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Paul Graham takes over Pier 24 with his American trilogy

BY GLEN HELFAND

In 2011 Paul Graham published *The Present* and completed his unofficial American trilogy – a series of photobooks which started in 1998 with *American Night*, and went on to include *a shimmer of possibility* (2004-06), which won the 2011 Paris Photo Book Prize. In August San Francisco's Pier 24 Photography gallery devoted its enormous, 28,000 sq ft space to an exhibition gathering all three projects, *The Whiteness of the Whale*, which continues to 29 February. “Each of the bodies of work, besides what they are about – the United States, the invisibility of the poor, the quotidian moments of everyday life – are also about photography, and that idea has come together in the exhibition,” Graham told me. “In the gallery you have an engagement on a scale that you simply cannot have in a book page. And one tries to work to maximise both of those potentials.”

It's the first time the gallery has showcased a single artist, but its luxurious size meant it was able to give Graham's three series the space they require. His work is subtle and multilayered, meaning it requires plenty of room for contemplation; in addition, *The Whiteness of the Whale* featured carefully thought-through installations. Works from *The Present* – multiple

images of shifting moments shot on New York streets – were often hung just inches from the floor [3] to give the viewer the sense that they could walk into the scene, for example, while *a shimmer of possibility* – a series of narratives originally presented in 12 slim photobooks – was shown in 12 small rooms [2]. The large prints of the *American Night* series [1], meanwhile, contrasted deliberately over-exposed, ethereal images with crisp, sunny shots of what Graham describes as “delightful new middle-class homes in the desert”.

One of the *shimmer* rooms featured photographs shot at an intersection in New Orleans, clearly a loaded location. “Everything is pre-Katrina, with the exception of the cherries, which is all I could find after the storm when I went back three months later,” Graham told me. “That corner. That's what I was left with, that cherry picture.”

The image he describes, a splatter of artificially red fruit stranded on harsh, grey concrete, also graces the cover of a new book co-published by Mack and Pier 24, which combines the three parts of the so-called trilogy. The book also unfolds with plenty of space for





contemplation, with essays by David Chandler and Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, and comes across less as an exhibition catalogue than as a summation of Graham's American work.

Graham's American trilogy evolved out of his wanderings through the US, an approach that echoes the practice of 20th-century masters such as Garry Winogrand and Robert Frank. His images can be difficult to parse, but if their meanings sometimes reveal themselves slowly, that also mirrors his working process. "Things generally take me from two to four years to come together," he tells me. "I don't know if that's my own laziness, but that seems to be the amount of time it takes me to figure out if a project is worth it, or has a call to it.

"I do that slightly unfashionable thing," he adds. "I go out into the world, among people and places that I come across, situations that I've put myself in, photograph them – unstaged, unaltered – and try to weave something together from what I've seen."

Graham usually works alone, travelling huge distances north through Chicago and Minnesota, for example, or across Montana. He references a quote by Julian Barnes that speaks to the

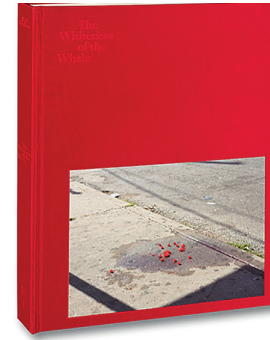
romantic position of solitude, and says it's key to what he shoots. "When you are on your own, isolated from other people, you no longer need to impress yourself upon the world or on others," he explains. "Therefore you can let the world impress itself upon you. There's no one else there – no one – you don't have to present a front on anything; that makes one's id or ego disappear and you can hear the world, see the world."

Sometimes he's worked with other people, though, asking a friend from New Orleans to drive him around the city for the first time, for example, but then returning alone to take photographs such as the cherries. "She drove me around to orient me, and I saw that particular intersection and knew instantly that I wanted to photograph there," he explains. "I found my way back there the next day to start my work and went back repeatedly over the next couple of years."

What he gets from these experiences is hardly a travelogue, and Graham becomes emphatic when "the D-word" – documentary – creeps into the conversation. "The work can get pigeonholed as social documentary work [but] the term documentary is difficult and troublesome. I try to avoid it if possible. I don't feel it's useful any

- 1 From *American Night*, 1998-2002
- 2 From *a shimmer of possibility*, 2004-06
- 3 From *The Present*, 2009-11

All images © Paul Graham, courtesy Pier 24 Photography, San Francisco



In print

The Whiteness of the Whale is published by Mack, priced £50.
www.mackbooks.co.uk



more. I find it ridiculous that anyone who takes pictures out in the world as it exists is labelled as a documentary photographer,” he continues. “William Eggleston is not a documentary photographer, nor is Garry Winogrand, realistically. The term is somehow used in a semi-derogatory manner as a way for people not to engage with the work.

“One reason I object to the documentary term when it’s used with *shimmer* is it’s impossible to say what it’s about,” he continues. “It’s not a piece of agitprop for any particular political viewpoint. There’s nothing really happening. People are cutting the grass or doing their shopping, waiting for a bus or smoking a cigarette. These aren’t subjects for a documentary. It’s very quiet – little rivulets of everyday life, rather than great rapids or waterfalls. That’s attracting me more and more. Years ago I was working in Northern Ireland about the conflicts 30 years ago, or about unemployment in the time of Margaret Thatcher. Since then, the work has become less obviously about a single, overarching condition.”

Because of this, he feels his practice has also strayed far from the territory usually occupied by documentary photographers

– that’s to say, from editorial work. “I can imagine a Magnum photographer doing a similar assignment to my early work on the unemployment lines, but I can’t imagine any editorial person being interested in 12 photographs of someone collecting their mail from a mailbox,” he says. “And that makes it all the more valuable to me, all the more wonderful. And I’m talking now about photography in general, in that someone takes time to examine these moments of our lives, our situation.”

This sense of the temporal sounds distinctly cinematic, and Graham is an avid filmgoer. He points to post-war Japanese cinema and directors such as Akira Kurasawa and Yasujiro Ozu as particular favourites, and says he’ll always be “first in line to see a Paul Thomas Anderson movie”. What these directors share is love of the vast, unhurried narrative structures that also characterise Graham’s work – but these days, his approach to editing is also somehow cinematic. “There is editing now on screen, rather than the old way of looking at a contact sheet,” he says. “You are looking on a monitor and clicking through, getting these stuttering frames, a flickering light happening; that helped

me recognise the moments in *shimmer* rather than using a China marker around the one frame that sums it all up. You work like a film editor going frame by frame by frame, knowing where to make the cut. This flowing, stuttering, filmic haiku that results is very powerful.”

We conclude our conversation by discussing his more recent, and seemingly hopeful, body of work, *Does Yellow Run Forever?* It’s not on view at Pier 24, but its divergent subject matter serves as a useful coda to the trilogy, focusing on rainbows and warm beds, shot in bed-and-breakfast stays with his partner. “You get to a point in your art career when you get too caught up in the hubbub of it all – exhibitions, books, sales and making a living,” says Graham. “And then you have to think about what really matters – love, friendship, dreams, wonders of the world.

“Hence the rainbow – that matters more than chasing gold. I’m reducing it down to a very simplistic narrative here, but there was that self-reminder, a little Post-it note to myself about what I value in life.” *BJP*

Paul Graham: *The Whiteness of the Whale* is on show at Pier 24 Photography in San Francisco until 29 February.
www.pier24.org

