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Stephen Shore's MoMA Survey Shows a Restless Reformer as a Master of Photography

By JASON FARAGO NOV. 22, 2017

In the art world of the 1960s and 1970s, the photograph came to have a multiplicity of functions: it could document a performance (as in the art of Carolee Schneemann), advocate a social message (Danny Lyon), underpin a conceptual practice (Sol LeWitt), or relate a fictional narrative (Eleanor Antin). And today, now that cameras are ubiquitous and cloud-compatible, we often expect photography to serve as a tool for other efforts. But a photograph can still — we forget sometimes — have no function than to be itself.

That autonomous virtue comes through loud and clear at the Museum of Modern Art's retrospective of **Stephen Shore's** work: a sprawling, demanding exhibition that sticks up for photography as a discipline in its own right. Mr. Shore, who emerged in the 1970s alongside William Eggleston, Joel Sternfeld and other pioneers of color photography, has spent decades shooting landscapes and highways, motel rooms and diner breakfasts, with an unaffected mastery and subtle humor. Not staged, not lit, not cropped, not retouched, his photographs are feats of dispassionate representation, and yet their attentiveness and exactitude make them far, far more than snapshots.

Mr. Shore was born in New York in 1947 and may have had one of the most precocious childhoods of any American artist. He had darkroom equipment at age 6, a camera by age 10, and he entered the collection of MoMA at just 14, when he persuaded Edward Steichen to buy three prints. Before he was out of his teens Mr. Shore had dropped out of high school and was hanging around the Factory, Andy Warhol's all-purpose studio, where he shot cavorting Superstars, musicians like Lou Reed and John Cale of the Velvet Underground, and visitors like Marcel Duchamp, pictured here with a cigar and a smile of refined forbearance. There's an echo of Warhol's aloof observational style in these early black-and-white images, as well as in a rare silent film by Mr. Shore, "Elevator" (1964), which intercuts shadowy shots of a lift's metal grilles into flickering harmony.

By 1969 Mr. Shore had hit the road, and in Amarillo, Tex., he produced suites of photographs, shaped by a single principle, that pictured anodyne Americana in impassive repetition. "July 22-23, 1969," a sequence of 49 square-format photographs, captures the artist's friend Michael Marsh at precise half-hour intervals, lazing about in the desert or sleeping in a motel bed; in "4-Part Variation, July 1969," Mr. Shore photographed his rented Oldsmobile at four different distances, then repeated the prints eight times to form a grid. These inexpressive sequences, as well as a related series of palm trees and gas stations he shot in Los Angeles, bear the clear influence of Ed Ruscha's small books of serial photography, which Mr. Shore gobbled up in 1968. His focus on the everyday and the undistinguished would continue with "All the Meat You Can Eat," a 1971 show at a gallery in then-rough SoHo, where Mr. Shore exhibited hundreds of dry or kitschy found images — flat picture postcards of hospitals and strip malls, topless pinup girls and F-106 fighter jets — among his own photographs, many shot with the Mick-a-Matic camera, a children's apparatus shaped like Mickey Mouse.



Mr. Shore's "Second Street, Ashland, Wisconsin, July 9, 1973."
Credit Stephen Shore/303 Gallery

Mr. Shore was on the road again in 1972, but this time he had a new piece of kit: a Rollei 35-millimeter camera, equipped with a flash (a rarity for him) and stocked with color film. "American Surfaces," as the hundreds of prints he produced that year came to be called, captured the everyday sights of America — a car dealership, a stained mattress, a potted plant, a squat building by the roadside. Their diaristic plainness, exacerbated by the flattening effect of the flash, effects a sea change from earlier principles of documentary photography, which held that an image rose to the level of art by capturing what Henri Cartier-Bresson called "the decisive moment," or revealing what Roland Barthes named the "punctum," or overlooked detail that holds the viewer's eye.

Mr. Shore put that aside, in favor of the noninterference he first embraced in Warhol's Factory. More shockingly, he did so in color. Though these photographs would eventually influence a generation of photographers from Nan Goldin to Thomas Struth, they were reviled by defenders of advanced photography in the early 1970s, who held that only black-and-white images could have the distinction of art. Quentin Bajac, MoMA's chief curator of photography and the curator of this exhibition, presents them here as they were initially shown in 1972: unframed, pinned to the wall, proudly bare-bones.

