A World Unto Itself

Photographs of Abu Dhabi by Stephen Shore hold no sense of moral judgment. They do not strive for overt visual statements, nor do they engage in a conceptual deconstruction of photography's claim to truth and impartiality. On the contrary, out of the nondescript accumulations and seeming contingencies of everyday life that are impressed on our surroundings, Shore, in his visual acuity, invites you to pause and to enter the realm of the pictorial as a world unto itself. To look at Shore's photographs is to enact the very process of registering the world or, as Shore would say, "the transformation of a world into a photograph."[1]

In his capturing of the quotidian, Shore's photographic eye directs us to markers of time and of change. His iconic photographic series, *American Surfaces*, which he produced in the early 1970s, and especially *Uncommon Places* that followed, deal with this sense of locality and signs of cultural and temporal drift. Undergoing its own processes of rapid urbanization, Abu Dhabi is, to use Shore's words "all about change," a city built in an age of globalization. Located on the Arabian peninsula of the Persian Gulf, Abu Dhabi is the name of both the capital city and the largest and, due to its extensive oil reserves and global investments, wealthiest of the seven Emirates of the UAE. While the transformation of Abu Dhabi into a modern and verdant city began in the 1960s as part of the vision of its ruler Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, for people from outside of the Gulf, and notably in the West, Abu Dhabi is often conflated with its more architecturally brash and vertically compensated neighbor, Dubai.

To the visitor's eye, the city of Abu Dhabi presents a distinctly reserved and elegant face, with its wide, tree-lined roads and sweeping corniche on the sparkling azure waters of the Gulf. Culturally, Abu Dhabi combines an educated worldliness and cosmopolitanism, nourished over centuries by its long history of commerce and trade. It is a city that communicates luxury and privileged access juxtaposed with the simplicity of pious humility. This is reflected in the worldly sumptuousness of the Emirates Palace Hotel—a neo-Orientalist fantasy replete with cryo-preserved palm trees and a machine for dispensing gold ingots—and the spiritual symbolism of the Sheikh Zayed Mosque. Less tangible, though visibly present and palpable, are the traditions of Bedouin and Islamic culture that inform life in the Emirates.

Shore's first visit to Abu Dhabi was in 2009. Invited to the Emirate to take a series of photographs as part of a commission for the burgeoning art fair Abu Dhabi Art, he spent three days traveling around with a Nikon D3x, a high-end digital camera. Having spent more than twenty-five years working with a large-format camera, his move to digital photography in 2003 enabled Shore to reintroduce the idea of the snapshot and the journey which had been part of his own history and evolution as a photographer, from *The Velvet Years*, documenting the activities and habitués of Andy Warhol's Factory in the 1960s, to his road trips across America in the 1970s. Digital photography made it possible to reintroduce the immediacy afforded by the a 35 mm camera, on which Shore came of age, while maintaining a level of visual information that is possible with large-format photography, and which Shore expressively exploited for *Uncommon Places*.

Using a large-format view camera shaped Shore's photographic vision. The view camera, an 8 x 10 inch plate camera, involves the use of a tripod to hold it steady during the long exposure times that produce a greater depth of field. In the resultant images, the concept of "the decisive moment" no longer plays a critical part. While the large negatives of the view camera register a density of information unobtainable with other types of cameras, its slow shutter speeds and the cost of color printing on that scale—what would have been around $40 per print in today's terms—imposed for Shore not only practical but economical limitations that contributed to what he describes as "learning the grammar of photography"—or, as he writes in *The Nature of Photographs*, "the characteristics of photography that establish how an image looks."[2] The conditions of making obliged Shore to learn what he wanted from a picture and to internalize this discipline as a way of seeing. His explorations during his formative years also led him to understand the potential of

the image to function as an object in itself, as opposed to merely a representation of something in the world. He talks about his photographs as "pictures," reinforcing the notion of a reality that has as much to do with the compelling allure of his photographs as it does with the world at which he takes aim.

