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Paul Graham: 'The photography I most respect pulls something out of the ether'

The influential English photographer talks about succeeding in New York after years as an outsider in London

Pittsburgh, 2004 (Lawnmower Man) From the series 'A Shimmer of Possibilities'.
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Sean O'Hagan
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In his catalogue essay for Paul Graham's imminent retrospective at east London's Whitechapel Gallery, the photography writer and curator David Chandler borrows a telling quotation from Richard Ford's novel, The Lay of the Land. "I do not credit the epiphanic, the seeing-through that reveals all, triggered by a mastering detail…" writes Ford in the voice of his American everyman narrator, Frank Bascombe. "Life's moments truly come at us heedless, not at the bidding of a gilded fragrance."

Paul Graham's most recent book of photographs, a shimmer of possibility, which was published in 2007, could be read as 12 visual short stories that illuminate – in their often open-ended, elliptical way – Bascombe's unvarnished view of life. Graham has said before that it was Anton Chekhov's short stories, rather than the work of any photographic precursor, that underpinned his way of seeing the world, when he began the project with the first of many journeys around America in the summer of 2004; but it is the quotidian America conjured up by writers such as Ford and John Updike that comes most readily to mind in the often interlinked images that make up his most epic, and well-received, book.

In one sequence, a man cuts a huge swathe of grass that borders a suburban car park in Pittsburgh, the haze of the setting sun suddenly illuminating the soft rain that falls around him. In another, a woman with straw-coloured hair sits on a roadside bench with a fast-food takeaway on her lap. Graham photographs her in profile, then homes in on the carton of fried chicken, then the litter on the pavement beneath her, and finally frames her dragging deeply on a post-snack cigarette. There are echoes here of William Eggleston's heightened everydayness, but, if anything, Graham's gaze is even more democratic, his subject matter even more quotidian. Life's moments might come at us heedless, these vignettes suggest, but they nonetheless contain a quiet, often overlooked, poetry.

"I have been taking photographs for 30 years now," says Graham, a softly spoken Englishman who has lived in New York since 2002, "and it has steadily become less important to me that the photographs are about something in the most obvious way. I am interested in more elusive and nebulous subject matter. The photography I most respect pulls something out of the ether of nothingness… you can't sum up the results in a single line. In a way, 'a shimmer of possibility' is really about these nothing moments in life."

The survey of Graham's work, which opens at the Whitechapel on 20 April, is surprising in two distinct ways: it shows how far this influential photographer has travelled formally, from the more social documentary-based work of his younger years, and it is, shockingly, the first solo show of his work in a British gallery since he exhibited a few early images on the walls of the Photographers' Gallery staircase in the early 1980s. "I don't want to sound conceited," he says, "but that is surely indicative of British attitudes towards photography in general. I know things are changing, finally, but London has a lot of catching up to do with New York. There is a real culture of photography out here that is very affirming."

Graham, 54, is a self-taught photographer, who first picked up a camera as a child at the bidding of his scout-master. He grew up in rural Buckinghamshire before the family relocated to Harlow new town, in Essex, where everything was "precise, planned and pristine". Initially he studied microbiology at university before happening on the works of Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Edward Weston and Paul Strand in the social anthropology section of the college library. "Suddenly, it was like this light went on," he says. "It was the discovery that you could actually say something with photography. I got the work immediately, though I was completely unable to articulate it to anyone else." He cites Eggleston, Stephen Shore and Lee Friedlander as abiding influences, alongside formalists like Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz.

Between 1981 and 1986, while living in London, Graham made three books of colour photography that are now much sought after by collectors and students alike: A1 – The Great North Road (1983), Beyond Caring (1986) and Troubled Land (1987). Back then, they were met with suspicion and even anger. "I gave a talk to photography students at Newport College of Art in 1985," he says, ruefully, "and one of the tutors described Beyond Caring as 'poisonous'. By that, I think he meant that it was poisonous to the established order of working, which was to use a Leica, shoot in black and white, and always have an establishing shot."

Beyond Caring, for all the controversy it caused, remains his most straightforward book, a work of undercover reportage shot in dole offices throughout Britain. It was funded by the Greater London Council in the last days of "Red" Ken Livingstone and, to Graham's great surprise, subsequently acquired "this strange double life: as both a political work of social reportage handed out at lefty political conferences, and as a fine art photography book". Since then his work has grown ever more elliptical. Troubled Land remains one of my favourite books on the Northern Irish Troubles, not least because it came at them sideways – highlighting the strange, normalised reality of a place that was anything but normal.

In 1994, Graham returned to Northern Ireland to make a series called Cease Fire, which is a contender – alongside his later book, American Night – for his most ambiguous body of work. It comprises photographs of the sky over some of the province's best-known trouble spots: Andersonstown, Ballymurphy, the Bogside and the Shankill Road. It is another measure of Graham's ongoing journey from the obvious to the nebulous. Likewise American Night, in which several of the images were so over-exposed and bleached out that some critics returned the book to the publishers, thinking there had been a problem in the printing process. Graham had, as he puts it, "whitened out" the images in the darkroom to emulate "the sense of disorientation and drama" he felt when he came out of a cinema in Tennessee into the bright, blinding sunlight of the American south.

"It was a shock to the critics," he says, chuckling, "but it was a shock to me, too. I always feel like I am the first member of the audience to see the work, and, in that instance, I did have to ask myself, 'Can I take this seriously?' It was a tough question, but I hope the work answered it." My own view is that the jury is still out on that one.

Like the Deutsche Börse prize, which he won in 2009, the Whitechapel show is, among other things, a long-overdue acknowledgment of Paul Graham's willingness to take risks in his work, and not to shy from making pictures that ask awkward questions about how we see – and interpret – the world through photography. "Sometimes, when I go out with a camera, I don't have a plan or even know what it is I am looking for," he says, in conclusion. "But I do go out every time and question how we make photographs of the world. It's the same question that photographers have always asked: how is this world? And, what are the new ways to find that out?"