

“Joel Sternfeld, Oxbow Archive at Luhring Augustine”  
DLK Collection  
<http://dlkcollection.blogspot.com/2008/09/joel-sternfeld-oxbow-archive-luhring.html>  
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LUHRING  
AUGUSTINE

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JTF (just the facts): 13 large scale color landscapes, approximately 5' x 7' each, shown in the entry, front, and two back rooms of the gallery. (see installation shot at right) In editions of 3, plus 2 APs. Negatives from 2005-2007, prints from 2008.

Comments/Context: It's been more than 20 years since Joel Sternfeld produced the work for which he is best known, the series of unexpected, paradoxical, and surprising work from American Prospects. The word most associated with these pictures is “ironic”, as exemplified by the image of the firefighter picking out a pumpkin while a house burns in the background.

One of the interesting challenges for the mid-career artist is how to get beyond the work that made you famous; how do you continue to innovate, without repeating yourself or becoming bored. Often, this means heading deeper into more personal territory and taking some more risks with images that are less obviously appealing to the “market” that has developed around the early work. So if you go to this exhibit hoping to find a repeat of American Prospects, you will be left puzzled. But if you go without preconceptions, I think you will find this exhibit quite satisfying, in a low key, quiet way.

All of the images in the show were taken in Northampton, Massachusetts, through the seasons over a couple of years. These are landscapes, but not the majestic grand gestures of Ansel Adams. This is second growth scrub forest, river flats, and meadows of weeds, scenes perfectly reminiscent of the sometimes anonymous and deadening landscape of current day New England. The pictures are grouped into seasons, with rooms for summer and fall in the back, and winter/spring together in the main room.

But unlike the less than beautiful California landscapes of Robert Adams, there is a touching affection buried in these images. There is no irony here; in fact, there are no people at all and no clever juxtapositions. These are pictures of a local, who has taken the time to really see the landscape around him, even though it might not fit the traditional definitions of beauty. This is a person who is noticing and enjoying the turning of the seasons, and selecting out those moments when the yarrow is high, or the river is frozen, or the warm spring light has finally come back after months of dismal grey. These pictures seem to me to be perfectly grounded in the thoughts and emotions of a 21st century world: what have development and global warming done to our traditional lands? how can we re-embrace the local world around us and reconnect to something more meaningful than consumerism? how can we get more in tune with the seasons and the local foods that grow in our communities? (A few Bill McKibben essays would be a nice pairing for this work.)

These pictures will not blow your hair back when you see them in the gallery. And whether they will stand up to the tests of time is still unknown. Perhaps they will be looked back on through the lens of heightened care for the world around us and seem emblematic of the thoughts of these times. Regardless, these pictures reflect the real sentiments of an artist who is watching the nuanced changes in the world around him. And for that, they should be praised.

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Collector’s POV: The images are priced at \$50000 each, which given their size and the prevailing market for Sternfeld’s work, seems about right for retail.

As an aside, as relatively anonymous collectors, we are used to receiving the frosty attitude of gallery staff, designed for the unwashed walk-ins. I was therefore pleasantly surprised to get not only a friendly greeting, but genuine enthusiasm for the work from the staff at Luhring Augustine. And when I inquired about the book published to coincide with the show and found they were already sold out, they went out of their way to offer me options for getting a copy later. Well done. Gallery folks out there, think of me as the mystery shopper at Burger King, checking to see if I get a hot meal and a clean bathroom. (For future reference, I am particularly annoyed by misdirection and sneakiness with the price list.) Luhring Augustine passed with flying colors, and made me eager for my next visit.