

## William Christenberry's groundbreaking colour photos of the deep south capture a disappearing world

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'His intimate photos are reminders of mortality': William Christenberry's 1964 photograph of a house near Marion, Alabama. Photograph: William Christenberry/Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.

William Christenberry began taking pictures on a humble box Brownie camera in the 1950s while studying art at college in his native Alabama. Having no real interest in the history of the medium, he used colour film at a time when serious photography was synonymous with black and white and processed his rolls of film at the local drugstore. In many ways, he was an accidental photographer, but he has since become an incredibly influential one.

More than 50 years on, Christenberry is now recognised as, among other things, a pivotal figure in the history of 20th-century American photography. His photographs of the vernacular buildings of the American south – wooden churches, shacks, houses, storefronts – were not just influenced by the work of Walker Evans but actually depicted many of the places Evans had photographed in the 1930s for his groundbreaking book with the writer, James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. When Christenberry showed his photographs to his friend and fellow southerner William Eggleston in the late 60s, it alerted Eggleston, then still shooting on black and white, to the power and possibility of colour, which he went on to explore in dramatic fashion. If Eggleston is the great maverick of American colour, Christenberry is its quiet man, his images understated but cumulatively powerful in their suggestion of a world that, even as it is fading into history, is loaded with memories and meaning.

In 2008, Steidl published the fascinating *William Christenberry: Working From Memory*, in which the artist recounted the stories behind many of his images. The first chapter of this new catalogue, which was published to accompany a recent retrospective of Christenberry's work at the Mapfre Institute in Madrid, is called "William Christenberry: Not Photographs But Stories". It shows, once again, Christenberry's personal investment in image as memory. Culled from a personal archive of more than 4,000 images, the book creates a poetic visual narrative of a disappearing American south mainly through his fascination with the churches and houses of Alabama, many of which were weatherbeaten and neglected when he photographed them and are now gone.

There are inevitable echoes of the work of Walker Evans in the faded storefronts and advertising hoardings, but, by the mid- to late 60s, Christenberry's colours and compositions have become bolder, more formalist. There is a strikingly geometric portrait of the campaign headquarters of the segregationist governor of Alabama, George Wallace, from 1966 as well as a few landscapes from 1981 that suggest Christenberry had also learned a thing or two from Eggleston along the way. The book also contains examples of the scale models Christenberry built of some of the churches he photographed as well as images illustrating his long-term conceptual project, the Klan Room, a disturbingly powerful installation made up of images, objects, interiors and ominous doll-like figures.

Christenberry is an artist who has followed his own instincts and obsessions, and his intimate photographs, though they contain no human figures, are reminders of mortality and arbiters of memory. Or as he puts it himself: "I think that oftentimes art can make an outsider look back on something he has never been part of, and make him feel like he has always been part of it."