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The Guardian.

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New York NY 10011
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The drifter: Joel Sternfeld on his sly glimpses of wild America - seen from the endless highway

When Joel Sternfeld had the chance to crisscross the US with a camera, he got in his campervan and never stopped. The 72-year-old photographer talks about his beguilingly sinister take on Americana



Not what it seems ... McLean, Virginia, December 1978, part of the Colour Photographs 1977-1988 exhibition. Photograph: Joel Sternfeld courtesy Luhring Augustine Gallery and Beetles + Huxley Gallery

Sean O'Hagan

In 1980, as Ronald Reagan was in the process of being elected president, Joel Sternfeld was embarking on one of the many road trips across America he had been making since being awarded a Guggenheim grant in 1978. "The reason I am showing this work now," he says of his forthcoming exhibition, "is that I remember feeling similar fears back then as I do now. If anything, there is an even stronger sense of apocalypse in the air today."

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With the Guggenheim money, Sternfeld purchased a Volkswagen campervan and a large format 8x10 inch camera that had to be mounted on a tripod. He was intent on leaving behind the generic New York street photography that had earned him the award for a more complex vision of America, which he pursued through large-scale colour prints full of fine detail and arresting tableaux. "I had so little money, I often couldn't afford to have a contact sheet printed," he says, laughing. "I was propelled by this very strong sense that I might disgrace myself, that I was taking this wonderful opportunity and absolutely blowing it."

The book that emerged, 1987's *American Prospects*, is now regarded as a classic. With its merging of the deadpan and the ominous, it has been as influential on succeeding generations of documentary photographers as Stephen Shore's *Uncommon Places* or William Eggleston's *Guide*. Its often ironic images - a circus elephant stranded on a rural road, a fireman apparently shopping for a pumpkin at a roadside stall while a house blazes in the background - are punctuated by more sinister elements: a looming battleship in Mobile, Alabama; a primed missile in White Sands, New Mexico; a row of aircraft carriers lining the horizon beyond a sunbathing, bikini-clad woman on a Florida beach.

Looking at *American Prospects* now, it's almost comforting to be reminded that Donald Trump's election victory has echoes of Reagan's equally unlikely ascendancy. "When I was making the work," says Sternfeld, "I went to see John Szarkowski, who was the cool new curator at the time. He was totally against hot maple syrup humanism and concerned photography of any kind. And here I come with images that have some social concern in them so suddenly he's calling me 'the worried photographer'. I didn't quite fit into the old tradition or the new one."



Kansas City, Kansas, May 1983 by Joel Sternfeld. Photograph: Joel Sternfeld courtesy Luhring Augustine Gallery and Beetles + Huxley Gallery

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Intriguingly, the new London exhibition, called *Colour Photographs: 1977-1988*, includes several images that have not been seen before. At 72, Sternfeld is, for the first time, delving into his archive. "I've been so busy making work, going from one project to the next without pause, that I've never had the time to reflect on what I've done." By way of illustration, he tells me that many of the photographs in a more recent book, *First Pictures*, were discovered in an old box containing a hundred rolls of film left unprocessed since the early 1970s. "I just never got round to it."

Sternfeld's images are often not quite what they seem. Called *McLean, Virginia, 1978*, that shot of the fireman, the pumpkins and the burning house is indeed a record of an actual event he witnessed, but the blaze is part of a training exercise from which the fireman is taking a break. "You take 35 degrees out of 360 degrees and call it a photo," he told the Guardian in 2004. "No individual photo explains anything. That's what makes photography such a wonderful and problematic medium." Today, he reiterates that sentiment: "A photograph is only a fragment of a shattered pot."

Sternfeld remains busy. As well as teaching in New York, he currently has three series in production, including one provisionally titled *A Book of Resemblances* that gathers recent photographs, including a mummified sacrificial victim revealed by a melting glacier in Peru and a waxwork of Kim Kardashian. As ever, the sinister and the sly sit side by side.

The photographer is an affable, if slightly eccentric, interviewee whose answers often roam far and wide through history, literature and art. "I'm utterly staggered by what has happened over the last 7,000 years," he tells me, unprompted, at one point. A native New Yorker, he has roamed through America constantly since earning a BA in Art from Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, in 1965, already obsessed with "the great underlying theme of my work: the utopian vision of America contrasted with the dystopian one".



Grafton, West Virginia, February 1983. Photograph: Tom Powel Imaging Inc./Joel Sternfeld courtesy Luhring Augustine Gallery and Beetles + Huxley Gallery

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The latter is explored in *On This Site: Landscape in Memoriam*, wherein ordinary places are rendered ominous by the terrible things that happened there; the former by the self-explanatory *Sweet Earth: Experimental Utopias in America*. Other equally ambitious books have trod the line between the two: in *Stranger Passing*, Sternfeld made full-length portraits of the random people he encountered on his journeys, while the quietly beautiful images in *Walking the High Line* chronicled the grass, weed and wildflower-strewn tracks of the disused elevated railway that ran through the west of Manhattan. It has since been transformed into a meticulously landscaped nature walkway.

Sternfeld's sensibility, he says, was formed in childhood. He is tightlipped about his upbringing and personal life, even refusing to reveal where exactly he was brought up in New York, but he does tell me that he planted a little garden to grow peas, aged just three. At seven, while his friends played ball on the street, he pored over pictures of fields, woods, forests and streams in *Outdoor Life* magazine. He was also the only kid in his New York neighbourhood to have a pet fox, bought as a gift to himself. Aged 11, he read Thoreau and discovered "with a sense of utter relief that there was such a thing as transcendentalism and I was not alone".

When, I ask, did photography impinge on his consciousness? "Not until much later and, even then, not with the same force as the nature books I read as a child. Every body of work I have done has come out of my childhood discovery of *The Young Trailers* series by Joseph Altsheler, which featured a guy who had been raised by Indians. With *Walking the High Line*, I could have looked up to the New York skyline, but I decided to follow the foot trails though the grass like the hero in those books. If you look closely, you can see paths of beaten down grass in many of the pictures."

For all his epic undertakings, Sternfeld's work remains relatively underexhibited. "Again, I have been too busy making work to show it that much," he says, "but for me, the best place to see the images is in the books." Was he influenced by any great photography books along the way? "No. I didn't care about photobooks," he says matter-of-factly. "I thought most photographers were idiots." Can he elaborate? "Well, it often seemed to me that some beautiful, magical things could be happening in the world and they were too busy fumbling with their lenses to see it. There are exceptions, of course. I've never seen a Robert Adams photograph that hasn't amazed me, but my point is you need to look out to the world."

· Joel Sternfeld, *Colour Photographs: 1977-1988* is at Beetles + Huxley, London, 27 January to 18 February.