



INTERVIEW

Paul Graham

By Lyle Rexer

Pier 24 Photography, the San Francisco exhibition space, is presenting British photographer Paul Graham's show *The Whiteness of the Whale*, on view through February 29, 2016. It provides an overview of his American work, including the first complete presentation of a *shimmer of possibility*, and its 160 photographs constitute the most telling view of this country since Robert Frank's *The Americans*.

Lyle Rexer: I'm intrigued by the title of the exhibition, a reference to Moby Dick, especially to Ahab's mad quest.

Paul Graham: I like to think it points the viewer in a direction. I don't want to pin down what that direction is, except to say it can be thought of as a metaphor for the United States in action – for instance, the pursuit of one thing to the exclusion of all others, even to the destruction

of yourself and your society. Of course, in America whiteness is also a metaphor.

LR: It does raise the question for me of why you took up residence here, like Jonah in the belly of the whale.

PG: A variety of reasons, but the main one was I felt that photography wasn't valued very highly in England. I remember in the early 1980s seeing a review of a Garry Winogrand show in *The New York Times* that covered two-thirds of a page. And the other third was devoted to a review of Boris Mikhailov. The level of presumed knowledge about photography was so high I couldn't quite believe it. I thought, this is where I belong.

Paul Graham, *San Francisco (Woman in Silver Jacket)*, from the series *a shimmer of possibility*, 2006. © Paul Graham. Courtesy Pace and Pace/MacGill Gallery

LR: It seems to me that your style changed somewhat when you began shooting a *shimmer of possibility*. With *The Great North Road*, 1981-82, you could be seen as a sociologist of Thatcher England and its discontents. In the United States, your work seems more open-ended, even puzzling sometimes.

PG: I suppose it is more open-ended. In England there is no such thing as the infinite highway, the Kerouacian open road, but I wasn't on the road in the same sense as Robert Frank. I wasn't on a quest for freedom or for the essential truth about America. It's more that I was wandering randomly through suburban America, looking to find something in nothing. At one point I found myself laughing because I was in a car park somewhere, and I realized I was in the same spot as I was 25 years earlier, in Yorkshire, alone in a car park.

LR: Something in nothing – that resonates for me because so many of my students are seeking the same thing. It's the shimmer you talk about, that thing that the camera hovers around, the experience you feel and know but can't fully articulate; a testament to being.

PG: It's that point when things, time, and circumstance come together, rich with cognitive potential. It's reality looked at directly, with a kind of amazement. It's often hard to say what the pictures are actually about because there is a provisional-ness to them. They refuse to kowtow to a narrative line, never crippling potential readings. Rather, they hint at a way of seeing, instruct us on how to perceive; that is the source of their consultability. I am pleased that young people are photographing nothing again.