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British Journal of Photography

Joel Sternfeld on his classic American Prospects – and his new work

Written by Shana Ting Lipton

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Family in a car in tent city, outside of Houston, Texas, January 1983. Previously unseen work © Joel Sternfeld. Image courtesy of Luhring Augustine and Beetles+Huxley

The American photographer, celebrated for his ground-breaking colour work, gives an insight into his classic work, and why he believes "a photographic artist can no longer simply be aesthetic"

The hardened, wary faces of a family crammed into a beat-up car in a tent city outside Houston, Texas are gripping – and timeless. Photographed by Joel Sternfeld in 1983, they could easily be mistaken for the desperate, jobless Rust Belt voters who helped send Donald Trump to the White House.

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The family had headed south to seek out work in the oil patch – unsuccessfully it turned out – and were shot on one of the epic treks across the US Sternfeld took between 1977-1988. Photographing what he saw found on a 10×8 camera, he ruthlessly edited his images to make his legendary photobook, *American Prospects*, first published in 1987.

The shot of the family didn’t make it into the original, but is now on show in London’s Beetles + Huxley gallery in an exhibition of 30 vintage dye transfer and chromogenic prints that includes both iconic and previously unseen work. There’s a photograph of a Christ Family religious sect member in a pastoral trench, for example, which the two-time Guggenheim fellow edited out for very personal reasons.



Member of the Christ Family Religious Sect, Hidalgo County, Texas, January 1983. Previously unseen © Joel Sternfeld. Image courtesy of Luhring Augustine and Beetles+Huxley

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“I don’t know what anybody else sees in that picture,” he tells me. “I can’t see it without thinking about my experience with him” – an experience which included picking up the bearded hitchhiker in Oregon and enduring his ‘fire and brimstone’ soliloquy.

As this image suggests, there’s a strand of ironic humour in *American Prospects*, most famously in the photograph of a fireman picking out pumpkins while a house blazes similar hues behind. But while Sternfeld can see the joke, he says it isn’t what he was driving at. “Although there’s humour in *American Prospects*, it was for me a deeply serious and political enterprise,” he says.



McLean, Virginia, December 1978. From the book American Prospects © Joel Sternfeld. Image courtesy of Luhring Augustine and Beetles+Huxley

Sadly for him, that enterprise continues to resonate in today’s radically-shifting political scene. “We’re at a very dangerous moment and I think the only thing that’s going to save us is a leader who comes along and

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speaks to the human heart and not to particular politics or systems of government,” he says.

In the years since *American Prospects*, Sternfeld has turned his camera to utopias and dystopias, to nature and to climate change, describing America’s chiaroscuro identity in purely visual terms – but also, increasingly, by juxtaposing images and words. In the era of iPhones and prolific social media uploads, he says, a photographic artist can no longer simply be aesthetic.

“A photograph is a very simple utterance,” he says. “It may generate a little bit of thought but frankly it’s not capable of complex thought.”



Architecture Museum, Provincetown, Massachusetts, July 1980. Previously unseen work © Joel Sternfeld. Image courtesy of Luhring Augustine and Beetles+Huxley

His new work features images augmented with fact-centric captions; his book *On This Site*, published in 1996, features image + text pairings focused on the sites of tragic events in America. He laments that “You

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can't convince some museums that the text is part of the art”, but has shown pieces from this series at the J Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

Even so – and despite his admiration for photojournalists such as Pulitzer Prize-winner Tyler Hicks – he made a point of differentiating between artists and journalists in a recent lecture. referencing the portraits he took at the 2005 United Nations Climate Change conference. Each time Bill Clinton punched the air, it elicited a flurry of photojournalists' camera clicks, he said, but when the former President appeared pensive, only his camera fired.



*Colleen Thorpe, Editor in Chief of Enjeux-ÉNERGIE, Helios Centre, Canada United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change: Eleventh Session of the Conference of the Parties to the Climate Change Convention and First Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol, Palais de Congres, Montreal, Canada, 28 November – 9 December, 2005. From the book *When It Changed* © Joel Sternfeld. Image courtesy of Luhring Augustine and Beetles+Huxley*

But then he wasn't there to shoot Getty uploads, but to capture delegates' stunned reactions to the dire scientific findings. After shooting the images he wove text from a broken old teletype machine into them, emphasising the gravity of the news they were hearing, and published the results in a book, *When It Changed*, and a related DVD in 2008.

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Sternfeld charts the genesis of his text + image process back to an image in *American Prospects*, which depicts beached whales and is accompanied by an extended caption: “Approximately 17 of 41 Sperm Whales Which Beached and Subsequently Died, Florence, Oregon.” Including this text, he says, was “political act”.



Latsouchabé Fall, Director of Planning and Equipment Senelec Energy, Sénégal United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change: Eleventh Session of the Conference of the Parties to the Climate Change Convention and First Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol, Palais de Congres, Montreal, Canada, 28 November – 9 December, 2005. From the book When It Changed © Joel Sternfeld. Image courtesy of Luhring Augustine and Beetles+Huxley

It's not the only way his work has evolved over the years, because while Sternfeld made his name with the large format photographs in *American Prospects*, he now uses more compact format, shot on a smaller, more unassuming digital camera. It's a shift that was partly forced upon him, after he was spotted with his 10×8 camera in Gezi Park in Istanbul, and intimidated by riot police.

