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January 21, 2010 [Eryn Loeb](#)

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Yesterday, I spent the morning drinking coffee and paging through Michael Eastman's lovely book of photographs, "[Vanishing America](#)." The book, published in 2008, is a gorgeous catalog of things that are falling down and coming apart across the country, signs and structures that at one time seemed to define what America was. And I guess they still do, maybe even more so, now that they're in ruins.

If you were to set out to take pictures of things that were slowly but steadily deteriorating, certain objects would call out to you for inclusion—you'd probably pull your car to the side of the road and aim your camera at an old neon sign, a shuttered storefront, a huge statue of a cowboy with paint peeling off it, a faded mural on a brick wall. But the things that would capture your attention, and fall into your definition of "vanishing," would end up being the things that tugged at you in a way you couldn't totally explain. You'd know something was vanishing when it whispered to you, *take my picture*.

Eastman finds evidence of a fading country in old theaters, churches, hotels, all kinds of hangouts, doors and entryways, signs, stores, restaurants, and cars, all studiously devoid of people. In the book, he gives each category its own section, prefaced by a short, moody paragraph or two. In his highly romantic introduction, Douglas Brinkley practically pleads with

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See All Gifts...

Eryn Loeb

Eryn Loeb has written for the Los Angeles Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, the Village Voice, Time Out New York, Salon, Bookforum, the L Magazine, and Bitch Magazine, among other

of broken glass, these are gems. It's just a matter of your eyes looking at them right." But that's no secret—lots of people can see the strange elegance of a crumbling building. The lost-ness of these places and things gives them a kind of magnetism: two opposing poles of time drawn together.

It's hard to think how these photographs might avoid the mythologizing of small towns, honest work, old-fashioned Americana, and unpeopled and/or abandoned places that seems to be a byproduct of looking at the past. Eastman, and other photographers and artists of his ilk, expect viewers to react to these images with wistfulness, to share his sense of wonder and loss. And the harsh, fleeting beauty of Eastman's decaying places (or at least, his artful photographs of them) makes a pretty convincing case: Maybe we *should* feel sad that the shoe repair shop is closed, that the old marquee movie theater is for sale, that juke joints—at least by that name—are out of style. Maybe things really were better back then, when these washed out signs were in full color and business was booming.



Still, Eastman isn't asking us to intervene in the process of vanishing, to do anything so bold as stop it from happening. He just wants us to witness it. For him, documentary photography is more of a solitary, poetic journey than a cause. And he's not alone: If Eastman's book leaves you wanting more, you can turn to "Ruin: Photographs of a Vanishing America" by Brian Vanden Brink, "A Handful of Dust: Disappearing America" by David Plowden, or "Store Front: The Disappearing Face of New York" by James T. Murray. Another photographer, Edgar G. Praus, shoots under the auspices of the [American Highway Project](#), a not-for-profit he founded to "[preserve] America's roadside culture through photographic documentation." (Tellingly, he's also the owner of [Praus Productions, Inc](#), the last remaining

Tablet magazine. Since 2005, she has written ...
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notice that the quaint, vernacular architecture and home-spun roadside attractions that he loves are rapidly disappearing,” Peraus’s web site explains, with familiar sentiment.

Looking for more information about Michael Eastman’s process, I googled “Vanishing America” and stumbled on another project with the same name. [This one is spearheaded by a photographer named Holt Webb](#), who drives around the country in a bus powered by vegetable oil; he positions his version of “Vanishing America” as a sort of activist project. Like Eastman, he’s interested in decaying buildings and old signs, but his bigger concern is the real and irrevocable vanishing of the natural environment. And he wants his audience to have more than a knee-jerk emotional response, to do more than just squint and sigh. With a busy, confusing website and a load of sponsors, his documentary project is much less austere, even if its message is ultimately—at least potentially—more sobering.

Webb’s aim, he writes on his site, is to “promote conservation and raise awareness about what we are losing—our culture, our wildlife, and our landscape—in hopes that some of it will still be around for future generations to enjoy.” It sounds like any other conservation project but for that word “culture,” which makes clear that he’s not just interested in photographing forests and wetlands, but in the shape and sensations of small town life, abandoned industry and various kinds of manmade Americana.

For people who care about photography—who see the world through their camera’s viewfinder—those latter subjects are pretty hard to resist, even if what you really care about saving is ancient forests. But it’s a little strange to see them all mixed up together in Webb’s world: swamps and wild horses alongside abandoned factory buildings. Sure, lots of different things stand as unofficial monuments to the past. But these things are hardly all vanishing in the same way, and I’m not sure it makes sense to mourn them in the same breath.

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It all reminds me of why I'm uncomfortable with the idea that some part of America is "vanishing" in the first place, even if to some extent it's undeniable. It's hard not to hear the ominous political reverberations of that phrase (or others like it), which are so easily [used to justify](#) all sorts of terrifyingly regressive ideas. There are things to rescue and preserve, and things to remember. But they're not necessarily the same things. "If not for Eastman's dutiful camera, amnesia would surely have engulfed all these haunts," Douglas Brinkley writes in the introduction to "Vanishing America." The only reason I can enjoy that book without it breaking my heart is because I know Brinkley is overstating his case.

Photos by Eryn Loeb

90% of people get this wrong.
How many triangles are in this picture?



- 1
- 4
- 6
- 13

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Reframe Collection says:

For more on this topic, please check out Virginie-Alvine Perrette's wonderful short doc, TWILIGHT BECOMES NIGHT (<http://reframecollection.org/films/film?Id=1645>)

February 19, 2010, 5:22 pm

[Holt Webb](#) says:

Hi Eryn,

You've made a great point about "things to rescue and preserve, and things to remember... not necessarily [being] the same things." I actually used to have a similar statement in my Vanishing America Project description, but couldn't quite figure out how to include that sentiment without getting too wordy. I do believe that some things need to be physically protected and some simply recorded for posterity, and with so much out there that is changing, making that distinction can often be a difficult choice -- at least for me.

And you're right about the website. It is quite busy. I'm actually in the process of redesigning it to be simpler, more elegant and easier to navigate.

Thank you for the honest assessment. Keep up the good work. :-)

March 21, 2010, 3:17 pm

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