



PHOTO BOOTH

ELLIOTT ERWITT'S VISUAL ONE-LINERS

By Andrew Dickson, OCTOBER 14, 2016



In the fall of 1954, the photographer Elliott Erwitt travelled to Wyoming to photograph a “ranch boy” for *Holiday* magazine, to appear as part of a feature highlighting the lives of children around the world. In the small town of Douglas, Erwitt met Jack Elton Brow, whose single father worked out in the ranchlands. Over several days, the photographer captured a series of images of the youngster: wearing a cowboy hat and too-large denims; gazing down at his dog; lost in thought at the dinner table. He considered these images some of the strongest he’d produced; the picture of the boy at dinnertime “reminds me of me,” he later wrote. But *Holiday*’s picture editors demurred. The photographs were too glum, they said, and told Erwitt to head back West and find another, cheerier ranch boy. He obliged, and then sold the rejected pictures elsewhere.

This story—one of many recounted in the lavish catalogue that accompanies a new retrospective of the photographer’s work at the Harry Ransom Center, in Austin, Texas—describes the Elliott Erwitt of photographic lore: a consummate pragmatist and pro who successfully juggled advertising and fashion jobs while producing some of the most indelible editorial photography of all time. The most famous of his images elicit surprise, even when viewed for the umpteenth time. Who can resist his shot of a woman’s boots flanked, on one side, by a tiny dog and, on the other, by the legs of giant one? Or the one of a woman, her reflection captured in the rear-view mirror of a car, grinning giddily as she’s kissed by her lover?



Erwitt, now in his late eighties, has always been an entertainer. For a time, he had a habit, when working with nervous subjects, of pulling a bicycle horn from his camera bag and honking it to puncture the tension. “It’s silly, but it works,” he has explained. But that unserious streak coexists with a pin-sharp sense of compositional timing and an astounding technical fluency. By the time he was just twenty-one, he had impressed Edward Steichen, who bought two portraits of children he had taken on a postwar trip to Europe. By twenty-four, he had become a member of the Magnum photo agency; by twenty-six, he was being exhibited at MOMA. When Erwitt was encouraged by his friend Robert Frank to use a Leica in addition to his Rolleiflex in the early fifties, he became faster-moving and more instinctual, and in the following decades managed to photograph some of the most influential figures in the country and around the world: J.F.K., Jackie, Marilyn, Kerouac, Khrushchev, Nixon, William Carlos Williams, Simone de Beauvoir. His sense of spatial structure has also made him a brilliant photographer of buildings—an underrated aspect of his craft. A 1969 scene in Amagansett, New York—a sober, soot-stained Victorian office block with a single storefront whose sign (“Tony’s of Worth Street”) is written in cheerful white paint—somehow combines the austerity of Atget with the irreverent glee of Weegee.



What Erwitt hasn't often managed—or perhaps hasn't wanted to—is to create photographs that overwhelm the emotions. His pictures of people are humane, but they rarely have the needling clarity of Frank's portraits, or the sardonic force of Garry Winogrand's. Despite a profusion in his work of bare flesh, much of it shapely and female (he once made a documentary called “Good Nudes”), raw desire seems alien to Erwitt, as does authentic sadness. It seems telling that many of his most successful portraits are of children and animals, subjects safely removed from the ungovernable realm of adult human feeling. (He has so far produced no fewer than seven books on dogs.) When dispatched to Nevada in 1960 to shoot the stars of John Huston and Arthur Miller's movie “The Misfits,” Erwitt returned with a portfolio full of radiant portraits of Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, and Montgomery Clift, a selection of which ran in American Weekly under the title “M.M.'s Men.” It took another Magnum photographer, Inge Morath, to detect what was really taking place on set: Huston wallowing in drink, Monroe addicted to pills, her marriage to Miller on the brink of falling apart. The two photographers seem to have captured not just different perspectives on the same material but entirely separate realities. Perhaps the side of Erwitt that had once identified with an introspective ranch boy from Wyoming had by then been filed away.

This is not to say that Erwitt's penchant for visual double-takes and finely tuned one-liners can't penetrate deeply. One of his most syndicated photographs, taken in 1950, when he was still in his early twenties, is a blurry, apparently impromptu shot of two water fountains in Wilmington, North Carolina. The fountain on the left, labelled “White,” is made of spotless porcelain and mounted on an Art Deco-ish base. The one on the right is battered and soiled, and labelled “Colored.” A black man uses the latter but glances over at the former—just a few feet away, but also immeasurably far. Sometimes a one-liner says it all.

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