

The eye of the storm David Julian Leonard's stunning solo show is dominated by his images of post-Katrina New Orleans. By Moira Jeffrey; [Final Edition]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

"I have very strong feelings about New Orleans," says [David Julian Leonard]. "I have visited many, many times. I come from Memphis and New Orleans is like our sister city to the south. Everybody has friends there, experiences there. My wife and I would often say that, if everything didn't work out, we'd just move to New Orleans. If we just wanted to do what we wanted to do, we'd do it in the city that we liked most."

The old friend thus described is William Eggleston, one of the greatest American photographers of the modern age. It's a little like a Parisian artist being handed his first paint brush by Picasso. If you don't know Eggleston's work you'll certainly know his sensibility. Before Eggleston, American art photography was black and white and concerned with the extremes of either the inner city or the wilderness. After Eggleston, it was in colour, raggedly suburban, interested in clipped lawns, the glow of neon and the gleam of chrome. The saturated colour of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, the shaky skies of Gus Van Sant, the entire feel of Sofia Coppola's debut, *The Virgin Suicides*, all owe debts to Eggleston. He is second only to Edward Hopper as an artist who has shaped the movies. His influence now permeates everything from fine art to fashion.

Leonard's own work is more than capturing shapes, as the raw emotion he displays over New Orleans clearly demonstrates. We talk about the controversy over whether the Bush administration could have done more to deal with the disaster. "I don't think he could have stopped it," Leonard says. "What Bush does for show when he talks to the press is one thing, but what Bush ever does is another thing. It only has to do with helping corporations and rich people, not poor people."

Full Text (1340 words)

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IT'S a long way from the muddy aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to the Amber Roome gallery in Edinburgh's genteel New Town, but when the American photographer David Julian Leonard shows me his pictures of the disaster in New Orleans, he is immediately transported there.

Leonard's voice drops and he appears to blink back tears as he shows me a series of images of the smashed interior of a church. The pews are overturned, the steps to the altar caked in wave after wave of mud. A drum, which once beat the rhythm of religious celebration, lies broken among the wreckage. The church piano has been completely upended, its keys now useless and clogged with dirt: New Orleans's most famous legacy, its music, appears to have been silenced.

"It's a tale of two different cities," says Leonard. "In the neighbourhoods that are alive, there's a fantastic spirit of getting back to what the city is all about and that includes the music. But, elsewhere, the only thing you hear is garbage trucks, a constant beep, beep, beep. You don't even hear any birds, no dogs barking."

The Memphis photographer, who cut his artistic teeth as a technician in the movies, working under such eminent directors as Milos Forman and Francis Coppola, visited New Orleans in December with a traumatised friend who was trying to decide whether he might be able to move back home to the city. The journey was emotional for both.

"I have very strong feelings about New Orleans," says Leonard. "I have visited many, many times. I come from Memphis and New Orleans is like our sister city to the south. Everybody has friends there, experiences there. My wife and I would often say that, if everything didn't work out, we'd just move to New Orleans. If we just wanted to do what we wanted to do, we'd do it in the city that we liked most."

His wife, a French academic, is one of the reasons Leonard finds himself exhibiting in Edinburgh. They recently spent a year in the city, when she took up a philosophy fellowship in Dundee. During that time he became informally associated with Edinburgh College of Art where David Williams, head of photography, has become a friend and champion.

The National Galleries of Scotland recently acquired two of Leonard's works for its photography collection. They are two images taken in Europe, although you might never know it. There is a red-hot neon-lit strip that makes the city of Valencia look like Vegas and a Mediterranean view of concrete and scrub.

Leonard never emphasises the geographical location of his pictures, instead considering his work as a loose narrative or collection of stories. Bars, churches and factories, shop-window mannequins and kids playing draw his attention equally. *Real Pretty Toast*, his first book, is a collection of the exotica of the every day. Its successor, *Burnt Toast*, is a darker journey culminating in the street life, the prostitutes and derelicts of San Francisco's Tenderloin district. It is the optimistic American journey west ending in the dissolution of the dream.

Leonard's sojourn in Scotland was, he says now, a wonderful extended honeymoon. But America called him back, especially his home town of Memphis.

Now 43, Leonard grew up in the close-knit artistic world of what he calls a "small town". His father was "a newspaperman on the corporate side" who later set up his own print shop. His mother was a writer.

Leonard now works behind the camera, but began his journey in front of it. He had a talking part in a children's movie at the age of 14. He learned stagecraft in the openair amphitheatre where Elvis first found his public voice, and taught himself film-making with a successful self-funded documentary on the loyalty of the King's fans, so lowbudget, he recalls, that he could not afford to use Elvis's music.

While finding his own voice, he worked on major motion pictures. In the 1980s and 1990s Memphis became a location for a number of movies. "I really liked it," says Leonard of his time on the sets of films such as Coppola's *Rainmaker* and Forman's *The People vs Larry Flynt*. "I've been a really independent person. I didn't finish school, I lost a lot of jobs that I had. It was an entirely different thing for me. It was the place where I learned to respect the chain of command," he says.

It's hard to imagine Leonard's rather free-flowing style in the intense factory production of a movie set. "It's not like a factory," he protests. "It's more like a war, but in a good way. Your goals are absolute, there's nothing bureaucratic about it. There's no sitting around hoping the boss isn't looking."

In the movies, Leonard learned a lot about camera technique and lighting but his route into still colour photography was personal. "I have a very good friend, who loaned me an old Leica camera and showed me how to load it," he says, understatedly.

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Leonard himself describes the relationship as one of friendship rather than artistic mentor and pupil. "We were just drinking buddies to begin with," he says. "We met in a beer joint and we became fast friends in the late eighties. I was in my twenties and he was in his forties but we became really good friends. He's just a lot of fun."

He describes Eggleston as a man who lives in the moment, a great pianist and composer, who will call in the middle of the night and insist they catch up.

His influence has been subtle.

"Bill taught me that pictures don't have to mean anything, but I don't think even he believes that," Leonard says. "Maybe the point is that the meaning doesn't have to be well defined. Maybe the meaning will come from the emotional response. It has to be more than just capturing the shapes."

Leonard's own work is more than capturing shapes, as the raw emotion he displays over New Orleans clearly demonstrates. We talk about the controversy over whether the Bush administration could have done more to deal with the disaster. "I don't think he could have stopped it," Leonard says. "What Bush does for show when he talks to the press is one thing, but what Bush ever does is another thing. It only has to do with helping corporations and rich people, not poor people."

One day in New Orleans, Leonard photographed a destroyed artist's studio. The roof tiles had been blown off. Suddenly, the sun shone through the rafters, sending dancing shafts of golden light through the wrecked building.

It makes a richly symbolic image. David Julian Leonard looks up at the chilly Edinburgh sky. "I want there to be more light. I'm looking for it."

David Julian Leonard is at Amber Roome, Edinburgh, until April 6.

[Illustration]

Caption: TRANSPORTING: the exhibition includes a series of photographs of a chaotic New Orleans from the *Where the Light meets the Mud* collection, which shows a church's overturned piano, light pouring through rafters and abandoned dolls. Pictures: David Julian Leonard

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