

EUGENE RICHARDS

the run-on of time

December 9, 2017–April 15, 2018

Teacher Guide

The
Nelson-Atkins
Museum
of Art

45th & Oak, Kansas City, MO
nelson-atkins.org

Photographer Eugene Richards (American, born 1944) has devoted his career to exploring challenging subjects with impassioned honesty. In unflinching and poetic images, Richards confronts the personal side of such complex issues as racism, poverty, health and medicine, the American family, the effects of war and terrorism, and the erosion of rural America.

This exhibition presents work from Richards's long career as a photojournalist and documentary photographer. The images included demonstrate his deep dedication to social and economic issues and his commitment to respecting the humanity of individual subjects. By illuminating aspects of our society that might be more comfortably ignored, Richards's photographs exemplify art's ability to ignite meaningful dialogue about difficult topics.



EXHIBITION CONTENTS:

You will see 129 photographs, all taken by Eugene Richards between 1968 and 2014. Of those, 23 are color prints and 106 are black-and-white.

Also included in the exhibition are clippings from *Many Voices*, a newspaper Richards helped produce while living in rural Arkansas, and three digital videos made by Richards, each featuring his commentary layered over images of his photographs.

The photographs in the exhibition depict a wide range of subject matter, from scenes of urban and rural life to individuals going through health crises and dramatic life changes.

GOOD TO KNOW:

This exhibition begins in the museum's Project Space (Gallery L8) and continues in the photography galleries (Galleries L10 and L11).

Most photographs in this exhibition measure at least 11 x 14 inches, making it possible for 3-4 people to examine a single image at the same time.

The exhibition includes challenging imagery related to drug addiction, emergency medicine, and poverty, and conversations that arise from viewing the exhibition are likely to touch on sensitive subjects.

Several photographs contain nudity.

Discussion questions in this guide are categorized as **INQUIRING EYE** (focused on the visual and expressive qualities of photographic images), **PHOTOGRAPHER AT WORK** (focused on the ethical and professional aspects of social-documentary photography), or **CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION** (intended to prompt deeper engagement with the social and emotional issues Richards examines).

BEFORE YOUR VISIT:

Explore the field of photojournalism by visiting schooljournalism.org, an online resource administered by the Missouri Interscholastic Press Association. You'll find a bank of lesson plans related to the techniques, ethics, and impact of photography in the context of reporting on contemporary issues.

Discuss the difference between social documentary photography and photojournalism:

Social documentary photography – a type of photography centered on social investigation connected to real life subjects. Photographers working in this mode seek to convey notions of truth and authenticity, even if their photographs are inevitably taken from a subjective viewpoint. Often, though not always, they wish to call attention to a particular subject to incite deeper conversations or social change.

Photojournalism – A subset of social documentary photography in which photographs are made primarily as a means of narrating current events or illustrating written news stories. Photojournalists are often assigned to work on specific stories with a reporter.

Eugene Richards has worked in both modes over the course of his career. Discuss: Which type of photography offers more creative freedom? Which one might reach a wider audience? Which one do you think has greater potential to influence public opinion and effect social change?



FROM METAPHOR TO DOCUMENT

KEY WORK: *U.S. Marine, Hughes, Arkansas, 1970*

Inquiring Eye:

Compare the figure shown in the foreground of this image with the figure and setting details shown in the background. How has Richards used contrast and composition effectively?

Photographer at Work:

Richards took this photograph while working as a social welfare advocate in rural Arkansas and awaiting the ramifications of his decision to refuse the draft for the Vietnam War. In this image of a military service member, how does Richards present his subject? What emotions do you see coming through?

Continuing the Conversation:

During the early 1970s, the United States was grappling with issues of racial discrimination, poverty, and an unpopular war. Where do you see those social conditions reflected in this photograph, and how might they relate to issues we still face today?



A PERSONAL VISION

KEY IMAGE: *Wonder Bread, Dorchester, Massachusetts, 1975*

Inquiring Eye:

By using a wide-angle lens to take this photograph, Richards was able to get close to his subject while maintaining a wide field of view divided down the middle by the curving sidewalk. How do the left and right sides of this image differ? How do they work together to create mood?

Photographer at Work:

Richards wrote about returning to his childhood home of Dorchester after being away for several years: "The old neighborhood isn't the same as it was. It's more run down, more foreboding, a brooding mix of old timers and immigrants, of working class aspirations and grinding poverty that everyone believes will explode someday." How are Richards' sentiments reflected in this photograph?

