

EST. 1985

# LUHRING AUGUSTINE

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## Joel Sternfeld

### *First Pictures*

Opening reception: Thursday, 5 January 2012, 6-8 pm

Exhibition dates: 6 January – 4 February 2012

Luhring Augustine is pleased to present *First Pictures* by Joel Sternfeld. This exhibition is comprised of four distinct bodies of work made between 1971 and 1980, the majority of which have never before been published or exhibited. In these bodies of work, Sternfeld develops conceptual and formal strategies that are fundamental to his practice over the past four decades. Such strategies include the building of narrative, elements of humor and irony, a politicized view of America, as well as a concern for community, social conditions, and the environment. In making this early work, Sternfeld began to experiment with the Bauhaus-based idea of building a work of art out of two or three dominant hues of relatively equal density; this approach became the central compositional principle of *American Prospects* (1978-1986).

Each of the four components of *First Pictures* bears its own title. Sternfeld began the first, *Happy Anniversary Sweetie Face!*, in 1971 and developed it over the next seven years. In these pictures, Sternfeld probed the essential nature of the color photograph, including questions of palette and purpose. *Nags Head, 1975* documents the eponymous beach town where Sternfeld spent the summer of that year. With these images, the artist attempted to visually achieve a sense of temporal and spatial fluidity. *Rush Hour* is comprised of urban street portraits made in Chicago and New York in 1976, the year of America's uneasy Bicentennial celebrations. These pictures attempt to portray the psychological landscape of the country in a time of recession, with memories of the Vietnam War and Watergate still fresh. The final group of images, *At the Mall, New Jersey 1980*, consists of semi-formal portraits of mall-goers presenting their purchases to the camera, a conceptual strategy that foreshadows the circumstantial portraits of *Stranger Passing*, published two decades later.

Sternfeld's 1970s America is depicted as a bittersweet era filled with exuberance but constrained by a sense of a society not living up to its ideals. This was also a time of excitement in photography as emergent color pictures struggled to compete in the more established world of black and white images. This exhibition is replete with examples of the societal and artistic conditions present at the time of the work's production, and it allows us to gain a fresh understanding of Sternfeld's achievement in the eleven bodies of work he went on to make in the subsequent four decades.

The first retrospective exhibition of Joel Sternfeld's work, organized by Ute Eskildsen, was on view at the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany from 16 July - 23 October 2011. Over the next two years, the exhibition will travel to the Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam from 15 December 2011 - 14 March 2012, the Albertina in Vienna, Austria from 26 June - 14 October 2012, and C/O Berlin from 7 December 2012 - 3 March 2013. This exhibition coincides with the publication of the book *First Pictures*, produced by Steidl.

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