

The Whiteness of the Whale

A Conversation with Paul Graham

How did you first become interested in photography?

I first learned how a camera worked as a teenager in the Scouts, of all things, but no one explained to me what photography could do, so eventually I lost interest. Then, while at university, I discovered some great photography in the magazine *Creative Camera*—there was a column every month by Robert Frank, for example—along with various books in the university library. In a section called “American Studies,” I found titles by Lee Friedlander, Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Paul Strand, and so on. That’s when I thought, “Wait a minute. You can actually say something with this?”

So your first serious exposure to photography came through publications and magazines rather than exhibitions?

Definitely. I was in a small city in the southwest of England where there was little cultural opportunity to see good photography. Though truthfully, even if you were in London, it was not a lot better in the 1970s. The main chance for me was books—either in libraries or arts bookshops—or, as I said, *Creative Camera*, the one magazine that would be like *Aperture* or *Blind Spot* today.



What was the first major project you completed after graduating?

I photographed English cafes and modern English housing developments in some of my earliest work, but the first project that ended up published was *A1: The Great North Road* (1981–82). I would drive along the A1, which starts in London, runs up the entire length of England, and crosses the border into Scotland to end in Edinburgh. I’d treat these trips like work-travel, similar to what I did with *a shimmer of possibility* (2004–6) many years later, sleeping in the back of my Mini most of the time.

Starting with your first significant body of work, you were traveling quite a bit to make photographs?

Yes, I suppose. *Troubled Land* (1984–86) was made in Northern Ireland. I wasn’t based there, so I would drive over to work. With *Beyond Caring* (1984–85), I went to various unemployment offices across the south of England. I traveled, but I don’t think there’s anything too unusual about that being part of your process. Traveling isolates you in time and removes you from distraction.

What kinds of challenges did you face making work on the road?

The difficult thing about photography is you have no idea where your photographs are. You've carved out time and space to do the work, but you just don't know when or where pictures will arrive.

When photographing unemployment offices for *Beyond Caring*, I could literally pull a page from a phonebook and there would be a list of addresses where my pictures might potentially be. But that was an exception; sadly, good photographs don't come with a list of where you will find them!



After completing the three projects in Great Britain—*A1*, *Troubled Land*, and *Beyond Caring*—what came next?

I traveled around Western Europe a lot more, which resulted in two books—*New Europe* (1993) and *End of an Age* (1999). I also traveled to Japan on and off for about seven years. Photographs from those trips resulted in the book *Empty Heaven* (1995).

Did you take any trips to the U.S. during that period?

I was periodically visiting America because I loved coming here, but it wasn't until 1998 or 1999 that I started visiting very regularly and began to seriously consider living and working here.



You relocated to the States just a few years later, in 2002. I know you currently reside in New York. Have you lived anywhere else in the United States?

I've only lived in New York. I've visited quite a few other places—maybe something like forty out of the fifty states.

What drew you to New York in particular?

Besides it being a great city? Well, New York is, of course, one of the principal centers for photography. The Museum of Modern Art has had a department of photography for over eighty years . . . since Edward Steichen. And while this was not a motivation to move, at the time I left London the Tate still didn't have a photography department and had not programmed a single exhibition by a photographer. So part of my thinking was, "I don't belong here." More important, though, was the positive embrace of being in the United States and its love of serious photography—about opening the *New York Times* and finding long articles about Garry Winogrand or Diane Arbus or someone like Boris Mikhailov. I remember finding a half a page on him in the *New York Times*—that was wonderful.

