

A Fresh Look At...Trees?

Mitch Epstein's *New York Arbor* is a quiet, thrilling black and white typology of New York's diverse foliage

By [John Mahoney](#) on May 7, 2013 | [0 Comments](#) | [Like](#) 67 [Tweet](#) 2 [G+1](#) 0



From *New York Arbor*

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In cities, trees are inevitably secondary to the man-made landscape that surrounds them. They're a garnish—something you're happy is there (and whose absence would be troubling), but often a backdrop. A non-participant.

But in [Mitch Epstein's](#) stunning *New York Arbor*, this pattern is inverted. In describing this project, which was recently published [by Steidl](#), Epstein writes:

"The cumulative effect of these photographs is to invert people's usual view of their city: trees no longer function as background, but instead dominate the human life and architecture around them."



From *New York Arbor*

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What is breathtaking to me about these photos is how skillfully he succeeds at this. Each photograph in *Arbor* is a masterful study of composition and focus. The trees all sit dead center in their vertically oriented frames, the rich large-format hues practically glowing with energy (an effect that's even more prominent when viewed off-screen). Despite a number of different backdrops—some are alone in parks, others on sidewalks, growing around buildings—every ounce of focus is on the life form in the center.



From *New York Arbor*

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What draws me to this project is the skill required to make such an expressive, focused study, with such a discernible style, out of something so seemingly pedestrian. These photos are almost anti-conceptual. What you see is what you get. But then there's that realization that you've never really actually *looked* until now—and that's entirely the point. In an image culture where it's easy to feel like there's *nothing* we haven't seen, I think it's amazing that a masterful, old-school take on an age-old subject has the capacity to show us something that feels brand new.

If you are in New York, Epstein will be signing copies of *New York Arbor* at [Dashwood Books](#) tonight.

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