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Stephen Shore's 'Early Work,' with Pictures He Shot at Age 13, Is Anything but Amateur

By *Emmanuel Iduma*

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A picture from Stephen Shore's book *Early Work*, 2025.
Courtesy The Artist And MACK.

The photographs in Stephen Shore's *Early Work* are early indeed. He took many of the pictures between 1960, when he was 13, and 1965, when he was 18. Yet they are as considered and sophisticated as those taken in his later years. How did he

achieve such aesthetic fluency as a teenager? Put differently: Why is it possible for him to return to these images and fail to be repulsed by any hint of amateurishness?

He has written “a pre-history” of the photographs that appears close to the end of the book. There, he tells of a remarkably atypical childhood: He was given a Kodak ABC Darkroom Outfit for his sixth birthday, a Ricoh 35 for his eighth, and a copy of Walker Evans’s *American Photographs* (1938) for his tenth. In the assiduous, scrupulous prose in which Shore tells of his “entrance into the world of photography as an art” there is scarcely a maudlin word. After all, his task, as he takes a retrospective glance, is to think of himself less as a creator of the images than an observer of them, a distinction he makes in the text. Perhaps he is also an observer of his own distinguished life, which includes such acclaims as being the first living photographer to have a one-man show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and having his photographs were purchased by Edward Steichen for the Museum of Modern Art when he was only 14. Of the individuals mentioned in this “pre-history,” like W. Eugene Smith, Dave Heath, and Jonas Mekas, he notes: “It’s not possible to disentangle the threads that come together to form a life. But these encounters are all with me today.”



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These threads include a three-year period spent at Andy Warhol's Factory, where he learned from observing the Pop artist "in the midst of his creative process, repeatedly making aesthetic decisions." A 1965 Warhol self-portrait Shore includes in the book shows the bespectacled artist from a selfie-like angle, likely sitting on the floor in the middle of banter, with shaded eyes and relaxed jaw. He also recalls how a friendship with William Dexter—the headmaster of a boarding school in the Hudson Valley, who had a darkroom in his house—encouraged and deepened his interest in photography. The earliest photograph in the book is of Dexter, at a moment when he is taking a photograph of a boys' sports team. Shore describes it with a deceptively simple formulation—as "a picture of a photographer taking a picture"—nodding to the metanarrative of the image, in which Shore's shadow rests on the back of his mentor. Somewhat symbolically, Dexter raises his fingers towards those who stand behind.

One way to appraise Shore's early mastery of technique is to seek clues in his descriptions of the photographic apparatus. "A camera," he writes, "doesn't point at the world but frames it." He gleaned this insight from the "classicism" of Evans's work, and quickly went on to compose his early photographs with a combination of intuition and skill. Rendered in black and white, the settings of most pictures are invariably the street, peopled by strangers and their advertent or inadvertent postures. Nothing of their identities or lives is preserved by captions, and this indicates how differently such details would have mattered to an older Shore, who, in his book of 1970s photographs *Uncommon Places*, includes names of people and locations.



A picture from Stephen Shore's book *Early Work*, 2025.
Courtesy The Artist And MACK.

What's most notable is that the essential character of all of Shore's work is seen in *Early Work*: his affinity for the ordinary charm of a place, his attraction to dramas that play out in configurations of items and people in a scene, and his hunch that a photographer's honest task is to render the world's surface at a degree to which it is slightly less familiar. One can say this about photographers in general. But Shore's advantage is that he's produced excellent work for so long, with both the temerity to experiment, and an inclination—as seen in his 2023 memoir on the craft of photography, *Modern Instances*—to think deeply about how photographs work and how a photographer can have a prodigious taste for influences.

When he made the photographs in this book, he was an only child. He felt tied to his parents but sensed a disconnection from them. While they encouraged his interest in photography, they “never really grasped what was driving me.” What, indeed, was driving him? It is a question for which there is no neat answer in his own reflections, concerned as those are with his origins and earliest influences. It is simple enough to say that the photographs, in their attentiveness to the American surface, speak for him. *Early Work* is a collection with the feel of a full-circle event: Shore's attempt to bridge the existential gap between the photographer he hoped to become with the one he is now. Remarkably, those selves scarcely look different.