

LUHRING AUGUSTINE

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"Joel Sternfeld: Luhring Augustine"

Artforum.

Online. Critics' Picks.

Joel Sternfeld
LUHRING AUGUSTINE
531 West 24th Street
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ARTFORUM



Joel Sternfeld, New Jersey, (#12), May/June 1980, color photograph, 8 1/2 x 12 3/4".

The arc of photographic history is a mean and subtle thing. Subtle, in that the line between the picture taken by a competent amateur and one taken by a consummate artist is often razor-thin; mean, in the way in which our rapacious, churning image culture can transmute even the most innovative image into an utter banality overnight. As such, mounting a show of historic pictures—particularly pictures that lack the kind of visual pyrotechnics that have become de rigueur for photographs that have aspirations towards art—is an enterprise haunted by the possibility of critical derision, or, worse, complete indifference.

However, Joel Sternfeld's current exhibition "First Pictures," which comprises never-before-shown 35-mm slide photographs dating from the mid-1970s through the early 1980s—all which predate his seminal *American Prospects*, 1987—manages not only to make a case for a reconsideration of his place in the history of American photography, but also to remind us of the unique photographic pleasures that can be derived from the work of an artist who has mastered the difficult art of seeing the world well. In these early pictures, which are grouped here into four separate projects though could just as easily be seen together, there are hints of the expansive, cinematic quality that would become a defining feature of his work. Simultaneously, the pictures also lay out a constellation of significant historical references—past, contemporaneous, and future—with which Sternfeld must now be associated: Garry Winogrand is here, as are William Eggleston, Bill Owens, and Henry Wessel, and so are intimations of Philip-Lorca diCorcia's partially staged street photographs. But perhaps most present as a reference point—particularly in the collection of images in the gallery's back room that are the show's tour de force—is Robert Frank's *The Americans*. Like Frank, Sternfeld turns an acerbic eye toward America, with attention paid to the gestures, environments, and modes of self-presentation that fill the stock houses of the country's psyche. Yet Sternfeld also blunts his criticism with affection, a thing that Frank—ever the dour expat—found difficult to muster. Despite our faults, Sternfeld seems to say, there was something essential about the America he pictured that was worth saving—and, perhaps, there is still.