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Photographer Paul Graham wins 2012 Hasselblad award

Self-taught photographer becomes first British winner of international prize for recognition of major achievements

Sean O'Hagan



Pittsburgh, 2004 (Lawnmower Man) From the series 'A Shimmer of Possibilities'. Copyright of the artist, courtesy of Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London.

Paul Graham has been named as the winner of the 2012 Hasselblad award, which is presented annually to "a photographer recognised for major achievements". It is the first time a British photographer has won the prestigious international prize. Previous recipients include Robert Adams (2009), Nan Goldin (2007) and William Eggleston (1998).

Graham, who had a major retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery in London last year, is a self-taught photographer. He was born in Buckinghamshire and discovered [photography](#) through the books of great American pioneers like Robert Frank, Walker Evans and Paul Strand. He has lived in New York since the early 1990s. Graham first garnered critical acclaim with his early documentary work, including [A1 – The Great North Road \(1983\)](#), a series shot in colour along the British motorway, and [Beyond Caring \(1985\)](#), which was shot in unemployment offices. Back then, Graham was a pioneer of colour in Britain, his work influencing subsequent generations of young photographers.

Belonging to what was arguably the last great generation of British documentary photographers in the 1980s, Graham was the most forward-thinking and self-questioning. His work soon took on a more elliptical style and way of seeing, often challenging the received notions of what constitutes documentary photography. Perhaps the most dramatic example is [American Night \(2003\)](#), an impressionistic visual investigation of the social and racial issues of the country through the use of images that were often overexposed, in some cases, to the point of near-invisibility. In 2009, he published [A Shimmer of Possibility](#), a 12-volume book that could be read as a series of vague short stories, each one illuminating the American everyday in often luminous images. In an [interview last year](#), Graham told me: "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."

Graham won the Deutsche Börse prize in 2009. He currently has a show of recent work, entitled [The Present](#), at Pace/MacGill Gallery in New York.