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ST LOUIS MAGAZINE / MAY 2008 / EASTMAN'S EYES

Eastman's Eyes

BY STEPHEN SCHENKENBERG



Photographs by Frank Di Piazza

Photographer Michael Eastman has lived nearly his whole life in St. Louis, a city that has both nurtured his work and in some ways held it back. With the publication this month of *Vanishing America*, which collects three decades of his photographs, Eastman reflects on receiving greater international recognition, what it took to earn it and why it was worth the wait

Surely one of the satisfying advantages of touring an art exhibition with the actual exhibiting artist is that the concept DO NOT TOUCH no longer applies. On an afternoon last December, I entered "Elusive Light: Michael Eastman Retro-

spective," and within the first few minutes the artist—youthful at 61, with near-blond hair grown long, round glasses, untucked shirt, a white goatee—had already turned down the sound on a video montage of his work and straightened a few framed photographs. The show was in its final days at the Saint Louis University Museum of Art, having opened the previous February; it stayed open an extra six months because the crowds, 6,000 visitors in all, kept coming.

SLU's Beaux Arts-style building was an ideal place to see Eastman's work, its high ceilings allowing Eastman's frequently monumental photographs room to assume their commanding positions. And this particular occasion—spending a few hours walking with an artist through the first retrospective of his work—turned out to be an ideal way to learn about his life, his work, his plans.

"It's a big, big space," Eastman said as we walked into the first gallery. "I was a little worried about filling it. And then I was a little worried we filled it with the wrong things. And then I wished it was bigger because I could put more works in it." The show's curator, Petruta Lipan, spent several weeks at Eastman's University City home looking at everything he's shot over the past 35 years. The 96 photographs she selected range from Eastman's early efforts to brand-new projects conceived of while the exhibition's planning was already under way.

We began where he began: with black-and-white images—cool, sober, abstract—shot in the early 1970s in St. Louis, where he returned after graduating from the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Eastman had been expected to follow in his father's footsteps as a wholesale liquor distributor, but he could see that his father himself was unfulfilled by the career wishing instead that he could have

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