There were opponents, too of “Uncommon Places,” (1973-1982), the first of his series shot with a larger 8-by-10 apparatus. Statelier and sterner than “American Surfaces,” these photographs translate the thoroughfares of Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Miami Beach and especially America’s burgeoning suburbs into meticulously composed tableaux. A street in Spokane, Wash., appears as empty as a stage set; a stretch of U.S. Route 93 in Kingman, Ariz., is rendered as three bands of street, land and sky.



Mr. Shore's "Breakfast, Trail's End Restaurant, Kanab, Utah, August 10, 1973."
Credit Stephen Shore/Museum of Modern Art, New York

The images of “Uncommon Places” have the same impartiality as “American Surfaces,” but the earlier series’ offhandedness has given way to formalist exactitude. Look, for example, at “Breakfast, Trail’s End Restaurant, Kanab, Utah, August 10, 1973,” which endows a meal of pancakes and half a cantaloupe with the nobility of a Dutch still life. Mr. Shore shoots the table overhead, at a nearly 45-degree angle, such that the false wood of the table slices against the lower left corner’s red plastic seat and floral carpet. Paper place mats create a network of parallel diagonals, compounded by a fork and knife, disrupted by a misplaced spoon, and traversed by the butter on the pancakes, which has melted from left to right to create the image’s only orthogonal line. Sparks of color, such as the green of the cantaloupe pith, punctuate the rhyming browns of the pancakes, maple syrup, plates, table and water glass.



Mr. Shore's "Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975."
Credit Stephen Shore/The Museum of Modern Art, New York, via Thomas and Susan Dunn

There is an extreme precision here, as there is in this show's most surprising inclusions: rare stereographs from 1974, seen in a special viewer, that inject a spectral third dimension to a bathroom sink or a mother and daughter on the street. Its chilly stillness countermands the visual delight of Walker Evans, Robert Frank and other earlier photographers, but it also negates the diaristic intimacy of "American Surfaces."

In the 1980s Mr. Shore moved to Montana, and turned his exacting gaze from suburbia to the landscape. Photographs of sinuous hills of the American northwest, and of Texan badlands and craggy fields in Scotland, resist heroic grandeur. Yet the wide-ranging exhibition, which includes more than 500 images as well as cases of archival material, shows Mr. Shore lately returning to more diverting imagery, shot with a more lightweight kit. A series of print-on-demand books, from 2003 to 2010, capture a single day's sights: the stone walls of Central Park, a visit to the dentist, the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show.

These days, Mr. Shore prefers to throw such images onto an Instagram account, commanding more than 100,000 followers, which unites landscapes, still lifes and (as any social media maven would) pictures of his food and his pets. In MoMA's galleries the books hang in midair, swinging from the ceiling, while the Instagram images are displayed on finger-smudged iPads, which visitors were flicking through with the same attention usually given to social-media imagery — that is to say, not much attention at all.



Mr. Shore's "County of Sutherland, Scotland, 1988."
Credit Stephen Shore/The Museum of Modern Art, New York, via Susan and Arthur Fleischer Jr.

There is a throwback, in these recent works, to the everyday impressions of "American Surfaces," and the Instagram account parallels, too, Warhol's documentation of forgettable daily minutiae on Polaroids or 16-millimeter film. Yet am I revealing myself as some hopeless Luddite when I say that I regret Mr. Shore's fifth-act decision to, as the kids say, "do it for the 'gram"?

Mr. Shore, as this commanding show demonstrates, has spent his career making images that matter out of subjects often overlooked, and via technologies (color film, the Mickey Mouse camera, the print-on-demand book) out of elite favor. Instagram may yet have the same potential, but it comes at a very high cost: losing the autonomy that this show begs to retain for photography, and freighting every image with commenters' adulatory emoji and the metadata of Mark Zuckerberg's ad sales team.

Stephen Shore

Through May 28 at the Museum of Modern Art, Manhattan; 212-708-9400, moma.org.

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