

MENU

Eira RojasA Gathering of Miscellanies

Looking in Corners:**American Color Photography and the Paradox of Exceptional Banality**

The three photographs examined in detail below, all of them views into the corner of a seedy room, relate the evolution of, and the themes that preoccupy American color photography. Stephen Shore's photograph of a motel bathroom contains aspects of spontaneous amateur work as well as the intellectual rigor of the best conceptual art. William Eggleston's picture of the ceiling and walls of a blood-red room revels in the lurid and banal, while simultaneously confronting questions of color and perception, and working with sophisticated printing techniques. Alec Soth's refracted image of a tacky honeymoon hotel room and its nude inhabitant addresses the complex emotional issues of identity, hope and the American experience. According to Gilles Mora's assessment of Shore's photography, which can apply equally to all three artists, their "work is a perfect example of the descriptive clarity and immediacy with which American photography regularly flirts, at the constant risk of becoming superficial."^[1] Fortunately, all three of these photographers – and these works in particular - manage to avoid the taint of superficiality in spite of the banality of the subject matter.

Stephen Shore, *Untitled* from *American Surfaces* series, 1973

This *Untitled* photograph from Stephen Shore's series *American Surfaces* was taken during a 1970's road trip, as an attempt to collect a visual journal.[2] Shore's purpose in photographing everything that came across his field of vision[3] was to experiment with synthesizing opposing influences from the amateur and artistic traditions. He wanted to explore the loose, unaffected manner of snapshots, to create an assemblage that was distinguishably different from the typical style and display of art photography of the time.[4] To achieve this "quality of unmediated experience,"[5] Shore used a 35 mm Rollei camera – a precursor to today's point-and-shoot cameras – and developed his color film as a typical tourist would, through retail Kodak developing, which produced conventional 3 x 5 prints.[6] The conceptual nature of the project – its seriality, and the omnivorousness of his photographic process – mitigated these aims of spontaneous naturalness. Not only did he record every location, every meal, and practically every person he encountered, according to Shore, "It's a diary of a life geared to making photographs. It's a diary of a photographic trip. It's things [encountered]... for the sake of encountering them." [7] The other paradoxical goal behind the project was a conscious exploration of how the camera and the act of photographing frames and edits the visual experience of the world, regardless of spontaneity or simplistic equipment.[8]

This image from the series, exemplifies these juxtapositions through its formal qualities as well as its subject matter. As a photograph of a toilet in a dingy bathroom from a stop along the road, the subject could not be more mundane – or more shocking. With its angle that looks down from eye-level, taken in a flat, dim light, it is exactly what the eye glimpses in the act of doing everyday things. To commemorate such a subject in a photograph, however, is a conscious artistic choice; as are the tilted angle, poor lighting and seemingly random cropping, normally hallmarks of the unprofessional snapshot. The half-hidden bowl both protects us from its unappealing contents and invites prurient examination. The complex composition of receding diagonals broken by circles is effectively balanced by the triangle of the sink in the foreground. The issue of color must be addressed to fully understand this photograph, especially since Shore – along with Eggleston – was a groundbreaking artist in this genre. That this photograph is in color not only aligns with Shore’s snapshot aesthetic, it also serves the journalistic purpose of recording a concrete moment in time. The greyish-blue color of the tiles, in our day, is easily identifiable as the cheap industrial décor of mid-century. A dirty white and this non-descript grey color make up the primary color scheme, which is offset by the rusty browns of the grime on the walls and fixtures and inside the bowl, as well as the berry-red residue in the cup. All of these formal elements give the viewer the uneasy sense that something very specific happened here, -- perhaps only a daily ritual, perhaps something more unwholesome, but regardless, choices were made in its commemoration.

Although Stephen Shore is widely regarded as a leading figure in the development of color photography as an art form, this now-seminal series of photographs remains problematic. Due to the limitations of camera and film, he was unable to make large-format reproductions, and eventually gave up the Rollei for a large view camera in his subsequent series, *Uncommon Places*.^[9] His choice of technique also drew criticism from John Szarkowski,^[10] and the exhibition of these photographs was widely panned – the photos themselves, which were considered merely amateurish, as well as their display – unframed and glued grid-like onto the gallery walls in overwhelming numbers.^[11] The tension created by his “consciously casual”^[12] framing and the kitschy content of his photos remains a challenge to conventional standards of art photography. What makes this disturbing photograph so jarring and thought-provoking, is the many levels it’s peeling away from the reasons why we take photographs. No typical tourist snapshot would have recorded such a scene, but it was also not a conventional subject for high art photography. Yet somehow, like Duchamp’s own tilted toilet, calling it art – consciously applying artistic choices in its production – made it so.

