

# Making the Past Present

Joel Sternfeld's careful documentation of everyday life, from Alaska to Albuquerque captures the sense of crisis at the heart of America today.

OF ALL THE PRIVILEGES PHOTOGRAPHY affords, perhaps the most significant is its capacity to allow us to meditate on things that would otherwise have disappeared. By making the past present, by inviting us to contemplate a static representation of what no longer exists, it enables us to penetrate the has-been in

quarter of a century, has been documenting his native America in a succession of epic journeys that have taken him from the wilds of Alaska to the theme parks of Florida. Concentrating on places and people not usually considered noteworthy, he has brought to attention the myriad, often incongruous details of everyday life that help explain the condition America finds itself in today.

Until his recent show at the Photographers' Gallery in London, few people in Britain had heard of him. But in the States Sternfeld has been an important figure ever since the publication of his first monograph *American Prospects* back in 1987. As its title suggests, the book deals both in views of that country and in moments that are not simply moments into which the past has flowed but are also ones out of which the future – a future that has now become our present – would seem to have inexorably unfolded. In his hands the landscape, particularly those parts of it where the struggle between man and nature is still ongoing, is framed in such a way as to reveal it to be saturated with meaning.

His most famous picture, *McLean, Virginia*, catches a fireman in the act of shopping for pumpkins whilst behind him an old farmhouse goes up in flames. Dramatic and ironic in equal measure, this deadpan vision of a modern-day Nero is typical of much of Sternfeld's

work. For although the majority of his pictures impart their message more discreetly, they too ask us to look at those symptoms of a crisis whose teleology is still being played out today, as an out-of-control America takes itself (and the rest of the world with it) ever closer to the abyss.

It is a full twenty-five years since the New York photographer framed this forewarning, and the reason it continues to resound in 2003 has as much to do with his approach to the medium as it has to do with the subject matter he was treating. In 1974 John Szarkowski, the influential curator of photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art, sent Sternfeld to meet William Eggleston, one of the few other people then using colour. It was a pivotal encounter for Sternfeld who, until then had been shooting in a similar way to the elder photographer. When he saw that Eggleston already owned what he termed the 'poetic snapshot' he decided to reconceive the way he would take pictures.

He began by associating himself with the New Topographics movement, a group of photographers who, following Walker Evans before them, aimed to minimise all trace of authorial inflection in their work. Its leading exponents included Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz and like them Sternfeld started using large-format 10x8in plate camera as his tool of choice. The strongly conceptual



**Joel Sternfeld,**  
*A man on the banks of the Mississippi, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, August 1985, from Stranger Passing.* © Joel Sternfeld. Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

a way in which it is impossible to grasp the here and now. Beheld by a consciousness, the photograph is above all a site where history and the current instant collide. For just as we are the interpreters of the images we perceive, so too do we find ourselves interpreted by these emanations of the past.

There are few more striking examples of this than the work of the photographer Joel Sternfeld who, for the last



formal approach the New Topographers encouraged no doubt came as a welcome corrective to the freewheeling ways Sternfeld was seeking to leave behind. But while today the monochrome work of Baltz and Adams appears somewhat dry and stuck in the age in which it was produced, Sternfeld's output from that period remains as fresh and relevant as ever.

One reason for this is his use of colour that means his pictures appear to us in a form that approximates the way we normally perceive the world. This lends them a vitality and a familiarity that black-and-white photographs, insofar as they are a further abstraction of reality, can never possess. A second cause of their staying power is the fact that his landscape work is characterised by the effect of distance. Figures, where they appear at all, rarely occupy the fore-

likely to endure the passage of time.

In 1983, midway through *American Prospects*, he took a number of photographs of economic migrants living in tent cities on the outskirts of Houston. For the first time he closed in on his subject, foregrounding and even centring the human figure in his compositions. Later he developed this formula into a fifteen-year project that would result in another major monograph, *Stranger Passing* (2001). Fifteen large-scale prints from this series formed the second half of the show at the Photographers' Gallery, making evident the continuum between the two bodies of work. For although these head-on, eyes-to-camera portraits of Americans are, formally speaking, quite different from his earlier efforts, they too tell the story of his country, this time through its people rather than through its vistas.

If his landscape pictures show us how the earth has been shaped by its inhabitants, then in these portraits Sternfeld always sets his subjects in the places where he finds them, as though they could have no valid meaning outside the environments that give them shape. Trusting a tech-

nique of close, consensual observation, he manages to mine that elusive space between self-possession and self-alienation, and in so doing gently unmasks the people before his lens. In one picture we see a conventional young woman seated in a café. Smiling coyly at the camera, she is unaware that the side buttons of her ankle-length skirt have come undone to reveal her underwear. In another we witness one wedding day

couple's attempt to look the part, an effort that doesn't quite come off thanks to the man's workaday footwear and ill-fitting trousers.

