

'Where We Live' photo exhibit at Getty captures poetry of mundane

by Robert L. Pincus

LOS ANGELES - For an institution with some 30,000 photographs, the J. Paul Getty Museum has never devoted a corresponding amount of wall space to the medium. There has been a mere 1,700 square feet for photography since its grand-scale Brentwood complex opened in 1997. Michael Brand, who became director last year, was intent on altering this scenario.

And he has.

BERMAN COLLECTION - The big hair grabs the eye first in William Eggleston's 'Memphis' (1965-68), but every element of the picture adds to its studiously casual atmosphere. CNS Photo courtesy of J. Paul Getty Museum. This is welcome news, since the image of the museum and the Getty Trust has been tarnished by international disputes about ownership of antiquities and the lavish spending of Barry Munitz, the former head of the trust. The handsomely appointed Center for Photographs, 7,000 square feet in all, is now being christened with a stellar exhibition, "Where We Live: Photographs of America From the Berman Collection." The 170 or so images have been culled from nearly 500 that Bruce and Nancy Berman have given to the Getty.

This is a cogent show because the collection is informed by a clear vision. Bruce Berman - chairman of Village Roadshow Pictures, which has yielded hits like "GoodFellas," "Mystic River" and the "Matrix" movies - calls the collection their attempt at "visual preservation." And it's true that all 24 of the photographers on view have an ambition to capture some essential aspect of American life, small or large.

Yet none do it by chronicling large events or people who play prominent roles in the public arena. They concentrate on humble houses, aged living spaces, domestic gardens, old bars and barber shops, odd storefront churches and people on stoops or in parks, along with other sights many of us might overlook in daily life but find absorbing when a camera is turned on them.

Photography critic Colin Westerbeck, writing in the companion book for the show, makes the point that these photographers, to a man and a woman, "are passionate about America, not sentimental." Too many photographers who make pictures along old highways, on city streets and in rural America pander to our

nostalgia for things past. None of those in "Where We Live" do.

Fairground architecture may seem a natural subject for an exercise in nostalgia. But David Husom's pictures of such buildings, with their straightforward views of arched facades and barnlike structures in wood, are matter-of-fact. But his photographs, taken between 1980 and the mid-1990s, embody a belief in the value of visual fact - a belief in the power of understatement. They are also a statement about the beauty of vernacular architecture, from the barnlike site of the Gogebic County Exposition Building in Ironwood, Mich., to the grand-scale Quonset Hut at the St. Croix County Fairgrounds in Glenwood City, Mich.

AMERICAN LIFE - Alex Harris' series on domestic interiors includes 'Amadeo Sandoval's Living Room, Rio Lucio, New Mexico.' CNS Photo courtesy of J. Paul Getty Museum. William Christenberry's "Red Building in Forest, Hale County, Alabama" (1983) is more humble: a small, peaked-roof structure all in brick with the doorway sealed up. But it is odd, too, almost fantastical, and the setting makes it seem more so.

It is clearly a talisman for the artist, who has also turned it into a small-scale sculpture as well. And you don't need to know more about him to appreciate both his pictures of this odd edifice and its three-dimensional version. Still, it adds a layer of meaning to learn that this is the county where Christenberry spent his summers as a boy, on his grandparents' farm. And this is where he continues to spend part of every summer making photographs.

The curators, Judith Keller and Anne Lacoste, say that many of the photographers take a cue from Walker Evans, arguably the greatest 20th-century American photographer. They invoke Evans' comment that he was practicing "transcendental documentary."

Evans' unvarnished homages to ordinary American main-street architecture have a strong presence in the work of Husom and Christenberry. It's just as evident in Karen Halverson's droll view of the motel in Dubois, Wyo., with its red doors, red lights and weird sculptural arch on a lawn; in Joel Sternfeld's deadpan images of places tied to horrific events, like the movie theater seat where Lee Harvey Oswald was sitting when police arrested him on Nov. 22, 1963; and in Chicago storefront churches that Camilo Jose Vergara chronicled.

Maybe we shouldn't be surprised that two of the photographers worked with Evans. When Christenberry found out that Evans' famous pictures of sharecroppers in "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men" were made in Hale County, he contacted him. Evans helped him get a job at Time-Life. They were friends until the older photographer's death in 1975 and collaborated on an update of Evans' classic series.

Jim Dow, who has spent decades making pictures of vernacular spaces, encountered a different book by Evans, "American Photographs," as a graduate student in photography. He was subsequently hired to make prints for Evans' retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1972.

Both experiences were formative. Dow chronicles an impressive variety of places and relishes creative clutter. The "Cactus Barbershop, Big Spring, Texas" (1980) doubles as a folk art gallery, with drawings and paintings filling every available inch of wall space. "Tootsie's Lounge, Upstairs Bar, Nashville, Tennessee" (1977) is an accidental archive of country singers current and past.

Along with Dow, some photographers function like anthropologists of American culture, though not dispassionate ones. Vergara's bold series on storefront churches is an engrossing example. So, too, is Alex Harris' series of Hispanic domestic interiors in New Mexico, with its keen eye for color, pattern and personal mementos. (Harris studied with Evans at Yale in the late 1960s and early 1970s.)

The dividing line between Evans' iconic pictures and those of nearly everyone in this exhibition is the use of color. Only three of the photographers on view - Robert Adams, Gregory Spaid and George Tice - work in black and white.

William Eggleston, handsomely showcased in "Where We Live," was seminal to this shift. He was the first noncommercial photographer to embrace color in a large way, though his pictures of the most mundane, everyday sights were anything but commercial - the back of a woman's head in a restaurant in "Memphis" (1965-68) or the back of a car at the "Delta Kream" drive-up eatery in "Mississippi" (1971-74).

Eggleston doesn't exactly celebrate the everyday. His pictures are too understated to invoke the word "celebrate." But they quietly suggest that there are rich traces of poetry in mundane things, and photographs can reveal those traces.

So many of these photographers suggest the same, some a little more forcefully than Eggleston. It's a democratic approach, which seems fitting since the ambition is to capture some aspect of American life or the landscape and make it visible. This collection illuminates the common ambitions of these photographers and is likely to make anyone appreciate the greatness of this major strain of American photography.

What a memorable debut for the Getty's Center for Photographs.

DATEBOOK

"Where We Live: Photographs of America From the Berman Collection"

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J. Paul Getty Museum, 1200 Getty Center Drive, Los Angeles

Free (parking reservations required)

310-440-7360 or www.getty.edu

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