

#89 Jan. 2024 Cameraderie
Stephen Shore (1947-)



Shore explains his “American Surfaces” images at his MOMA Retrospective.

Stephen Shore’s biography is the most interesting of any photographer I have studied in this series. As a recent, still living, and still working photographer, he tells some of his story in his video lectures on the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) websites (see below). He took up photography as a high school drop-out (and ironically, he says, he is now a professor at Bard College). At age 14, he boldly asked Edward Steichen (#9, Sept. 2013), Director of Photography at MOMA, to let him visit Steichen and show Steichen his photographs—Steichen graciously met with him and bought three of his photographs for the MOMA collection. Later, Shore entangled himself with Andy Warhol and was photographing at Warhol’s meeting place, “The Factory,” for three years. After that, Shore has continuously reinvented himself for the rest of his life with a series of notable projects.

“Stephen Shore ...[and his contemporaries] in the nineteen-seventies, stormed to eminence with color film, which art photographers had long disdained.” [New Yorker review of his 2018 50-year retrospective at MOMA]. Here is the full New Yorker review:

This immersive and staggeringly charming retrospective is devoted to one of the best American photographers of the past half century. Shore has peers—Joel Meyerowitz, Joel Sternfeld, Richard Misrach, and, especially, William Eggleston—in a generation that, in the nineteen-seventies, stormed to eminence with color film, which art photographers had long disdained. His best-known series, “American Surfaces” and “Uncommon Places,” are both from the seventies and were mostly made in rugged Western states. The pictures in these series share a quality of surprise: appearances surely unappreciated if even really noticed by anyone before—in rural Arizona, a phone booth next to a tall cactus, on which a crude sign (“GARAGE”) is mounted, and, on a small-city street in Wisconsin, a movie marquee’s neon wanly aglow, at twilight. A search for fresh astonishments has kept Shore peripatetic, on productive sojourns in Mexico, Scotland, Italy, Ukraine, and Israel. He has remained a vestigial Romantic, stopping in space and time to frame views that exert a peculiar tug on him. This framing is resolutely formalist: subjects composed

laterally, from edge to edge, and in depth. There's never a "background." The most distant element is as considered as the nearest. But only when looking for it are you conscious of Shore's formal discipline, because it is as fluent as a language learned from birth. His best pictures at once arouse feelings and leave us alone to make what we will of them. He delivers truths, whether hard or easy, with something very like mercy.

Here is the link to Shore's MOMA Retrospective website:

<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3769>

This website documents how Shore "keeps reinventing himself," as the show curator, Quentin Bajac, has said in one of the videos on the website. You can traverse through the rooms of the exhibit, and stop at each wall of photographs, then zoom in on a few individual photographs. There are multiple short videos embedded on the website narrated by Shore and others. He is very interesting and a very good lecturer, being presently a professor at Bard. As you scroll down the website, you will come to a set of four embedded videos. The upper left one is titled "HOW TO SEE;" please view at least this ten-minute video.

Here is another MOMA website—an artist profile of Shore. There is some overlap with the Retrospective exhibit, but there are narrative texts, images to browse, and both audio and video to take in:

<https://www.moma.org/artists/5409>

In the early 1970s, Shore took a road trip from New York to Amarillo TX. His famous "American Surfaces" project was the result. Here is an article about it:

<https://www.artnews.com/feature/stephen-shore-american-surfaces-1202688481/>

Here is Shore's website, containing a number of sub-categories of the "American Surfaces" project:

<http://stephenshore.net/photographs/americansurfaces/index.php?page=1&menu=photographs>

This is a link to a brief interview, but I will quote here its most cogent part:

Shore held a solo exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art [in New York City] at age 24.

Shore's work is celebrated alongside William Eggleston's as laying the groundwork for the place of color photography in the art canon.

<https://news.artnet.com/market/artnet-asks-photographer-stephen-shore-84306>

In the early 1970s, Shore created his "All the Meat You Can Eat" show. Here is a link to a brief article on it: [Stephen Shore. All the Meat You Can Eat. 1971 | MoMA](#)

The following International Center for Photography bio gives a good summary of Shore's entire career.

<https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/constituents/stephen-shore?all/all/all/all/0>

Here is the Wikipedia article link: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Shore

Shore has constantly explored photographic concepts. In his video lectures and discussions (please view them and listen to them), he explains what he is exploring in each of his phases. Below I will try to discuss a representative of each phase.

Dallas, Texas, June 1972, from the “American Surfaces” series.



Shore explains in one of his MOMA Retrospective videos that this series attempts to “see” through the camera the way we see in real life (in snatches and at odd angles) everyday things that for a moment might have a special mental radiance for us. Therefore, it is the *collection* of these images that makes “American Surfaces” special.

How the “American Surfaces” images were displayed at the MOMA Retrospective.



Shore chose to present these images in post card size format, both in the original exhibit of them many years ago, and in the reproduced MOMA Retrospective. I think this is part of his concept of “seeing” these images.

From the MOMA Retrospective.



In this room, two images are “off the wall” in the center of the room.

From the MOMA Retrospective.



More “off the wall” images, demonstrating creative ways to display images, credit to the curator, Quentin Bajac.

Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975, from the “Uncommon Places” Series.



Shore discusses this image at length in his MOMA Retrospective videos. He says this is the most complex shot in this series, pointing to the pairing of rectilinear objects everywhere in the image. He shot it with an 8x10 view camera and explains to us that there is a world of detail in every part of the image. In a panel discussion video, he talks about “seeing the world with concentrated attention.”

From Shore's website, one of his Warhol shots.



It appears to me that recent photographers (like Robert Frank (#23, Oct. 2017) in his 1958 book *The Americans*) are unafraid to shoot social images out of focus, apparently going for story and feeling rather than sharpness. Note that the ceiling line is not level, consistent with Shore's approach of shooting in the same way he sees.

Broadwater County, Montana, 2021, from Shore's website.



This sort of landscape study was one of Shore's recent interests. He has commented that there is no foreground, no center, no background—everything is shown in full detail, just as one's eye would see it as one looks from place to place over the entire view.