

FAZ

The end of reverence: The “Black Lives Matter”-movement takes over a Robert E. Lee statue.
Photo Mitch Epstein

Who does the land belong to?

American conflicts: Mitch Epstein photographs where people fight for their rights

If one disregards the chronology of his books, a trajectory becomes apparent in the work of American photographer Mitch Epstein that leads from life at home and at his father’s business, a furniture store in a small town in Massachusetts, via the big city of New York and finally to extensive trips across parts of the United States, during which he dedicates his attention to the occasionally bizarre passions of people, and to the precarious handling of resources. To what extent questions of justice and property, of lobbying and mentalities of entitlement have concerned him from the outset becomes clear only now, with his most recent book “Property Rights”, – a book of almost three hundred photographs, for which Epstein spent four years visiting sites and people sometimes thrown into disastrous circumstances by the often careless treatment of property rights. Some instances are charged symbolically and are also shown this way by Epstein, other times he focused on the immediate effects on daily lives, in which there is no shortage of problems and difficulties.

“Property Rights” is no simple term. Aside from the right to property, it refers to rights of protection, assets and disposal, even copyright. And over the course of his project Mitch Epstein made spirited use of this variety of meanings. The work started, however, with what one might call a classic case of land appropriation. It was in 2017, when he visited the Sioux reservation Standing Rock in North Dakota. Seven tribes protested against the oil pipeline there, whose route was suddenly changed due to a threat of drastic environmental pollution and was now meant to cross their land. Consequently, they saw their drinking water in danger. “Water is Life”, was the motto under which thousands of people came together, lived in makeshift camps and in minus degrees resisted the attacks of the oil company’s security guards as well as the water cannons of the police.

The fact that it was the same territory, which Sitting Bull defended in the battle against General Custer in 1876, extended the protest in a historic dimension. All contracts, writes Dorothy Roland Sun Bear, a Sioux, in Epstein’s book, going back to the 19th century, have been broken by the American government: „America was built on stolen land”. President Obama prohibited the development of the pipeline, President Trump in turn lifted the prohibition.

Mitch Epstein makes no secret of where his sympathies lie. But his images are not suitable for propaganda. Instead, they reveal a keen power of observation, which he uses to compose poignant, sometimes multi-layered images with the cumbersome technique of a view camera. In so doing, he pushes the boundaries between reportage, documentary and art photography. At Standing Rock he also shows the squalid camps on the vast, snow covered plain. But most of all, he made portraits of people whose faces are no less furrowed than the eroded landscapes of the Badlands, or he once photographed four young men from the Lakota people during a drum ceremony. One of them is playing games on his cell phone, another one wears a hoodie

proclaiming: “I am Hip Hop”. He had no idea, Alex White Plum of the Lakota people told him, who he photographed both wearing a cowboy hat and a feather headdress identifying him as a chief, how many times a day they moved between two worlds.

This too is a subject in Mitch Epstein’s “Property Rights”: the clash of cultures and the usurpation of the weaker by the supposedly stronger. He shows the recklessness with which this has occurred throughout history eat the example of Mount Rushmore, the massive rock featuring the likenesses of four American presidents, which was carved into the face of a sacred mountain in South Dakota in the 1930s. Nature smiled on the photographer and shrouded large parts of the memorial in fog as if to draw a veil over history. In the lower section of the image, the star sprangled banner is hanging limp and dripping wet on the pole. In a different image, citizens leave no doubt about their discontent. The plinth of a Civil War statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee on horseback in Richmond, Virginia, is sprayed all over in neon-colored slogans of the “Black Lives Matter”-movement. “Property Rights” according to Mitch Epstein includes the right to the integrity of one’s own body and one’s own world view. „Property Rights”, of course, were also claimed by the plantation owners with regard to their slaves.

Epstein’s book falls into eight chapters. A visual prologue presents the land he is concerned with in majestic sublimity. Rugged canyons and the open mesa become expressions of timelessness, in which traces of civilization such as historic messages in the rock or an asphalt road can be seen as signs of an age that lasted but briefly. After the prologue, sites of current conflicts follow. He found them in Hawaii, where locals try to stop the construction of a telescope, thirty meters tall, at the foot of the Mauna Kea volcano, a place sacred to them. And he found them along the border to Mexico. Signed with inscriptions like “Is There Life After Death? Trespass And Find Out” leave no doubt about some people’s attitude towards uninvited visitors. Meanwhile the fence, built on Trump’s behest along the border, destroys what has been connected for generations.

Mitch Epstein, whose book can also be read as a chronicle of the Trump era, gives reason for optimism only insofar as time and time again he came across activists who stood up to narrow-minded policies and international corporations with equal persistence, when rules and laws are suddenly abandoned by the law of the most powerful – a tradition in America that can be traced back as far as Henry David Thoreau’s essay “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience”, published in 1849 and still topical today.

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