Stephen Shore's non-peak moments

It is exactly one week after the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States of America. And from his New York home, Stephen Shore is looking down his computer at me, via the Skype feed that links us, deliberating over the words to express his reaction to the news. "This is going to be a very slow recovery, I think. All over the world it's been a shock." The sprightly, silver-haired Shore, who turns 70 this year, pauses for a moment and then neatly diverts the political headline to a subject still relevant to the discussion but of greater concern to him personally.

"I do Instagram very actively. I have a lot of followers in Iran," says Stephen Shore. "In fact, the book on photography I wrote called *The Nature of Photographs*, a bootleg translation in Farsi, has been published in Tehran and has been used in schools there. One of the people Donald Trump is considering for Secretary of State is a person whose policy position is to pre-emptively bomb Iran. This is unbelievable!"

This observation of a potential area of conflict that remains no more than a peripheral concern to others is consistent with Shore's way of seeing the world. During our conversation, he uses several phrases to describe his perspective. This is a man led by his "contrarian nature" and attracted to the "non-peak moments" of life; a photographer who sees the world "with a heightened awareness", whether it's on the ground glass of 8 x 10, or through the nose of a plastic Mick-a-Matic.

By the time Shore was 14, he thought of nothing else but photography: "Oh yeah. I was very serious about it," he says. Then, his eyes widen and the brow rises, as a distant memory pushes to the forefront of interest. "Something I just remembered when talking to someone last week, by the time I was probably 11… do you know what developing by inspection is?"

I try earnestly to recall the phrase from the vernacular of a master Fleet Street printer long gone, but to no avail. Shore bridges the gap: "In the middle of the developing process of film under a very, very dark green safelight, you're taking the film out of the developer and looking at it and judging how much further development it needs. It takes it out of using a clock to develop the film, it makes it entirely a judgement call that's based on experience. It's a very hard thing to do, and this was how I was developing black and white film when I was 11 or 12. I'd forgotten about it until last week."

As he speaks, I wonder at the child who taught himself to process film at six, develop by inspection at 11, phoned MoMA's department of photography director Edward Steichen at 14, and hung out with Andy Warhol at 17. I'm thinking: "Really Stephen, what *were* you like as a child?"

Self-portrait, New York, 1976

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Do you think you were a precocious or overly confident child?
I don't think I contacted Steichen because I was overly confident. I think it was more that I was naïve, in a way. I was just a kid and didn't think this was something you weren't supposed to do. The fact was, there weren't that many photographers at the time, and I think he spent a lot of time sitting around his office without something to do. I know that at the beginning of the 70s I had this long relationship with John Szarkowski, his successor, and I would see John frequently whenever I had a new body of work and we would discuss it. But by the end of the 70s there was so much demand on his time that he couldn't do this with people as much. But in Steichen's day there just weren't that many demands on his time.

Another pivotal moment from your childhood was when you were gifted a Walker Evans book, *American Photographs*. You'd never heard of him, yet that book was a key influence on your early work.
I can't help but think that. My work didn't really bear any resemblance to his at the time, but for me he is the central influence on my photography, and I feel that there is a kind of harmony of sensibility between me and Evans. I look at my Warhol photographs and the first time they were published in 1968, in a catalogue by the Moderna Museet in Stockholm – it had about 165 pages of my pictures and a section about equal in size of pictures by Billy Name. And it's very interesting to see the stylistic differences, because we were at the same places at the same time, and my pictures are simply more formal, they're more formally organised. They're more classical in their approach. And this I think is something innate in me, it's just part of why I feel this way about Evans' work; there's a classicism in his work that speaks to me. It's not simply that I was influenced by it, it's that it spoke to something that may already have been there in me.

Speaking of Warhol, you were at The Factory practically every day for two or three years. What do you think watching this great modern artist on a daily basis taught you as a photographer?
Well, I was just 17 at the time and I don't have that many memories of it. But I saw how he would experiment with things and he would be open to new technologies. When video cameras were first invented – I guess it was when they were first invented, I'd never seen one before – one appeared at his office and he played with it. There was a lot of artistic play going on, and I saw him make decisions.

The cow wallpaper, for example: he'd try this colour background, that wasn't quite right, he'd try a different colour combination. I got a sense of what the creative process and aesthetic thinking was really like. Just as I found a kinship with Evans' perspective, in his classicism, there was something I found with Warhol – I don't think I learned from him – that also resonated something within me, which is a kind of relishing of contemporary culture. Not cynically, not buying into it either, but from a distance, thinking, 'This is amazing.'

