



04

# Stephen Shore

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A Photo London Academy Publication

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Front cover: *Madison River Norris Montana August 24, 2017*, Stephen Shore  
This page: Exhibition view at Photo London 2019



# INTRODUCTION

For our fourth issue, Photo London is delighted to present a selection of rarely-seen works by Stephen Shore, our 2019 Master of Photography.

The featured photographs were taken in 1998 chronicling events that were of historical significance in the US. Photo London is especially grateful to be given access to some works that have never been published in the past.

This issue, circulated a week after what would have been the sixth edition of Photo London, is a celebration of photography during difficult times, and includes a conversation between Stephen Shore and Alec Soth, as well as a video presented by NOWNESS, originally screened during our fair in 2019.

*"To see something spectacular and recognise it as a photographic possibility is not making a very big leap. But to see something ordinary, something you'd see everyday, and recognise it as a photographic possibility...that is what I am interested in." – Stephen Shore*



Stephen Shore during Photo London 2019





# Stephen Shore in conversation with Alec Soth



Alec Soth and Stephen Shore

Alec: I wanted to start with a stupid question but it's a stupid question that I have to deal with. You're sitting on a plane, and the person next to you, they say, "What do you do?" You say you're a photographer, and then comes that next question: "What do you take pictures of?" I wondered if you have any advice for me. What do you say?

Stephen: I say I've been doing it for so long that I've wound up taking pictures of everything.

Alec: And that's it?

Stephen: Yes.

Alec: But then they'll say, "Do you photograph for magazines or do you photograph for...?" Most people don't have any concept of what a fine art photographer is. They're thinking nature photography or sports photography. Do you just change the subject?

Stephen: No one's ever asked a follow-up question like that.

Alec: Really? I get it all the time. So you don't struggle with this issue the way I do?

Stephen: No, I would struggle with it if someone had to pin me down about what I photograph, but I'm telling the truth. Maybe if your hair were grey people would believe you more. They'd say, "Oh God, he's done it a long time..." I do sometimes say I do it as a fine art. And so that they understand what I mean I say I exhibit in galleries and museums.

Alec: What age do you think you first said, “I am a photographer”?

Stephen: Probably ten.

Alec: Didn’t you want to be a baseball player before that or something else?

Stephen: It’s always been photography. There wasn’t anything that interested me particularly before that. I started doing darkroom work when I was six.

Alec: I hope you wore gloves.

Stephen: I didn’t. This was at a more primitive age, and my fingers were cracked from the fixer. My fingernails were dark and the skin on my fingers had big fissures in it.

Alec: How did you find yourself in a darkroom at age six?

Stephen: I had an uncle who was an engineer who gave me a Kodak darkroom set for my sixth birthday, and it had a little instruction pamphlet. It had hard plastic trays and a developing tank and little packets of chemicals that were paper on the outside and foil-lined on the inside, and you’d tear, and you’d mix it. And I followed the instructions. I wasn’t taking pictures then. I was just using my family’s Kodak snapshots. And then, I guess I was eight, I got a 35mm camera.

Alec: You said someone gave you a Walker Evans book. When was that?

Stephen: I was ten.

Alec: As a father of a 12-year-old, the thought of any of this happening is pretty remarkable.

Stephen: I feel very lucky. I feel lucky that my uncle gave me the chemistry set. And lucky that I lived in an apartment building in New York and our upstairs neighbour was a music publisher. He was a very cultured person, obviously, and knowing of my interest in photography he gave me [Walker Evans’] *American Photographs*, which was the first photography book I ever looked at. I lucked out.



Alec: And then, at age 17 or whatever it was, how did you end up at the Factory with Warhol?

Stephen: I was a senior in high school but had pretty much stopped going to school. I hadn't officially dropped out, but I just wasn't attending and I was involved in the classical music scene in New York. I got a job as a photographer for an orchestra and I was going to a couple of concerts a week and going to films every day. And I made a small film. It was shown at a theatre called the Film-Makers' Cinemathèque.

