

MICHAEL FRIED IN CONVERSATION WITH STEPHEN SHORE

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MF: The works of yours I know best are the photos that belong to the series you call Uncommon Places, largely because of the two or three days that you, Jim Welling, and I spent viewing a marvelous exhibition of those pictures at the Hammer Museum at UCLA. But today I'm fresh from going through your two books, Uncommon Places and American Surfaces -- which contains the photos in a just previous series -- and what I'd like to know is how you feel about these as books. That is something that hasn't come up in the other conversations with you that I have read. My own sense of the matter is that the photo book is a terrific vehicle for both groups of pictures. It's very dramatic in American Surfaces. Being able to see them in small groupings as one turns the pages. I think the layout is superb -- many two-page spreads contain just two photos, very few contain four. And lots are three, which is brilliant. Having that blank space to let breath in has a powerful effect on the reader/viewer. It signals that each of the images is autonomous at the same time as it belongs to a series with its own inner "logic," however loose that "logic" may be. There is a strong sense of order as you turn through the book, but you can't predict what any two-page layout is going to look like.

SS: Yes. And there are a couple of other things I really love about it. First of all, the reproduction is fabulous. I am happier with American Surfaces than with any other book that has ever been done of my work in terms of the quality of reproduction. Also, the size of the reproductions approximates the size of the original prints when they were first exhibited, and because of these two factors, the quality of reproduction and that the photos were never Gursky-sized prints, the illustrations in the book are almost facsimiles. So the book becomes, on the one hand, its own object and its own experience which is different from the show, but as a way of seeing the work it is a marvelous way into it because the surface is so similar, size is similar, and the reproduction is so good.

MF: That makes perfect sense. For me, it has provided access to the photos that exceeds what I found looking at them on the wall, because -- despite everything, despite all my experience looking at art -- confronted by lots of relatively small identically scaled images on a wall it is very hard not to speed up and start looking "generically." Whereas dealing with two, three, or at most four pictures at a time in a given two-page spread works made me slow down and look closely. I was swept away on the train coming up here, going through the book. A first-rate photo book that can have the something of the feel of a book of poems. You can go back to it, and have the same intense experience, and I must say that I love that.

SS: You raise a problem that I had with the original show, which is that, it was in '72 and the pictures were shown as Kodak-made snapshots, unmatted, unframed, and pasted on the wall.

MF: In three long rows, right?

SS: Yes, and I think people just had a very hard time looking at it. It was up for three months and after a month or so, some of the people who worked in the gallery told me that it grew on them, but I think for a lot of people who entered the room it was like colored wallpaper. So it is a difficult question, how do you make sense of the work and show it most effectively. That is why when I had my show at P.S. 1 this past year we wanted to keep a bit of the flavor of the original show with its grid of photos three rows high, but I framed and over-matted the work so that each image was given its own relative autonomy. You still walked into the room and had the experience of the grid, but the images were separated and more emphasis was placed on each one, and I think the ensemble was easier to look at.

MF: I'm sure that's so.

SS: But the book is a way of re-editing the work and presenting it in a different medium. There is a linear thread that isn't there, or that is

differently there, in an exhibition.

MF: Yes, it is linear and you also get these smaller groupings. I was very struck in American Surfaces by the presence of the flash -- it's obviously something you were happy with, and there are pictures where it is absolutely thematized, as when you were shooting a TV screen and you must have known you were going to get a bright reflection and those very strong shadows and so on.

Did viewers find that hard to take at the time? Was there a lot of serious photography that let the flash show in that way before those pictures?

SS: Yes, Winogrand and Friedlander were using flash before them, but this particular camera had a flash that was different from all others in that it was underneath the lens rather than over the lens. So that increases the shadows and creates a kind of black outline around the forms that makes them kind of pop out.

MF: So that's it. I felt there was something special in these.

SS: Yes, the flash is different.

MF: It's a very white flash. Is the layout in the book basically chronological?

SS: Yes.

MF: But still you had to make a lot of decisions about layout.

SS: On each page or within each section, which is by month and place, we moved things around so that each grouping -- each spread -- worked visually. In fact the project started as a visual diary, and I was photographing everyone I met on the trip, it had lasted two or three months. So it was really everyone I met. If I went to a movie theatre with one night, the person who took the ticket. If I went to a restaurant, the waitress . . .

