2000.





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his discovery of Cartier-Bresson). That he was a gadget man attracted to anything mechanical: synthesizers, Sony portapacks, guns, cars, stereo systems. That he had an outside reputation as a major league carouser, Southern-style, subcategory Mississippi Delta division (a very major carousing category, indeed). That he worked constantly, traveled widely, and had a range of bohemian acquaintances of astonishing variety (from avant international jet-setter Charles Henri Ford to polymath musician and artist David Byrne).

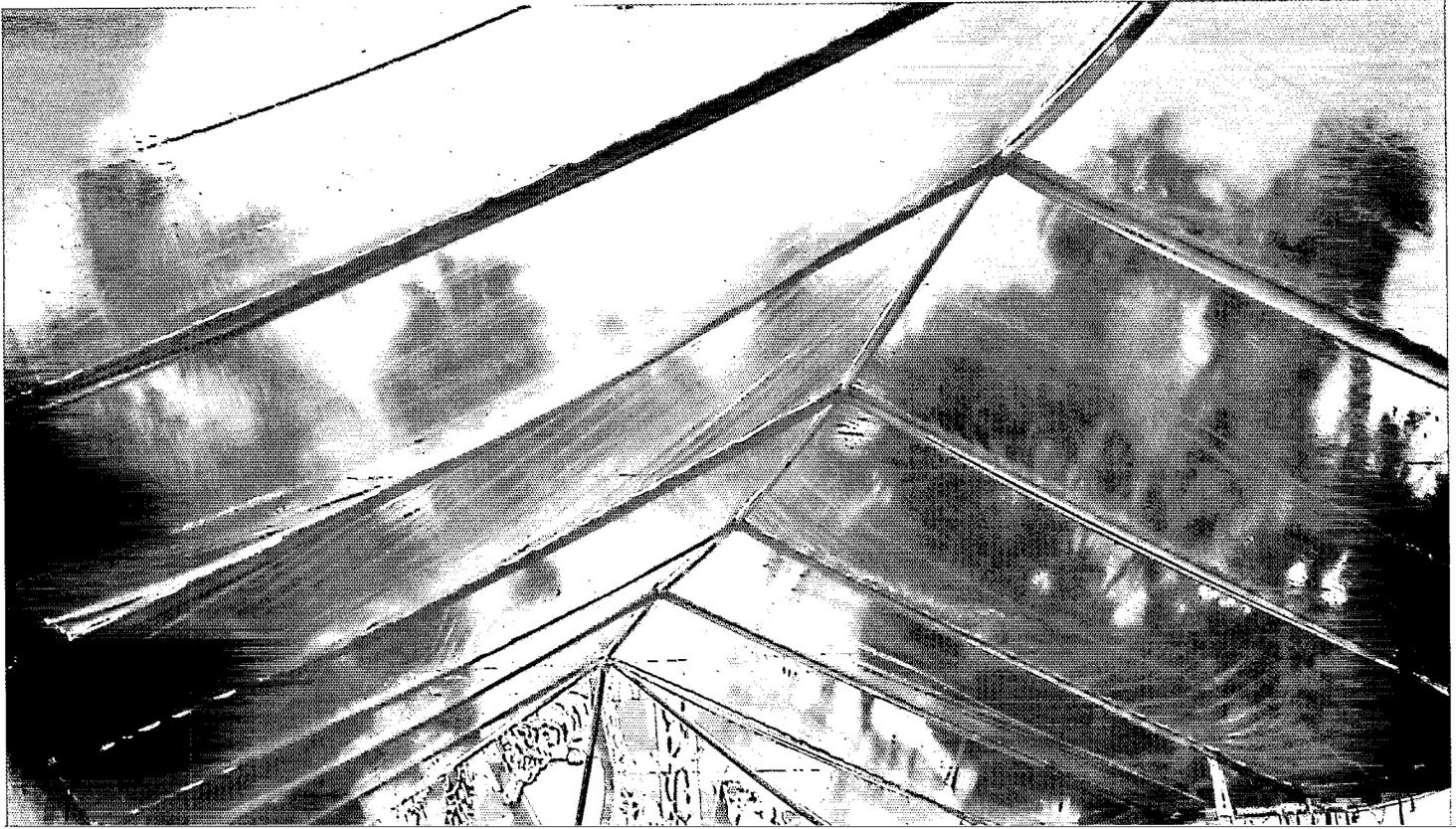
Now, at my request on behalf of *Aperture*, I am invited to Eggleston's Memphis home. Our meeting has been billed as "a visit," the best way to get the famously shy and elusive photographer to meet to talk about his art.

