

The New York Times

The 6th Floor

EAVESDROPPING ON THE TIMES MAGAZINE

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Mitch Epstein, Tree Stalker

By Kathy Ryan February 11, 2012



Mitch Epstein's series of New York City trees were featured in this week's Voyages Issue, accompanied by an essay by Michael Kimmelman. His work will be exhibited in March at Sikkema Jenkins. Kathy Ryan, the magazine's photography director, talked to him about the peculiar challenges of his project.

Q. What inspired you to do the trees?

A. Trees have long been an interest of mine, and I wanted to do a piece that was in part about New York and also a work that would take me forward from "American Power," where I spent five years traveling the country looking at sites where energy was produced and consumed. It had long been an idea in the back of my head to photograph trees in New York. A year ago I was traveling in the Everglades, and I had the intuition this was the time to do it. That led me to

buying a box of 8-by-10 black-and-white sheet film. I'm essentially a color photographer. But I had this instinct that color would be an interference with the pictures I wanted to make. I really wanted the trees to be a part of the city — to be contextualized by the city.

Q. How does black and white give you a greater ability to contextualize the trees?

A. Well, I wanted the trees to come forward, both in a formal and a conceptual way. I realized there was a lot about the contemporary urban landscape that was colored that was going to become a distraction. Whether it was the yellow streetlights, the cross lights at the intersections, or the color of the red fire hydrant. There was also the potential to fall prey to the sameness of the color, especially in the summer season, when yes, there are varieties of green but the green is what is prevailing. Somehow black and white doesn't prevail as a palette the same way color does. I wanted the urban populace and the architecture to in some way serve as a stage set and become something that would drop back for the trees, which would become the primary subject — the primary focal point of the picture. I also had the sense that it would be riskier in color because of the pitfalls of the picturesque.

Q. What do you mean by the “pitfalls of the picturesque”?

A. There are certain subjects for photography that are by their nature contrived. It would be hard to make a breakthrough picture of, say, a baby. At the same time, it is hard to photograph fall foliage because it's so seductive. It takes over. It is hard to penetrate. I didn't want the color to be intrusive. I didn't want the color to be a distraction to what was intrinsic to the picture. The way I have moved forward with my photography is to change tools, materials, and subjects in ways that are unfamiliar and often a little bit uneasy. That was all part of the gambit here for me.

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Q. How did you choose your trees?

A. I found a list the city drew up in the '80s designating certain trees in the five boroughs as “great trees.” I also found a resource guide — “New York City Trees” — a field guide for the metropolitan area by Edward Sibley Barnard. It was also helpful in steering me as well to areas that were rich in parkland and in old groves of trees. Researching on the Internet, I found out about a 300-plus-year-old tree in Washington Square Park. That was the first tree I went to.

Q. Tell us about photographing that tree in Washington Square Park.

A. Before bringing the 8-by-10 camera, I photographed the tree several times with a little digital camera. I spent time with the tree. It was January, and I first had to educate myself as to when the light would be at a favorable vantage point in the sky.

Q. Why did you choose January for this tree?

A. After initially photographing it in January, I went back several times over the course of the winter months, trying to understand the best vantage point to photograph the tree. I wanted the transparency that the bare branches gave the tree, so you could see the buildings through the branches. Once it became spring, the trees began to bloom and suddenly there was no more transparency, because of all the leaves and growth that came with spring. So I didn't have the opportunity again until the fall. I made several visits in the fall, but it wasn't until late December, early January that the leaves were all gone from the tree. Not every picture is like that, but in this case it was important for me to find a way to step back, to see the tree in its full scale.

Q. So you went from showing a detail of the tree the first time you shot it, to deciding that the picture had to be the whole tree, with bare branches.

A. That often happens. Often I am making pictures that become sketches for other pictures. With the 8-by-10 camera, there is the opportunity to make pictures that are very layered. The prints of these pictures for the exhibition will be 68 inches high — the size of a human being. You will have the opportunity to step into them and to engage with every detail.

