

***Pictures and Words:
Conversations with Eugene Richards***



From *Red Ball of a Sun Slipping Down*, 2014

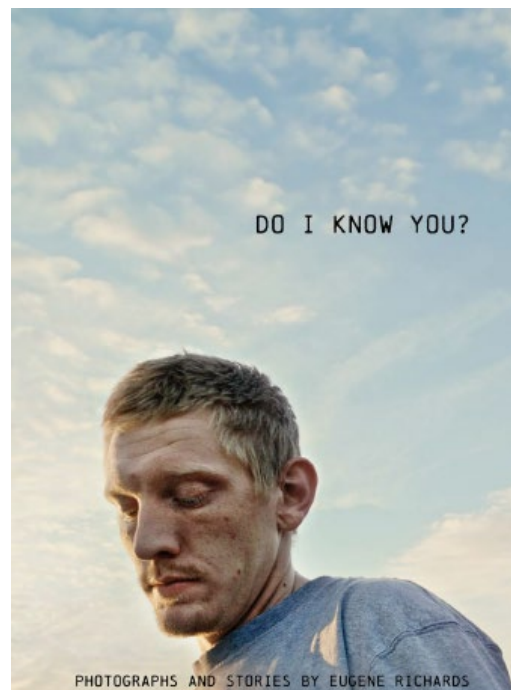
American photographer Eugene Richards was born in late April of 1944, about six weeks before D-Day, and grew up in Dorchester, Massachusetts during the so-called boom years that followed World War II. This was a time of reunification, rebuilding and new alliances: the United Nations was founded in 1945, the Marshall Plan to assist war-damaged Europe was announced in 1947, and NATO was established two years after that. The Eisenhower administration (1953-1961) brought an end to the Korean War and provided a degree of stability for the working class; the Interstate Highway System was mapped out and begun, and America's political focus was on the Cold War and the arms race as much as anything else. American society camouflaged its racism, celebrated its sense of global leadership, and thought itself progressive. Most adults could still remember both the war and the Depression, and accordingly, taught their children that things in the fifties were relatively OK.

The 1960s brought a series of compound fractures to this constructed order. Among these were the Kennedy and King assassinations, the protests and murders of the Civil Rights era, and the tearing apart of the social fabric during the Vietnam War. By 1968, the year Richards finished the graduate photography program at MIT, the United States was a different place altogether. What followed—cutbacks of the Reagan era, the onslaught of drugs, two recessions and three more wars—only made life more difficult and change more threatening. Ever since, America has seemed to be at war with itself.



From *Americans We*, 1994

Between 1973 (the year *Few Comforts or Surprises: The Arkansas Delta* was released) and now, Richards has created eighteen books of photographs that look—hard—at this divided nation and its people, photographing their situations and struggles, communities and relationships, and their anger, hope or desperation. His nineteenth book, *Do I Know You?*, has just been released, self-published via Many Voices Press.



In the Preface to this new volume, Richards writes:

I'm an old man, not as old as Robert Frank was when I last saw him, but old. And now that I'm old, most every night an overflow of memories, doubts, regrets, images, yearnings chew at my brain and keep me from sleeping. Still, come morning, I'm compelled to work.

His self-critical tone is partly a measure of Richards's integrity, but it also points to the depth of his commitment. And just as Richards himself can't stop thinking about the things he has seen, no serious person can either ignore or forget what his photographs show.

Do I Know You? presents the reader with just over two dozen short image sequences, accompanied by brief narratives. Impeccably produced and intuitively paced, with great economy of means it reaches more deeply than you would think possible into the lives of its subjects.

It isn't easy to look at these pictures. For me at least, Richards's book projects always bring to mind a passage from the writings of scholar and critic Harold Bloom:

Traditions tell us that the free and solitary self writes in order to overcome mortality. I think that the self, in its quest to be free and solitary, ultimately reads with one aim only: to confront greatness... Our common fate is age, sickness, death, oblivion. Our common hope, tenuous but persistent, is for some version of survival.