I am met in the driveway of one of those 1920s neo-Italian-villa-style houses so in vogue among the Southern well-to-do of that era, by Eggleston's wife of forty years, Rosa. She invites me into the house by the back door. (Is it only Southerners who build large houses with grandiose porticos and formal entry halls that are hardly used?) I am shown into the two-story living room.

There's a coffee table piled high with stacks of snapshots, back issues of *Artforum*, and random correspondence. At one end doors open onto a music room. At the other end is a grand stairway illuminated by stained-glass windows that leads upstairs.

Eggleston comes down these portentous stairs to greet me. He is dressed in the classic Memphis gentry uniform: blue pin-striped button-down shirt, khaki pants, and loafers. After saying hello, he settles on a stuffed chair, arranges his cigarettes and lighter, then sits, silently, smoking. He looks around the room as if checking for the exits. Like all Southerners meeting for the first time, I start the ritual of getting acquainted by matching up mutual friends, if not actual relatives. I give him Byrne's new CD, *Look Into the Eyeball*. Eggleston's photos were printed in the book about Byrne's 1986 feature film, *True Stories*, and his super-saturated color and "democratic" vision were major influences on the movie's look. I mention that I interviewed Byrne at the time of the movie's release for a magazine article. Eggleston

OPPOSITE: Memphis, 2000; ABOVE: Winston Eggleston, William Eggleston at the office, Memphis, 1999.





