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portfolio text

Joel Sternfeld



All images from the series *iDubai* © Joel Sternfeld, courtesy Luhring Augustine, New York

Joel Sternfeld was born in New York City in 1944. He has a BA from Dartmouth College, and started to experiment with colour photography in the 1970s. He is now considered to be one of the major figures in the world of photography. In 1987 Sternfeld published one of his most famous series, *American Prospects*, a result of many road trips around America, during which he explored landscapes that had been altered by human activity and made his photographs with a great eye for detail and a strong sense of colour.

Sternfeld is the author of twelve books including *Hart Island* (1988), *Stranger Passing* (2001), *Sweet Earth* (2006), *When It Changed* (2007) and *Oxbow Archive* (2008).

He has received numerous awards, including two Guggenheim fellowships, a Prix de Rome (2004) and the Citibank Photography Award.

In recent years he has developed a strong interest in global warming and the destructive forces faced by our society. His most recent

project *iDubai* – to be published by Steidl in May 2010 - investigates consumerism and capitalism plus the theoretical implications of the proliferation of mobile phone cameras around the globe. In Dubai, Joel Sternfeld used his iPhone camera to get beyond mass-media images of the Emirate.

Joel Sternfeld is represented by Luhring Augustine, New York.

Chris Wiley is an artist, writer, and curator based in Brooklyn, New York. He is a regular contributor to *Kaleidoscope*, and his writing has also appeared in *Abitare*, *Cabinet*, *Art Press*, and other publications. He has also previously worked on curatorial projects at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, and is currently working as part of the curatorial team of the 8th Gwangju Biennial in South Korea. For more information visit: www.chriswiley.net

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Castles Built on Sand: Joel Sternfeld's iDubai

by Chris Wiley

'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.'

– Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Kubla Kahn; or A Vision in a Dream*

In October 1956, construction was completed on what is perhaps the most influential piece of architecture built in the second half of the 20th century: the Southdale Mall in Edina, Minnesota. This may sound like hyperbolic praise, a designation more befitting Philip Johnson's Glass House or Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building than a retail complex erected in a small Twin Cities suburb, but no single mid-century architectural masterpiece laid the ground work for such a thorough and irrevocable alteration of both the physical and psychic character of the world landscape than Southdale, which holds the distinction of being

the world's first fully enclosed, climate-controlled shopping mall. Designed by Viennese émigré Victor Gruen and members of his architectural firm Victor Gruen Associates (VGA), Southdale was built as both a retail paradise – it boasted, among other attractions, a tropical garden court equipped with a twenty-one foot tall cage filled with exotic birds – and as a prototype of new kind of town centre for the suburbanized post-war era, designed to host a variety of civic events, exhibitions, and lectures. But as Gruen's architectural model proliferated, his original intention for the mall to function as a social crystallization point was jettisoned to create a more streamlined architectural product, which is now familiar to almost everyone: a hermetically sealed non-place, whose every detail is designed to serve a single end – consumption. Thus divested of its encumbering frills, thousands of Southdale-like clones began popping up across the United States, and, eventually, across the face of the entire globe. As the century wore on, the enclosed mall began to rival the skyscraper as America's most prominent architectural export.

If this worldwide dispersal of Gruen's architectural progeny could be said to have a centre – a somewhat ironic designation when dealing with such a fundamentally decentering architectural space as the mall, which, like the airport, is one of those quintessential spatial products of globalization where one gets the feeling they are somehow everywhere and nowhere all at once – it can no longer be said to be in America, whose retail landscape is now dominated by warehouse-like big box stores like those of the much-maligned retailer Wal-Mart. In the 21st century, the centre of the shopping mall diaspora is undoubtedly Dubai, that mirage-like emirate whose hypertrophic growth and outlandish displays of opulence over the course of the past decade have made an indelible impression on the global imagination, casting it as both a model post modern fantasy land, and an exemplar of the follies of unbridled decadence. Home to more than five dozen malls, including the world's largest, the Dubai Mall, which clocks in at over twelve million square feet, and another mall, the Mall of the Emirates, that famously sports a sixty-seven thousand square foot indoor ski slope, Dubai has taken up Gruen's project with an unmatched fervour that seems to border on hysteria.



