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Stephen Shore: Something & Nothing, Sprüth Magers, London – review

By Francis Hodgson

The US photographer's work finds poetry in the ordinary and meaning in the details



Detail from Stephen Shore's 'Queens, New York, April, 1972'

You don't get much more garlanded than Stephen Shore. His talent was recognised very early and has not been in much doubt ever since. This is a photographer who at the age of 14 sold a few prints to Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who hung out at Warhol's Factory while still in his teens, and who became only the second living photographer to have a show at the Metropolitan Museum while still only 24. He was included in the famous *New Topographics* show at the George Eastman House museum in 1975, an exhibition that flagged a generation as surely as *Film und Foto* in Stuttgart in 1929. Even before that, he was included in a raw but fascinating show called *Ten American Photographers* at the London Photographers' Gallery in 1974.

Shore has often been credited, along with William Eggleston, as being among those early to adopt colour photography as an artistic medium when so many thought it only good for vulgar commercial pictures. Now a donnish figure habitually clad in tweeds (he has long been a distinguished teacher), Shore is in his mid-sixties. His theoretical primer on photography, *The Nature of Photographs*, is a wonder of pithy enlightenment, and two books of his own pictures – *American Surfaces* and *Uncommon Places* – are counted among the fundamental American photo books. He was very quick to make digital books, too. Now he has a small but fine exhibition at the Sprüth Magers gallery in Mayfair.

Stephen Shore was one of the great inheritors of the American tradition of the road, following such major photographers as Walker Evans and Robert Frank, and ahead of others such as Alec Soth. That has allowed him to work as a diaristic photographer, a conceptual artist, a documentary photographer. He has made postcards and sometimes distributed them anonymously. He has picked through vernacular photographs. His apparently tumultuous, even incontinent, variety of treatments suggests an artist anxious never to repeat himself, and Shore is certainly that. But the variety of approach masks a consistency, too. Shore has always been at pains to strip away the conventions of artistic vision the better to examine what it means actually to look.

That sounds suspiciously simple. Indeed, Shore has often made gestures that alone would be plain beyond describing. He once photographed every meal he ate on one journey, for example. He has often photographed the picture on TV screens. Simple, but millions of Instagrammers and Flickr users do exactly that every day now. In Shore's hands, such a process became the visual equivalent of oral history, close in feel to the original aims of the Mass Observation project in the UK (and similar attempts) really to get to grip with the

vernacular. Always with Shore, his process – how he chose to see what he saw – matters as much as the formal subject. American photographers tend to take themselves very seriously, and there is a long line of po-faced lensmen who have taken up one or another of Shore's many inventions. But with Shore there is always a leavening of wit, just the hint of a smile.

His new Sprüth Magers show, *Something & Nothing*, is arranged differently to most in the past. Todd Levin, the curator, has made 10 close groupings of pictures by theme, varying between three or four pictures to eight or 10 in each, quite irrespective of when they were made or where. This puts lovely little 6x4-inch C-types with plain white borders (fading a little now) next to larger, newer prints. It shows the consistency of Shore's vision, in that he has come again and again to look at similar non-sights. A landscape set shows his method nicely: here is Shore on a ridge high above the Dead Sea in 2009. The shot he finally chooses is neither heavy with Biblical influence nor with more modern political weight. Instead he makes a view that seems deliberately to ask what it might be to make a view up there. Raw, scrubby foreground; the sea not even defined as the background, since a low line of land lies beyond; focus not at all clearly in one plane. It's the view that other photographers would have passed by on their way to The View.

Shore uses very large cameras that capture lots of detail. That detail would take long minutes of scrutiny were we to mine it ourselves, but is made available by compression in a picture. He consistently finds some archetypal quality in the mundane and never photographs what screams to be photographed. He's a classical, even an austere, printer. It all adds up to a real vision in which there seems to be only the refusal to have a vision.

Two vitrines in the show give two different perspectives on the man and his work. In one, from which Levin has obviously taken the title of the show, lie two lectures by John Cage, *Lecture on Nothing* and *Lecture on Something*. These seem to speak for Shore with modesty and elegance: "Someone said 'Art should come from within; then it's profound.' But it seems to me Art goes within and I don't see the need for should . . ." In the other vitrine, a Magritte of a frame-within-a frame lies boldly next to a Shore photograph of a censored billboard of a landscape seen within a landscape. This is a false footstep – there are not many in the show – a little ponderous, a little self-important. That's always been a failing of Shore's. He has long felt that if he looked with enough concentrated attention at something, then it must be interesting. Often it has been, but not quite always. And from that confidence sprang a dull legion of his imitators who have made large-format views of nothing at all.

Shore believes in equality before the camera. The new urbanism of the Middle East is not qualitatively different to the more familiar urbanism of America. A badly made concrete surface is as "interesting" as the more ponderous grandeur of wood or drapery. An anonymous face can have as much character as a well-loved friend or a relative. Photographs, in Shore's lexicon, prove that details have a life of their own. And where other photographers take those details to add up to metaphors for larger meanings, Stephen Shore, like John Cage, knows that there is meaning enough in the details.

On his best form, Stephen Shore discovers the poetry of ordinariness. He also discovers that the ordinary isn't ordinary at all.

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