Q. Can you tell us about the gigantic Cottonwood on Staten Island?

A. What was interesting is that an old house by the tree had been torn down, and there were rows of condominiums put in, and before I had even taken the camera out, people in the neighborhood came up to me and began to tell me stories about how the contractor that put up the houses had to tear out a lot of the roots of the tree, and they were concerned about it. The tree was a kind of anchor for the people, and they were disgruntled about it. There was a sense of community ownership of the tree. I'm conspicuous with this big camera, and people are curious, especially today when nobody is using cameras like these.

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Q. So when they pulled up the roots of this tree, it looks like it wasn't enough to hurt it.

A. Well, one doesn't know. It was within the last decade or so. The tree looks like it's thriving.

Q. What month did you photograph this Eastern Cottonwood?

A. September 2011. There was a deep fog, and I was thinking, 'Gosh, I got up at a this early hour, and maybe nothing's going to happen.' But I got there, and I photographed the tree. One of the problems that I had during multiple visits to this tree was there were always cars parked on the street, including one in the spot I needed to place the camera for the vantage point I wanted. I asked this one gentleman who was always coming out to walk his dog in the morning whether he would move his car, and he always refused to do so. He had absolutely no interest in the fact I was there. And one day, and it happened to be this day, I got lucky, and he got in his car and he drove off. This was the fixed point from which I could make the picture I'd been striving to make.

Q. You said it was arduous photographing this tree. Why?

A. I'm on a ladder. To decrease the distortion you get up on a ladder so you are not tilting too much. I have certain limitations of depth of field with a large camera like this. By being a little above the ground, I can bring the focus in. When I have a tree that's 100 feet high, I can get myself at a vantage point which is going to enable me to photograph the lower part of the tree so that it's not just flat to the ground. I'm always working up against time. The light is changing all the time. With this tree, I was there maybe at 7:15 a.m., but I've already been there before, and I know that at 8, this corner is where all the kids congregate to get picked up by the school bus.

Q. Are there trees that you want to photograph that you haven't yet? Are there still some on your wish list?

A. Yes, there are. Many.

The New York Times

Saturday, October 9, 2009



Capturing a Nation's Thirst for Energy
By RANDY KENNEDY

A new book by the photographer Mitch Epstein includes a shot of the Hoover Dam. Whitish outlines along Lake Mead show depletion levels.

The photographer Mitch Epstein, thin and professorial with gray hair and glasses, does not exactly cut a menacing figure. When he ducks beneath the dark cloth of his 8-by-10 view camera, the words that come most readily to mind are late Victorian, not potentially violent.

But one afternoon several years ago in the tiny Ohio River Valley town of Poca, W. Va., he found himself and his assistant surrounded by police cruisers, watching as sheriffs searched their rental car and came up with a stack of Polaroids of power plants much like the coal-fired one that towered across the river. This discovery led to the summoning of an F.B.I. agent, who concluded after much deliberation that Mr. Epstein had broken no laws by taking pictures near the plant, but told him, as he later recalled, "If you were Muslim, you'd be cuffed and taken in for questioning."

As a well-regarded artist whose work is represented in major collections like those of the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Mr. Epstein might have found the incident a little shocking. But by that point, deep into a six-year project he was to call "American Power" — a nomadic exploration of the nation's production of energy and its hunger for it, and what both might mean for America's political power in the world — the drill had become almost routine.

In 2004 in Shippingport, Pa., near the site of a nuclear plant, someone called the police to report a man on Main Street carrying a missile launcher. Mr. Epstein, traveling with his big camera and tripod, was escorted out of town and told not to return. The project had first taken shape a year earlier in Cheshire, Ohio, where he had been hired by The New York Times Magazine to document the small town's dismantling by the American Electric Power company, which had bought it for \$20 million amid concerns about emissions from its coal-burning plant. The police there quickly informed him that he was violating company policy by photographing in the town.

"That set the pattern," Mr. Epstein said in an interview in his home and studio on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where he recently displayed huge 70-by-92-inch prints of the project's photographs, which will be published in book form later this month by Steidl. "It got to the point later where I would almost have an anxiety attack every time I pulled over to the side of the road to take a picture."

Mr. Epstein's work over more than 30 years has always been marked by political and social awareness, from his documentation of Americans at leisure to his deeply personal 2003 book, "Family Business" (Steidl), about the demise of his father's real estate and retail concerns in Holyoke, Mass., where he was raised. The critic Vince Aletti

has written that Mr. Epstein's combination of subtlety and assurance leads to photographs that feel "not just ideal but inevitable."