Continuing the Conversation:

Places that once seemed familiar – neighborhoods, houses, schools – have a way of changing over time. Have you ever returned to a place after a long absence to discover that it had changed, or that your perception of it had changed?



AMERICAN LIVES AND STRUGGLES

KEY IMAGE: *Emily's second child, Chicago, Illinois, 1986*

Inquiring Eye:

What visual elements within this image communicate poverty? What elements communicate a mother's love and care for her child?

Photographer at Work:

Richards often spent a great deal of time with the people he photographed, getting to know them on a personal level. How might this image be different if taken by a photographer who was less invested in gaining the trust of his subjects?

Continuing the Conversation:

Approximately 20% of children in the U.S. were living in poverty in 1986, the year this photograph was taken. The rates are similar today. Which makes more of an impact: hearing those statistics or viewing this photograph? Why?



DEFINING "FAMILY"

KEY IMAGE: *Grandmother, Brooklyn, New York, 1993.*

Inquiring Eye:

What effect do the multiple streams of water have on this image? How would your impression of the photograph be different without them?

Photographer at Work:

After the birth of his son, Richards's ideas about the meaning of family changed, and his interest in capturing the nuances of "family" increased. What messages about family does he seem to be sending in this image?

Continuing the Conversation:

During the later decades of the 20th century, numerous social commentators and media reports decried what they saw as the collapse of the traditional American family. Based on what you see in this image, does Richards seem to share that pessimism? What about you - how do you define family?



HEALTH AND HUMANITY

KEY IMAGE: *Exhausted nurse, Denver, Colorado, 1982.*

Inquiring Eye:

Most of the people in this photograph are intent on something the viewer cannot see, but one nurse faces outward. What emotions do you read in her expression and posture? How would the image be different if we didn't see her face?

Photographer at Work:

Richards took this photograph while documenting the new field of emergency medicine. Working in an urban hospital, Richards was frequently surrounded by life-or-death situations and busy healthcare workers. What factors might explain Richards's ability to get close to his subjects without apparent notice?

Continuing the Conversation

How has your perception of emergency medicine been shaped? Through personal experience? Television? How does this photograph support or contradict your own notions of life in the ER?



WAR AND TERRORISM

KEY IMAGE: *Snow globe of the city as it once was, New York, New York, 2001.*

Inquiring Eye:

How does the presence of a human hand in this image contribute to its meaning? How does it impact the composition?

Photographer at Work:

Richards had been living in New York for many years when the September 11th terrorist attacks occurred. Compared to his images of other traumatic events and situations, the photographs he took of the attacks' aftermath are less direct, subtly hinting at what had happened. What might explain this approach to photographing 9/11?

Continuing the Conversation:

Photography has become an integral part of documenting the tragedies of our time. Do you think photographs like this one help people process terrible events? Why or why not?



TIME AND CHANGE

KEY IMAGE: *Corinth, North Dakota, 2006*

Inquiring Eye:

Although there are no humans in this photograph, how does it still suggest a human story?

Photographer at Work:

Richards worked in black and white for decades before experimenting with color. This photograph is part of a series exploring the "emptying out" of the upper Midwest as family farming operations died out and the population shifted from rural to urban areas. How do you think Richards's use of color affects the mood of this image?

Continuing the Conversation:

Richards's photographs of the changing Midwest seem to suggest a sense of loss. Where do you see change that feels like loss in your world? What about change that feels positive?

AFTER YOUR VISIT:

Ask students to identify an issue that affects their school or community. Challenge them to take a series of photographs that documents that issue at work in their lives.

Have students study the work of other social documentary photographers, such as W. Eugene Smith, Robert Frank, or Lewis Hine. What similarities and differences do you notice between their work and Richards's?

IMAGE CREDITS:

All images by Eugene Richards, American (b. 1944).

U.S. Marine, Hughes, Arkansas, 1970. Gelatin silver print. Collection of Eugene Richards. © Eugene Richards.

Wonder Bread, Dorchester, Massachusetts, 1975. Gelatin silver print. Collection of Eugene Richards. © Eugene Richards.

Emily's second child, Chicago, Illinois, 1986. Gelatin silver print. Collection of Eugene Richards. © Eugene Richards.

Snow globe of the city as it once was, New York, New York, 2001. Gelatin silver print. Collection of Eugene Richards. © Eugene Richards.

Grandmother, Brooklyn, New York, 1993. Gelatin silver print. Collection of Eugene Richards. © Eugene Richards.

Exhausted nurse, Denver, Colorado, 1982. Gelatin silver print. Collection of Eugene Richards. © Eugene Richards.

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