

Beautiful Story

Kevin Moore

The moon you might not think of as a subject for a serious twenty-first century photographer. It is more of a nineteenth-century subject, a history of photography subject, a subject loaded with technical challenges and histrionic mythological references — mutability, phases, gravitational and emotional pulls, tides, time, and distance. The moon is a body to desire and conquer, a poet's cliché and a scientist's fathomability. It's the hero of a children's book, a character in a Meliès film, the namesake of a beer, the protagonist of a country song, and the subject of a series of photographs by Roe Ethridge.

The moon is visually compelling, to be sure. It is a big glowing ball and can look amazing in the sky. Yet, as we all know, its amazingness can be hard to capture in a photograph. Sunsets are slippery in the same way. The scale, the texture, the quality of the color — these traits just do not look the same in a picture. For this reason, Ethridge's moons are a champion success. They are what we perceive them to be, exaggeratedly so, big bald orbs cartoonishly "moving" across space, multiple moons arranged sequentially in a series of large-scale photographs.

Scale, composition, sequence. While Ethridge's discussion of photography, not to mention reviews of his work, can at times be alpine, in the sense of reaching for precarious footholds on unnamed peaks, he is also quick to express his love of the fundamentals of the medium. He believes firmly in craft and form as primary conveyors of meaning. "I want to make compositional images," he said recently during a discussion of conceptual versus formal approaches to photography (in which he gave no hint of preferring one over the other). He cites Henri Matisse and Alex Katz as his influences, emphasizing their attention to the edges of a picture, its framing, the frame. As in their art, Ethridge's larger ideas come tumbling from a technical center.

Ethridge's work generally starts with a single image, the stylized subject — be it a model, a pony, or a can of peas — lit and framed to convey both the familiar and the perverse. The familiar comes out in representational clichés that photography over time has dumbly ingrained in the collective psyche: stock photographs featuring happy families with good teeth, models in swimsuits, faintly eroticized cell phones and bottles of perfume, faintly eroticized children, pets, pizzas. The perverse comes out in subtle twists: an oddly cropped elbow, a sickly pallor, an awkward smile, cigarette butts or fish roe placed where you wouldn't expect them to be. Ethridge has a nose for the uncanny and an instinct for overabundance, both of which he applies liberally to his everyday subjects. But he does so lovingly. One might presume that Ethridge's larger project, the "art" component in his photographs, is a wry critique of the commercial culture in which photography plays such a central role. That suggestion might hold by some slight percentage. More accurate could be to say that Ethridge's ambivalence toward photography's role in commercial culture — a culture that has shaped his vision and sustains him professionally — crystallizes in moments of appreciation for commercial photography's perfected, seductive style, and he delights further in contaminating that perfection with notes of humor, oddity, and petit revulsion.

The sensibility is classic surrealism, and Ethridge's invocation of the historical movement's methods has a similarly transforming effect: an inversion or convulsion of familiar images generated by a tech-based, capitalist, marketing machine. Or, if you prefer, Ethridge throws cayenne pepper on our easy appetite for sex, scandal, and the magnetic animal stories dangled daily by Yahoo News. Pepper can enhance the flavor but it can also make things gross and inedible. There is a very fine line between good and bad taste.