When he became interested in a book about the energy needs that underpin the American way of life, Mr. Epstein said, "I didn't start it with any kind of specific political agenda."

"I mean, I'm not much of an environmentalist," he said. "But as I worked and traveled, I came away troubled by the implications of what I was seeing and what happened to me."

What he saw — during the first and second administrations of George W. Bush, years deep in the shadows of 9/11 — was a country that could be both largely ignorant of the immense environmental and political costs of its energy consumption and profoundly suspicious of anyone paying too much attention to the sources of that energy.

"I traveled numerous times to photograph the repercussions of westward expansionism on the landscape," Mr. Epstein, 57, writes in the book's afterword, describing visits to the Hoover Dam and the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, to the cavernous truck stop in Walcott, Iowa, that bills itself as the world's largest, and the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository in Nevada (which he was allowed inside to photograph), and to both the Democratic and Republican national conventions (neither of which he was allowed inside to photograph, though he points out that the Secret Service agents were much friendlier at the Republican convention).

"Humankind's technical prowess has etched itself into nature's grandeur," he adds in the essay. "But settlers did not expect that their American Dream of material ease would ultimately require more energy than the land could give."

The project eventually took Mr. Epstein to 25 states, many of which he returned to several times, revisiting places like the Kern River oil field in Oildale, Calif., a sere expanse of the San Joaquin Valley where networks of pipelines and oil-pump jacks seem to stretch past the horizon.

As the work proceeded, Mr. Epstein and his studio manager, Ryan Spencer, put together what came to look like a war room in his New York studio, a giant map of the country with red pushpins for coal, blue for nuclear, green for wind, and yellow for "been there." Combing the Web (where in many cases the power plants in his photographs can easily be seen from the same distance or often closer, on Google's Street View pictures), he would pick sites to visit and then go about the painstaking and generally unsuccessful task of writing letters to companies and government officials seeking permission to photograph.

"This project was, in part, about not getting in," he said, adding that his lawyer's advice about dealing with police questioning was remarkably straightforward, if not always easy to follow for someone with a slight authority problem: "Don't get arrested, at all costs."

Sometimes what Mr. Epstein came across in his research — the bright blue gas pump in Omaha labeled "terror-free oil" — led him directly to what he would photograph. But often, the pictures and articles and printouts he compiled in a fat ring-binder notebook were just starting points for trips that took him serendipitously to things like a lakeside baptism in Herald, Calif., where the cooling towers of the Rancho Seco nuclear power plant can be seen rising in the distance like a cathedral.

He came across a father-and-son motocross outing near Midland, Tex., both riders suited up and helmeted head to toe like "Star Wars" storm troopers, staring into the camera. Emerging from his motel in Snyder, Tex., on a misty morning, he took an almost romantic shot of a defunct gas station, one of whose pumps had been consumed by weeds.

None of the pictures add up to anything like a simple polemic, but Mr. Epstein said that perhaps for the first time in his career, he felt the need to shed artistic detachment. He and his wife, Susan Bell, have designed public-service-type messages that they intend to place around the country, pairing some of the book's images with literary quotations, like one from Mark Twain that hovers above a shot of a slab of new Nevada highway: "Civilization is a limitless multiplication of unnecessary necessities."

"I have tried to convey in these pictures," Mr. Epstein said, "the beauty and terror of early-21st-century America, as it clings to past comforts and gropes for a more sensible future."

MITCH EPSTEIN: AMERICAN WORK

In his 1981 introduction to *American Landscapes*, John Szarkowski wrote: "We have been half persuaded by Thoreau and by the evidence of our own brutal use of the land that the earth is beautiful except where man lives, or has passed through; and we have therefore set aside preserves where nature, other than man, may survive. . . . This is an admirable idea, and would perhaps be nobler still if we locked the gates to these preserves and denied ourselves entrance." While pursuing his most recent photographic series, *American Power* (begun in 2003), Mitch Epstein has discovered that, within contemporary America, it is no longer nature, but our "brutal use" of nature that is aggressively protected. The clamorous police response to his presence as a photographer beneath the shadow of a West Virginian coal power plant reveals not only the pervasive influence of both corporate interests and paranoia in post-9/11 America, but also the resilient perception that photography constitutes a threat to security, and therefore retains its own mysterious power.

