

Prospecting for Gold

Photographer Joel Sternfeld's iconic "American Prospects" at the Hall Foundation

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REVIEW

three hues" of "equal density." That objective required the perfect light.

Sternfeld told of scouting a particularly disastrous site of flash flooding in a California desert city. He slept in his van down the street until he could catch the image at 4 a.m., before the sun rose over the hills. The deep blue of a daytime sky would have overpowered the hue of a blue Trans Am suspended belly-up in a massive landslide that somehow spared the house perched above the affected area. (The work is part of "American Prospects" but not in the Hall's exhibition.)

As interesting as it is to think about color in Sternfeld's photos, what strikes the eye first is their irony. In "American Prospects," Sternfeld manages to capture both landscape views (one meaning of "prospects") and the possibilities for financial exploitation (another) of those landscapes. The result is a tension between nature and the American dream — or, as he put it during his talk, "the idea of utopian versus dystopian possibilities."

Sometimes that tension generates humor. In one of his most famous photographs, "McLean, Virginia, December 1978," a helmeted fire chief picks out pumpkins at a farmstand while a house burns in the background. (The firefighters were doing a live-burn exercise.) The juxtaposition of a frantic scene and a contemplative one induces a chuckle; the parity of color between the orange flames and the scattered pumpkins reinforces it.

In other photos, Sternfeld's sly humor is overcome by ominousness. "U.S.S. Alabama, Mobile, Alabama, September 1980" places a fisherman seated in a lawn chair at the very bottom of the frame, dwarfed by the giant hulk of the battleship anchored just beyond his fishing pole. The suggestion of possible wartime mobilization appears to loom over a scene of leisure in nature. In fact, the *Alabama* was already permanently berthed there as a museum ship. As Sternfeld said during his talk, "The idea [of my work] is that you don't know anything, truly, from a photograph."

A similar sense of unease pervades "Little Talbot Beach, Florida, September 1980," a composition of thin horizontals that foregrounds the figure of a bikini-clad woman stretched out on a lounge chair at the ocean's edge, one knee raised slightly. Her body perfectly echoes the forms of several military ships lining the distant horizon.

Sternfeld juxtaposes human enterprise and nature again in "Walking the High Line," shot in 2000 and 2001. The beauty of these images almost makes a viewer rethink the aesthetic value of the popular

On a recent gorgeous fall day, landscape photographer Joel Sternfeld stood in front of a packed audience at the Hall Art Foundation in Reading to talk about his work. Eighteen of Sternfeld's large-format color photographs are hanging in the venue's farmhouse, and his 16-minute video, "London Bridge," is on view in the pole barn, where he spoke.

"You should be kayaking," the 81-year-old joked in the semidarkness, the wall behind him lit up with projected images. "I'm going to try to make it worthwhile to give [that] up."

Sternfeld lives where he was born, in New York City, and teaches in nearby Sarah

Lawrence College's visual and studio arts department. He's best known for "American Prospects," a series he shot with a large-format, wooden 8-by-10 view camera while traveling around the country in a VW camper van between 1978 and 1984. During that time, he won two Guggenheim Fellowships and a National Endowment for the Arts Photographers Fellowship. Many of the images from "American Prospects" have become iconic.

The Hall's exhibition features 13 of them, as well as five from Sternfeld's later series, "Walking the High Line." That project captures the abandoned elevated train track in lower Manhattan before it opened as a park in 2009.

At the Hall, Sternfeld spoke mainly of his development as a photographer and his approach to color. When he started out in 1969, he said, fine art photography was black and white, and there were only two galleries dedicated to the medium in New York City. Color photography was "career suicide," he said. But Sternfeld loved nature and the seasons, so color made the most sense.

The son of two artists, Sternfeld earned a bachelor's degree in art from Dartmouth College and took his color cues from painting. Josef Albers' color theory became central to his explorations, he said, as did Paul Klee's watercolors, from which he gleaned a practice of capturing "two to

COURTESY PHOTOS

"McLean, Virginia, December 1978"



From top: "U.S.S. Alabama, Mobile, Alabama, September 1980"; "A Railroad Artifact, 30th Street, May 2000"

elevated park. What a treat it must have been to stride through wild overgrowth while looking down on the city's relentless rectilinearity, as many apparently did; Sternfeld's photos center on the faint footpath of trespassers.

"Walking the High Line" doesn't include a human presence, unlike many of the works in "American Prospects." When Sternfeld was creating the latter project, America's future — yet another "prospect" — looked bleak. Having endured a failed Vietnam War and Richard Nixon presidency, the country had plunged into the hyped-up materialism of the 1980s. Nevertheless, Sternfeld said at the Hall, "In those days, I believed there was a goodness in the American people."

That outlook seems to persist in his 2016 video, "London Bridge." The setting is preposterous but real: London Bridge, originally an 1831 structure over the Thames River, is a tourist attraction in Lake Havasu City, Ariz. In 1968, an American oil entrepreneur paid to have

it dismantled and rebuilt over an artificial channel that leads to Lake Havasu — itself a dammed section of the Colorado River.

In the 16-minute video, a gondolier, in full costume and singing Italian arias, guides a gondola under and around the bridge until he is drowned out by partying students playing loud music on motorboats. By sunset, the youths have departed, and the gondolier picks up a couple, serenading them in the golden light as sincerely as if he were in Venice.

Vermonters may turn up their noses at such constructed bodies of water, but Sternfeld's art has the effect of illuminating the ways that ideas of nature and landscape are themselves constructs. Even the state's best kayaking spots are part of the managed, and sometimes mishandled, American landscape. ⑦

INFO

Joel Sternfeld, through November 30 at the Hall Art Foundation in Reading. hallartfoundation.org

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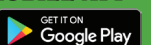
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