

Schwendener, Martha.

"Joel Sternfeld."

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JOEL STERNFELD

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The circumstances surrounding Joel Sternfeld's last show, in 2004, were almost as sensational as the photographs themselves. Defecting from Pace/MacGill Gallery to the same gallery as Gregory Crewdson (a Sternfeld champion who makes work that bears a striking resemblance to the senior artist's), his "American Prospects" photographs, shot in the late 1970s and mid-'80s, were printed nearly twice the size of earlier editions. It was a controversial move that seemed both

market- and art-historically driven, a self-conscious update for the post-Gurksy age aimed at positioning him as an overlooked or "rediscovered" American master who, along with William Eggleston and Stephen Shore, had pioneered the use of color photography in an artistic context.

The debate around those issues mostly faded with this show of new work. "Sweet Earth: Experimental Utopias in America" found Sternfeld once again crisscrossing the country. But this time, the oddities he found are geographically fixed. Visually, the photos themselves aren't as jarring as those in "American Prospects," which admittedly gained some of their power through incubation (Sternfeld spent eight years on the project, and the results have aged particularly well). The images—mostly of landscapes, buildings, and people—are also quieter than Sternfeld's best-known works, which feature such subjects as a fireman buying a pumpkin at a farm stand

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Utopia here is broadly defined—taking in everything from urban garden projects to rural religious sects—but is always linked to physical structures and spaces. Subjects range from more established utopian forays—Hutterites in South Dakota; the original Mormon temple in Nauvoo, Illinois; and a Jewish kosher/organic community in Massachusetts—to the recent and more radical: the Light of Truth Universal Shrine in Buckingham, Virginia; a Radical Faerie and “queer safe space” commune in central Tennessee; an Earthship at Earthhaven Ecovillage, an “ecologically responsible community” in Black Mountain, North Carolina. The “Sweet Earth” series also relies heavily on accompanying texts which resist editorializing on their subjects via controlled, neutral language (unless they quote a speaker). The marriage of image and text turns the project into a sort of photo-essay, or something along the lines of Edward Steichen’s 1955 exhibition “The Family of Man” (except that here, Sternfeld focuses on those family members who’ve absconded from the fold, retreated from the mainstream to the fringes).

The idea of utopia is a conceit beloved of Americans—think of Brook Farm (where Nathaniel Hawthorne did a stint), or Amos Alcott Bronson’s Fruitlands. It dovetails with the nation’s image of itself as an oasis of freedom. And it’s both timeless and

timely—particularly now that “freedom” is being forcibly exported overseas. While Sternfeld’s “American Prospects” depicts a civilization that seems surreal and unsustainable—but presents itself as “normal”—his utopias accomplish the reverse. Here are the places where people go to escape. What makes them so American, perhaps, is their pragmatism. An experimental utopia, in Sternfeld’s lexicon, isn’t a fantasy: It’s a concrete place, a method of retreating from a confused and corrupt world. As this series demonstrates, the experiment fails as often as it succeeds. But it constantly regenerates itself as an idea, a myth, another American Dream, as powerfully seductive as the Great American West, or the modern American suburb.

—Martha Schwendener

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Joel Sternfeld, *Dacha/Staff Building, Gesundheit! Institute, Hillsboro, West Virginia, April 2004*, color photograph, 26½ x 33¼".