

On not letting your expectations get in the way of discovery



Photographer Roe Ethridge discusses getting your reps in, still getting scared, and trusting your instincts

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As told to Alexa Margorian, 2769 words.

Tags: [Photography](#), [Beginnings](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Inspiration](#), [Focus](#).

One of the main things I really like about your work is that when I encounter it in a magazine or if I see it online, I'm able to know exactly that it's your work. How did you develop that very specific visual style?

I mean, that's funny. People have said that to me recently and people used to say the opposite.

Really?

It was diverse strategies, trying to make different kinds of pictures, something for a magazine that's a big production or doing something that's just me, my camera, and a flower. But now I feel like something has happened. There is an intention throughout the work and stuff that—probably all artists have this, where you could look back at something they made 20 years ago and see the die gets cast. It doesn't mean that you can't change, but there probably is some sort of aesthetic development that's environmental combined with education or intentions that you pursued and, without even meaning to, it becomes a voice.

Having those two things side by side of your more recent work [*Rude In A Good Way*] plus your older work [*In The Beginning*], you're able to see a bit of a through line aesthetically. The kernel is still there from the beginning. Where did that come from?

I grew up in the middle-class suburbs of Miami and Atlanta. Both my parents are from a small agrarian town in Florida near Okeechobee. It's first generation suburban, and that would've been in the '60s—I was born in '69. In the '80s, I was starting to get an idea about what I liked, and those two things were weirdly Andy Warhol and [Lee Friedlander](#). My dad was an amateur photographer, so he had photo books like the *Kodak Encyclopedia of Photography*. I can remember seeing Lee Friedlander [photos] and thinking, "This makes sense to me. I don't know what it is exactly, but it was funny and it was weird and very compositional." I wasn't [actually] thinking those things, I was just responding to it. [Warhol and Friedlander] are responding in a way to American stuff at the same time, but both kind of have this personality that I like, a persona, and that was appealing to me, too. I don't do the persona thing, but I probably would if I wasn't Gen X.



from *In the Beginning* © Roe Ethridge 2026 courtesy Loose Joints.

Did you have someone championing you? Was this always something that you wanted to do?

When I figured it out in high school, I knew that that's what I was interested in, but I wasn't sure. The place that I went to university had some great photography teachers, so I got lucky in that way. It became clear that this is what I'm doing, whether [my parents] like it or not. My parents would have preferred that I get a business degree and not be depending on creative stuff to make money. They're like, "You can do that on the side or do it as your hobby, but you need a real job." It didn't work out for them, their plan.

Did you have day jobs at the beginning, once you graduated?

I took my time going through, but I did work in restaurants a lot and I loved that experience. It took me seven years to get a bachelor's degree because I was in and out. I played in bands too, and that would be an excuse to not do a semester or something because we might get signed or whatever.

What were you doing in the years between you studying and moving to New York?

I made a couple bodies of work in Atlanta. I graduated in '95. I was assisting a couple of different catalog photographers. In Atlanta, that's the main sort of commercial industry there, which I also loved. I credit that as a formative experience because it's the base kind of commercial. Now it's e-comm, but at the time catalogs were a way to make money, but it was also the most baseline type of photo communication you can do in the commercial

realm.

Something that I admire so much about your work is that you're able to bring that kind of fine art sensibility into commercial work. How do you find that kind of balance between the two?

It's not a thing that I could exactly explain. And it's a little bit like your story is your story and that's it. And so this is just my story. Part of it is I think that maybe I didn't get things educated out of me. I didn't go to graduate school. So I didn't go to Yale or UCLA and get more thoughtful or intense about my artwork as a project. I was really just guessing most of the time how to make something look like a commercial image. I wasn't on a desert island or anything. I assisted Philip-Lorca diCorsia. There were a lot of enriching, educational things—it just didn't come through a Master of Fine Arts program. In that way, I suppose I'm lucky because I can not think in any orthodoxy because I didn't get one. So that may have something to do with it. I don't think I've ever said anything like that to anyone before, but it does make sense as I'm saying it now.



from *In the Beginning* © Roe Ethridge 2026 courtesy Loose Joints.

Sometimes the more constraints that you're putting on yourself in terms of your work and your art, then you're like, "I have to do X, Y, Z." How did you learn to trust yourself?

