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"Joel Sternfeld: A Modern Master's *First Pictures*"
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Among a group who legitimized color as a serious medium for art photographers in the 1970s and 1980s, Joel Sternfeld first came to prominence in 1987 with the publication of *American Prospects*. The book, which featured pictures taken on a series of road trips across the country, subtly documented underlying socioeconomic issues in America with irony and humor. Both poignant and formally beautiful, the images are now considered one of the most important works from the period, and the tome a landmark contribution to the history of American photography. *American Prospects* was the first of a number of highly regarded and influential books by Sternfeld, which also includes *On This Site* and *Stranger Passing*. And though *First Pictures*, published this month by Steidl, is the newest by the photographer, the book actually pays tribute to Sternfeld's beginnings.

The book is comprised of Sternfeld's formative work—mostly unseen until now—and brings further understanding and context to his oeuvre. Featuring Sternfeld's images from 1971—when he first started taking color pictures — to 1980, *First Pictures* is broken down into four series: *Nags Head*, a North Carolina beach community; *Rush Hour*, street photography taken outside the Macy's in New York City, *At the Mall*, taken in New Jersey and most interestingly, *Happy Anniversary Sweetie Face*, a disparate series of images taken during road trips across America, which serves as a direct precedent to *American Prospects*. At the time, Sternfeld was

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working with kodachrome and a 35mm camera rather than the 10×8 format that he would later use to fine tune his aesthetic. The book showcases work that would secure Sternfeld the first of two Guggenheim photography awards and lay the foundation for *American Prospects* as well as the work that followed. While some images are indicative of Sternfeld’s trademark style—a pastel color palette, compositions that place seemingly insignificant objects in the landscape to reflect a sometimes ironic, cynical or tragic situation, and a socially conscious eye—other photographs seem to relate more formally to the work of other color photographers such as William Eggleston or Helen Levitt.

First Pictures will be a fitting companion to writer and curator Sally Eauc Claire’s three book series on color photography: *New Color Photography*, *American Independents* and *New Color New Work*, published in the early 1980s, each of which placed Sternfeld’s images directly alongside that of other pioneers in color, including Steven Shore, Joel Meyerowitz and Eggleston. *First Pictures* goes back a little further and reveals how Sternfeld consciously reacted against the influence of some of his contemporaries—particularly Eggleston and his “poetic snapshots”—in order to create his own voice in color photography through narrative photographs that, individual and in sequence, speak not words or even phrases, but sentences, paragraphs and stories.

First Pictures, published by Steidl, is available now. An accompanying exhibition will be on display at Luhring Augustine gallery in New York from Jan. 7-Feb. 4 2012.

Related Topics: 1970’s, American Prospects, At the Mall, color photography, First Pictures, Guggenheim Award, Joel Sternfeld, Nags Head, Rush Hour, Steidl, Sweetie face

Read more: <http://lightbox.time.com/2011/10/12/joel-sternfeld-a-modern-masters-first-pictures/#ixzz1an0DU9Bk>