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# Too Many Problems, Too Few People? Integrate and Automate with workato

## America the improbable

Joel Sternfeld's odd take on the United States impresses our reporter

By Joanna Pitman

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Joel Sternfield

Photographer's Gallery, WC2

WELL-KNOWN AND highly regarded in America, Joel Sternfeld, 58, has had surprisingly little exposure in Britain, a fact which is being redressed by a show at the Photographers' Gallery focusing on his classic 1987 road-trip book, *American Prospects*, and his more recent book of portraits, *Stranger Passing*.

Yorker's idea of the country, of tumbleweed and dust, epic mountain chains and vast, inhospitable spaces. So I set off in a camper van to find a way to understand the new America. Hundreds of people had done this before me, but I had my own ideas and I wanted to see the wealth, exuberance and exoticism of this noble experiment in democracy.”

Sternfeld's biggest photographic influence was Walker Evans, who had found during his meandering odyssey in the 1930s an America in which the physical world was crumbling but the human spirit remained intact. Sternfeld found the opposite. Through his viewfinder we see an elephant escaped from the zoo lying tranquillised on a road, surrounded by bewildered onlookers. We see the “Wet ‘n’ Wild” swimming pool heaving with tiny swimmers, a Constable sky in the background building up to dump on them. And we find a colossal removals van spilling its contents on to the forecourt of a new house, a woman quietly breast-feeding her baby on a sofa in front of the garage.

Every photograph is pin- sharp, minutely detailed, epically scaled and, most importantly, utterly exuberant in its colours. “These were the days when colour photography was still not acceptable. A handful of practitioners used to meet secretly and trade information on films and exposures.”

Sternfeld's portraits from *Stranger Passing* give you a deep breath of the United States. These are photographs unashamedly of their time, but no less intelligent and unblinking for that. You will experience a surreal tingle as your eye explores the portrait of the homeless man in New York, his dignified face and elegant red leather sneakers stubbornly refusing to fit into our preconceptions of the homeless. The lawyer carrying his dirty laundry on the way to work struggles to stay in character.

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Glancing around the gallery, you realise that Sternfeld, despite his claims to simple documentary motivations, is in fact in thrall to theatricality. These strangers are not just colourful, they are all distinctly weird. The young woman dressed in Eighties pink Lycra totters along the pavement in her high heels carrying a small pink basket containing a puppy. Behind the careful gaze of a banker eating his breakfast at an outdoor café is the sense of a highly strung psyche ready to implode.

For some, Sternfeld's brand of photographic document showing explorations of America, with unfamiliar species displayed like rare butterflies, may seem all too familiar after the major Egglestone show at the Hayward last year and the recent Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall shows in London and Manchester. But we should not forget that, in most cases, Sternfeld got there first.

- Joel Sternfeld is at the Photographers' Gallery, 5 Great Newport Street, London WC2 (020-7831 1772), until January 18



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