

# JOEL STERNFELD

AMERICAN PROSPECTS



## Exhibition Facts

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| Duration      | 28 September – 1 April 2024  |
| Venue         | Tietze Galleries   The ALBERTINA Museum  |
| Curators      | Walter Moser with Astrid Mahler  |
| Works         | 42   |
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| Opening Hours | Daily 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.<br>Except Wednesday and Friday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.   |
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# Joel Sternfeld

## American Prospects

28.09. – 21.04.2024

Joel Sternfeld numbers among the most important protagonists of the New Color Photography movement, which discovered color for art photography in the 1970s. Sternfeld has spent years traveling around the United States as a critical observer, documenting the country and its inhabitants in all their idiosyncrasies and contradictions. His grandiose series *American Prospects* (1978–86) focuses on how human beings relate to the American landscape—a landscape they've helped to shape. In addition to exposing a natural world subject to economic exploitation and threatened by accumulating ecological damage, the frequently whimsical everyday scenes captured by Sternfeld in this series also permit inferences as to the sociopolitical conditions of that era. *American Prospects* is part of a major donation to the ALBERTINA Museum by, and the present exhibition presents a first-ever survey of these donated works.

# Wandtexte

## American Prospects

Joel Sternfeld (b. 1944 in New York) ranks among the foremost exponents of New Color Photography, a heterogeneous group of photographers using color as a stylistic device in artistic photography from the 1970s on. Today a ubiquitously accepted and established means of expression, the use of color in fine-art photography—being overly associated with such commercial photographic applications as advertising and fashion—used to be frowned upon for a long time.

This exhibition presents works from Joel Sternfeld's groundbreaking series *American Prospects*, shot between 1978 and 1986 in the course of several extensive journeys across the USA. If in his early work Joel Sternfeld captured the hustle and bustle of everyday life in his native New York in snapshot-like photographs, his approach changed radically when he swapped his handy 35mm Leica for an unwieldy large format camera. In detailed and meticulously composed pictures, Sternfeld examined the relationship between humans and the landscape shaped by them, which the photographer oftentimes rendered in its impressive vastness. A microcosm of everyday and frequently bizarre happenings thus captured illustrates not only the problematic exploitation and man-made transformation of nature. Rather, it also allows us to draw conclusions about political and social conditions. *American Prospects* describes critical content through the virtuoso use of sublime, brilliant color values and contrasts that seem to contradict the gravity of the occurrences depicted.

This exhibition is presented on the occasion of a capital donation from the artist to the Albertina Museum, comprising 349 works from three photographic series. In addition to *American Prospects*, Joel Sternfeld's series *First Pictures* (1971–1980) and *Stranger Passing* (1986–2001) have also entered the Albertina Museum's collection, so that its focus on international fine-art street and documentary photography can be further expanded and intensified.

All of the photographs on display are archival pigment prints.

## **Jungle Gym, Wet n'Wild Aquatic Theme Park, Orlando, Florida, September 1980**

The recognition of color photography as an artistic means of expression only began toward the mid-1970s. Motifs familiar from black and white photography could not simply be translated into color. Color film requires longer exposure times, and entirely different pictorial effects were achieved thanks to advanced and costly developing techniques. In 1976, William Eggleston's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York proved a pioneering event for the development of color photography. His saturated color photographs of everyday motifs from the US South were partly still polemically reviewed by contemporary critics. Besides Eggleston, Joel Sternfeld names color pioneer Helen Levitt, who structured her New York street photographs in a sophisticated manner through formally autonomous color fields, as a great example. The color theory of Bauhaus instructor Josef Albers, who had emigrated to the United States, exercised an equally important influence on Sternfeld. Albers analyzed the psychological effect of visual color sensations and the mutual impact of tones. In *American Prospects*, Sternfeld implemented Albers's theories by mostly limiting his palette to related, subdued values he combined. This strategy connects the pictures in a harmonious way, a conceptual thread running through the whole series.

## **Great Salt Lake, Utah, August 1979**

*American Prospects* was preceded by systematic preparations. Sternfeld took into account the seasons, studied an area's typical geology and vegetation, and acquired relevant knowledge about its economic and cultural situation. With the financial support of two Guggenheim fellowships, Sternfeld traveled the USA several times for up to a year in his VW camper. Whereas classical landscape photography had rendered nature as pristine and sublime, Joel Sternfeld captured the relationship between humans and the surroundings molded by them. Instead of authentic natural experiences he depicted man's artificial shaping of the environment. An important motive of national selfexpression, Sternfeld's critical approach to the landscape goes hand in hand with his questioning US-American identity. Forerunners of this theme of the so-called "American social landscape" were Walker Evans and Robert Frank, who, however, advocated black and white photography. Sternfeld was particularly impressed by Frank's legendary photographic book *The Americans* (1958/59) and the critical eye he had on US-American postwar society. Yet Sternfeld's carefully planned photo shooting process is fundamentally different from Frank's intuitive pictorial language. The elaborate compositions of *American Prospects* focus on the landscape as a product of economic interests. The pictures show both the urban sprawl caused by suburban developments and the commercialization of nature for the sake of tourism.

## **McLean, Virginia, December 1978**

Joel Sternfeld's description of the United States is frequently based on a humorous and ironic stance. The most laconic example shows a firefighter in front of a stall, buying a pumpkin. He is completely at ease, while his mates in the background are in the process of extinguishing a raging fire. This could be a *mise-en-scène* because of the incongruence of the scene. The content remains inscrutable, as the title does not provide any information. The meaning only reveals itself through some background knowledge: it is a firefighter using a break during a fire drill to do some shopping.

