



Coco Chanel, tête nue, by Jacques Lipchitz, plaster cast, 1921, and CHANEL
Sunglasses, Ready-to-Wear Fall-Winter 2002/03, photographed by Roe Ethridge

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Stephen Shore, New York, New York, March-April, 1973 from the series *American Surfaces*, 1973



Stephen Shore, Greene County, New York, 1987 from the series *Hudson Valley*, 1987

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN SHORE

BY REBECCA SIEGEL

Stephen Shore is a celebrated photographer whose work has been featured in exhibitions around the world for the past forty years. He is currently the Director of the Photography Program at Bard College and the 2025 CHANEL Chair at the Jeu de Paume in Paris.

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RS I wanted to start by talking about Louis Sullivan's statement that you have shared: "To pay attention is to live and to live is to pay attention". How has that informed your practice?

SS Photography, although it's a mechanical medium, seems to be somehow particularly sensitive to the level of attention of an experienced practitioner. Once they've mastered the technique of the medium—the optical chemical technique and the formal technique, how a picture is structured—if that becomes second nature, the quality and intensity of their attention is somehow transferred to the picture. It may be picked up as a sense of clarity. I think for me there's a distinction between sharpness, which is optical, and clarity, which is psychological.

RS You have spent decades directing Bard College students who are at the very beginning of a practice; they have almost no experience. What do they bring to the table in terms of attention? Do they pay a different type of attention as digital natives, raised on social media's endless scroll?

SS Well, we can talk about a generation in the aggregate, but that doesn't describe the individual. I have students that are just incredibly talented but, at the same time, what you are suggesting I see all the time—a difficulty in paying attention and in a very basic way.

As an analogy: do you ever experience it when you're reading a book, and something sets off a chain of thought? You carry on reading but your mind isn't on the words, so you have to stop and go back to where you left off?

RS Almost daily...

SS Imagine if you didn't stop and go back, and what if that was happening all the time? I see this in some of the students in a way that I have not seen in previous generations. I've been teaching for 40 years, so my students have been Gen X, Gen Y, Millennials and Gen Z. I think a good teacher needs to alter their approach with the time and the place and the changes in technology. But some of their inability to pay attention is different.



Stephen Shore, *Natural Bridge, New York, July 31, 1974* from the series *Uncommon Places*, 1974

RS They have also grown up at a time when everyone has always had a camera. What is the relationship between that democratisation, and a particular level of expertise?

SS I understand that everyone has the skill of taking pictures. A picture is whole from the moment it's taken; you can close your eyes, hold up a phone and take a formally complete photograph that is in-focus and properly exposed.

RS Yes, but I wonder whether everybody's ability to do just that has challenged the value of those images?

SS I suspect the answer is not that it's challenged the value, but that it has maybe clouded the perception of them. More photographs are considered thoughtful when, to the eye of a practised photographer, they're not.

RS It's brought too much value.

SS Perhaps.

RS When you were working on *American Surfaces* and *Uncommon Places*, you were working with film. It was an expensive medium at that time and one with real limitations: after all, you can only carry so much of it. That's in sharp contrast to today's endless digital capacity. Were those limits useful?

SS Absolutely, absolutely useful. Five years ago, our college closed for the pandemic; I was teaching a 4x5 camera class at the time and we sent the students home with their equipment. One of them was immunocompromised and spent the rest of the semester in her bedroom producing work every week, processing the film in her bathroom. She couldn't print but photographed her negatives against light and then reversed it on her phone. She could not have been in a more restrictive situation but wound up doing a series of self-portraits that were fabulous. It was as though this extreme limitation stimulated her imagination.

RS I was reading a 2023 *Vanity Fair* article that said that you had used OpenAI to create a "Stephen Shore image" - the opposite of straight photography, with a different set of limitations.

SS There have always been methods of synthesising pictures, combining negatives, collage, but I'm only interested in straight analytic photography. What excites me is being at a spot and being totally present and making the picture I want, which I would not dream of altering afterward. It's such a wonderful experience when it all comes together in that moment.

With AI-generated pictures, that quality of discovery and attentiveness is not going to be there. However, it is predictable, like a camera. I can make a camera do what I want it to do, and I've seen artists approach AI-generated images in the same way - they understand what instructions to give it so that it makes the picture that they've conceived. I think that's fascinating.

RS But your prompt resulted in pastiche?

SS That's what it did with me. It looked at some of my pictures online and thought it identified patterns. But the result is

not exactly the picture I would've taken, it's not that good.

RS It's also not a real place. Whereas your work intentionally calls attention to real places and spaces.