Confronting greatness as we read is an intimate and expensive process and has never been much in vogue. Now, more than ever, it is out of fashion, when the quest for freedom and solitude is being condemned as politically incorrect, selfish, and not appropriate to our anguished society...

The word *confront* really got my attention. Bloom makes no mention of redemption, self-improvement, or the alleviation of pain; he puts forth no suggestion of gained wisdom or a better life, and he gives no hint of finding refuge, even for the dedicated reader. Instead, Bloom's equation is minimalist and reductive: freedom implies solitude; things must be faced directly; nothing is promised. He prescribes no course of action and offers no moral lesson. The key is, simply, to stand there. And this is really all you can do when looking at Richards's photographs.

"Unflinching" is a term often used to describe Richards's imagery as well as his personal ethics, and no one would argue. Critics have tried out other descriptions: *harrowing, shocking, compelling*; sometimes, *poignant, poetic, humanist*. More rarely, one finds *idealist*, or, once in a while, *lyrical*. "Stark" and "truthful" can easily be added—but also, I believe, "generous": Richards has always been willing to share both his work and his experiences with anyone, and he consistently acknowledges the individuals who have shared their stories with him. *Do I Know You?*, like all his books, concludes with an expression of gratitude to those he has photographed.

It's very interesting to read the many articles and essays where these descriptive words appear. One example is Richard B. Woodward's review of *Eugene Richards: The Run-On of Time*, the 2017 retrospective first shown at the George Eastman Museum in Rochester:

Looking at the photographs of Eugene Richards can induce a kind of disbelief. That the world should inflict so much pain on so many people, and that he would regard it as his life's work to witness and capture it, can be hard to comprehend. And yet, for nearly 50 years... he has recorded the human capacity to withstand suffering and despair, using his camera to extract moments of lyrical intensity from the direst circumstances.

...[T]his untrendy and emotionally draining retrospective... [has] skillfully organized [Richards's] oeuvre in a chronology that exposes his common themes... Identification with the damaged and luckless is one visible thread. Another is the magnetic grip of family and community.

Any viewer of Richards's images is bound to be unsettled by them, forced to confront their own response to what they see. And most are left wondering, with varying degrees of urgency, *how did we get here? And what should we do next?*



Trailer Park, 2012, from *Do I Know You?*

There are no ready answers, but a good place to start searching is with what Richards himself has to say; he has always spoken and written about his work with exceptional awareness and clarity.

As early as 1981, in a conversation with Maren Stange published in the *Boston Review*, he made some key remarks about his expressive intentions:

How would you describe the act of making a photograph?

I don't read a lot of poetry, but I've always found an enormous kinship between poetry and photography. The poet knows what he wants to say and he seeks out the proper metaphor and the proper symbol to say it. Photography works exactly the same way—it involves taking responsibility for your ideas and for getting them across. It ought to be, and can be, a way of making your intentions and your emotions clear...

How does that work for you?

If I've got something I want to say, I don't care whether anybody likes it or not, but I want to make sure they know what I mean... So if I see something and have an emotional reaction to it, then I quickly look around for the things—the symbols—that make my point. I've realized that very few of the things one has to say are simple, so in photographs I've come to the conclusion that just to grab the thing itself is never quite enough.

Examples?

Well, the startling photographs that Stieglitz made of Georgia O'Keeffe: she had an incredible body - a large-breasted, voluptuous body -and incredibly spare hands. The conflict of the bony, long hands and the large breasts makes an astonishing photograph. When Stieglitz caught this, he made her into something that's very, very beautiful. But any part of the body singularly isn't nearly as lovely as such a contrast. Generally, in photographs without contrast or context, the meaning or the beauty of the thing's not going to come forward. There can be—usually is, in fact—something sad, or mortal, in the contrast, but nonetheless it's wonderful, I think. And the thing that pisses me off about galleries is that if you show that contrast, people find it depressing, and it isn't depressing...

In photography, in mine at least, I try to make the photograph more complex and less singular... I try to make the photograph have a narrative, or anecdotal, or symbolic quality... these are all things that the writer can probably do more easily. I want the photograph to have more than a simple surface...



