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“Some photographers go out and want to make beautiful photographs. I think that puts the cart before the horse.

Good photographers are the by-product of some other exploration, or some other intention.”

— Stephen Shore

A GROUND NEUTRAL AND REPLETE

STEPHEN SHORE AND
GIL BLANK IN CONVERSATION

GIL BLANK: *Over the last five to ten years, the work of yours that has increasingly come to the widest attention relates most directly to what began in *Uncommon Places* — photographs especially remarkable for their self-consciousness as pictorial assemblies.*

STEPHEN SHORE: Yes.

GB: *But your current retrospective has gone a long way to recontextualize that later work in light of earlier practices that clearly demonstrated the much different priorities and influence of Conceptualism.*

SS: I think it was the intention of the curator, Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, to show that. He saw *Uncommon Places* growing out of *American Surfaces*, and *American Surfaces* growing out of the Conceptualist work. When I look back at a broader view of what I've done, though, I don't see one project superceding the other.

American Surfaces was begun in 1972, with its first showing at The Light Gallery in the fall of that year. I continued the project into the winter of 1973, and that spring I began *Uncommon Places*, but there was some *American Surfaces* work that lingered until the end of that year.

GB: *So that you were working on both simultaneously during your road trips.*

SS: Yes. So there was a little bit of overlap, but I'll specifically tie it to a shift in equipment. All of *American Surfaces* was done using a Rollei 35 millimeter camera, which was a precursor to the point-and-shoot. It was very small, very unpretentious-looking, very amateurish in a way. All of *Uncommon Places* was done with a view camera. And I think it's important to recognize that, because it's what led to some of these qualities that you're talking about. I had intended the photographs in *American Surfaces*, at the time I shot them, to be seen as snapshots. I had many other cameras that I owned, but I got this camera because it was a kind of amateurish camera. One thing that I hope is made clear in the show is that the roots of *American Surfaces* lay in the Mick-o-Matic series. These were also meant to be seen as snapshots, and were done with a camera called the Mick-o-Matic, which was a big plastic thing



in the shape of a Mickey Mouse head with a lens in his nose. I was interested in the snapshot, and in the natural quality that some few snapshots do contain. I wanted to continue with that, but I didn't feel I had to limit myself to the mechanism of using the Mick-o-Matic.

GB: *Can you explain a little more what you mean by "the natural quality" of the snapshot?*

SS: One of the thoughts behind the Conceptualist work was that there's this world out there that we experience, and that making it into a photograph necessitates the mediation of an artist. Almost inevitably, visual conventions come into play, so that what I see in the photograph is tied as much to visual conventions as any opportunity to see the rest of the world. If some of my decisions can be taken out of my hands because of an imposed Conceptual framework—if, for example, I know that I'm going to walk north on Sixth Avenue and at the beginning of each block take a picture due north—then at least one decision out of the array of many necessary to create a photograph has been taken out of my hands. Part of that was to see if I could circumvent the mediating voice of the artist. I finally found that this wasn't satisfying, and that I felt like I ought to be able to accomplish the same result independently—because every now and then I would see a photograph that would have that quality of an unmediated experience.

GB: *In what context? I'm guessing that you're talking about what we might now refer to, in terms themselves that I would allege are already loaded, as "vernacular": anonymous snapshots, newspaper photographs, accidental documents, and the like. You're not talking about any of the purposely de-skilled photographs born of the Conceptual art period, albeit of an intentionality that sought to imitate those other forms.*

SS: I'm talking about what you just said, about postcards and snapshots. Not *all* postcards, and not *all* snapshots. In fact, as you look at collections of amateur pictures today, you'll find that everyone has been so educated visually, and that people are striving so hard to make "good" pictures, that it's very hard to find that quality of the undetermined image.

GB: *You're talking about the same quality that Gerhard Richter invoked when he said that throwaway snapshots come closest to achieving the state of "pure picture." And that feeds as well into the purposeful "amateurization" of photography found in the Conceptualism of Ed Ruscha and Douglas Huebler, and separately, into the negative dialectic by which Warhol framed all image production.*

SS: Although it's important to say that it was not my intention to "be a machine." If I can detect a difference between how I see things as I experience the world, and how I then see them in photographs, that difference interests me. Part of my intention with *American Surfaces*—and the entire terminology of "mediation" is something I've only begun to discuss in retrospect; at the time I don't think I used that term—was simply to take pictures that looked natural to me, but that distinction is what I was after.

