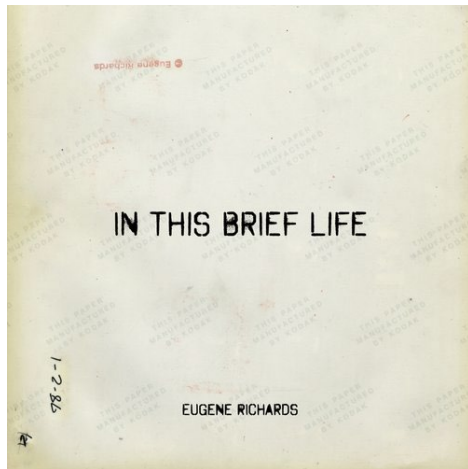


Eugene Richards:

In This Brief Life



Maybe it was because I was edging up in age; people that I'd come to know in this life and things I'd seen were weighing on me. Every day for months I slipped into the small room at the back of our house where my contact sheets are stored, and searched through them for pictures that I'd somehow overlooked over the years, had dismissed, had found difficult to look at, had forgotten.

The first binder of contact sheets I pulled down from the shelf was labeled "Eugene Richards Pre-Arkansas Delta book 1970." I was 26 years old back then.

While this text is the Afterword to *In This Brief Life*, Eugene Richards' newest book, it also serves as a good introduction to the project: two paragraphs, 99 words, with not a syllable wasted. The book itself—a model of spare design and impeccable sequencing—is ten by ten inches and includes 120 photographs Richards made between 1969 and 2019. All are black and white, and most are horizontal; there are seven vertical images, thirteen with a line or two of text on the opposite page, thirty-seven shown singly, and seventy displayed in pairs. Page numbers and captions are handwritten, and the notes at the end, varying from two to six lines of text, appear to be manually typed.

Included are images from Richards' work in the Arkansas Delta, both early and more recent; images from *Dorchester Days*, *Exploding Into Life*, *Below the Line*, *The Fat Baby*, *Cocaine True*, *Cocaine Blue*; from *The American Family*, produced for *LIFE* Magazine; and from *A Procession of Them*, *Stepping Through the Ashes*, *War Is Personal*, *Red Ball of a Sun Slipping Down*, and *The Day I Was Born*. There are photographs from the Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Ohio and the Virginia State Penitentiary, as well as from the Guantanamo Bay prison and psychiatric hospitals in Mexico and Paraguay; there are images from West Beirut, Lebanon; from Mali, Guinea, Nigeria, Niger and Ethiopia; from South Dakota, Tennessee, New Mexico, North Carolina, New Jersey and Virginia; from Washington D.C, Chicago, Brooklyn, Philadelphia, Kansas City, Missouri, Fort Worth, Los Angeles, Detroit, Mexico City, and Mabou, Nova Scotia. The opening and concluding sequences were photographed in Arkansas, fifty years apart.

In This Brief Life was selected by Smithsonian Magazine as one of the ten best photography books of 2023, and you can read an outstanding review by Cary Benbow in F-STOP Magazine at <https://www.fstopmagazine.com/blog/2024/book-review-in-this-brief-life-by-eugene-richards/>. Published by Many Voices Press, it was initially funded through a Kickstarter campaign; as part of his outreach to supporters, towards the project's conclusion Richards gave an online talk about the book's making. His presentation, limited in sound quality but very illuminating, is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOv5BVudQdw>.



Mr. Will and his granddaughter, Hughes, Arkansas, 1986

A lot has gone on in the last fifty years, let alone the last hundred or more. Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives* was published in 1890; Lewis Hine began photographing for The Pittsburgh Survey in 1907; photographers were hired by the Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration) starting in 1935. Picture magazines were established during the same era: the *Berlin Illustrated* in 1892, the *Munich Illustrated* in 1925, *LIFE* Magazine in 1936, and *Picture Post*, the London weekly, in 1938. *The Family of Man* exhibition premiered in 1955, and the first volume of Cornell Capa's *The Concerned Photographer* was published in 1968, when Richards was still a graduate student in Minor White's photography program at MIT. Capa's second volume came four years later, and Richards' first book, *Few Comforts or Surprises: The Arkansas Delta*, was published in 1973.

While Minor White sometimes questioned the traditions of documentary picture-making and of photojournalism—and once remarked, infamously, that “Gene makes pictures of people being eaten” — he also had a deep respect for the expressive potential of any photograph, and in the end, I think he saw very clearly the human values that lay at the core of Richards' work.¹

White also insisted that a truly effective photograph needed to be “both lyrical and accurate,” and took it as a given that serious photographers would be fully aware of the historical currents and traditions that shaped and informed their practice. His students were idealists, passionate about photography and convinced of its place in the world; I’ve yet to encounter a single cynic among those who studied with White during the years he offered the “Problems in Photography” seminars at MIT.

It is true that Richards’ photographs can show the afflictions of racial injustice, poverty, addiction, illness in body or mind, or the ravages of famine and war. But it’s equally true that his pictures show the respect Richards has for the medium itself, the trust he has earned from his subjects, and the relationships they themselves manage to form—and onto which, somehow, they manage to hold. Of all the photographs in the book, only a dozen or so show people in isolation. The rest show families, parents, children, siblings; caregivers and those being cared for; makeshift villages and haphazard communities, no matter how dire the circumstances that brought them into being. Even gang members and addicts can and do have close relationships. And more often than not in Richards’ photographs, people are shown touching each other, with Richards himself working at close enough range to his subjects that he could, if he chose, reach out and touch them.



Drug Raid, North Philadelphia, 1989

What’s most remarkable, then, about all this work is not its pessimism but its humanism, which in turn is directly related to the circumstances in which Richards grew up, studied and became a photographer. It was already apparent in his first three books: *Few Comforts or Surprises*, 1973; *Dorchester Days*, 1978; and *50 Hours*, 1983. It has continued since and seems to have come full circle in Richards’ trilogy from the last decade: *Red Ball of a Sun Slipping Down*, 2014; *The Day I Was Born*, 2020; and *In This Brief Life*, 2023.

Richards' stylistic consistency throughout all these years is astonishing, as is his commitment and his work ethic; and his spare, expressive writing—as an undergraduate, he studied English at Northeastern University—has continued to illuminate and support his photographs, with increasing clarity and precision as time has progressed.

In an era of big-box celebrity images, when exploitation of spectacle is the norm and the empty, transactional nature of much contemporary picture-making leaves everyone dissatisfied, I wanted to find a way to validate Richards' work. I spent a lot of time searching for a quotation to properly acknowledge the worth of these photographs, especially in the media environment of today. I tried writers on photography, on literature, on art; critics, exiles, award-winners of all stripes, and self-styled public thinkers. But always I came up empty; it was only by chance I encountered a collection of remarks by the American painter Edward Hopper. One of these rings particularly true:

Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.

In the case of Richards, what he makes us see is not easy, not comfortable, not resolved, and probably not even resolvable. But in being asked to look, and eventually having to confront both difficulty and anguish, we can at least become a bit more humble. I've never heard Gene raise his voice, but maybe he doesn't need to: it's really his pictures that speak for him.



4th of July, Crawfordville, Arkansas, 2010

All photographs: Eugene Richards

Eugene Richards' work can be viewed at <https://eugenerichards.com/> and on Instagram at <https://www.instagram.com/eugenerichardsphotography/>

Many of Richards' films are posted at <https://vimeo.com/eugenerichards>

ⁱ For a fuller discussion, see Jonathan Green's *American Photography: A Critical History, 1945-1980*