

Mitch Epstein's Katrina Moment

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For some time during the middle of the last decade I had hanging over my desk an image that symbolized for me the catastrophic failures and—somewhat more inexplicably—the rising hopefulness of American culture in the still-young new millennium. This lovely color photograph, torn from some publication, showed a scene of absolute calm yet near-total destruction. At the picture's placid center stood a spreading banyan tree, its branches festooned with all sorts of detritus, including, improbably, a queen-size mattress. This appeared to be the contents of someone's house, spewed forth in a kind of convulsive beauty, while the house itself had been carried away from its foundation, and a smashed truck lay nearby on its back like a dead animal. Beyond, the sea churned endlessly against the shoreline, yet was stilled, like everything else in the photograph. And overall, this melancholic vista of quiet devastation was bathed in the sort of honey-hued light that always made me wonder whether the sun was rising or setting.

This view, I later discovered, was made by photographer Mitch Epstein in Biloxi, Mississippi, in October 2005.¹ About six weeks earlier, on August 27, 2005, Hurricane Katrina had slammed into the Gulf Coast, throwing up twenty-nine-foot waves—the largest recorded in North America—and causing over 1,700 deaths. Nearly a quarter million or more citizens had become homeless refugees, many fleeing the poorer neighborhoods of New Orleans, a major city that was at one point over 85 percent underwater. Katrina devastated New Orleans and rocked the thousand-mile Southern coastline of the United States, including not only the stretch of Mississippi beach where Epstein photographed the tree but also Dauphine Island off Alabama, where he recorded the looming hulk of an oil rig smashed on its mooring. In a larger sense, the hurricane and the blasted oil platform signaled what was increasingly evident as a fundamental global crisis: the necessary link between energy production and environmental depletion. As Epstein himself noted, “Even before this hurricane, scientists had connected the dots between energy production, climate change, and an increase in deadly weather. Katrina was the ultimate symbol of how we, as a society, had failed; how our rapacious, ‘supersize-me’ culture had led to catastrophe.”²

Epstein's encounter with the aftereffects of Hurricane Katrina was in some respects a coincidence; his trip to Louisiana had been planned well before the storm. But, other the other hand, it was no accident. At the time, Epstein was midway through an ambitious, five-year project to record evidence of the production and consumption of energy in North America, a project he called “American Power.” In 2003, Epstein had been commissioned by the *New York Times Magazine* to photograph in Cheshire, Ohio, a town that had been thoroughly contaminated by the American Electric Power Company. Confronted with a massive cleanup and potential lawsuits, the company simply purchased the town for a lump-sum payment of \$20 million dollars, and began demolishing homes and relocating residents.

Haunted by his experience in Cheshire and the specter of corporate erasure, Epstein embarked upon the wider “American Power” project, what he self-mockingly calls “energy tourism,” a quixotic odyssey that sent him crisscrossing the country, visiting twenty-five states, in search of the sources and consequences of energy

production, from nuclear power plants and hydroelectric dams to solar panels and windmills. By deliberately seizing upon energy, one of the most talked about yet inauspicious and virtually invisible issues of the time, Epstein was staking out a challenging territory that had received surprisingly little previous attention from photographers. Energy had become a political watchword in the United States during the bizarre, contested presidential election of 2000, which pitted Texas governor George W. Bush, a staunch exponent of expanded rights for the oil and energy production industries, and Vice President Al Gore, an outspoken advocate of environmental reform and chief whistleblower regarding climate change and global warming. Following Bush's election, one of his first initiatives was the development of a new energy policy, a task he assigned to his vice president, Dick Cheney, the former CEO of Halliburton Co., a Dallas-based multinational firm that serviced the oil industry. Among other things, Cheney's task force sought ways to stimulate domestic oil drilling, to promote nuclear power and coal extraction, and to respond to a Western-states electricity crisis, which had caused soaring utility rates and rolling blackouts in California. Though the group's recommendations, issued in May 2001, were widely criticized by environmentalists, they still became the basis for many subsequent Bush administration policies, including the relaxation of environmental protection standards and policies, the illegal occupation of Iraq in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the governmental response to the artificial energy crisis in California, and the collapse of the Enron Corporation.³