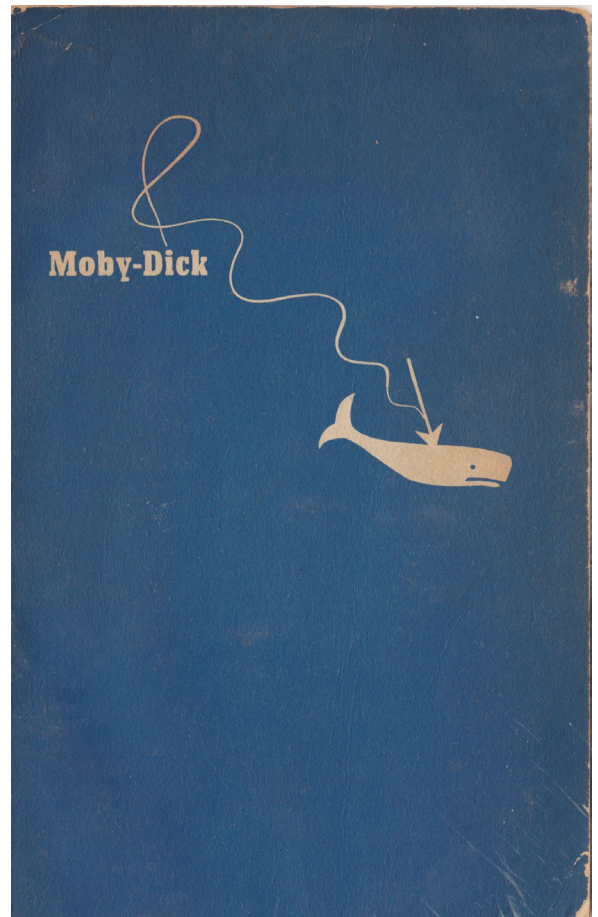
Once you arrived in New York, a city filled with galleries and museums, did you spend more time looking at work in person? And if so, did it shape how you were thinking about the medium at that time?

Yes, of course, and I still do—I'm a very regular gallery-goer and look at a good amount of contemporary art. Virtually all artists come through New York at some point, which is one of the wonderful things about the city—you can see a lot.

But really, the contemporary photography that influenced me wasn't often in galleries—you'd find it primarily through books. It should be said, though, that there comes a time when you stop regularly looking at other people's work because it can be too distracting. It's nearly impossible to avoid being influenced by others, especially subconsciously. So I've found it best to just shut down when I am into the work and get on chasing my own ideas, rather than look too much at the work of others.

Your upcoming exhibition at Pier 24 Photography includes three bodies of work made in the United States. The exhibition is titled *The Whiteness of the Whale*, a reference to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). What was your experience reading that book?

Well . . . I'm no Lit graduate, but I think the book touches on many major subjects. Especially relevant here are issues of monomaniacal blindness in a human being and how chasing one thing obsessively can drive you to destruction. To be honest, I found it a hard read—inspired and crazy in places, insightful in others, racist and offensive in others again.



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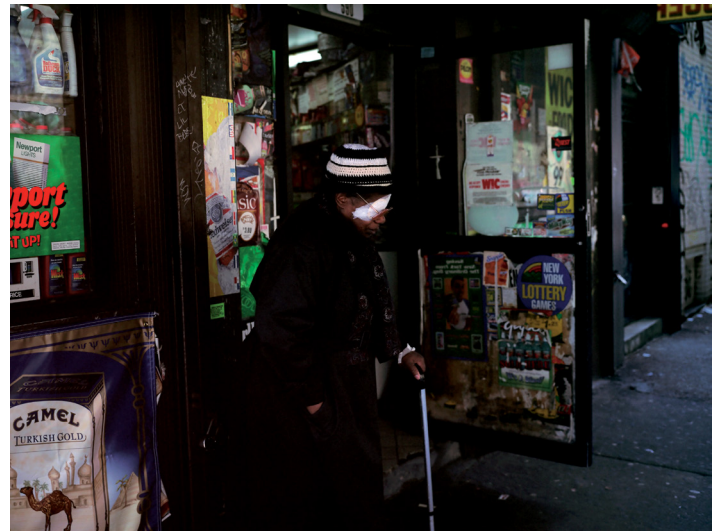


Why did you decide to read *Moby-Dick* the first time?

Because of *American Night* (1998–2002)—the white images, the white whale, etc. We ended up using a quote from *Moby-Dick* on the back cover about seeing and whiteness. It's nice to return to the book now with *The Whiteness of the Whale*. Melville's chapter of the same name—which we have included in our exhibition book—is on the edge between genius and madness and that intrigues me.

How do you see it as a metaphor for what's happening in the U.S. today?

I'd rather not over explain it—it's better to let the work live for itself. But I do think *Moby-Dick* speaks to the way people go down rabbit holes based on their own particular beliefs and fail to see what is happening to them, their society, or their land. Ahab causes his whole ship to founder in his quest.



So is *American Night* the first project that resulted from your serious focus on making work in the U.S.?

