

Meyers, William.
"Those Nice, Bright Colors."

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By WILLIAM MEYERS

Color came late to photography. In the 19th century, color was sometimes painted onto photographs, and in the 20th century, a process — Autochrome — was developed, which Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, and a few others briefly experimented with. But it wasn't until the introduction of Kodachrome in mid-century that color really became a viable medium for photography.

And even then, as Ringo Starr wrote about love, "it don't come easy." It is very difficult to take a beautiful, an artful, color photograph because a good color photograph has to be not just *in* color, but *of* color. Jeff Sternfeld is one of a small number of photographers who can do it.

"American Prospects and Before," an exhibition at Luhring Augustine in Chelsea, displays some of his earliest work and selections from the project, undertaken in the late 1970s and early 1980s, that made his reputation. The pictures were reprinted last year as Digital C-Prints that translate the original negatives into vibrant, deep, sharp images.

The first part of the exhibition, "Rush Hour," consists of eight pictures taken in 1976 on 35mm film and printed at 9 ½ by 14 inches. These images were taken on the streets of New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia and show the influence of Gary Winogrand and other contemporaneous street photographers. What makes them unique is that they are in color, and the use of a flash to light up the faces (and sometimes the backs of the heads) of the pedestrians.

In "New York City, June 1976 (42nd Street)," four figures are caught in front of what was then the Esso Building. Each seems to have his mind somewhere else, and the only thing they have in common is that they are all in the frame of the same Sternfeld picture. It is urban anomie, rendered well enough, but these early images are like finger exercises, the practice an artist does to warm up for his real work.

That was "American Prospects," a project begun with a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1978. Mr. Sternfeld switched to a large-format camera and, in seeking America, found his true "eye" — the photographer's equivalent of a writer's "voice." These pictures, printed at 42 by 52 ½ inches, are

PHOTOGRAPHY

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like stills excerpted from narratives that we will never get to hear the end of. Their attention to social particulars and the details of place reminds me of the short stories by the late-19th-century "local colorists," Sarah Owen Jewett, George Washington Cable, and Hamlin Garland.

"Domestic Workers Waiting for the Bus, Atlanta, Georgia, April 1983," shows three black women standing in the street of an upscale suburban development. The women are surrounded by gently rolling, uniform, green lawns and landscaping, and houses in sophisticated shades of brown. We know the inhabitants of these comfortable residences are white, even though none are about.

But these women are not the raggedy servants of a former era. They stand with dignity and are nicely dressed, the one in the middle especially: She wears black pants and a handsome jacket with multicolored vertical stripes, and she faces the camera with an intelligent face.

Sternfeld uses the color of the lawns and houses to isolate the women on the black road, and then the color of their clothes to particularize them.

Some pictures show extraordinary sights, seen from far enough away that they are not sensationalized. "Approximately 17 of 41 Sperm Whales That Beached and Subsequently Died, Florence, Oregon, June 1979" and "Exhausted Renegade Elephant, Woodland, Washington, June 1979" are two of these. The first has the dying whales in an expanse of beach and limitless ocean; the second has a pachyderm splayed out on a rural two-lane highway in the middle of nowhere. In both pictures the colors are muted, pastel, and unexceptional, which plays against the singularity of what they are about.

Mr. Sternfeld's America is prosaic and surreal, amusing and depressing, but always totally plausible. And, ultimately, it is home. Its colors are what we live with; he just arranges them so we can recognize it again.



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Jeff Sternfeld, 'Domestic Workers Waiting for the Bus, Atlanta, Georgia, April 1983' (2003).

"Joel Sternfeld: American Prospects and Before" at Luhring Augustine until February 7 (531 W. 24th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-206-9100). Prices: \$9,000-\$20,000.

