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CLINTON TO GORE

by Noel McKenna

Clinton and Gore are two small towns in the southland region of the South Island of New Zealand.

In 1999 I found myself on the road between these two towns with Laurence Aberhart, Darren Knight and Peter Fay. At the time Bill Clinton was the American President and Al Gore was his Vice President, so it was a moment in history of sorts.

Laurence was driving at the time, quite quickly, and I admit to being a tad nervous about arriving in Gore in one piece. I got to talking about colour photography and Laurence said he did not have much time for it at all. I think I then said 'what about William Eggleston'; after a short pause Laurence replied 'except for Eggleston'. That brief exchange has stayed in my mind and 14 years later the three of us are in an exhibition together.

I first became aware of Laurence's work through *Headlands*, an exhibition of contemporary art from New Zealand at the MCA in 1992. Also Darren Knight began representing him in Melbourne in the mid-90s and I bought a few of his photographs so I have lived with them for a while now.

Sometimes I think Laurence sees the world through the eyes of a person who is colour blind (around 8% of males have some form of colour blindness while women are rarely affected). His photographs have a wonderful range of tones from white through to black and the sharpness and depth of them are some of the qualities that draw me into his work. I look at them for long periods, at times getting into an almost trance-like state.

Some nights I will fall asleep with one beside me on the floor, maybe a photograph of a cemetery, which may explain some of my dreams.

I like to get close to works of art and Laurence's work rewards you if you spend the time looking.

I have never owned an Eggleston photograph but have many books and publications on his work.

His work is often described as documenting the vernacular which in some ways is too fancy a way of describing it. I prefer something like photographing the excrement of life.

When Eggleston's work was first shown at MOMA in 1976, it was ridiculed in most quarters. But his work has stood the test of time and he has become a very influential figure in photography.

From the first moment I saw an Eggleston photograph, I knew there was something special about his work. His world is the south in America. I have never been there but through his photographs I feel I have been there. His work has an authenticity about it that draws you in.

His photographs come at you with awkward angles and heightened colours that makes one see the world in a different way which is always a good thing.