Alec: What was the film?

Stephen: It was called *Elevator*; it was shot inside of an old cage elevator. It was shown the same night that Warhol premiered a film of his called *The Life of Juanita Castro*, and I was introduced to him afterwards. This was maybe February of 1965, and in '65 he was very famous in New York. This was a couple of years after the soup cans and Brillo boxes.

Alec: So he saw your movie?

Stephen: Yes.

Alec: And he liked it?

Stephen: He never said. But I asked if I could come to the Factory and he said yes.

Alec: Amazing.

Stephen: I started going every day, and at that point, I realised I couldn't maintain the fiction that I was a student and told my parents I was dropping out of high school.

Alec: How did they take that?

Stephen: They weren't happy. On the other hand, Warhol was famous in New York, and I would have parties at home – I was still living with my parents – and Andy would come to their apartment, and the Velvet Underground.

Alec: The Velvet Underground came to your parents' house?

Stephen: Yes. One evening, my mother befriended Nico and they spent the whole evening in the kitchen. My mother gave her milk and matzos and Nico told my mother her life story. And then my parents would take Seconals and close their bedroom door and go to sleep. And in the morning there were probably a few people who had passed out and my mother would insist on making them breakfast.

Alec: How old were your parents at that time?

Stephen: If I was 17, they were in their late 50s.

Alec: Amazing. They died young, your parents?

Stephen: Yes. Well, they were 40 years older than me, to begin with, so they died young by modern standards, but they were in their late 60s. They died relatively early in my life.

Alec: Regarding Warhol, did you idolise him or did you just look up to him? Did you identify with him in any sort of way?

Stephen: No, I didn't identify with him. I loved what he was doing as an artist. The main thing was that it was exciting. It felt like you were at the centre of things.

Alec: I get the sense that you were very ambitious early on.

Stephen: Which was also why I left...

Alec: Left New York?

Stephen: No, left Warhol. I was there for three years. There was no falling out, I just needed to get on with my life, and I saw people who I felt were going to look back at the Factory as the highlight of their lives, and were going to live in that time and that felt yucky to me. I needed to move on.

Alec: To have the wherewithal to know that at that age, it's impressive.

Stephen: What about you? How did you get involved in photography?

Alec: When I was ten I was just a weird kid. I had imaginary friends and a whole fantasy life. I kind of lived far away from other people, so I played by myself.

Stephen: Were you in Minnesota?

Alec: I was in Minnesota and I was in the country. I was a weirdo and didn't know what to do with it, really. And then, in high school, I had the right art teacher and he said, "Hey, maybe you could apply that to this...", and this "was" painting and then sculpture and one thing led to another.

But that brings me to another question for you. With this exposure to Warhol and his universe, I wondered if you wanted to identify yourself primarily as an artist in the beginning? I know that you felt a connection to Ed Ruscha and conceptual work. Did you want to come in that way or as a photographer?

Stephen: When I started working at the Factory, I was a photographer from a very traditional photography background. But what happened there was that I saw an artist working. I started thinking about the kinds of decisions he was making, his use of serial imagery, and my exposure to him and some of his friends opened a door to a broader aesthetic thinking which was then what I pursued when I left.

*After leaving the Factory, Shore spent a year working with his father, an investor on Wall Street, then returned to photography. In 1971, he was given the first one man show by a living photographer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. During the early 1970s he worked on a series he called "American Surfaces". The idea was to make a visual diary of his everyday existence.*

Alec: Would you say that *American Surfaces* started almost as a quasi-conceptual project, with the road trip diary and all the notations?

Stephen: *American Surfaces* came out of a couple of things at the same time. One was an idea of doing a diary but out of repeated subjects, so it wasn't as strictly conceptual, but I photographed every meal, every bed, every television set, every person I encountered. But I had other interests as well, which was I wanted to take a picture that felt natural, that felt like seeing and didn't feel like picture-making. So, that was on my mind.

