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Paul Graham

MoMA, Salon 94 and Greenberg
Van Doren Gallery

Paul Graham's career has seen dramatic transformations, a trajectory that was difficult to trace in these recent, too-slim shows. "Paul Graham: Photographs, 1981-2006" was split between Greenberg Van Doren and Salon 94. At the latter, the exhibition skimmed the period from 1981 to '86, when Graham was upsetting the British tradition of black-and-white documentary photography via William Eggleston and the New Topographics movement. *Café Waitress, John's Café, Sandy, Bedfordshire, May 1982*, a picture from his first series, "A1-The Great North Road (1981-82), shot in England, is an uneasy compromise between Eggleston's color-saturated object-world and the social life of documentary: backdrop and figure seem to be vying for prominence. By the late 1980s, following what he called a "juggernaut of British colour documentary," Graham began to look further afield for inspiration. His wanderlust – and documentary taste – was already apparent in a series shot in Northern Ireland, "Troubled Land" (1984-86). *Union Jack Flag in Tree, County Tyrone, 1985*, offers just a glimpse, in a lush landscape, of the period's troubled politics.

His encounters with German photographers like Volker Heinze and Michael Schmidt in the late '80s sparked a significant change in his work, as registered in the second half of the show at Greenberg Van Doren. Graham's subject in "New Europe" (1988-92) is how capitalism was working to homogenize culturally distinct people and cover over the wounds of history, and he tackled it with an expressionism that put aside the more explicit commentary to be found in traditional documentary. The gallery presented one picture from the series,

Untitled, Paris, 1988 (man on metro), showing only the knee of a suited commuter waiting on a platform. There were also three photographs from the "Painting" series (1997-99), in which Graham recorded the scarred and graffiti-covered interiors of elevators. Graham renewed the tradition of social documentary throughout his career, introducing new subjects, formal innovations and changes in scale. At 71 by 91 inches, *American Night #32* (2002), from his "American Night" series (1998-2002; he moved to the U.S. in 2002), is larger than his earlier prints, and it features a heavy use of over-exposure that produces a sense of blind struggle in an otherwise ordinary scene of a figure in a parking lot.

His most recent series is "a shimmer of possibility" (2004-06), selections from which were displayed at MoMA. (The series has been published in 12 volumes by Steidl/MACK.) Like "A1," it arose from road trips, this time in America. But Graham's style has taken on a theatricality in which human encounters supply small epiphanies, as in *San Francisco (Man Selling Flowers)*, 2005, whose roadside vendor at night could be a prophet in the desert. Previously, Graham took pleasure in showing figures in moments of withdrawal and contemplation. Now he is more interested in time's flow, as captured in the sequencing of his pictures. Graham continues to move forward even while renewing early concerns.

-Morgan Falconer



Paul Graham: *San Francisco (Man Selling Flowers)*, 2005, one of six Inkjet prints, 20 by 14 ¼ inches; at MoMA.