Summer Interns Having Lunch, Wall Street, New York, August 1987 © Joel Sternfeld,
courtesy Luhring Augustine, New York

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It is no surprise, then, that when Joel Sternfeld sought to create a new body of work that would critically address the global culture of consumerism, he would head to Dubai to document its seemingly endless acres of air-conditioned retail space. What is surprising, particularly in light of his extensive photographic career using an 8×10 inch view camera, is that he would choose to create this new body of work using only the camera on his iPhone, which lends the project its faux-technological title, *iDubai*.

It is hard to imagine a more drastic change of pace in terms of photographic working method. Unlike the cell phone camera, which is ubiquitous, cheap, and designed to make casual images on the fly, the 8×10 inch view camera is unwieldy, exacting, and extremely expensive, which drastically limits both the spontaneity of the images it produces, and the number of pictures that can reasonably be made with it (during the making of Sternfeld’s seminal book *American Prospects* (1987) the cost of film and processing capped the number of pictures he could make per day at two, even with generous funding from a Guggenheim Fellowship). But, as Sternfeld explained to me when I sat down with him in his loft in New York, the choice to put aside the tool with which he has worked for decades was largely a conceptual one. ‘For me,’ Sternfeld explained, ‘it was about the marriage of form and content – using one of the most visible contemporary consumer fetish-objects to create an image of global consumption.’

Admittedly, there is something almost too satisfying in this tidy twist of conceptual legerdemain, something that, in the hands of a lesser photographer, might render the pictures themselves moot – mere visual trimming on a conceptual tree. However, even behind a camera phone, Sternfeld puts his adroit visual faculties to work, creating a group of images that not only stand out from his conceptual framework, but also make a convincing argument that the camera phone may well have been a better choice to document Dubai’s consumer excess on an aesthetic

level as well. For if Sternfeld had lugged his 8×10 out to the desert to document Dubai’s great pleasure domes, the sumptuousness of the resultant pictures’ tonality and grain, that almost hyper real quality that 8×10 inch negatives impart to prints, would have surely seemed like a visual capitulation to the malls’ slick surfaces and ornately adorned interiors. In the camera phone image, this seduction is short-circuited: in some images, the quality is afflicted with the familiar muted haze of the low-res, while in others, the colours take on an amped up digital crunch that seems sucked straight out of a video game – everything comes off looking both materially and spiritually cheap. Even a Mercedes SLR fully plated in white gold that Sternfeld captured parked outside the Mall of the Emirates (presumably not left unattended) seems to have only a muted luster, as if it was just a gaudy child’s plaything rather than a multi-million dollar paean to conspicuous consumption that would have Thorstein Veblen doing back flips in his grave.

One of the things that the cell phone camera cannot achieve, of course, is the kind of magisterial heft that has marked much of Sternfeld’s previous work. But if no single image in *iDubai* has the weight of some of Sternfeld’s most well known photographs, it is because they were not designed to. ‘The very nature of the photographic act has changed,’ Sternfeld told me, ‘from a kind of privileged, discreet act to something more continuous and generic. I’ve always felt that the individual image can’t present a truth, but cumulatively, a group of images might. And, in fact, I mean [*iDubai*] to be a marker on that road from the single image to the multiplicity of images, as well as from the analog image to the digital image. What matters now I think is ideas, groupings of images, books and the development of ideas across a lifetime.’ Indeed, *iDubai* works best as just such a grouping of images – the book, which is forthcoming from Steidl in June features approximately two hundred and fifty of them – that cumulatively coalesce into an visual synecdoche designed to indict the global culture of consumerism as a whole. But the full significance of *iDubai* cannot be understood, as Sternfeld himself implies, without taking into consideration the broader arc of his work as a whole.

