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Review/Photography; The Campagna Romana Viewed by Joel Sternfeld

By CHARLES HAGEN

Whether in word or line, countless poets and artists have celebrated the Campagna Romana, the lushly verdant volcanic plain outside Rome. Among the legions who have tried over the years to capture its beauty have been the painters Claude Lorrain and Camille Corot, as well as the poet Goethe. Now the American photographer Joel Sternfeld has turned his hand to the task of recording this storied landscape. Mr. Sternfeld recently spent a year in Italy on a Rome Prize fellowship, and during his time there photographed extensively with a large-format camera in the countryside around Rome. This strikingly beautiful show offers the results of his labors, depicting the Campagna in richly colored images made with a sharply observant eye.

Mr. Sternfeld is one of a number of American photographers -- among them Stephen Shore, William Eggleston and John Pfahl -- who came to prominence in the late 1970's with color prints, made using the simplified processes that first became available in that period. Like many of his colleagues, Mr. Sternfeld has long taken the landscape as his primary subject. What he is best known for, though, are the deadpan but deflating touches of humor he includes in many of his pictures. In one, a lovely but insipid vista of tree-covered hills suddenly takes on an ominous, almost Surrealist air when one notices, in the center of the frame, the tiny figure of a circus elephant collapsed from heat exhaustion on a narrow highway.

Despite the romantic overtones of his current subject matter, Mr. Sternfeld has lost none of his wit in his depiction of it. Even more than is true elsewhere in Italy, the Campagna includes a jumble of remnants from the country's long history, from

ancient aqueducts to Renaissance villas to modern office buildings. Many of Mr. Sternfeld's pictures record the stylistic leaps across time that the juxtaposition of structures from such disparate eras can suggest. In one picture here, black-clad housewives cluster beneath a fragment of an aqueduct, knitting and talking, while in the background rows of modern apartment blocks stretch away in the distance. Another, marked by the eerie light found in paintings by Giorgio de Chirico, shows a regal-looking bald-headed man, implausibly spotlit and posing in profile like a Renaissance prince, behind the fence of his lush garden; in the foreground water gushes from a street fountain.

Also included in this show are a number of works in which Mr. Sternfeld has used his 8-by-10-inch camera to create panoramic shots that stretch across several frames. This formal device enables him to present sweeping vistas of the countryside while also setting up contrasts between the images within each piece. In one such work, a crumbling fragment of an ancient wall huddles forlornly in one frame of a four-panel piece, surrounded by the scaffolding-clad buildings of a new apartment complex.

Occasionally, Mr. Sternfeld's pictures engage not only the history of the Campagna but of photography as well. In one image of a popular lovers' lane, twin Fiats lurk beneath a huge wall fragment that seems about to topple over. The structure of this picture recalls a famous 1872 photograph by William Bell of a similarly huge, precariously balanced rock in Arizona. But where Bell's image is unabashedly awe-inspiring, Mr. Sternfeld undercuts the majesty of the ancient ruin in his picture by including the banal details of the lovers' cars.

Despite the obvious affection he feels for the Roman countryside and the people who live in it, Mr. Sternfeld attempts to remain the coolly distant observer, dispassionately recording the curious and suggestive disparities to be found in his subjects. But in the end, the physical beauty of the Campagna captures Mr. Sternfeld, as it has so many earlier travelers. His pictures take on a rich sensuousness, and revel in the visual delights of the Campagna -- its shifting light and vivid colors; the way the sweep of the landscape will be suddenly disrupted by a ruin or a Palladian farmhouse in the middle of a plowed field.

In several pictures here, crumbling remains of aqueducts dot the plain of the Campagna like majestic galleons on the face of the ocean. The light that Claude made famous in his paintings -- thick, golden, almost palpable -- is to be found in these

photographs as well. It seems to suffuse everything, and lends an aura of nobility even to such banal subjects as cars junked on the edge of a field. For all their smart modernist wit, these pictures reveal clearly the lyrical vision that underlies Mr. Sternfeld's work.

The photographs of Joel Sternfeld remain at the Pace/MacGill Gallery, 32 East 57th Street, through Oct. 19.

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A version of this review appears in print on September 20, 1991, on Page C00022 of the National edition with the headline: Review/Photography; The Campagna Romana Viewed by Joel Sternfeld.