

Roadside Reflections on Your Land, My Land

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Museum of Modern Art
"New Orleans (Woman Eating)," 2004, part of a sequence taken in 2004-5 by the British photographer Paul Graham.

The latest project from the British photographer Paul Graham, "a shimmer of possibility," is a quietly radical update of the Great American Road Trip.

Mr. Graham, born in 1956, grew up looking at Robert Frank, William Eggleston and the photographers of the New Topographics movement. Yet "shimmer" rejects the linear, automobile-centric narrative of the 1960s and '70s in favor of a looser, more open-ended structure, one that Mr. Graham has aptly called "filmic haiku." It is a form that owes more to Chekhov's short stories than to Kerouac's novels.

Mr. Graham's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, organized by the photography curator Susan Kismaric, is only a slice of a larger book project. Published in 2007 as a series of 12 slim volumes, "a shimmer of possibility" is currently out of print but will be reissued in March as a single volume by steidlMACK. Mr. Graham also has a midcareer survey at Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany, on view through May 4.

The book is the product of Mr. Graham's travels around the United States after his 2002 move from London to New York. On more than a dozen trips to states including Nevada, Texas, North Dakota, California and Louisiana, he took thousands of pictures of unspectacular, everyday life in America.

Nothing new there. But when Mr. Graham subsequently clicked through the images on his computer, sequences began to emerge: a woman eating takeout in New Orleans, a man mowing the lawn in Pittsburgh. Essentially a retrospective project, "shimmer" takes full advantage of digital photography's "shoot now, ask questions later" ethos, a generational marker that separates Mr. Graham from the likes of Robert Adams and Stephen Shore.

Mr. Graham's national and cultural identity also figures in the shift away from the American social-documentary tradition. As he said in a recent interview: "The great open road journey photography doesn't translate that well to the United Kingdom. It's not that big." In Mr. Graham's photographs the highway-and-strip-mall landscape is humanized by arresting images of people on their daily errands and commutes.

Mr. Graham's early series, like "A1 — The Great North Road" (1981-82) and "Beyond Caring" (1984-85), documented the grim realities of Thatcher-era Britain in living color. At the time it was an unexpected combination, although color photography had other advocates in Britain: Martin Parr, Simon Norfolk, Richard Billingham.

Through the 1990s Mr. Graham slowly expanded his scope. "New Europe" (1988-93) explored life in Western Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall; "Empty Heaven" (1989-95) took a look at the intermingling of history and fantasy in Japanese youth culture.

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In the precursor to “shimmer,” the series and photo book “American Night” (1998-2003), Mr. Graham emphasized the geographical fragmentation and socioeconomic stratification of American life. He juxtaposed deliberately overexposed streetscapes of slums, and portraits of their inhabitants, with crisp, vivid shots of recently constructed suburban houses. Turning the pages, you experienced a psychic disconnect of the sort driven home, two years later, by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

In “shimmer” Mr. Graham focuses almost exclusively on Americans who are struggling or of modest means. We intuit their circumstances from their surroundings or gestures or physical appearances. Few subjects seem aware of the camera, either because they are distracted, or because Mr. Graham maintains a polite distance.

The installation of “shimmer” at the Modern tries to replicate the episodic, Chekhovian experience of the books. Its nine sequences — each containing prints of varied size, placed at different heights — represent only fragments of the volumes from which they are drawn.

In one group of photographs taken in New Orleans in 2004-5 (before Katrina), a woman sitting on a stoop hunches over a takeout container of fried food; her frizzled, overprocessed hair is the same color as her lunch. Six images show her face in profile, her hands as she eats her meal, her postprandial cigarette and the food scraps she has apparently left on the street.

A group of photographs taken in California has several story lines. One shows an androgynous figure crouched on the street outside a fast-food joint; in another, a little girl plays with toys on the curb outside a windowless building.

A separate photograph from California, which hangs on its own across the room, is a large close-up of a man’s hands cradling a Styrofoam cup. We can’t see whether the cup holds change, coffee or something more potent.

The content of “shimmer” isn’t all bleak. In a sequence from Texas, an African-American father and daughter shoot hoops in their driveway at sunset. The sun is so low that the photographs look underexposed, but you can just make out the words on the daughter’s shirt — “Lee Country All-Stars” — and the ball floating off her fingertips.

The books are more intimate; the 12 volumes vary widely. (One contains just a single photograph of a blue Camaro with a peeling hood.) They offer many excellent images that didn’t find a place in the exhibition, including a single photograph taken in New Orleans after Katrina: a shot of maraschino cherries lying in a puddle on the pavement. It’s rich in color and suggestion.

In both the books and the exhibition, you can sense Mr. Graham’s dissatisfaction with traditional photojournalism. His solution is imperfect; it forces the photographer into the role of editor, which doesn’t always work. But it acknowledges that the way we experience photography is changing, through slide shows, vast archives sifted and sorted by tags and key words, and ease of access to video.

In other words, the photographer setting out on the American road must obey the rules of the information superhighway.

“a shimmer of possibility: Photographs by Paul Graham” is on view through May 18 at the Museum of Modern Art; (212) 708-9400, moma.org.