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ART/ARCHITECTURE; Portraits Picked Out of The Crowd

By RICHARD B. WOODWARD AUG. 19, 2001

TO photograph strangers these days takes nerve and imagination. The man in the street is no longer naïve about the manipulative powers of the camera. With surveillance devices monitoring our sinful lives around the clock in the name of government or business or reality television, people now are either rightfully wary or way too enthusiastic about having their pictures taken. Nor is the art world so willing as in the past to accept documentary images as factual accounts of the world. That photographs advance a hidden agenda is one of the clichés of postmodern critical theory.

For the last 20 years Joel Sternfeld has been negotiating this bumpy terrain by adopting a liberal-minded neutrality toward those he coaxes in front of his lens. The occasional portraits in his earlier books "American Prospect" and "Campagna Romana" bespoke a curiosity about how all kinds of people look and live. This expansive attitude toward humankind fills every room of "Stranger Passing," an exhibition of 65 of his large-scale portraits (3 feet by 4 feet) now at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and continuing through Oct. 2.

The success of portraits made outside the studio often depends on a balance between opposing forces. The gaze leveled at the camera lends moral gravity to these

face-to-face confrontations. A portrait is a judgment of character, with the portrayer as harshly assessed as the portrayed. At the same time, a sense of the fugitive, the unscripted moment or a background detail seen by happy accident should be visible to counteract any idea that the meeting had been set up. When formality rules, the photographer is a cruel puppeteer. But without some string-pulling to ground the picture, the props of daily life may cause it to sink or fly apart.

August Sander and Diane Arbus were the 20th-century masters of this improvised approach to portraiture, and their achievements in black and white stand behind Mr. Sternfeld's in color. Like Sander, he has consciously set out to chronicle the faces of his time; and like Arbus, he photographs with stealth, cunning and an uncondescending sympathy for the outcasts among us. "Stranger Passing" is an unscientific survey of anonymous Americans from 19 states (with New York and California most heavily represented) as he happened upon them between 1985 and 2000.

In Mr. Sternfeld's view of his native land, clothes and hair seem more reliable indices of status and character than facial expression. Historians of fashion may one day consult these portraits to chart the dressing down of America at the end of the 20th century. Attire for work and play are now interchangeably blurred and confused. The array of denim jeans alone -- stonewashed, ripped, faded, stained, three-quarter, dyed -- rewards careful study. Judging by Mr. Sternfeld's evidence, we live in a country where rich and poor alike prefer the comfort of sneakers, and women are more likely to wear roller blades and lycra workout suits than heels and a skirt. The running shoe and t-shirt, seen here in a panoply of styles and colors, may now be as much a symbol of America as hamburgers and Coca-Cola.

Mr. Sternfeld's camera records these changes without decrying them. If he can't help noticing it's a mighty strange place we inhabit, with a cast of characters unlike any that have walked the earth before, he observes our new sexual, racial and socio-economic arrangements with wit rather than satire. His eye can spot the incongruous detail that undermines self-presentation.

A young woman seated outdoors at the South Street Seaport in New York has a measuring, come-hither stare. What she doesn't know, however, is that her skirt has

come undone at the waist to reveal a glimpse of thong.

A teenager in Dallas leaning against a car in a mall proudly displays the logos on his clothes and shopping bag (Tommy Hilfiger, Nike, Old Navy). But the boy's red hair and innate gawkiness indicate that despite his best efforts to look like everyone else, he has about as much chance of fitting in as one of Arbus's melancholy oddballs.

With wall text invoking Walt Whitman, the exhibition demonstrates some of the strengths and drawbacks of unbridled Emersonian optimism about humanity. Mr. Sternfeld embraces the new ethnic diversity confirmed by the 2000 census. There is no nostalgia for a vanishing old order in which everyone knew his or her place.

But some pictures seem to have made the cut to fill a journalistic niche, as if to illustrate a story about shifting American demographics, rather than out of pictorial concerns. The captions sometimes assume too much of the burden of meaning. A portrait taken last year of a woman in San Francisco would very likely not be on the wall had she not been attending a "dot.com party." A picture of an Iowa farmer holding a cigarette is riveting enough without our being told that she suffers from thyroid cancer. Mr. Sternfeld views all the strangers he has met in their best light, lest he be accused of that dreaded word "exploitation." Anger and evil are missing from his America.

More often than not, however, especially when he appears to surprise himself by what he finds, Mr. Sternfeld proves himself an invaluable witness to his times. Many of his best pictures seem to flow effortlessly out of random encounters. We can guess where the New York lawyer with the rumpled shirts over his arm has come from and where he's going. A mother and son (included in the exhibition but not the catalog) sit on a couch at a Hawaii resort, with the ambiguous light of an atrium, neither inside nor outside, reflecting their complex familiarity. In the grandest fulfillment of Whitman's America, a middle-aged man in overalls and running shoes stands on the banks of the Mississippi River as though he had discovered it.

The journalist Ian Frazier, one of two essayists in the catalog (the other is the curator, Douglas R. Nickel), expresses a credo that might be the photographer's own. "I believe in the truth of what can be seen by anyone," he writes. By doing little more

than stopping to look closely and well at the anonymous people who pass us every day, Mr. Sternfeld has provided an eerie group portrait of our contemporary democracy, where, despite the many new and old categories of difference, we are all equally strangers to ourselves.

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