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“I look up and there’s a guy screaming at me and he’s got a long baton raised,” he says, but he adds that it was also partly an aesthetic decision. “I felt like digital has a kind of look of now.”

Sternfeld’s newest body of work, which will appear in an as-yet untitled book, is also politically engaged, but works on a more global scale. A photograph of the humble Apfelkind Cafe in Bonn, Germany in accompanied by text explaining how the small merchant was sued by American tech behemoth Apple, for example, for using a bitten apple logo.

The passage concludes: “In human history the apple has come to represent love, beauty, fertility, evil, knowledge, life, health, the world’s largest corporate entity, as well as a simple object of delectation.”



At a narrow point in the Thames River, Romans, who had recently invaded what is now modern day England, built a bridge. The year was 50 AD—the city of London grew up around that bridge. Over ensuing centuries, many replacement bridges have been built, each bearing the appellation ‘London Bridge.’ In the early 19th century, this stone bridge was built on the site. By the 1960s it was sinking into the muddy bottom of the Thames at a rate of 1 inch every 8 years. Not quite falling down, but enough to induce the city of London to sell the bridge. Piece by piece it was dismantled, brought to Lake Havasu, Arizona, and reassembled. Riding his bicycle over the bridge one day, David Jensen concluded that an Italian Gondola concession would go well with London Bridge. He built his gondola and proceeded to ply romantic tourists with arias in Italian, French, German, and Japanese. Image and text © Joel Sternfeld. Image courtesy of Luhring Augustine and Beetles+Huxley

A central piece in the new collection depicts a singing gondolier in full regalia, paddling in front of a bridge. It was photographed in Arizona's Lake Havasu; the structure in the background London Bridge, sold to an American in the 1960s and was shipped Stateside, as Sternfeld explains in his accompanying text.

This image is a working model for Sternfeld's new approach, just as a faded 1975 shot of Queens' Rockaway Beach became the working study for the pastel palette of *American Prospects*. The 2016 photograph is also brought to life in a related short film, which follows the aria-trilling gondolier through London Bridge and around the waterways filled with booze cruises and collegiate revellers.

Sternfeld met the boatman in 2009, but it took him seven years to return to photograph him. That's not unusual, he says, adding that "every body of work that I've done seems to have this very long preamble".

In the late 1960s, for example, he sought to link the hippie movement with a lost generation of sylvan long-hairedes he read about in Van Wyck Brooks' book *The Flowering of New England 1815-1865*. This seed didn't bear fruit until 2006, when Sternfeld published *Sweet Earth – Experimental Utopias in America*.

And that seed may yet have a full flowering, because Sternfeld is now working on a related group of photographs, due to be unveiled in Germany in spring. His fascination with 19th century New England lead him to learn of Joseph Palmer, a Massachusetts farmer who grew a beard when such facial adornments were frowned upon. After defending himself when a group of men tried to removed it, he was charged with assault; when he refused to pay a fine, he was sent to jail.

In *To Joseph Palmer*, Sternfeld will show the mass of images he's taken of bearded people, and showcase Palmer's tombstone, which reads 'Joseph Palmer persecuted for wearing the beard'. It sounds quirky, but Palmer's story, which was apparently cited in a US Supreme Court case about the First Amendment, sheds light on free speech in the face of today's strained democracy.

"Such a hard society to understand," says Sternfeld of America. "I used to say to myself: there's a constant race between the forces of evil in America and utopian forces. Just when utopia is squarely in view, evil will win out. Now of course I'm haunted by that."

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Bricks dating back to 7500 BC have been found at Tell Aswad in the upper Tigris region of what is now modern Syria. In Exodus 1:14; 5:4-19 we are told that the Egyptians "came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in bricks and mortar." Straw and sand were added to mud and kneaded by foot for days before being set in moulds. Union Solidarity International has been campaigning against "blood bricks" in India since 2012. In the words of Andrew Brody, "its modern day slavery. Entire families of men, women, and children are working for a pittance, up to 16 hours a day in terrible conditions. There are horrific abuses of minimum wage rates and health and safety regulations, and it's often bonded labor, so they can't escape." Bricks, Outskirts of Kolkuta, India, March, 2014 © Joel Sternfeld. Image courtesy of Luhring Augustine and Beetles+Huxley

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Rustic Canyon, Santa Monica, California, May 1979. From the book American Prospects © Joel Sternfeld. Image courtesy of Luhring Augustine and Beetles+Huxley

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Canyon Country, California, June 1983. From the book American Prospects © Joel Sternfeld. Image courtesy of Luhring Augustine and Beetles+Huxley

Joel Sternfeld Colour Photographs: 1977-1988 by Joel Sternfeld is on show at Beetles + Huxley until 18 February. www.beetlesandhuxley.com