Alec: That's interesting, because you're thought of as this great formalist who's fixated on picture-making, but you started out in this conceptual vein.

Stephen: Yes.

Alec: Something I haven't been able to figure out – I've read about you not having a driver's licence or not knowing how to drive. I just don't understand how this worked.

Stephen: I did a lot of conceptual work in Texas in '69 and '70, and in those years I wasn't driving. I would fly out to Amarillo and stay with friends. But *American Surfaces* was the year – or maybe it was the year before – I got a driver's licence. So for *American Surfaces*, I was driving across country. I guess if you grow up in the country in Minnesota you think how does someone wind up being 24 and not driving. But if you grow up in Manhattan...

Alec: Sure. But it seems like you had this almost European understanding of America. There are all these Europeans – for me, I always think of Wim Wenders dreaming of America and the cross-country journey.

Stephen: It's interesting you say that because a lot of the famous cross-country trips in photography and in literature were done by outsiders. There's the cross-country trip in *Lolita* that's so beautifully described. There is Cartier-Bresson in the late '40s, he makes an incredible trip that in many ways pre-figures some of Robert Frank's work. Then there is, of course, Frank, and even Kerouac, although he was born in Massachusetts, his family was French-Canadian, and he didn't speak English until he was six. So a lot of these famous cross-country trips were made by outsiders or foreigners.

Alec: Over this period, *American Surfaces* bleeds into *Uncommon Places*. Was there an overlap period between the two?

*"Uncommon Places" is Shore's best-known series of large-format colour landscape photographs taken while driving across the country between 1973 and 1978. It has been published in various formats and expanded editions since its first publication in 1982.*

**Stephen:** There is an overlap period in '73, and it was really simple. I wanted to show *American Surfaces* as snapshots: unmatted, unframed, pasted on the wall. But as time went on, I became less interested in the cultural reference of the snapshot and more interested in what the image was doing and the exploration of the country I was engaged in and I wanted larger prints. But Kodacolor, which was the 35mm film then, was a very grainy film. It just didn't hold up to enlargement. So I needed a larger negative, and the only medium-format cameras I knew at the time were 2.25 in square, which I didn't want, so I got a Crown Graphic just to get a larger negative.

I thought I was going to handhold it, but if I was photographing a building there was no reason to, so I put it on a tripod and I found that I just loved working on a tripod, and I loved looking at the image on the ground glass. So the next year I bought an 8 x 10 in. The camera kind of led to the journey, in a way: the deliberateness that is inevitable with an 8 x 10 led to that journey into...

**Alec:** A different kind of seeing...

**Stephen:** Yes, and the formalism you talked about. But I want to say something else. By the end of the '70s, I had started taking pictures *intentionally*... I tried to take pictures that were as simple as *American Surfaces*. So I feel it's sort of like a spiral, that I start here and go deep into formal complexity and then come out of it to a similar point, but at a different level.

**Alec:** There's this one point that I'm really fixated on, and it's in the editing of *Uncommon Places*. Because the way I see it is that you had this conceptual background and then you got formal, and you were mixing those two things, and then in this book there's the [picture of the] pancakes and [the portrait of] Ginger, and I read somewhere that you said, "Maybe I shouldn't have kept those in because it could have been more rigorous."

Stephen: No, it was actually the opposite, but it's sort of right. What it was, I think the original book didn't have them in, the original edit that Carole Kismaric, who was the editor of it, did. And I just insisted. I understood that they were different from all the other pictures in certain ways, but I just couldn't imagine a book without them.

Alec: So, that decision right there...

Stephen: Let me say something else: *American Surfaces*, there are portraits, there are details, there's architecture, occasional landscape. *Uncommon Places*, exactly the same, in almost the same proportion; a little less portrait simply because, as you've demonstrated, it's a lot harder to do a portrait with an 8x10 than it is with a 35mm. But there were a lot of portraits. There were details. It was the same thing, in a way.

