



Photographer Joel Sternfeld: close encounters

Continuing her series on the best new photography books, Liz Jobey looks at US photographer Joel Sternfeld, a man who has documented the strange, disturbing - sometimes absurd - realities of American life

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When Robert Frank travelled across the country in 1955 to take photographs for the book he called *The Americans*, he inspired a younger generation to follow his example. Since then many photographers have made personal journeys to take the cultural and political temperature of the United States, but none has done so with more conviction than Joel Sternfeld.

Supported, as Frank had been, by a Guggenheim fellowship, Sternfeld set off cross-country in 1978, driving a camper van. His quest, he says, was that "of someone who grew up with a vision of classical regional America and the order it seemed to contain, to find beauty and harmony in an increasingly uniform, technological and disturbing America." The photographs that resulted would become his first, now classic book, *American Prospects*.

Sternfeld is part of a line that began with the photographer-explorers of the 19th century and was continued in the 20th, particularly by Walker Evans, with his 1938 book *American Photographs*, and then by Frank. Indeed, when Frank put in his Guggenheim application, Evans was one of his referees. But whereas Frank had stipulated that he wanted to use the

"miniature" hand-held camera "exclusively", Sternfeld was seeking another form with which to portray the contemporary landscape. Ironically, considering the final outcome, he'd been given his grant money in order to continue a series of New York street photographs, in colour, using the same type of camera that Frank had used for *The Americans*. But whereas it allowed Frank to achieve spontaneous, sometimes covert-seeming glimpses of American life that made his work so personal, Sternfeld felt the hand-held approach would no longer serve his needs. By the time he took to the road, he had abandoned the small camera and determined to make another kind of picture altogether.

He took with him an 8" x10" view camera similar to those used by pioneering photographers such as Carleton Watkins a century before. The large format allowed him to focus on the details of individual experience and yet show it in its wider context. It was an approach that echoed the importance the landscape played as a backdrop to the small-town dramas of 1970s American cinema, and to the way small, individual experiences found universal significance in the short stories of Raymond Carver. His use of colour and the all-over detailing on the picture plane enabled Sternfeld to establish his own strain of colour landscape photography.

Since then he has used it to investigate aspects of American society in a series of books. *On This Site: Landscape in Memoriam*, published in 1996, made a record of 50 locations in America where acts of violence had occurred. Some were well known: the Dallas cinema where Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested in 1963, or the corner in Los Angeles where Rodney King, an African-American, was beaten by four white policemen in 1992, inciting the Los Angeles riots. Others were sites of local tragedies: the street in Des Moines, Iowa, from which a 12-year-old paperboy disappeared while on his rounds in 1982, and the bus shelter in front of the housing department in Washington DC where a woman froze to death after being turned away from a homeless shelter. Cumulatively, they presented a picture of a society in trouble.

Stranger Passing used portraits of ordinary Americans to explore ideas about image and class; *Walking the High Line* was a series of sequential landscapes that recorded the derelict New York central railroad track, an elevated stretch of goods track that ran along the west side of Manhattan and was scheduled for demolition. In *Sweet Earth: Experimental Utopias in America* he photographed alternative communities, from the Gesundheit! Institute in West Virginia, and its plans "to humanise health care", to cohousing communities, based on ecologically sound principles.

He has worked during a time when digital technology and staged photography have undermined the assumption that a documentary photograph is a record rather than a construction, and yet Sternfeld has (so far as I know) never resorted to staging as such. Two of his best-known pictures, both from *American Prospects*, are entitled *Exhausted Renegade Elephant, Woodland, Washington* (1979) and *McLean, Virginia* (1978). The first shows an elephant collapsed in the middle of a suburban highway with a truck, a small group of onlookers and the sheriff in attendance. The other depicts a farmer's market, with a stack of orange pumpkins out front; in the background a house is on fire with flames pouring from its roof. The flames are exactly the same shade of orange as the pumpkins. A customer standing casually at the market with a pumpkin under one arm turns out to be a fireman, bagging a pumpkin or two while his colleagues tackle the blaze. In the present photographic climate, such pictures might have been assumed to be fictions, but in Sternfeld's case they were repayment for his diligence; chance encounters in the strange and disturbing reality of American life.

None of these surveys, it has to be said, are particularly optimistic, giving the lie to the ideal of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Much of what he photographed, from *American Prospects* on, shows brokenness and decay, whether in old industrial plants, wrecked

automobiles, ugly contemporary housing developments, or people whose demeanour reflects displacement and disorientation. But there is also a sense of the absurdities of life, of humour, and even hope among the photographs to offset a blanket statement of defeat.

Now, though, he is publishing two new books which, taken together, constitute his most political statement so far, and it is no surprise that his investment in the American landscape over the past 30 years should have brought him to its largest and most intractable problem: climate change. *When It Changed* is a small paperback book of portraits, taken in 2005 at the eleventh United Nations conference on climate change in Montreal. The portraits are, collectively, faces of concern, but the text that accompanies them, culled from reports in the international press since 1957 (though the majority covers the past 20 years), are an indictment of the apathetic disinclination of America, and the world as a whole, to pay attention to the warnings, scientific and anecdotal, that the planet is heading for self-destruction. Though the conference portraits are a consistently strong photographic element, this book lacks any redeeming beauty. It is a bleak handbook for the future, and should be issued to every family in the land.



Changing climate ... image of a field from Oxbow Archive.
Photograph: © Joel Sternfeld

When It Changed is published at the same time as another new book by Sternfeld. Taken in isolation, Oxbow Archive might appear to be a serene study of the way one particular stretch of landscape - a field within the oxbow of the Connecticut river in Massachusetts - changes with the seasons over the course of a year. But when it is seen, as Sternfeld intends, as the third part of a trilogy with *When It Changed*, and *Sweet Earth: Experimental Utopias*, any innocent pleasure is replaced by the realisation that this ordinary field is threatened by the changing climate, and may never appear quite the same again.

The Oxbow field appears in one of the famous paintings of the American sublime: *View From Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, After a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)*, painted by Thomas Cole in 1833. Sternfeld first photographed it in 1978, as part of *American Prospects*. The photographs in this new book seem to express everything that Sternfeld believes in and holds dear. These pictures come from a moral sense of the fragility of the landscape, and from a belief in what photography can do to express the temporary nature of the Earth - and, possibly, to assist in its preservation.

When It Changed, by Joel Sternfeld, published by Steidl, £40.
Oxbow Archive, by Joel Sternfeld, published by Steidl, £17.50.

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