

THE ART WORLD DECEMBER 11, 2017 ISSUE

STEPHEN SHORE'S OFFBEAT SUBLIMITIES

An immersive and staggeringly charming retrospective of the photographer's work showcases his easeful acceptance of the world.

By Peter Schjeldahl



"Yucatán, Mexico, 1990." A search for fresh astonishments has kept Shore peripatetic.

Courtesy the artist / 303 Gallery

Stephen Shore, the subject of an immersive and staggeringly charming retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, is my favorite American photographer of the past

half century. This is not purely a judgment of quality. Shore has peers in a generation that, in the nineteen-seventies, stormed to eminence with color film, which art photographers had long disdained, and, often, with a detached scrutiny of suburban sprawl, woebegone towns, touristed nature, cars (always cars), and other familiar and banal, accidentally beautiful, cross-country phenomena. The closest to Shore, in a cohort that includes Joel Meyerowitz, Joel Sternfeld, and Richard Misrach, is his friend William Eggleston, the raffish Southern aristocrat who has made pictures unbeatably intense and iconic: epiphanies triggered by the hues and textures of a stranded tricycle, say, or of a faded billboard in a scrubby field. While similarly alert to offbeat sublimities, Shore is a New Yorker more receptive than marauding in attitude. I fancy that Eggleston is the cavalier Mephistopheles of American color photography, and Shore the discreet angel Gabriel.

A shot of a graceless, weirdly arresting intersection in downtown El Paso, from 1975, feels less to have been discovered by Shore than to have happened to him, and an expansive view in which people disport on a Yosemite river beach is so rife with appeal that you can hardly start, let alone finish, looking at it. What gets me in Shore's work is an easeful acceptance of a world—the actual, whole one—in which I have never felt quite at home. I have comforted myself with the idea that anxiety in the face of the real is an American cynosure—a point of pride, even—essentialized by Edward Hopper in painting and by the likes of Robert Frank and Diane Arbus in photography. But Shore invokes another tradition: that of Walt Whitman, who recommended “a perfectly transparent, plate-glass style, artless” (quoted in the catalogue by the show's fine curator, Quentin Bajac). That's Shore precisely, with artfulness aplenty but so understated—somewhat akin to the shrewdness of Whitman's free-verse cadences—as to be practically subliminal.

Shore's best-known series, “American Surfaces” and “Uncommon Places,” are both from the seventies and mostly made in rugged Western states. He shot the first with a handheld 35-millimetre camera, sometimes using flash, and the second, strictly by daylight, with bulky view cameras, which feature flexible bellows and ground-glass screens. The pictures in both series share a quality of surprise: appearances surely unappreciated if even really noticed by anyone before—in rural Arizona, a phone booth next to a tall cactus, on which a crude sign (“GARAGE”) is mounted, and, on a small-city street in Wisconsin, a movie marquee's neon wanly aglow, at twilight. I remember

assuming, back then, that the photographer must be intimately familiar with those places. But, as someone who grew up in small Midwestern towns and never registered them so acutely, I should have known better. In fact, Shore was a just-arrived city boy, virginal to what he beheld. His road pictures illustrate a truth of experience: you can be new to something, and something can be new to you, only once. (A search for fresh astonishments has kept Shore peripatetic, on productive sojourns in Mexico, Scotland, Italy, Ukraine, and Israel.) Of course, some things are always new, such as breakfast. Shore is the all-time pictorial bard of fried eggs or pancakes saluting the eye from Formica tables at random eateries along streets and state highways, from sea to sea.

