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# When color entered the picture

## A new exhibit at the art museum displays art photographs from 1970-1980

BY KATHY SCHWARTZ • ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR • FEBRUARY 11, 2010

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*Kodachrome*  
*They give us those nice bright colors*  
*They give us the greens of summers*  
*Makes you think all the world's a sunny day, oh yeah*  
*I got a Nikon camera*  
*I love to take a photograph*  
*So mama don't take my Kodachrome away*  
**Paul Simon**

Music fans know that another line from that 1973 song is "Everything looks worse in black and white." But Simon also has sung the lyric as "Everything looks better in black and white."

It's hard to believe today, but some critics took that latter view as color art photography appeared in museums and galleries in the 1970s. Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980, which opens Saturday at the Cincinnati Art Museum, surveys a period marked by questioning not only in society and politics but in art, too. It was an extraordinary time, but photographers were recording very

ordinary subjects.

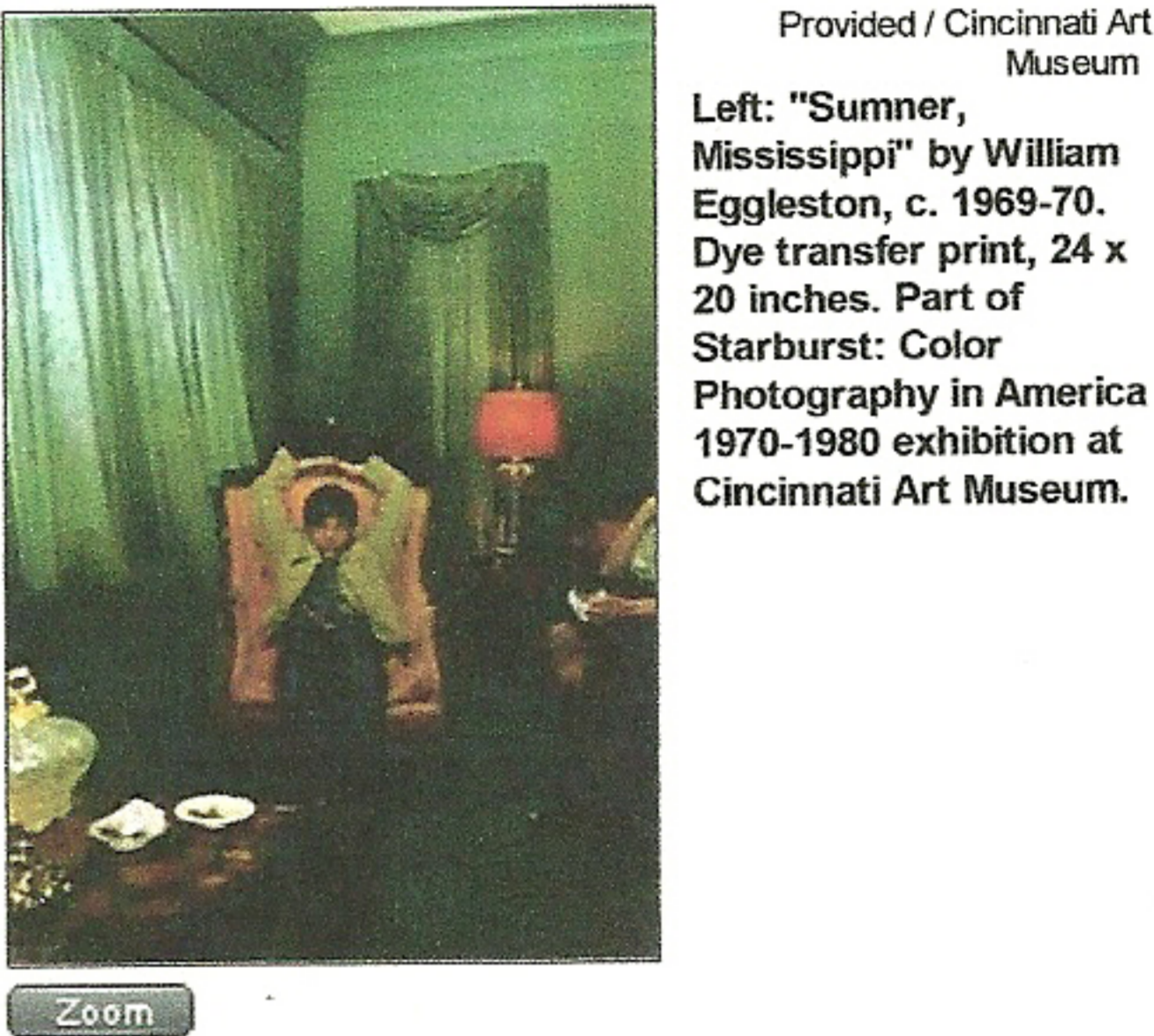
"The show is as much about the decade as it is about photography," co-curator Kevin Moore says. The exhibit will appeal to baby boomers who remember 'Nam, Nixon and Kodak Instamatics, and to 'millennials' accustomed to taking digital pictures and manipulating them via Photoshop. It is the first such retrospective since 1981.

Before 1970, much of photography was about capturing events. Think of some of the iconic images from the previous decade: JFK, RFK, MLK. But by 1970, disillusionment had set in. Those icons were dead. Photographers were no longer looking for the significant event, Moore says, and there was no longer one idea of truth.