American Work, Epstein's recent exhibition at the Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam (FOAM), showcased five grand prints from *American Power*. Despite the limited number, the selection revealed the diversity with which Epstein is both approaching and defining "power"—from the use and abuse of natural resources, the societal implications of such actions and their environmental impact to the power of nature itself, and even that of sexuality within contemporary America. Epic in scale, rich in detail, Epstein's compositions are easily located within the traditions of painting as well as those of photography. A couple beneath a tree near Niagara Falls—the woman gracefully wading out into the river, the man sitting on a rock, captivated by her gaze—invokes Titian's *Adam and Eve*, or perhaps his *Venus and Adonis* with the gender

roles reversed. A rag-strewn tree in Biloxi ravaged by Hurricane Katrina bears an eerie resemblance to Goya's *Disasters of War* etchings, with their dismembered corpses scattered similarly among bare branches. Even the abstracted chimneys of Ohio's Gavin Coal Power Plant emit churning plumes of smoke that mimic the brushstrokes of a windswept Van Gogh cypress.

As with the best visual art past and present, there is something palpable and deeply personal about these images, their compositional structures and textured surfaces evoking as much emotional response as their subjective content. Much contemporary large-format photography relies on scale, high vantage-point, and the precision of the medium to captivate museum visitors. But the best of Epstein's photographs manage to hold the gallery wall like an Old Master work, luring one's gaze through measured arrangement and subtlety of color, line, shadow, and texture.

In his earlier series *Family Business* (2000–03), also featured at FOAM, Epstein further revealed his artistic agility. *Family Business* documents the financial collapse of Epstein's elderly father: a story of the American Dream leading one man to disillusion and despair. In its entirety (as seen in the monograph published by Steidl in 2003), the project is at its most dynamic, forceful, and moving. Yet even intensely edited and placed within the museum context, the images held the space. Again, allusions to fine art are evident, particularly to that of the American twentieth century—a fluorescent light bulb tucked into a corner hints at Dan Flavin; a plastic-wrapped flag on a pink wall riffs on Jasper Johns. But the more old-world, painterly intuitions of Epstein's eye are not entirely absent here: a portrait of the photographer's swimming father—naked, arms spread wide, literally sinking into the blackened water—hung at the far end of the galleries like a Pietà, an ever-present reminder of the martyr at the center of the surrounding tragedy.

Exhibited together, *American Power* and *Family Business* demonstrate Epstein's remarkable ease in the public and the private realms, and also reveal what lies at the heart of his concerns as a documentary photographer, whether its effects are mutual or deeply personal. When asked why he is pursuing *American Power*, Epstein often responds simply: "I have a daughter"; and *Family Business* could easily be subtitled "I have a father." But what the two projects share most is an intensive examination of a place, America, that appears to have transformed from a land of plenty into one of fear, greed, and devastation. ●

—Aaron Schuman

Mitch Epstein: *American Work* was presented at FOAM: Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam, June 29–September 19, 2007.

Mitch Epstein, *Hoover Dam and Lake Mead, Nevada*, 2007.

Courtesy Skidmore, Jenkins & Co., New York/Galerie Thomas Zander, Cologne



Art in America



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Art in America

Mitch Epstein at Sikkema Jenkins

Mitch Epstein's new series of photographs, "American Power," focuses on the physical evidence of America's relationship with the fuel of modern life. Engaging in what he calls "energy tourism," Epstein seeks out small towns where there are vast power stations, oil rigs, smokestacks and refineries. Yet he grounds his images—70-by-92-inch C-prints—in the human condition, combining empathy with sharp social observation, politics with sheer beauty.

In *Poca High School and Amos Plant, West Virginia* (2004), a team of young football players in red jerseys engages in a leisurely practice. It's a peculiar sporting pastoral—the surrounding land is dotted with mobile homes, and the

field is dwarfed by an enormous power plant with a trio of active smokestacks. We're struck by the casual attitudes of the boys and their indifference to the pollution streaming into the sky, which is part of their landscape and apparently, to them, invisible.

