

The Museum of Modern Art

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN SHORE (Wall Label)

Photography has distinguished itself as a descriptive medium. It seems to record the physical world without interference; nevertheless it inevitably alters its dimensions, color, and context. In practice, this failure to exactly replicate its subject admits freedom: it is the latitude that art requires.

Photographers use this latitude differently. Some restrict description through selective focus, extreme lighting, or radical framing; others distort it through manipulation of the print. Such choices mark the photographs with the clear impress of aesthetic intent. But those who willingly embrace photography's descriptive talent practice a more recondite art. Their contribution is difficult to identify because its parameters are closer to those traditionally expected of the medium.

Stephen Shore is an artist of the latter persuasion. His technique urges the medium to its most ambitious descriptive extension; the large stand camera and 8 x 10" color negative film render detail, hue, and texture as precisely as the state of the art allows. Yet these photographs are not just facts, fixed like specimens under glass; they are cogent as pictures: what is experientially real and disorderly becomes in them a coherent graphic entity, as definitive and eloquent as it is fictitious. Thus a yellow plastic shower curtain is simultaneously the gravitational core of the composition, the chromatic counterpoint of a study in pale azure and ivory, and rubbish--a thing once private and functional, now the discarded evidence of a shared habit. By overlapping layers of structure and meaning, Shore reinforces each, and invests the works with a positive duplicity whose detection demands an attention like the photographer's own.

Despite their contemporaneity, these photographs maintain an air of harmonious repose more common to ancient idylls than modern urban life. The quietude is analogous to Shore's attitude toward his subject--one of pleasurable reflection rather than judgment. Alert, he finds moments of exquisite delectation while becalmed amidst ordinarily negligible surroundings. One imagines that Shore can indulge his love of beauty so completely only by making those moments as neat, timeless, and self-sufficient as they are in his photographs.

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