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Elusive Light: Michael Eastman Retrospective

Judith and Adam Aronson Gallery

February 23 - December 2007



The Saint Louis University Museum of Art presents *Elusive Light Michael Eastman Retrospective* in the Judith and Adam Aronson Gallery of the Saint Louis University Museum of Art. The exhibition has been extended and continues until December 16, 2007.

Elusive Light is the first retrospective of internationally renowned photographer Michael Eastman and features photography drawn from his archive. The exhibition will present acclaimed photography from the America, Cuba, Horses, Rodin, Abstractions, and Palladiums series as well as photography from Eastman's earliest days as a photo-artist.

Eastman is a St. Louis native (b. 1947) whose work is held in prestigious collections throughout the country including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of New York, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Art and the Saint Louis University Museum of Art. His work has been featured on the cover of Time magazine four times and *Horses*, published in 1999, entered its fourth edition in 2003.

A self-taught artist, Michael Eastman's use of a camera has not been limited by convention. He has retained an intuitive sense of the "photographer in the right moment" and turned his eye to specific subjects revealing a particular sensitivity to both built environment and to landscape, either pristine or invaded. Eastman's photography rarely shows human subjects. Human existence must often be inferred, in some case deduced from his presentation. Absent from the photos themselves, the person in Eastman's work becomes the viewer whose imagination takes her through the empty door, up a spiral stair, or into the cloud-filled landscape of a Montana Valley.

Eastman admits the influence of photographers whose seminal work has inspired his own. Eugene Atget's nineteenth-century photography of Parisian store fronts and the public spaces of Paris and Versailles presaged Eastman's own interest in similar spaces and places, especially in the towns of Middle America. Atget's portrayal of the places of life and hopes is reshaped today by our own knowledge that much of what he surveyed was inexorably destroyed in the name of modernization and progress. Yet Atget's work challenges a nostalgia that emerges not from lived experience as for what his eye saw and his camera captured is a place and time that no contemporary viewer would desire to call home today.

Walker Evans, another native of St. Louis, Eastman also credits as a significant influence in his work. Born in 1903, Evans worked much of his life in New York and made his mark during the Great Depression, capturing images of poverty and desperation in the rural south of the 1930s. Evans used his camera to document and to indict, and his photographs remain as compelling historic evidence of an era of suffering and loss. But his photographs also surpass the needs of the clinical historian and today Evans' images are embraced as artistic and masterful compositions of the human condition.

Michael Eastman challenges the conventions of a public discourse that looks longingly upon the past as a simpler and better time. In America, his work is often subversive, presenting to the viewer images of that past, now frayed at the edges and cast away or made banal in the transformation from original purpose to present use. Initially, the images of Cuba seem similar to America, except that the past has not been abandoned. Rather, progress has been arrested, nearly frozen in place. From Eastman's perspective, the present now co-exists in the degraded splendor of an aristocratic, colonial past. Castro's Havana has neither the interest or the resources to eradicate what the revolution rejected and the detritus of Spain and America becomes not building blocks for the future but instead only the decaying buildings of the present. Were it for us such places would be restored, gentrified perhaps. But then the very people whose lives hang from the clothesline beneath the baroque chandelier of Isabella's Two Chairs (2000) would once again be invited to enter such spaces only by invitation.

Landscapes and *Horses*, on the other hand, seem to embrace the mythic West where land and sky and animal exude a power greater than any action effected by the human person upon the environment. Still Eastman subverts, for the viewer knows that the West is subjected, the horse is tamed and the land has been transformed, rarely pristine as Ansel Adams saw little more than a century ago.

Eastman continues to evolve as an artist. Great vistas have given way to the intimate still life of his Palladiums series and he continues to respond to the opportunities presented by emerging technology. After thirty years, Michael Eastman remains committed to invite the present to engage experience - experience captured in the fragment of a second when both the photographer and his camera is truly focused.

Websites:

[Duane Reed Gallery](#) (click on "Artists" and then "Michael Eastman")

[Michael Eastman - Official Site](#)