MF: You would ask them?

SS: Yes, "can I take your picture?" There wasn't self-serve gas in those days, so the guy who pumped the gas. When the trip was over I just continued the project. And there were categories of things that were repeated, particularly on the first trip, and they were the people I met, the meals I ate, the beds I slept in. Art on the walls, store windows, residential architecture. And then everything else. I wasn't limiting it to those subjects but those were repeated categories. Television sets that I watched.

MF: And finally one senses the project coming to an end. I mean, there are images that look forward to Uncommon Places. You can sense the burgeoning desire to get the photographs to work in a certain way.

SS: Yes, and I think that a lot of the subject matter that I went on to explore in Uncommon Places over six or eight years was really staked out during this time.

MF: One of the things that strikes me about both books is that your relation to what you are photographing is essentially un-ironic. You don't seem superior to the material. Nor are you seeing these places and things as a foreigner might. Let me personalize this: my wife is British, and she grew up in Inverness in a house that still stands right by the River Ness. You can hear the water sliding by. I grew up in the Bronx and the Queens, we always lived in apartments, and every apartment in all the buildings when I was young had the radio on. So my wife and I have completely different sensibilities with respect to noise and also with respect to certain locales. For example, I have always loved the New Jersey Turnpike, that stretch between New York City and Newark Airport -- this sounds like Tony Smith, but the fact is I love places and things that are not just unfinished but unfinishable. There are parts of Baltimore I pray never get fixed up: the area around the train station, for example. I find these sorts of places imaginatively liberating. And I feel the same sort of attitude in your photos. Is that right or wrong?

SS: I think I have all kinds of mixed feelings, and I didn't particularly want the pictures to take a political stand. As I recall, I found that in a certain way unappealing. For example, I have immense admiration for Robert Frank's The Americans, but to my taste at the time his work seemed too directed in that way.

MF: I was thinking of Frank.

SS: And I know that sometimes my work is compared to his because we both do road trips, but I think that in a certain way, mine is maybe a reaction to being a strongly stated, or visually stated view, and so there is a kind of restraint in the way I worked. But also I just saw a complexity in what I was drawn to that could not be expressed simply in terms of this is bad, this is not. I remember once giving a lecture at the University of Arizona in Tucson and one of the first questions assumed that I look a negative view of gas stations and that that was why I photographed them. So I said, well, how did you get here tonight? Here I am driving around the country and right where the gas gauge is getting towards empty I am praying for a gas station. I understand the problem with them, I understand the problem with the car culture, but things are not that simple. At the time, also, I was reading turn-of-the-century Austrian economists, who were free-market economists, writers like von Böhm-Bawerk and von Mises, and I found them very interesting. So I was looking at the complexity of the situation. And I think I was also influenced to some extent by my early exposure to Warhol.

MF: I'm sure you were.

SS: Warhol had what I would call a distanced delight in culture that wasn't exactly ironic. He thought, oh wow, isn't this fabulous. So he thought it was fabulous but he didn't buy into it.

MF: In Warhol's case wasn't there an element of camp that seems not to be in your work?

SS: That is not in my work.

MF: At this distance in time it's clear that Warhol was a much more complex figure I for one appreciated in the sixties, but I was always put off by what seemed to me the camp element in his art and world. In my neck of the woods, the high modernist abstract painting and sculpture neck of the woods, camp had no play at all, and yet you were able to be part of life at the Factory and yet to produce such different work. Was camp an issue for you?

SS: It wasn't an issue in that Warhol and I had different personalities. I think my view of things was perhaps expanded by my experience of the Factory, but I perfected my own way.

MF: You clearly did. Let me ask you something else about American Surfaces. Did you make many more photos than are collected in the book?

SS: Yes.

MF: So the book represents a significant winnowing.

SS: Yes, it does, and the same is true of Uncommon Places. Although the new edition is called "the Complete Works", it isn't. It is not the Complete Works, and I have come to realise that I am probably a terrible editor of my own work, and there are many more pictures from the years of Uncommon Places that are just wonderful.