There was maybe greater emphasis on architecture and intersections because, as I got interested in certain formal questions, like how space works in a picture, I would sometimes gravitate to certain subjects because [the photography] was the laboratory. So the original edit emphasised more the architecture and the intersections and took it away from the actual balance that was in the work between the different kinds of pictures.

Alec: The reason I feel so strongly about this is it's those pictures within the context of all the other pictures that make them just Bam! I'm not sucking up to you to say it was the thing, for me. I saw that and I thought I want to do that. To me, it's where that road divides from Lewis Baltz and that super-rigorous way of seeing. Thank god you put those pictures in is all I have to say. How different it would have been.

Stephen: I want to add one other thing about conceptualism. Because I came to it from photography, I thought that there could always be a visual element. I did an early series on Sixth Avenue, where I took a picture at the beginning of each block facing due north from 42nd Street to 59th Street. But I was still choosing the moment and who's in the picture. And I shot it on infrared film, and it's a bright sunny day, so it all looks blown out. It looks like after a nuclear explosion.

Alec: When did you do this?

Stephen: '69. So I was always interested in the visual element at the same time.



Alec: There's a story about you with Ansel Adams. You know what I'm getting at?

Stephen: Yes. The story you're referring to is that one of my closest friends at the time was a curator named Weston Naef, and he had a loft in SoHo. He invited me to dinner one night with Ansel Adams. This is in maybe the mid-70s. Ansel had been, in fact, very helpful to me without my knowing it. *Uncommon Places* came about because I had a show in '76 at MoMA and he saw it and came back with his editor at New York Graphic Society, named Tim Hill, and suggested they do a book. That's how *Uncommon Places* happened.

Ansel had been drinking before I got there, and while I was there he had six glasses of straight vodka – a prodigious amount of vodka – and at one point he said, "I had a creative hot streak in the '40s, and since then, I've been pot boiling." And I thought, when I'm 85 that's not how I want to look back at my life.

A number of the very best photographers had relatively short productive periods. The people who had long productive periods tend to fall into two categories. The first are those who had an overwhelming and often documentary vision, like the Bechers [the German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher], like Atget, maybe Sander. And then there are people who reinvent themselves in the best possible way, like Stieglitz, like Harry Callahan; not with different techniques so much, but with different subject matter. I knew that, by temperament, I was in the latter category, and so that was on my mind.

Alec: You were clearly in the latter category because by 25 you'd already been through so many phases.

Stephen: Exactly. And this process interests me. I have taken out the [1971] Leslie Katz interview with Walker Evans where Katz says: "Millions of people feel they're performing an instinctual act when they take a snapshot. What distinguishes what they do from a photograph of yours?" And Evans answers and he is basically saying, "My photographs are transcendent." He says he knows it sounds... pretentious. But if I'm satisfied that if something transcendent shows in a photograph I've done, that's it. It's there. I've done it. Evans goes on to say that it's a very exciting, heady thing. And it is. It happens more when you're younger, but it still happens, or I wouldn't continue. There's a period of aesthetic discovery that happens to a man and he can do all sorts of things at white heat.

Alec: Thinking about you with Ansel Adams – when my career was just starting to take off I did an assignment where I was photographing a famous artist. I didn't want to bug him, but I had this one burning question. I was starting to travel all the time and I had a young child and I knew that he had five children. I said, "How do you do it? How do you manage all this?" And he said, "I just got separated." Being in Magnum over the years, being exposed to different photographers, it's not a pretty picture of what it does. But you held it together.

Stephen: I don't take road trips.

Alec: It does seem like something changed in your work [in the mid-1980s] when you were in Montana, and Hudson Valley. Was that part of it? Parenting?

