

Pioneers of Color; an exhibition at Edwynn Houk



July 4th, Provincetown, 1983

Image copyright Joel Meyerowitz, courtesy the artist and Edwynn Houk Gallery

by Rena Silverman

What do the photographers Stephen Shore, Joel Meyerowitz, and William Eggleston have in common? The answer almost certainly hangs from the Houk Gallery walls in *Pioneers of Color*, an exhibition revisiting the emergence of color photography through the earlier works of Shore, Meyerowitz, and Eggleston. These photographers, among others, were responsible for leading their medium from the commercial world to the art world, and through a sea of controversy.

Even if you weren't there to experience the incredible shift that took place in the 1970s within the art and photography worlds, the very name of this exhibition should stimulate enough hunger for contextual regard; the word *pioneer* is implicit of a revolution or story.

Like with any art, context affects meaning, and color photography emerged out of a context full of opposition. "Up until the 1970s, art photography thought of itself as a social conscience," said Kevin Moore who curated *Starburst. Color Photography in America 1970–1980*, a show in Cincinnati that inspired the assembly of *Pioneers of Color*.

"The shift to color seemed to represent a lowering of standard and a sign of apathy," he said.

Mr. Moore's point not only reeks from the pages of every New Yorker review from 1975–1979; it shows through statements made by some of the most famous photographers of that time.

Typical of Walker Evans to express discomfort, with color, it was more acute. (Later, he would fall in love with polaroid.) Evens hated the "screeching hues," the "bebop of electric blues," the "furious reds, and poison greens," writing, "there are four simple words which must be whispered: color photography is vulgar." But as Geoff Dyer noted his *The Ongoing Moment*, "Vulgarity, like beauty, was in the eye of the beholder."

Robert Frank had a more permanent distaste for color photography. "Black and white are the colors of photography," he said, "To me they symbolize the alternatives of hope and despair to which mankind is forever subjected". Even Henri Cartier-Bresson hated color. "Imagine having to think about colour on top of all this," he said. The response was unanimous: color photography was simply too commercial for the real artist.

But what is a *real* artist? To deal with this daunting definition, critics have squeezed every huge concept into one of two categories: commercial vs. art; amateur vs. professional; creation vs. representation; form vs. content.

Consider this 1977 *New Yorker* review of William Eggleston's 1976 debut at The Museum of Modern Art:

"...the Eggleston photographs made a particularly poor showing in exhibition. they looked inartistic, unmodern, out of place in an art museum....if a photographer wants to create instead of imitate, he should get himself a brush."

How odd that a new kind of photography should look "unmodern" to this writer. Yet the issue was not one of modernism; it was one of an art-world door, which would, for almost another decade, slam repeatedly in the faces of color photographers. As Joel Meyerowitz put it, for a long time color photography was simply "the bastard-child of fine art." But one must marvel at the black-and-white thinking imposed by the critics.

With all of this context in mind, enter the exhibition, where vivid prints encircle one cylindrical axis, like painted horses on a merry-go-round. Almost immediately, a sudden, bright bloodbath floods the eyes: it is William Eggleston's *Red Ceiling*, a "Bach exercise", as Eggleston called it because "red was the most difficult color to work with." The image, which would dwindle in brio if ever merely scanned, measures a modest 11 3/4x18 inches. Yet it sets the room on fire, bringing out every bit of red the neighboring photographs.

To the left of *The Red Ceiling*, is Joel Meyerowitz's *New York City*, 1974, an energizing scene bursting out of a 20 x 24 inch HP Archival pigment print with crisscrossing lines of focus, negative space, edge and linear tensions, all framed by a transverse of eyes. One could safely bounce a child off of this composition; and, mapping out the oculesics of this image, one would end up with something that looked like a shoelace.

The photograph features a man in glasses and a blond paisley tie staring from the left at a lady in a white sun hat. The lady, who wears a pale blue t-shirt and a burgundy patterned skirt, holds her hat with one arm bent, raised, and hooked above her hat as she walks forward against the wind. Mystery emerges from under her hat, which covering her eyes, is the main focus of this photograph. On the right, a younger woman with wavy brown hair and polka dots stares back and left towards a green tunic that hangs off a woman walking away from us, into the blurrier part of the image. Beyond her, pedestrians are traveling in rows, multiplying like mirrors as they disappear towards the vanishing point, where they are greeted at the narrowest point of perspective by the blur of a blue bus.



New York City, 1974

Image copyright Joel Meyerowitz, courtesy the artist and Edwynn Houk Gallery

This kind of street scene is what Meyerowitz likes to call a “jazzy slice of life”, something that could only happen in color, “because when you walk down the street,” he said in an interview, “the sky is blue and someone’s wearing a yellow hat.” And, according to Meyerowitz, while this is true of color, “black and white describes a narrow experience of the world.”

Meyerowitz became a photographer in 1962 after watching Robert Frank at work. His first role of film was in color, but it wasn't until 1973 when the price of printing dropped that Meyerowitz was able to fully break from black and white photography. “For me, at the time it [using color] was an act of independence,” said Meyerowitz. “I had to do this to be an artist.”

But, few artists work with a gas station more gracefully and with a slicker sense of composition than photographer Stephen Shore. *La Brea Avenue and Beverly Boulevard* is an 8x10 contact print (from the original negative) of a gas station in California. Like a hand hanging from a long blue arm tattooed by the letters S-T-A-N-D, a Chevron sign looms over the center, its red and blue logo pointing to a clear ‘rule of thirds’, with the gas station on the right, and long road on the left. A silver street-lamp splits the grid between center and left; it stands skinny, tall, and headless projecting a shadow across the photograph all the way onto the gas station. (Shore's 8x10 camera lends linear authenticity to this lamp; it would almost certainly bulge at the bottom under 35 mm circumstances.) All of these elements--the Chevron sign, the lamp, its shadow, the gas station---serve as a frame for the long road ahead, as it vanishes into a gradated pale sky, which hangs like a window shade over distant hilltops.



La Brea Avenue and Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975

Image copyright Stephen Shore, courtesy the artist and Edwynn Houk Gallery

Often cited by famous photographers, including Gursky, as an influence, *La Brea Avenue* was first published in 1981, in Sally Euaclaire's survey *The New Color Photography* and then again in 1982 in Shore's own *Uncommon Places*.

It was a photograph taken by Shore on the road, one of many that he snapped in the early 1970s when he “just got in a car” and drove west across the country, photographing “every meal, every toilet, every bed, every town” that he saw. Why not? By the time Shore was 24, he had already hung out with Andy Warhol at “The Factory” and had his own solo show at the Met. “I find I can take it all in stride”, Shore said.

At the opening for *Pioneers of Color*, one man praised the smaller size of Shore's prints: “it is refreshing to have to lean into the photograph; the smaller size makes you want to get closer to it,” he said.

Looking at this exhibition, with all this history in mind, one might want to note Virginia Woolf's point in “Modern Fiction”, one of her most famous essays: “In making any survey, even the freest and

loosest...it is difficult not to take it for granted that the modern practice of the art is somehow an improvement upon the old.”

For Meyerowitz, Shore, and Eggleston, color was such an improvement; they could now describe what was around them, and with the highest possible quality the time had to offer.

Pioneers of Color: Through April 24, 2010 at the Edwynn Houk gallery; 745 5th Avenue. www.houkgallery.com.

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