In his introduction, he draws comparisons with the scenic details painted around 1800 by artists who felt them worthy to be pictures in their own right. This is interesting, but gives little sense of the contemporary context for an activity that Miller seems half inclined to play down as ‘random scavenging’. What he doesn’t mention is the degree to which such ‘bits’ have seduced many artists, photographers and designers in the twentieth century. The torn posters on the cover of his book – one face appears almost to be dreaming the other – belong to a well-established, though admittedly off-beat, genre of image-making. Part of the fascination of Nowhere in Particular lies in observing this poetic way of seeing being pursued for many years, almost obsessively, by a casual, non-professional photographer with no immediate artistic use of the images in mind.

The American photographer Walker Evans was one of the first to focus on street posters and signs as sources of insight into the society that created them. In Torn Movie Poster, taken in 1930, the movie stars’ glamorous heads are divided by a gash that begins in the top right corner and narrows to a fissure across the starlet’s face. Evans’ tight close-up excludes most of the poster because it is the fault line destabilizing the image that he wants us to see. In Mistrel Showbill, Alabama (1936), he shows the entire poster, with some of the surrounding wall. This time, a much greater proportion has been torn away and the bricks are re-emerging from behind a patronizing scene of ‘comical’ black folk running round a yard. The abrasions of the elements, assisted perhaps by the ends of passers-by, strip away a dubious piece of racial propaganda.

Even more significant in the evolution of this aesthetic of the ‘negligible’ was another American photographer, Aaron Siskind – in his book, Miller briefly acknowledges an affinity with Siskind’s pictures. By the 1940s, Siskind had abandoned his early documentary approach, always notable for its attention to formal qualities, in favour of the preoccupation with flatness and surface texture usually compared to Abstract Expressionism, although Siskind’s artistic interests developed in a parallel with those of painters like Mark Rothko, Franz Kline and Clyfford Still.

‘First, and emphatically, I accept the flat plane of the picture surface as the primary frame of reference of the picture,’ Siskind wrote in 1950. Even more significant in the evolution of this aesthetic of the ‘negligible’ was another American photographer, Aaron Siskind – in his book, Miller briefly acknowledges an affinity with Siskind’s pictures. By the 1940s, Siskind had abandoned his early documentary approach, always notable for its attention to formal qualities, in favour of the preoccupation with flatness and surface texture usually compared to Abstract Expressionism, although Siskind’s artistic interests developed in a parallel with those of painters like Mark Rothko, Franz Kline and Clyfford Still.

Despite being based on the most inconsequential subject matter, his black-and-white close-ups of rocks, sand, seaweed, pointlessly marked walls, fragments of buildings, graffiti, details of decaying signs and peeling posters achieve the raw formal language and heightened expressive power of abstract paintings. In pictures such as Jerome, Arizona (1949) and Degraded Sign (1951), distressed and damaged surfaces resonate with a promise of deeper metaphorical meaning.