



Photographs by Stephen Shore

PHOTO BOOTH

STEPHEN SHORE'S PRECOCCIOUS ADOLESCENT EYE

*A new book titled "Early Work" reveals that the
acclaimed American photographer barrelled into the
medium fully formed.*

By Chris Wiley

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To call Stephen Shore the most precocious photographer in the history of the medium is almost correct. Technically, the French boy wonder Jacques Henri Lartigue, who took his first picture at the age of seven, beat him by a couple of years. Shore had reached the comparatively ancient age of twelve when he created the first image that appears in the newly released book, “Early Work,” published by Mack, which presents pictures he made between 1960 and 1965, the vast majority of which have never before been published. But whereas Lartigue concerned himself with boyish subject matter—racecars, flying machines, the choreographed high jinks of his governesses—and the fashionable trappings of the Belle Époque, Shore seems to have barrelled into his adolescence as a fully formed artist. His work in those early days bears little resemblance to the crystalline large-format portraits of lonely American landscapes that would come to define his career. Instead, the young Shore is a hard-bitten black-and-white street photographer whose work would have felt most at home in the company of Garry Winograd, Lee Friedlander, Helen Levitt, or Robert Frank. That first picture, for instance, is a satisfyingly arch self-portrait, capturing one of the headmasters from the boarding school Shore attended taking a group photo of a soccer team, and showing Shore’s shadow creeping up the edge of the man’s coat from behind.



How did this happen? To begin with, Shore had an uncommonly encouraging and generous family. His uncle Leo, a naval engineer, noticed that his nephew was a budding tinkerer and gave him a Kodak photo-chemistry set for his sixth birthday. (In an essay for the new book, Shore recalls, “It was as though this gift uncovered something that was buried in me.”) His parents subsequently let him turn a bathroom in their apartment in Peter Cooper Village into a darkroom, where he occupied himself developing and printing family photos. When he was eight, they bought him his first camera, a 35-mm. Ricoh.

His parents were also the kind of people who, that same year, would drag their son to a production of Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot.” But they were not, in Shore’s telling, particularly interested in art, or necessarily hoping that their son’s hobby would become a profession. “I think they were proud of what I was doing,” Shore, now seventy-seven, told me during a recent afternoon I spent with him in his old brick house

in Tivoli, New York. “But, at the same time, they expected me to follow a more traditional path—like, not drop out of school.” (Their hopes were, of course, dashed: at seventeen, Shore dropped the flimsy pretense that he was any kind of high-school student, then spent three years hanging out with Andy Warhol and acting as the unofficial photographer at the Factory, before rocketing to his own art stardom. “I don’t know how I got away with going to as little school as I did,” he said.)



