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## Starburst (Review)

*A pivotal decade in photography explodes at Cincinnati Art Museum*

By Tamera Lenz Muentz



### Critic's Pick

It's hard for our generation to imagine controversy over color photography. In a day and age when many art schools have shut down their traditional black-and-white darkrooms in favor of going digital, color is simply taken for granted.

Audiences had been accustomed to color in film since the 1930s and television since the 1950s. Color photography, however, was reserved mostly for commercial advertising, family portraits and snapshots until the 1970s. The Cincinnati Art Museum's *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970–1980*, which opens Friday, explores that groundbreaking decade, when landmark exhibitions by several artists changed the face of art photography forever.

Don't worry if you're not up on photo history — the exhibition begins with a gallery featuring pre-1970s photographs representing the establishment of the day. These predecessors leaned towards modernist abstraction (Aaron Siskind), austere beauty (Eliot Porter) or social documentary (Diane Arbus). While mostly in black-and-white, there are a few examples of early color works.

According to Kevin Moore, guest curator who organized the show with CAM's photography curator James Crump, "There were occurrences of color photographs being shown before 1970, at the Museum of Modern Art, for example, and there were people working since the 1940s. But they were isolated instances and still following the rules of what was considered an art photograph at that time."

The show then launches chronologically into a series of sections devoted to individual photographers. Several galleries recreate the spirit of the original 1970s shows with either vintage or more recent prints.

"Color had a fading problem in the 1970s," Moore says. "I think one of the reasons some of these prints are not as famous as they should be is that they simply did not hold up well. The show represents a lot of different processes, and some held up better than others. In every instance, we sought out images that look just as they did in the '70s, meaning as vibrant as they were then, and in the same format. In some cases, it meant going directly to

the artist for new prints and in others it meant using older ones."

"The works in the show come from a who's who of North American collectors, including private collections, museums, and the artists themselves," Crump says.

Some rarely exhibited photos from CAM's permanent collection also appear. The approaches and subject matter vary widely.

The show possesses undeniable cultural echoes of the 1970s. Robert Heineken's lithographs of an American soldier carrying the severed heads of Viet Cong, superimposed over beauty product ads, evoke the clash of social concerns with the rise of the self-absorbed "Me Decade." Neal Slavin's group portraits of American clubs ranging from the International Twins Association to the Lloyd Rod and Gun Club remind us of the importance of assembly to American identity while serving as anthropological records of a particular time in history.

The most controversial subjects appear on the surface to be mundane, banal images of 1970s America. Stephen Shore, for instance, visited Amarillo, Tex., and found it to be the perfect subject for a series of postcards. Utilitarian buildings like churches, diners, banks and retail stores stand in nearly empty parking lots, surrounded by garish blue skies.

The 1970s saw the rise of this kind of photographic series; when experienced individually, Shore's Amarillo postcards seem uninspired, but as a whole can be seen as a presentation of daily experience in Mid-America without forced social commentary. He leaves interpretation up to the viewer, an approach to which art audiences were not accustomed.

In his later series, *American Surfaces*, Shore documented a cross-country road trip. Rather than photographing typical tourist sites, he focused on the meals he ate, the hotels he stayed in, store clerks he encountered and the like. As detached as the photos may appear, the series is quite personal. Shore is noted

as having remarked, "I was just really amazed by all these things I was encountering — what my hotel looked like and what the food looked like."

The most puzzling and evocative photographer in the show is William Eggleston. His 1976 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art was famously described by its curator, John Szarkowski, as "perfect," but critic Hilton Kramer called it "perfectly boring." Eggleston captured images of the people and places of the South, presenting them without taking a stance (pictured above).

However, there is a suggestion of darkness and decay in the pictures — an old man seated on a bed holding a gun, the interior of an oven, an empty suburban street, flowers at a gravesite. We can't tell how Eggleston felt about that darkness, which confounded many viewers of the day, but it makes the work challenging and fascinating for today's audiences.

Other veins of color photography in the show include more formal approaches that resemble carefully composed paintings, like Jan Groover's abstractions of everyday objects and Barbara Kasten's Constructs, for which she built sculptures she then photographed, resulting in interesting designs of color, form, light and shadow. Joel Meyerowitz's grand seascapes appeal to a picturesque sensibility, while John Pfahl places objects within the landscape as a catalyst for conceptual land art.

According to the curators, the title *Starburst* suggests a process that both destroyed what came before and created something totally new.

"The landscape of contemporary art would look much different today without the pioneering efforts of the photographers comprising Starburst," Crump says in the museum's press material.

Through more than 200 photographs by 18 artists, the exhibition presents a 10-year surge of experimentation with color, the effects of which we're still feeling today.

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**STARBURST opens at the Cincinnati Art Museum on Friday and runs through May 9. Get exhibition and gallery details [here](#).**

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