Clouds of Seeing

Stephen Shore
PaceWildensteinMacGill Gallery
32 East 57th Street
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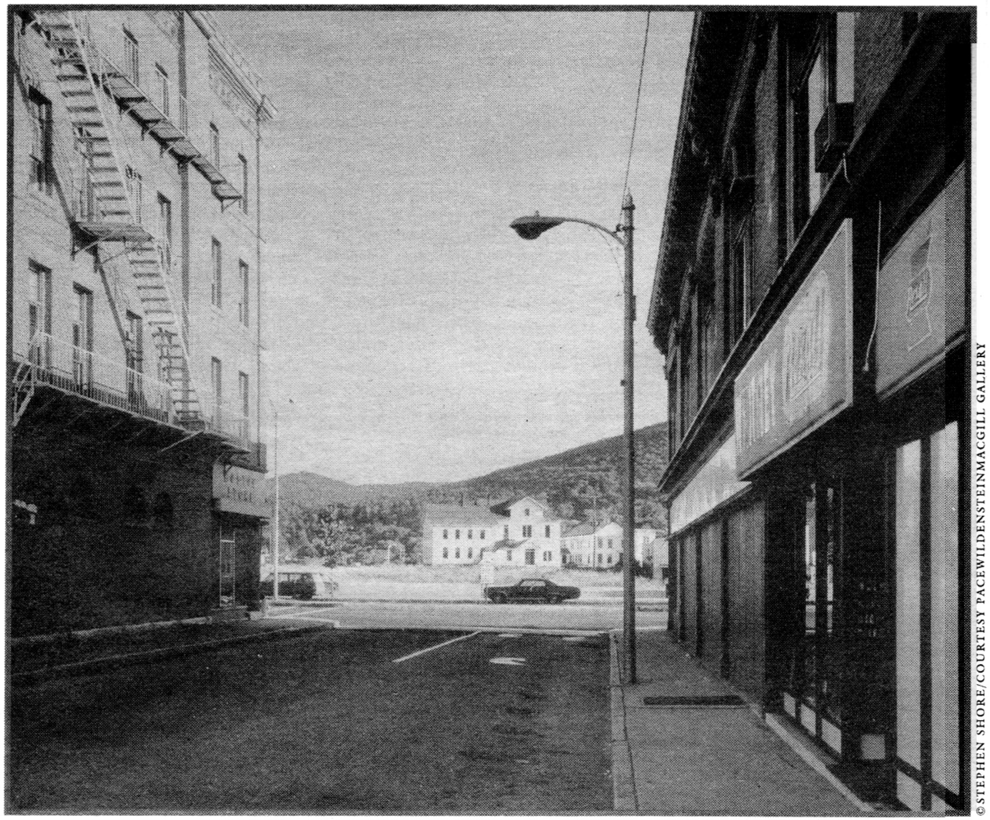
BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

For years when I was traveling a lot and very nervous, I stared at concrete. It was a ritual wherever I found myself, such as in a car stopped at an intersection: looking hard at a featureless but specific, there-and-then curb, abutment, or sidewalk, trying to memorize its color and texture and how it took the light. Trying to love it. It had to be concrete: the stupidest, most anonymous stuff, essence of anywhere. Anything else, such as asphalt or dirt, was too variable and interesting.

My ritual was autistic, I suppose, in a step-on-a-crack-break-your-mother's-back way, only aestheticized. The point was to make sheer banality yield beauty for me alone, its secret devotee. Leaning my emotions into concrete, I was organized for a moment. My scattered existence felt supported and, after all, supportable.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Confronting the vernacular: Stephen Shore's *Holden Street, North Adams, Massachusetts* (1978)

Stephen Shore made me do it, somewhat. Shore's anxiously and rapturously beholding photographs of obdurate American places, color pictures I started to see in the mid-1970s, gave me a wavelength. So did other items of bright, shocky '70s sensibility that set truth at right angles to anomie: plays by Sam Shepard and fiction by Peter Handke, Photorealist painting and Postminimalist sculpture (Bruce Nauman foremost), punk music, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and photographers besides Shore, notably Ed Ruscha. But Shore (though with no special thing for concrete, by the way) was my Zen guide to the road.

Encountering some of those '70s pictures again in this quiet, jewelbox-like Shore miniretrospective takes me back. It also confirms for me an ongoing role of photography in my own and other people's spiritual economies. More and more, art photography takes on practically sacramental functions in bridging gaps (which are not narrowing in American society) between isolated self and stony world. This show gives me little sensations of worship.