In searching for a title for the exhibit and his accompanying catalog, Moore hit upon "starburst," a word describing both a destructive and creative moment. The pictures by 18 photographers are arranged chronologically, but to understand critics' initial outrage over color art photography, jump ahead to the "starburst" year of 1976.

**A Turning Point**

There had been color exhibits earlier in the decade - in fact, color photos had been shown occasionally since the 1940s - but '76 was the year William Eggleston's deeply saturated



Left: "Sumner, Mississippi" by William Eggleston, c. 1969-70. Dye transfer print, 24 x 20 inches. Part of Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980 exhibition at Cincinnati Art Museum.

Provided / Cincinnati Art Museum

**IF YOU GO**

**What:** "Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980"

**When:** Saturday through May 9. 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. (Preview event 6-9 p.m., Friday. Free members, \$15 nonmembers. Reservations: 513-721-2787.)

**Where:** Cincinnati Art Museum, 953 Eden Park Drive, Eden Park. [www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org](http://www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org); 513-639-2995. \$4 parking; members free.

**AN EYE ON PHOTO EXHIBITS**

A sampling of other photography exhibits now and coming up in Cincinnati:

**Contemporary Arts Center:** Marilyn Minter: Chewing Color, through May 2. Photographs and paintings with a fresh take on the topic of female beauty and empowerment.

**National Underground Railroad Freedom Center:** Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America, through May 21.

**Weston Art Gallery:** Disturbing Reality, March 19-June 6. Explores quirky and disquieting images, psychological dramas and off-kilter environments. Includes several Cincinnati photographers.

**Cincinnati Art Museum:** Thomas Schiff: Las Vegas 360, May 1-Sept. 26. From the local photographer known for his panoramas.

"Walker Evans: Decade by Decade," June 12-Sept. 5. Evans' work influenced several of the photographers in the "Starburst" exhibit.

**Taft Museum of Art:** TruthBeauty: Pictorialism and the Photograph as Art, 1845-1945, May 21-Aug. 8. Photographers include Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston and Ansel Adams.

dye-transfer prints went on view at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Lined up starkly on white walls were pictures of treeless suburban streets, cemeteries, the inside of an oven, and a tricycle dominating an ordinary ranch house. Many of the people in Eggleston's photos appeared sullen, impatient or freakish.

Only recently had any photography been accepted as fine art. Two years before the Eggleston exhibit, color works of longtime New York street photographer Helen Levitt were shown at MoMA, but in a noncommittal fashion as slide projections. Nevertheless, her sensitive pictures of the residents of tenement buildings were appreciated as social commentary, not much different from the Depression-era work of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. At the time, dye transfer cost \$300 per print, which was much more than a photo would fetch from a buyer, Moore explains. But Eggleston was from a rich family, and he liked the look of the garish colors usually reserved for "low" pursuits such as magazine ads.

Moore describes Eggleston as "the Shakespeare of color photography," in that he can be interpreted from many directions. There is deadpan humor, certainly, but also sadness in his works. Eggleston was frustrated by the new world of shopping centers and generic housing developments, and taking photos was his way of confronting that.

"The alienation of American life was too negative" for the critics, says James Crump, curator of photography for the art museum and co-curator of "Starburst."

A Turnaround

If Eggleston's exhibit was the "most hated" New York photography show of 1976, Jan Groover's show was the most loved of 1977. Though her subject matter - sinks, bowls, knives, bell peppers - was just as banal as Eggleston's, "elevated art language" was used to describe Groover's large-scale kitchen still-lifes, Moore says. Critics appreciated the more traditional approach to photography and compared her images to the paintings of Cezanne.

Color photography, whether bold or nuanced, actually invited more ambiguity than artistic studies done in black and white. There was a certain conditioned response when looking at a black-and-white photograph, but color made details pop and created all kinds of surprises.

Hitting The Road

Until the mid-'70s, color photography had been limited mostly to magazines and other commercial uses because of cost. Even important images from photojournalists were black-and-white. So it's not surprising that as the decade began, growing frustration with the Vietnam War and the limits on photography would be expressed via images appropriated from mass media.

The "Starburst" chronology begins in 1970 with the work of Robert Heinecken, who overlaid beauty and fashion ads with the monochrome image of a grinning South Vietnamese soldier carrying the severed heads of two Vietcong.

"The 1960s optimism was breaking down," Moore says.

In response, some young photographers - Stephen Shore, Joel Meyerowitz and Joel Sternfeld among them - went looking for answers on the road.

Shore took 3-by-5 "Kodak drugstore prints" of personal spaces on the road, such as barren motel rooms and cluttered restaurant booths. "Shore wasn't looking for important sites," Moore says. After all, answers for Americans weren't coming from their top leaders or institutions, so it made sense to look within and celebrate the ordinary.

Time To Experiment

As the price of color technology dropped, experimentation was natural for many photographers.

Eve Sonneman adapted the cinematic jump cut with her use of diptychs, or sequential photos in which the viewer is left to fill in a gap in the story.

"She's intentionally playing up ambiguity, leaving things very open-ended," and her work was wildly popular, Moore says.

"It's the way people felt in the mid-'70s ... searching, questioning. Sonneman questioned the idea of a single picture showing a truth. It's all about questions, not answers. That's the spirit of the ('Starburst') show and of the decade."

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