SS Back when I was doing my cross-country trips in the 1970s, I'd work all day, thinking about each shot photographically. Structural questions kept arising, almost driving themselves forward, on how a picture formally worked, how it affected perception, how a sense of three-dimensionality could be captured. I'd encounter thousands of different views from different angles, but the camera is dumber than the eye - it can only see from one angle at a time. So, how do I translate this complex experience, this three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional image with four edges?

Those were the formal questions I was thinking about. At the same time, I was also thinking about culture. There's a speech from *Hamlet* that I've known for 55 years, where he is giving an acting lesson and he says that the purpose of playing is to show "the very age and body of the time his form and pressure". That line has stuck with me. What is the form and pressure of the time?

RS Amidst the form and pressures of today, what do you pay attention to?

SS I try to pay attention all day long. I try to live with attention. In 1972, for the series *American Surfaces*, I was using a small 35mm camera. The following year I went to a 4x5 view camera and noticed a certain luminosity to my contact sheets that I hadn't seen before. So, I went larger, to an 8x10. What I came to realise was that the 8x10 in colour was photography's technical means - at the time - of representing what the world looked like in a state of heightened awareness. When your mind is quiet, colours and textures are more vivid, space seems more tactile, objects seem more clearly defined, and this was photography's means of communicating it.

I tended not to photograph things that were dramatic. Because dramatic things demand attention. It's just walking down a street, looking around your room, paying attention to the everyday, that I was hoping to communicate.

RS That's an extremely focused style of communication.

SS A painter starts with a blank canvas and every mark they make adds complexity to it. A photographer does the opposite. They start with the entire world and every decision they make structures it. It's the difference between an analytic and a synthetic medium.

The two terms stem from Greek roots - synthesis from the act of putting together, analysis from breaking up constituent parts in a certain way. In Greek, at least, they're opposites. And when I'm talking about imposing an order, that's what I'm talking about, the basic analytic decisions the photographer makes: what exactly the vantage point will be, where the frame will be, where the focus will be, and when to release the shutter.

RS Fifty years from now, where will photography be? Do you believe that the medium has fundamentally changed now more so than it has over decades before?

SS I occasionally hear photographers say that nothing new can be done. I've heard them say that for 50 years and it's only because they can't think of anything new. I don't know what it'll be, but someone will come with a fresh vision.

Before AI, the question 20 to 30 years ago was, is Photoshop going to get photography? When I came to Bard in 1982, I decided that the programme was going to be based on straight photography because almost all the other schools in the country were doing synthetic work—painting on photographs, sewing on photographs, collaging. I thought there was room for one school to say, we just do straight photography.

RS What are the unexpected challenges with the methodology?

SS What I'm concerned with is simple attentiveness. I don't mean heightened awareness, I mean simple awareness. A couple of years ago, I went to a show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and I saw a man go by and take a picture of each of the works of art without actually looking at them. People identify with their phones—as if by photographing or recording something, they themselves have digested that knowledge and experience.

RS It is almost the opposite of what your practice asks of people, which is the recognition that you have paid attention, and that the resulting photograph is something they can—and should—pay attention to in a new way.

SS Yes. That reminds me of your question around digital and attention. View cameras bend towards mindfulness, whereas digital cameras do not. I've seen photographers, who I know do very thoughtful work, pick up a digital camera and their intentionality begins to disappear. They just shoot.

When I was using an 8x10 in 1974, it cost me the equivalent of about \$75 today to develop the film in one contact print. I'd take one picture and then move on. I like to put as much pressure on myself as possible when I'm taking a picture. If I'm taking only one shot, I'm not going to manipulate it in any way other than controlling light and dark contrasts. And knowing that I only have 36 exposures on a roll makes me be present in the moment. Digital is just different. It can be used with as much attention and intentionality as any camera, but it doesn't demand it.

RS In terms of intentionality, it's not only the photographs you take, but also the printed objects. You have a particular style in terms of scale.

SS I tend to make smaller prints. I think that they demand more attention, it's easy to ignore them compared to a wall-size print. To see them, you have to stop and pay attention. And I think that's interesting. I think that opens a channel of communication.

RS You are the 2025 CHANEL Chair at the Jeu de Paume, which includes delivering a series of lectures on photography—a different type of communication, so to speak.

SS I hate to sound like an old geezer but I started developing and printing 71 years ago, I've been doing it a long time.

I've learned some stuff over the years and I feel like I need to transmit it, so I thought of these four lectures.

The first one is about what a photograph is formally and how, because of the nature of photographic materials and equipment, the three-dimensional world is translated into the medium. The second lecture is about structure in a picture—this is something basic to what a photographer does either consciously or unconsciously. The third lecture is about attention. And the fourth lecture ties them all together.

In the first lecture, I talk about the three levels of a photograph. One is the physical: a piece of paper or a screen with an image projected. It has certain physical qualities, and those qualities affect the image. I call the second level the depictive level. It's how we normally read a photograph, and that's where the formal decisions are made.