Lest one imagine that the program stops there, at the prospect of an inventory of singular convulsing images, it should be recognized that Ethridge is a wily editor and organizer of his own photographs, arranging and even altering images made under different circumstances to create vague, often darkly poetic narratives. Such narratives play out in the artist's exhibitions and publications, where image proximity automatically sets into motion the random formulation of relationships and half-baked narratives; Ethridge intercepts and directs this process with a light and intuitive hand, personalizing the outcome. Early in his career, the narratives spoke of global industry, of production and distribution (cargo ships, UPS logos, fashion models, mall signs, and Polaroid cameras) — a young man's meditations on the ways of the world, perhaps. More recently, the narratives hover around neighbors, friends, family, and children, an ever-narrowing circle of personal connections who, under Ethridge's professionally trained eye, ascend to acquaintance "types," glamour-shot versions of real selves peeking out through a lacquered exterior. In expounding on his vision, Ethridge often mentions masks: masks created by the artifice of the photograph, but also masks worn by sitters conforming or aspiring to social types, not to mention product packaging and labels for people, places, and things — the words "Shelter Island" on top of a picture of the sun setting over Shelter Island. In an art vocabulary, this is mediation: a repackaging of things through the photographic medium, something we are all vaguely aware of. But Ethridge's work runs headlong into the question of what mediation means when we ourselves are the items packaged, and willingly contribute to the process by "posting" ourselves, our friends, family, and loved ones on various social-media platforms. It is as if we had all suddenly become celebrities who know that fame is something to be managed. Yet while most of us post to Instagram, Ethridge posts to *Allure*, *Artforum*, and the Whitney Museum, where the question deservedly garners a different kind of attention.

Such confluences of private and public self come, of course, with larger social and psychological implications. How do we salvage the sense of a unique self and life within a saturated media culture offering selves and lives that look disturbingly — or maybe satisfyingly — like our own? When did our personal life become merely the content for self-advertising? It all seems like some 24/7-amok version of the annual Christmas letter, an extended brag session about the accomplishments of our children, a catalogue of bucket-list travel, a website as an answer-in-waiting for some future employer, some future collaborator, some future love interest out there googling us as we speak.

In that semi-random Google sense, Ethridge's narratives are not so much traditional narratives as they are allusive and evasive image arrangements that demonstrate calculation but nevertheless appear marginally confused, disintegrating. Though logic seems to prevail, it is systematically undermined by competing marketing and product-placement schemes, by search terms that don't quite translate, or simply by a loss of conviction in the old order. Ethridge has spoken often of his interest in the concept of the fugue, chiefly in the musical sense, where disparate lines overlap, repeat, create bright points of interest, followed by dark

counterpoints, like the rhythmic disorder of waves crashing on a shore. A walk through any one of Ethridge's artist books takes you through passages that seem like narratives — about wild horses, skyscrapers under construction, suburban soap operas — and then suddenly lurch into another gear through the introduction of outré elements seemingly from a different story. Here is where the other definition of fugue, which Ethridge increasingly cites, comes into play: a psychic break entailing amnesiac flights of fancy, a symptom of the inability to cope with contemporary life, or, of equal validity, a method of coping with contemporary life — a sane, momentary excusal from an insane world. King Lear's fool demonstrated this potential for wisdom buried in chaos long ago. Ethridge's photographs, particularly in their editorial groupings, show signs of that stress along with signs of an order maintained, or regained. Insofar as Ethridge's narratives are "about" anything, they dramatize the breakdown of an assumed order — the familiar social order, built and upheld by the stories we tell — and its last-minute, seat-of-the-pants, uncertain recovery.

The question isn't really whether we will lose our souls to advertising and social media due to our own naiveté and negligence — giving away our image, our digits, our data, our control to some global marketing machine — but how we will preserve authenticity within an economic system that seeks to absorb more and more of us, not just our images but our genetic makeup, financial information, and sexual fantasies. If there is anxiety in Ethridge's photographs — in a certain dark palette and an attraction to vulnerability — it may well be the artist registering the decline of modern culture (if so, then the decline of modern photography as well) as a sustaining structure we once expected to behave in a predictable way. I see this most clearly in the fugues involving the artist's children: a tiny hand holding a tiny crab, once upon a fleeting summer holiday; a curious portrait claimed as a self-portrait by way of an engineered screenshot; an exploration of a desolate landscape. In such narratives, one glimpses the classic archetypal journey, the stock fantasy of children throughout all of history, involving danger and loss (usually of the parents) and near-destruction, concluding in an almost inevitable return to safety. Such precious and fragile and fraught moments — the most sophisticated algorithm would not know how to touch them. Or it would be useless data, in any case. For Roe Ethridge, this is where the beautiful story begins.

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Roe Ethridge
Neighbors

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