GB: *I want to raise one apparent contradiction. You're invoking the ideal of a unitary photograph, of an unmediated experience, while, on the other hand, the point around which you've oriented that principle is the first-person point of view, the "I." So that from your earliest efforts, those Pop and Conceptualist influences that are so assertive about the elimination of the authorial trace are balanced by the determination to reconstitute some space, however ostensibly depersonalized, from which a paradoxically personalized practice can be established.*

SS: I am an "I." Let's put it into Freudian terms: If you obliterate the superego, it doesn't mean you've obliterated

the ego. And the visual equivalent of that superego is the inheritance of artistic conventions, which determine how you "should" see or structure the world. If I do away with those trappings, it doesn't mean that there isn't still something else beneath it that's me seeing.

I've known Hilla Becher since perhaps 1973. I remember once having a conversation with her when she told me that I ought to photograph every main street in America. And there's the difference: I said, "Well Hilla, that sounds like one of your projects, but not mine." I wasn't trying to photograph every street in America—I was *picking* streets. I'm picking this one for whatever reason, because the conjunction of its different buildings, in this light, at this moment, seems particularly interesting.

At the time, the phrases and thoughts in my mind were taking "natural pictures," and making a "visual diary." That wasn't my intention when I began the trip, but it became so within three days of being on the road. It was the first time I'd been on the road alone, and it was all new. I'd open a door, and there would be this bed. I'd get up in the morning and open the bathroom door, and there would be this toilet. I'd go to the diner and there would be this food on this surface, on this table. And it became clear within two or three days that I had the idea of doing a journal. The journal had certain categories—every meal I ate, every person I met, every bed I slept in—and maybe that was a Conceptualist remnant.

GB: *An ideational framework.*

SS: I would say that the Bechers have an ideational framework, but it's not exactly a system, in the way that Douglas Huebler had one.

GB: *Then you're distinguishing production that is rule-based, and thus proscriptive, from that which is more widely idea-based, and thus potentially generative. You're inferring that Conceptualism was something specific, traceable to a certain time, which is different from contemporary work that might otherwise aspire to meanings beyond the strictly optical or formal aspect of the material photographic object.*

SS: That's a very good point. There is a notion that before Postmodernism photographers weren't really capable of thinking aesthetics through. So that whenever a photographer is demonstrably thinking about things, or proposes an ideational background, his or her practice is carelessly labeled with a word like Conceptualism. Conceptualism was something much more specific.

GB: *So I think it's crucial in that light to discuss how American Surfaces occupies a singular historical position, because bearing as it does certain of those specific legacies of Conceptualism—seriality, a conspicuously de-skilled approach to production, recordkeeping, and all the operations of a bureaucratically devised product—nonetheless you've asserted that it was executed in a fundamentally intuitive manner. It was made during the exact year that Lucy Lippard marks as the end of the period in which artists sought to "dematerialize" the art object, and enunciates an unquestionably pictorial language, albeit of a debased form.*

SS: One point I'd like to make here about the Bechers' work is that it, too, had specifically pictorial qualities. I was impressed by their work when I first saw it, as I was also deeply impressed by Ed Ruscha. But there's a significant difference between those two approaches, in that the Bechers' pictures had a clear ideational intention, but were also *photographs*. They furnished visual information in the way that traditional photographs do.

To put it in a slightly different way, when I show one of my students a copy of *Water Towers* for the first time, they start turning the pages and it dawns on them that there are hundreds of pictures of towers in this book. That's something

Previous page
Steven Shore
 ...
 Merced River, Yosemite National Park, California, August 13, 1979
 From *Uncommon Places*



>
Steven Shore
 ...
 U.S. 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973
 From *Uncommon Places*

“In the early '70s, the term “fictive” was often used in conversations among photographers. And despite all the Postmodern writers who would come soon after, this was no news to photographers.” — Stephen Shore



>
Steven Shore
 ...
 From *Circle No. 1*
 July, 1969



<
Steven Shore
 ...
 Queens, New York, April,
 1972
 From *American Surfaces*

“When I look back on American Surfaces, I see that a lot of the subject matter and territory that I explored over the next decade was all staked out during that year.” — Steven Shore



<
Steven Shore
 ...
 El Paso Street, El Paso,
 Texas, July 5, 1975
 From *Uncommon Places*

amazing because it's the first time they encounter this kind of thinking in photography, but there's something else when you really start looking at the pictures ...

