

EPSTEIN'S BERLIN

His pictures are like cinema: large, dramatic, tragic, and comical. When photographer Mitch Epstein explores Berlin, the past becomes present. A visit to the New York artist's studio.

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Strange, how the characters moved through the city. Almost like sleepwalkers, thought Mitch Epstein when he saw Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire* in the movie theater. And now that he has arrived in the real Berlin, he has the same feeling: that people sleepwalk through the streets. "You probably don't get through the winter otherwise," the New Yorker says and laughs.

Ever since he arrived as a fellow at the American Academy in January, Mitch Epstein has not seen much of the sun. Instead he has seen many other things: the Olympia Stadium, Tempelhof airport, and the ministry of finance, which once was the Reich's aviation ministry, then the "Haus of Ministerien" of the GDR, and an escrow after the fall of the Berlin Wall. All places where the Jewish-American discovers different layers of German past and present.

The photographer has explored the city, read heaps of books, searched the Internet, and spoken to people. And he did what he did not want to do: photograph Berlin. In the beginning he was just grateful to escape the routine and distance himself from his major project *American Power*, which he has been working on for five years. But maybe, he says and smiles with ironic amusement, that stance was just a defense: not to *have* to take pictures, just to be *able* to take pictures. He realized: now I know enough.

Mitch Epstein is not someone to just go out and snap photographs aimlessly. In any case it wouldn't be possible since his camera doesn't fit in any back pocket. The 55 year old works with a plate camera propped up on a tall tripod, "basically just like it was invented in the eighteenth century." The bulky and expensive equipment forces him to be concentrated and exact. Only two pictures fit on one plate and when he looks through the lens everything is upside down. "That way you pay more attention to the formal structure." The camera forces him to work conceptually – and simultaneously to stay open to surprises. Just like the other day when, on his way to Marzahn, he noticed elephants between the prefab buildings in Lichtenberg.

Mitch Epstein speaks like he photographs: very deliberately, making an effort to be exact. "To be honest," he says. He does not give many interviews, but when he does, he does it right. He takes almost a whole day. He has taped enormous 1.78 x 2.34 meter prints of his Berlin pictures on the walls of the apartment in the pre-war building in Kreuzberg that is his studio and has put up tall floodlights to light them correctly. With his assistant's help he rolls them out bit by bit; from left to right and

from right to left. It is as if he is exposing layers of Berlin, opening up a book page by page.

Epstein's pictures are like cinema: large, dramatic, tragic, comical, and touching. He emphasizes the human aspect, even and especially when no person can be seen. For example, in the crisis conference room of the foreign ministry, once the Reich bank's vault, he is pleased by the water bottle and name tag in the corner: "Mr. Doldi, Studiosus-Reisen." In the midst of the weathered, crooked, ivy-covered tombstones in the Jewish cemetery at Weissensee, between the knobby trunks and branches and all the green and brown, there is a white laptop that you can see only after taking a closer look: a researcher has set up his work place here, transplanting the present into the past. In Epstein's studio in Kreuzberg, the little bouquet of buttercups on the table in the bay window also feels like a personal brush stroke – a still life at the work place.

Epstein's cinema is in wide screen format. It is not until you see the large prints that you discover all the details and nuances of the pictures that so often look like paintings. The artist sweeps over the endless rows of prefab building windows with his fingers. "You can see exactly what kinds of curtains are hanging there – that families live there." He speaks of "landscapes" even when talking about interiors.

His movie glows with powerful colors. Epstein, a Fassbinder fan, had already been working with such colors at a time when color photography was deemed vulgar and commercial. "Real" art in the 1970s was black and white. Epstein, whose pictures can be seen in the Museum of Modern Art and the Getty Museum, is today said to be one of the pioneers of the genre. Of course, Epstein's art doesn't actually have anything to do with Hollywood. It is too quiet for that, too sophisticated. The artist also requires that the viewer "do his homework." The titles give nothing away but the location. The viewer must know the story behind the subject to be able to "read" the photographs, Epstein says. It is no coincidence that books are an important medium of his photography, through which the story can unfold sequentially. The books are just as bulky as his camera – they don't fit in any purse.

Epstein is a New Yorker through and through – intellectual, ironical, quick. He still seems to be a little shocked by the change of location for him; his wife writer, Susan Bell; and daughter Lucia, from the Bowery to the secluded Wannsee. Here, singing birds wake him at five in the morning. "Where we are from, you can hear singing drunks at the most."

Leaving in order to return, that is the rhythm of his life. Like a wave he goes and comes back with even greater force. At the age of 18 he left his hometown of Holyoke, Massachusetts to become an artist in New York. At the age of 48 he returned with his camera to his native city, now destroyed leaving even his own family standing in front

of the ruins of an American dream. His father's furniture store, once one of the region's largest, was closing out; after teenagers had set fire to one of his empty houses, destroying a whole city block, a claim for compensation was now threatening to ruin him completely. Epstein accompanied the crisis with his camera for three years. "A very painful time." That resulted in his coming closer to his feared and distant father, as well as a book like never before: *Family Business*. Critics called the volume, which tells a story with photos and very personal texts and dialogues, "a visual novel" and it resulted in the movie: *Dad*.

During summers as a teenager, Mitch, skinny and unathletic, had worked in his father's store and delivered fridges and heavy chairs. It was so fascinating to him to enter a stranger's apartment that he later ventured out to foreign worlds. He married his first wife, director Mira Nair, in the 1970s on top of an elephant in India, worked there and in Vietnam, only to return back to New York years later to portrait the city of his heart. He called the series *The City*. As if only this one city existed. On the question about how September 11 changed New York, he says that the economic developments and exploding real estate prices have had a larger impact. But still, during that first year, New Yorkers also walked the streets like sleep walkers.

In India, Epstein collaborated with Mira Nair and was a camera man in her documentaries and a set designer for her feature films *Salaam Bombay* and *Mississippi Masala*. As a photographer he found the work immensely freeing. He had never seen himself as a documentary photographer but rather as an artist who presented a picture of reality, not a copy. Today he allows himself some intervention – no staging, but concentrating – moving people and objects, hiding them. For example, while working on *Family Business* he came across an American flag on a coat hanger, packed in plastic like a pair of pants from the dry cleaners. He took it and hung it against a pink wall to create an even more intense image. Or in *Lichtenberg*: that the elephants actually belonged to a small circus didn't interest him, so he simply didn't show the tent.

Epstein came to Germany for the first time in 2001 to print a book with Gerhard Steidl. Since then he has published all his books with the Steidl Verlag and collaborates with a gallery owner in Cologne, Thomas Zander. To Epstein, the most impressive thing about Germany is its serious examination not only of its own history but also of art. When, with his archaic contraption, he comes to high-security places like Berlin's ministries, where the Academy is helpful in opening doors, Germans seems to consider his interest a sign of legitimate concern. In Washington people were suspicious – he couldn't get close to the Capitol, let alone inside. The impartial way in which Americans treated photographers in the 1970s is long gone. Today, he says, he is viewed with great suspicion, even questioned by the FBI. "You constantly have to prove your innocence."

www.mitchepstein.net. Steidel Verlag has published three books: *Work, Family Business*, and *Recreation*. On May 20 at 8 pm, the artist will give a presentation with pictures from the series *American Power* at the Humboldt-Universität (Unter den Linden 6). A few pieces from the series *Family Business* are exhibited in Andreas Murkudis' store until May 22 (Muenzstrasse 21, also this Sunday from 12 pm to 6 pm.)