Snyder, Texas (2005) shows a dilapidated gas station set beneath a bank of leafless trees. A faint light issues from behind its pale yellow door, and we see a collection of small salvaged glass bottles lining the windows—the defunct gas station seems to have been converted into a low-end thrift store. The paint on one old gas pump is peeling, another is overgrown with vines. As a portrait of the changing fortunes of American small towns—their vulnerability to demographic and economic shifts, but also their resilience—it is lovely and haunting.

Epstein captures social nuance, but he also creates images of extreme formal strength. A gray sky is the background for two downward streaming clouds of smoke in *Gavin Coal Power Plant, Cheshire, Ohio* (2003). Only along the uppermost margin of the frame do we see the tops of two smokestacks. These landscapes slowly reveal the collateral cost of America's reliance on power (in both senses). That's a freighted subject, but Epstein, who prefers discretion to sanctimony, never loses his assured touch—as a colorist he's unrivaled. Beyond the seductive tones, we're left with indelible reminders of the potential damage, both environmental and, implicitly, political, of our collective behavior. These photographs create a delicate balance, leaving us neither absolved nor privileged.

—David Coggins

Mitch Epstein: *Gavin Coal Power Plant, Cheshire, Ohio*, 2003, C-print, 70 by 92 inches; at Sikkema Jenkins.



YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY

ARTnews

JANUARY 2005

Mitch Epstein

Yancey Richardson

It was difficult not to be moved by Mitch Epstein's show "Family Business," an extended meditation on the final days of his father's real estate and retail ventures in the town of Holyoke, Massachusetts. Like this postindustrial New England town, Epstein's dad is a remnant of the past: a hardworking American shopkeeper, proud of his Main Street furniture outlet but now unable to compete with Ikea and Pottery Barn.

Epstein captured this American tragedy with understated eloquence in a series of photographs. A collection of living-room lamps in *Warehouse* (2000) silently awaits its fate at auction; a cabi-

net filled with keys is the last evidence of his father's once-thriving real estate business in *Key Board for Epstein & Weiss Real Estate* (2000). In fact, it was an accidental fire at one of his run-down properties that caused Epstein's father's downfall: he was underinsured, and the settlement led him to the verge of bankruptcy. Several of the photographs—especially *Family Business, Apartment 304, 398 Main Street* (2001), depicting a burned-out kitchen in a low-income dwelling—showed not only the fire damage but also how shabby these apartments were, hinting that his father's business standards were not the highest. Yet a portrait of the patriarch himself, *Dad, Hampton Ponds III* (2002), reveals not a villain but a fragile old man, barely able to balance himself in a pool of water.

Family Business, a book of the photographs published by Steidl in 2003, re-



Mitch Epstein, *Family Business, Apartment 304, 398 Main Street*, 2001, chromogenic print, 60" x 80".
Yancey Richardson.

flects both Epstein's ambivalence and pride regarding his father's accomplishments. But independent of this psychological tug-of-war, the work is a savvy contribution to the current debate about the impact of globalization and the "Wal-Marting" of America. A final image—*Flag* (2000)—showed Old Glory, dry-cleaned and wrapped in plastic, at a tag sale. An apt symbol for downsizing.

—Barbara Pollack

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SHORTLIST

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Courtesy of Mitch Epstein/Yancey Richardson Gallery

The old man and the sea: Mitch Epstein's *Dad*, *Hampton Ponds III*, 2002 (see Saturday).

SATURDAY 25

Photo

MITCH EPSTEIN These 11 images from Epstein's *Family Business* only telegraph that fine book's interwoven narrative strands—prodigal son, imperious father, failing business, blighted city—but even without an obvious story line, the pictures pack a terrific punch. Epstein's father, seen from above, bare arms outstretched, while dog-paddling in a lake, looms over the show like a benevolent, if nearly helpless, deity. He's surrounded by still lifes of his furniture store and the town it once served, which appears to be going out of business too. Through October 16, Yancey Richardson Gallery, 535 West 22nd Street, 646.230.9610 **ALETN**

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