Stephen: Yes. I would do trips, but they were much shorter. I wasn't going away for two or three months; I was going away for a couple of weeks. Although, thinking about it, my son was born in '88. So I started doing landscapes in the '80s and I did three trips to Texas where I'd go away for a few weeks, and sometimes my wife would come with me. Then after my son was born, I did one trip to Scotland and he was six months old and he came along. My wife, being a good sport, took care of him all day and I went out and took pictures. But I was never going to do it again. Just being married meant I wasn't going to go away for three months again.

Alec: It's interesting, because you were so ambitious, but you didn't sacrifice family for that.

Stephen: Well, there were other changes. It was about the same time I got married that *Uncommon Places* wound down. I remember being in Georgia and setting up at an intersection in downtown Savannah and realising that I knew exactly where to stand, and I could do it very quickly, and the picture was *absolutely perfect* and *absolutely boring*. And I remembered Ansel. I thought, OK, this is the time. Now I find myself copying myself and I can do a Stephen Shore without thinking, and that's not of any interest to me.

The simple thing to say then would be that I started doing landscapes. But the reality is that there was a period of having to re-establish what I was doing in between.

Alec: You'd always done landscapes, but those pictures were super stripped-down, particularly in Montana. I was so crazy about them, they were like Ellsworth Kelly's [minimalist colour-field paintings] or something. They're so formal. So that feels like a cleansing period, in a way. But you didn't photograph your family. That's what happens to so many people. They have a baby and then they do the family project. You were never tempted by that?

Stephen: Much to my wife's regret. I don't think of photography as a way of remembering an event, and so she has to remind me: "It's your son's birthday. Take a picture."

Alec: I'm in completely the same category. I've wanted to do that kind of work and I've tried to do it at various points, but it just doesn't work for me. It's not natural.

But at this point were you being tagged as an "American/Americana" kind of person, too?

Stephen: Yes. When I stopped doing *Uncommon Places* and started doing landscapes there were a couple of dealers who dropped me.

Alec: Is that right?

Stephen: They would have been happy if I'd just done the same work over and over again.

Alec: I suppose the art market was different then, though, so the stakes weren't quite as high. And you were teaching.

Stephen: That is true, yes. That's when I started teaching, in '82.

Alec: So you've always been doing this experimentation in between things. And this leads us on to phone usage. Yesterday, before coming here, I decided I was going to need to ask questions that other people are interested in, so I asked my intern, "What do you want to ask Stephen Shore?" She wrote down three questions, and they were all about Instagram. She wanted to know how things change when you're shooting on your phone, and particularly when you have an audience in mind? She asked whether the photos can be understood the same way as when experienced in a book or on a gallery wall. Or is it necessary for them to be displayed on a screen?

Stephen: I haven't seen them on a gallery wall. There was one book done [in 2015] of my whole Instagram feed up to that point, and I think it worked pretty much the same, because a book can have a way of de-emphasising an individual picture.

One of the things that interested me about Instagram is that you can make notational photographs with it that are not pictures meant to stand alone. There's something about the medium; the size of it, the quantity, maybe, that reminds me of the [Polaroid] SX70. If you just look at the SX70 pictures done in 1975, people would look at the light hitting the glass and they'd make a picture. And the SX70 is the same size as a square Instagram picture on a larger iPhone, and it's used the same way. Though not by everyone – there are people who promote their pottery on Instagram. But the standard kind of Instagram picture is very similar to the SX70.

Alec: Do you think about the audience with Instagram or are you just having fun making notational pictures?

Stephen: I notice how many likes they'll get. I posted something yesterday that I knew wasn't going to get a lot and it got 800, and I know that if I did a picture of my cat I would get thousands, but that's not why I do it. I notice the likes, but I don't gear to the likes. But I do gear to the size. I gear the pictures to what they look like on the phone. And I'm taking pictures with Instagram in mind, so I'm taking it thinking, this is something I'm going to post.

