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Paul Graham and Seizing the Everyday Moments

By PHILIP GEFTER FEB. 18, 2016



“New Orleans, 2004 (Woman Eating)” by Paul Graham. Paul Graham

“Stare,” wrote Walker Evans, the canonical 20th-century photographer. “It is the way to educate your eye, and more. Stare; pry; listen; eavesdrop. Die knowing something. You are not here long.”

The British photographer Paul Graham, among Evans’s most consequential heirs, does a lot of staring and also waiting as he roams the streets of New York, where he has lived since 2002, or the industrial pockets of suburban America, anticipating some wisp of an instant worth shooting, one to remind us we are all residing on the same planet, all of us in our own skins.

“I spend time going to thrift stores looking for clothes,” Mr. Graham once told a packed theater audience of students about how he approaches picture-making, explaining the hours he might loiter in a strip mall waiting for something ordinary to happen. “Boredom is part of my work. I accept it and embrace it.” He was describing the off-handed concentration with which he looks at the normal flow of everyday activity and documents it in narrative sequences.



Paul Graham
Credit Geordie Wood for The
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His photographs fall into the tradition of social documentation epitomized by Evans in the 1930s and also Robert Frank in the 1950s, but Mr. Graham presents his work, both on the wall and on the page, in a way that places it firmly on 21st-century conceptual art-making soil. His current retrospective at Pier 24, an internationally regarded private museum of photography in San Francisco, is called “The Whiteness of the Whale” (through Feb. 29), and includes three bodies of work that constitute an informal American trilogy: “American Night” (1998-2002); “A Shimmer of Possibility” (2004-06); and “The Present” (2009-11). The catalog has been published by Michael Mack.

“When you look at his work on the surface, it seems to be about quiet moments,” Chris McCall, director of Pier 24, said. Looking deeper, he added, other themes emerge, including Mr. Graham’s regard for an entire underclass of individuals often erased from the public image of American society. “It’s work that challenges the way we see this culture.”

At 59, Mr. Graham, with smart black-rim glasses, a thick tangle of black hair spilling over his forehead and a three-day stubble, seems catapulted out of time— as if from the modish Bloomsbury set of the 1920s— to the modern, casually furnished West Village loft he shares with his partner, Senami D’Almeida, and their infant son, Marlow.

“It’s a live-work studio building,” the artist said recently, sitting on a vintage Italian leather sofa in the center of his loft, and adding, “only artists live here. Robert Smithson once lived downstairs.” Although a sixth-floor walk-up, the climb is a small price to pay to live in the fashionable shadow of the new Whitney Museum of American Art; the workout may account for his wiry frame and youthful manner.

Afternoon light spilled in from a bank of windows as he described his routine. “A good day is one where I’ve overcome my procrastination, actually gotten out the door to shoot, weather cooperating.” He can get lost answering emails, surfing the Internet, grazing for new camera equipment. Pointing to the monitor at his desk, he leveled a modest bombshell with his tidy British accent. “I build my own computers,” he said. “It’s not that hard. You order the components— the motherboards, the memories, the graphics cards.” He finds it very satisfying, “like servicing your own car.”



An installation view of “The Whiteness of the Whale” at Pier 24 in San Francisco.
Pier 24 Photography, San Francisco

Given the 14 bodies of work Mr. Graham has produced over the last 30 years, his claims to distraction are more akin to Zen *koans* about diligence and rigor: “Sometimes I have to kill a couple of weeks doing other things, appearing to be very lazy while I’m actually finding my way through a problem.”

This is the first time Pier 24 has given the entire museum over to the work of an individual photographer, a distinction, according to Mr. McCall, that signifies Mr. Graham’s standing. “This work, specifically, is dealing with social issues that are seriously relevant in America at this moment,” he said by telephone. While Mr. McCall cited racism and economic disparity among them, he emphasized the formal aspects of the three series as well: “Paul is also exploring, at a really high level, the medium itself.”