You've been described as being best known for, and I'll quote here: "Images of banal scenes and objects and also as a pioneer of the use of colour in art photography." Would you say the scenes you are attracted to are, in fact, banal? Do you see them as such?
You know [pauses], someone wrote that about me and someone else set up a Facebook page for me. ➣

Andy Warhol and Gerard Malanga, 1967

[Left] Stephen's wife, Ginger Shore at Causeway Inn, Tampa, Florida, 1977
[Above] Room 509, Dnipro Hotel, Kiev, Ukraine, 2012

Paul Strand told me, and his exact words were: 'Higher emotions cannot be communicated in colour!' I was not a naïve artist, I knew this was nuts.

They didn't even ask me, they just set it up. And I eventually found out who did it and I took it over and I left that. You can't generalise a career: we're talking about decades, so it's hard to sum it up. But the reason I left it in was this: one of the things that interested me was to communicate the experience of seeing the world with heightened awareness, to really pay attention to the world around you. And in a certain way, that is more clearly communicated if what you're looking at isn't dramatic.

If you're seeing an amazing event, of course you're paying attention to it. But to really exercise awareness means paying attention, when you're riding in the back of a taxi or just walking down the street. I find I'm often attracted to the undramatic moments, the non-peak moments. For example, I've been photographing, both for Instagram and myself, my garden. Also, I tend the garden and I'm interested in the life of the plants other than when they're blooming. I'm interested in what they look like after they have gone to seed. And I know that the typical garden photograph is made when it is in bloom, but for a typical perennial that's maybe three weeks in a year. For me, they're of interest when they're budding out, they're of interest when they go to seed, so I'm photographing all of that. And so I'm using that as a kind of metaphor for looking at culture in general.

How did you make the transition from black and white to colour in the early 1970s? What were the influences for you to make that step, to explore colour?

There are a couple of things that happened at the same time. When I had my show at the Met [aged 24, Shore became the second living photographer to have a one-man show at the Met, in 1971] which was all black and white work, I was interested in exploring some new projects. I was interested in the vernacular use of photography and I curated a show at an exhibition space in New York, a show called 'All The Meat You Can Eat', which was made up of snapshots and postcards and police photographs and pornography, and all kinds of different uses of photography from collections that two friends and I had assembled.

I also did a series of postcards that year of Amarillo in Texas. It's 10 postcards, it's the 10 highlights of Amarillo. It plays off the genre of the postcard a little bit in that half of them are of the actual type of things that postcards are typically of: the small American city, the main street, the hospital, the civic centre. And then half are local places like the Double Dip, where kids go on Friday nights to get sodas, and the Army and Navy store, where people go to buy their Levis. And so it's places that wouldn't really have a postcard of it, but treated the same way. I then had it printed by the largest printer of postcards in America. So these are real postcards and, of course, they're in colour because postcards were always in colour at the time.

The third project was a series of snapshots using a ridiculous camera called a Mick-A-Matic, which was a big plastic head of Mickey Mouse with a lens in his nose. I had sent the film out to Kodak and got snapshots. And again, like the postcards, some were just like anybody else's snapshots, of somebody smiling, but some were pictures that you would not really see a snapshot of, but in the form of a snapshot, made with a snapshot camera and printed by Kodak and again in colour, because all snapshots were in colour. And this last project led to 'American Surfaces' the following year [1972]. So those were my first experiments in colour.

Shoot for *Another Magazine*, 2006

[Left] Holden Street, North Adams, Massachusetts, 1974
[Above] New York City, 1973

I started examining: 'What does looking, look like? What is this experience like? Can I use this as a basis for making a picture?'

Also, around the same time I had the Met show I met a young composer at a party in New York and he expressed interest in seeing my work. He didn't know anything about photography, but he was involved in the arts. So I opened up a box of prints and his first reaction is, "Oh, they're in black and white."

I thought, this is interesting: here's a person who is an artist himself in a different medium, is cultured but knows nothing about photography, and his expectation was that he was going to see something in colour, because all photographs were in colour – except fine art photography.

Television was in colour, movies were in colour, billboards were in colour. That made me think: why did this person have this reaction, and where does this convention in me come from? That happened just at the time I started doing the snapshots and postcards, and that led to me re-thinking colour.

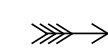
Then, when I first showed 'American Surfaces' at Light Gallery in the Fall of 1972, I had lunch with Paul Strand, who was also represented by the gallery. And in the kindest, most thoughtful, grandfatherly way, he told me, and his exact words were: "Higher emotions cannot be communicated in colour!" I was not a naïve artist. I had read, for example, Wassily Kandinsky, on higher emotions and colour specifically. So I knew this was nuts.

