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review

**Joel Sternfeld**  
**'Sweet Earth: Experimental Utopias**  
**in America'**

Luhring Augustine  
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Joel Sternfeld. *Sweet Earth: Experimental Utopias in America*.  
Steidl, 2006. 136 pp., 60 color plates.

The idea of vacating the mainstream for a consciously constructed community has an enduring history in the United States. Joel Sternfeld sees these communities as utopias where nature is equal to the model societies formed. This "Sweet Earth" series began in the early 1990s, and he considers all manner of alternative communities, from religious sects, communes, and even government-sponsored projects. What connects the photographs is the photographer's interest in idealist landscape, a notion deeply embedded in American art history. This idealism is further reflected through extensive wall labels written by the artist, which provide a history of the community documented. The image operates as a symbol, not illustrating the text, but rather as an elaboration on a particular theme the text examines.

Sternfeld's quest to represent varieties of utopian ideals often favors a singular portrait or landscape view. We rarely get a glimpse of those who populate these communities, so one feels rewarded by the very moving group portrait, "May Pole, Short Mountain Sanctuary, Liberty, Tennessee, May 2005." An outgrowth of the Radical Faerie gay movement of the 1970s, Short Mountain Sanctuary welcomes lesbian and gay visitors, and permanent residents number seventeen. Sternfeld visited at the annual May Day gathering, or "Beltane," an event that draws more than 300 visitors from all over the world. The scene recalls the improbabilities of Manet's "Le Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe." A woman dressed as a cowgirl leans against the maypole, her costume in concert with a tangle of colorful ribbon and found objects affixed to the pole. Just beyond her, a picnic is underway, and various groupings reflect the serenity of outdoor celebration. Woven into the tress are hammocks and laundry, traces of prosaic human activity in the wooded setting.



*May Pole, Short Mountain Sanctuary, Liberty, Tennessee, May 2005.*  
C-print, 26 1/2 x 33 1/4 in., courtesy of the artist and Luhring  
Augustine, New York.

"May Pole" vividly captures the anarchistic spirit and the playful experimentation that compels people to an alternative lifestyle. Although religion is represented—some religious groups sharing characteristics with cultish sects, most definitely the downside of group living—the images and text reflect Sternfeld's keen documentary sensitivity to grand ideals of living in harmony with nature.

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