



Mitch Epstein, *BP Carson Refinery, California*, 2007.

AMERICAN POWER: MITCH EPSTEIN

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STEIDL

In his ravishing new book, *American Power*, acclaimed art photographer Mitch Epstein succeeds at both enthralling and horrifying with his 63 images of our widely polluted land. After witnessing the evacuation of an Ohio town in the wake of environmental contamination, he decided to explore the ramifications of American production and consumption of energy. For five years he traveled the country photographing energy production sites, mines, factories, rigs, and deserted gas pumps, as well as the power-related devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina.

The book could be seen as a sequel to Robert Frank's groundbreaking *The Americans*, another brilliant photographic record of the country that revealed a pervasive sense of alienation, angst, and loneliness. Published more than 40 years ago, *The Americans* was reissued last year preceding an exhibition, titled "Looking In: Robert Frank's *The Americans*," that will be at the Metropolitan Museum of Art September 22 through December 27.

Like Cormac McCarthy in his postapocalyptic novel, *The Road*, Epstein documents a bleak world that we would prefer not to contemplate. He quotes George Orwell: "To see what's in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle." President Obama could find no better argument for protecting the environment than this book.

But praising *American Power* as a catalyst for change should not lead anyone to think it does not stand on its own as an engrossing collection of beautifully composed images. A member of the 1970s generation of photographers who explored the use of color photography as an extension of documentary work, Epstein first developed his remarkable sense of color in India, expanding his artistry in his captivating series on Vietnam in the 1990s. Epstein, whose work is collected by New York's Metropolitan Museum, Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, and J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, to name a few, has since

published five books. His most recent is the retrospective monograph *Mitch Epstein: Work* (Steidl, 2007).

In his images here—70-by-92-inch C-prints—Epstein utilizes the supsize scale and saturated color of Conceptualism, with implied, almost surreal, narratives similar to those of Jeff Wall. They are not staged, however, for Epstein works as a pure documentarian. As his subjects, he chooses landscapes over people, though the book includes the affecting portrait of the elderly *Beulah 'Boots' Hern Cheshire, Ohio* (2004), who refused to leave her home in Cheshire and lived in fear of retaliation by the local power company. There's also a poignant scene of boys fishing in the murky, polluted waters near the spewing stacks of *Big Bend Coal Power Station, Apollo Beach, Fla.* (2005).

In a way, Epstein uses the very absence of human beings in his landscapes to underline their hostility to life. *Amos Coal Power Plant 111, Winfield, W. Va.* (2007) shows slender spires and hourglass-shaped stacks billowing smoke into a bright blue sky. A track runs straight through black mounds of coal residue to the geometrically shaped plant. Everything is given over to the production of energy, erasing all color and life. His photograph of a small, dilapidated house, *Cheshire, Ohio* (2004), surrounded by dead trees and a forlorn, grassless yard, is also unpopulated. On its roof, someone has written: GONE. Smoke billows in the background.

Every image in the book evokes powerful emotions of shock, disgust, and sadness, none perhaps more so than *Exit Glacier-Kenai Fjords National Park, Alaska* (2007). The eroded, filthy, blue-tinged glacier appears pathetically human, with melting mounds of snow like vein-lined arms reaching out for help in a last plea to be saved. Epstein says the wounds that he discovered in the American landscape made him reconsider his own sense of entitlement. It should make us do no less. —Valerie Gladstone