Stephen (cont'd): There's a new series of pictures I'm showing in London this month, which I started about a half-a-year before my show at MoMA went up in the fall of 2017. As it was approaching I started getting this sinking feeling. Because if you're not an artist you think [having a major exhibition] is just the greatest thing ever. But an artist knows that then there's the question of what do you do next? So I thought the way to deal with it was to start a new project before the show even went up. This was about three months after the Hasselblad X1D came out and I got one. [The Hasselblad X1D is a lightweight medium-format digital camera with an electronic viewfinder.]

With Instagram, I'd probably spent too much time photographing just stupid stuff on the ground. I have these two little dogs I walk every day, so I'm often looking down. The X1D is a lot more cumbersome than a phone but because it's touchscreen, but I feel like I can almost take the same pictures I'm doing with my phone. So, I was doing these pictures with the X1D and blowing them up huge, and the quality is amazing. That was my last gallery show and I'm still working on it.

Alec: OK, give me your London story.

Stephen: So, my first experience in London, I spent a month there in 1968 and I didn't know anyone. The only introduction I had was from Warhol, who gave me an introduction to his gallerist, a guy named Robert Fraser.

Alec: That's a good introduction.

Stephen: Robert Fraser was very connected in those days. You know The Beatles song, "Doctor Robert"? This is Doctor Robert – Doctor Robert not only dealt in art, I think – and through him, I got to meet lots of people, and got to smoke with George Harrison and Brian Jones. I would hang out with Brian a good bit.

Alec: Unbelievable.

Stephen: One night, we were wandering around London at like two in the morning and found ourselves in front of St James Palace, and there were these guards who were standing there rigid and they can't blink their eyes. This guard is 25-years-old, and this is a Rolling Stone in front of him, who says, "I'm Brian Jones." It's two in the morning. No one's around. And the guy would not blink.

London in '68 was fabulous. Then the following year I went back. I stayed three months and it's the rare year that I haven't gone back since. That was 50 years ago.



*Kennedy Space Flight Center, Discovery Space Shuttle mission, October 29, 1998*





*Kennedy Space Flight Center, Discovery Space Shuttle mission, October 29, 1998*



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*Schumer election headquarters, Waldorf Astoria Hotel, NYC, November 3, 1998*



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*Monica Lewinsky testifies, E. Barrett Prettyman Federal Courthouse, Washington, August 5-6, 1998*



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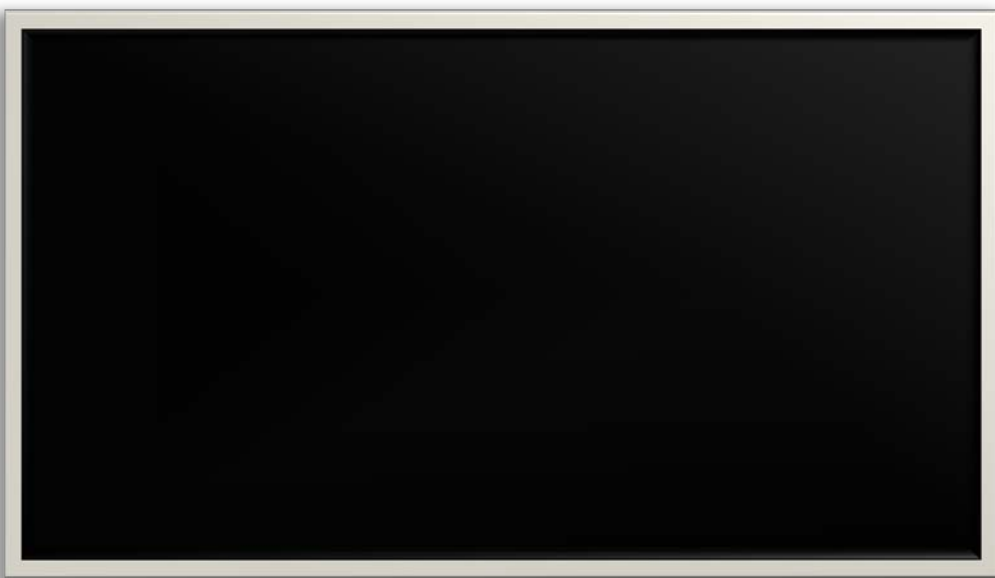
*Monica Lewinsky testifies, E. Barrett Prettyman Federal Courthouse, Washington, August 5-6, 1998*