Shore, now 48 and head of the photography department at Bard College, was a Manhattan prodigy, an Upper East Side kid whose photographs were first bought by the Museum of Modern Art when he was 14. At age 18 in 1965, he happened into Andy Warhol's Factory, where he became the in-house shutterbug. His Factory pictures fill an excellent new book, *The Velvet Years*, with text and interviews by Lynne Tillman (Thunder's Mouth Press). They are hard, silvery, wary shots, so fresh as to repel nostalgia, that preserve the Warholian social magic: no magic at all, but deadpan temerity, hiding in plain sight.

There are no Factory photos in this show, whose selection of Shore's classic view-camera contact prints starts in 1973. It features woebegone prairie downtowns in raking sunlight, a movie theater at dusk in Wisconsin, the little-considered stretch of Country Club Road in Tucson, Arizona, and bleakly, beautifully on and on. I remember thinking the photographer must be a cool cowboy type intimate with the hardscrabble West. My mistake made the pictures arcane to me in a way I rather cherish, looking back.

In fact, Shore was a hothouse New Yorker without a driver's license. His pictorial confrontations with vernacular America were dramas of innocence: his and that of places oblivious to their own cascading strangeness. Knowing this now, I find the work less mysterious and more companionable. As art about the United States, it suggests an improbable patriotism, spread-eagled between cosmopolitan pride and a vulnerable yen for identity.

I incidentally recall a mental photograph of mine from 1974: seen through a windshield on the morning after Nixon's resignation, a breeze-stiffened American flag above a town square. I got a lump in my throat, feeling proprietary toward that symbol for the first time in bitter years. Did my emotion and Shore's crosscountry odysseys participate in a spell of tentative national reconciliation, stirring amid exhaustions of avant-gardism and Vietnam?

When you are anywhere for the first time, you know you see it in ways that natives never do. This can be thrilling, as if you were a spy, and distressing, for the same reason. The photographer in whose symbolic tire tracks Shore traveled, Robert Frank, made the all-time spyscape of America in his *The Americans*. The Swiss honorary beatnik did it with grainy black-and-white grab shots, mostly of people. Scion of the New York art world, Shore followed two decades later with long, slow, infinitely nuanced meditations in color on the light of mostly empty locales.

The flat-toned poignance of Shore's road pictures has a lot of levels to it. One that strikes me now is the photographer's tacit determination to intuit the most typical aspects of places he never saw before, much less experienced in daily life. Not for nothing has his gravely savoring approach to cityscape been compared to that of Eugene Atget. But imagine an Atget who arrived in Paris for the first time this morning to create his immemorial views this afternoon.

For me, Shore's art bespeaks being mentally off balance in the face of a thing and yet getting the thing exactly right, eliminating in the process all trace of one's self-consciousness. It is about blind faith in the sufficiency of one's creative means, which in Shore's case are the technical and formal panoply of photographic vision. Looking at his work, I feel possessed of the answers to questions I don't know how to ask. This effect instills belief in the glory of photography.

A nuisance of working with an innocent eye is being sabotaged by one's own naturally growing sophistication and aplomb. Understandably, then, Shore since the '70s has turned from well-worn demotic America to the guaranteed intractability of landscape and foreign cultures, at the cost of making less widely resonating bodies of work. His recent pictures of Upstate woods and of the environs of Luzzara in Italy (site of famous photos by Paul Strand 40 years ago) are apt less to excite photography fans than to please connoisseurs. Still, Shore's creative honesty, always at the far edge of what he knows, remains exemplary.

And now and then something jumps through his lens to reward him. I am looking at the black-and-white shot on the show's announcement of a young, phlegmatic Italian guy in bathing trunks looming behind and to the side of a pleasantly dowdy older woman, perhaps his mother. The picture's complex composition, with sunlight falling from the side in the way Shore favors, holds the guy up to quizzical admiration. His bare torso and folded arms feel styled, as if chosen from a rack of designer body parts. They are in the finest Italian taste, to which the youth becomes, adorably, a portable monument.

It's amazing how well and how much you can see when focused on how things and people exist for themselves, rather than for you. Then it is as if you ceased to exist for a moment except as an illuminated cloud of seeing. When the moment ends, you return to yourself rearranged and provisionally, until life fetches you another of its upsets, glad to be alive. ❖

political theater. Everybody wanted to lie to the American people about Yeltsin's popularity," he says. "There was a systematic effort not to talk about it."