MF: I believe it -- there was a show at a gallery in New York last year of vintage prints from, as it were, Uncommon Places, and I remember being surprised when I got to the Hammer that some of the images that I liked best in the New York show weren't in Los Angeles or the book. Are there many such photos?

SS: Yes, a significant number more. I regret it being called the Complete Works.

MF: There will have to be a revised edition.

SS: Or the catalogue raisonné or the More Complete Works. I'm having a show at the end of this month at 303 Gallery, and I just could not believe the pictures I found that hadn't previously been shown. I mean what had I been looking at? Maybe I just hadn't opened the right box or had completely forgotten to look in it.

MF: All Uncommon Places photos.

SS: Yes.

MF: And they will be printed in that larger size you are using now. I look forward to it.

SS: Let me ask you a question. In the past couple of years you became interested in photography and are now writing a book about photography.

MF: Yes.

SS: How did this come about?

MF: I'll try to be brief. I have always liked photography; I bought a Berenice Abbott print of an Atget bedroom more than thirty years ago, and since then have lived for a long time with photos by Evans, Baldus, and O'Sullivan, whom I particularly love. And I regularly attended exhibitions of photography, all the major ones at any rate. But I didn't feel I had any particular insight into photography (I saw no way to write about O'Sullivan, for example, which I would still like to find a way to do), and without a sense of insight -- some kind of epiphany -- I can do nothing. Then several things happened. First, I got to know Jim Welling and his work because close friends in Baltimore came across an early show of his photos at Metro Pictures and not only bought several of them but became friends with Jim, and when he

visited Baltimore I met him too. We became friends, and I found that I liked his work enormously. And then about ten years ago I met Jeff Wall by chance in Rotterdam, and discovered that, to put it mildly, we were interested in many of the same pictorial issues. Shortly after that I started looking seriously at recent photography, and fortunately there have been major exhibitions of work by figures like Gursky, Struth, the Bechers, Demand, Dijkstra, Höfer, etc. that have advanced my education by leaps and bounds. And what happened was that I fairly quickly came to see how all that work, and lots more besides, hangs together in ways that I don't think anyone else has quite recognized.

SS: What sorts of ways?

MF: It's a complicated story, but the simplest way of putting it is to say that when around the late 1970s and 1980s art photographs starting being made not only at large scale but (as Jean-François Chevrier was the first to note) also for the wall, the issue of the relationship between the photograph and viewer standing before it became crucial as it had never been before -- for photography, I mean. This is also to say -- according to me -- that such photography immediately inherited the entire problematic of beholding -- in my terms, of absorption and theatricality -- that had been central, first, to the prehistory of modernist painting in France from the 1750s on and second, to the conflict between high modernism and minimalism in the late 1960s (I'm referring, of course, to my essay "Art and Objecthood"). This is a huge topic, one that goes way beyond the boundaries of our conversation, but it all turns in the first place on the issue of size. It's as if with smaller photos the fundamental assumption is that you approach closely and look through the transparent surface of the photo into the world beyond. Whereas with the new, large-scale art photography something else, something more confrontational, takes place.

SS: I think it is the intention of the photographer that makes one surface transparent and one opaque regardless of scale. Some are meant to be seen, I believe, just as a surface to be looked at and others you step into and enter

the analytic problem of the picture. I come from the days of the small photograph. I have related it more in my mind in the past to prints and drawings. So it was not so much that it wasn't for the wall as that it was a different experience on the wall. And maybe prints and drawings were not originally made for the wall, but most of the time I saw them they were on a wall. I would go to the Morgan Library and look at old master prints and drawings. Ironically things that also often stand up very well in a book.

MF: That's right.

SS: Or maybe not ironically. Of course, with a larger print there is more a sense of the print, of the image coming out at the viewer. The viewer doesn't have to work the same way. When the print is small the viewer has to give it close attention, and something special happens when there is this channel of attention between the viewer and the work. So it is asking the viewer, not quite to step into the illusion of the picture, but to give it his or her attention. Rather than standing there and just letting it do its own thing to you.

