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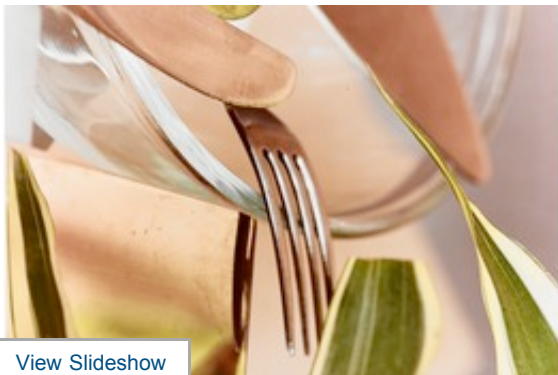
# When Color Burst Through

By [RICHARD B. WOODWARD](#)

*Princeton, N.J.*

Color photography, it is easy to forget, was once an expensive special effect. Hollywood studios in the 1930s and '40s reserved Technicolor for big-budget musicals. Advertisers needed a garish palette to sell lipstick and frozen food, and amateurs preferred to remember family vacations in Kodachrome. But for anyone with higher aspirations, only black-and-white photography mattered during much of the 20th century.

### Photography Gets a Burst of Color



[View Slideshow](#)

Jan Groover, courtesy of the artist and Janet Borden, Inc.  
Jan Groover, 'Untitled' (1978).

This rigid attitude did not abate in the U.S. until the '70s, when improved color-film saturation and the new Polaroid SX-70 became flexible tools of a younger generation. By 1981, the independent curator Sally Eauclore was able to identify more than 40 artists for her landmark exhibition "The New Color Photography" at the International Museum of Photography in New York. Most of those she chose were under 40 years old and many had been shooting in color for less than a decade.

"Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980," at the Princeton University Art Museum, is the first scholarly re-examination since Ms. Eauclore's survey of this period. Independent curator Kevin Moore has

reduced her list of 45 artists to 18 and in his well-researched essay tried to put a lasso around an unruly group who were never a cohesive "school." By opening with the anti-Vietnam offset lithographs of Robert Heinecken and ending with portraits of strangers taken by Leo Rubinfien on his world travels, "Starburst" wants us to see photographers in the '70s—even if they weren't aware of it at the time—as leaving behind political activism in favor of careers as disinterested observers of, and participants in, globalization.

### Starburst: Color Photography In America 1970-80

Princeton University Art Museum  
Through Sept. 26

This tidy revision isn't altogether accurate—photographers who were agitators in the '70s (Heinecken, for one) continued to be so in the '80s. Those who never protested anything (William

Eggleston) went about their business as before. But Mr. Moore improves on the 1981 show in several ways, not least in his careful selection of pictures.

A wall in the lobby of earlier 20th-century prints offers a historical prologue. What had been done in black-and-white, represented here by Dorothea Lange, Minor White, Robert Frank, Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand, was more exciting and diverse than anything yet done in color, as the stately prints by Eliot Porter and Ernst Haas attest. Color was slow; color was costly.

Then, in the first room we encounter Heineken's bawdy satires on war, sex, race and consumerism in America, and the fun begins. In a series circa 1970 he superimposed an image of a Vietcong soldier, holding two decapitated heads, over a series of ads from women's magazines. Heineken and Les Krimms, represented around the corner by a group of Polaroids in which naked or topless women perform absurdist stunts—stretching bubble gum with the heel of a shoe and the nipple of a breast—often dared feminists to object. More than a few obliged them.

In Ms. Eauclaire's group show, Mr. Eggleston had more prints than anyone else. His one-man debut at the Museum of Modern Art in 1976 had sharply divided critics but granted an institutional imprimatur to color. His influence since has been unrivaled. This time around, though, Stephen Shore emerges as the central figure, both for his playful ideas about photographing in series and for the enduring integrity of his large-format urban landscapes.

It's too bad the reinstallation here of his 1972 New York gallery show, "American Surfaces"—a record of a road trip in 312 snapshots—was too large to be embedded in the cramped Princeton galleries and is orphaned in the lobby. The 3-by-5-inch prints wind around three walls, demonstrating the diaristic possibilities of picture-taking with a small camera as well as its tendency to aggrandize trivia and flatten relationships, leaving narrative threads loose rather than laced up. The series transmits with perfect fidelity the knockabout mood of friends on a purposeless journey around America, including Mr. Shore's native New York City, a trip that ends without the melodrama of period pieces such as "Easy Rider."

Time has been kind to several bodies of work. The mockery in Neal Slavin's group portraits—of a Star Trek convention, a Miss USA pageant, a meeting of a gun club—has been replaced by an empathetic air of awkward, shared mortality. The same could be said of the characters that drift through Mitch Epstein's and Mr. Rubinfien's portraits. The expert selection highlights their *sprezzatura* with color, as if they had been using it all their lives.

Other artists look less relevant now than a quarter-century ago. The still lifes of Jan Groover were extravagantly praised in the '70s because, as Mr. Moore notes, they seemed so painterly that critics had no trouble legitimizing them as "real art." As formalism has fallen out of favor and Mr. Eggleston's lyrical documentary style has taken hold, Ms. Groover's analytic studies in muted tones of kitchen utensils feel isolated from today's zeitgeist. The Polaroid riddles of Eve Sonneman—the same scenes taken moments apart—have also lost whatever topical urgency they once had.

The breakthrough into color in the '70s deserves this curatorial attention and lately has received it. In 2007 the English photographer and writer Martin Parr mounted a provocative show titled "Colour Before Color" at the Hasted Hunt Gallery in Chelsea. He argued that European and British photographers in the '60s and early '70s produced work the equal of Americans. If the evidence he

marshalled was not ultimately persuasive—"Starburst" confirms the superior vigor and scope of U.S. practice—the discoveries were welcome.

Missing from both shows, though, is any discussion of touchy preservation issues, such as the state of vintage color prints from these years. As many examples in "Starburst" were printed later, I'm guessing that etiolation has been high except in the case of dye-transfer prints. Nor do Messrs. Moore and Parr wrestle with the fundamental challenges of seeing in color vs. black-and-white. Why did Mr. Eggleston and Joel Meyerowitz seamlessly make the transition, while older figures, such as Ansel Adams and Henri Cartier- Bresson, never got the hang of a polychromatic world?

The exclusion of certain figures and bodies of work is also questionable. The antic self-portraits of Lucas Samaras and the Polaroid composites of David Hockney, both in the 1981 survey, continue to inspire younger artists. A comprehensive study of '70s color needs to look at them again and at artists, such as Michael Bishop and Roger Merten, who have disappeared from galleries and thus from our blinkered present.

"Starburst" is deeply satisfying despite these limitations, many dictated by budget and space constraints. The number of pictures has shrunk slightly since the debut last spring at the Cincinnati Art Museum. That installation in a long gallery allowed each artist more independence—the original shock of Mr. Shore's "American Surfaces" was more apparent when encountered within the flow between rooms—but tended to lose energy at key points. This tighter version by curator Joel Smith better manifests the title. There is also a selection of gallery notices and other period ephemera from the collection of Peter Bunnell, professor emeritus of the history of photography and art at Princeton, an eyewitness to much of this activity as a curator at MoMA during the '70s.

The show reaffirms the vitality of the era as it also marks the overthrow of black-and-white's supremacy. By about 1985, as Mr. Moore notes, exhibitions of color photography no longer needed an adjective.

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