

STEPHEN SHORE, IN PRAISE OF A «QUIET» PHOTOGRAPHER.

ELOGE D'UN PHOTOGRAPHE «SILENCIEUX».
LOB EINES «STILLEN» FOTOGRAFEN.

«Photographers who work in this way do not compose their pictures in the way that artists do; they do not assemble them from various parts, they do not achieve results that are autonomous. Instead, they shape them subtractively and use photographic methods to select, on the basis of their own themes, only a part, a detail, from what is present... Because photographs that are produced in this way have an effect of simplicity, aesthetics for a long period regarded them as being mere documents, and they were not recognised as independent forms of original artistic expression.»
Thomas Weski¹

While mulling over (as one does) the thorny issue of photography and postmodernism, I took down the splendid monograph on the work of Stephen Shore, published by Schirmer Mosel, and was struck by the following thought. Shore has been an immensely influential and respected photographer, one of the mid-seventies triumvirate - the others being William Eggleston and Joel Meyerowitz - who virtually defined colour photography for the serious art photographer. His body of work, Uncommon Places, and the book of the same name, established a leading voice from that important period, yet he has not quite had the high profile career one might have expected, given his precocious and well attended beginnings in the medium.

Shore, given his importance, has been somewhat neglected. As the organisers of the exhibition accompanying the Schirmer monograph rightly say, Shore's work «became widely known during the 1970s through exhibitions in a number of important museums. In the decade that followed, he ceased to be the centre of such broad attention...»²
And upon studying the imagery in the book, and some of the philosophies behind it, well articulated by both the photographer and his advocates, one major reason, I suspect, is this. Stephen Shore, to his artistic credit but perhaps to his career detriment, is essentially what I would term a «quiet» photographer.

What exactly do I mean by this soubriquet? It is a difficult notion to define with any exactitude, partly a question of style, more a question of voice. Shore's voice is not of the hectoring kind, his whole artistic persona from first to last is modest, self-effacing. He photographs modest landscapes, with no quirky tricks of technique or vision, and (perhaps crucially) he presents the work in a modest way. His classic style can be characterised as «non-style» (though it is relatively easy to copy and bowdlerise), but it is not style alone which makes him a «quiet» photographer.

The primary characteristic of the «quiet» photograph, according to Lewis Baltz, is that it should appear to be «without author or art.»³
That is to say, transparency is its main objective. The photograph should seem to be a direct and unmediated transcription of the scene before the camera, as if taken, indeed, by the unaided camera. The quiet photographer, therefore, interferes as little as possible with his subject.

Such an attitude contrasts with much thinking about serious photography, especially high modernist thinking, where it was almost de rigeur to exaggerate authorial mediation in order to counteract the mimetic, mechanistic nature of the camera, while at the same time making photographs that were nominally in the documentary mode.

But operatic lighting, gestural expressionism, reductive minimalism, painting-sized enlargements, as well as image manipulation, have all been utilised to demonstrate literally a proper degree of photographer mediation and thus declare a singular artistic style.

It is demanded of the photographer-artist not only that he or she mediate, but be seen to mediate.
There is also the issue of one's stance in relation to the art-world, particularly acute in these postmodern times. Take photographs by all means, but do not admit you are a photographer.

Declare yourself an «artist utilising photography», and make big art with big prints. Your work must address, and crucially, be considered to address the current issues exercising the art world.

The «quiet» photographer on the other hand, remains a photographer, and seeks recognition as such, though considered to be practising an independent form of artistic expression. The crucial difference remains one of voice. And in Shore's case, and that of others I would characterise as «quiet» photographers, this does not predicate a bland, uncritical acceptance of the world's realities, a retreat into sentimental lyricism, or a flight from intellectual rigour.