In Abu Dhabi, as in Amarillo or in Fort Lauderdale, Shore is attracted to signs of lives lived and values transformed. As in most places in the world, Abu Dhabi is not short on contrasts and contradictions, something which Shore registers with poised subtlety. Vernacular culture, by way of shop signage, civic and domestic architectural details, and current-model cars parked in front of the local Internet shop are emblematic of Shore's "time markers." He has talked about his interest in representing culture, and of capturing things that will pass. In his visual universe things that seem the most unremarkable are, in reality, the tangible references by which we communicate culture and by which we can measure its transformation: A low-rise building carries on its façade two building-height banners announcing the construction of new high-rise tower developments. Supported by an ordered chaos of suspended wires, lines, and metal supports, a toolmaker's shop sign carrying emblems of his wares hand painted in pastel pink and grey-blue against a cream background arrests us in its tones and play of graphic curves and arabesques. While the picture is what Shore would describe as "opaque" in its closing down of the image beyond the picture plane, it offers up a richness of suggestive detail that reflects the coexistence of an older face of commerce alongside the mechanisms of globalization that drive Abu Dhabi's economy.

Shore's approach seems to be one of stealth. He doesn't aim for the heroic, or the big panoramic shots. Instead, he imbues the seemingly incidental encounter of the passerby with a photographic monumentality. With *Abu Dhabi* (p. 25), we can be absorbed by the atmospheric perspective of a distant city skyline, viewed from the back of a simple, single-story block building. Despite its seeming casualness, there is a precision to the composition worthy of a Baroque painting. In the distance, verticals of electrical wires and a lone palm tree vie with distant cranes and budding skyscraper towers. A suite of horizontal blocks at differing angles, highlighted further by the red-ochre shapes painted onto one, pulls us back and anchors the foreground, our gaze gently led forward and back again by the rounded curves of a satellite disc and the crescent moon atop a modest minaret at the very center of the picture.

According to Shore, "A photographer imposes order on a scene—simplifies the jumble by giving it structure."[3] Geometries of color, pattern, and form are also part of what Shore might describe as "the fractal geometry of experience." The description served as a title for a text by him in 1993, in which he describes the theories of scientist Benoit Mandelbrot on fractal forms and mathematics structures. For Shore, the idea that certain forms and mathematical relationships are present in all things, and that they are culturally recognizable was a revelation: "On a more profound level this ordering reflects our world view, be it simplistic and rigid or complex and fluid. And it is the analytic part of us that is stimulated by a visual representation of a geometric structure that so well correlates with our experience of the world."[4]

Many of Shore's photographs of Abu Dhabi offer this sense of visual ordering that one might posit as culturally recognizable. They are rendered more complex again by the exploitation of his highly refined sense of spatial composition—his "constructive intelligence" to draw on a term used by Michael Fried[5]—to give expression to converging rhythms of daily life. In one photograph, a frontal view of a pale blue sliding door dominates the image plane (p. 19, bottom). Another of Shore's seemingly opaque images, here Shore gives us enough detail to allow the eye and the mind to wander. Its formal and architectural subject is highlighted by the lines of linear decoration, composed of two sets of linear frames around the outline of a shape evoking a niche—evocative of the semicircular *mirhab* in mosques that indicates to the faithful the direction of Mecca. Over one of these embellished frames, in its lower left-hand corner, a further set of graphic lines outlines a bolted access door, prompting questions of past use and present-day obsolescence, emphasized by a realization that the door is partially open to one side to allow for easy flow into and out of a fluorescent-lit space beyond.

Shore's attention to detail reflects his sensitivity to local forms and colors, what Fried, again, has described as "the sensuous materials of the world."[6] Behind the veneer of objective restraint, Shore inflects his images with an eye for their symbolic value. His pioneering role in the history of color photography is reflected in the nuances of tonal range and accents that give structure to his pictures. Color for Shore "expands a photographs' palette and adds a new level of descriptive information. . . . It has added description because it shows the color of light and the colors of a culture or age."[7] Similarly, the simplest of objects or views become indicators of social and cultural aspiration, or patterns of ingenuity, traces of tradition that coexist with signs of modernity. Shore photographs the back of a water tanker decorated in brightly colored paint with images of a fertile river valley; a potted shrub sits atop a scaled-down replica of a Corinthian column standing on what appears to be an improbable green lawn (p. 12, top). In one gloriously textured image, car parts are neatly sorted and arranged beneath an oriental rug (p. 21, bottom), while in another, we see round flatbreads laid out in repeating circular motion to bake dry in the desert sun (p. 18, bottom).

