

PORTFOLIO

Stephen Shore

At the age of twenty-five, Stephen Shore set off by car from his native Manhattan and headed west. The year was 1972, and the America he discovered through the lens of his 35 mm range finder, a vast network of windswept back roads and empty downtowns, would inspire him to crisscross the country some ten more times during the decade that followed. By his second outing a year later, Shore had traded in the 35 millimeter for a 4 x 5 (a slower, more exacting large-format camera, later replaced by an even bulkier 8 x 10), initiating the seminal document of the American vernacular that would come to be known as *Uncommon Places*, after the title of the 1982 Aperture collection.

The large-plate view camera was the signature tool of nineteenth-century American survey photographers like William Henry Jackson and Timothy O'Sullivan, who employed the format to record (and promote) the western landscape as a kind of uninhabited sublime. Shore's use is in part homage, but an homage complicated. In a photograph such as *5th Street & Broadway, Eureka, CA, 9/24/74*, Shore places us above an empty intersection, near a parking lot festive with automobiles, where a racial slur in faded circus colors doubles as a corporate logo. A pocket of urban sprawl depicted with the epic clarity and sense of scale once reserved for natural wonders, Shore's image introduces color (then associated only with the snapshot and the ad), amplifying the location's lurid markers of consumption.

Shore's work, traditionally assessed within a framework of aesthetic formalism, has been mistaken—like the photography of Walker Evans before it—for simply an exploration of the beauty in the banal. (His examinations of urban space owe a debt to, but differ from, earlier investigations by Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand, who relied on a rich cast of contrasting characters to construct their theaters of social anomie.) Less often discussed is Shore's nuanced contribution to the post-Pop investigations of the late '60s. In *Uncommon Places*, he not only brings the lessons of his contemporaries Douglas Huebler, Ed Ruscha, and Dan Graham to the twentieth-century American photographic tradition, but also integrates Pop's disengaged signifiers—turning an eye trained by a stint at Warhol's Factory on an increasingly homogenized United States—with Conceptual art's flirtation with the typological. Defining an American architectural vernacular at the dawn of globalization, Shore's photographs prefigure the Düsseldorf school's serial explorations of contemporary consumerism (indeed, Thomas Struth titled his first book *Unconscious Places*).

Shore self-consciously employed traditional genres—the portrait and the landscape—to suggest that the American West, historically the most potent symbol of American freedom and will, was fast becoming a commodified wasteland. As if to literalize the depleted agency of the mass-cultural subject, Shore presents concrete-clad office buildings, parking lots stretching to the horizon, and candy-colored sedans whose occupants and owners seem to have vanished, only to resurface in his portraits. With the publication of Aperture's *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works* (spring 2004)—six never-before-published highlights are presented here—Shore's prescient document will finally be available in all its breadth and complexity.

—WALEAD BESHTY



Stephen Shore. Page 148: *Center Street & W. 3rd St., Little Rock, Arkansas, 10/5/74*, color photograph, 20 x 24". Page 149: *Saint Louis, Missouri, 5/31/75*, color photograph, 24 x 20". Page 150: *Fromm Crescent, Regina, Saskatchewan, 8/17/74*, color photograph, 20 x 24". Page 151: *5th Street & Broadway, Eureka, CA, 9/24/74*, color photograph, 20 x 24". Page 152: *Main Street, Fort Worth, TX, 6/17/76*, color photograph, 24 x 20". Page 153: *Mount Blue Shopping Center, Farmington, Maine, 7/30/74*, color photograph, 20 x 24".

Each month in this ongoing series, a photographer offers a preview of a previously unexhibited body of work.