Most immediately relevant in terms of this broader personal narrative are Sternfeld’s three most recent books, *Sweet Earth: Experimental*



Wet'n Wild Aquatic Theme Park, Orlando, Florida, September 1980 © Joel Sternfeld,
courtesy Luhring Augustine, New York

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Utopias in America (2006), *When It Changed* (2008) and *Oxbow Archive* (2008). Together they form a kind of trilogy, to which *iDubai* could be seen as a pessimistic coda. The first, *Sweet Earth*, was an archive / source book of American utopian communities, both failed and thriving, sincere and cynical, that was designed to serve as photographic barometer of American's attempts, on a communitarian scale, to alter the nature of society and interpersonal relations (Sternfeld, it should be noted, had previously documented attempts to facilitate social change on a macro-cosmic level in his book *Treading On Kings* (2003), for which he photographed protestors at the G8 convention in Genoa). The second book, *When It Changed*, took a more despondent turn, collecting portraits of the perturbed and frustrated faces of various politicians, NGO activists, and climatologists in attendance at the eleventh United Nation's conference on climate change, interspersing them with teletype-style dispatches detailing scientists' grim prognostications for our global future, as well as a host of environmental and ecological disasters that have already come to pass as a likely result of man-made climate change. The third, and most subtle, of these books, *Oxbow Archive*, is an extended photographic meditation on a single unremarkable field in Massachusetts that imbues it with a poignant mix of romanticism and elegiac feeling, conveying a sense of both the inestimable value of even the most humble corners of the natural world, and the devastating spiritual and ecological price we will pay for driving it to ruin.

Together, these three books track the vicissitudes of Sternfeld's world view over the past five years, which has moved from the provisional optimism of *Sweet Earth*, through the sense of crisis and urgency evinced in *When It Changed*, to the feeling of tragic and perhaps inevitable loss that is palpably present in *Oxbow Archive*. Seen as an addendum to these books, *iDubai* marks a descent into a deeper kind of pessimism. Gone is the sweet sting of the melancholic, in favour of a feeling that we now live in a world gone mad, which Sternfeld conveyed powerfully in our discus-

sion. 'I don't believe we can solve climate change,' he asserts. 'It's way too late for that. But even if we could solve climate change, it would simply allow us consume the world in some other way, which is what I wanted to address with iDubai. Ultimately, I think that whole world is organized wrongly.'

However, despite these sentiments, this is not to say that *iDubai* is filled only with vitriol and pessimism directed at the world's out-of-control consumer culture. There are also hints, among the people who find themselves adrift in Dubai's mallscape, of all that is worth saving. Scattered among the images of bored-looking sybarites and paradoxically lavish food courts selling Starbucks coffee, are images of people attempting to reclaim the alienating space of the mall in order to fashion it into a semblance of public space, as Victor Gruen had originally envisioned: a family playing cards, teenage boys laughing convivially, a hooded hawk brought in as part of a Ramadan festival. Most touchingly, Sternfeld also made it a point to search out tender images of fatherhood, which exist in opposition to the West's predominate view of the Middle Eastern male as a threatening entity. These images of fathers are the *iDubai*'s most empathetic, perhaps owing to the fact that Sternfeld has recently become a father himself.

Empathy for the people who are subsumed within the ideology of consumer culture, of course, does not translate into empathy for the ideology itself. Many of Sternfeld's subjects, even the ones who receive his empathetic gaze, seem hopelessly lost in malls' spectacularized environments, which are designed more for distraction, an endless perceptual slippage across the surface of things, than for anything approaching habitability. At its heart *iDubai* remains, despite flashes of human feeling, an indictment of the inhumanity of both the literal and figurative architecture of consumer capitalism, which, when viewed in light of the economic collapse of 2008 and the looming crisis in the European Union, would seem to be a castle constructed on sand. +

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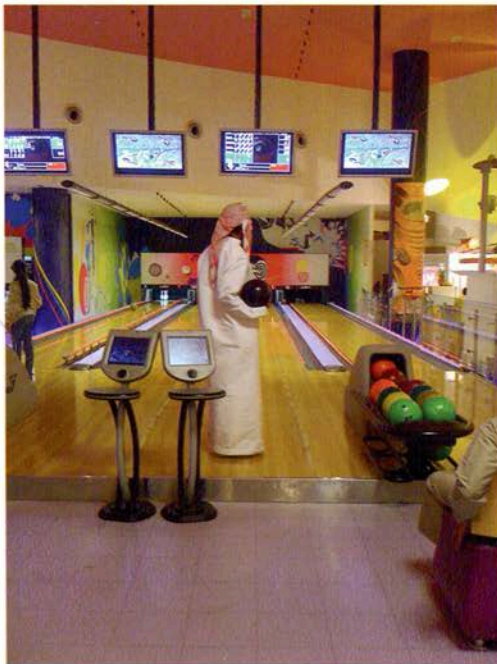
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