



SOUTH *of no* NORTH

Laurence Aberhart, William Eggleston, Noel McKenna

SOUTH
of
no
NORTH

SOUTH of no NORTH:
*Laurence Aberhart,
William Eggleston, Noel McKenna*
by Glenn Barkley

South of no North brings together three artists whose works are connected by an interest in the vernacular, a regional sense of place and a similar visual sensibility.

Primarily known as a painter, Noel McKenna joins two photographers from different parts of the world. Laurence Aberhart resides in Russell on the North Island of New Zealand and works predominantly with black and white photography. William Eggleston lives and works in Memphis, Tennessee, deep in the American south and works almost exclusively with colour photography.

McKenna is an incredibly *knowing* artist whose work is driven by a deep engagement with the art of the past and the present. He sees a lot of art and is a voracious consumer of journals and books. The scope of his reading and viewing is refreshingly eclectic and is reflected in his work. A conversation with him may veer from the history of colour photography to the minutiae of printmaking to the practical difficulties of making ceramics. He has lived and worked in Sydney since he moved from Brisbane in 1980. He has chronicled the city and its people whilst also travelling extensively, particularly in New Zealand and Europe.

McKenna first remembers seeing William Eggleston's images as a young artist in the early 1980s and being struck by their focus on the commonplace – Eggleston's 'Democratic Camera' – the idea that anything, no matter how inconsequential is worthy of photographing and hence becoming the subject of art. Finding Eggleston clarified his own use of subjects drawn directly from the world around him – dogs, cats, houses, horses, beds, interiors and the vernacular architecture that fills our

world. Eggleston also focuses on these things and inspired McKenna whose practice ran counter to the prevailing orthodoxy of issues-based work then dominating Australian contemporary art.

He was also drawn to Eggleston's use of colour, akin to painting, where one colour is saturated or heightened against another, drawing out metaphorical possibilities. Eggleston was originally trained as a painter and there is a distinct painterly sensibility at work in his photography. Another aspect that appealed is an all over distribution of forms that is both considered and intuitive. Eggleston's works are 'snapshot-like' rather than snapshotsⁱ, the most telling manifestation being a formal quality of placing something in the centre of the composition whilst drawing our attention to what happens around the edges of the central motif.

This centrality is employed in many of McKenna's works, which also derive from his use of 'the snapshot'. This is unlike the centrality employed by Laurence Aberhart whose use of a large format camera – cumbersome and time consuming to use – means that his compositions are more considered in a formal sense. This formality is akin to the work of Walker Evans who, like Aberhart, is another fellow traveller whose works were created as part of sweeping journeys across America. Aberhart travelled for three months in the American south in 1988, and like Eggleston and Evans, was drawn to the rich subject matter that existed there from the hand-me-down architecture, the whimsical folk marketing of handmade signs and the stoic people themselves amongst the radical disjuncture of relative wealth juxtaposed against profound poverty and social injustice.

SOUTH
of
no
NORTH

Aberhart's gaze falls, not on things that have disappeared but rather, things in the process of disappearing. This is most evident in his images of buildings, signs and environments. Everything seems to be holding on tenaciously to existence. Nothing is overly grand; even the size of the photographs, at 8 x 10 inches, mirrors the humble nature of a lot of his subject matter.

His images of children also depict something at the point of disappearance – childhood. They crystallise the scary, hallucinogenic reality of being a child, both terrifying and wonderful. In *Kamala, Lyttelton, September 1981* (1981) Aberhart's daughter lies on a roof looking up to the sky. It reflects on the wonder of being a kid, where everything is waiting to be realised, while reflecting on the swiftly passing passage of life and time through the photo's inclusion of a symbolic ladder reaching into the heavens.

Similarly in one of Eggleston's most famous images *Untitled (Memphis)* (1970) he takes on the view of a child, shot while lying on the ground looking up to a tricycle that looms gigantically, dwarfing the landscape surrounding it. Isn't childhood like this? Where everything looms larger than life? Time moves slowly and the simplest of things, the sky, the light, have qualities of the infinite.

McKenna also taps into this wonder through his series of paintings of 'big things' – a very Australian civic obsession. They have this magical quality too and we are rendered child-like in their presence.

All three artists work on a diminutive scale and their works provide a window onto the world where you really have to *look*. You are drawn in rather than overwhelmed; peering into moments and places now gone.

Their common literary sensibility captures details of the built environment and human interactions that have their own particular pathos. They are akin to short storiesⁱⁱ where emotions and narratives are condensed into rich and provocative sensations. And while they do reflect the everyday world, they also make manifest the power of art to alert us to the wonder and poetry that is all around us.

- i. See Thomas Weski, 'The Tender-Cruel Camera' in Gunilla Knape (ed.), *William Eggleston: The Hasselblad Award 1998*, Hasselblad Center, Zurich, 1999 for a further discussion on the idea of the central image or motif in Eggleston's works see Alfred Barr's comments via John Szarkowski, 'Introduction' in *William Eggleston's Guide*, Museum of Modern Art, 1976.
- ii. The title of this exhibition comes directly from a book of short stories by American writer Charles Bukowski, *South of No North: Stories of the Buried Life*, Black Sparrow Press, Los Angeles, 1973.