As Epstein's "American Power" project unfolded, it became an extended meditation on the changing nature of everyday life in the United States during the Bush-Cheney years, as represented through new forms of documentary realism.⁴ What his effort gradually revealed was a widespread American obliviousness to the ongoing corrosion and impending consequences of power production and, at the same time, an almost paranoid fear of material sacrifice or loss. In some cases these social attitudes are manifested in Epstein's photographs by overt acts of protective hostility or overdetermined surveillance, as in a portrait in Cheshire of "Boots" Hern—a resident who refused to move, and is portrayed in her suburban living room clutching her pistol—or one of an armed security guard at the New Orleans Museum of Art, or the jingoistic isolationism implied by an advertisement in a Nebraska gas station for "terror-free oil." But more often these views are reflected in a passive acceptance of a "new normal," embracing both the greedy hyperconsumption symbolized by the deliriously overstocked Iowa 80 truck stop and the normalized surreality of life alongside potentially hazardous energy sites, typified by the small town dominated by a belching power plant. The quiet neighborhood view in Raymond City, West Virginia, that opens the book version of "American Power" is a startling example. This bucolic fall panorama depicts a cozy, middle-American backyard with a patio, garden, white shed, and nearby houses. But looming in the background, like a ghostly apparition, are the outsized stacks of the Amos Coal Power Plant. Whether the environmental and health hazards are real or implied, the scene is menacing and unforgettable. Epstein is particularly adept at capturing such ambivalent perspectives and, as such, these images are among the most incisive and ardently political photographs made in recent years.

Echoing his often grandiose subjects, Epstein's "American Power" pictures have a bold scale and a big-screen impact. The actual photographs from the series are printed at a massive size, approximately six by eight feet.⁵ But aside from their physical scale,

there is an inherent bigness to the pictures that depends on both Epstein's choice of settings and the formal rigor with which he frames each shot. It is hard to diminish the vastness of the Hoover Dam, for example, but to photograph it Epstein selected a surprising elevated position on a cliff above the dam that emphasizes the even greater magnitude of the valley and the mighty Colorado River that the comparatively small manmade structure obstructs. A former cinematographer, Epstein understands the filmic tricks and techniques required to translate such concepts, and in the "American Power" series he marshals them all; not simply the wide-format panorama but also dolly-up views, worm's-eye perspectives, close-ups and details, and, occasionally, portraits and character studies. At the same time, Epstein's subdued yet inherently dramatic approach to his subjects capitalizes on small conflicts or contradictions within the images themselves. Many of the pictures betray their ambiguities through literal splitting of the image into two incongruous parts. In his image of the Altamont Pass Wind Farm in California, for instance, the wind farm itself, with its jumbled phalanx of giant pinwheels, is in what appears to be a separate landscape of parched sand-colored terrain, while in the foreground half, golfers idly play on a verdant oasis of grass and their bright white golf carts rest on an exclamation-point-shaped band of buff concrete.

Color photography is a form that Epstein mastered in the 1970s, and his photographs are rightly lauded for their bold and distinctive use of color. Each photograph in "American Power" demonstrates a subtle and exemplary consideration of color, sometimes in an elegantly gauged surface of nearly monochromatic tones (as in the sweeping view of the umber landscape of the *Kern River Oil Field in Oildale, California*) and in other cases through a brilliantly orchestrated composition of Kodachrome hues (as demonstrated by the shot of red-shirted football team of Poca High School practicing amid autumn foliage). But commentators on Epstein's skillful deployment of color have often paid less attention to his innovations in documentary photography and documentary narrative, which is where I believe Epstein's most powerful contributions lie.

Perhaps the best way to understand the overall documentary scope of "American Power" is to consider the sixty-three pictures as they appear published in book form, as a highly structured sequence of images in which each photograph contributes to the cinematic flow and propulsive argumentation.⁶ Individually, many of the photographs in Epstein's *American Power* are straightforward, if complex, images of energy production and consumption. Epstein carefully considered the geographical and historical range of sites, methods, subjects, and topics to provide, on one level, a responsible survey of the sources and the uses and energy in America. But it is abundantly clear that Epstein's photographs are no mere documents; much of their impact lies not in what they represent but how they do so, and the filmic traits of vivid color, narrative detail, image juxtaposition and pacing, visual humor, and variations in scale are substantial contributions that Epstein has made to the lexicon of documentary photography.⁷ In fact, he has so transformed the genre from the grim, deadpanned black-and-white images that once typified documentary photography that it is often hard to recognize his work as fitting within that category at all.

To the extent that documentary photography has functioned as social or political critique, it has always been concerned with collective identity and struggle. In taking documentary pictures of individual sites and moments, Epstein has made clear that his intention is neither to illustrate political events nor to create persuasive propaganda.