If you're talking about the first body of work, then yes. But you don't start out thinking, "I'm going to make a body of work about America." You just start taking pictures and looking for truly interesting photographs. And that can take a month, or a year, or three years—to find some amazing, unusual, different image, which is the gateway through which you will pass into uncharted territory. In this case, I found these overexposed white pictures, which described a sort of invisibility of the dispossessed in this country. That was a fresh visualization worth pursuing—making near-invisible photographs.

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Where were you making these pictures?

The locations in *American Night* were basically along the compass points across the United States. North was Detroit; South was Memphis and Atlanta; East was New York; West was Greater Los Angeles. I wanted to make sure that the pictures were geographically spread out so people didn't think, "oh, isn't inner-city New York terrible, or Detroit . . ." It wasn't about one location; it was about something pervasive.

You made these near-invisible photographs through deliberate overexposure. How did you decide to make pictures in this way?

The idea principally came about during a visit to Memphis. I was there for a group show that included a portrait from *End of an Age*. One afternoon, I went to the cinema—lazy me—and when the movie finished, I walked out a side exit door that led straight into the bright afternoon sunlight. I stumbled around thinking, "what is going on here?" While completely blinded by the brightness, I noticed this slightly unhinged guy shouting to himself as he walked across the car park. And I realized how amazing this whole scene was. With my overwhelmed, burnt-out vision, this poor man appeared to be crossing a wasteland of whiteness, unnoticed by the world.

There are also very dark inner-city photographs and bright “Technicolor” images of large homes included in *American Night*. How do these three different kinds of pictures work together?

The earliest pictures for *American Night* were the dark inner-city ones. Some are dated around 1998 and 1999, like the man and woman with white eye-patches. In those pictures I was working on the streets of New York like a classic street photographer, but didn’t have any purpose for them.

Two or three years later, I discovered the white pictures. And I realized that was the breakthrough. While I wanted the majority of the images to be these near-invisible white pictures, the dark pictures were important too, and I wanted to include the American Dream—presented as glorious full-color McMansions. I worked with these three types of imagery—white, dark, and “Technicolor”—looking for ways to integrate them. Ultimately, the white images predominate; they’re around 80 percent of the pictures.

In the book for *American Night*, you grouped all the dark inner-city pictures together in the center. What inspired that design decision?

The idea of a play within the play. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare has the characters create “The Mousetrap”—a play within a play—that speaks to the plot of *Hamlet*. Situating the dark pictures in the center of the book is kind of like that, a project within the project.

How did you know when you were finished making pictures for the project?

The work was complete with the edit of the book and realizing how to integrate those three categories of photographs—light, dark, and color. I realized these elements were working together—forming a stable base upon which to build the final work—and I didn’t need a fourth approach. I showed the pictures to the publisher, Michael Mack. It took him a little time to see what was going on, but to his credit, he totally got it and stood behind it, and we published the book.



As you moved on to making pictures for *a shimmer of possibility*, did your working process and concerns feel like a departure from, or a continuation of, long-standing interests?

In all my works, there is a similar engagement with the world through photography and being in the world. *shimmer* also engages with the social fabric of the United States, so in that sense it’s not a departure. It is, however, structurally different with these extended, flowing sequences—the “visual haikus”—of images.

Change is not unusual for me. I’ve consistently moved things around to keep my work interesting for myself. *Troubled Land* is visually quite different from *Beyond Caring*, which is different from *New Europe*. I’ve always believed that as soon as artists succeed in something, they should find new ways to scare themselves!



You have linked the idea of the “visual haiku” to the short stories of Anton Chekhov. What is the connection?

As I was reviewing scanned negatives on my computer screen, I started to notice these interesting flickering sequences. Even though I was still shooting analog, there was no traditional “contact sheet.” Instead, I was working with scans—digital files—of the work. As the pictures come on your screen, and you flick next, next, next, you get this stuttering sequence. The actual process of photographing, of seeing, is right there: the realization of the world as it arrives and departs on your screen.

As for Chekhov, well, he describes the most ordinary things in his short stories—a sailor on his day off sitting by the banks of the river, a school teacher on a horse-drawn cart who shares a few words with the local landowner she encounters on her way

home. There’s an openness to these simple descriptions of ordinary moments. I realized these stories were connected to the sorts of pictures I was making—of people waiting at bus stops, cutting grass, or scratching a lottery card in hope of winning. It wasn’t so much an influence as a validation that this was a profound and worthwhile way of working, however humble it may seem.

As you were making these pictures of ordinary, everyday life, what would inspire you to pick up the camera and take a photograph?

