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“Exhibition Review: Joel Sternfeld’s Oxbow Archive at Luhring Augustine Gallery thru October 4.”

Daylight Magazine.

<http://www.daylightmagazine.org/blog/2008/09/15/211>

September 15, 2008

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Joel Sternfeld’s Oxbow Archive, which is on view at Luhring Augustine Gallery through October 4 and accompanied by a catalog published by Steidl, is comprised of large-scale (5’ x 7’) prints of a single field in Massachusetts that Sternfeld has lovingly followed through the vicissitudes of the seasons and variegations of atmosphere and light. The show is suffused with a quietly elegiac grace that departs in aesthetic tone from the journalistic feel of much of his work after the landmark American Prospects. Thematically, however, the work is of a piece with Sternfeld’s most recent work in Sweet Earth: Experimental American Utopias and When It Changed, and while it is possible to approach this new body of work by itself, it is most interesting to begin by looking at it in the context of these predecessors.

Here, then, is the story so far: Sweet Earth acts as a kind of sourcebook of America’s utopian communities stretching back to the 19th century, encompassing experiments failed and successful, genuine and cynical. It is, broadly, a portrait of humanity’s noblest and most dangerous sentiment: that a perfect world can be achieved on Earth. When It Changed intersperses images taken at a 2005 United Nations convention on climate change in Montréal with breathless Teletype dispatches concerning present and prospective calamities brought on by global climate change. We are shown the state of the world and it’s possible future in the company of the faces of conference attendees that betray frustration, fear and resignation, but rarely hope.

Oxbow Archive is more nuanced than either of these bodies of work, but placed within their thematic lineage the work acts as sweetly sad denouement to a three-part narrative about the state of humanity’s tumultuous relationship with nature. Seen this way, the three bodies of work move from a vision of our strivings for harmony and balance in Sweet Earth, through stocktaking of our currently dire moment both politically and climatologically in When It Changed, ending up with a dirge for the steady rhythm of the seasons that work themselves upon the land, which we are in danger of forever altering, if we have not already done so.

While the first two bodies of work make their points with steadily increasing stridency, Oxbow Archive punctuates the progression softly, with pathos that moves beyond mere editorializing. The images are immediately redolent of 19th century Romantic landscape paintings, particularly the dazzling atmospherics and emotional heft of some of Caspar David Friedrich’s less bombastic works, and seem also to betray the backstage presence of the writings of New England Transcendentalist writers like Emerson and Thoreau. Thus, it should surprise no one to learn that the field in question is a patch of land that first entered the cultural spotlight as a swatch of the larger vista presented in Thomas Cole’s 1836 painting The Oxbow.

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The juxtaposition that this art historical confluence affords is particularly resonant: Cole’s painting is a mountaintop view of a resplendent Arcadia whose radiant glow seems to be hard at work repelling a flock of ominous storm clouds back across a craggy wilderness. As such, it is about as direct an allegory of progress that you can get without spilling over into something as bracingly literal as John Gast’s 1872 paean to Manifest Destiny, American Progress. The views in Sternfeld’s photographs often share the luminous glow of Cole’s pastoral idyll, but rather than exuding triumphalism, the light seems to be on the wane, a last gasp of beauty before dusk. They seem to be photographs taken at the endpoint of progress, where our advances no longer coax the light out of the wilderness, but are poised to extinguish it forever.

For images that stake their claim as poetically as these, it seems strange that they should find themselves lumped together under the rubric of the archive. While this was once a fashionable concept in art and theory, the recent efforts to resuscitate it by curator Okwui Enwezor in his *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* at ICP came off as somewhat overbearing and pedantic, and the designation does Sternfeld’s work no favors. Readers of Sebald can attest that there is no lack of pathos in archives or in the archival impulse itself, but Sternfeld’s photographs are not the dispassionate documents that their title implies. Certainly, *Oxbow Archive* is an archive in that it documents the ebb and flow of the seasons and the light as they act on a small portion of earth, but it is only good because it is a lament.