Shore was born in 1947, the only child of parents who owned a handbag business. They were upwardly mobile during his early years, ascending from middle-class Peter Cooper Village to haughty Sutton Place South. Shore bloomed into his calling like a hothouse orchid, with his first darkroom kit, the gift of an uncle, when he was six and, when he was fourteen, a sale of three photographs to MOMA, where he was encouraged by the august former director of its photography department, Edward Steichen, and his successor, John Szarkowski. Shore distressed his parents by dropping out of school before he graduated. But, in the show, they grin from photographs that he took of them in 1970, first fully dressed and then in their underwear: evidence of glad capitulation. At seventeen, Shore began to frequent Andy Warhol's Factory, where he documented the artist and his devoutly narcissistic hangers-on with shutterbug zeal. He had a solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum when he was twenty-four. He could disquiet conservative elders—as with a show, “All the Meat You Can Eat,” that he curated in SoHo, in 1971, of postcards, news and police photographs, pornography, advertising images, and other visual flotsam, including snapshots that he had taken with a Mick-A-Matic, a plastic camera shaped like Mickey Mouse—but he seems never to have met with serious resistance. I'm put in mind of being a kid in school and discovering that your coolest classmate, whom you itch to resent, is really nice.

Eager to learn, and finding mentors among museum, gallery, and studio professionals, young Shore acquired sophistication in historical and avant-garde photography like a windfall inheritance, counting among his special heroes the nineteenth-century doyen of Western grandeurs Timothy O'Sullivan, the memorialist of old Paris Eugène Atget, and Walker Evans, who conferred poetic dignity on Depression-era rural America. On the fly, meanwhile, Shore absorbed Pop, minimalist, and conceptualist aesthetics. Of

signal consequence was his discovery, in 1967, of the textless photographic books of Edward Ruscha. On a visit to Los Angeles, in 1969, he paid homage to Ruscha's no-comment cataloguing of that city's recurrent features, but with the difference of explicit points of view. Where Ruscha's photograph of a gas station would have an impassive air of anonymity, Shore tilted his lens to capture a Standard sign against the sky.

Shore has remained a vestigial Romantic in his always implied presence, as someone stopping in space and time to frame views that exert a peculiar tug on him—perhaps as simple a sight as a battered troughlike shelf, outdoors in Mexico, holding citrus fruits arranged with an elegance that is innate to Mexican folk culture. His framing is resolutely formalist: subjects firmly composed laterally, from edge to edge, and in depth. There's never a "background." The most distant element is as considered as the nearest. But only when looking for it are you conscious of Shore's formal discipline, because it is as fluent as a language learned from birth. Since 1982, he has imparted his enthusiasm to waves of students, as the director of the photography program at Bard College, where he insists on historical grounding and darkroom mastery while being fully open to current trends.

For proof of this, visit Shore's Instagram account, with its proliferating hundreds of shots that are confoundingly—each and every one—perfect, tailored to the square format and variable sizes of the medium. Unlike other analogue masters, he hasn't hesitated to adopt digital innovations. He has been producing print-on-demand books, sometimes themed to single days of shooting, since 2003. (Bajac has installed many of these at MOMA, dangling on strings for hands-on perusal: visual diaries of expeditions in country and city places, far-flung or near his home, in Tivoli, New York.) Photographic technique is a set of tools to him, never a fetish. Working by computer is not so much a departure from as a fulfillment of his prior art, demonstrating that beauty is no less, or more, frequent in the world than the act of paying attention.

Unexpected beauty unsettles. Shore's American road shots reintroduce me to things that I assumed I knew, with the emotional effect—of encountering expressions of thoughts that had seemed my own—that Ralph Waldo Emerson termed "alienated majesty." And I can only imagine the impact, on natives there, of a recent series made in Israel and the West Bank: starkly factual views of terrain that is fraught with association to ancient and ongoing impassioned experience. Shore doesn't presume to

know the meanings, addressing none of them, while setting a stage for them all. His best pictures at once arouse feelings and leave us alone to make what we will of them. He delivers truths, whether hard or easy, with something very like mercy. ♦



"Queens, New York, April 1972," by Stephen Shore. Courtesy the artist / 303 Gallery

This article appears in the print edition of the December 11, 2017, issue, with the headline "Looking Easy."



Peter Schjeldahl has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1998 and is the magazine's art critic. He is the author of "The Hydrogen Jukebox." [Read more »](#)