From *Exploding Into Life*, 1986

Richards was an English major as an undergraduate; his affinity for language and his understanding of the poetic aspects of expression are natural. So are his references to the uses of metaphor and symbolism. And his description of Stieglitz's collective portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe says a great deal about his awareness of visual tension as an expressive force; the language of a body itself has always been a key element of his work. He has said many times that if he could get close enough to his subjects to touch them, he knew he could make a photograph.

You can open any of Richards's books and find these ideas animating his photographs of people, regardless of subject, place or situation. They serve as a constant, and they help explain the sense of physicality and presence that his images always project.



Jessica, Earle, Arkansas, 2019, from *Do I Know You?*

Ironically, the very vividness of Richards's images has frequently collided with (and now actually runs counter to) the ways in which many people want the world to be pictured. As a result, for the past ten years Richards has had to rely on self-funded projects and, incredibly, has also had to self-publish all but one of his books. While raising money for *Do I Know You?* during the summer of 2024, he wrote:

When I lived in the Arkansas Delta in the early 1970s I thought of myself as a social worker with a camera. When I took to wandering the streets of my hometown of Dorchester, Massachusetts, in the mid '70s I thought of myself as a street photographer. From the '80s on, being called a photojournalist made me feel that I was a part of the world of truth seekers.

[Now,] after coming to meet people, I learn what I can about their lives, then photograph them as they are... This book is a kind of real-life storytelling.

Once there'd been book publishers and magazines interested in producing socially concerned and humanity-exploring picture stories. Not so much anymore. The noose of censorship, identity politics, allure of celebrity, rising costs and indifference to the lives of others is making the publishing of books about real-life, particularly in America, more challenging than ever...

He continues:

As to why people allow me into their lives, some may sense that by speaking with me, they might better understand the things that they've experienced: their losses, hopes, fears, disappointments, joys. Being photographed can be a means of being lifted out of the shadows, acknowledged as existing, as alive.

Down in the Delta in 1970, an impoverished sharecropper, Horace Landers, asked me to take his picture in front of the tiny church he'd built at the edge of a cotton field. "I'd be proud," he said, his eyes tearing up, "to be so remembered and immortalized."



From *Red Ball of a Sun Slipping Down*, 2014

A few years earlier, while speaking with Tess Meyer in an interview titled *Eugene Richards and American Poverty*, Richards had already started to address the contentious issue of documenting the lives of people facing hardship:

There's never a time that I'm not intrusive. That's the base of what we do: we're intrusive. Anyone saying the opposite is silly. There's a process and a means of getting to know people and getting them to trust you, but I'm always very aware that I'm visiting—that I'm there, that I have a responsibility, but I am intrusive...

It's a complicated thing. That's maybe what helps me a little bit; I make it clear to people that I'm doing my job and they have to accept that I'm doing my job. We certainly become friends, but I'm there for a purpose and I remind myself of that. But it's always uncomfortable. Approaching people is not—it's ironic that it's what I do—but it's not necessarily what I enjoy doing. Later on, I'm fine. Once we get talking I have a great time but not in the beginning.



From *Below the Line: Living Poor in America*, 1987

Richards elaborated on this in a recent exchange with Melissa Harris of *Aperture*, as they were discussing text material for a different book project:

It's necessary to be really honest about what you are doing, and what you are not doing. When you photograph people, you are rarely forming lasting relationships. And we should not pretend that they are. You don't see many of the people you photograph ever again. You move on. It's a sketch--never the whole story. And I do, in fact, see or stay in touch with so many people I've photographed, but there are many I don't ever see again – so just like you cannot pretend that one image represents poverty or whatever, you cannot pretend that one image represents a person, or a family, or someone's life...



Paralyzed Iraq War Veteran, 2006, from *War Is Personal*

It's very complicated. Because people, if they truly accept you, they don't accept you as a friend – they accept you as a member of the family. People are smart. They know that clearly you are there for a reason, but when I'm able to stay, and they realize I'd like to know more about them—beyond the reason for my coming--then people relax and really open up. And when you're able to spend this kind of time with people, you always leave a part of yourself behind.