Shore does not so much narrate in his photographs as he provides the evidence for us to construct our own narrative. A photograph of a woman's handbag reposing innocently on the floor at a threshold of doorway arouses curiosity as to its owner and a way of life that gives no cause for concern for private property left in a semipublic place (p. 18, top). In another image, a blanket and cushion covered in a tattered red-and-cream patterned cover lie as if adrift in the back of a utility truck (p. 14, bottom). While the interplay of vertical and horizontal lines of the truck's window grill, railings, and back chassis visually structure the picture, it is the scuff marks and scratches of its surfaces that evoke the passage of people; through the image, the cushion and blanket are transformed into symbolic carriers of sleep and repose after a day of work.

One might suggest that just as the imagery of cinema has shaped the way we see the world, so too, Shore's images from his road trips across the US have impressed themselves onto our visual memory and imagination. The photographs from Shore's *American Surfaces* possess an uncanny familiarity and stillness—what his fellow photographer Joel Sternfeld described as "hyper-reality"[8]—as if the model for a movie set we should have seen, if we have not already. A city of subdued bustle and entrepreneurial diligence, Shore's *Abu Dhabi* is largely one of absences, reminiscent of Atget's Paris, where window displays and public monuments stand in for human activity.

In the larger series of photographs, when people are present, they appear not to be of the place. A man—a tourist or one of the expat community employed in executive and middle management across the Emirates—stands in his bathing suit on an empty beachfront while a small group of young people play in the water; a gardener tends to a leafy expanse; another man rushes towards an unpopulated street corner. The few depictions of the indigenous Emirati population include a photograph in which a man bends down to attend to his car, his face hidden while the red-on-white embroidery of his *ghoutra* (or headscarf) and the curve of his crouched figure add to the contours of a vertical assemblage of car exhausts and other machine parts (p. 23, bottom). In another photograph, a publicity image serves as a screen to the door of what appears to be a local merchant—a picture of a representation and not of a person (p. 13, top).

Shore's Abu Dhabi is all the more striking for its modesty of view. Within the context of the Middle East, the history of photography is tied to the history of Colonialism and the Orientalist gaze, a history that contemporary artists, photographers, and historians of photography from the region have looked to counter through their research and work with local archives. In the Gulf, archival photographs date from the years of the Trucial States, an alliance of individual Sheikhdoms under British Protectorate formed in the late 19th century (and prior to the UAE's formation in 1971), and the exploration companies that established themselves in the region with the discovery of oil in the early 1930s.

Contemporary photographic representations of the Gulf tend towards the image as mapping or research document, as in the projects and publications of Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA). From the perspective of the visual arts, a younger generation of artists living in the Gulf or for whom it is a subject of their work—Tarek El Ghoussein, Hala Al Ani, Ziad Antar, among others—seem to be looking to the examples of late 1960s and 70s conceptualism. Others are using photography as a means to explore the politics of representation (Ebtisam Abdul Aziz, Lateefa Bint Al Maktoum). For an artist whose lineage includes some of the American great portraitists and street photographers of the twentieth century—from Walker Evans, Paul Strand, and Andy Warhol, to Gary Winogrand and Lee Friedlander—Shore's approach possesses a particular discretion and candidness. He quietly introduces the popular and the everyday as a visual narrative, not of detached irony, but of eloquence and humanity. For this, his pictures offer an exemplary alternative to visualization of a world in the process of becoming. They are, indeed, a world in a photograph.

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Notes

1. Note that all unattributed quotes by Shore are from a conversation with the artist in New York City on June 10, 2011.
2. Stephen Shore, *The Nature of Photographs: A Primer*, 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon Publishing Ltd, 2007), 7.
3. Shore, *The Nature of Photographs*, 37.
4. Stephen Shore, "The Fractal Geometry of Experience," 1993, in *Stephen Shore* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2007), 137.
5. "Michael Fried in Conversation with Stephen Shore," in *Stephen Shore*, 20.
6. Ibid., 23.
7. Shore, *The Nature of Photography*, 18.
8. Joel Sternfeld, "Focus," *Stephen Shore*, 119.