

# LIFESTYLE

STYLE, ART, CULTURE AND EVENTS OF THE SOUTH VALLEY



THE ROBERTSON HOME  
20,000 THINGS TO LOVE  
FILM FAN'S HOME TIES  
HISTORICAL FUTURISM WITH  
CONTEMPORARY HISTORICISM

LIVELY LIVING  
FLYING HIGH

## RIGHT: Why?

Barn-side sales pitch or age-old cry of existential angst: The enduring question shows the patina of age and the elements in this Michael Eastman photograph entitled *Why* (digital c-print; 37x45 inches) included in *Vanishing America*, a solo show currently on view in West Hollywood as well as the title of his new eponymously-named monograph recently published by Rizzoli (2008).



# EVERYTHING MUST GO!

Michael Eastman Captures the Marred Beauty of "Vanishing America"

TEXT BY AARON COLLINS | PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MICHAEL EASTMAN

**F**orget Norman Rockwell's America. That was an idealized place that mostly never was; a simplistic, sentimental fiction of happy endings for small town tales that were mostly suited to the confines of picture planes or movie screens.

Even Norman Rockwell himself seemed to give out, abandoning his own version of America near the end of his career in the turbulent 1960s, painting as he did some very forceful, clear-eyed images depicting the consequences of poverty and racism. Rockwell's *Southern Justice* (*Murder in Mississippi*), painted in 1965, is a bloody drama that might stand alongside Goya, the master of violence in art, for its stark portrayal of brutality. *The Problem We All Live With* centers on a young black girl trying to enter a Southern schoolhouse flanked by white federal marshals as she walks past racist graffiti. That's not *The Saturday Evening Post* cover artist; that's the other Rockwell.

But is anything left of that earlier America, whatever part of it might have actually existed? What came of our aspirations and hopes for family and prosperity, and community small-town pride and the small-time wonders of that bygone era?

Michael Eastman's *Vanishing America* points to one possibility. To say it isn't a pretty picture isn't quite accurate. In *Vanishing America*, now on view in a Los Angeles solo show, Eastman photographs a fate that isn't so bitter at all. His old America is really quite a beauty, albeit a marred and wizened one. But Eastman points our way on the map not via illustrative early Rockwellian sentimentality with its guilty and occasionally slim pleasures, but to the hard fact of decrepit old buildings in withering small towns, fading store signs, and quaintly inept promotional murals whose patinas are so oxidized that these photographs' subjects seem to decay before our eyes, in some instances. The artists' two different Americas could hardly be less similar.

Documenting a three-year project across 40 states – including images shot in Central California – the photographer's series suggests the embalming fluid might have flowed already, judging from the empty stores, the vacant streets, and the prior century's architectural modesties and graphic trends that Eastman wants to capture before they're all gone, replaced by paler, ersatz corporate retro versions of Americana now invading malls near you. In his work, viewers will not find fake '50s diners that never quite hit the mark, the Wal-Mart generics or any theme-iness in general, nor the endless reshapes of earlier trends by a new generation that doesn't seem quite able to invent its own. Only the real deal will do for this artist. →



#### ABOVE: Guadalupe

Logic of geometry and hue interact to elevate *Guadalupe* from decrepitude to Modernist composition. The photograph is among the digital c-print images that are part of Michael Eastman's solo show *Vanishing America*, through July at DNJ Gallery in West Hollywood.

#### RIGHT: Fremont

Disconcerting dark skies frequently overshadow comforting images of a quaint America fading into history in Michael Eastman's *Vanishing America*, including this image shot in San Luis Obispo entitled *Fremont*, part of a solo show currently on view at DNJ Gallery in West Hollywood through July.



*Guadalupe* is a prime example in the show. Shot in the rural town of Guadalupe near Santa Maria, the image shows a dilapidated mural on the side of a brick building. It operates as art by uniting time and cultures, bridging ironic Old World conquest and hope for wealth with the fading ways of the New World. Objects within the composition quote and echo one another: A blue car cover reflects the aqua Pacific, a rust-colored VW van speaks to the rusty-looking brick, a picture of order amidst disorder, a fusion of optimism and dystopia.