Sternfeld has said that what is of interest to him in portraiture is the encounter with the person he is photographing. Rather than make claims to a position of mechanistic objectivity, he chooses subject matter which indicates that he belongs to a different tradition, one that has been described as 'concerned photography'. For although the frame he uses is ostensibly neutral, his socially aware, sometimes ironic attitude forms an integral part of each picture. And, by destabilising his sitters' attempts at self-presentation, this self-reflexive method occasionally allows us a glimpse of the concatenation of forces that goes towards producing an individual at the end of the twentieth century.

*Stranger Passing* is chock-full of individuals. In a coast-to-coast trawl aimed at demographic veracity, Sternfeld encountered website designers, bankers, motorcyclists, farmers, lawyers, vagrants, real estate brokers and more. But as the labels that accompany each picture suggest, these individuals are also types. Confronted by

(Above)  
**Joel Sternfeld**,  
*A woman pumping gasoline, Kansas City, Kansas, June 1999*, from *Stranger Passing*. © Joel Sternfeld. Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

(Left)  
**Joel Sternfeld**,  
*McLean, Virginia, December 1978*, from *American Prospects*. © Joel Sternfeld. Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

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ground. Nor does incident dominate. Instead the wider setting is what counts. In one picture, seventeen beached whales lie dead on the sand. In another, a renegade elephant has collapsed in the middle of the road. Events like these may sound like the stuff of transient newspaper reports. But by standing back from the scene, by placing them in the broader context, Sternfeld succeeds in making them less topical and more





**Joel Sternfeld,** *Looking east on 29th street on a morning in May, 2000.* © Joel Sternfeld. Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

**Joel Sternfeld,** *After a flash flood, Rancho Mirage, California, July 1979, from American Prospects.* © Joel Sternfeld. Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

the bulk of a 10x8in camera, they seem caught between a moment of blithe inwardness and the sudden need to prepare a face for the photographer's lens. It is this tension between private and public, between solipsistic singularity and a social mode of being, which gives these images their power. At times it looks as though this act of self-invention, of auto-mythification, requires an effort that Americans and by extension their country still have a

hard time sustaining.

Faced with their own frailty, humans can respond in unmeasured ways. In *American Prospects* we are shown how this can impact on the landscape. The New World's need to create instant communities and its desire to impose a human scale on such continental vastness has resulted in the incongruous and often calamitous abutting of man and nature. In pictures such as *Lake Oswego, Oregon*, or *Pendleton, Oregon*, Sternfeld turns his attentions to tracts of modular housing that have landed in open country with typical frontiersman conceit. The flimsy newness of the buildings, the brooding presence of the elements, makes enclaves like these look impermanent and somewhat futile. In *After a flash flood, Rancho Mirage, California*, where a villa teeters precariously on the edge of a half-washed-away sliver of tarmac and midway down the hillside below a car lies embedded belly up in the mud, we see with dramatic effect how thin the veneer of domesticity actually is.

Yet, however powerful their message,

the pictures in *American Prospects* and *Stranger Passing* are only ever obliquely political. Recently though, Sternfeld has addressed matters more overtly. In June 2001 he went to the G8 summit in Genoa where over the course of five days he made portraits of a number of anti-globalisation protestors. Uncharacteristically taken with a smaller camera, they lack the compulsion of his usual scrupulously patient images. If the best of his work relies on its own visual eloquence, then here Sternfeld buttresses these less-than-compelling mug shots with extended explanatory captions. It is as though, unlike the understated pictures he spent nearly three decades compiling, this summer attempt to take stock of history is quite simply too sudden and too direct.

His current project is a documentation of utopian communities in the United States. After a lifetime attending to the consequences of events, he has chosen to turn his attention to a sector of society that refutes the inevitability of history. If photographs show us what the past looks like, then by taking pictures of communities such as these Sternfeld is putting on view would-be futures. It is true that many of the groups he has visited are either defunct or in irreversible decline. But now that our present has taken a turn that even a prescient eye could not have foreseen, perhaps the fantasy of dispensing with the past that utopias represent is the best way left to us of contesting recent chronology. For the idea of suspending history leads to a less burdensome logicity. And by picturing such schemes, even when they are riddled with flaws, Sternfeld offers us a glimmer of hope to our present in a fashion that mirrors the way that his pictures from the last quarter of a century help explain the calamitous condition we now find ourselves in.

'American Prospects', 29 May - 17 August, Cordoaria, LisboaPhoto, Portugal.

