

Shore's new book, "Early Work," hints at the towering figure he would become in photography, a master of elegantly prosaic scenes.

By Arthur Lubow
Reporting from Tivoli, N.Y.
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Stephen Shore Started Taking Photos at 8 Years Old and Never Stopped - The New York Times

When he titled his new book "Early Work," Stephen Shore wasn't exaggerating. He made these photographs between the ages of 12 and 17. All are remarkably precocious, and many are flat-out remarkable. Last month, in the sunny dining room in his house in upstate New York, near Bard College, where he has been the director of the photography program since 1982, Shore flipped through the book, analyzing images as if he were assessing the output of another artist — which, in a way, he was. In most cases, he had no recollection of taking the picture.

Shore, 77, is renowned for elegantly composed color photographs made with a view camera, often of prosaic scenes that he encountered on road trips across America. They seem a world apart from these black-and-white pictures, almost all previously unpublished, that he snapped between 1960 and 1965 with a hand-held 35 millimeter camera.

Over the years, his studio manager urged him to take a look at his youthful efforts. When she finally printed a stack of photographs for him, he was astonished. "I thought they were amazing," he said. "It puts me in this awkward position of talking about my work in the third person and saying it's amazing."



Shore as a youth roamed the New York City streets looking for interesting people. Stephen Shore, via MACK

Shore's youthful photographs, mainly of New York City street scenes, predate his earliest published pictures, which he took at Andy Warhol's Factory. He chose to end this collection with a sampling of shots he made in his first day at the Factory in 1965, having been invited to photograph there by Warhol, whom he met through the filmmaker Jonas Mekas.

“That was the lead-in to the next phase of my life,” Shore said. “Different subject matter, and it was a very different circumstance. Rather than roaming the streets and photographing strangers, I was photographing friends who all liked to be photographed.”

After befriending Warhol, he stopped attending his high school classes and told his parents he would not be going to college. “I don’t recall there being a conversation,” he said. “I think it was totally clear. In ’65, Andy was famous, not just in New York but in the world. And so, they understood that putting on my school jacket and tie every day couldn’t compete with going to the Factory. I would have parties and Andy would come and talk with my father. One night, my mother sat in the kitchen all night with Nico, giving her milk and matzos.” (Nico, the singer and icon, was part of Warhol’s circle.)



Although Shore had never seen the work of Helen Levitt, who took photos like this one, he wasn’t much older than his subjects at the time he made this picture. Stephen Shore, via MACK

When Shore first revisited his pre-Warhol pictures, he required a little detective work to determine what he was seeing. For example, he has two rolls of film taken on the floor of the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, N.J., in 1964. Examining his contact sheets for those photos and others made in the same period, he identified a small figure with a distinctive posture as Robert F. Kennedy. He found other pictures, of demonstrators outside the hall and of young people on the train to Atlantic City. “I have no recollection of it,” he said. “I must have been with some Democratic student group and had a floor pass.”

Shore discovered his vocation at an implausibly early age. Raised as an only child in Manhattan, where his self-made father owned a successful handbag manufacturing company and his mother managed the home, Stephen received a photographic developing kit for his sixth birthday from an uncle who knew of his interest in chemistry.

His indulgent parents let him transform his bathroom into a darkroom. They gave him a Ricoh 35 millimeter camera when he was 8. And for his tenth birthday, a neighbor presented him with Walker Evans’s classic “American Photographs,” which would serve as a touchstone in his aesthetic development.



This portrait of a man in the doorway of a photo studio could be a homage to Walker Evans, a key influence. Stephen Shore, via MACK

Some of the pictures in “Early Work” evoke Evans’s formal rigor, his preference for frontal angles and his attraction to vernacular signage. Indeed, Shore’s photograph of a middle-aged gent in a white coat, standing with a proprietary air in the doorway of a photo studio, could be a homage to several of Evans’s images in “American Photographs”: a shuttered studio in downtown Manhattan that is decorated with hand painted advertising; a picture-covered window of a studio in Savannah, Ga.; and a woman at the painted entrance of a New Orleans barbershop.

“I was looking a lot and had a lot of influences,” Shore said. But how do you distinguish influence from coincidence or, more precisely, a shared sensibility? As a 14-year-old student at Columbia Grammar School, Shore met the editor of *Contemporary Photographer*, a quarterly magazine, in whose published portfolios he first saw the work of Bruce Davidson, Lee Friedlander and Duane Michals. Along with the Evans book, he also owned ones by Henri Cartier-Bresson, Weegee, Robert Frank, Frederick Sommer, Harry Callahan, Edward Weston and Edward Steichen.