GB: *At the individual pictures.*

SS: ... at the individual pictures as they break through that ideational structure. That additional capability as *photography* is essential, because it's the sole way by which we can then understand the cultural tendencies of these buildings, and how it changes from France to Belgium, or from 1910 to 1930. All of these structures have the same mechanical function: They need to store water at a high enough elevation so that the water pressure resulting from gravity can service a municipality. Beyond that, anything else is a culturally accrued artifact. The Bechers were interested in this, and sought to communicate it in specifically visual terms.

GB: *And I think that's what distinguishes you in turn from Ruscha. That, like the Bechers, you have from the very beginning, even within the period of work most directly influenced by Conceptualism, asserted the viability of photographic meanings and processes on a specifically pictorial basis. And that, further, your incorporation of Pop and Conceptualist idioms is not simply an earlier "phase" that you were working through, nor even meant as an undermining of that pictorial integrity as formulated earlier by Warhol, but rather was openly acknowledged as the lay of the historical land from which you departed, and beyond which you would then demonstrate, as did the Bechers, the renewable potential of pictorial vocabularies.*

SS: I remember that when I first saw Ruscha's work, it was a big event for me. It was in 1967 or 1968, in a loft in SoHo, and I was editing my pictures for Warhol's *Stockholm Catalog* along with Kasper König. We finished going through the pictures, and Kasper said, "I have something to show you." He then laid *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* out on the floor of the loft. It was a revelation.

I may have taken a different approach eventually, in terms of my acceptance of the visual qualities of photographs, but the ideas behind *Sunset Strip* were so stimulating that I immediately went to Wittenborn and bought all of his books that day. His work did awaken a certain kind of thinking for me, but I thought that there had to be a way of unifying things, that there didn't have to be a negation of visual quality.

In the late 1960s, John Gibson had a gallery on the Upper East Side, where he showed Christo, Peter Hutchinson, Dennis Oppenheim, Richard Long, and maybe later Dan Graham. I used to hang out there, and was friendly with all those people. I even collected some of their work. I understood the negation of the visual quality that they were referring to, but I guess because I came to it from a photographic tradition, I wondered whether that negation was entirely necessary. I wondered whether there couldn't instead be a unification.

GB: *How then would you square that with your process of assembling a vast and undifferentiated archive of found photographs in All the Meat You Can Eat?*

SS: Holly Solomon made her gallery space available to me in 1971, and told me to do whatever I wanted. I had been collecting photographs, and had a couple of friends who were doing the same. A lot of it was vernacular imagery of different kinds. I loved it and I wanted to show it, and that was it.

GB: *That can't be just it, though, anymore than a loaded gun can be "just it."*

SS: [Laughs.]

GB: *And I think that points out the failure internal to Conceptual photographic exercises, that no amount of rule-making*

can ever render such a project entirely objective, or de-skilled. You made All the Meat You Can Eat with a knowledge of the specific time and milieu within which it came about ...

SS: Yes.

GB: ... *And it uses both individual images and a combinative reading of them in a highly provocative or loaded way.*

SS: I was saying, "Look at this work" — that there are important qualities in pictures that are not totally circumscribed by art photography.

GB: *Do you really mean to suggest that you were only positioning the image bank as source material or reference point? As a kind of raw ore, what you referred to as an unmediated or "pure picture"?*

SS: It wasn't that singular; there were a couple of things. Some of it had to do with photographic style, with photographic meanings, and with the cultural meanings contained in those styles. For example, there were a series of posters printed by the U.S. government printing office. They showed Air Force Thunderbird jets in formation, seen from above, over national landmarks like the Statue of Liberty or the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls. There were maybe a dozen of these. There was also a series printed by the Soviet government printing office, showing heavily airbrushed portraits of the Politburo. These were large posters. And there were corporate headshots. I'm not saying there was wonderful, intuitive quality to this work, but rather that I was trying to look at the cultural meanings in it.