I think I got so tired of being exhausted. I would do a job, and I would be like, "That job took three days, but it took 10 days off my life." It was so stressful. I had to figure out how to have a different mental approach to

it. It's still really hard. But you get reps, you find a way, you just naturally evolve into something where it's less crazy. It seemed like the pictures were better if I was more loose and less expectation-based and more discovery.

Once I started going in and thinking, "This is a Philip-Lorca diCorsia street scene set up." You set it up and then you kind of wait for people to start moving through the frame and you're kind of guessing. You're making intuitive decisions, but it requires a lot of intention to set it up. It's kind of like a commercial job. It requires a lot of intention. It's very hard to just be like, "Let's do a commercial job."

Pre-production meeting, talk to somebody, get the product, get the stylist, get the thing, do the whole thing. There's a ton of intention, but then once you get there, if you're just allowing something to occur in a way and you discover it, that's the best. That adds days to my life. It enriches me or gives me something to be grateful for that is not something that I personally did. I'm just fortunate to be in proximity to it and be like, "That's great. I didn't even have that in my mind." It's like a gift, you know what I mean?

Sometimes it's scary. [I think,] "I'm going to fail," or, "This is not working," "What's wrong with this camera?" I had this last time [I was on set]. I had just broken a lens on a personal project and then my assistant broke the same lens, but a new one. Then the camera seemed to be not auto-focusing. Everything worked out, but it reminded me of how hypervigilant I used to be. Maybe it's because I do have good people that I work with and trust them and can co-regulate with them.



from *Rude in the Good Way* © Roe Ethridge 2026 courtesy Loose Joints.

I'm surprised that you still get scared.

It's really hard. There's just so many ways for [things to go wrong]. If it's a commercial job and there's 12

people on set and everybody's doing their best and you're like, "Oh, these are out of focus. Sorry." That fucking sucks.

Do you ever find that there's that gap between what you're expecting it to be versus what it ends up being? Do you get disappointed? And when you do get disappointed, how do you deal with that?

I mean, it never really works out how you saw it. And thank god. I think it would be disappointing if it did. And I know that sounds a little bit like flip or something that somebody would say who was like, "I'm a creative person," or whatever, but the truth is, like I said, I love discovering something and sometimes it's even against what I think it should be.

I just did something recently with an actress and I was like, "The prop needs to be over her face or she needs to be smiling." I don't like it when everybody's so serious all the time. The second picture was just to do it, to kind of get it done. I thought it was too typical of an image or expression. And then we shot a bunch more pictures, and then we were looking at it on set and it was like, that's the one and there's only one. It was the second frame click, but that's the one. Everything actually was kind of perfectly imperfect inside of that one, but I couldn't see it when I first took it. That happens all the time. It's crazy. In fact, if you talk to other photographers who before digital times took pictures, they'll tell you that I bet.

I feel like you've always got something going on. How do you avoid being burnt out?

Well, to be honest, I've been complaining for many years that I was not getting enough opportunities. So it may seem like I'm always working on something, and I guess I am, but part of it is that's just the job. And part of it is that maybe it's my calling, maybe that's why, because maybe I'm a little bit neurodivergent and can't help it. And that gives me something to do. I remember Eggleston saying in an interview—I think he was talking to Juergen Teller—he's like, "Something about photography is good for us because it gets us out of the house." And so it could be as simple as that.

Recently the new show and new book, I'm sort of in a new chapter, or a new book collaborating with my partner Lulu. There's some sexy pics. That's stuff that we've been doing together. It's the kind of thing that I didn't expect to be doing, but it was a sort of result of this partnership. It wasn't like I'm looking for someone to take kinky pictures of. It was just like it sort of came out of this relationship. I'm not sure I would have asked an anonymous model or someone that I didn't know to do that kind of thing. I guess I hadn't been in a situation with a partner where I felt comfortable asking them. So it's just a strange thing. It's like you don't want to be That Guy. You know what I mean? But once the can of worms is open, it's like, "Oh, okay, we're doing this."



from *Rude in the Good Way* © Roe Ethridge 2026 courtesy Loose Joints.