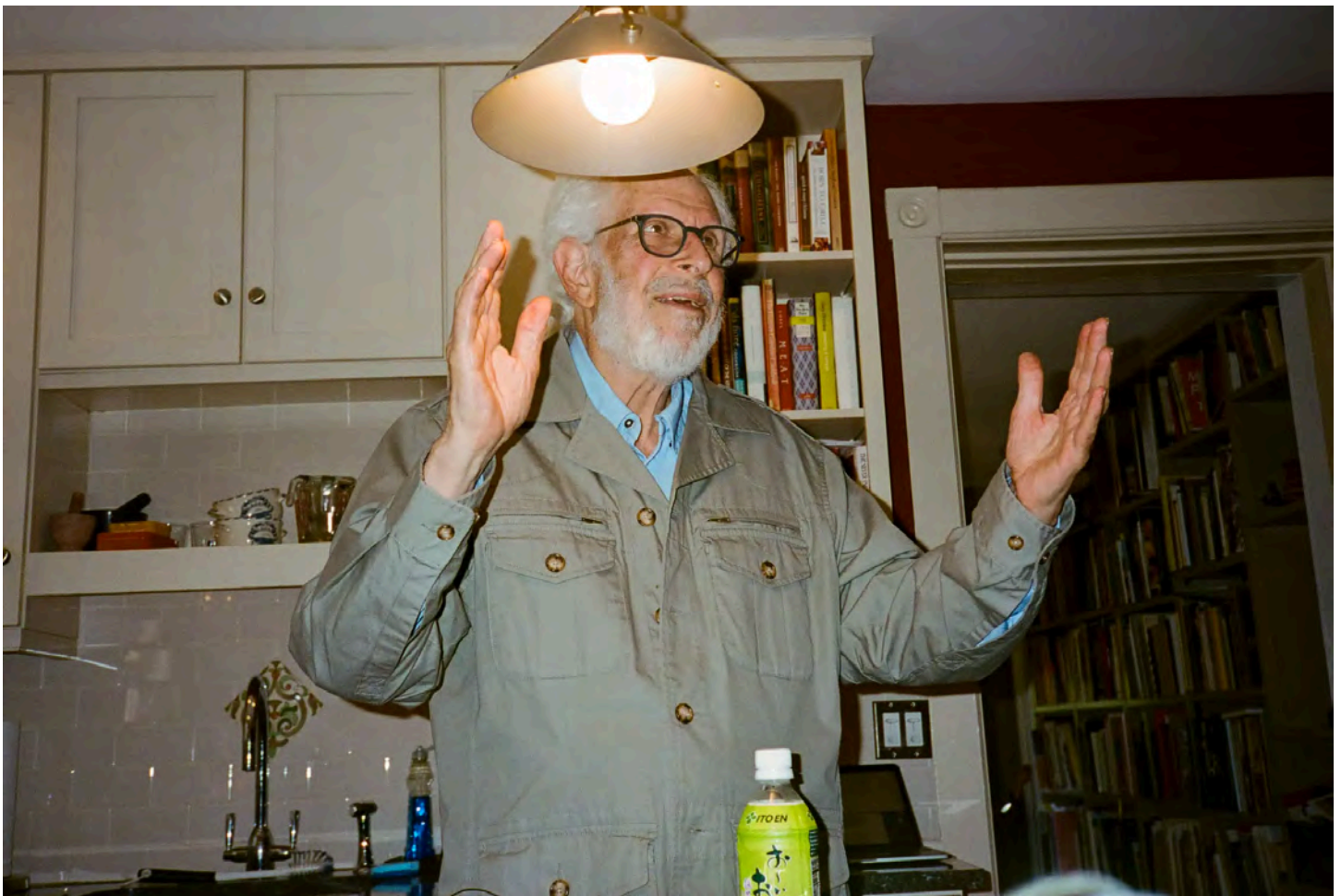


A bench scene closely resembles a photo Shore later saw and greatly admires, taken that year by Garry Winogrand. Stephen Shore, via MACK

There are echoes of these photographers in Shore's boyhood pictures, but one can also detect resonances with Garry Winogrand, Helen Levitt, Andre Kertesz and other artists who were unknown to Shore at the time. A picture that the teenager took of a young couple in a park, alongside a mother seated on the same bench holding a pram, is strongly reminiscent of "World's Fair, New York City," a dazzling, seemingly choreographed image of bench sitters that was made contemporaneously by Winogrand in 1964. Shore says that he saw "World's Fair" only years later. But it is one of his favorite photographs. It hangs in his upstairs hallway.

Since 1990, Shore has lived in this red brick house, which dates from about the 1840s and has been modified repeatedly over the years, most prominently by a white wooden trim on the facade in Carpenter Gothic style. His dining room is dominated by a large 18th-century ink brush painting by the renowned master Hakuin Ekaku, depicting Daruma, the legendary founder of Zen Buddhism. He bought it at a Sotheby's auction. "I've had it for maybe 55 years," he said. "It's something I see every day. It's such a great experience to live with such a great work of art every day and see it differently over time."

