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Cultural Confines by Taylor Ruby

First Pictures

Joel Sternfeld
Luhring Augustine
531 W.24th St., New York, NY 10011
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Alluring in their mixture of acute irony and sincerity, Joel Sternfeld's C-prints are a stark view into the dual utopian/dystopian illusion of the American dream. Taken over the past forty years, his large-scale photographs wryly illustrate the varying degrees in which society fails to live up to our ideals.

Sternfeld is an austere storyteller, not unlike William Eggleston or Diane Arbus, concentrating on the commonplace moments that fill the broad spaces between individual events. His images of teenagers idling around street corners, families delighting in the artificial surf of man-made water parks, and bland expanses of all-too-familiar strip malls affect us *because* of their triviality, indicating the collective cultural disquiet we all find ourselves privy to.

While Sternfeld's previous bodies of work like *American Prospects* (1987) – vast stretches of land (and often concrete) caught in a tumultuous battle between nature and culture – and *Stranger Passing* (2001) – a group of jarring portraits that not only allow, but recommend we challenge our own assumptions about who we think these individuals are – operate as contained narratives of social, economic, and environmental anxiety, *First Pictures* on the other hand – shot between 1971 and 1980 – acts as a small-scale visual prologue to the themes he would expand upon decades later.

First Pictures is organized into four distinct groups: *Happy Anniversary Sweetie Face!*; *Nags Head, North Carolina*; *Rush Hour*; and *At The Mall, New Jersey, 1980*. Within these suites, Sternfeld experiments with Bauhaus color theory and subjects as disparate as adolescence, consumer malaise, and the socio-economic flux of a post-Vietnam War America.

Ten-year-old boys wear bikini-clad Farrah Fawcett t-shirts and ultra-tanned twenty-somethings smoke, stand around in large groups, and lay on the beach. Harried businessmen walk down New York City streets with agitated purpose, and excited consumers pose for snap shots with their most recent purchases. Senior citizens gawk at a monumentally sized department store, but ignore the impending thunderstorm behind them, and a homeless, defeated veteran sleeps in a public park. Not only does Sternfeld's combination of sardonic wit and sober reality suggests the tense struggle between man and the natural world, but the enduring struggle between man and our self-made cultural confines.

~Taylor Ruby



Images: Joel Sternfeld, *Nags Head, North Carolina*, (#6), June-August, 1975; Joel Sternfeld, *June*, 1980. Courtesy Luhring Augustine.