GB: *But that's precisely the problematic and loaded contextualization that I'm referring to. First, that somehow the wider social archive of imagery existing at random, out in the world, beyond any stated or self-conscious artistic agenda, is tantamount to an intrinsically authentic parcel of meaning, one preferable to any explicit gesture of authorship connected with art history.*

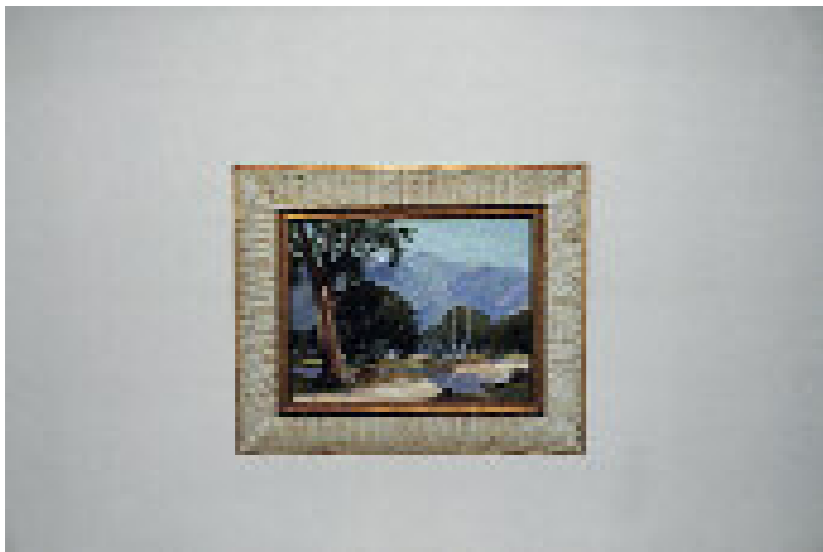
But second, and much more significant, is the problematic suggestion of reading these pictures in a chiefly formal sense: that they are equivalent to so much visual stuff, to styles or modes, all of which bear a standardized value of exchange. Because that kind of equalization of content — of images of concentration camp victims, celebrities, pornography, corporate headshots, and postcards — indeed has several important precedents, particularly European, but precedents that are oriented toward wholly different ends. I'm referring here to the archives and atlases put together by Aby Warburg, Gerhard Richter, and Christian Boltanski, and moreover, the way in which the latter two can both be read as deeply negative postwar inversions of the first, inversions that are totemic of the pessimistic undermining of pictorial legitimacy that was among the primary motifs of art-making during the second half of the 20th century. What in the U.S. we might have regarded as the primarily formal deconstructions carried out by Pop and Conceptualism was in Europe manifested as the inescapable condition of a catastrophic social consciousness.

SS: I don't think I thought of it in that way. I personally took pleasure in these pictures: Some of them were more two-dimensional than others, some were more stylized than others, but I found I took pleasure in them, and I didn't see their assembly in that form as nullifying.

GB: *Would you consider that a tellingly American prerogative, that what to an American artist of the time might "just" be a picture of a gun, to a European contemporary was inevitably an image that was loaded in many different ways?*

Because it would seem to me that the comparison of All the Meat You Can Eat to, say, Richter's Atlas yields one crucial insight: that what for Richter is a vast catalogue of anguish, and perhaps even paralysis, was for you a point of departure, a cleared space within which art history had not in fact reached an aggrieved terminus, but rather a manic and disillusioned rebirth. The mechanistic void of photography that Ruscha had lampooned

Following spread
 all photographs from
American Surfaces



and the social history that Richter perpetuated as scar tissue was for you a profane permission to make a supremely dispassionate art by means of portraying what simply was. This represented a subjectivity, perhaps, but one wholly stripped of the projective voice of subjective styles, one that insisted on the sovereign “I,” but has never gone past an acknowledgment of existence to venture presumptions of essence.

SS: I would say that some of it informed the work I would go on to do, and that other images did not, though I could still appreciate them. There are pictures that I think are funny, that are two-dimensional, or that I enjoy looking at, and there are other pictures, some of the snapshots, and particularly the postcards, that were in fact a sourcebook for me. Part of how I entered color photography was based upon the work I was doing the same year as *All the Meat You Can Eat*, in 1971, when I also did the *Mick-o-Matic* shots and the series of Amarillo postcards. I’d been collecting postcards as I was traveling around the country, and there were some of them that were bland or hokey, but every now and then there’d be one that was this cultural view of what a street looked like, with wonderful light and a real sense of the place. I don’t know if the photographer intended that or not, but that’s what I got out of it, and it clearly informed my work.

