

Living in America

MICHAEL FRIED ON MITCH EPSTEIN'S *AMERICAN POWER*

AMERICAN POWER, BY MITCH EPSTEIN. LONDON: STEIDL, 2009. 144 PAGES. \$72.

MITCH EPSTEIN'S BOOK *American Power* comprises sixty-three color photographs of energy-related sites across the United States plus a short, vivid afterword, in which he describes the origins of his project in a commission from the *New York Times Magazine* as well as some of the difficulties he encountered, including run-ins with police, in post-9/11 America. "I didn't start it with any kind of specific political agenda," Epstein recently told the *Times*. "But as I worked and traveled"—between 2003 and 2008, he visited twenty-five states, including Alaska, many more than once—"I came away troubled by the implications of what I was seeing and what happened to me." The photographs were produced as C-prints at a large scale, seventy by ninety-two inches, and a selection was exhibited at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York in 2007. Epstein decided to bring the images together in a book, along the lines of his previous books *Work* (2007) and *Family Business* (2003).

For this project, Epstein, who for years worked with a handheld camera, began by shooting with a 4 x 5-inch view camera, which of course had to be mounted on a tripod; partway through the project he switched to an 8 x 10-inch instrument because it yielded more acute detail in landscape scenes (for example, *Kern River Oil Field, Oildale, California 2007*) as well as a more satisfying, "luxurious" (his term) relation to the image in the ground glass. The larger image made possible "an intensity of looking and indeed of building a photograph" (Epstein again) beyond anything he had previously experienced—qualities that can be felt throughout the book, in pictures made in both the 4 x 5- and 8 x 10-inch formats.

Take, for example, the first photo one encounters, *Amos Coal Power Plant, Raymond City, West Virginia 2004*. The camera has been set up in a somewhat elevated position at the side of a grassy yard; a white frame (aluminum siding?) house is to the left, next to a modest concrete patio with chairs, a table, and plants; to the right is part of a garden, and almost in the middle of the picture rises a tree with bare branches (though trees elsewhere in the photo are full of foliage—our first clue that something untoward may be going on). Alongside

the tree is a white garden shed and beyond it, following a small rise, are another yard and a house with yellow siding, and more trees. The neighborhood, in other words, is typical American suburban, not wealthy but not depressed either. And beyond the yellow house and the trees, dimmed as if by distance—but not very far away—we see two broad cooling towers and two tall narrow smokestacks, with steam issuing from the tower on the left. All the evidence is in plain view, but the photo itself is devoid of attitude; what one feels instead is the photographer's visual interest in the scene, his appreciation of the neatness of the premises (the people living there obviously care about keeping them up), and perhaps above all an impersonal relishing of the beauty of the light, which shines through the translucent foliage and casts gentle shadows on the grass. One also senses the care Epstein must have taken to select exactly the right point of view, from which the scene would appear at once to open itself unguardedly and to hang together—to compose itself—as an aesthetic whole, his ideal throughout the book. It matters, too, that a small bush just off the patio and a few others in the garden bear bright red blossoms, and that a red car is visible in the narrow space between the house at left and the one in the middle distance: Eliminate any of those and the scene would lose crucial *éclat*.

All this takes time to notice, as it must have taken time for the photographer to bring it into pictorial and indeed mental focus; nothing about the scene—nothing in the book, with the possible exception of the penultimate image, of a woman in shorts stepping uncertainly into rapidly flowing water at Niagara Falls—feels caught on the fly. (And yet she too was captured by a camera on a tripod; one can intuit her half-flirtatious willingness to be so captured, even as she looks back over her shoulder at her male companion seated on a rock.) In short, *Amos Coal Power Plant* is a deeply contemplative image, quite apart from its thematic



Mitch Epstein, *Amos Coal Power Plant, Raymond City, West Virginia 2004*, color photograph.

content, and with it the reader/viewer is embarked. The journey continues in the second picture, *Poca High School and Amos Coal Power Plant, West Virginia 2004*, in which we observe in the middle distance the same or similar cooling towers and smokestacks, the former issuing thick clouds of white steam, and nearer to us—again from a raised vantage point—an athletic field with a football team in red jerseys and silver helmets running a play. The effect here too is of an almost diagrammatic clarity of perception and framing.

Another high point for me is *Chevron Oil Refinery, Point Richmond, California 2005*, the foreground of which is taken up by a magnificent eucalyptus tree in the sharpest imaginable focus, beyond which, glimmering in the distance, we see the sprawling Chevron refinery and beyond it a bare landscape disappearing into haze. The contrast is striking and poetic, yet stops short of editorial comment.

These few remarks scarcely begin to suggest the magnitude of Epstein's achievement in *American Power*. It's a brilliant book, one to turn through slowly, studying the pictures in detail (note the slightly blurred player in motion in *Poca High School*, a rare indicator of temporality) so as to take in the seamless blend of understated environmental critique, unapologetic mastery of the photographic medium, and formal intelligence both on the level of the individual print and on that of the construction of the sequence from first to last. □

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