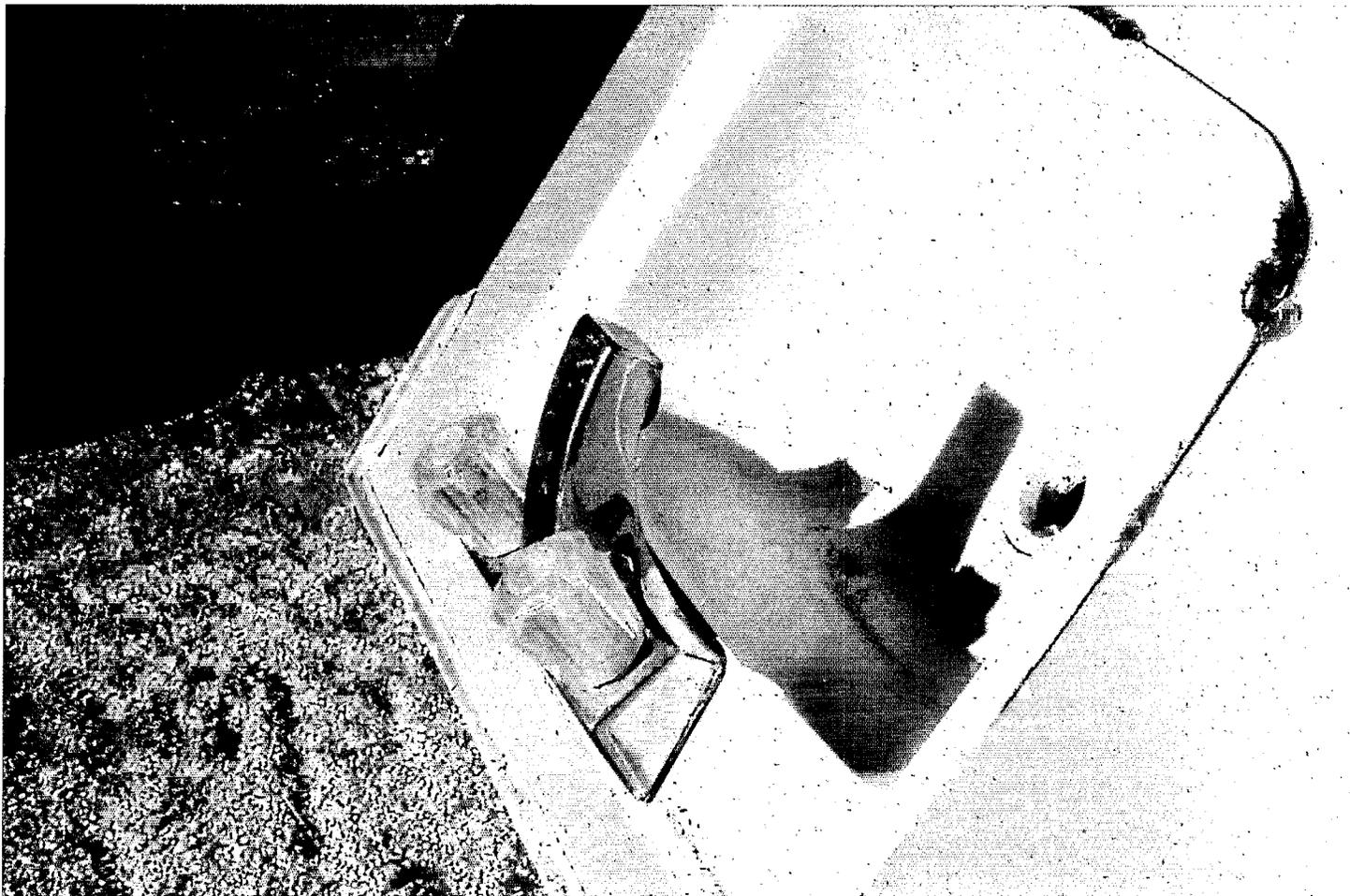


ture of. I have never been a bit interested in the fact that this was a picture of a blues musician or a street corner or something.”

While there are several ways to think about that stance, perhaps the most important is the one in plain sight: Eggleston is trying to direct his—and by extension, the viewers’—attention to the *act of seeing*, to angles of vision in looking at the world and the things and people in it. He has spoken of wanting to use the vantage points of an insect and of a child to take pictures (as in his close-to-the-ground view of a tricycle that is the cover of *Eggleston’s Guide*, the catalogue for the momentous MoMA show). He has talked of shooting with the camera the way a duck hunter uses a shotgun, lifting, aiming, and following through in a full-body glide to lead the target. He has shot without looking through the viewfinder. He usually limits himself to taking one picture per subject (no bracketing for exposure, no refocusing). For Eggleston, photography is *actively seeing*, both literally and metaphorically. Grandiose subjects are like large conclusions: they are not usually in sight. Decisive moments are instants that

occur in swarms of millions, fractional instants pulled out of the unending stream of phenomena and activity by scanning what’s out there and clicking the shutter. What’s “ordinary” subject matter, anyway? Eggleston’s pictures ask. Doesn’t life consist largely of everyday rooms, basic objects, and familiar people? And can’t those be made mysterious and wonderful and ominous and funny in their own right by a certain way of looking at them?

The question of angle of vision comes up when his son Winston, who manages Eggleston’s business affairs and archives, drops by with prints from the latest Cheim & Read show for the photographer to sign. (Eggleston has another grown son, William Jr., and a daughter, Andra.) As Winston carefully unwraps the prints and puts them before Eggleston, there’s a problem. It’s that photo of a pink sink: which way does the picture go, vertical or horizontal? I realize that the man who took the picture . . . is not sure. Winston puts it on the table as a vertical, which is how it has been printed, he says, in a book published by the Fondation



Cartier, but now he observes, “Look at that shadow. This should be horizontal.” I realize that the confusion exists because the angle from which Eggleston chose to photograph the sink is so unusual—it is as if you are looking at the sink in a way you never have, and the mind cannot organize the image. The “wrong” way, vertically, makes more “sense.”

