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The Big Book



Synopsis

W. Eugene Smith, an icon in the field of twentieth-century photography, is best known as the master of the humanistic photographic essay. Smith's most expressive and frequently reproduced images—World War II combat, the country doctor and nurse-midwife, Pittsburgh, Albert Schweitzer in Africa, rural Spanish villagers, and the mentally ill in Haiti—have altered our perception and understanding of the world. In 1959, Smith became obsessed with creating an extended photo-essay that he called "The Big Book," a complex retrospective of his work that would reflect his philosophy of art and critique of the world. Smith's layout grouped photographs out of context and chronological order to form a series of connected "visual chapters and subchapters" that were intended to have a Joycean or Faulknerian literary quality. After three years of intense labor, Smith completed two handmade folio-sized maquettes to send to publishers. With 380 pages and 450 images, The Big Book was universally rejected as unviable and non-commercial, and it was never published. Now, five decades later, a facsimile of W. Eugene Smith's The Big Book, which is part of the Smith Archive at the Center for Creative Photography (CCP) at the University of Arizona, is in print for the first time. Accompanying the facsimile is a supporting volume with a foreword by Dr. Katherine Martinez, Director of CCP; an introduction by William S. Johnson, who arranged Smith's archive at CCP; an essay by the renowned Swiss critic John Berger; notes on the Smith Collection at CCP by archivist Leslie Squyres and Jennifer Jae Gutierrez; "The Walk to Paradise Garden," by W. Eugene Smith; and an appendix that maps Smith's complete layout with titles, dates, and reproductions of each image from original prints. The Big Book is an essential primary source document for the study of both the history of photography and the history of the photobook. This set, in slipcase, will likely be the most comprehensive catalogue of W. Eugene Smith's work ever published.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Gene Smith taught me how to print when I was young. I had always thought he was an interesting journalist photographer, and a kind man. Now I know, to my surprise, that he was a great book artist way ahead of his time." (Photo-Eye Blog 2014-01-04)" "With photographs of children, war, city streets, landscapes, workers, entertainers, religion, doubt, mysterious scenes of beauty and threats of death, The Big Book appears to accomplish Smith's goals, and embody a perspective of that strange and infinite thing called the human condition. The atypical layout and the images' poor readability compounds the effect, leading to something of an emotional whirlwind, vertiginous." (GUP Magazine 2014-01-09)

Finally, someone has found the temerity to publish this experimental masterpiece! In this age of the "Conceptual Photograph" and experimental photo-journalism, with practitioners such as Christian Patterson and Wolfgang Tillmans, along with younger artists such as Aleix Plademunt, leading the way, bringing this experimental/conceptual work out is a boon to all whose interests lay within the realm of such concerns. Sure, the quality of the photographs is not up to Smith's level of presentation for a FINISHED work, but if it was good enough for him to send out as a maquette to publishers, then I hardly think he'd be "rolling over in his grave" in disappointment, as another Reviewer states. If anything, I think he'd be resoundingly impressed that we get to see, and study, the work at all, as well as read what some of the latest scholars are thinking. Would it be nice to see some editor put together a large set using original high-quality vintage prints from his own hand? Maybe. But then it wouldn't be Smith's project; it would be some editor's (i.e., one can safely assume, for instance, that Smith would have printed at least some of these images differently, due to desired printing sizes, etc., than he did for the full-scale vintage prints). As an original, by-the-hand-of-Smith, unrealized mockup of a work, this set will stand as the last word on the project before its photocopied prints disintegrate into dust in the years to come...return the book at your own peril (as yet another Reviewer did), as it will also conceivably fetch 5-10 times its current price over the next decade. I'm sure it will never be reprinted again, especially with such

care.(...anyone that complains that this book is "unworthy" of Mr. Smith's skill/vision simply can't see the forest for the trees, and, in their conservative snobbery concerning photographic prints and presumptuous thinking that they are the ones that "truly understand" Smith - rather than the fine editors/publishers at UT, the Center for Creative Photography, and even Smith himself - ironically come across as philistines.)