MF: I understand the distinction very well. In my teaching, I stress to my students the need to know how to "activate" a picture -- photographs, paintings, all art really. Take a Courbet landscape, which can seem simply a kind of brown and green presence hanging on a wall. But if you "activate" it by close looking, it magically opens up and becomes something extraordinary. And this involves understanding how the painting was made -- for example, that Courbet began by laying down a brown ground and that everything else in the picture takes place on top of that. In other words, it's important not to forget that works of art are first and foremost material artifacts. And that they call for a concentrated act of looking that will differ in its nature and emphasis depending on what kind of art you are looking at. One point I loved in your book The Nature of Photographs is when, talking about a photo by Robert Adams, you describe the sensation of changing focus, of one's eyes focusing progressively further away, as one moves one's attention from the foreground to the movie screen in the middle distance -- and yet the page is

flat, no actual refocusing is going on. And then you note how when one moves one's attention from a mountain to the sky beyond it, one's focus seems to come closer -- an amazing fact. I found that totally convincing, and completely original, by the way.

SS: I think that in the terms you have just been talking about, that is my way of getting people to "activate" the space.

MF: Yes. And then there was the "Cézanne and Provence" exhibition at the National Gallery of Art that we both saw recently. Cézanne is a perfect case in point -- his paintings are supremely great at the same time as they positively demand, indeed absolutely require, "activation" on the part of the viewer. In fact we are still learning how to look at them with the intensity they deserve.

SS: Yes. I was struck by that too.

MF: In the Uncommon Places photos, there is certainly an enormously powerful constructive intelligence, constructive intentionality, at work throughout the entire series. It comes back to a certain use of the view camera, to make pictures that not only allow the viewer to "enter" them perceptually but also prodigiously reward the viewer for doing so. Standing close to the pictures at the Hammer, I couldn't help but want to explore them visually. To the extent that I felt that the crucial category for understanding them would be something like photographic looking and seeing.

SS: One of the things I was doing at the time when I was taking those pictures was that I would stand next to the camera on its tripod and I would simply look. After I had gotten a rough idea of what I was photographing, I would look at what was in front of me and literally pay attention to as much as I could as far back into space as I could see. And I would decide whether there was any slight adjustment I wanted to make.

MF: Systematically?

SS: Yes, taking into account any perceptions that came my way doing that. And I would say yes, systematically, because if I didn't do it systematically then I wouldn't do it. Does that make sense?

MF: Perfect sense.

SS: So it was like a check list. Okay, I have done all this, I have got the rough framework of the picture and now I am going to stand here and really look at everything, and the metaphor that I had in my mind was that in a certain way I am clearing the space for the viewer. That by my moving my attention through the scene, and making any adjustment to the picture based on that, I clear the space for the viewer to move his or her attention through. If I only looked fifty feet into the scene, then there would be a wall there that the viewer would stop at.

MF: That's wonderful -- the photographs live up to that, in my experience of them. And of course the Uncommon Places photos also feature a highly conscious and sophisticated exploitation of the sensuous materials of the world. The automobiles, their paint jobs, the look of a street or intersection. Features of decor. Buildings, signs of all sorts, and of course the sky. And perhaps more than anything else, daylight.

SS: Yes.

MF: Daylight is a fantastic poetic motif. It goes all the way back to the Greeks, as the primary metaphor for what it is like to be alive. The whole point about the underworld is that when you are dead there is no daylight. So daylight, sunlight is synonymous with life itself, the supreme human good. Something that so struck me going through Uncommon Places is what you were able to do with light. You must have been keenly aware of this.

SS: Yes. One thing that colour photography does is show the colour of light,

so I often had to travel to parts of the country where atmospheric conditions were such that the colour of the light was what I wanted.

MF: You did that? Where did you go for that purpose?

SS: The Southwest often. And conversely in the nineties I spent most of the decade working in black and white, and was photographing a lot around my house in the Hudson Valley. In the summer there would be a period of some weeks where there would be an atmospheric inversion over the valley and the sunlight was actually orange on a cloudless day. It would be a period during which I would never dream of taking a colour photograph because the whole taste of the photograph would be off. But it was fabulous light in which to work in black and white. It showed sunlight and it gave the look of sunlight, but in black and white it gave a softness too. So it was a beautiful light for black and white but for my kind of colour, for what I was attempting, I couldn't even go near it.

MF: That's fascinating. The book could have been called American Light. Or Uncommon Light. Light is such a powerful protagonist from start to finish.