Eggleston asks me what I think. I tell him. I add that the horizontal, *correct* way to view the picture is a “vertiginous” one. It makes me dizzy. “What’s that word? Vertiginous? I’ll have to remember that one. . . .” Then he signs the prints as horizontals.

The next print that comes out of the box is *Red Jesus*. “That’s not immersed in blood, is it?” I ask. “And is it in a cemetery? Red dead bloody Jesus?”

Eggleston chuckles. “It’s my version of the *Piss Christ*,” he says. “That ought to shake ‘em up.”

I say I think it will take a lot more these days to make a scandal with a heretical photograph than it used to.

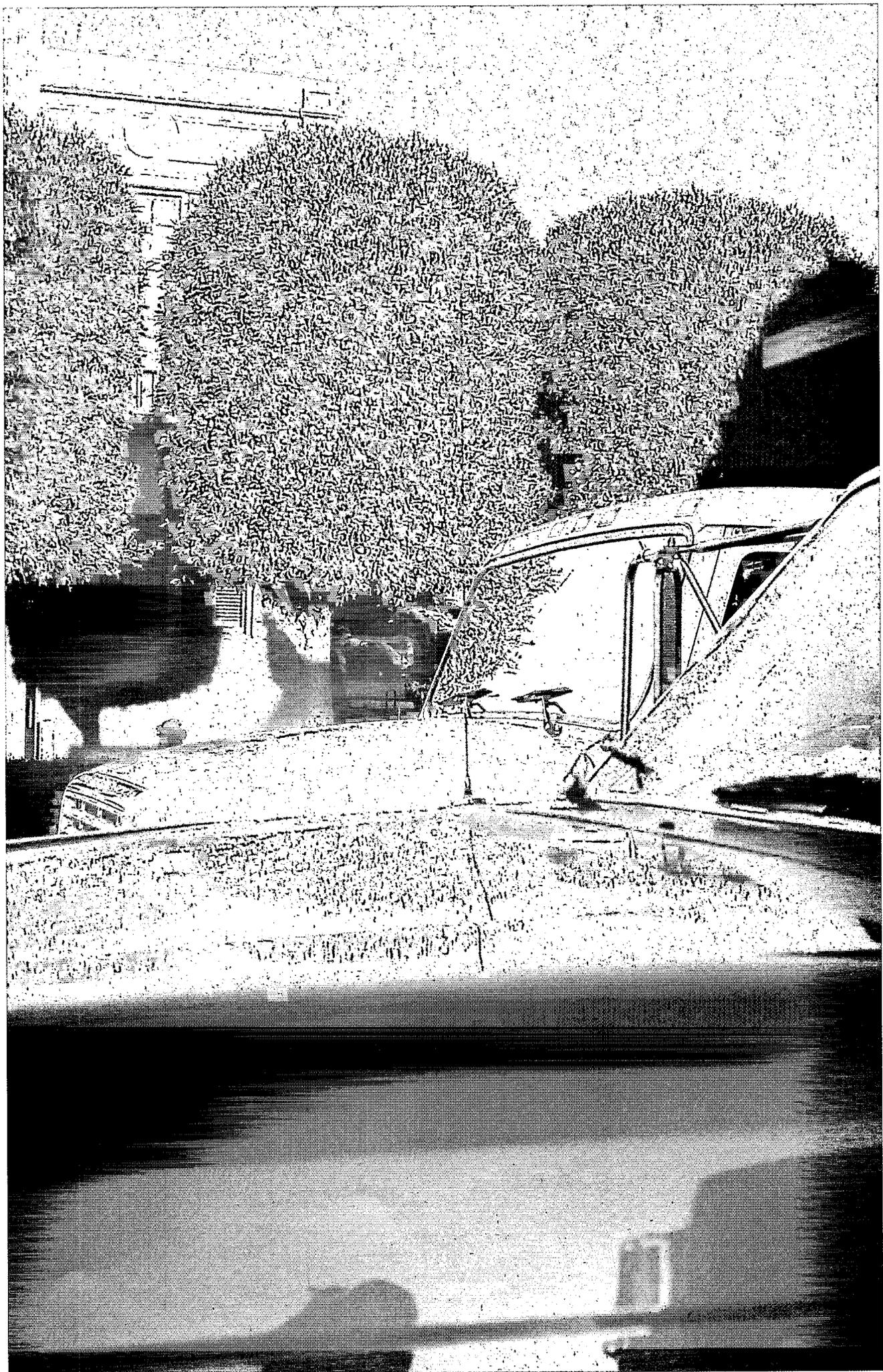
OPPOSITE: Orange County, 1999–2000; ABOVE: Arizona, 2000.