Rather, he raises the more challenging question of how inherently abstract political concepts about the nation and the culture as a whole can be represented photographically. Stated another way, the question is: How can one understand or read photographs politically? In his “American Power” series, Epstein addresses this crucial question head on, offering a new, nondidactic approach to political photography, or, we might say, the representation of political power through photography, grounded in specific historical circumstances of individual communities and the changing social status of documentary photography itself. Epstein is explicit about this purpose: “The political function of ‘American Power’ is to engage people with a world they live in, not persuade them of any single idea about energy. I am working out of a tradition of projects that address the idea of nation, and specifically [address] America as nation.”⁸

In this respect, Epstein’s “American Power” succeeds as a successor to a longstanding tradition in American photography that yokes documentary photography to the peripatetic road trip or quest to find the meaning of the nation. This sort of ambitious photographic expedition has numerous precedents, many of which announce in their titles explicit nation-defining aspirations. Thus, in photography, Walker Evans’s *American Photographs* (1938), Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (1959), and Joel Sternfeld’s *American Prospects* (1987), to name just a few, form a sort of patrimony in which the journey down American highways becomes an attempt to isolate and describe political affiliations and identities through new forms of documentary photography, an effort to distill a coherent national ethos from a disparate set of cultural facts and circumstances. In each case, the documentary images by those photographers do not so much illustrate the political circumstances of the moment as develop a visual language and format to address particular national cultural crises. However, as Walker Evans made clear in defining his own approach to documentary photography, artistic or formal concerns are not the overriding motives for such projects. Rather, his intent was to use a nonacademic form of sociology to produce what he called a “visual study of American civilization.”⁹

If Epstein’s goal was to create a portrait of America during the Bush-Cheney era, he could have found no more resonant metaphor than Hurricane Katrina. By any measure Katrina was a human and ecological disaster, but it also precipitated a political meltdown by suddenly exposing the Bush-Cheney administration’s failed cover-ups and sham policies toward security, disaster preparedness, and the environment. It seems altogether appropriate, therefore, that Katrina stands at the heart of Epstein’s “American Power.” Of the sixty-three photographs that constitute the book *American Power*, about a fifth of them, roughly thirteen images, relate to Katrina. In addition to the wreckage outside Biloxi, these pictures show individuals whose lives were upended by the hurricane, including some who lost their homes and others who became refugees in sleeping bags; the brooding New Orleans Superdome, where at one time 20,000 storm victims huddled for days without adequate food or drinking water; the security detail at the shuttered New Orleans Museum of Art, where an armed guard from Homeland Security stares glumly through binoculars; the crushed offshore oil rigs and the massive outlying oil refineries; and, finally, the strangely unused FEMA trailers stored in camps, seemingly oblivious to the makeshift tent cities of homeless victims of the disaster. Neutral in tone, these complicated and completely devastating documentary photographs detail, in a way no photojournalistic pictures ever did, what was at stake and what was lost in that natural disaster and national political calamity of Katrina.

The shock of the Katrina moment was not only witnessing the horrific circumstances themselves—including dead bodies floating in the waters of the Ninth Ward—but also recognizing the blatant falsity of the version of events that the Bush administration sought to propagate. Twenty-four-hour news coverage, citizen journalism, and spectacular photoreportage sent instantly from the field all undercut the administration’s claims about the President’s concerns and his agencies’ prompt responses. Here, documentary photographs—as evidence—were crucial to undermining the fantasy images created by the President’s media team. The alternative representations of Katrina—ones not susceptible to shaping or spinning by the administration—fueled the widespread recognition that many of the principal political perceptions of a worried public were based on perceived realities conjured by a White House image factory. This widespread recognition that the American people were being duped led, in turn, to a more general questioning of the legitimacy of political institutions, a skepticism about the credibility of official pronouncements and media representations, direct criticism of the bellicose War on Terror and its culture of fear and surveillance, and, more profoundly, a disillusionment with any belief in shared values. The robust picture of American dominance that the Bush administration had sought to project was replaced by alternative national image that emphasized the general fragility of the system and the pervasive imminence of collapse. In capturing this mood, Epstein says, his pictures show the “beauty and terror of early 21st-century America as it clings to past comforts and gropes for a more sensible future.... [These photographs show] America teetering between collapse and transformation.”¹⁰

