

Photographer's work shines light on 'invisibility of the poor'

By **Judy Walgren** | October 9, 2015 | Updated: October 11, 2015 1:54am

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Photo: Paul Graham, Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery

A woman sits on a sidewalk in New York, which is from the series "American Night, 2002."

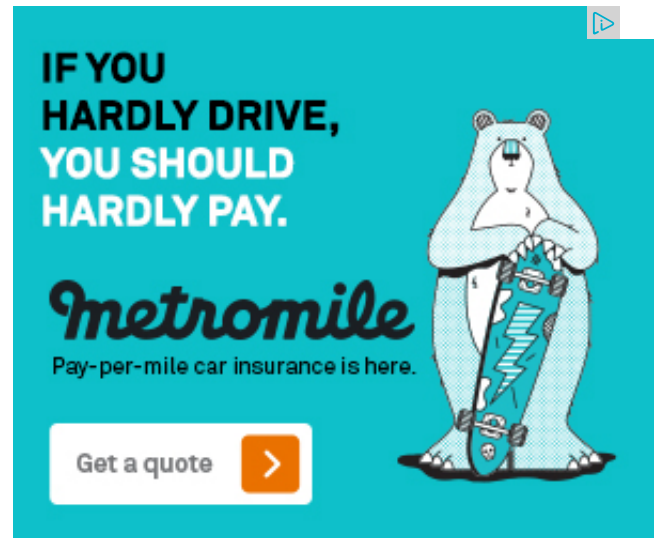
British photographer Paul Graham has masterfully organized three bodies of work:

“American Night (1998-2002),” “a shimmer of possibility (2004-06),” and “The Present (2009-11)” for the first single-artist exhibition at Pier 24 Photography in San Francisco: “The Whiteness of the Whale.”

The artist created the images for his trilogy throughout the United States between 1998 and 2011, employing different visual strategies such as portraiture, street photography, exposure and proportion to comment on American society, particularly the racial and social inequality throughout the country.

In a video shown as part of the exhibition, Graham describes the first body of work, “American Night,” as calling out the “invisibility of the poor in the United States and how they have been edited out of our seeing, on a sort of way.” He places large-scale white, overexposed prints depicting impoverished areas in the U.S. among images of California “McMansions” and the juxtaposition is powerful.

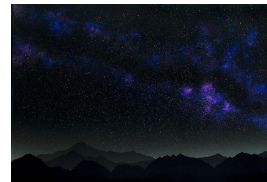
“When one looks at these pictures, they are hard to see. One has to overcome one’s initial reaction that there is nothing there, there is no one there, there’s nothing to see here. Let’s move along. You have to choose to look into the photographs to see the person there, the figure. You have to choose to overcome your blindness.”



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He included a dramatic selection of photographs depicting the poor on urban streets, photographed in light that accentuates the intensity of the scenes captured.

The second body of work, “a shimmer of possibility,” is built around clusters of different-size images illustrating everyday life in various parts of the U.S. The visual bursts range from people waiting for something, possibly a bus, on a street corner in New Orleans to pastoral scenes of a man mowing a vibrant green lawn in Pittsburgh to a couple walking with plastic shopping bags and a case of Pepsi propped on a shoulder.

Moulded together, Graham has merged multiple layers of commentary on American society among poetically composed slices of everyday life. “Life shimmers with possibility even in the most mundane and humdrum of circumstances, there is this glow of being alive — whether it’s just eating this meal at a bus stop or smoking a cigarette while you wait or a walk down through Chelsea in Boston or a sunset in North Dakota — that how life glows with opportunity and wonder.”



Photo: Paul Graham, Courtesy Pier 24 Photogra

IMAGE 15 OF 15

Paul Graham, "The Whiteness of the Whale, 2015 (Installation View)."

"Present," the final body of work, consists of street photography in New York City. Graham assembles two and three photographs in an attempt to mimic the frenzied pace and visual attention span that one would experience on crowded city streets while immersed in a sea of humanity.

He plays with focus, framing and rhythm to capture and manipulate the viewer's attention. He places the base of the large images near the gallery floor to simulate the experience the viewer would have if she were actually on the street in the middle of the action.

"Of course, it's bizarre to call some photographs the 'Present' because inevitably, the instant they are taken, they age and they date, which is something I look forward to with this body of work in a way," he said.

Graham will be discussing his images at the Timken Lecture Hall on the California College of the Arts in San Francisco at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 13 as part of the Larry Sultan Visiting Artist Program. There will be a book signing for the the catalog accompanying "The Whiteness of the Whale" exhibition immediately afterward. The exhibition will be on view through Feb. 29.

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