“How about *Satanic Jesus* then?” Eggleston replies.

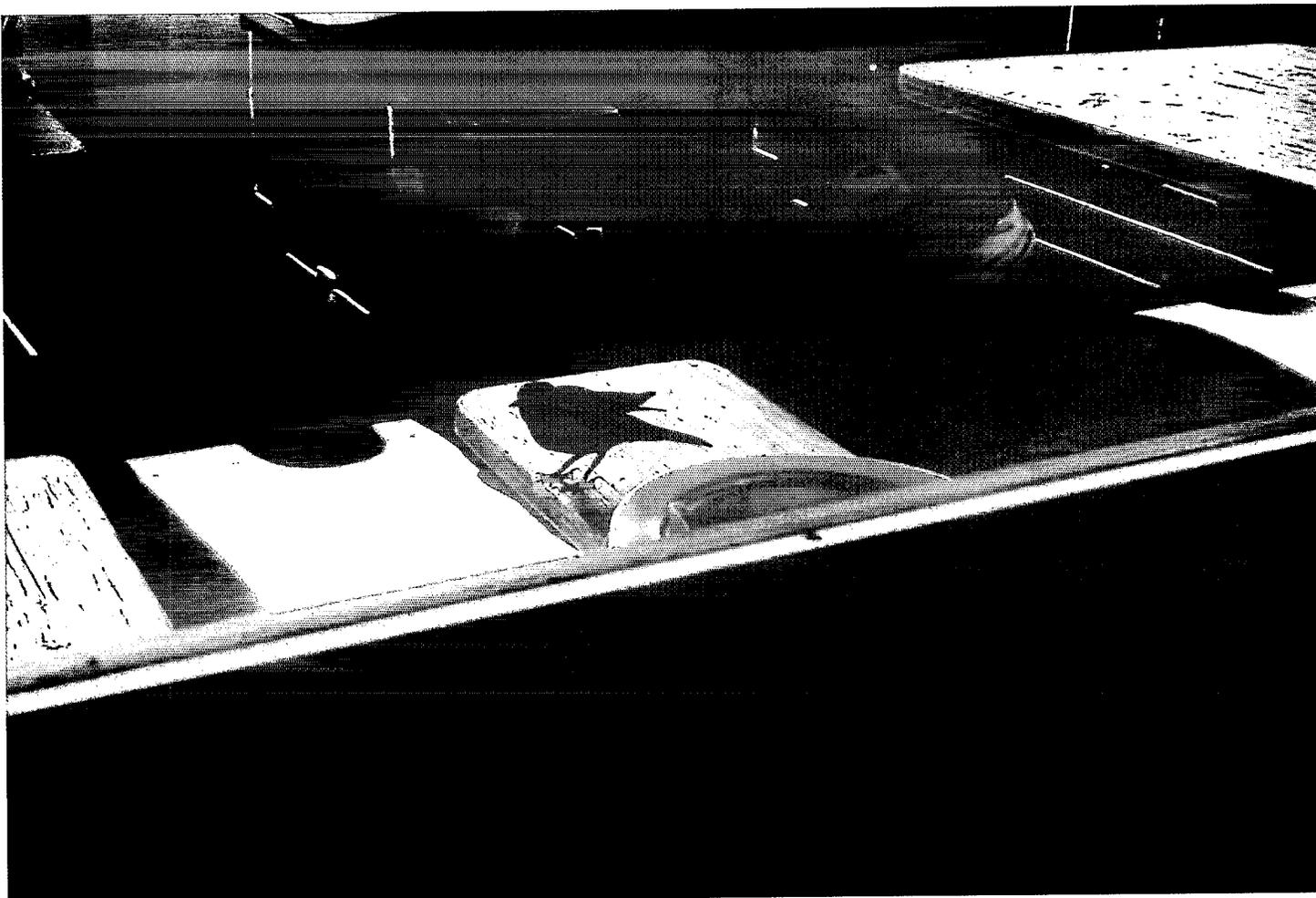
I say nothing, hoping to myself that this never gets around in Memphis. *Satanic Jesus* would indeed just about do the job, I think.