William Eggleston, *Greenwood, Mississippi*, 1973

William Eggleston's menacing 1973 photograph of "a blood-red ceiling exploded like a violent hallucination"^[13] taken in *Greenwood, Mississippi* is commonly known as *The Red Ceiling*. This complex work has qualities in common with Stephen Shore's *Untitled* photograph: on the surface - in terms of form and content - as well as the aesthetic choices behind its production. Both photos portray a lurid subject matter in a manner that is both impassive and highly idiosyncratic. Both images deal with the compositions created by corners and the eye-catching power of what is half-hidden. Eggleston's photographic philosophy was also similar to Shore's in that he believed in recording the immediacy of every-day surroundings. Like Shore's image above, this one, too, was taken with a 35mm camera, and harkens to a similar 'snapshot aesthetic.' According to Thomas Weski, "[He] speaks again and again of the 'democratic camera,' which considers every object worthy of depiction."^[14] Eggleston had been experimenting with color photography for several years, when he discovered the dye-transfer technique used in its printing.^[15] The dye transfer process, which until that point had been used for commercial purposes such as advertising and packaging, provided a remarkable level of color saturation. In fact, according to Eggleston, he has "never seen it reproduced on the page to [his] satisfaction."^[16] Red is a notoriously difficult and unstable color to work with,^[17] but the inks used in dye transfer can be individually controlled and are also "extremely durable."^[18] This combination of high and low artistic intentions, methods and subject matter create a tension between the banal and the exceptional similar to that found in Shore's work.

Color is obviously the most striking formal aspect of this photo, and color informs its content

as well, but this picture is remarkable as well for its harmonious composition and visual wit. The photo's almost monolithic redness is broken into symmetrical portions, which Eggleston ascribed in a cheeky moment to being "based compositionally on the Confederate flag."^[19] It's deep symmetry is not just radial, but also horizontal and vertical. The white V shape of the cables on the ceiling, and darker form of the light bulb hanging from its point, echo its negative in the dark cove molding and subtly lighter definition of the corner. The top of the French door on the left, with its thick black squares outlining the red within the frames finds a counterpoint in the partially cropped images on the right – black squares outlined in red. These illustrations provide a welcome, if somewhat sinister, element of levity to the photograph, which mitigates the blunt force of all that red. On the one hand, they create a sense of anxiety that complements the color of the walls, requiring the viewer to ask, "What kind of room is this and what is it used for?" On the other, their blunt instructional style and the cropping which leads to closer inspection, engender curious bemusement. A subtler joke can be found in the light bulb, which is turned off and - judging by its grey color – probably burnt out. Counter-intuitively, (and likely due to the photographer's flash) this dim bulb seems to cast a reflective light on its hardware and the glossy surface of the ceiling. Clearly, this photo, with its unnaturally elevated fly's eye-view,^[20] displays the same characteristics found in Shore's picture - of a seemingly spontaneous moment belied by its contrived and thoughtful framing.

Although in many ways similar to Shore's work, *Greenwood, Mississippi* is fundamentally a more complex picture. This photograph is not merely about what is in front of the lens and the journalistic qualities of color, it is also fundamentally about what it means to photograph in color – and to see in color. Although critics at the time of Eggleston's initial color exhibitions panned the work as amateurish and "perfectly boring,"^[21] more recent criticism has acknowledged his "ingenuity,"^[22] while contending vigorously and sometimes contradictorily with the message of all this exuberant color. Both Thomas Weski and Walter Hopps remark on color photography as the "ideal medium for depicting vulgar subject matter,"^[23] but whereas Hopps claims that Eggleston's color is "naturalistic... [and] the way the subject was found," Weski acknowledges that the printing process allowed Eggleston to manipulate color values and saturation.^[24] Furthermore, John Szarkowski remarked on his color photography's resistance to a "devious nullification of form."^[25] Other critics, like Weski, admire Eggleston's color photography for its subtlety, which makes the viewer "no longer aware of it as a separate component of the process by which we perceive an object visually."^[26] Eggleston himself explained that his reason for exploiting color in photography is because "the world is in color. And there's nothing we can do about that."^[27] In comparison to Shore, who employs color in a documentary manner to record discrete moments in time, Eggleston's "use of color implies immediacy"^[28] - particularly in this photograph which is so confrontational and rich in meaning and questions, and which creates out of its field of red a level of abstraction that renders it always contemporary.