*Western Wear*, for example, shows a humorously crude store mural. The shot is a kind of visual pun, a summation of the whole of every worn-out looking small town in the American West.

In Eastman's lens, earnest shops make one last sales pitch before calling it quits for good. Movie theater marquees seem lit but only for closing night, with ominous clouds looming that have sent scurrying whomever might be left lingering with a wistful eye to the past. Between the lines and on the walls are clear signs that Eastman's America isn't just vanishing on its own; it is imperiled under dark clouds and forces that threaten to overwhelm.

A rueful acceptance of the failure to thrive underpins many of these images. But the artist evades total despair via the poetic visual aspects of his work, and by depicting the oddly beautiful corpse with a careful eye for the authentic formalities of the remains. By following the visual music of architecture, he creates what can be seen as wistful elegies to the fleeting lives that once inhabited these now-desolate and defunct spaces.

Citing painter Mark Rothko among his greatest influences, Eastman is a self-described colorist who documents the moment when color accepts a last poised dance with volume, when geometries' worn edges balance and touch one last time, and the theater's retiring grand dame takes her final turn in the spotlight. Equal parts Irish wake and festive El Dia de los Muertos celebration, grim processions these shots are not. They are tributes shot through with love and, quite often, humor, but tinged with sadness, too. Important photographers Edward Weston and Walker Evans also had an influence on Eastman, a resident of St. Louis.

He does not shoot populated spaces, happy blues skies, tricky angles. For more than 30 years he has recorded mostly head-on, empty spaces whether they be found in Cuba or the United States, offering spaces that make room for the viewer and invite us in. In their abandonment, they are ours. Instead of any particular statement, he hopes for many multiple layers of meaning rather than only one, and sees himself primarily as a historian, documenting things under natural light in an as-is way while avoiding excessive post-shoot manipulations of his 4x5 old school film technique.

"I am as much a historian as I am a photographer," he says. "I think that as a recorder of history, I have an obligation to try and present what I photograph in an honest and straightforward manner. The power of the image is in the fact that it is real and exists in the world. Pushing the image is unnecessary if I have found a strong enough subject." It is all about the search for those places, as he sees it. "I have nothing against pushing photographs, but for me, the power of what is real is a significant part of the relationship with an audience." →





# LEFT: Candy Counter

The formal elegance and saturated color of *Candy Counter* offer viewers some eye candy as well as a loving glimpse of *Vanishing America*, photographer Michael Eastman's 40-state examination of disappearing Americana including images shot on his travels through Central California.

A good audience he has cultivated, too: Museum photography collections now featuring his work include the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Art Institute of Chicago, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, among numerous others as well as important private photography collections. His subject matter may be waning away as years pass, but fortunately, his documentary efforts were just published in a book entitled *Vanishing America* (Rizzoli, 2008). The museum collections and publication mean that his work can speak to future generations, while in the not-so-distance future the buildings may no longer do so.

Like Rockwell eventually did, Eastman finds an affirmation in seeing clearly the way things are, and not by omitting the blemishes, but offering the broadest spectrum of the whole truth. "We can never know or change without this knowledge. And the possibility of progress exists only through seeing clearly," he says.

But despite the exhaustive cataloguing of the kinds of decay he shoots, he still has work to do. Even with time and weather and economic and environmental entropy of every kind, his America will not likely vanish completely, the present tensions and signs of Constitutional crumbling notwithstanding. So Eastman's job isn't finished. Somewhere in a forlorn little U.S. town is a store window painted with more than just a hard-sell goodbye whose apocryphal chipped text forms a plaintive and inadvertently existential claim on the window that reads, "*Everything Must Go!*"

As his work reminds us, indeed everything must. ■