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Stephen Shore's Landscapes of a New America

The photographer's recent work captures rural and suburban scenes from a drone's-eye view to meditate on mankind's relationship to nature.

By Brian P. Kelly

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'Kingston, New York, November 8, 2020 41°56.9443167N, 74°1.7406167W' PHOTO: 303 GALLERY

New York

Photographer Stephen Shore is a master of the mundane. Whether it's a snap of a water fountain, a film of an elevator, or an aerial shot of miles of highway, he transforms the everyday into the extraordinary—the spigot, mounted in a richly patterned niche, takes on a religious air; the seismic jitters of his camera make the commonplace lift a site of chaos; the roadways crisscross into a carefully plotted geometric abstraction.

The last of these is included in the 76-year-old's current show at 303 Gallery, which collects 13 works from his "Topographies" series, a project begun in 2020 in which Mr. Shore uses a drone to capture sky-high views of rural and suburban landscapes. The title of the project harks back to the influential 1975 George Eastman Museum exhibition "New Topographics," which marked an abrupt turn away from traditional depictions of landscape and in which Mr. Shore was included. Like that show, these newer works nod to the legacy of American landscape photography while investigating mankind's impact on nature.



'Newark, New Jersey, April 23, 2021 40°44.1524583N, 74°7.4420033W' PHOTO: 303 GALLERY

Alfred Stieglitz's 1922 image of a lone house under a roiling sky seems to be a touchpoint for Mr. Shore's photo of a crumbling clapboard structure dwarfed by the field in which it sits in Meagher County, Mont., and Paul Vanderbilt and Art Sinsabaugh also come to mind when looking for historical precedents, as well as the airscapes captured by the military in the early 20th century. Among Mr. Shore's contemporaries, Frank Gohlke, Michael Light and Alec Soth are all in the conversation.

But Mr. Shore is no imitator, and the best shots here have a quiet eeriness about them that's further heightened by the fact that many of these images were captured at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. A nearly vacant street scene in Livingston, Mont., speaks to the way that small towns have struggled in recent history and, given that the photo was taken on July 27, 2020, a grim depiction of how tourist destinations—this one a gateway to Yellowstone—were hit particularly hard by the virus's economic impact. Looking closely, we see a man sitting outside an eatery, a blue surgical mask dangling from his face. In

Kingston, N.Y., a flaccid flag hangs over an RV dealership, dwarfing a banner that encourages readers to “Stay Safe!” The empty customer parking lot is in stark juxtaposition to the sleek trailers that surround the building—like a military convoy stuck in a holding pattern, waiting for orders or better days ahead.



‘Three Forks, Montana, September 1, 2020 45°56.977861N, 111°36.454105W’ PHOTO: 303 GALLERY

The tension between man and nature—our attempts to tame it, for good or for ill—is especially poignant in a shot from Three Forks, Mont. The ash brown of a hardscrabble plain is punctuated with bursts of green on which humble houses are built, each lawn battling the unfriendly clime in which it grows, a metaphor for an American Dream that seems constantly under threat. In another photo, a tightly packed junkyard is separated from a similarly dense neighborhood in Chesapeake, Va., by a highway overpass, a reminder of the debris that’s constantly generated by even the least glamorous of lives.

While he can sometimes be bleak, Mr. Shore also captures the enduring beauty of America. A white horse takes center stage in a shot of lush fields in Bozeman, Mont., and you can almost smell the grass. Thirty miles southeast in Brisbin, a solitary Airstream trailer gleams under azure skies filled with fluffy clouds, verdant trees surrounding it as watchful mountains rise up in the background. And farther north, in Sedan, a dirt road stretches to the horizon; the brightly lighted fields it runs through are cast into shade farther in the distance. It’s a simple shot, but one that celebrates human perseverance, through good times and bad.

Stephen Shore

303 Gallery, through July 3