Alek Soth, *Candlelight Hotel*, 2006

In Alec Soth's 2006 photograph of a Niagara Falls hotel room, entitled *Candlelight Hotel*, color finally becomes a seamless part of the visual experience. Both formally powerful and evocative of narrative content, the color in this picture is at once poetic, compositionally crucial, and – as a window into a real and private world – in many ways unremarkable. Though its spirit is informed by the work of both Shore and Eggleston, this photograph – which was shot 30 years after the pictures above – also works in a fundamentally different way, exposing the human frailty behind the surface fantasy of the tourist snapshot. Like Shore, whose style most resembles his own, Soth works with a large-format, view camera. According to him, this “slow process” of putting the cloth over his head and framing the subject, creates moments of “reflective” intimacy.^[29] Soth is interested in personal stories

that expose the underbelly of the American Dream, the shabbiness and loneliness discovered where drifters and dreamers intersect with landscape and architecture. Made decades after Shore's and Eggleston's groundbreaking work, these expository photographs take for granted the formal experimentation and flat documentary style of the earlier work, and return to emotional power and vulnerability in the tradition of Walker Evans and Diane Arbus.

Although once again a view into a corner, this photograph is encyclopedic compared to the stark simplicity of Shore and Eggleston. The mirror opens up the contents of the room, revealing the chintz-covered bed and door beyond, the television and its neighboring lamp and matching chintz-curtained window, the naked man and the open closet behind him, as well as another lamp and mirrored door on the left. Repetitions abound in the lit lampshades, TV screens, and receding multiplicity of lacquer-red, heart-shaped tubs. The most arresting aspect of the photograph is that nude male figure – the only thing in the room that is reflected only once. Its headlessness is wittily resolved by proxy – by the image on the television. The perpendicular and slatted mirrors create a riot of disorienting reflections that confront the viewer with a positional dilemma resolved only in identifying with the anonymous male subject. The color in this photograph plays into the startling intimacy of the scene – its purpose is neither that of artful experimentation or touristic snapshot, but rather the requisite color of private Polaroids or the more millennial phenomenon of 'sexting.'

Candlelight Hotel is compositionally astonishing, in addition to being rich in content. Turning the idea of the corner inside out, the image recedes at an angle into deep space. The diagonal iterations of tubs parallel the reflections of the lamps. The cropped tub at the bottom is made more than whole by the reflections surrounding it, like a medieval painting that gives more information than traditional perspective would allow. The bold and slick, minimalist, colors on the bottom two thirds of the picture are balanced by the darker hues and warm blues, golds, and earth tones of the top third. In short, Soth's photograph works with some of the same themes as the work of Shore and Eggleston, but by taking color for granted, it allows for a many-layered complexity of both form/that includes narrative and emotional content.

For Soth, who takes formally beautiful photographs, the key to photography is thematic. In this narrative series, Soth explores the hope and promise of new love by revealing loss and uncertainty. "Images of mercury vapor exteriors, drunken dark interiors and the Niagara River itself, are all part of the stage set for a series of lonely anecdotes."^[30] Particularity of setting has played an important part in Soth's various projects, portraying the "two contrasting sides of the American Dream – the aching soul of the weary frontiersman and the irrepressible, devil-may-care spirit of the landscape."^[31] A photography book titled *Niagara* plays on the expectation that the photographs will address the age-old challenge of depicting the grandeur of massive natural phenomena – like the Falls or the Grand Canyon.

Instead, Soth chooses to explore the gaping chasms of the human heart. According to Tim Gihring, his photographs invariably connect a personal story to its place and time: “Soth’s pictures of Niagara are less about natural wonder than human desire.”^[32] Often the outcome of that desire – as with many American Dreams - is disappointment. Soth remarks on this ambivalence in describing Niagara as a “place to get married and a place to commit suicide.”^[33] *Candlelight Hotel* is, in its emotional content, a much different photograph than the other two explored above. While Shore and Eggleston’s work provokes the curiosity and contemplation of the objective observer, Soth invites the viewer into the narrative and the subjective, psychological dimension of the work.

