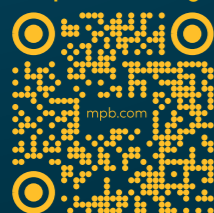


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Studio Visit

In the 1980s, Mitch Epstein found a loft on the Lower East Side at a time when New York's downtown was the center of the art world.

Brendan Embser



Mitch Epstein and his studio, New York, May 2023
Photographs by Daniel Terna for Aperture

One Sunday in April 1972, the *New York Times* ran a notice under the column News of the Camera World announcing openings for transfer students to the Cooper Union in New York who “demonstrate a serious and mature commitment to photography.” *The Pioneer*, Cooper’s student newspaper, highlighted the school’s darkrooms and silk-screen facilities, along with the prominent faculty, including Roy DeCarava, Inge Morath, Joel Meyerowitz, and Tod Papageorge. A portfolio of “exceptional merit” would be required for application.

Mitch Epstein happened to see that *Times* piece. “And I seized the opportunity,” he told me earlier this year, at his light-filled home and studio on Rivington Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. “I came down, submitted a portfolio, did an interview, got in, and it

was golden—because there’s no tuition at Cooper. It got me here into the city.”

At the time, Epstein, who is known for his vivid street photography, long-form documentary essays on India and Vietnam, and *American Power* (2009), a monumental series about energy infrastructure in the United States, was a student at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). Artistic experimentation reigned, but his attempts, he once recalled, were “charming and mildly ridiculous.” RISD was “fine,” Epstein says, but he was just “treading water.” He was twenty years old.

His first residence in New York was at 190 Bowery, the seventy-two-room Germania Bank Building—and holy altar for graffiti artists—that the photographer Jay Maisel purchased in 1966 for \$102,000. In the summer of 1972, Maisel rented Epstein a former bank office as an



apartment. “The larger downtown area wasn’t monetized in the way that it is now,” Epstein tells me. Artists were living in cold-water SoHo flats and FOOD, Gordon Matta-Clark’s artist-run enterprise, was one of the postindustrial neighborhood’s few restaurants.

The Bowery “had a kind of wildness,” Epstein says. “You were reminded every day of social hierarchies of the city.” Freeman Alley—possibly named for its proximity to an African American burial ground nearby—was littered with needles and condoms. In 2015, Maisel sold 190 Bowery for \$55 million and the street-wear brand Supreme now occupies the retail level. Rivington Street today is like an unruly palimpsest: the metal gates to a lumber yard are covered with a fantastical space-scene mural; the galleries once occupied by Eleven Rivington and Sue Scott are now run by Tibor de Nagy and Candice Madey. One night in 2018, a reckless driver slammed into several of the street’s decades-old trees, which were later replaced with spindly saplings.

A first apartment is often the opening salvo of any New York story, and so it was for Epstein, who was living on the Upper West Side in the years after studying at Cooper but looking for something permanent. “Downtown beckoned,” he explains.



Certain buildings were designated for artists in residence. In 1986, Epstein and his wife at the time, the filmmaker Mira Nair, found a space on Rivington Street and waited out the legal process until, finally, they were able to purchase a floor-through loft, which they promptly gutted. Epstein built a darkroom and studio in the back. The front became the living space.

“I never thought I would be here this long,” Epstein says. “But it’s enabled me to live a very fertile, very creative life.” He and his second wife, the editor Susan Bell, raised their daughter, Lucia, in the loft. In the open-plan kitchen, there’s a statement midcentury pendant lamp by the designer Poul Henningsen, and in the living room, a paper lantern made by Tomi Shinagawa, who operated the legendary SoHo restaurant Omen. On a rack of Vitsoe shelving are LPs by Fela Kuti and Pharoah Sanders. In a corner, near the oversize windows, a rubber plant soars toward the ceiling.

In 2008, Epstein dismantled his darkroom. He worked with a contractor and a feng shui advisor to redesign the studio, which, despite facing a back alley, takes in a generous amount of light reflected off white brick walls. The

custom-made layered-plywood bookshelves were inspired by Donald Judd and hold a formidable collection of art books. Like Epstein’s photographs, the studio has a strong sense of order and clarity, but it’s not fussy: his dog, Ginger, has her own bed on the floor. Ryan Spencer, Epstein’s longtime studio manager, sits at a desk adjacent to an enormous Epson printer and opposite a refrigerator stocked with film (and sometimes bread). Epstein’s own desk is set on a diagonal opposite a magnetic steel wall, powder-coated white by an auto-body shop, on which he examines his test prints. At the center of the room is a black German-made table he’s had since the 1980s. Everything happens on this table: from planning an exhibition to sequencing a book.

During his first year at Cooper, Epstein studied with Garry Winogrand, who became a mentor. “He took me upside down and shook out a lot of the gobbledygook that I had in my head,” he says. Epstein’s work from the early 1970s, collected in *Silver + Chrome* (2022), shows Winogrand’s influence—the exuberant street scenes, the beguiling compositions that meld chance and precision. Winogrand suggested Epstein try color film, which would become his medium for decades, from *Family Business*

(2003), a book about his parents in Holyoke, Massachusetts, scheduled to be reissued by Steidl next year, to his current project, *Old Growth*, a large-format study of some of the oldest forests and trees in the American landscape.

Epstein has never had another studio—or another home. “I’d like to have a bigger studio. I’d like to have a place in the country,” he says. “But do I want those things in lieu of having to give up my freedom to make my work? No. My priorities are very clear.” Art is life, and life is downtown.