

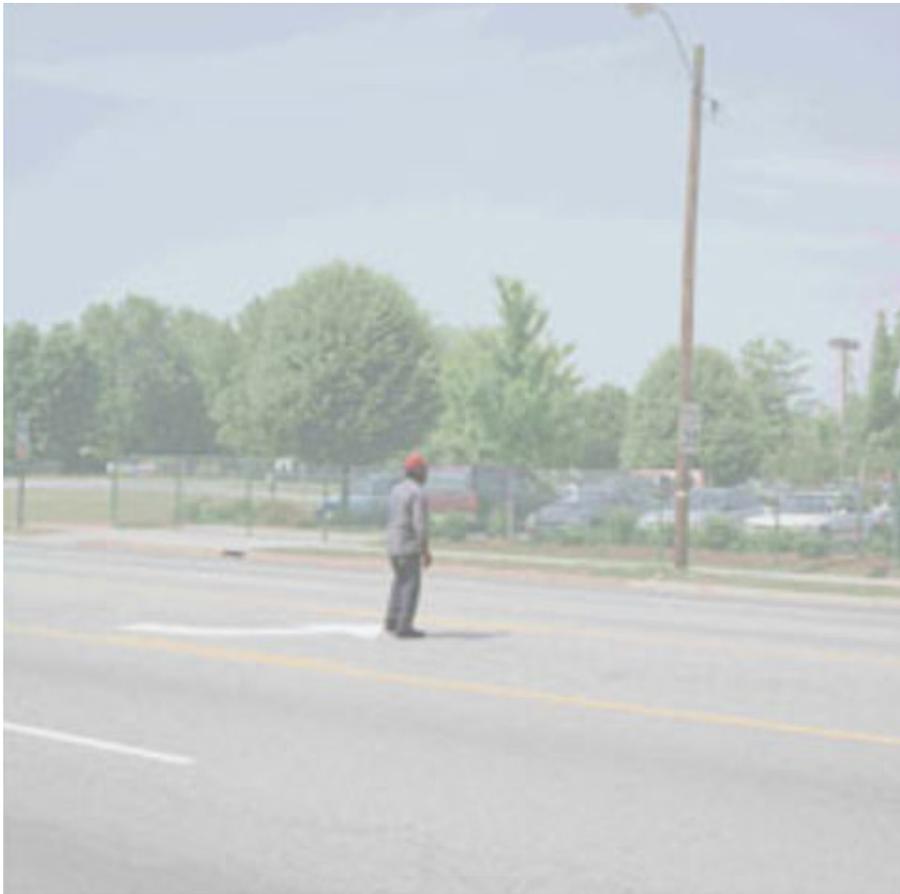
Art

Stalking the invisible man in the American landscape

By Vince Aletti *Tuesday, Dec 9 2003*

Paul Graham, the British photographer currently living in New York, combines a daunting sense of purpose with an instinctive understanding of ordinary beauty. His enormous, washed-out American landscapes at P.S.1 are the latest in a series of projects that involve the best sort of committed photography—work that's as smart and socially engaged as it is ravishing to look at.

Working in pungent color, Graham has photographed the waiting rooms of British unemployment offices in the depths of Thatcherist depression, landscapes subtly marked by resistance and repression in Northern Ireland, solitary young people enjoying their last nights of freedom before slipping into adulthood, and, with a sociologist's probing eye, citizens of the New Europe and even newer Japan.



Courtesy Salon 94 and Artemis Greenberg Van Doren Gallery
Paul Graham: American Night #32 (2002)

He strikes out for unfamiliar territory again in the series he calls "American Night," compressed to 16 images at P.S.1 from the 63 that make up his extraordinary book of the same title (Steidl Mack, \$65). The most remarkable of these photos were made on the outskirts of Detroit, Atlanta, Memphis, and other cities, where the landscape is a mix of urban sprawl and rural decay. Each site is unoccupied save for a single figure, nearly always a black man, at the side of a road. Sometimes these figures are so small you don't immediately notice them, and they're further obscured by Graham's decision to overexpose the images both in the camera and in the darkroom. The effect is like peering through a blindingly white scrim: Everything is at once illuminated and nearly invisible. At P.S.1, these pictures are introduced by four others of isolated African Americans in a mix of sun and shadow on the streets of New York. Two are wearing eye patches, making explicit Graham's theme of selectively obscured vision, and the ever present, still-invisible man in the benighted American landscape.