

Southern Environs, Memphis, 1971 – Interpretation

At first glance, this photo by William Eggleston seems rather ordinary. It looks like something anyone could have taken, perhaps you or I, or even my mother. It's a rather commonplace scene; a suburban neighborhood, typical suburban houses, nothing special about it at all. The color is quite subdued, so without seeing an actual print of the photo, you might assume this is a scan of an old photo that faded somewhat since it was first taken. If you didn't know anything about it, you might assume it's just a snapshot from somebody's old collection.

The focal point of the scene is an old car, maybe from the 1950s, although the houses seem newer. The title/caption tells you that the photo was taken in 1971, though, so you don't have to wonder. But the circumstances under which you might see this photo, perhaps in a museum or gallery or on a slide screen in a class devoted to a discussion of art interpretation, tell you that there's more to this than a simple snapshot, even if you have never heard of William Eggleston. But once you find out that Eggleston was the first photographer ever to have a show of color photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, you know you have to look deeper to try to find out what makes this photo special. If for no reason other than historical significance, you know that this photograph is important because of the photographer's status.

In art and design classes, you are taught certain basic things: Don't place the horizon line of a scene in the center of a composition so that the top and bottom make two even halves, and don't place the focal point smack in the center of the image. Eggleston breaks both these rules with nary a care, though. Strong horizontal and diagonal lines seem to point straight to the car, but then beyond, to a distant point on the horizon. Is this an expression of a longing to get past this place to something beyond?

The sky is neither clear nor overcast; the filtered sun casts an equivocal haze on a dull scene. Judging by the shadows, it's the middle of the day, yet there is no human or animal life in evidence. Even though there appears to be a lot of room between the houses, indicating a richness of space, the place looks deadly dull. Everyone's either gone or inside the houses, maybe watching soap operas. The neighborhood isn't shabby, and what trees there are seem small and scrawny, leading one to believe the

development is somewhat recent. But there seems to be a lack of caring. The scene has an air of neglect evidenced by the overgrown grass and the out-of-control growth in what might be an empty lot at the far right side of the scene. Someone thought enough of their house to buy a fancy mailbox with a filigreed post, but otherwise, there is no evidence of an effort to personalize or decorate, to place a stamp of uniqueness that indicates pride of ownership.

Another element which might be considered a mistake, or at least unfortunate, in an amateur composition, is the wide expanse of concrete driveway at the left of the scene. This large empty area is light in value, and together with the dark vegetation just below it, forms an area of strong contrast dangerously close to the bottom left of the scene, where the viewer's eye just might wander out of the photo, never to return. Although the scene is distinctly American, there isn't even a regional significance to this picture. You could probably find a similar neighborhood in almost every state in the country, even 37 years after this image was taken.

We are left to wonder, then, what is it about this image that makes it worthy of a photographer who enjoys wide recognition and acclaim? Did Eggleston spend hours seeking out this particular site, setting up his tripod, framing the scene and angle with great care, lovingly burning and dodging the print in his darkroom? Or did he just happen upon the scene by chance, hop out of his car, and pop off a quick snap? While some photographers might seek to elevate the commonplace by creative framing or effects, there is no evidence of that in *Southern Environs, Memphis*. This photo seems random, almost careless, in its selection and composition. Eggleston just records what he sees in a straightforward manner, with no fanfare.

I would have to surmise that this work isn't about outstanding compositional skills or compelling content. Perhaps this photo, together with a larger body of work, makes a general statement about life in America. Perhaps by focusing on the mundane elements of life, Eggleston is saying that life itself is mundane and dull, and he only reflects what he sees. Or perhaps he is celebrating the ordinary, inviting the viewer to take a another look and ponder these ordinary things with more care and consideration than we might if we were just passing by the scene itself. In any case, because of the photographer's status, we do have an obligation to overcome the urge to dismiss this image out of hand for its simplicity and to look beyond to see if we can find meaning.