These books should never have been published. Gene Smith was a master craftsman who made many significant sacrifices in an effort to control his work. I am sure the effort to show his thought process in forming the "big book" was done with good intentions. However, the result is a disaster, the absolute horrendous reproduction, the minimal text to help provide context, make this an embarrassment for all involved. I am returning my copy. The University of Texas should recall and destroy any remaining copies. If Gene were to see this he would be turning over in his grave.

Three volumes. The first two are incredibly ugly and battered reproductions straight from Smith's working manuscript. The photos have been absolutely destroyed by age, wear and tear, and the abysmal printing and paper of this book. The third volume has some academic blather in it, then a series of tiny thumbnail repros of all the photos in the first two books, but actually made from good prints (or perhaps his negs). The beauty of the images and thoughtfulness of the sequencing makes me angry that the publisher didn't try to live up to Smith's original intention and produce a proper book of his photos, rather than an ugly and horribly overpriced reproduction from damaged originals. If the first two volumes had been reproduced from the originals used for the thumbnails in the third volume, this would be an amazing book, both artistically and historically.

I looked forward to the release of this book with great anticipation, but what a disappointment. I think Eugene Smith would be embarrassed to see his name on this publication. If like me you are an admirer of Smith, there are far better publications showcasing his work, do not waste your time or money on this second rate collection.

An expensive box-set of three books. Two are facsimiles of Eugene Smith's original mock-ups and the third book has some essays about him and largish thumbnails of all the images in the other two books. Throughout this third book the mock-ups are referred to as a maquette (which a dictionary defines as a small reference statue of a potentially larger work) what Smith made were dummies as they are known in the publishing business. I've used the words mock-up for this review. Now

consider this scenario: A very professional and hugely creative photojournalist, after many years of frustration dealing with Picture Editors and Art Editors, decided to create a book of photos which would reveal his thoughts on the nature of this art form. To get it printed he needed to show potential publishers what the book would look like so he starts a mock-up with rough copies of his photos in various sizes to be pasted onto the blank pages. Because it used fairly thick paper the mock-up rapidly became quite thick which meant starting another one. The two mock-ups eventually had three hundred and forty-one photos that summed up his best work. He considered the layouts of each spread, size of the photos and their sequence to be extremely important. Unfortunately publishers showed no interest and the photographer moved on to other assignments. When he died all of his work was acquired by a university. Years later a publisher decided that the time was right to print a book of the photographer's work. There were the two mock-ups which showed which photos went on each spread, their size, layout and all the photos were available in a university archive. The photographer would have been pleased that his work was going to be published using quality paper and printing like other photo books. Then something extraordinary happened, instead of printing the book the publisher actually wanted the photographer's printed the mock-ups and sold them at an excessively high price. If Eugene Smith was alive in 2013 and the Uni of Texas Press said they were going to print his mock-up rather than a proper book of his work he would have laughed in their faces (and then maybe called his attorney). Why wasn't it picked up by a publisher in the early sixties, probably because the book is, at first glance confusing (especially if anyone looked at the rough photo copies in his thick mock-ups). Smith wanted a short essay at the start of the book, a draft of this is in the third volume, with the rest of the pages using his photos which are not sequenced historically but a mixture of assignments and family portraits though the last few dozen cover the war in the Pacific. There was no text on the photo spreads. William Johnson writes in the Introduction to the third book that Smith was challenging traditional ideas about layout and design. He wasn't a publication designer and it shows. The Chronology in the book says that in 1959 Carole Thomas became a sketch artist for the 'Big Book' layout but these are not much different from spreads seen in the 'Family of Man' book published in 1955 or in Life magazine layouts in the fifties. This box set is only really of interest to academic libraries and maybe publication designers (which is why I have a copy). To expect anyone else to get much insight in Eugene Smith's amazing creativity and humanity by looking at very poor photo copies is a mistake though there is a slight redeeming factor in the third book because it's possible to get a feel of what the photographer was trying to achieve by looking through the sequence of excellently printed thumbnails.

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