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## Photographer Joel Sternfeld's 'First Pictures,' at Luhring Augustine, offers a straight, stark gaze at Americans in the '70s



BY ROZALIA JOVANOVIC  
4:47 pm Jan. 6, 2012

In the main gallery at Luhring Augustine, there's a photograph of a dark-haired woman lying in the grass. With her back to the viewer, she gazes into the distance at a building. Though the picture was taken in 1980, and the building bears a "SEARS" logo, the photograph more than closely resembles Andrew Wyeth's painting *Christina's World* (1948)—Wyeth's most famous work—of a young woman lying in a field looking up at a farmhouse and barn. The image, *New Jersey (#3)* by Joel Sternfeld, is in a section of the gallery titled "At the Mall, New Jersey." The photos around it are portraits of shoppers holding items they've purchased (a Miss Piggy notebook, a 45, toy makeup, a cannoli) and wearing youthful smiles or looks bordering on exhaustion.



Joel Sternfeld, *New Jersey, (#17)*, May/June 1980 ©Joel Sternfeld

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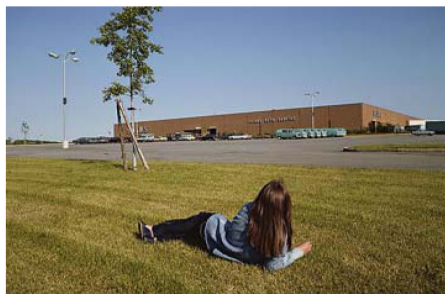
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"At the Mall, New Jersey" is one of four sections in the exhibit "First Pictures" (up through February 4). A documentary photographer born in New York in 1944, Sternfeld first came to the attention of the public in 1987 with the publication of *American Prospects*, a document of American culture during the '70s and '80s that he developed on desultory road trips around the country. He has also trained his lens on utopian communities (in 2008's *Sweet Earth: Experimental Utopias in America*), a defunct New York railway (in 2001's *Walking The High Line*), and the in-between places and faces of suburban America (in *Stranger Passing*, the 2001 follow-up to the his breakthrough 1987 book, *American Prospects*). "First Pictures," which is also documented in a book, presents Sternfeld's earliest work, taken between 1971 and 1980, much of which has never been exhibited.



Because he works in large-format color images, and has set a new precedent for clarity, satire, and sociological investigation, Sternfeld has often been compared with Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall. Yet while Crewdson and Wall make a tremendous effort—through elaborate sets and productions—to create fictional tableaux, and to distance themselves from the photographic tradition of "capturing a moment," Sternfeld works very much with the photographic conventions of Robert Frank and Dorothea

Lange while still managing to build a similar narrative tension and mystery that give his photographs the look and feel of being exceedingly worked-over, even posed.

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Unlike his earlier large-scale works, the images in “First Pictures” are presented in humble size (8 ½ x 12 ¼). They’re neatly arranged in one nearly continuous eye-level row that snakes its way through the gallery, from one section to the next beginning with “Nag’s Head” (1975), a document of Sternfeld’s summer spent at the beach town in North Carolina with that name; through “At the Mall, New Jersey” (1980); “Rush Hour” (1976), dramatic portraits taken in the streets of New York and Chicago during the Bicentennial celebrations; and “Happy Anniversary Sweetie Face!,” the most eye-catching set of images, taken during sporadic road trips Sternfeld took through the country, stopping in places from Green Valley, Arizona to Lynchburg, Virginia. While all the sections illustrate the young artist’s development, the last really set the foundation for Sternfeld’s breakthrough, *American Prospects*.

Like Andrew Wyeth, Sternfeld is something of a regionalist, an artist interested in the land and the people around him, and the way his subjects engage with their settings, one another, and the camera lens. He is drawn to rural and suburban scenes, juxtaposing everyday life with striking landscapes and structures. But unlike the affirming and idealistic images of Wyeth, Sternfeld’s photographs are laced with humor, satire, and a confrontation with the social conditions of his subjects, whether it’s a young woman returning from the beach with glaring tan lines or a half-dressed man on his dilapidated front porch, summoned by a police officer.



At the show’s opening last night one gallery-goer said, “Who knows? Maybe these are all intricately staged to look like snapshots.” Another replied, “What about the one with the boys holding the pictures of Farrah Fawcett?” It was as though nothing so snapshot-ish could ever have been staged, but such is the lingering effect of Cindy Sherman, Philip Lorca di Corcia, Wall, Crewdson and others whose elaborately staged or doctored photos so impacted the genre. Looking at these pictures and imagining, for a moment, that they were staged or manipulated, I realized how much stock I had placed in the authenticity of the subjects and the scenarios not only as evidence of Sternfeld’s ability to create complex and moving images without sets and big budgets, but also because the veracity of the pictures as social documents felt necessary.



And yet, interestingly, Sternfeld goes over and above simple documentation: at the time of this early work he was deeply invested in exploring Bauhaus color theory—composing works that tended toward a few principal colors of similar saturation. In works like *California (#1)* the fascination with color is evident: a young boy in a white T-shirt stands in front of a house painted bright green, the color matching his sneakers to striking effect. Because of its strong and simple color scheme (green, red, blue), and the angles created by

its stark shadows, *New York City, 1973* is one of the most compelling compositions in the show as both documentary image and color study, though it’s a picture of nothing but legs. It’s fun to try squaring Sternfeld’s aesthetic interests. What photos did he abandon or never take because the wrong colors were present? What moments were documented for color alone? When did he bend the rules to catch some image, some face or some building or just some legs that were too perfect to pass up?

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Due in part to the vibrancy of his color palette, Sternfeld’s works often do look too good to be true. But he’s always sworn abstinence from digital manipulation. The clarity and saturation are a benefit of the Kodachrome slide film he used, and the prints in the gallery are true to the way the things looked when the pictures were taken. But as Sternfeld said about the High Line, when he got the exclusive right to (legally) take



pictures of it (in 2000, long before its renovation), “in some ways, it’s more pristine than Yellowstone or Yosemite because every inch of it is authentic.” In an age where we’ve lost faith in the ability or motivation of photography to tell the truth, it’s a relief to look at a red beach-town lunch shack (*Nags Head, North Carolina, (#3), June-August 1975*) and know that the white-aproned man walking stoop-shouldered in front of it worked there, maybe for decades, and that the shack existed, and that its red walls were just that bright, and that it served its burgers on giant buns, and that people ate there that summer of 1975. In that knowledge is a small affirmation of faith that makes “First Pictures” well worth a visit.

*All images ©Joel Sternfeld, courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York*

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