Behind the house, hidden from the street, is a large garden that was largely designed by Ginger Shore, his wife of 45 years. They met when she was working as a picture editor for Time-Life Books and came to interview him for a series on photography. (She later worked for about two decades as the director of publications at Bard before retiring.)



Shore in the kitchen of the house in Tivoli, N.Y., where he has lived since 1990. His studio manager often urged him to take a look at his youthful efforts. "I thought they were amazing," he confessed. Daniel Arnold for The New York Times

Part of the pleasure of looking at Shore's early pictures is the vivid sense they impart of a rapidly advancing artist who is gobbling intellectual nourishment and making things up as he goes along. As an adolescent, Shore raised money to buy camera equipment by frequenting a park near Sutton Place and approaching nannies to ask permission to photograph their charges, who were only a few years his junior. Obtaining their addresses, he would show up later with an 8 by 10 print and sell it to the parents for \$5 — worth about \$50 today. He said his sales pitch never failed.

His elders unstintingly encouraged this talented, ambitious young man. Steichen was the director of the photography department at the Museum of Modern Art in 1962 when Shore, then 15, called up and obtained an appointment.

It went very well: Steichen bought for the museum three of the photographs that are in "Early Work." Nine years later, in 1971, Shore had a big solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of his black-and-white photography. He was only 24. He was also the first living American photographer since Alfred Stieglitz in 1929 to be so honored.



Two men and a Rolls-Royce grille fill the frame in a shot that resembles the work of Lisette Model, whose New School course he took. Stephen Shore, via MACK

Shore's photograph of feet striding the pavement in pumps and lace-ups brings to mind the "running legs" photographs that Lisette Model produced in 1940 and 1941, and a close-up of two men leaning against a Rolls-Royce evokes the images she made of the French bourgeoisie in the 1930s. Asked if he knew of Model's photos when he took his, Shore said, "I probably knew Lisette Model," and then, after a few seconds of hesitation, divulged that she had taught him for a semester at the New School when he was 13 or 14.

While enrolled in Model's class, Shore had a show of his pictures at the Donnell branch of the New York Public Library in Midtown Manhattan, which mentioned in a wall label that he was her student. A volatile personality whose most famous pupil was Diane Arbus, Model berated him for using her name in connection with his photographs. Hurt, he dropped out of her class. "I never talked about it because she asked me not to, but now that I'm looking back at my early work, I can," he said.



For a time, Shore held his camera over his head to disrupt his conventional approach to picture making. Stephen Shore, via MACK

Shore transitioned in 1973 to making color photographs with a large, cumbersome view camera that demanded finicky deliberation. He aspired both to create images that seemed more natural and to break out of the routine that he feared was mirroring his work in convention.

Color art photography, also practiced by his contemporaries Joel Meyerowitz, William Eggleston and Joel Sternfeld, was just beginning to be accepted. “Color can show the color of light, the palette of an age and a particular culture, and it’s transparent,” Shore said. “It doesn’t call attention to itself. It’s more like seeing.”

In some of his early black-and-white pictures, Shore was already seeking to upset his convention-bound habits. He took a series of photos (some of which are in the book) in which he raised the camera above his head and snapped, unable to know what was in the frame. “I remember doing those,” he said. “I don’t know how the idea came to me. I was looking at randomness.” Accompanying his father on a business trip to Los Angeles, he shot freely from the car window. “I wanted to make pictures that looked like seeing and not pictures that look like photographs,” he explained.



Stephen Shore shot his parents visiting Rhinebeck, N.Y., near where he now lives. Stephen Shore, via MACK

Shore detects, in his earliest work, that he was already addressing the concerns that have driven his lifelong practice. He pointed to a photograph he made of his parents when they visited Rhinebeck, N.Y., near where he now lives, standing at an intersection by a street sign of arrows pointing in opposite directions. The sky appears behind and between the buildings. “I’m thinking about the spaces between things,” he said. “I’m positioning myself very carefully. I’m looking at three-dimensional space and understanding how to articulate that space and collapsing it into two dimensions.”

He said he could perceive a unifying vision in the book. “These all look to me as if they’re done by the same person,” he said. “I see a formal awareness from the beginning. There’s always a scene in the frame. I’m framing, not pointing. I intuitively understood the difference between the world I’m seeing and the world of the photograph.”



Shore in the garden that was primarily designed by Ginger Shore, his wife of 45 years. Daniel Arnold for The New York Times

Video camera operator: Gus Aronson

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