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JOEL STERNFELD

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In the '70s and '80s, when Joel Sternfeld traversed the US on a series of cross-country trips, he toted not a Leica or a Rolleiflex but an old-fashioned 8 x 10 view camera. Sternfeld was following in the footsteps of a generation of American photographers for whom the automobile had been almost as integral to the project as the camera itself; like his fellow "New Color" road-trippers Stephen Shore and William Eggleston, he modified the itinerant documentary tradition as he went along, jettisoning its chromophobia and rethinking the snapshot ethos as well. But if, say, Eggleston's street shots and on-the-fly intimacies embody a first-person, driver's-eye view of the world, Sternfeld's magisterial perspectives lead one to wonder whether he had a crane mounted on the roof of his VW van.

Fourteen new digital prints from "American Prospects," 1978–86/2003—blown up to forty-eight by fifty-eight and a half inches, roughly twice the size of earlier editions—afforded wide-angle views of prefab housing developments, vacation spots, and shabby rural enclaves. In one well-known picture, an elephant lies collapsed on a country road (*Exhausted Renegade Elephant, Woodland, Washington, June 1979, 1979/2003*). It's a jarring image that may look staged or Photoshopped to an eye nourished on Jeff Wall or Gregory Crewdson and his spawn. But no: It's just that Sternfeld has a knack for homing in on improbable situations, and his lucid, hieratic style, which suggests the gaze of an omniscient narrator, heightens the pictures' resemblance to fiction. Elsewhere, perfectly spaced in what could almost be military formation, beached whales expire in a row on the sand (*Approximately 17 of 41 Sperm Whales That Beached and Subsequently Died, Florence, Oregon, June 1979, 1979/2003*); a man gazes with inexplicable suspicion at his lawn sprinkler (*Hailey, Idaho, June 1980, 1980/2003*); and a little girl in a bathing suit stands in the midst of a barren salt flat, near a lonely picnic table and a

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trash can bearing the legend PITCH IN! (*Great Salt Lake, Utah, August 1979, 1979/2003*). In these pictures, the built environment is as hapless and untoward as the creatures that populate it—a provisional mishmash of signage and light-industrial outcroppings, laid over the contours of the land like a transparency over a Bierstadt. At their most sweeping—as in the New West panorama *Phoenix, Arizona, August 1979, 1979/2003*, which features a line of riders on horseback meandering through desert scrub while the city’s Mission-lite suburbs hover in the background—the photographs seem to collapse the narrative of manifest destiny into a fractured fairy tale of visual clutter run amok. The crystalline, allover focus made possible by the view camera and used to such valedictory effect by Ansel Adams becomes a subversive agent when used to apprehend these post-Pop landscapes. While at least one critic (Howard Halle, in *Time Out New York*) has noted that the oversize new prints could be construed as an ex post facto bid for fashionable monumentality, they could also be understood as a case of technology catching up with sensibility: Before digital processing, the pictures could not have been enlarged to this size without sacrificing resolution. The greater magnification here seems like the logical continuation of Sternfeld’s penchant for pushing reality toward the hyperreal.

—Elizabeth Schambelan



Joel Sternfeld, *Wet n' Wild Aquatic Theme Park, Orlando, Florida, September 1980, 1980/2003*, color photograph, 48 x 58½".