

# All the non-sights worth seeing

PHOTOGRAPHY

## Stephen Shore: *Something & Nothing*

Sprüth Magers, London

Francis Hodgson

You don't get much more garlanded than Stephen Shore. His talent was recognised very early and has not been in much doubt ever since. This is a photographer who at the age of 14 sold a few prints to Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who hung out at Warhol's Factory while still in his teens, and who became only the second living photographer to have a show at the Metropolitan Museum while still only 24.

These days, Shore, who is in his mid-sixties, cuts a donnish figure, habitually clad in tweeds; he has long been a distinguished teacher. His theoretical primer on photography, *The Nature of Photographs*, is a wonder of pithy enlightenment, and two books of his own pictures – *American Surfaces* and *Uncommon Places* – are counted among the fundamental American photo books. He was very quick to make digital books, too. Now he has a small but fine exhibition at the Sprüth Magers gallery in Mayfair.

Shore has often been credited, along with William Eggleston, as being among those early to adopt colour photography as an artistic medium when so many thought it only good for vulgar commercial pictures. He was also one of the great inheritors of the American tradition of the road, following such major photographers as Walker Evans and Robert Frank, and ahead of others such as Alec Soth. That has allowed him to work as a diaristic photographer, a conceptual artist, a documentary photographer. His apparently tumultuous, even incontinent, variety of treatments suggests an artist anxious never to repeat himself, and Shore is certainly that. But the variety of approach



'Queens,  
New York,  
April, 1972'

masks a consistency, too. Shore has always been at pains to strip away the conventions of artistic vision the better to examine what it means actually to look.

That sounds suspiciously simple. Indeed, Shore has often made gestures that alone would be plain beyond describing. He once photographed every meal he ate on one journey, for example. He has often photographed the picture on TV screens. Simple, but millions of Instagrammers and Flickr users do exactly that every day now. In Shore's hands, such a process became the visual equivalent of oral history, close in feel to the original aims of the Mass Observation project in the UK (and similar attempts) to get to grip with the vernacular.

Always with Shore, his process – how he chose to see what he saw – matters as much as the formal subject. American photographers tend to take themselves seriously, and there is a long line of po-faced lensmen who have taken up one or another of Shore's inventions. But with Shore there is always a leavening of wit, the hint of a smile.

His new show, *Something & Nothing*, is arranged differently from most in the past. He has made 10 close groupings of pictures by theme, varying between three or four

pictures to eight or 10 in each group, quite irrespective of when they were made or where. This puts lovely little 6x4-inch C-types with plain white borders (fading a little now) next to larger, newer prints. It shows the consistency of his vision, in that he has come again and again to look at similar non-sights.

His landscape set shows his method nicely: here he is, on a ridge high above the Dead Sea in 2009. The picture he finally chooses is neither heavy with Biblical influence nor with more modern political weight. Instead he makes a view that seems deliberately to ask what it might be to make a view up there. Scrubby foreground; the sea not even defined as the background, since a low line of land lies beyond; focus not at all clearly in one plane. It's the view that other photographers would have passed by on their way to The View.

Two vitrines in the show give two different perspectives on the man and his work. In one, from which Shore has obviously taken his title, lie two lectures by John Cage, *Lecture on Nothing* and *Lecture on Something*. These seem to speak for Shore with modesty and elegance: "Someone said 'Art should come from within; then it's profound.' But it seems to me Art goes within and I don't see the need for should..." In the other vitrine, a Magritte of a frame-within-a frame lies boldly next to a Shore photograph of a censored billboard of a landscape seen within a landscape. This is a mis-step – there are not many in the show – a little ponderous, a little self-important.

That's always been a failing of Shore's. He has long felt that if he looked with enough concentrated attention at something, then it must be interesting. Often it has been, but not quite always. And from that confidence sprang a dull legion of his imitators who have made large-format views of nothing at all.

On his best form, though, Shore discovers the poetry of ordinariness. He also discovers that the ordinary isn't ordinary at all.



'Dead Sea from  
Judean Desert,  
West Bank,  
September 20,  
2009'

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