At the end of the 'American Surfaces' project what did you feel you had discovered? How did you feel you had moved on in terms of your photography?
At the beginning of the project, I discovered I wanted to make a picture that – and the term I used at the time was, 'that felt natural'. And now that I'm a professor I would say, 'an experience of the world less mediated by visual convention'. But maybe saying 'natural' is just as good! What I mean was, at various moments during the day, and not when I was just taking pictures, I would take what we would now call a (mental) screen shot of my field of vision.

I started examining: 'What does looking look like? What is this experience like? Can I use this as a basis for making a picture?' So, once I started making these mental screen shots, it fed the pictures very quickly. So that was the major formal change: to take a picture that felt like the experience of seeing something, not the experience of composing a photograph, although they were in fact composed, but they were composed to be like seeing.

The breakthrough for me, by the end, was that by the time I came back from this cross-country trip, I found a content of American culture that I would continue to explore for maybe five years afterward with large format cameras. But I see a lot of the roots in terms of content and common places in the 'American Surfaces' work.

During that project, what were you actually working with?
The camera I used was a Rollei 35. I wanted a camera that looked almost amateurish. It was so small, I don't think there was room on top for the accessory shoe. And the flash actually went underneath, which made incredibly beautiful flash, because the shadow outlined things. It gave an almost Cubistic effect of making things pop and be outlined. I wanted to be able to go to someone and say, "Can I take your picture?" without them being intimidated by the camera. I mean, by that time I had a Hasselblad, two Nikons and two Leicas. But one thing I learned from using the Mick-a-Matic, where you always got pictures of people smiling because you've got this



Merced River, Yosemite National Park, California, 1979

[Left] Ginger Shore, West Palm Beach, Florida, 1977
[Left] Michael and Sandy Marsh, Amarillo, Texas, 1974
[Next page] Stanley Marsh and John Reinhardt, Amarillo, Texas, 1975

My camera is my iPhone. If a camera can't go in my breast pocket, I'm just not interested.

plastic Mickey Mouse, I realised the camera you use is going to affect the interchange. I wanted a camera that's not intimidating. I could appear as just some kid travelling around taking snapshots.

Which in effect, you were.
Exactly.

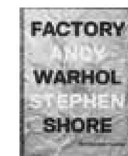
The perception is that when you started with colour, the black and white stopped. But is that really the case?
Well, it did stop for 20 years.

So when did you pick it up again and why?
In 1991, because at that point – and this is the contrarian nature of my thinking, and kind of stupid, as my decisions often are – I realised I had been working in colour for 20 years. When I started, there were just a handful of artists and photographers working in colour. Now, 20 years later, there were very few working in black and white! So that contrarian part of me thought: 'I spent 20 years working in colour, but now I'm going to spend the next 10 working in black and white.' And I did. I can't tell if I'm unconventional, or if it's just that when something is a convention, the hairs on my back go up or something. That's not seeing things in a real way. That's seeing through a filter of convention.

Let's fast forward to now and you're on Instagram. Can you describe how you are working now? What subjects are you pursuing?
All I am doing is Instagram. I did a project last month for a new French magazine in Washington DC. I've a Nikon D800 which I love, and I used that. I've done a few 4 x 5 black and whites of my garden this summer and I did a few the summer before, but other than that, my camera is my iPhone. Everything I post on Instagram is taken with the iPhone except 'Throw Back Thursday' pictures. So if I do post a TBT picture, I label it as such and give the date. But everything else is done with the iPhone, and it's always posted, if not the day it was taken, within a couple of days.

That is an extraordinary change when you think about how you began and the path that you have followed.
Yes. Even when I switched to black and white, I worked with an 8 x 10, so I spent almost 30 years working with an 8 x 10; I've paid my dues. Now I figure that if a camera can't go in my breast pocket, I'm just not interested. You know, if you use an 8 x 10 for 30 years, you take one picture of everything; you don't bracket exposures, you take one picture. That's how I use the iPhone. I'll take two if I'm taking pictures of people on the street, three if they're moving, but basically I'm treating it like a view camera and it's similar. Instead of looking at the ground glass I'm looking at the screen, but it's not looking through the camera. When I see people photographing with their iPads, I can relate to that. The iPad is the same size as 8 x 10 ground glass. It's taking the camera out of being an extension of your eye. You're not looking through the camera, you're looking at an image on the screen or the ground glass, and the camera then becomes a tool – it's not an extension of yourself. So when I see tourists holding up their iPads, I relate to that. I understand what the attraction is.

Keith Wilson



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