There’s another thing I would relate to that, which is something I’ve written about in other contexts. When I was photographing in the ’90s, in Luzzara, Italy, where Paul Strand had photographed forty years before, I was shown a letter that he had written at the time. He wrote that it had been difficult to photograph there because there were no buildings of what he called “architectural interest.” When I read that, I realized what a different meaning that phrase “architectural interest” had for him than it did for me. I could look at a postcard of the main street in Tucumcari, New Mexico, where there might not be any distinguished buildings, but still find that it has something of architectural interest to me. It’s the face of a culture.

GB: The subject simply is, in the most fundamental sense: It exists.

SS: Yes. And that alone is fascinating to me.

GB: So it seems to me that what the incremental accretion of each of your projects results in is the proposition of a hypothetical zone — you can call it a metaphysical space, or a practice, or a life’s work — that sets some very basic parameters of what a human experience can be, and thus through it, one articulated model of a subjectivity, of how a sovereign social being might see out his existence. And this to me is photography’s great potential, its ultimately ethical dimension and proposal. That paradoxically, through both its mechanistic passivity and ambiguously factual plenitude, through its brutal deracination of content and social continuity, it does not warrant the emotive dimensions of subjective expression or metaphor, but rather through its seemingly total evacuation of those poetics, might instead delimit only the most bare parameters of what exists. That alone must be accepted as not merely sufficient, but in fact as all that can possibly be.

If we take as a point of origin for our analysis your Conceptualist work, we can see those projects as the imagistic field laid bare, tilled over for the coming crop. American Surfaces then makes the initial, multifaceted proposal of how wide and dynamic a photographic life’s work might be. And *Uncommon Places*, as the most baroque stage in the oeuvre, establishes the far reaches to which the pictorial project, as an emblematic display of that personal “space,” might reach.

“This is,” the pictures say, which is a direct outcome of the photographer’s own implicit statement, “I am.” As a publicly presented and materially manifested photographic work, it thus confers on all potential viewers as cognizant social beings the further sanction, that “You are.”

SS: Though at the time, I would have formulated that slightly differently for myself. I would say that I was fascinated by

what the world looks like when you pay attention to it, and that I’m still interested in this act of attention. And so the pictures are reflective of the condition of a self, paying attention.

GB: Was there a sense that by eliminating some of the more immediately impressive and conventional traces of the self, the motifs established by the legacy of 20th-century artistic photography such as symbolism, expression, biographism, and the essentializing point of view, all of the leftovers of Weston and Frank and Steinert and Cartier-Bresson, among others, that one could counterintuitively render that newly neutralized space as therefore free, barren perhaps but wholly open all the same?

SS: I don’t see it as a contradiction. To use the Freudian analogy again, it’s not paradoxical that if you rid yourself of your superego, your ego becomes strengthened; in fact, it’s what you would expect. In photographic terms, if you remove as much of the photographic convention as possible, what you’re left with is yourself, and how you see.

GB: I want to bring this back to *American Surfaces*, which I often think of as the neural center of your oeuvre. In particular, I think it’s important to consider all of its various incarnations over the years, as a continually evolving combination of exhibition and publication. A couple of years ago, I wrote:

With the admitted benefit of hindsight, one can suggest that none of the constituent parts that now make up the American Surfaces phenomenology rightly ought to be considered outside of the others. It has at this point become a motile and fluid architecture for photographic meaning: simultaneously Conceptualist, documentary, formalist, art historical and (paradoxically for a photographic series) atemporal. In its most radical orientation, the project breaks through the conventions and limitations of photographic practice not by attempting to perfect its documentation of life, but by positioning its execution, in all of its fractious non-linearity, as an exercise in life.

Is there some value then in considering *American Surfaces* not merely as a self-contained exercise, but as metonymy for the operation of the greater oeuvre?

SS: I think it’s right to see it as something central. When I look back on it I see that a lot of the subject matter and territory that I explored over the next decade in *Uncommon Places* was all staked out during that year. A lot of the visual approaches, too — there are street scenes and architectural pictures and photographs of food, pictures that look very much like the ones I did several years later in *Uncommon Places*.

But one way of answering this is to consider how I went from *American Surfaces* to *Uncommon Places*. There were some problems with the original show of *American Surfaces* in 1972. It had about 220 pictures in it, shown as unframed Kodak-printed glossy snapshots, roughly 3-by-5 inches each. They were pasted on a wall, just attached with tape, I guess, or something like that — I forget; it was probably two-sided tape — in a grid. And there were a lot of pictures. I think people weren’t used to looking at grids at that time. A lot of them came in and saw it as colored wallpaper, so that it was hard to focus on the individual pictures. As the project progressed, I found I was less interested in attaching the cultural meaning of snapshots to them. I was interested more in what was going on in the pictures individually. And I wanted to make larger prints, as simple as that. But when I tried to make larger prints from them, I found that the film I was using at the time, Kodacolor, was very grainy, and that when I made a larger print, it lost its sharpness and its saturation of tone.