It seems only fitting that *Do I Know You?* begins with an image of Robert Frank, and with fragments of conversation between Richards and Frank: it was Robert Frank who originally spotted the cracks in the façade of 1950s America, and who challenged us all to see in a different way. Some critics identify the 1967 *New Documents* exhibition, which came nine years after *The Americans*, as a turning point in photographic reportage; others describe documentary picture-making from the 1970s onward as a practice that most effectively gave visible form to the hard facts of diminishing expectations and increasing inequality. But all agree that Robert Frank first sensed what was coming, and photographed it before anyone else.



Photograph of Robert Frank, 2013, with transcripts of conversations, from *Do I Know You?*

-Robert.
 -Yeah.
 -Hello, Robert. This is Gene.
 -Do I know you?
 -It's Gene... Eugene.
 -What's your name again?
 -Eugene. I visited you a couple of weeks ago.
 -Eugene? You mean the old Eugene?
 -The old Eugene! It's hard to believe that the first time we met was like 40 years ago.
 -Forty years! So we know each other. That's good.

-Hello, Robert.
 -Yeah.
 -It's Eugene.
 -Yes, it is.
 -How are you doing today?
 -Fifty percent.
 -Is that good?
 -Fifty percent is not enough. But I look outside and it's okay outside, so I'm okay.

-Hello, Robert.
 -Can I help you?

-This is Eugene. I was wondering if today's a good day to visit?
 -No, I can't get out of bed. Just looking at the snow.
 -You're not feeling good?
 -Not so much. So tell me, how's your son?
 -Sam's doing great.
 -He's a good guy.
 -He is.
 -Then we'll see you tomorrow?
 -I can come in the morning, maybe 10:30 or 11:00.
 -No June says tomorrow morning's not good. Can you come in the afternoon, later in the afternoon?
 -That's fine.
 -Then you'll come before I leave, before a new page starts.

-Hello, Robert.
 -Yeah.
 -This is Eugene. I just remembered you're going to be going away soon.
 -Not soon. In two or three days. It takes a while to get things ready, to get ready to go.
 -Where are you going?
 -It's a journey.
 -A journey where?
 -I don't know. But it takes a long time to get there.

Richards has been exploring the territory of a changed America ever since he left MIT in 1968, and I think his work, taken as a whole, is unique for the breadth of its coverage of the problems of our time, and for the vividness of its description. While some photographers rely on ironic detachment, and others veer into sensationalism, Richards has concentrated on the facts of what he sees and tried to the best of his abilities to transmit those facts, as he puts it, "without direction or artifice."

And somehow, despite the tightening "noose of censorship, identity politics, ...and indifference to the lives of others" referred to above—and despite the countless ways in which we have limited ourselves, either by attempting political correctness or railing against it—he has managed to keep working:

DO I KNOW YOU? is a compendium of 24 photographic and textual stories that speak of America, of survival, the shadows cast by slavery, crime, imprisonment, blind hatred, incomprehensible loss, the longing for love, what it means to be beautiful.

As for the text, I write and conduct extensive interviews when I don't think my pictures say quite enough, when I feel that they might be misunderstood, or when I feel the need to reveal the circumstances in which they were made.



4th of July, Crawfordsville, Arkansas, 2019, *Do I Know You?*

These circumstances are not likely to disappear, and when new histories of the late 20th and early 21st centuries are written, the evidence provided by Richards's images and writing will only become more valuable. Many photographers have dealt with strife, heartbreak or family dysfunction; others have pictured the destruction of war, the ravages of pollution or the human toll of industrial accidents. Some have turned their attention to addiction, poverty, displacement or alienation. But few have covered all of these topics, and fewer still have taken on such a vast range of issues over such an extended period of time. The fact that Richards has successfully done so is remarkable, as is what he has given of himself in continuing to do this work.