# **NOWNESS presents**

# **Stephen Shore**

**A film by Victoria Hely-  
Hutchison**





Commissioned as part of the Photographers in Focus series on Nowness.  
Directed by Victoria Hely-Hutchinson

# Biography

Stephen Shore's work has been widely published and exhibited for the past forty-five years. He was the first living photographer to have a one-man show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York since Alfred Stieglitz, forty years earlier. He has also had one-man shows at George Eastman House, Rochester; Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Jeu de Paume, Paris; and Art Institute of Chicago. In 2017, the Museum of Modern Art opened a major retrospective spanning Stephen Shore's entire career. He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. His series of exhibitions at Light Gallery in New York in the early 1970s sparked new interest in color photography and in the use of the view camera for documentary work.

More than 25 books have been published of Stephen Shore's photographs including *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works*; *American Surfaces*; *Stephen Shore*, a retrospective monograph in Phaidon's Contemporary Artists series; *Stephen Shore: Survey*, and in the past year, *Elements* (Eakins Press), *Transparencies* (MACK), and an expanded edition of *American Surfaces* (Phaidon). In 2017, the Museum of Modern Art published *Stephen Shore* in conjunction with their retrospective of his photographic career. Stephen also wrote *The Nature of Photographs*, published by Phaidon Press, which addresses how a photograph functions visually. His work is represented by 303 Gallery, New York; and Sprüth Magers, London and Berlin. Since 1982 he has been the director of the Photography Program at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, where he is the Susan Weber Professor in the Arts.

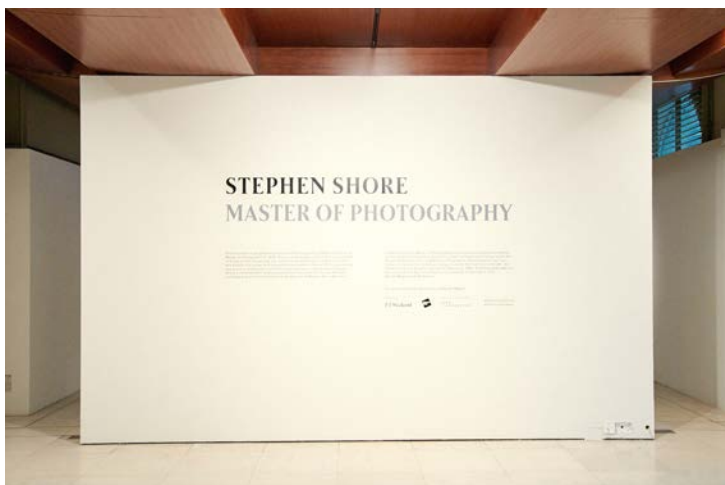


Stephen Shore at Photo London 2019

# Acknowledgements

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Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York, and Sprüth Magers, Berlin, London, Los Angeles



Exhibition view at Somerset House, Photo London 2019

# Photo London Talks Archive

The Photo London Talks Archive brings together the video recordings of the world-class panels and talks held at Photo London over the past five years. It's a free resource that gives everyone access to conversations with over 100 artists and curators, including Sebastiao Salgado, Edward Burtynsky, Hannah Starkey, Don McCullin, Liz Johnson Arthur, Martin Parr, Stephen Shore, Susan Meiselas, Taryn Simon, Simon Baker, Hans Ulrich Obrist & Isaac Julien.

Find the Archive [here](#) - new talks are added daily!

#TalksArchive #PhotoLondonAcademy

# Talks Archive Programme 1-5 June 2020

Monday, 1 June



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