

## PAUL GRAHAM



Paul Graham, *Vesey Street, 25th May 2010, 5.51.05 PM*, diptych, color photographs, overall 4' 8" x 12' 4 1/2".

Explaining to an interviewer why he called his recent show “The Present,” Paul Graham said the name was a reminder of photography’s “struggle to deal with time and life. Sometimes I think those are our materials. Not film, not paper, not prints: time and life.” The idea that the subject of photography—time and life—is also its material, and in a more primary way than its physical paraphernalia can be, is one that Graham has addressed in the past by photographing in series, and in his most recent work, a selection of which appeared in this exhibition (at Pace, but co-organized with Pace/MacGill Gallery), he focused that idea further. Working in the streets of New York, he shot a series of places two or three times each, each shot a few seconds apart. In examining life not just as it appears in the photograph’s “decisive moment” but also as it takes place in time, Graham concocted a strange, edgy fusion of impulses that conveys a vivid sense of modern urban experience.

Occasionally in these diptychs and triptychs, the cast of characters in the particular patch of pavement on which Graham’s camera is trained changes completely in the short span between one recorded moment and another. More often, though, someone distant in one view moves nearer in the next, or vice versa, producing a sense of narrative that fights against a simultaneous feeling of randomness. For Graham seems to dispense with the street photographer’s usual search for a moment when the placements and postures of people, things, and their shapes miraculously and momentarily compose a meaningful image. In most of these pictures, nothing much happens; if you had to identify a theme, it might be “people on the sidewalk.” Although most of the images have a shallow depth of field that isolates individuals or groups in small areas of clear focus, supplying them with a certain portentousness, the significance of each picture is principally given by its partner or partners.

In the left-hand panel of *34th Street, 4th June 2010, 3.12.58 PM*, a heavysset, apparently weeping woman wearing a pink T-shirt and black pants appears in sharp focus in the foreground. Around and beyond her, eight or ten more people we see less clearly are making their way down the cut-rate-shopping street—2 SUITS FOR \$150.00, reads a large sign above her head. In the right-hand panel, two of these people, a couple, have taken her place in focus beneath the sign. Mysteriously, though the second woman could not look more different from the first in most respects—weight, skin color, style, attitude, frame of mind—she too is wearing a pink top and black pants. A commonality between the two seems unlikely, but Graham pulls off this trick more than once, as when two guys leaving a Duane Reade within seconds of

each other are both wearing uniforms, or when a man with a patch over one eye is replaced by a man squinting one eye against the sun. The weeping woman in pink and black, incidentally, had chosen a T-shirt with a smiley face, and that smiley face too is squinting; in another picture we see a white cane. A subtextual point in these photos may be how much we *don't* see when walking in the street.

To deny the importance of film, paper, and prints is surely disingenuous on Graham's part, since he is nothing if not skilled, and his technical choices are rigorously deliberate. That shallow focus, for example, making one part of the picture sharper than everything around it, has a contradictory effect, suggesting on the one hand that those in its scope have been singled out for attention, on the other that they appear there by chance: They're just passing through our field of view on their way somewhere else, to be replaced by someone else, whom we'll see in the next shot. This corresponds finely to the drifting experience of the street, yet the photos constantly hint at meanings to be decoded, and suggest that the apparent arbitrariness of street life does so as well.

—[\*David Frankel\*](#)