

April 14, 2004

Contact:

Robyn Wise, 415.357.4172, rwise@sfmoma.org
Libby Garrison, 415.357.4177, lgarrison@sfmoma.org
Sandra Farish Sloan, 415.357.4174, ssloan@sfmoma.org

WILLIAM EGGLESTON: LOS ALAMOS AT SFMOMA

William Eggleston: Los Alamos, the first public exhibition of a recently rediscovered series of color photographs by one of the most innovative American photographers of the twentieth century, will be on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) from August 21, 2004, through January 4, 2005. The eighty-eight dye-transfer prints featured in this exhibition were taken between 1965 and 1974 in Eggleston's native Memphis, Tennessee, and during numerous cross-country road trips through the southern United States. These seemingly unstudied, snapshot-style images record the physical and psychic terrain of southern American culture as revealed in its most commonplace by-products—street signs, lawn ornaments, hamburger stands, fences—and look beyond the merely descriptive at what is universal in the banal artifacts of everyday life.

Initially meant to appear in book form as an encyclopedic twenty-volume portfolio of more than two thousand photographs, the *Los Alamos* series was put aside by the artist in order to work on other projects, and many of the negatives were never printed. Now, almost forty years later, these pictures offer new insight into Eggleston's aesthetics, his use of color, and the casual beauty of his observations. Seen together, the *Los Alamos* photographs add up to a careful investigation of how we look at the world, a testament to the complexity of the instant.

Thomas Weski, former curator at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, where *William Eggleston: Los Alamos* originated, is curator of the exhibition. Corey Keller, SFMOMA assistant curator of photography, is organizing the San Francisco presentation. "SFMOMA has a rich history of presenting exhibitions that explore the broad and decisive proliferations of snapshot-style photography during the past century," Keller comments. "Informally elegant, Eggleston's pictures engage the vernacular tradition of photography and establish a dialogue with both the function and aesthetics of the snapshot."

After its U.S. premiere at SFMOMA, *William Eggleston: Los Alamos* will travel to the Dallas Museum of Art (February 6–May 15, 2005), the final stop on the exhibition tour.



William Eggleston, *En Route to New Orleans*, 1971–1974, from the series *Los Alamos*; 1965–1974; dye-transfer print; © Eggleston Artistic Trust 2004

Widely regarded as the “father of color photography” since his landmark 1976 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Eggleston is credited with establishing color photography as a valid art form worthy of critical response. His groundbreaking work prefigured many recent developments in art and has influenced a generation of photographers including Nan Goldin, Richard Billingham, and Alec Soth.

Eggleston was born in 1939 in Memphis, Tennessee, and grew up in the Mississippi Delta. Though he never studied art formally, he began to shoot black-and-white photographs at age eighteen, taking inspiration and instruction from books by Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson. In 1964 he began to experiment with color technology, first using color negative film and then shooting in slide format. When Eggleston moved to New York City in 1967, he met street photographers such as Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, who further nourished his interest in snapshot aesthetics. That same year, Eggleston showed some of his color slides to John Szarkowski, then director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, who began to organize what would become the exhibition and accompanying catalogue *William Eggleston's Guide*.



William Eggleston, *Memphis*, 1971–1974, from the series *Los Alamos*; 1965–1974; dye-transfer print; © Eggleston Artistic Trust 2004

At the time, most “serious” photography was still being produced in black and white, while color photography was associated with commercial advertising and family snapshots. *William Eggleston's Guide* astonished viewers with seventy-five large dye-transfer prints made from slides that included images of shoes under a bed, a child’s tricycle, a tile shower, and the contents of his refrigerator—trivial subjects monumentalized by heightened contrast, color saturation, and Eggleston’s eye for the significance of everyday moments.

Unlike the photographs in *William Eggleston's Guide*, the pictures featured in this exhibition were shot on negative film. The majority of the images were made shortly after those presented in the *Guide*, many of them taken on Eggleston’s road trips with his friend, the curator, critic, and museum director, Walter Hopps. A group of Eggleston’s earlier photographs—made before the *Guide* series, but also with negative film—will also be on view, including *Memphis*, 1965, which Eggleston has identified as his first color print.

