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Serendipity All Over Again

Joel Sternfeld Versus His Successors

By RICHARD B. WOODWARD

WHICH is a tougher assignment for a photographer: to invent a picture or to discover one? Should you confine yourself to a studio, where you can more easily control accident and realize the dreams in your head? Or do you gamble on finding what you didn't even know you wanted in the unpredictably rich world around you? Re-creations or reflexes? Fiction or fact?

These questions, practical decisions with serious philosophic and aesthetic implications, have always divided photographers into camps, and never more so than today. The latest reminder of this situation can be seen in the new edition of Joel Sternfeld's "American Prospects" (published by D.A.P.) and an exhibition of 14 prints from that influential book at his new gallery, Luhring Augustine in Chelsea, through Feb. 7.

Images from the series, first exhibited in 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art and gathered into a 1987 book, are, once seen, hard to forget: a fireman taking his sweet time choosing the perfect pumpkin at a Virginia farm stand, seemingly oblivious to the house ablaze only yards away; an exhausted runaway elephant being hosed down on a two-lane road in Washington State; a basketball net on a wooden pole in the Arizona desert; a car at the bottom of a ravine after a California mud slide.

Mr. Sternfeld came upon these uncanny scenes as he roamed the country with his 8-by-10 view camera. Interspersed in the book are formal portraits of anonymous Americans. But as the writer and curator Anne Tucker wrote in the afterword to the original edition: "It is essential to Sternfeld's art that he has not manipulated his subject beyond asking the person to pose."

Among American documentary photographers working in large-format color, the pictures set a standard for clarity, sociological breadth and sardonic humor. But what's more surprising is the imprint they seem to have made on photographers from the other camp. It is hard to look at "American Prospect" and not be reminded of work by Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall, both of whom go to elaborate lengths to fabricate images. Their tableaus, which quote from history painting and cinema, advertising and photography, use actors and studio lighting in hopes of creating the same narrative tension and mystery that Mr. Sternfeld has captured by being in the right place at the right time.

Especially now that Mr. Sternfeld has left his longtime dealer, PaceWildenstein, to show in Luhring Augustine, which is also Mr. Crewdson's gallery, their two approaches will come into even sharper contrast. Mr. Crewdson has welcomed the comparison by including Mr. Sternfeld's mud slide photograph in a show he organized there in 2002 called "American Standard."

He can afford to be generous. More than 19 years younger than Mr. Sternfeld, who will be 60 this year, Mr. Crewdson is among the most successful photographers at work today, his highly cinematic style imitated by art school undergraduates, his name a reference on the HBO show "Six Feet Under."

For those who remain suspicious that photography seems too easy, who want it to be more like painting or advertising or moviemaking, the labor that goes into setting up a scene for the camera adds value. The record price at auction for a photograph by Mr. Wall is $277,500; for Mr. Crewdson $41,825; for Mr. Sternfeld $3,600. (Mr. Wall's high prices derive in part from the fact that he has been staging pictures for more than 25 years. But more important, his background in conceptual art, rather than in photography, allows his works to be sold in the contemporary art auctions in the company of Warhol and Jasper Johns.)

That artifice should outrank realism on the auction block seems both odd and unfair, when not only are Mr. Sternfeld's artistic solutions generally more elegant, but the problems that he has set himself — of catching life on the fly — are more challenging.

The labor of a reality-based photographer is at least as onerous as that of one who works from fantasy. The rental cost of props and actors doesn't compare to the frustration of heading out the door with hope and coming back with nothing after a long day of shooting. How many photographers would be sensitive and quick enough to capture an image like Mr. Sternfeld's of three black domestic workers waiting for the bus in an Atlanta suburb? No lighting technician could rig a set to duplicate the late afternoon sun in this picture, unless, perhaps, that technician had seen this picture first.

There are signs that Mr. Sternfeld now wants to proclaim himself an innovator for a younger generation that has underestimated his role. The new edition of "American Prospects" includes several new images that in publishing's predigital era would not have "read." Vital detail would have been lost. One of these, taken in 1984, shows two men repairing a bulldozer in their junk-strewn Alaska yard. Cover the caption and you'd swear that you were looking at one of Mr. Wall's constructed enigmas.

A degree of strain can be felt in this effort. The new edition of the book, with its much wider pages, is not as reader-friendly as the old one and suffers from gigantism, as though Mr. Sternfeld felt the need to imitate the attention-grabbing scale of Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth. A new set of digitized 42-by-52-inch prints from "American Prospect" is now for sale; all previous print editions have been canceled.

These are the realities of the art marketplace, and perhaps one shouldn't begrudge Mr. Sternfeld his chance to impress by following the example of his higher-profile colleagues. But it shouldn't be necessary. Not when it's so clear who is the more interesting photographer. □

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