

Formalists Who Flirt With Banality

By GENE THORNTON

At first glance, the color photographs of Stephen Shore currently on view at The Museum of Modern Art strongly resemble picture postcard views of unusually drab and boring Middle Western towns. Even when he photographs a picturesque city like Charleston, S.C., Shore ignores the beautiful old churches, houses and gardens that have been the principal subject matter of all previous photographers of Charleston in favor of corner filling stations and the backsides of nondescript commercial buildings. Usually, however, he avoids even the proximity of the picturesque and concentrates his attention on the kind of dismal small town where the principal sights are the drive-in movie theater, the new suburban residential section, the litter of

have made with this kind of contrast. His color is equally bland and unemphatic. Unlike the expressive and distorted color of so many magazine photographs, it is, one suspects, as close as possible to the real color of the objects photographed.

This blandness and lack of comment makes Stephen Shore's photographs hard to take for a certain kind of viewer, among whom the present writer often finds himself. Why, one asks, should one bother to give serious attention to postcard views of backyards and boring towns? The answer seems to be that one is not supposed to look at the subject matter but at the form. In the past when photographers wanted to be formalistic—i.e., to emphasize arrangements of shape and color at the expense of subject matter—they imitated the effects of modernist painters and sculptors. Now, however, the new

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motels, trailer camps and truck stops on the outskirts and the three-or-four-story downtown commercial district.

Shore does not, I hasten to add, look down on this subject matter. His photographs are as bland and uncritical as the most ardent Chamber of Commerce booster could desire. They do not praise, perhaps, but neither do they blame. In them a rose bush, a grassy back yard, a telephone pole, a view of distant mountains, a wire fence, a piece of crumpled shower curtain, a sack of onions, a tree, a street sign and the shiny red fender of a car all have equal value.

Even when Shore includes an immobilized mobile home in the same picture with the ruins of an old Southern mansion, he does not seem to be making the kind of outraged statement about the decay of a culture and its values that so many photographers

photographic formalists imitate the purely photographic effects of the snapshot, the picture postcard and the old-fashioned 8x10 stand camera.

By deliberately choosing banal subject matter of no intrinsic interest, which they often frame in such a way as to further reduce any possible interest in the content, they focus the viewer's attention on the formal elements of the picture. Thus in Shore's townscapes one can often admire the beautifully managed intervals between telephone poles, sign standards and the edges of buildings and trucks. Even when this is not possible one can admire the essentially photographic color that owes nothing to the expressive distortions of painting. If all else fails, one can fall back on the fact that whatever else Shore is doing, he is not imitating painting.

Emmet Gowin is another young

photographic formalist who has gradually been moving from a snapshot approach to the 8x10 stand camera approach. The current exhibition at Light Gallery and the new book, "Emmet Gowin Photographs" (Knopf, \$8.95 paperback) demonstrate this movement. Gowin's earlier photographs strongly resemble the kind of small town family snapshots in which the wife, the kids, the old folks and the neighbors pose, mug and show off for the camera. They are, however, not at all in the sentimental, would-be ingratiating spirit of the usual family snapshot. For one thing, wife Edith is constantly taking off her clothes indoors, outdoors and in front of Granny and the children. This does not happen in the usual family snapshot. For another, Edith and her sister often glare into the camera with the sullen, alienated expressions that were once the prerogative of existential youth in Paris cafes, though now they appear even on billboard and subway advertisements for cigarettes.

In Paris cafes and on advertising billboards these expressions are meant to be taken as signs of sincerity, honesty, authenticity, etc., but in Gowin's photographs they seem, like Edith's nakedness, to be nothing more than a game played with the conventions of the family snapshot. Gowin pushes this game very far in one notorious picture of Edith in the barn lifting her dress and wetting the floor, but we are not really supposed to think she is some degenerate farm girl from Erskine Caldwell or William Faulkner-land. We are merely supposed to be shocked by this unwifely behavior into a realization that these are not really family snapshots but photographs about the family snapshot.

Or so it seems to me. In fairness to Emmet Gowin I have to say that he seems to regard his snapshot-like photographs as celebrations of a happy family life. Gowin's later photographs show a broadening of his subject matter to include landscape and still life, and in one landscape done in Yugoslavia in 1975 he achieves a classic beauty that has nothing to do with the snapshot. But throughout his entire work he seems to be concentrating on photographic form.

Neal Slavin's photographs at Light Gallery and in his new book, "When Two or More Are Gathered Together" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$25) also start from a conventional photographic form, the group portrait, and the bland neutrality of his treatment of bizarre and off-putting groups like the Star Trek Convention and the Girl Wrestling Enterprises links him to other young photographic formalists. Unlike most formalists, however, Slavin works hard to vary his poses and settings and bring out the peculiar characteristics of his subjects. For a formalist he comes dangerously close to achieving something as banal as old-fashioned human interest. ■