So I thought I’d continue with *American Surfaces*, but that I’d use a bigger camera. I got a Crown Graphic, the same kind Weegee used, with the intention of hand-holding it. But when photographing a store window, or a building on the

> Steven Shore
...
Clovis, New Mexico, June, 1972
From *American Surfaces*



> Steven Shore
...
Trail’s End Restaurant,
Kanab, Utah, August 10, 1973
From *Uncommon Places*



street, or a home, I thought I might as well put it on a tripod. I hadn't expected it when I started, but I ended up enjoying working on a tripod, and looking at the ground glass. I hadn't really known about view cameras, and so I found, "Okay, it has a rising front." So I started using the rising front, and then found I was using it for every picture. Then I thought, "Well, there's no reason for me to use this press camera; I might as well get myself a conventional view camera." Which I did.

I couldn't do some of the pictures I was doing for *American Surfaces* as easily, like pictures of food. I did my pancake picture the next year, the first year with the 4x5. But to do it, I had to be standing on a chair, looking into the camera, and by the time I did it, the food was cold because it's a big production, and I have to get permission from the restaurant, because if I had this camera and this tripod and I'm standing on one of their chairs, it's not as simple as just looking down at the plate in front of me and snapping a picture of it.

The kind of portraits I did for *American Surfaces*, for instance, came about partly due to the fact that no one knew that I was a serious photographer. I was just some guy, just a kid, with this little camera, asking, "Can I take your picture?" When I go into a museum now and take pictures with my little digital point-and-shoot, no guard ever stops me because I'm just another tourist. And that was the reaction to me earlier, when I was taking pictures of people. If I take out a 4x5 and put it on a tripod and put a darkcloth over my head to focus, though, that changes how people respond to me. So that kind of picture changes. On the other hand, the pictures I did of houses and stores and streets got even more intense. I hadn't seen prints from view-camera color negatives before. I made the first prints from these, and they were just amazing. It had

a tonality I'd never seen in a color photograph before. I loved it. That choice of camera then led me to photographing intersections and streets and buildings in a way that took advantage of what the camera did. Although if you look at *Uncommon Places* as a whole, there still are photographs of beds and lamps and chairs and people and a lot of the same kinds of things that would have appeared in *American Surfaces*.

There was a time though that something else changed. When you put an 8x10 camera on a tripod, the decisions a photographer makes become very clear and conscious. There is a period of awareness, of self-consciousness, of decisions, that is different from 35 millimeter. So that even though I knew what I was doing with *American Surfaces*, I felt like I could take a picture that really felt "natural," or that you were less aware of the mediation, that was harder to achieve when I started using the view camera because of the self-consciousness of the decisions. Over time, I very slowly examined each of the decisions involved in putting a picture together, and played with it, and tried to learn how to do it so that I could eventually get to the point of very consciously taking a picture that had much of the same quality that *American Surfaces* had, except doing it with this great big camera.

Does that make sense?

GB: *It does, but rationalizing everything on a purely formal or technical basis seems inadequate.*

SS: I'm talking about one aspect of the picture, and as an artist out there working, I have other intentions as well. But I'm following one particular trajectory in describing this to you.

GB: *Is there another way for us to enlarge a reading of the work*



>
Steven Shore
...
Robert and Lucille Wehrly,
Coos Bay, Oregon, August
31, 1974,
From *Uncommon Places*

"I'm not in fact completely denying the old-fashioned notion of the portrait." — Steven Shore



>
Steven Shore
...
Main Street, Fort Worth,
Texas, June 17, 1976
From *Uncommon Places*

< clockwise
Steven Shore
...
New York City, New York,
September-October, 1972
From *American Surfaces*