The prints are departures in several ways for Eggleston: they’re Iris prints instead of his standard dye-transfer process, and a new, larger size, 24 by 30 inches. With more muted colors and a larger area for the eye to move over, they seem even more mystifying. They oscillate harder between abstraction and realism, sincerity and irony, symbolic meaning and anecdotal charm.

There’s a Zen-like emptiness at their center—you have to look around in the picture, slowly, to begin to get it. While this experience in Eggleston’s most recent work is different, overall the feeling is ultimately the same one always conjured up by his distinctive, disjunctive, Eggleston way of looking at what’s out there. The same but different—that’s the clue to an artist with a vision who is still extending it, exploring.







The same is true of the recent snapshots taken in San Diego and Tijuana, which Eggleston allows me to look through. Flipping through an unedited pile of drugstore-processed pictures, you discover two things: how remarkably consistent his vision is—even snaps look like “Egglestons”—and, at the same time, how that vision tries to see something unique in its sighting on each subject, whether parking lot or python. One way is technical: when I ask what these photographs were taken with, Eggleston answers, “One-third with a Leica, one-third with a Contax, and one-third with a Pentax.” This gadget man is always tinkering with the tools of reproduction. Another is the subject matter: “Walter Hopps, an old friend of mine, suggested that I go to the world-famous San Diego zoo, so I did. It was horrible, just like Disneyland.” And Tijuana? “I only stayed ten minutes. It never rains there, but it did when I hit town—a complete flood. Had to leave as soon as I got there.” Yet despite these misadventures,

PAGE 16: Hollywood, 1999–2000; **PAGE 17:** Memphis, 2000; **ABOVE:** San Diego, 2001; **OPPOSITE:** Arizona, 1999–2000.

there’s a huge stack of photographs, proving that a determined visionary can indeed make a picture of “anything.” Another Zen thought occurs to me: there are no accidents.

Eggleston is also known for making music much in the same way he takes photographs. The self-taught keyboardist improvises, records everything in the first take, and does not edit the results. He invites me into the music room where there’s a harpsichord, an Eggleston-designed and built stereo system, and a synthesizer. The amplifiers rest on Winchester shotgun-shell-ammo boxes. The bookshelf overhead contains rows of contrasting titles: one trio of adjacent books—Velikovsky’s *Worlds in Collision* next to *The Better Homes and Gardens Sewing Book*, flanked by *The Great Century of the Gun*—makes a symbolic mini-portrait of Eggleston’s interests and influences.

He inserts a disk into the synthesizer, and the music that pours out of the speakers is many things at once: New Age ambient, church-like hymnal, funeral-home dirge, Bach-like counterpoint, and jazzy improvisation, with **(continued on page 64)**



Hosoe (continued from page 54) The first was the dancer Tatsumi Hijikata, a founder of the Butoh dance school. He and Eikoh came from the same part of Japan and in their landscape of wooden houses, barley- and rice-fields inhabited by spirits, they staged the *Kamaitachi*, a dance based on a sickle spirit-lunatic, humorous, and ambivalent. While Hijikata reinvented himself in front of Hosoe, the photographer explored his own memories of the past through the dancer's body. In "Man and Woman," a series where gender relations are depicted both as an erotic dance and a private battle fought with black against white, curves against curves, Hijikata was again one of the models.