It really felt like a kind of taboo or personal forbidden zone, like a repressed area for my little kid inside gets to kind of be released or has access to this kind of more explicit conversation about desire that I think was sublimated into the work and still is. There's something about this libidinal aspect to whether it's the still life or portrait. Not always, but oftentimes there will be that kind of thing in the picture, even if it's not sexy or obvious that it is. It's sort of like, and I think that's in part just having conservative Christian parents who are very concerned about their teens' desires.

I get it. I went to Catholic school.

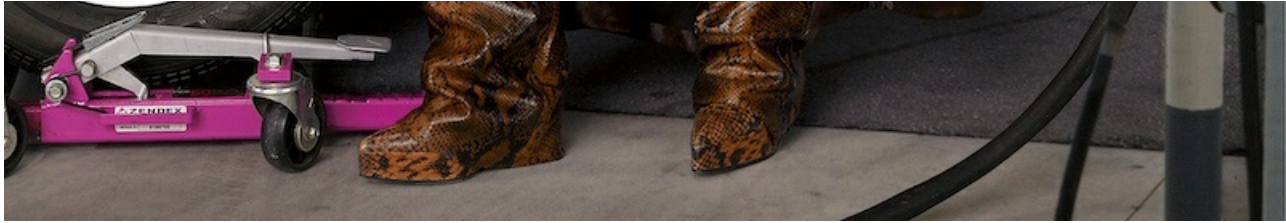
My parents were Sunday school teachers and were sort of Methodist, so we're pretty mild in the terms of it's not evangelical like, but it's kind of, it's in the South, so it still has this sort of like, extra layer to it. But those are the things that are weirdly kind of like a blessing sometimes. The messy parts of your identity can be sort of important. They're just ingredients. There's no wrong answer, right? So it's like if you can use it, that's the best.

When did you first feel successful?

When I first moved to New York, I got a job for *The New York Times Magazine* from an editor named Pilar Viladas who passed away a year ago. She was amazing. She gave me a job kind of based on those flower pictures, taking pictures of textiles. And I don't think I did a great job. I think I panicked, but it was my first real job. And I remember being like, "I wonder if they're going to ask me for my union number or whatever." It's like, do I need a SAG card to do this thing and am I going to get paid? Then I sent an invoice, no one said anything. Then I got a check, and no one said anything. I put it in the bank, no one said anything. I was like, "Oh my god, I just got

paid by *The New York Times Magazine*. This is fucking cool.” That gave me an enormous amount of whatever, identificatory reward.





from *Rude in the Good Way* © Roe Ethridge 2026 courtesy Loose Joints.

How do you pick your projects? Do you have the luxury to say no to things?

I mean, I don't say no too much. I do get overbooked sometimes, but that hasn't been the case until recently. Personal projects I may work on or dabble on over many years and wait for them to find their place. Then there's stuff sometimes it's just like there's too much going on and I can't do it all. I finally recently got to the point where I'm like, "I can't do it. I just can't do that job and I'm going to have to say no." And it almost kills me. I'm such a people pleaser. I don't want to say no or whatever. I don't want to take anything for granted.

Roe Ethridge recommends:

Coffee! Ground for espresso. Pour over. A little sugar. Drink. Repeat at least two more times.

Having just returned from Athens I have the Acropolis on my mind. Specifically the Erechtheion. In my unscholarly interpretation, I like thinking of it as a kind of Indie rock temple of the Acropolis because its so asymmetrical and seems so idiosyncratic. The way its built into the hillside. I love the Porch of Maidens. In my minds eye I can see them worshiping Owls and and bunch incense smoke in the air, music and scantily cladness, Gibby Haynes from the Butthole Surfers going oooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhh!

Terry Real's book US. Terry Real's book US. I really don't wish to be an expert at therapy. But I would like to be an at least semi-pro at my ability to drop my ego, lose arguments, understand wtf is wrong with me so I can be a better partner and parent. Its really simple in a way but hard to do. This book makes me feel like I have purpose in acting like an adult. Its ridiculous but true!

InDesign. I am returning to this chestnut because of a question I was asked in an interview about how Instagram has changed the contemporary photographers approach. I love to work on the images in sequence, how they come together in spreads or even just one of the other to create something like a musical score.

Sleeping!

[All photos from *In the Beginning* and *Rude in the Good Way*, both by Roe Ethridge, published by Loose Joints]

Name

Roe Ethridge

Vocation

photographer

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