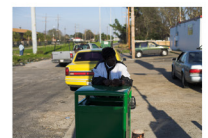
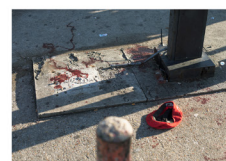
I honestly don’t know. It was not as if every time I picked up the camera and took pictures I ended up with one of the sequences that appears in *shimmer*. I photographed hundreds of things that didn’t turn out to bear fruit.

But driving and wandering around America—often without even really knowing where I was going or to what end—led to random and wonderful moments. Meeting someone or sharing a modest experience, be it in New England, Las Vegas, or Memphis.

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Were people often aware of your presence photographing?

Sometimes. You can see from some of the sequences that I’m talking to people and they’re looking at the camera as I photograph them; they’re clearly cooperating. But sometimes you talk to strangers and sometimes you don’t, just as in life. You may equally remember both experiences; there may be a stranger you never spoke a word to, but you will still be able to perfectly describe what you saw and experienced.





As you designed the sequences in *shimmer*, did you always use consecutive images, or were there instances where you eliminated exposures from the final sequence?

Some pictures are left out because there's a pause, they're repetitious without purpose, so I'll skip them. I'm not literally showing every frame from a five-second film. That's not the idea.

In a haiku—there's a moment where it breaks away and they touch upon the weather or the time of year, like "spring blossoms," just a single word or two. I try to integrate that breakaway into some of the sequences. For instance, in the pictures with the man cutting the grass, one frame looks at his brown minivan, in all its 1980s glory. In the pictures where I'm walking behind the couple carrying home their Pepsi, I glanced to the side at some children playing

in the garden with plastic bags and took a picture of them. It's a little glance aside from the main thread—to note the sunset or the rain falling or a child playing. And those genuinely belong in the series . . . So that's a haiku-style aside or step back from what is immediately in front of you.



Was the working process for *The Present* (2009–11)—a body of work made on the streets of New York—significantly different from when you were on the road making pictures for *American Night* or *shimmer*?

I lead a weird artist's life, so I don't go to the office in midtown or a regular job where I clock in and clock out. So for me, going to midtown during the morning commute or a busy lunch hour is similar to being on Mars. When I wander around Wall Street and experience the city's financial life, it's like another world. And one of the great things about New York is how you can travel on the subway for just fifteen or twenty minutes and find yourself somewhere else. When you come out through another hole in the ground, you are in Ghana or Israel or Pakistan because each different neighborhood has its own ethnicities and histories.

Was there any anxiety in approaching New York City as a subject when so many others have explored it before you?

Of course. It's a cliché. A trope. But it's very rare that people do it exceptionally well. There's plenty of bad street photography. I also feel like a lot of the art world doesn't quite get street photography. They associate it with random observations and don't see the value, or deep art, in a Winogrand or a Frank. That's kind of ridiculous to me.

You mentioned earlier that there comes a point when you try to avoid looking at the work of other photographers as you undertake a new project. Were you consciously trying to think about different ways of approaching the city, or did you just go out and start making pictures?

I can't erase my knowledge of Winogrand, or Arbus, or Tod Papageorge. But hopefully that knowledge is constructive—I appreciate their lessons and experiences rather than simply imitating or copying them. So it corrects and steers you.



Many people who came through our exhibition *A Sense of Place*—which included selections from *The Present*—were surprised to learn that the photographs were completely unstaged. Can you talk about the process of making those pictures?

If you look at Winogrand's contact sheets, he took five pictures of the same thing and then printed the one he thought was the most interesting. And that was great, of course. Likewise, I'm taking five pictures, but choosing two, or very occasionally three, to show this flowing consciousness of time, to get a different sense of the city, time, people, and life's flow. It takes a different direction from Henri Cartier-Bresson or Winogrand, who worked to capture the singular instant, but it continues in that lineage and connects with their amazing work. In short, there's an attempt to shift our awareness from a sort of spotlight to a floodlight.



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The photographs in *The Present* are very much about the way our eye operates in the urban landscape. You draw our attention to the idea of seeing through repeated allusions to sight and blindness. Was that something you noticed during the editing process . . . that these subjects appeared in the work? Or were you deliberately shooting for those kinds of pictures?