The commission's findings were later confirmed by various independent experts, as well as a Canadian observer from Elections Canada. If the commission is correct, then everything Yeltsin has done since 1993 is technically illegal. A new regime could declare all of Russia's current privatization, for example, invalid. But most of the political parties—from the Communists and ultranationalists to the reformers—refused to challenge Yeltsin on the 1993 results. As distasteful to them as Yeltsin might be, they all have too much vested in the current system.

"If the commission was right, it's definitely a blow to everyone's integrity, especially the Russians'," says one Western diplomat. "But everyone accepted the election as legitimate—even if the results were tampered with.

"People had just been through October 1993," he adds. "The choice was a Russian white lie or a major headache and prolongation of instability and uncertainty. It was a trade-off, and a regrettable one, if true."

In an interview at the Kremlin, Yeltsin's spokesman, Sergei Medvedev, would only say that the 1993 elections were free and fair. However, he also maintains that Russian stability is tied to Yeltsin.

"The biggest threat to Russian stability now is civil war," says Medvedev. "People may call him a tsar . . . but as long as Yeltsin is president, everything will be okay—even with the Communists."

This time around, the elections do seem to have been a little more free and fair. "There is an undeniable movement forward," says the Western diplomat.

First, more people are voting. After 1993, the voter turnout rule was downed from 50 per cent to 25 per cent. This time, voter turnout is up to more than 60 per cent, according to preliminary results. Stories abound about long lines of voters and not enough ballot boxes.

Second, there seem be fewer voting irregularities. In 1993, especially at the local level, there were tales of men in some clan-based Russian regions voting for 40 members of their family.

"The balloting process has been sweetly clean, like a 1930s Hollywood film of wholesomeness," says McIntyre. "But was the campaigning fair? The government's party has better access to the media. What happens now will also be hard to tell."

Sergei Koptev, who organized Our Home Is Russia's $1.2 million advertising campaign, acknowledges that the government party advertised more than the other parties, but insists it was simply a matter of strategy rather than any unfair advantage.

"We tried to create a dominant presence to block our competitors," he says. "It was a sophisticated campaign for our country."

On Monday, preliminary results from 13 million votes in the Far East and Siberia show the Communist party with 21.8 per cent of the vote, followed by Zhirinovsky's LDPR with 11.7 per cent. Our Home has so far netted 9.2 per cent, while the reformers, headed by economist Grigory Yavlinsky's Yabloko party, received 7.9 per cent. These are the only parties—out of 43 on the ballot—who have made the 5 per cent cutoff mark for the State Duma. Yegor Gaidar's support lies just below 5 per cent.

General Alexander Lebed—touted as a potential presidential candidate—and his Congress of Russian Communities did not even come close. Although he scored points for standing up to Yeltsin when he was head of the army in Transdniestr, and for opposing the war in Chechnya, his blundering speeches put people to sleep. As one Russian woman put it, "He's a good general, but he should stick to military affairs and leave politics to the politicians."

Despite the resurgence of the Communists, their latest victory won't have much significance. The Duma is largely ineffective because Yeltsin rules by decree.

Still, says Ubuzgalan, of Moscow State University, the Communist victory does show a trend where both ordinary, disaffected Russians and a new business elite—who depend on centrally planned state subsidies—are gravitating to a paternalistic form of government.

"It's the growth of social populism, to realize the dreams of a good paternalistic tsar," says Ubuzgalan. "People remember only that the Communists organized a good life. That's where their sympathies go. The new elite of huge cooperations, the mafia, and some small businessmen now also want a bureaucratic, paternalistic, state-regulated, promarket government."

I leave Chernomyrdin's headquarters after midnight. By then, the serious hacks and backbenchers are on the hotel's upper levels, doing some even more serious drinking. Downstairs, champagne is served on trays; women prepare souvenir bags with Chernomyrdin baseball caps. People are still waiting for Chernomyrdin to show up—he won't, even though these are his own campaign headquarters.

Hitching a ride, I move to the central election headquarters, where hundreds more journalists wait for the results. The atmosphere is slightly more festive. Zhirinovsky is in the hall, blue worker's cap and all, in an especially gleeful mood—defying pollsters who dared to write him off.

"We have more deputies [members of parliament] now than ever—and we're going to do even better," he declares.

Standing nearby is the lone figure of Viktor Anpilov, head of Communists-Working Russia for the Soviet Union. He is inconspicuously watching results from a nearby television. Anpilov is calling for renationalizing property and foreign bank accounts, abolishing the Duma, and rebuilding the Soviet Union. He makes Gennady Zyuganov's Communist Party look like capitalist demons.

For Anpilov, the Communist comeback is just the start.

"For five years I've been struggling against the colonization of my country," he says. "There is still no joy." ❖