One might add also that it is not a question of differentiating between a mirror and a window upon the world. The successful photograph by the serious «quiet» photographer is just as likely to be a complicated amalgam of mirror and window, an ineffable struggle between subjectivity and objectivity, as an image by any photographer or artist. Like anyone else wrestling with this tricky medium, the «quiet» photographer is totally assured of the fact that a «simple», «straightforward» act of recording is anything but. The «quiet» photographer, however, will not draw undue attention to that process, nor, for that matter, to the process of apprehending the resultant image by the viewer.

The goal of the «quiet» photographer is an elusive one, the illusion of transparency, but not a dumb, or mute transparency. «Quiet» photographs do not lack a voice, but that voice is always calm, measured, appropriate, reasonable.

Stephen Shore published Uncommon Places in 1982, a book with a profound influence upon young photographers in both America and Europe.

The book was the result of Shore's first real exploration of his homeland, and because the mystical American highway was invoked precursors readily cited by commentators were Walker Evans' American Photo-graphs (1938) and Robert Frank's The Americans (1959). Indeed, because of his large format view camera style, Uncommon Places could be (and has been) referred to glibly as «American Photographs in colour.»

Shore's aims, however, were quite different from those of Evans. On an immediate, yet profound level, the very fact that Uncommon Places was in colour was fundamental, not only announcing a keystone of contemporary colour photography, but placing Shore's vision in a much broader tradition than that of Evans' aestheticised social documentary mode - a tradition looking both backwards to the roots of modern painting and forwards to post-modern photography.

In this wider context, one might remember there is a «quiet painter» tradition too, which feeds back both into photography and into Stephen Shore's preferred subject-matter, his fascination with the everyday, «uncommon» place.

I am referring to the tradition of the oil sketch, small, modest pictures of modest subjects - «pictures of bits» - where the painter's aim was simply to explore and to see.

For example, The Plain of Chailly (c. 1833 - 50), by the Barbizon School master, Théodore Rousseau, in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, is only a couple of centimetres larger than Shore's 8 x 10 inch negatives, and from a distance might be mistaken for an image from Uncommon Places.

There is almost no discernible motif at all, a green field, a straight horizon, a limpid grey sky, and in the picture's middle a solitary gate, or more likely a bridge over a stream.

A picture describing a scene of such sublime ordinariness, that the very fact the artist chose to employ his talents depicting it seems quite extraordinary.

Here, we see painters' interests moving from the jumbled rocks and tangled trees in the Forest of Fontainebleau on one side of the village of Barbizon to the flat, featureless Plain of Chailly on the other.

The shift from romanticism to realism encapsulated in a few square miles of French countryside. The «heroic» landscapes of Italy supplanted by the ubiquitous, commonplace landscapes of France that fell within a short train ride of the great Parisian railway termini. The beginnings, in short, of a «modern» artistic sensibility.

From here there is a clearly discernible trail from «uncommon» places in the Île de France - Argenteuil, Marly-le-Roi, Louveciennes (not to mention Giverny, where Shore has made work) - to those humble, disregarded places in America recorded by Edward Hopper and Walker Evans, Robert Frank and Lee Friedlander, Robert Adams and Stephen Shore. Alfred Sisley's desolate, rainy Fourteenth of July at Marly-le-Roi (1875), segues into the glistening Main street, Saratoga Springs (1936), by Evans. Thomas Jones's A Wall in Naples (c. 1842), segues into Early Sunday Morning (1930), by Hopper and Meeting Street, Charleston, South Carolina (1975), by Shore.

These disparate, but clear connections confirm the roots of modern American art. In a more particular sense, they confirm Shore's role, along with perhaps that of Robert Adams, as a central figure in the exchange of contemporary photographic influences between America and Europe, especially Germany.

It is a two-way exchange, and a demonstration of an essentially northern sensibility.

The classic oil-sketchers were primarily Northern Europeans - English, Scandinavian, German, and Northern French painters - who began the plein air tradition in the dazzling light and sun of Italy before importing its precepts back into their own backyards.

