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T Magazine: The New York Times.  
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**ART**

## Old Photographs That Capture America at a Crossroads

By HATTIE CRISELL JAN. 24, 2017

“There’s an old French expression: The nearer the gallows, the clearer the truth,” says the documentary photographer Joel Sternfeld. “And my truth began with Walker Evans.” The iconic photographer of the Great Depression was a key inspiration on Sternfeld’s own influential 1987 photography book “American Prospects,” images from which go on display at London’s Beetles+Huxley gallery this week, alongside pictures that have never been shown before.



Credit© Joel Sternfeld, courtesy Luhring Augustine Gallery and Beetles + Huxley Gallery

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“It seemed to me that Evans was describing an America in which the physical world was crumbling, but the human spirit was intact,” the photographer says. “And as I looked around at America in the late 1970s, it seemed like the very opposite was occurring. A brand-new physical world was arising of interstate highways, fast-food chains, motel chains, new technology buildings, the new industrial parks — but the human spirit was under assault.”

Sternfeld spent years traversing the country with his camera, looking for ways to capture this dynamic. His photographs show displaced Americans like the Kickapoo man, living in straw huts after centuries of persecution — or a boy perched on a bench in Red Rock State Campground, his family having failed to find work locally. These are contrasted with images that show then-cutting-edge luxuries and innovations such as an Orlando wave park, or a Ferrari parked in front of the pink lawn of a Santa Monica home.

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Sternfeld believes that now is the right time to show the work again; in today's America he sees the same extremes of wealth and poverty, advantage and despair.



“McLean, Virginia, December 1978” Credit © Joel Sternfeld, courtesy Luhring Augustine Gallery and Beetles + Huxley Gallery

Of what is perhaps his most famous image — a firefighter shopping for pumpkins while a house blazes in the distance — he says, “It completely embodied what I was trying to say. You know, here it is — Nero fiddled while Rome burned. Here was this graceful old house, and it was being torn down to put up condominiums.”

*Joel Sternfeld’s “Colour Photographs: 1977-1988” is on view from Jan. 26–Feb. 18 at Beetles+Huxley, 3-5 Swallow St., London, [beetlesandhuxley.com](http://beetlesandhuxley.com).*