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# In Arles, Paul Graham's Photographic Insights Shine

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Paul Graham, "New Orleans," from the "shimmer of possibility" series, 2003-2006.

(Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York ; Carlier | Gebauer, Berlin ; Anthony Reynolds Gallery, Londres.)



Paul Graham, 8th Avenue & 42nd Street, 17th August 2010, 11.23.03 am, from the The Present series, 2010.

It's a disorienting feeling to walk into a 15th-century church on a scorching day in the south of France only to be faced with walls and walls of large-scale photographs that question notions of American racial and cultural relations. The feeling is that of nothing being related, as if you'd spun three wheels — place, artist, and art — and landed upon the most disparate of possibilities.

But there's more pinning things together than might first appear. The 63-year-old, white, English photographer Paul Graham's exhibition "The Whiteness of the Whale" is being shown at the Church of the Preaching Brothers in Arles, France, through August 26 as a part of Les Rencontres d'Arles, the annual photography festival. Curated by Christopher McCall, the founding director of the San Francisco-based non-profit photography museum Pier 24, the exhibition brings together three of Graham's most famous series, "American Night," which he shot between 1998-2002, "a shimmer of possibility" 2004-2006, and "The Present," 2009-2011, in order to look at the shifts and stakes of social class — mediated largely by race — in modern America.

Who is invisible, he asks with intentionally overexposed photographs that show houses in typically black neighborhoods looking as though they're about to disappear? In other images, a black man walks outside Penn Station; in another photograph right next to it, the image is almost entirely the same — except the black man has been replaced in the frame by two policemen. Is the area safe or dangerous, the photographs ask? Who is keeping it safe? Who is the instigator, and who is the victim?

A slight shift in time and in framing entirely alters one's perspective. Photography proves to be the ideal medium for Graham: sight itself becomes a shorthand for invisibility, inequality, and inherent bias.

And yet, even as Graham has taken on a question as grand and as charged as race in America (and as a white, British man no less), he is disinterested in making sweeping political claims. "I have been taking photographs for 30 years now," he told *The Guardian*, "and it has steadily become less important to me that the photographs are about something in the most obvious way. I am interested in more elusive and nebulous subject matter. The photography I most respect pulls something out of the ether of nothingness."

Naturally, he cites William Eggleston as a major inspiration, and many of his photographs might easily be confused for ones taken by Eggleston — a mess of bright cherries on a sidewalk, a man pushing a lawnmower as the grass's morning dew shimmers.

Graham has been around for quite some time as a photographer, showing at the Venice Biennale in 2001 as a part of an international coterie put together by the Italian pavilion as well as having a role in the survey exhibition of 20th-century photography at the Tate in London in 2003. But his most important breakthrough came in 2009 when he was given a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where he showed “a shimmer of possibility.”

“a shimmer of possibility” is the best series on show at the Arles photography festival. The other two series are too forceful in their message. In “American Night,” for instance, the critique of American class society is too on the nose. Overexposed images of people and places that have been socially exploited — including homes owned by African-Americans and working-class individuals — are juxtaposed with colorfully shot images of prosperous white suburbs. A similar problem shows up in “The Present,” which is composed mostly of diptychs and triptychs that shift angles and time to create a portrait of America — a Jewish man wearing a yarmulke walks down a street in Midtown Manhattan, only to be replaced in the second photograph by an Arab man wearing a keffiyeh.

But in “a shimmer of possibility,” which takes up the center of the Church of the Preaching Brothers, Graham isn't trying to prove a point of view, only to provide a different one — and he does so by capturing quotidian life, a twist on street photography. In one image, a woman sits on a bench eating fast food. In another, a man does yardwork on a hillside, the city of Pittsburgh quiet behind him. In another, a group of African-Americans in Atlanta stand outside a convenience store, some sitting on a car, others walking from the store, the image arranged in

a way that would please a Renaissance painter: each face telling its own story, at once individual and relating to one another.

Many of the photographs in “a shimmer of possibility” are shot in sequences so that the woman who’s eating her fast food is first shown eating her fried chicken, then the next photograph is of her litter on the pavement beneath her, and the final image shows her smoking a cigarette.

Graham allows for time to pass in front of his lens, for life to play out. The images may seem pointless from a political standpoint, but that’s the intention. Nothingness is a poetry — and a politics — in and of itself.

Having begun its journey at Pier 24 in San Francisco, the exhibition moved to the High Museum in Atlanta then on to the Bombas Gens in Valencia, Spain, having made brief stops along the way, as when certain photos from the exhibition showed up in Sabine Weiss’s retrospective at the Pompidou Center in Paris. But it is here, in Arles, that the exhibition holds a greater weight.

Les Rencontres d’Arles has long been a vital photography festival, but with the billionaire Maja Hoffman’s Luma Foundation moving to Arles with 100,000-square-feet of space for Contemporary conceptual art and a 200-foot-tall Frank Gehry building to trumpet its entrance, Les Reconcontres needs original, subversive photography in order to stand out more than ever before. Here, Graham has provided it — the best exhibition in the festival, and such an unexpected one at that. A Brit’s eye finding a fresh focus on American daily life. When he slips into the background, his work comes most alive.

*“The Whiteness of the Whale,” by Paul Graham is on view at L’église des freres precheurs in Arles as part of the Rencontres d’Arles photo festival through August 26. More information: <https://www.rencontres-arles.com/>*