SS: It is something I look for very consistently.

MF: I'm sure of it.

SS: And then so much of the "taste" of a picture comes from the light or the sense of clarity or the sense of vividness. A lot of these subtler qualities have to do with the light and it is not just, is this a nice day, it is the absolute specifics of the light reflecting off this object at exactly this angle at exactly this moment.

MF: Yes. Again, it is one of the ways in which automobiles figure in your work. The colours they were then, the particular sheen they had or didn't have. They function in such an intimate relation to light in these photos. Let me ask you something that has become an issue in discussions of your work:

were you ever committed to contact printing only? That's been said, as you know.

SS: It is an idea that has taken on a life of its own. I always made enlargements. I did work in a couple of sizes. By 1975 I was printing from 8 by 10 to 20 by 24.

MF: I see. You felt comfortable doing that.

SS: Yes. And sometimes it would vary according to where the work was being shown, and if it was a small space I would print 8 by 10 and if it was a larger space I would print it larger.

MF: Right.

SS: I really hadn't thought out the issue of size.

MF: And the dimensions now?

SS: 20 by 24 for my view camera work from the 70s and larger for the landscapes from the 80s.

MF: And you now use a computer. As you mentioned in Los Angeles, you make colouristic adjustments when they seem appropriate.

SS: Yes, absolutely. What I am making are called Digital C Prints. So they are actually photographic prints -- it is just how the light gets to the print that is different. Digital printing allows me to do the kind of corrections that as a black and white photographer I have always been able to do. Just simple things like control of contrast. With a colour negative it can be controlled but only through a very elaborate system of masking that was very time-consuming and not finely adjustable.

MF: Let me ask you something else -- it's my impression, correct me if I'm

wrong, that both Uncommon Places and American Surfaces have a kind of public visibility today that perhaps wasn't true for a long time, at least to the same extent. If that is right, would you speak to it?

SS: Yes. I think one of the things I was interested in was, what does the age we are living in look like. I have talked in past interviews about the line in Hamlet, where he tells the players that the aim of acting is to show "the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." And I think sometimes people need a little distance from an age to appreciate it, and that perhaps if I was somewhat successful in this aim, in dealing with the age I was living in in visual terms, maybe some viewers were too close in time to that period to see what I was doing with my observations. That said, I don't want to make it sound as if my work was unappreciated in the seventies. I would say that American Surfaces was unappreciated but Uncommon Places wasn't. It was shown a lot but I see a different kind of interest in it today.

MF: I wish I knew more about the landscape work you made in the 1980s. There are three series of pictures, based on places in Montana, Texas, and Scotland, right?

SS: Yes. Some of these are reproduced in Photographs 1973-1993, a book published by Schirmer in the mid-1990s. And a few were exhibited in Los Angeles, in the last room of the exhibition.

MF: I remember them very well. I was especially struck by what I saw as their relation to embodiment. Now, the nature of photography as a medium, an art form, has always had a somewhat distant relation to embodiment. This is part of my argument toward the end of my book Menzel's Realism, in which I try to show that the 19th-century German artist Adolph Menzel's art is entirely based on the most intense sort of empathic projection between himself and what he depicts (and the drawing or painting on which he is working). So for example when he draws a bicycle, he isn't trying to depict what it looks like so much as it what it feels like to sit on a bicycle, to grasp the handlebars, to work the pedals, even to ring the little bell. Or when he paints a brick wall, the

viewer is somehow invited to register the heft and texture of the individual bricks, as well to imagine the actual temporal process of their having been laid down in rows, etc. This has been hard for people to see because of the general assumption that realistic painting simply depicts the appearance of things -- but neither Courbet nor Eakins nor indeed Caravaggio can be adequately understood in those terms. I argue in Menzel's Realism that empathic projection of this sort lies outside the bounds of photography. But your landscape photos that I saw in Los Angeles made me rethink this generalization.

SS: As you were just talking I was thinking of how I would approach the issue of embodiment in photographic terms, and that is if you become aware of yourself as a physical object in space, as though you were a dancer moving through the space of a room, your perception changes, your perception of space changes, your perception of time changes, and to the degree that that perceptual change is visual, it could be communicated in a photograph. So the sense of space is often the easiest of these subtler qualities to talk about, but if your physical awareness of yourself changes your perception of space, if you are a photographer that has had a lot of experience, a practiced photographer who has control of the medium, the picture you take can communicate that.

