

When I first started surfing in Rockaway, I'd get up early and take the A train from my apartment in Brooklyn and transfer to the S train at Broad Channel, a forty-five-minute trip, if I was lucky. I'd change into my wet suit in a shared surf shack, surf for an hour or two, maybe chatting with the photographer Roe Ethridge or other surfers in the lineup. I could be back by noon. Coming into "the city" after a morning surf always felt like I carried a secret—surfing in New York, with dolphins, whales even!—as I wandered through gallery shows in Chelsea or sensed water pockets displace in my ears during faculty meetings at Pratt.

I now live in Rockaway full time, since before Hurricane Sandy, in 2012, which destroyed much of the boardwalk and flooded the peninsula. Rockaway is technically part of Queens, but it's a remote and liminal space. For most New Yorkers, Rockaway is a down-for-the-day experience, and only on a nice day at that.

And the summers in Rockaway are crowded—this past summer particularly so. After many vacation plans of 2020 were tabled due to the pandemic, day trips were all that were left. Summer crowds create a lot of garbage; visitors are unprepared for the strong afternoon onshore winds, and all the shit they carry down for a beach day ends up strewn about the sand and in the ocean. Tragically, in entirely preventable incidents, people die because they venture into the surf after the lifeguards go off duty at 6 p.m. You know when you hear the helicopters and the sirens that there's another body being taken out.

Ethridge's photography is about mixing categories, and his projects on Rockaway likewise capture the whiplash effect of moving between spaces and seasons in New York's uncut gem of a neighborhood. His work confuses the genres of traditional photographic representation, including still life, landscape, and portraiture. Ethridge lavishes the attention of product photography on banal or foul objects such as old fruit and drugstore toys, makes landscapes of "ugly" places, and converts fashion photography into an ersatz mix of these things. In his recent series on Rockaway, where he has a weekend home, these categories get further jumbled. In his 2007 book, *Rockaway, NY*, even the notion of place is upended: some of the images are not even of Rockaway but rather mark the way that, for many, the area is an urban vacation station between

other places in New York, a beach day that begins and ends somewhere else.

Ethridge's new book, *Beach Umbrella* (2020), portrays the jolie laide character of Rockaway. In addition to pictures of broken umbrellas littering the shoreline or stuffed into overfed garbage cans—the detritus of objects becoming landscape—he includes images of a fashion editorial with a red-headed model, paradoxically called "summer in winter," and landscapes of the urban-littoral blender of the peninsula, some from an advertising campaign for the Medea handbag line, most shot in Rockaway, or on the ferry, or off the Belt Parkway en route to the beach.

These images capture the unique and sometimes sublime weirdness of Rockaway, a place I love for its racial and economic diversity, all the while living here in trepidation about its infrastructural vulnerabilities. Rockaway is a hub of contradictions. It's New York's face to the majesty of the open Atlantic Ocean. It's the wildness of Jamaica Bay and Fort Tilden. And, encompassing the "uptown" Rockaway neighborhoods of Belle Harbor and Breezy Point, it's one of the city's most politically conservative sectors. (They adore the Queens boy Donald Trump uptown.) Rockaway Beach is "downtown," a landscape blotted by tightly packed, gambrel-roofed houses clad in vinyl siding, desultory strip malls, blocks of nondescript brick housing towers, and a tremendous amount of telephone poles that in other parts of the city were disappeared but here stand as sentinels of urban grit.

Ethridge's images show all that—bits of beauty spattered with dollops of blight. Along with the somehow still-cheery busted umbrellas and the patterns of trash on the beach, his photographs depict African American glamour among the Blue Lives Matter paraphernalia on Beach 116th Street, the once derelict house on Holland Avenue that has been undergoing a glacially paced reconstruction for about the past eight years, and the earnest and garish Halloween decorations that come out every year, rotated among attic boxes of Saint Patrick's Day, Easter, and Christmas tchotchkes. Rockaway beach-goth eclectic: it's a perfect Empire apple (on this issue's cover) from the local Edgemere Farm market, stem still attached, cupped by the black latex glove of COVID times. Ethridge accomplished the ultimate genre paradox of 2020—a travelogue about his own neighborhood.

# Roe Ethridge

## *Fugitive Sunset*

Eva Díaz

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