



## Joel Sternfeld's First Pictures: the opening chapter of a colourful career

Sternfeld's early pictures of America highlight his precocious understanding of colour and composition - and signal what was to come from this modern master of colour photography

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**A**t what point does a good photographer become a great one? This is one of the questions prompted by Joel Sternfeld's latest book, *First Pictures*, a collection of his early work spanning the years 1971-80. It is a revelatory book, not only in the way it signals what is to come, but also in the way it highlights Sternfeld's early - and precocious - understanding of colour and composition as well as his keen eye for telling detail.

Sternfeld is a modern master of colour photography. He first came to prominence with *American Prospects*, which was first published in 1987 and is now considered a landmark book in the history of the form. In it, he caught the American everyday in all its varied strangeness, with often-muted tones and delicate colours. In one unforgettable image a fireman shops for a pumpkin at a roadside farm market as a house blazes in the background. The colour of the flames echo the orange hue of the pumpkins arranged in rows outside the shack and the rotting pumpkins that litter the swath of dry grass in the foreground of the picture. In the background, behind a row of neatly manicured small trees, a fire truck's extendable ladder leans into the blaze like a craning creature. As in several Sternfeld photographs, there are two narratives captured here: one dramatic; the other oddly mundane. You sense, in his editing and sequencing of images - and even in a single complex shot like this one - that he is a visual storyteller who prompts the viewer to imagine the bigger picture, the world beyond the frame.

There is nothing as dramatically widescreen as the pumpkin photograph in *First Pictures*, but you can see ample evidence of the talent that won him two Guggenheim awards in 1978 and 1982. Sternfeld worked in colour from the beginning of his career, using Kodachrome slide film for its sharpness of definition and muted tones. "A photographer

must choose a palette as painters choose theirs," he wrote years later in an essay on Stephen Shore who, alongside Helen Levitt, was one of the pioneering colour photographers he looked towards for affirmation in the 70s.

In 1974, he also visited William Eggleston, then teaching for a brief time at Harvard. In her illuminating essay for *First Pictures*, Jessica May notes that Sternfeld was struck by "Eggleston's absolute mastery ... of the poetic snapshot" but was also inspired to react against it. "Thus," writes May, "the question that came to animate Sternfeld's own practice pushed in the opposite direction - how to make photographs, individual and in sequence, that could speak not words or even phrases, but sentences, paragraphs, stories."

Interestingly, the photographs gathered in *First Pictures* fall into four distinct thematic groups.



From *First Pictures* by Joel Sternfeld. Nags Head, North Carolina, (#8), June-August 1976. Photograph: Joel Sternfeld/Steidl

The first is made up of work he made in Nag's Head, North Carolina, a beach community where young Americans gathered to surf, socialise and party. There is a tenderness and raw intimacy to many of the images. He catches the carefree mood and the sense of freedom of the seemingly endless American summer that great pop musicians, from Brian Wilson to Bruce Springsteen, have praised in song.

In 1976, Sternfeld started shooting on the streets of Chicago and then New York, where he stationed himself outside Macy's department store snapping Christmas shoppers, often using a flashbulb. The results are resolutely downbeat: people hurry past, expressionless or anxious-looking, their pale faces shrouded in the encroaching winter darkness. It adds up to a portrait of a bicentennial America where stoicism and survival are the key human characteristics.

The third series was shot in and around the homogenised shopping malls of New Jersey, where Sternfeld asked passersby to pose with their new purchases. Here, the portraits possess a surreal humour that both Sternfeld and his subjects seem to share: a besuited businessman daintily holds his new running shorts over his crotch; a cool young couple hold a photocopied portrait of themselves in monochrome. People pose happily or gauchely, the series mimicking the awkwardness of posed family portraits but, for once, the end result does not quite transcend the sum of the parts.



From *First Pictures* by Joel Sternfeld. California, (#1), 1977. Photograph: Joel Sternfeld/Steidl

The most intriguing images here come from Sternfeld's various road trips across America, in which he captures people and places that often appear randomly selected but add up to a kind of poetic travelogue of the everyday, the odd and the beautifully mundane. Titled *Happy Anniversary Sweetie Face*, after a personalised billboard he came across, the fourth series has echoes of Shore, Levitt and even Eggleston - including a strange interior with a shiny cigarette machine and an orange-pink curtain - but the most powerful photographs suggest an imagination that has suddenly found its

direction and its signature. In one picture, a group of men seated on the porch and steps of a yellow and pink rooming house, stare vacantly out beyond the camera. It is a snatched group portrait in which boredom hangs in the air, not so much a decisive moment as a suspended one.

In another atmospheric shot, three black men lounge in a bar. Two are seated at a red table against a red wall, and one seems to be shrouded in smoke. The third, more alert to the camera, is leaning against a jukebox that gives off a clear violet light. Colour here is part of the meaning and part of the subject matter of the photograph, creating not just an atmosphere but a sense, again, of a suspended - and heightened - moment. These may be Sternfeld's first pictures, but his greatness - and his concentrated thoughtfulness - is apparent throughout.

### Now see this

Alejandro Chaskielberg was overall winner of this year's Sony World photo awards. High Tide, at the Michael Hoppen Gallery, is a selection of his haunting images of the people of the Paraná River Delta in his native Argentina, where he lived and worked from 2007-10. Chaskielberg works at night by the light of the moon, using technicolour film, an approach that requires his subjects to remain still in one pose for up to 10 minutes. The results produce, he says, "a border between document and fiction". Magical reportage.

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