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"Exhibition Reviews: Joel Sternfeld - Luhring Augustine"

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Joel Sternfeld: *New Jersey, (#34), May/June 1980, 1980*, pigment print, 8½ by 12¾ inches; at Luhring Augustine.

JOEL STERNFELD LUHRING AUGUSTINE

"Mama, don't take my Kodachrome away . . ." As Eastman Kodak was preparing to file for bankruptcy earlier this year, an exhibition affirming the company's indelible impact on the 20th-century cultural landscape was on view at Luhring Augustine. Joel Sternfeld's "First Pictures," a selection of color prints (all 8½ by 12¾ inches) from four series undertaken between 1971 and 1980, charted the photographer's pioneering work in a medium whose artistic merits had long been overshadowed by those of its black-and-white predecessor.

Seeking a visual vocabulary specific to the assets of color film, and with his guideposts limited to the trailblazing work of William Eggleston and a few similarly inclined peers, Sternfeld looked early on to Bauhaus color theory for inspiration. Yet his photographs from the 1970s are characterized as much by their subtle humor and sensitivity to place as by their lofty formal ambitions.

Unlike the hidden overgrowth captured in his images of the High Line in Manhattan between 2000 and 2001—before the stretch of disused train tracks had been redesigned as a park—the works here were populated as much by fauna as by flora. In the celebrated tradition of Robert Frank, Sternfeld is a great cataloguer of Homo Americanus. Images like the gaggle of mall-going teenage girls proudly displaying their latest purchases in *New Jersey, (#17), May/June 1980* or the three men sporting open-chested shirts and decidedly unironic mustaches

in a print from the same series are as important as historical documents as they are as works of art.

Prevailing throughout "First Pictures" was the eye for oddity that helped make Sternfeld's 1987 book, *American Prospects*, a classic. One photograph from the show depicts a Yorkshire terrier-clutching wig salesman flanked by hairpieces unsettlingly similar to his own curly 'do. Another offers a close-up of a classified ad from a person hoping to sell an "18 mos old, partially trained & housebroken" chimpanzee.

Perhaps most revelatory was a series of never-before-exhibited photographs from the summer of 1975, which the photographer spent living in a surfers' rooming house in Nags Head, N.C. While sun, sand and sky might have provided the backdrop for a splendid meditation on mid-tones—just as Rockaway Beach would in an eponymous work from later that summer—it is rather Sternfeld's meticulous concern for detail and the subtle tension established between formal, subjective and sociohistorical elements that make this group of photographs so compelling.

One memorable print is of a seaside burger joint bedecked in the Pepsi logo and red, white and blue signage—a color scheme echoed by the almost unnoticeable American flag affixed to the restaurant's pick-up window. An uncharacteristic foray into primary colors, the image conjures nostalgia for an innocence that might never have existed in this country and that—mere months after the end of the Vietnam War—was certainly long lost to the Baby Boomer generation.

Here, as in much of the work in this engrossing exhibition, one glimpses a gifted beginner making a case for the artistic credibility of his medium.

—David Markus