The third level is the mental level. What I mean by that is when we see anything, we're seeing a mental image. Our eyes work just like a digital camera: light is focused by the lens onto the retina; it converts the light into electrochemical signals which are sent along the optic nerve to the brain where—like a computer opening a jpeg—it is converted into the image that we see. This is how we see anything; we're always seeing the mental construction.

RS And when you're talking about the mind, you're speaking from the point of view of the photographer, not the point of view of the person at MoMA looking at your photograph?

SS I'm talking about both. I'm talking about how a photographer's decisions affect how the viewer receives the image.

A photographer can learn to control the materials and how to get a particular tonality they like. And then, through years of experience and practise, they can also learn to control the very image on the level that the viewer will see it. They can make the image do exactly what they want it to do—and this is something that has become second nature to me.

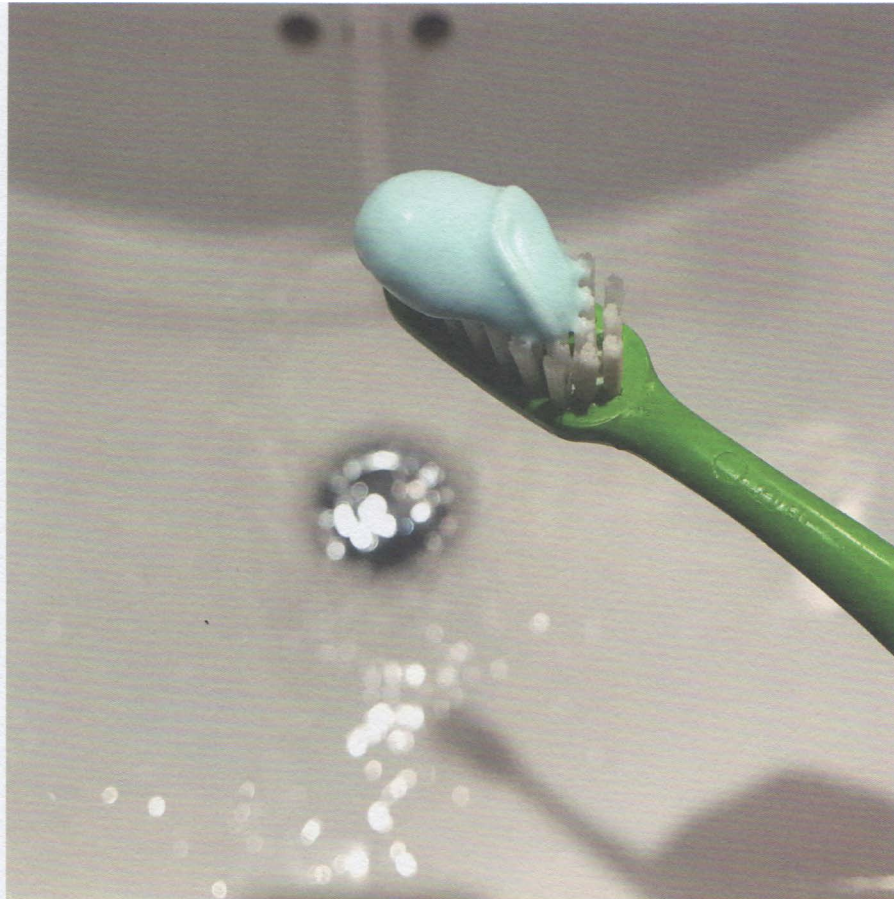
To put this into context, my son lives in Montana and has a shop that sells natural wine. About a month and a half ago, he and some colleagues were taking a trip to vineyards in France that produced natural wine. He would call me and describe a particular wine—the initial impression, how it lingers in his mouth, the aftertaste. It meant nothing to me, I don't have that discrimination, but he does and he learned it through practise.

RS So it's learned.

SS Oh yes, just like knowing what a particular colour film and paper combination or camera's chip looks like, it's all learned. The technical and formal aspects must be completely assimilated first. After that, a person can then learn to control the middle aspects of the picture.

RS And that control requires a significant amount of expertise—a significant amount of attention.

SS If a work looks timeless, I think it's because the photographer was fully present in the moment. If that sense ofnowness is embedded in the work, it feels present 50 years later, even though the world it's describing has changed.



Stephen Shore, Bozeman, *Montana*, December 30, 2017from Instagram, 2017



Stephen Shore, *Kingman, Arizona, July 2, 1975* from the series *Uncommon Places*, 1975



Stephen Shore, *Xtepen, Yucatan, Mexico, January 8, 1990* from the series *Yucatan, Mexico, 1990*