It's in *American Night* as well. The first and last pictures in the sequence of dark pictures in New York are of a blinded man and a woman whose eye is covered over with gauze. In *The Present* there are quite a few pictures of blind people with white sticks in the city. I've always been interested in notions of sight, seeing, and blindness. And *American Night* is primarily about blindness—willful blindness or psychological blindness.

And for what it's worth, I temporarily lost my sight as a child when I fell in a bag of cement, leaving the corneas of my eyes burned for a few months. I lost my vision during that time, and I vividly remember it coming back when I was five or six years old. So maybe there are echoes of that experience in the work. I don't want to overplay that story, but it would be silly to avoid mentioning it.

Thinking about your work more generally, I was interested in writer David Campa-ny's comments about your use of color. In discussing the work you made in Britain, he suggested your use of color serves the work's social commentary. Does the use of color operate similarly in your pictures of the United States?

Without a doubt, color is an extra layer of information. Sometimes it matters a lot and sometimes it's less relevant. Just like it's essential that some pictures be made in black and white, while other photographs just happen to be in black and white. When we look at the color of some early Stephen Shore or William Eggleston pictures now, we see how specific palettes of color were connected to the time. You can date pictures by the colors used on cars, signage, clothing, or even hair. I don't know why you would want to remove that embedded information, unless you feel it's especially unhelpful or confusing.



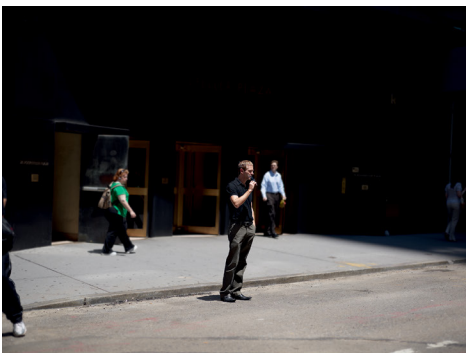
The work you made in the U.K. documents a particular moment in time. Do you think the same is true of the work you've made in the U.S.?

It's hard to tell right now, because we're so close to it chronologically. You need the parallax effect of time to spiral off into the distance, and then we might begin to see it. And that can be slightly sad—to look at a Shore or Eggleston and start focusing, with nostalgia, on the hairdos and cars. Those pictures were contemporary, absolutely of their moment when they were made.

On the other hand, that datedness is an inevitability, especially with photography. When people look at pictures from a *shimmer of possibility* in forty years—the clothing, the surrounding landscape, the signage, the cars in the background—will undoubtedly appear aged. And it's the same for the people photographed in *The Present*. That's one of the reasons I called it *The Present*—it nods to the fact this work was made at a particular point in time. Someone will be looking at these pictures called *The Present* in 2100, and maybe they will look like Victorian street pictures!

Do you think anything about your relationship to American politics is reflected in the photographs?

Well, I am not a political skill for any party viewpoint. Most photographers worth their salt rely on empathy and concern for their fellow citizens on this planet, rather than on political ideology. Inevitably, that empathic connection with other human beings leads one to certain sympathies. But I'm certainly not a spokesperson or a mouthpiece for the Democrats or Socialism or anything like that.





You did three bodies of work in Britain, and now there are three bodies of work you've done in the United States. Is this idea of working in threes something that happens organically? Or is there something about this three-part organization that suits the way you made work in these two places?

I feel it's just a coincidence. Though, with *American Night*, *shimmer*, and *The Present*, there is a connection to the three principal controls of the camera—aperture, shutter, and focus . . . though that isn't why I made them—I didn't think of this master plan fifteen years ago and then decide to dedicate three to four years to each body of work—I'm not that smart! It's usually something you realize along the way and recognize is happening, like novelists recognize who their characters have become as they write them.

At what point did you become conscious of the fact these three bodies of work touch on the three controls of the camera?

It occurred to me toward the end of *shimmer*. I also realized by using very shallow focus on the street in *The Present* that I could deal with specific individuals in terms of one's awareness very effectively. And that would neatly encompass all three respects. Of course, the three camera controls—shutter, aperture, and focus—are really not that interesting in themselves. I mean—so what? But when you start to think of them in terms of the shutter controlling time, the aperture adjusting light and the focus directing our attention or consciousness, they become a lot more powerful and fertile: time, light, consciousness.

Art often does that—it speaks both of itself and of the stuff it is made of. I like that about this work. It speaks about America, about seeing, and about photography. That makes me happy.



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