Rochester, Michigan, July,
1972
From *American Surfaces*

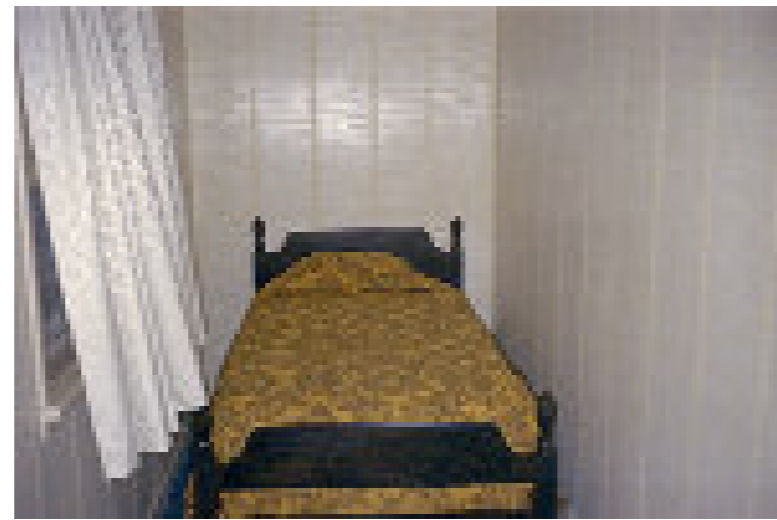
Clovis, New Mexico, June,
1972
From *American Surfaces*

New York City, New York,
April, 1972
From *American Surfaces*



Following spread
all photographs from
American Surfaces





and its implications, and to draw some kind of systemic understanding from its unfolding? To explain *Uncommon Places*, even if only incidentally, as the outcome of what just sorta happens when a guy starts working with an 8-by-10 camera would, I think, minimize its position as the higher embodiment of the pictorial project you presumably spent the earlier part of your career working to articulate. As we've discussed at length, you were exceptionally conscious of your place among your contemporaries at the time of its making. Furthermore, you've commonly been regarded in retrospect as a key initiator of several photographic and art-historical developments to do with the reinvigoration of pictorial formats. So I think it's incumbent upon any discussion of the transition taking place in *Uncommon Places* to contextualize its impact as one great example of the intrinsic viability of the photographic project.

What I can't say is whether the view camera brought about a desire to create the kind of pictures we see in *Uncommon Places*, or whether, after knowing that you had attained some sense of completion in *American Surfaces*, the desire evolved within you to find some means for achieving that more intricately constructed and elucidated sense of pictorial space, which in turn necessitated the use of the view camera.

SS: There were a couple of steps. When I started *Uncommon Places* and first went to the Crown Graphic, my intention was simply to produce a larger negative, and do the exact same pictures. The first pictures I did, and which have never been published, were of a Chinese takeout meal on a table done with an on-camera flash on the Crown Graphic, a big old flashbulb like Weege used to use. The more pictorial explorations started with the use of the view camera. The following year, in 1974, I borrowed an 8x10 camera from my friend Weston Naef, and I remember the first day I used it thinking that I had found the tool that I had been looking for. So only at that point does the second part of your argument come into play, of whether the camera led me to this, or whether it was something in me that led to the camera. In the course of that year using the 4x5, other interests arose, and when I got my hands on an 8x10 for the first time, I immediately felt like I had found the tool to do what I had wanted to do, even before I knew I wanted to do it.

GB: I want to ask you about your use of portraiture in *Uncommon Places*, which has always seemed to me to be its most problematic aspect. If we're to consider at least one chief aspect of the project as the attempt at a rigorous analysis of pictorial space, and that act itself of constructing such a hermetic and evacuated space as an emblematic parallel to a thoroughly disillusioned model of subjectivity, what possible value could a portrait practice have within that, projecting as it does such hopes of the essentializing and consummating moment?

SS: It's a complicated issue. Let me give you a couple of different answers. First, in formal terms, it's a different kind of subject. *American Surfaces*, for instance, which also used portraiture as one of its several motifs, had a different kind of balance between people, objects, and places than *Uncommon Places* did, which is much more architecture-oriented. I may be wrong, but if you were to take those architectural pictures out of it, and were left with food and objects, the people might fit in more. It's because it's a more singular subject and not a scene that it calls forth different formal solutions. But that's not addressing the deeper question you're asking.

When I look at a photographic portrait, I don't believe that I can draw any true conclusion about the person being photographed. I can have responses to the image; I can have thoughts and feelings about it, in the same way that I would have thoughts and feelings about a fictional character. That could even be very interesting. But in reading a novel, for example, I don't mistake the character for being a real person.

