

Photography

Teenage clicks: how child photographer Stephen Shore turned everyday New York moments into magic

Before he found fame at 17 photographing Andy Warhol's Factory, Shore roamed the city with his camera. He talks about the joy of those early 60s pictures - and why they never made him rich



📷 Confrontational and bold ... an image from Stephen Shore's Early Work. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Mack

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Black-and-white street shots of elegant, unimpressed elderly women. Classic cars in shadows cast by New York's soaring tenement buildings. Street-corner preachers. Imposing wiseguys too busy posturing to notice the camera. Stephen Shore's new

book, *Early Work*, is full of such everyday New York moments turned into magic. Though he later won acclaim for the photographs he took at Andy Warhol's studio/hangout the Factory, the previously unseen *Early Work* may be some of Shore's most uninhibited and daring pictures - and they were taken in the early 60s, when he was a teenager.

Perhaps it's understandable, then, that the photographer, now 77, can't really remember taking them - though he does recall that he printed them himself, in a DIY darkroom set up in the bathroom of his parents' home on Manhattan's Upper East Side. "The memory of the prints I made then is hard to separate from the memory of the actual event of taking the photograph," he admits over the phone. "I don't remember what was on my mind then, but what I see looking at them now is a kind of formal awareness, which I guess I understood intuitively. I understood from the beginning that a camera doesn't point, it frames. I also understood the gap between the world of the photograph and the world we experience - the world of the photograph has to make sense on its own, out of context."



'I see a photographer observing the people and the city' ...
Stephen Shore, from *Early Work*. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Mack

He does remember how he took a series of shots from an unusual high angle, a kind of giant's eye view of passersby - as if the voracious young photographer were trying to grasp his home city from every possible perspective, to make himself big enough to understand it. "I put a very wide-angle lens on my Leica and held the camera over my head and took pictures randomly."

■ People were out on the street experiencing each other - not scrolling through TikTok

The idea for *Early Work* came after Shore returned from Rhinebeck Village in upstate New York, whereupon his studio manager Laura Steele presented him with a stack of prints made from his archive. The picture on top depicted Shore's parents standing on a street corner - in Rhinebeck. Though Shore has lived nearby since the early 1980s, "I had no idea I had been there before." The picture appears on the back cover of the book and is the one in the collection Shore is most attached to. Aside from sentimental reasons, it prefigures the formal concerns he would explore aged 23, when he travelled across the US with an 8x10 camera, taking the photographs that appear in his lauded book *Uncommon Places*, an expansive portrait of America's diners, gas stations and national parks.



📷 'I had no idea I'd been there before': Stephen Shore's parents in Rhinebeck.
Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Mack

Looking through *Early Work*, it is remarkable how uninterested Shore seems to be in people his own age. Most of his subjects are over 40. Their generation, he points out, had lived through the Great Depression and the second world war - many were veterans trying to return to regular life in the city. The pictures suggest a reverence and respect for their authority, though Shore can't remember whether he was feeling this when he took them. "I see a photographer observing the people and the city, observing their inner state, how they interact, looking at social and cultural meanings," he says. "People who are drawn to the medium of translating the world into an image tend to be fascinated by the world."

Shore's documentation of 1960s [New York](#) inevitably reveals how social habits have changed over the decades. "The city is crowded now, but people don't hang out in the same way," he says. "People were out on the street experiencing each other, engaging with each other and feeling free to roam the city, not scrolling through TikTok." The pictures also convey a sense of liberation perhaps less accessible to New York kids today. "Parents were not as protective and determining of their children's activities," Shore says. "When I was eight and living in Manhattan, I went to school downtown alone on two different buses. That was typical in the 1960s."

It was Shore's uncle Leo who introduced him to photography. Recognising his nephew's nascent interest in chemistry, he gave Shore a Kodak ABC Darkroom Outfit as a sixth birthday present - a simple kit for making contact prints at home, complete with developing trays and chemicals. By 1962, the 14-year-old Shore had signed up to take photography classes at New York's New School, where he studied briefly under the great Austrian American photographer [Lisette Model](#) - whose influence can be seen in the confrontational approach and bold attitude of some of Shore's shots of people on the street.



📷 'Pictures sold for nothing - if they sold' ... Stephen Shore, from Early Work. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Mack

He became involved in a photography community who would get together once a month to critique each other's work. "You'd get a little slip of paper in an envelope with a time and date for the meeting," he remembers. "It was like a secret society - except we didn't have any pretensions to exclusivity." [Photography](#) was hardly ever exhibited at museums or galleries at the time: "There was absolutely no notoriety involved in being a photographer, there was no remuneration, pictures sold for nothing - if they sold. Some people are drawn to the medium without any possibility of fame or fortune."

MoMA was one of the few New York art institutions to take photography seriously enough to have a curator dedicated to it, [Edward Steichen](#), and at 14 Shore called him up, which led to MoMA acquiring three of Shore's photographs. In 1971, Shore became the first living photographer to have a solo exhibition at the Met. Despite being awarded two prestigious

fellowships in 1975 and a subsequent solo show at MoMA the following year, his pictures sold for as little as \$125 each. Shore got by financially thanks to teaching - he has been the director of the photography department at Bard College, New York, since 1982. "I've taught every generation from X to Z."



📷 A diner with Shore reflected in the window. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Mack

Early Work ends with pictures Shore took on his very first day at the Factory. He and Warhol had met at a screening where the latter premiered his underground movie *The Life of Juanita Castro* and Shore presented a 16mm film, *Elevator*. He would spend three years photographing the Factory almost daily, capturing "superstars" such as Edie Sedgwick, its house band the Velvet Underground, and the groundbreaking work its impresario was making. Warhol, Shore says, "was always friendly and direct. He was 20 years my senior and would, if I said something inappropriate in a situation, correct me, somewhat like an older relative giving guidance, but otherwise he treated me as a friend." As Shore was the only other person in the group who lived on the Upper East Side, "when we broke up for the evening, perhaps two in the morning after a late supper in Little Italy or Chinatown, Andy and I would share a taxi uptown. We had totally unguarded conversations." Many of the Factory regulars were gay, as was Warhol, but "he understood that I was straight - and this was never an issue".

While Shore got unprecedented access to the Factory, the pictures he took there lack the expansive experimentation and lucidity of Shore's street shots. You can sense the photographer, still only a teenager, feeling his way into a new world. In his 20s, Shore would become one of the defining photographers of postwar America, but *Early Work* shows that his ability to articulate the mood of his country in images was present right from the start. "Painters start with a blank canvas and make marks to add complexity; photography is the opposite - you start with the whole world," he says. "I don't know what to do with a blank paper - but put me on a street corner and my imagination goes off!"