Given this grim historical context, what is most surprising about the photographs in Epstein’s “American Power” is that they evince such unabashed optimism. To a certain extent this hopefulness is embodied in Epstein’s depictions of a progressive approach to a revised model of the American dream, one based on renewable energy and a healthier way of life. But equally significant is the unique form of documentary storytelling that he has invented in “American Power”—colorful, sweeping, concerned, intimate, honest—which aims to counter public distrust with specific stories about recovery from social alienation and to reinvent a sense of national community that is believable. There is a gentle mockery in his pictures of handmade electric chairs and garage-based Tesla coils, but there is also a distinct pride in the homespun ingenuity of American tinkerers and mechanics. There is a thrilling engagement with American popular culture, from the tacky splendor of Las Vegas to the sheer wackiness of a hand-painted Biblical wall mural at an Oregon car dealership. There is an exuberance in the vast American landscape, even in the moment of its despoliation. And even though there are several standoffs with gun-toting security guards, there is a general sense of a distinct pride in the community of citizens coming together, whether for a river baptism in front of a nuclear power plant or in the temporary shelter of a New Orleans convent.

Such photographs do not conform to the powerful precedents of political persuasion and epic documentary drama, because Epstein’s motive is at once simpler and more ambitious. Epstein has been clear in explaining the goal of his photographs, especially those in his “American Power” series. Recently, he said, quite succinctly, “Walter Benjamin summed up my view when he said that Atget’s photographs ‘stir the viewer.’ That is the political function of art, for me: to stir the viewer.”¹¹ This may sound like a small thing. But in an age of media overload, a pervasive glut of photographs, and a

sophisticated round-the-clock news presence spin, a chance to stir the viewer may provide the best hope we have for a new political awakening.

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1. Epstein has said of this photograph: "It is the tree of life turned upside down. It is in a hellish state except for the fact that it was made at an astonishing point during the day when the sun was just getting close to the horizon. You can just see the coast of Mexico in the distance. The light has no memory of what has happened before and the natural occurrence renders and describes the landscape—it creates a tension between a kind of beauty and a kind of terror." Mitch Epstein, quoted in Drusilla Beyfus, "American Beauty," *The Telegraph* (London), Culture section, November 18, 2006. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3656586/American-beauty.html>
 2. Mitch Epstein, *American Power* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009).
 3. Michael Abramowitz and Steven Mufson, "Papers Detail Industry's Role in Cheney's Energy Report," *Washington Post*, July 18, 2007.
 4. "'American Power' is kind of a testament to and investigation of the Bush-Cheney era. The project contains the themes of that administration.... The misuse of power—corporate and governmental—to profit a very few.... Fear of terrorism, and the ends to which we will go as a society to keep in place what we have already instituted. Security was an important theme for me, as it was for the Bush-Cheney brigade." Quoted from interview by Richard B. Woodward with Mitch Epstein, *BOMB* magazine online, October 2009. <http://bombsite.com/issues/999/articles/3355>
 5. The experience of Epstein's "American Power" photographs is not easily replicated in book form. Each of the images is six by eight feet, or 70 x 92 inches (178 x 234 cm).
 6. Mitch Epstein, *American Power* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009).
 7. In one interview, Epstein makes clear his priorities in organizing a photograph and in understanding its political meaning: "I don't begin my day with a political agenda. The topics of global warming, energy sources, and heavy-handed security are not on my mind in a conscious manner when I make pictures. Formal questions like how to frame the landscape are much more compelling to me then. I only become aware of the political aspects of the pictures as I step deeper into the intricacies of making the work itself. I make a conscious effort to engage with the complexity of our cultural state of things, rather than reduce it to visual sloganeering. Pictures with a clear one-sided message don't interest me even if I agree with their message; they are mere propaganda." See Jörg Colberg, "A Conversation with Mitch Epstein," *PopPhoto.com*, December 19, 2008. <http://www.popphoto.com/gallery/conversation-mitch-epstein>
 8. Mitch Epstein, quoted in Stefan Gronert, "The Convergence of Concept and Document: Mitch Epstein in Conversation with Stefan Gronert," in *Mitch Epstein: State of the Union*, exh. cat., Kunstmuseum Bonn (Osfieldern, Ger.: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 112–13.
 9. In 1936, Walker Evans said of his proposed "American Photographs" book, "My project is a book of documentary, non-artistic photographs, with text essay and extended captions, recording aspects of American society as it looks today. This work is in the field of non-scholarly, non-pedantic sociology. It is a visual study of American civilization of a sort never undertaken at all extensively by photographers, who are all either commercial, journalistic, or 'artistic.'" Quoted in John Tagg, *The Disciplinary*

Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 316, n. 153.

10. Mitch Epstein, quoted in John Vidal, "The Power of Nightmares," *The Guardian* (London), Environment section, October 3, 2009.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/oct/03/mitch-epstein-power-plants-photographs>.

11. Epstein, quoted in Gronert, "The Convergence of Concept and Document," 113.

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