I think an interesting example of this is *Intimate Enemy*, a book that the photographer Robert Lyons did. He had access to prisons in Rwanda. He photographed both perpetrators

and survivors of the genocide. Some of the portraits project that quality of presumptive wisdom that Paul Strand might have tried to get; they have the photographic signs that we're culturally cued to pick up on, like the look in the eye, the wrinkles on the face. And then you'll find out that this person is in fact a monster.

I'd say then that I see portraits as visual fictions. When I take a portrait, I have to be aware of how this expression is going to look out of the context of time, frozen into this moment, and how it could be read. But here's the thing: That doesn't mean that at the same time I can't bring my own perceptions to bear and attempt to see something in that person.

So I'm not in fact completely denying the old-fashioned notion of the portrait. I know enough about photography though to know that as a viewer of a portrait, I can't then take what I see in the portrait and make judgments about the person shown. Having said that, here's the confusing factor. Tod Papageorge, who's an old friend, came out to Berkeley, where my wife Ginger and I were getting married, and he photographed our wedding. It was in the backyard of a house we were renting in Berkeley. And other than Henry Wessel, Tod didn't know anyone there. But he took pictures of these people who are friends of mine, and I look at the pictures today and I think, "Gosh, Tod really got them. This is such a typical moment of this person; there's something of this person's personality that Tod really captured again and again and again." And that confuses things, particularly in light of the Rwanda monsters.

There's a picture in *Uncommon Places* of a couple from Oregon, the Wehrlys. He's a guy with white hair and a beard, and his wife is looking at him, with her arm on him, and there's a kind of tenderness between them, and he looks like a profound person. As I recall, he was an alcoholic who had nothing particularly interesting to say. He just looked a certain way. Who knows why she looked at him in that way at that moment? I'm taking a picture out of a flow of events.

For me there aren't any simple answers to that; there are many layers.

GB: The Papageorge anecdote, I think, at least raises one complication, which is the mutually exclusive nature of public and private meanings in a portrait.

SS: But what I'm suggesting is that Tod had particular insight. An ability to see someone for the first and only time in his life, and pick up on something in their personality.

GB: You're speaking, then, of mannerisms. Photographic as well as social.

SS: Mannerisms. But they seem very true to those people, and I think another photographer, who may have been less perceptive than Tod, would have been there and gotten entirely different pictures.

GB: I've mentioned portraiture because it feels to me like the feature of *Uncommon Places* that most prominently hearkens back to the more traditional idea of essentializing. Does *Uncommon Places*, in contrast to that, seek what we have been referring to as a neutralized ground? Was that ever an intention behind it? A way, on the one hand, of looking for a form of pictorial consummation, the sense that this picture could only have been taken from this place, at this time, by this person; but on the other hand a self-conscious leveraging of that ambiguous photographic facticity, one that empties out the same construction, so that to your complement, the sensitized viewer, it becomes a neutral ground upon which any subsequent subjectivities might begin anew?

SS: Regarding neutrality, what I remember thinking about at the time was that with all the respect I have for Robert Frank, I still felt his work was too pointed. In the early '70s, the term "fictive" was often used in conversations among photographers. And despite all the Postmodern writers who would come

soon after, this was no news to photographers. You couldn't be a good photographer if you believed that a picture was a factual depiction of reality, because you wouldn't have been in command of the tools.

What occurs to me as you ask this is that maybe one of the reasons *Uncommon Places* allows for new ideas to flow is that I'm not trying to confine it to a specific set of ideas. That this is a journey of exploration for me. And there are visual questions that arise, and questions about content that arise, and as I explore them, I take them on as they come. So there isn't an overarching or single intention, which can explain why I might treat different things in different visual ways, and do at different times.

Some photographers go out and want to make beautiful photographs. I think that puts the cart before the horse. Good photographs are the by-product of some other exploration, or some other intention. If I'm following through on those explorations and intentions, I can't help but ultimately create what you're referring to as the arc of an oeuvre — there's nothing else, in fact, that I can do.

Newly expanded and remastered editions of *American Surfaces*, published by Phaidon, and *Uncommon Places*, published by Aperture, are widely available. *A Road Trip Journal*, published by Phaidon, will be released in Spring, 2008. Stephen Shore is the Director of the Photography Program at Bard College.

All photographs courtesy of 303 Gallery, New York.

“The pictures are reflective of the condition of a self, paying attention.” — Stephen Shore



Steven Shore
...
Room 125, Westbank
Motel, Idaho Falls, Idaho,
July 18, 1973
From *Uncommon Places*