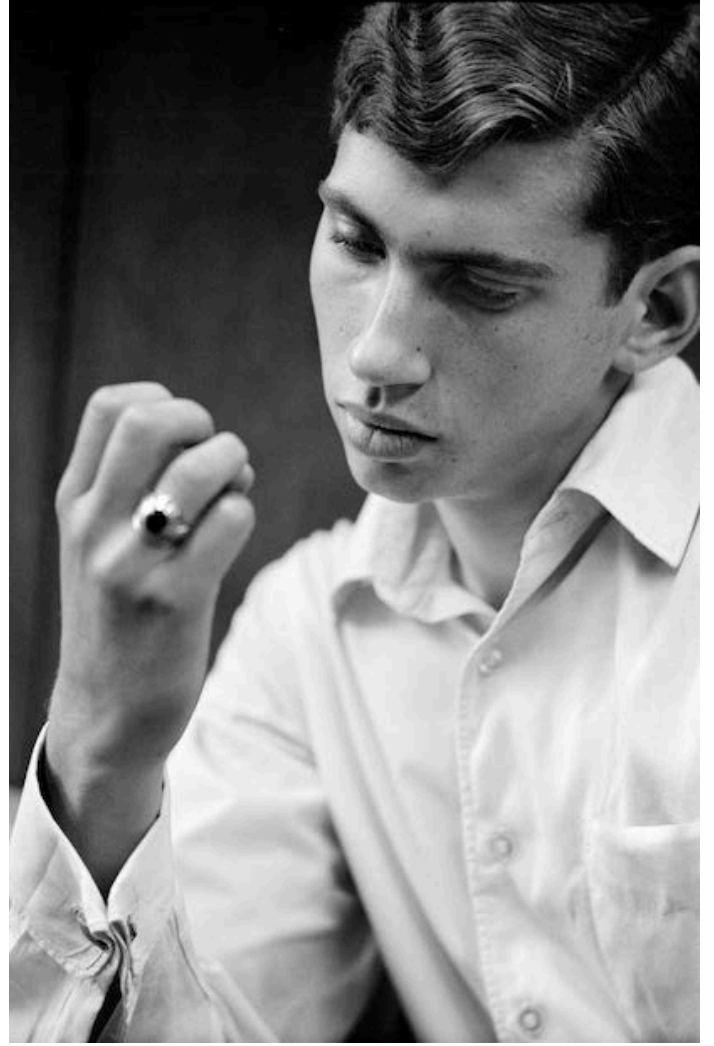


Shore's first epiphany that his camera equipment could produce more than just family snapshots was catalyzed by a benevolent neighbor, who gave him a copy of Walker Evans's "American Photographs" for his tenth birthday. The influence of Evans pops up all across Shore's early pictures, not only in his obvious mirroring of Evans's deep affection for hand-painted signage and his penchant for austere, flattened compositions but also in the sense that the young Shore, like Evans, seemed to be trying to capture the particular flavor of America itself. One of Shore's photographs, showing a bemused-looking man in a lab coat standing in the doorway of a commercial photo studio, pays homage to Evans's famously self-referential opening pictures of "American Photographs," which also feature the exteriors of photo studios. Other references are less



Lisette Model, the famed French street photographer who taught Diane Arbus, was another of Shore's early influences. Shore took a class with her at the New School for Social Research when he was fourteen, and you can see him trying on some of her well-known strategies. His efforts included a worm's-eye view of pedestrians feet which recalls her series "Running Legs"; a few dynamic pictures taken of shop windows which seem to have been inspired by her series "Reflections"; a picture of a wrinkled grande dame, wearing a veil hat and a chunky charm bracelet, sucking down the dregs of a drink which calls to mind Model's withering pictures of the French bourgeoisie.





But Shore was not simply aping the styles of his predecessors; he was hard at work cutting his own path. Inklings of his lesser-known conceptual work, which garnered him a solo show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art at the age of twenty-four, appear in a collection of pictures he took by placing the camera, a 35-mm. handheld, high above his head and snapping images whose compositions he could only vaguely guess at. A picture taken of his parents on a street corner in Rhinebeck, New York, amid a riot of signage, which graces the back of the book, is echoed in a color photograph he made in Regina, Saskatchewan, a decade later, for his epochal project “Uncommon Places,” which saw him leave behind the speed and ease of a 35-mm. in favor of the preternatural crispness of a cumbersome eight-by-ten-inch view camera.