And it is primarily the Northern European tradition that underpins much of nineteenth and twentieth century American art, a tradition that is essentially conceptual and «quietist», rooted in close observation - a tradition in which the «smallest fact in nature» is valued. As the art historian Barbara Novak has written :

«...American artists guarded the unbroken integrity of the objects or things of this world, which became, very often, vessels or carriers of metaphysical meaning...»⁴

In purely material terms, Stephen Shore's *Uncommon Places* seem to have been as much about depicting light and space as much as matter. Light has been a fundamental concern of his imagery from the very beginning, and in this he might also be said to be a typically American artist. The clear, sharp, all enveloping light he invariably seeks to depict derives (through a long line of tradition) from Luminist painting, an intrinsically American mode which reflected not only an attitude to that country's light but predicated this distinctly American concern for the integrity of the seen object.

A quiet, calm mode of painting once more, with clarity and lucidity the watchwords, a meditative point of view which permeates so much American photography and which is exemplified perfectly in Shore's imagery.

A point of view in which the artist eschews direct comment in favour of an invitation to contemplate. Shore himself quotes Hamlet's injunction to «overstep not the modesty of Nature» and cites the example of Chinese poets, which «rarely trespasses beyond the bounds of actuality», accepting the world as it is and finding in it «sufficient solace.»⁵

In the preface to *Uncommon Places* he quotes from Louis Sullivan's *Kindergarten Chats* :

«...You must cultivate attention - the art of seeing, the art of listening. You needn't trouble about memory, that will take care of itself; but you must learn to live in the true sense. To pay attention is to live, and to live is to pay attention...»⁶

And the substance of Stephen Shore's moments of attentiveness? The «thereness» of things and places, to be sure. First and foremost, we are taken «there», to these hitherto unsung locations in Texas or Montana and elsewhere in the heartland of America. The oil sketchers dashed off their pieces to place themselves «there», but nothing does that like photography. «Thereness» is undoubtedly a quality of his pictures, but what we have in Shore, I feel, is something more, the ultimate photographic pleasure. To give it a name, we might turn to James Joyce, and an art of a very different character, but an art that was concerned, like the photographer's, with the heroic articulation of the real and the commonplace.

In his magisterial biography of Joyce, Richard Ellman describes Joyce's emphatically secular notion of an «epiphany», a momentary flash of heightened perception :

«The epiphany was the sudden «revelation of the whatness of a thing, the moment in which the soul of the commonest object... seems to us radiant.» The artist, he felt, was charged with such revelations and must look for them not amongst gods but among men...»⁷

This seems the perfect «mission statement» for Stephen Shore's American sojourn.

And since Shore is first and foremost a photographer, it may be the perfect mission statement for the photographic enterprise, from the very writer whom, Ellman concludes, was perhaps the first novelist to attempt to prosecute to the full the fundamental artistic discovery that «the ordinary is the extraordinary.»⁸

As always, we must hark back to the photographer's sense of the world for photography's deepest and purest pleasures - be they those of a father simply seeking to capture a likeness of his family, or Stephen Shore meditating upon his experience of American culture. The pleasures of good photographs, photographs such as Shore's *Uncommon Places*, are fundamentally the pleasures (and the pain) of sight, an affirmation of the profound connection we have with the world through our eyes. One of the best definitions of the photographer's crazy, compulsive, impulse to suspend these humble, mordant fragments of time and space as if in aspic came from one of Stephen Shore's masters.

Walker Evans surely was one of the finest writers on the medium as well as one of its most distinguished practitioners. In a few succinct sentences, worth any number of essays, or even monographs, he nailed the matter firmly to the wall :

«Whether he is an artist or not, the photographer is a joyous sensualist, for the simple reason that the eye traffics in feelings, not in thoughts. This man is in effect voyeur by nature; he is also reporter, tinker and spy. What keeps him going is pure absorption, incurable childishness, and healthy defiance of Puritanism-Calvinism. The life of his guild is combined scramble and love's labour lost...»

«...Leaving aside the mysteries and inequities of human talent, brains, taste and reputations, the matter of art in photography may come down to this; it is the defining of observation full and felt.»⁹