With *Barakei* ("Ordeal by Roses"), whose subject, Yukio Mishima, has also been Hosoe's most inspired critic, the photographer gained recognition beyond Japan. No one could forget the novelist's body, his theatrical images of extreme narcissism and masochism set in baroque backgrounds where Mishima was both mired and mirrored.

On November 25, 1970, Mishima committed suicide. With his friend's death, Hosoe went into a period of grief leading to renewal. But there were other trials to come as well; the year 1973 marked Tatsumi Hijikata's final performance on a Butoh stage.

In *Simon: A Private Landscape* Hosoe—through the transvestite's body—dealt with his memories of postwar Tokyo and his own beginnings. Then he took a leap from *Barakei*'s baroque stance to the extreme abstraction of *Embrace*, where flesh, like a coarse metal on its way to alchemic gold, was burned to a white flame. In *The Cosmos of Gaudí*, a decade-long homage to the Catalan artist, the architecture became the body, echoed its curves and erotic power, blended Japanese and Western traditions. In *Luna Rossa* the subjects' bodies awakened through the photographer who sought, through the power of light, a kinesthetic link with them.

In 1977, after a long interruption, Kazuo Ohno, a genius of the Butoh school, started dancing again. Since then his relationship with Hosoe has taken on the aspect of a ritual, repeated outdoors or in the studio before each new dance—but also, on a deeper level, of a pas de deux. "My photographing is part of his dance," Hosoe wrote in a recent letter to me. While Hosoe draws inspiration from Ohno, the dancer is drawn by photography to the creation of a new dance. It is this event, this transformation, that fascinates Hosoe.

In 1994, when Hosoe and Ohno went to the Kushiro marsh in Hokkaido, where Ohno was born, the dancer, moved by his childhood landscape, exclaimed: "My mother!" and started to dance.

Ohno was then eighty-six. The emergence of his mother in him was the moment seized by Hosoe. Through wind and bitter water, long dead but alive, Ohno's mother floated up to his body and his face like a lily on memory's marshes. She came through the wrinkles of his face, the sweat of his exhausted body, the rusty creaking of his tired joints as he was pushing himself to his limits creating a dance for her.

Just a few months ago Hosoe photographed the ninety-four-year-old Ohno in his tiny home garden and in his studio. It may be their last session, but their imminent parting was not on Eikoh's mind: "He danced not with his whole body but with his two hands subtly and quietly lifting up and down, while closing his eyes in the weak sunlight filtering through the trees." ❁

Eggleston (continued from page 18)

occasional threads of pop music melodic themes. Much like the polymorphous perversity of the vision that informs his pictures, Eggleston's "democratic" compositions have the effect of being both stimulating and soothing at the same time, with their hybrid blend of sound.

While listening, I reflect that I have been invited in through the back door, served iced tea and invited to stay for lunch, shown pictures of Jesus—and now am hearing the Eggleston version of "Old Man River" emerge from his speakers. Just as when looking at his pictures, I am definitely in the South—but not just the South. I am in Eggleston's world, where what's at hand is used as a given vocabulary to create something previously unseen: a world full of surprising collisions, located somewhere between the ideas of home and the gun. That world is on view in other pictures taken by Eggleston in Kenya and London, in the Arizona desert and the heart of Berlin, as well as in Memphis.

If the perfect relationship is, as the country song has it, "somewhere between lust and watching TV," for Eggleston, the perfect picture is something with lust and watching TV—and a dozen or more other attitudes—in it. His appetite, and his willingness to share it through his photography, enlarges our own. ❁

An exhibition of William Eggleston's work, curated by M. Hervé Chandès, Director of the Fondation Cartier, is being held at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris, November 18, 2001–February 17, 2002.

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TITLE: Sight unseen in plain sight: photographs by William Eggleston

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