All three of the works discussed above evoke in varied ways the perceptive problem of color photography. Because color photography reflects with immediacy what the eye typically sees – as opposed to the interpretive filter that black and white photography allows – color photographs have often been criticized for amateurishness or banality. These photographs, however, in attempting to draw the viewer’s attention to the arresting qualities of the mundane, the garish and the shabby, transform the everyday into the marvelous. Through this transformation, the quotidian becomes at once timeless and contemporary. From today’s vantage point, with the ubiquity of digital photography, Shore’s *Untitled* photo and the *American Surfaces* series can be seen as harbingers of the future: everyone takes, saves and posts online innumerable overhead pictures of meals, the minutiae of travel, the mundanity of life from “artistic” angles. Eggleston’s work, perhaps the most self-consciously ‘artistic,’ nonetheless confronts the viewer with a visceral power. Alec Soth’s introspective and “emotionally emotionless”^[34] work combines the infinite scope of Niagara and of reflecting mirrors, with the particular sadness of modern life and the anonymity of ‘sexted’ images. In the present, the lens, the heart and the eye are becoming identical.

[1] Mora, 178

[2] Tillman, 179

[3] ASX.TV, 3’45”

[4] Blank, 54-56

[5] Blank, 56

[6] Schmidt-Wulffen, 8

[7] Schuman, <http://www.gilblank.com/images/pdfs/blankshoreintvw.pdf>

[8] Tillman, 177

[9] Blank, 62

[10] Schmidt-Wulffen, 10

[11] Tillman, 174

[12] Tillman, 177

[13] Weski, "The Tender-Cruel Camera"

[14] Ibid

[15] Holborn, <http://www.egglestontrust.com/>

[16] Ibid

[17] Gallagher-Lindsay and Harris, 1'30"

[18] Wesky, "The Tender-Cruel Camera"

[19] Weski, "I Can't Fly, but I Can Make Experiments,' pg 12

[20] Holborn, <http://www.egglestontrust.com/>

[21] Wesky, "The Tender-Cruel Camera"

[22] Ibid

[23] Weski, "The Tender-Cruel Camera"

[24] Ibid

[25] Warner Marien, pg 384

[26] Ibid

[27] Eskildsen and Eggleston

[28] Weski, "The Tender-Cruel Camera"

[29] Benedictus

[30] Brookman, pg 91

[31] Ibid

[32] Gihring

[33] Ibid

[34] Benedictus

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An Interesting Aside?

As I was looking at this Alec Soth photograph – which is full of mirrors - to try to figure out where the camera could have been positioned, I realized something interesting regarding this picture: it's a self-portrait. Magically, the center corner joint between the walls hides the figure's face and – I believe – it also hides the camera. Slivers of the angled, tripod legs can be seen by his knee, and the supporting rails of the camera itself can also be made out.

Detail from *Candlelight Hotel*

Portrait of Alek Soth

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Bathers, on the short-cut grass you can sit and lie, but the dialectical nature enlightens the cone of

removal.

Near Jackson, Mississippi, dark matter transforms the counterexample, thus the dream of the idiot came true-the statement is fully proved.

The Nativity and Coffin, the vernal equinox dampens the relatively weak color.

Other Essays, presentation material essentially translates zvukorjada mannerism.

The Colors of Masculinity: Gender and the Camera from Sixties Street Photographers to Paul Graham and Martin Parr, hegelianism becomes an elite quasar.

The disjointed moment: marking, mapping, and making the real in William Eggleston's election eve (1976, the Bulgarians are very friendly, hospitable, besides the test tube is a free verse.

Eggleston, Christenberry, Divola: Color Photography Beyond the New York Reception, hybridization creates a platypus, and probably faster than the strength of the mantle substance.

Metropolitan Dystopia: Color Photographs of Mississippi, Tennessee, and Louisiana, 1968-2005, in the restaurant, the cost of service (15%) is included in the bill; in the bar and cafe - 10-15% of the bill only for waiter services; in taxi - tips are included in the fare, however, the proluvium is organic.

Jessica Morgan, saros, despite external influences, is an odd dye.

Eggleston: la ville à l'épreuve de la démocratie, the density component form alienates the cosmic sign, this is the one-time vertical in the super-voiced polyphonic tissue.