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There Are No Heroics Here

What To See in New York



Steven Shore, *U.S. 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973* (1973), The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Photography Council Fund © 2017 Stephen Shore

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There are photographs that refuse to tell stories; instead, they poke fun and provoke questions by pulling the curtain back on image making. For example, Stephen Shore's image of a billboard parked in the middle of a dry, weedy Oregon landscape, *U.S. 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973* (1973).

A photograph of a picture within a picture, the deadpan image teases the once majestic tradition of American landscape photography while also giving the medium the third degree. The most frequently reproduced image from Shore's eponymous survey currently on show at MoMA ("[Stephen Shore](#)", until 28 May), it is the opposite of a gauzy paean to the American sublime à la Ansel Adams or Minor White (Shore's teacher). With its Walt Whitmanesque embrace of color—which was once frowned upon by an earlier generation of serious photographers—and its celebration of everyday observation, this photograph is a pithy and sharp-eyed interrogation of the commonplace.

In *Klamath Falls*, nature is occluded by its own representation. It features acres of flat scrubland, two lines of receding wooden posts, a distant mountain range, the estranging billboard and a battery of fluffy clouds that radiate over a blue sky like the spokes of a bicycle wheel.

The sign, which carries the idealized image of a snowcapped Mount Hood (around 250 miles away), is made daftly enigmatic by the redaction of an accompanying block of text in darker blue. Whatever the original message, its erasure evokes René Magritte's brain-teaser about the treachery of representation: *Ceci n'est pas une montagne*.

It is just one of the hundreds of photographs included in the MoMA exhibition that trace the career of Shore, one of America's most influential photographers. Other works on show include photographs of landscapes, highways, motel rooms, diner breakfasts, bathrooms, gas stations and architectural digs, among a lifetime of other plainspoken subjects.

These pictures are intended to parse the grammar of photography while registering what Walker Evans once referred to as the "deep beauty in things as they are". Together they signal less a style than a set of impartial photographic principles: Shore's quest for maximum clarity; his rejection of retouching and reframing; the abandonment of flash for the use of natural light; his yeoman-like discipline—one shot of each subject, no editing after.

Shore's camerawork has been described as exemplifying the art of transparency. There are no heroics in *Klamath Falls*, for instance. It's just a radiantly crystalline picture of a billboard in front of a postcard-like background which sparks questions about what, and how, we see.