The body of work takes its title from the Los Alamos laboratory for the development of atomic weapons, which Hopps is said to have pointed out to Eggleston while driving through New Mexico. Eggleston was intrigued by the site, and so he dubbed the series *The Los Alamos Project*. In its original concept, the *Los Alamos* images would be shown only as a group, with no commentary, titles, or representational hierarchy, essentially imitating for the viewer the artist’s own visual experience of the world. “I had this notion of what I called a democratic way of looking around, that nothing was more or less important,” Eggleston has remarked. Most of the images are geographically nondescript, and thus remain strangely timeless, like series of moments continually happening in the present.

The automobile, one of the most familiar icons of American culture, appears often in the series. Many Eggleston cars are parked, or used as framing devices for portraits of their drivers and reflective surfaces to mirror the environment. People are less common in the pictures, though their presence is felt in the objects they leave

behind—hand-lettered signs, a mop head caught on a chain-link fence, a dilapidated swing set—which, through Eggleston’s lens, take on the significance of artifacts. The images seem almost incidental, yet there is an exact composition that uses power lines crisscrossing the sky or a stretch of fence as a formal device to divide the picture plane, or aligns the angled front wheel of a parked car with the high oval window of a building in the background.

Approximately fifty additional photographs from the SFMOMA’s permanent collection will also be on view, contextualizing Eggleston’s work through other photographers’ explorations of color technique and the psychological landscape of America. These galleries will include photographs by Eggleston’s early contemporaries, including William Christenberry and Stephen Shore, and pictures taken in the 1980s and 1990s by photographers such as Sally Mann and Deborah Luster.

William Eggleston: Los Alamos is accompanied by a fully illustrated book (\$65, hardcover, 175 pages, ninety-seven color plates) published by Scalo in collaboration with Museum Ludwig, featuring texts by curator Thomas Weski and Walter Hopps.

In conjunction with *William Eggleston: Los Alamos*, SFMOMA’s Education Department will present *Snapshots of William Eggleston* on September 18, at 3 p.m. in the Phyllis Wattis Theater. In this panel discussion, critic Andy Grundberg presents a critical perspective on Eggleston’s extraordinary career. In relation to Eggleston’s practice, artist William Christenberry talks about his own work, which also pays tribute to his Southern roots. The event will be followed by a book signing at 4:30 p.m. in the MuseumStore where William Eggleston will be signing copies of *Los Alamos*, available in hardcover. Tickets for *Snapshots of William Eggleston* (\$12 general; \$8 PhotoAlliance and SFMOMA members, students, and seniors) are available at the Museum (with no surcharge) or through www.ticketweb.com. The book signing is free and open to the public. Additional program information is available on the Museum’s Web site at www.sfmoma.org.

William Eggleston: Los Alamos is organized by the Museum Ludwig, Cologne. SFMOMA’s presentation is supported by a generous grant from the James Family Foundation. *Snapshots of William Eggleston* is sponsored by PhotoAlliance.

* * *

Museum hours: Open daily (except Wednesdays) 11 a.m. to 5:45 p.m.; open late Thursdays until 8:45 p.m. Summer hours (Memorial Day to Labor Day): Open at 10 a.m. Closed Wednesdays and the following public holidays: Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year’s Day.

Koret Visitor Education Center: Open daily (except Wednesdays) 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; open late Thursdays until 8:30 p.m. Summer hours: Open at 10 a.m.

Admission prices: Adults \$10; seniors \$7; students \$6. SFMOMA members and children twelve and under are admitted free. Thursday evenings, 6 to 8:45 p.m., admission is half price. The first Tuesday of each month admission is free.

SFMOMA is easily accessible by Muni, BART, Golden Gate Transit, SamTrans, and Caltrain. Hourly, daily, and monthly parking is available at the SFMOMA Garage at 147 Minna Street. For parking information, call 415.348.0971.

Visit our Web site at www.sfmoma.org or call 415.357.4000 for more information.

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is a private, not-for-profit institution supported by its members; individual contributors to Donor Circle; corporate and foundation support; foreign, federal, and state government grants; and admission revenues. Annual programming is sustained through the generosity of Grants for the Arts/San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund, The James Irvine Foundation, and the Koret Foundation. Thursday evening half-priced admission is sponsored by Banana Republic. Media sponsors: San Francisco Bay Guardian and SFSTATION.COM. KidstART free admission for children twelve and under is made possible by Charles Schwab & Co., Inc.

#