Do I Know You? concludes with two nocturnal self-portraits, made during the Covid years and lit only by the flashing lights, red and blue, of an emergency vehicle. They give more than a hint at the personal toll of Richards's ongoing efforts, both in making his images, and in sharing them with us.

Notes:

The quotation from Harold Bloom is from *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, 1994, p. 525.

Richard B. Woodward's review of *The Run-on of Time* was published in *The Wall Street Journal* on June 19, 2017.

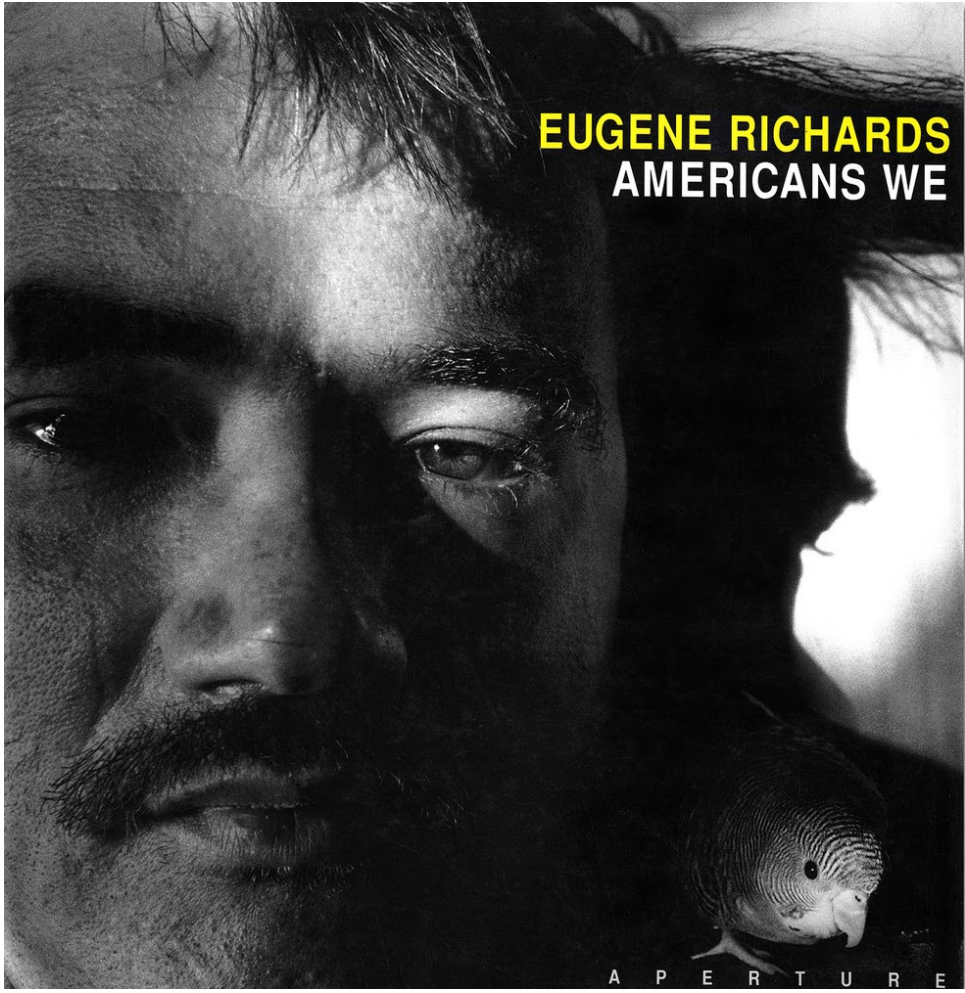
Richards's 1981 interview with Maren Strange is available at:
<https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/an-interview-with-eugene-richards/>

His October 2016 discussion with Tess Meyer, *Eugene Richards and American Poverty*, is posted at <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/eugene-richards>

Richards provided a transcript of his discussions with Melissa Harris via email in August 2024.

Eugene Richards's website is www.eugenerichards.com

Additional images and narratives are available on Instagram:
<https://www.instagram.com/eugenerichardsphotography/>



Cover, *Americans We*, 1994