MF: Yes. What struck me in landscape photos at the Hammer, especially the two at the very end of the show, is that I felt something intensely empathic about, for example, the way they depicted the unevenness of the ground. And about the way in which they treated the whole question of relative distance. It had to be read. I mean I was keenly aware of the visual work I had to do to make my way imaginatively through the photos, to figure out distances, to read scale relations. Let's say there is something at a certain distance, it might be a big rock or it might be a smaller one. Everything depends on whether it is a big rock at 800 yards or a small rock at 75 yards, and those photographs don't immediately deliver that information. They make you work for it, and I came to feel that the labor of construal they forced me to do was implicitly physical, if you see what I mean. It was more than just mental, it was equivalent to imagining myself having to physically negotiate

that space. So they were for me extremely interesting photos precisely with respect to the issue of bodiliness and empathy. Also, they made me register the unevenness of the ground in a more than strictly visual way -- the way I would have done had I been walking on it, climbing that slope, or coming back down. I was impressed. Does this make sense?

SS: Absolutely. I have been interested for many years now in how on a flat piece of paper there sometimes can be a three-dimensional illusion of space. One understands that as an object it is flat but there are times when you step into it and it seems that something different is happening and it seems almost three-dimensional. In the seventies I tried to experiment with this using formal devices, articulating space, seeing how things break into a picture from an edge, how a picture plane is set up in the picture. In the eighties, the period we're discussing now, I was more interested in what happens if I step on an essentially treeless piece of land, and I don't have a road heading toward a simple vanishing point, I don't have telephone wires, I just have space and how do I communicate the sense of space, the vastness, the feeling of standing on the earth. That was in some way my project for myself in the eighties.

MF: I'm delighted -- that's exactly what I was getting out of those pictures. So you obviously succeeded in your aim.

SS: Let me add something to that. I started landscapes when I was living in Montana, but when I first moved there I didn't feel I could approach the subject because I was a New Yorker, and I saw that I didn't have perceptions about the land the way I had perceptions about the town I was living outside of. And it took a couple of years of simply seeing it in different lights and walking it and cross-country skiing across it.

MF: Getting the feel of it.

SS: Yes, physically getting the feel of the land. The very things you are talking about -- the unevenness -- comes from walking on it, and seeing slight

differences, and seeing how vegetation changes when there is a tiny dip. All this gets back to something you were talking about earlier that I found very interesting. The idea of "activating" a picture and what the viewer has to do to "activate" it and how your experience of the work changes when you do and how it may involve different things for different artists. In the Cézanne show, for example, there were a number of pictures that somehow, I don't know, I was familiar with them in reproduction but actually looking at them something happened and all of a sudden the picture became alive. As if it went into motion. Also, I grew up in New York and spent a lot of time at the Frick, and over the years I kept coming back to the Van Dyck portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Snyders. I found I could look at them and could do what I needed to "activate" them, which for me in those paintings means becoming physically aware of different parts of my body. It is like peeling emotional layers off the painting. I can go into these people and see . . . to say their emotional state is too simple. As much depth as I can find in myself I can find in them.

MF: Those pictures have never opened to me in the same way. But I feel I have physically negotiated every square inch of the great Constable White Horse in the same room. Because Constable couldn't have made it without having had the fullest imaginable version of the kind of experience you had in Montana. What it was like to walk through that countryside, to follow various paths and perspectives, to tread through that muck, to smell the smells, to actually be involved in poling a barge. All of that is intensely felt, not just seen. When you were in Montana, it was the time you spent walking, skiing, fly-fishing, and so on that made the photos possible. It may be that the most valuable thing I convey to my students is that they are embodied beings and that paintings, sculptures, and now photographs are made by embodied beings, and that it's impossible to understand anything about art if you lose sight of that basic fact. I would like to go on and hear your thoughts about your work since the eighties, the large black and white inkjet prints of trees, rocks, and archaeological sites, as well as the new multiple small-scale photo books, but this is probably a good point at which to stop.

SS: I agree.