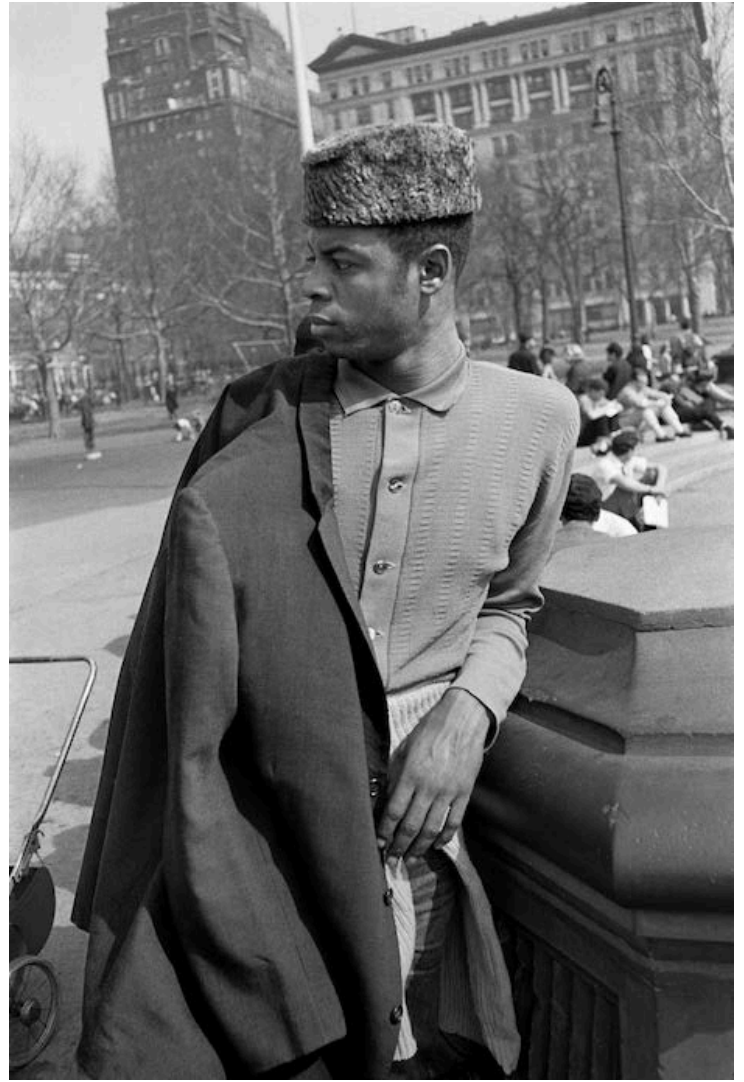
In lieu of attending classes, Shore used the city as both his laboratory and his schoolroom. The boldness evidenced in his street pictures, in which his subjects frequently stare straight into his voracious lens, extended across other extracurricular activities that he cultivated in New York. He would introduce himself to people he found fascinating, among them the choral conductor Noah Greenberg, who helped him get a job as the staff photographer for the Festival Orchestra of New York, and the late-night classical-radio d.j. Bill Watson, who eventually put him on the air. Shore met the pioneering experimental filmmaker Jonas Mekas while popping by the office of Mekas's magazine, *Film Culture*, and it was he who ultimately introduced Shore to Warhol.





Shore was undoubtedly talented, but he acknowledges that he also benefited from the times in which he grew up. “I could call up Szarkowski”—the legendary MOMA photography curator John Szarkowski—“who didn’t know me particularly, but I could get to see him, which is insane now,” he told me. “The director of Light Gallery at first was a guy named Harold Jones, and he had nothing to do all day. And so, if someone walked in off the street with a portfolio, he would look at it. Get a gallery director in New York to look at your portfolio? It hasn’t happened in thirty years.” Kids of Shore’s generation were allowed to roam unsupervised, and life in New York City was still lived publicly. “People hung out on the street. They weren’t scrolling through TikTok. They weren’t even watching television,” he said. “That’s a thing you don’t really see anymore.”





Shore has spent much of his time outside the city since 1982, when he became the director of the photography program at Bard College, a position he holds to this day. He's surrounded there by a preposterously Edenic garden designed by his wife, Ginger, and by his eclectic art collection, which includes African masks, Japanese sumi ink drawings, a Goya etching, and, of course, some photographs, including the first print he ever purchased, for the comparatively princely sum of twenty- five dollars (bargained down, he notes, from thirty-five), of a group of Spanish civil guardsman, by W. Eugene Smith. Lately, he has been thinking about the quasi-spiritual aspects of photography, an interest that he has had since his early twenties, when he sought out a ten-day workshop with the modernist guru Minor White.

There is something about the act of paying very close attention to the world through the camera, Shore explained, that can mimic a kind of altered state of consciousness, akin to what occurs during meditation. “This spring, I asked my class about halfway through the semester, ‘How many of you, when you’re working, found that you’ve entered a flow state?’ Every hand went up.” What Shore was doing during those first days roaming Manhattan with his camera was not just acquiring formal skills but also honing a particular quality of attention that would serve him for the rest of his career. This, perhaps, is why many of his earliest images maintain their vitality today. He told me, “If you were in the present when you were doing the work, the work always exists in the present.”

