

# Shoot first, ask questions later

Ed Panar's approach to photographing is essentially a walking meditation with a camera. He seeks to observe without judgment, to strip away the web of meaning that we create for the world. He goes on photographic walkabout wherever he finds himself, taking Eggleston's democratic camera to its logical conclusion: finding pictures 'everywhere, all the time'.

Panar doesn't just take a lot of time to look at the world, he also takes a lot of time to look at his pictures of the world. His body of work is as much a result of his immersive editing as his prolific shooting. Both of those processes are treated as ends unto themselves, each repeatedly informing the other. Each picture is respected as an open mystery, whose meaning shifts based on the context of neighbouring pictures.

At first glance, it's hard to say what many of his pictures are of, and that ineffable quality makes each one a delight to look at. It's as if the pictures themselves are indifferent to your gaze, a complete and welcome anachronism in an age when everyone seems to clamour constantly for eyeballs.

The alchemy of Panar's books (and other formations) is uncanny – both acknowledging and subtly reconfiguring our sense of order. He recognises patterns, but also makes us conscious of our underlying instinct for pattern recognition. Panar does not have an urgent message to get across and, therefore, we should listen to what he has to say.

If you know his work, chances are you came to it via his most recent and most accessible book, *Animals That Saw Me*, 2011. In it, Panar has collected his pictures of the animals that met his gaze during sixteen years of street-level explorations.

Panar's images stand apart from the canon of animal imagery, including everything from the Nature Video to *I Can Haz Cheezburger*. Panar's animals resist our urge to anthropomorphize, categorise, and even sympathise. We dare not write funny captions for them. If they are funny, it's because they are true.

Despite the fact that all the landscapes in the pictures that the animals occupy have been created or substantially affected by humans, it seems that we are entering their domain – it is they who look at us. The sum of their inscrutable expressions seems to boil down to 'What are you looking at?' The viewer is made to feel like a suspicious intruder, an anomaly in what could be a post-zombie apocalypse. The animals don't just break the fourth wall, they repeatedly bang against it until the viewer becomes the self-conscious subject of the pictures.

If the idea of the observer-effect is tacit in Panar's other work, it is explicit in *Animals*. He is the visual hunter-gatherer, the proto-photographer whose selective use of the language of vernacular pictures belies his deep engagement with the basic nature of perception. If Panar embraces the uncertainty of his pictures, he also embraces the uncertainty of his own consciousness. To view his work is to be shaken by that uncertainty too. What are you looking at?

Artist – **ED PANAR** is a photographer who lives in Pittsburgh and graduated with a MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. Panar's photography has been exhibited widely including The Museum of Contemporary Photography, The New York Photography Festival, the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Next Level Projects intervention at No Found, Paris. His published monographs include *Salad Days*, *Animals That Saw Me*, *Same Difference*, and *Golden Palms*. In 2007 he received a fellowship from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and his work is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago.

Text – **NEIL HARRIS** is an Associate Photo Editor at TIME Magazine in New York. Previously, he was an adjunct assistant professor for photography at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. He graduated from the International Center of Photography's one-year program for Documentary Photography and Photojournalism in 2005.

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