

Paul Graham

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

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HOW MIGHT WE ACCOUNT FOR the burgeoning interest in the British photographer Paul Graham—who, in addition to his solo debut currently at the Museum of Modern Art, recently had two concurrent commercial-gallery shows in New York? It is partly, no doubt, a consequence of steidlMACK's publication of *a shimmer of possibility*, a deluxe, limited-edition, twelve-volume set of books presenting photographs Graham shot between 2004 and 2006 on trips throughout California, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Texas. These books, which one can look at but not touch, are at the entrance to MOMA's exhibition, which shares its title with them and features seven photographic suites of between six and nine pictures each, along with two larger prints, selected from the images inside. But their publication took place two years ago, so there must also be other reasons for this, our Paul Graham moment.

The installation at MOMA makes it strikingly clear that Graham's principal innovation resides not in his having pioneered (along with Martin Parr) the "serious" use of color in the UK, but in the way he archives, selects, sizes, sequences, and juxtaposes images to produce photographic groupings that have been likened to "filmic haikus" and Chekhovian short stories. Such lofty comparisons are not entirely undeserved, given the precision and economy of Graham's photographic vignettes and the modest everydayness of their subjects. Among the most moving works in the show is a sequence of six shots of a gentle-faced, hippieish flower seller proffering his wares at night (*San*



From left: Paul Graham, *untitled*, 2005, color photograph, 20 x 14 1/4". From the six-part suite *San Francisco*, 2005. Paul Graham, *untitled*, 2004, color photograph, 24 x 32". From the six-part suite *New Orleans*, 2004 (*Woman Eating*). Paul Graham, *untitled*, 2004, color photograph, 15 x 20". From the six-part suite *New Orleans*, 2004 (*Woman Eating*).

Francisco, 2005). To the right of this, Graham has abutted *Las Vegas, 2005*, another suite of six photographs, five of which capture a portly guy in shirtsleeves smoking (and coughing) outdoors beside a building in brilliant light; incongruously, the third picture shows a laundry pile on the ground in the same smoker's corner.

Graham has characterized his American project as the fortuitous result of vacation travels after his move to the United States in 2002. But surely it is not only by chance that his wanderlust recalls that of the postwar American photographers he most admires (Eggleston, Frank, Friedlander, Shore, Winogrand, etc.): Graham shares their taste for the American vernacular, as well as their tendency to loiter around strip malls, fast-food restaurants, and bus stops. One effect of this is that his photographs often suggest *Anywhere, USA*; another is that they are not infrequently peopled by the problematically photogenic poverty-stricken men and women who populate such marginal spaces.

The MOMA installation opens with *New Orleans, 2004 (Woman Eating)*, a troubling sequence of six photographs, three of which are tight close-ups of a poor black woman, her hair dyed orange, eating take-out fried chicken at the bus stop where Graham met her. These are followed by two prints of what appears to be the same image, showing the sidewalk littered with chicken bones and cigarette butts, and a final shot of the same woman smoking. *California, 2005* consists of two staggered rows of four photographs each. All but one of the upper photographs show a young girl sitting on a sidewalk, next to a narrow strip of lawn and a featureless wall, surrounded by her stuff: a kid's bike, assorted toys, a red hoodie, a snack bag of peanuts, and a large Burger King soda cup. The last shot depicts her belongings, apparently left behind. Contrasting sharply with these images of a soulless American setting for child's play, the bottom pictures scope out a presumably homeless man, also seated on the ground, but next to a garbage bin outside a Jack in the Box.

Graham shoots his more difficult subjects as if Allan Sekula's and Martha Rosler's merciless indictments of documentary had never been written, as if Walter Benjamin's objection that certain photographs transform "even abject poverty . . . into an object of enjoyment" were just too

antique to matter. Indeed, the wide-ranging reconsideration of such critiques since 9/11 also helps explain the attention now being lavished on Graham's work. Critic David Levi Strauss, responding in 2007 to the "aestheticization of suffering" debate (and pointedly to Rosler's argument that "concerned photography" embraces "the weakest possible idea of social engagement, namely compassion"), rightly noted that "one needs first to feel the pain of others before one can begin to act to alleviate it" and that one way people can recognize the pain of others "is by seeing it, in images." Not all the revisionist arguments are so mindfully considered.

Graham, for his part, has spoken about his desire to "lend dignity" to life's "tiny moments," a somewhat paternalistic goal that MOMA curator Susan Kismaric amplifies when, introducing Graham's project, she recommends that "instead of recoiling at [the sight of] a problem we feel we can't do anything about, we let our attention be drawn to the normalcy of life and the small pleasures people experience." Small pleasures—does that really mean things like the cigarette a poor black woman smokes after eating takeout at a New Orleans bus stop?

The significance of that sequence of pictures, taken prior to Hurricane Katrina, was altered forever after that cataclysm, and it now reads as an indictment of the factors that turned a disaster not only into an occasion for aesthetic contemplation but also into an "opportunity" (according to Naomi Klein) to get rid of the city's poorest residents, to privatize its schools, and to initiate development schemes that ignore those whom the catastrophe dislodged. The current financial crisis has also put a retroactive spin on Graham's entire project, and perhaps one can best understand the currency of Graham's work today as a result not only of its nuanced portrayals of everyday American life but also of its implicit condemnation of an economic system that—now on the verge of collapse—deprives ever more Americans of the wherewithal to lead lives marked by dignity and, yes, those small pleasures. □

The exhibition remains on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, through May 18.

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