## **U.S.S. Alabama, Mobile, Alabama, September 1980**

*American Prospects* impressively conveys the socio-political mood in the United States between the years 1978 and 1986. In 1981 Ronald Reagan succeeded Jimmy Carter as US president. The years of his administration were marked by the country's military and nuclear armament during the Cold War. At the same time, the United States was forced to overcome the trauma of the Vietnam War. Ronald Reagan pursued a neoliberal economic policy and ordered severe cutbacks in social spending. The subsequent recession led to fundamental economic, social, and demographic changes. Industry's harmful impact on nature, the expansion of man's living environment, and the intensified cultivation of the landscape began to manifest themselves in natural catastrophes, climate change, and the growing impoverishment of certain groups of the population. Sternfeld frequently emphasizes people's estrangement from their environment through the juxtaposition of contrasts and paradox proportions.

## **Domestic Workers Waiting for the Bus, Atlanta, Georgia, April 1983**

Joel Sternfeld photographed scenes of daily life in brilliant colors, behind the alluring surface of which frequently hide such socio-political deficits as racism and social inequality. The picture of a wealthy suburban residential neighborhood shows three Afro-American women on the street amidst well-kept lawns. The subtext is only revealed by the title— Domestic Workers Waiting for the Bus: they are by no means residents but household servants waiting for a vehicle that is to take them away from this idyll.

## **Yellowstone National Park, August 1979**

Not least because of the high material and production costs involved when taking pictures with a large format camera, Joel Sternfeld selected the motifs for *American Prospects* most carefully. He only shot one to two photographs per day. The complicated procedure of shooting pictures with a plate camera also called for a precise pre-visualization of the pictorial object. The accurately thought-out compositions are inspired by traditional

Netherlandish painting of artists like Jacob van Ruisdael or Pieter Bruegel the Elder. In Bruegel's landscapes, the foreground and background frequently merge, with multiple places and actions rendered as equally relevant and from a distanced perspective. Even in the distant past, artists were interested in the relationship between man and nature. In addition to these aspects, the arrangement of tiny figures, acting on the stage-like expanse of the landscape like extras, informed Sternfeld's photography. The theatrical effect of his pictures was to inspire a younger generation of postmodern photographers like Gregory Crewdson and filmmakers like Sofia Coppola or David Lynch.

## **A Blind Man in His Garden, Homer, Alaska, July 1984**

In *American Prospects*, the human portrait is often a focus of artistic interest. The people photographed in situ are characterized both by their outward appearance, such as clothing and poses, and by the spatial context in which they are staged. Not only do the pictures show fundamentally differing social groups and milieus, but they also tell us about contrasting lifestyles. The consistently reserved and distanced perspective with which Sternfeld keeps a visible distance to his motifs refrains from judgment—a strategy pursued by August Sander as early as the 1920s for his famous photographic project *People of the 20th Century*. However, while Sander subordinated his models to their respective professional functions, Sternfeld concentrates on rendering his sitters' individuality. The oftentimes whimsical (self-)enactments visualize overarching social structures which, in their sum total, provide a complex and highly nuanced portrayal of American society.

## **Member of the Christ Family Religious Sect, Hidalgo County**

In the course of his photographic analysis of America's social landscape, Joel Sternfeld has dealt with various forms of social coexistence. Time and again he presents models of alternative communities and social experiments. Motivations for a specific lifestyle range from political to ecological considerations. By representing heterogeneous life concepts, Sternfeld elucidates American society's various value systems while questioning the prerequisites and developments of social norms and conventions. Joel Sternfeld amplified some of the variegated themes and motifs from *American Prospects* in the form of independent series and book projects. In *Sweet Earth* (1982–2005), for example, he offers an overview of the historical development of communities from the nineteenth century to the counterculture of the 1960s and to new forms of living together in the present.



# Press images

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Joel Sternfeld  
Wet 'n Wild Aquatic Theme Park, Orlando, Florida, September 1980  
Series: American Prospects  
Pigment Print  
107 x 133 cm  
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Donation Joel Sternfeld © Joel Sternfeld



Joel Sternfeld  
Domestic Workers Waiting for the Bus, Atlanta,  
Georgia, April 1983  
Series: American Prospects  
Pigment Print  
107 x 133 cm  
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Donation Joel Sternfeld © Joel Sternfeld



Joel Sternfeld  
McLean, Virginia, December 1978  
Series: American Prospects  
Pigment Print  
107 x 133 cm  
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Donation Joel Sternfeld © Joel Sternfeld



Joel Sternfeld  
Exhausted Renegade Elephant, Woodland, Washington, June 1979  
Series: American Prospects  
Pigment Print  
107 x 133 cm  
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Donation Joel Sternfeld © Joel Sternfeld



Joel Sternfeld  
Canyon Country, California, June 1983,  
Series: American Prospects  
Pigment Print  
107 x 133 cm  
Donation of Kerry Propper to the König-Baudouin-Stiftung, United States,  
On loan to the Museum, © Joel Sternfeld



Joel Sternfeld  
Buckingham, Pennsylvania, August 1978,  
Series: American Prospects  
Pigment Print  
107 x 133 cm  
Donation of Kerry Propper to the König-Baudouin-Stiftung, United States,  
On loan to the Museum, © Joel Sternfeld





Joel Sternfeld  
Kansas City, Kansas, May 1983,  
Series: American Prospects  
Pigment Print  
107 x 133 cm  
Donation of Kerry Propper to the König-Baudouin-Stiftung, United States,  
On loan to the Museum, © Joel Sternfeld



Joel Sternfeld  
The Space Shuttle Columbia Lands at Kelly Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio. Texas, March 1979,  
Series: American Prospects  
Pigment Print  
107 x 133 cm  
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Donation Joel Sternfeld © Joel Sternfeld