Mr. Graham had in mind what the French refer to as the “social fracture” while making “American Night,” on his first travels in America. The title alludes to the Truffaut film, “Day for Night,” a filmmaking term for creating nighttime scenes by underexposing footage shot in broad daylight. “American Night” consists of two sets of pictures: Half are bleached-out images of postindustrial areas, often with lone African-Americans on the street, which Mr. Graham intentionally overexposed so that the outlines of buildings, streets, and figures are barely

visible — the precise point he is making about an entire strata of the American social landscape. He sets these images against richly saturated color photographs of crisp tract houses in suburban California, often with a late-model car parked in the driveway.

Mr. Graham grew up in a new housing development northeast of London, Harlow Newtown, with similar homes. “I personally have a sort of childhood yearning for houses like that,” he said. “I’m sure many of the people in the overexposed pictures would love to live in one of those houses,” adding that they deserve to live as comfortably.

In 2009 he won the prestigious Börse Prize, and, in 2012, the Hasselblad Award — the highest international honor for a photographer. In 2009, his series, “A Shimmer of Possibility,” was shown at the Museum of Modern Art. Susan Kismaric, the former senior curator who organized that exhibition, noted the rarity at the time of his use of multiple images in narrative sequences. The everyday moments he captured “are, after all, how we spend most of our time, mindlessly active or lost in thought — they provide what appears to be the undercurrent of our existence,” she said. “Paul’s work is innovative, inventive and freshly imagined, while rooted in photography’s magic, that is, its ability to transform the mundane into a picture with resonance.”



“The Whiteness of the Whale” runs through Feb. 29. Pier 24 Photography, San Francisco

In 2004 while shooting “A Shimmer of Possibility” he checked into a roadside motel in Pittsburgh and heard a lawn mower. He considered the Sisyphean task ahead for the man mowing so large a field, and then noticed his shirt — a riff on the American flag, which prompted him to make some pictures. “Why is everyone addicted to prepackaged spectacular moments, as if that’s all that’s worth photographing?” Mr. Graham said. “There is so much more to the flow of life all around us that isn’t revolving around perfect page-one moments.”

At Pier 24, the lawn mower appears on the wall in multiple time frames, the print sizes varied for rhythm, their height from the floor staggered for cadence. The sequence echoes a musical score. Mr. McCall refers to them as “clustered moments or sputtering pieces of time.”

In “The Present,” diptychs or triptychs show splintered views of a single spot — a street corner, a building entrance — in which Mr. Graham stood stationary as people moved in and out of his frame. They are studies of time, place and motion, what he calls “filmic haikus.” These life-size pictures are hung low, as if the sidewalk has met the gallery floor and the viewer.

Mr. Graham presents his work as an equivalent of the way we experience the world: “You walk down the street and glance at someone askew,” he said. “You avert your gaze to their hands; you look back to their face; you can’t hold their gaze for too long, so you stare into the road in front of them, looking up, down, left, right.”

Like those of most photographers today, Mr. Graham’s computer is a virtual studio. Pictures can be enlarged, minimized and moved around on the screen, which was not possible looking at exposures in a linear fashion during the long epoch of the contact sheet.

He is hands-on at every stage, including the wall-size exhibition prints he makes during several weeklong stints throughout the year. He has access to a wide-format printer for his own printing — up to 64 inches to 80 inches — but emphasizes that his images are not altered or manipulated; what you see is what he photographed.

Mr. Graham described his attempt, while making pictures, to “realize and then illuminate a modest moment of our lives.” He is not looking for anything so much as entering a zone that the photographer Henry Wessel referred to as “soft eyes — when you are outside your mind and your eyes are ahead of your thoughts.” Mr.

Graham is alert to “someone sitting at the bus stop, or someone smoking a cigarette,” he said. “You know, some moment of quiet beauty that arrived into your life and was humbling, really.”

Call it that dumb, just-being-there quality or a second glimpse of the “it-ness” of those moments, perhaps a clarity of the kind evoked in the metaphors in imagist poetry: “So much depends upon a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens,” wrote William Carlos Williams. So much, indeed.

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