

ARTFORUM

“Starburst: Color Photography in America: 1970–1980”

CINCINNATI ART MUSEUM

953 Eden Park Drive

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“I photograph in color because the world is in color,” Eve Sonneman declared in 1976. Such a statement presented color photography as a near tautology—as exquisitely self-evident. But it also addressed an art world where the medium was understood as black-and-white. So argues this exhibition, which charts the fraught and uneven emergence of chromatic photography in the 1970s. While black-and-white images were seen as artful translations of the world—and hence cerebral abstractions of it—Sonneman’s comment captured a desire for an artless empiricism that several early color photographers toyed with as they married the camera’s capacity for dumb transcription with the radical de-skilling enabled by new technologies like the Polaroid.

Stephen Shore’s 1971 postcards of Amarillo, Texas, clearly indebted to Ed Ruscha’s serial cartographies, are situated as one point of origin of the emergent tradition. Yet these deadpan Conceptual beginnings seem to quickly slip into more traditional documentary modes. In the many images of vernacular landscapes, clapboard houses, billboards and signage, the legacy of Walker Evans looms large, even if his focused vision is now splayed out into a spectrum of possibilities. By contrast, Jan Groover and Barbara Kasten turned their backs on the dialogue with documentary, using color instead to articulate a range of formal, painterly concerns. This chromatic intensity reaches a saturated frenzy in John Divola’s *Zuma #29*, 1978, Richard Misrach’s 1978 “Hawaii” series, and, most famously, in the milky-veined, crimson ceiling of William Eggleston’s *Greenwood, Mississippi*, 1973.

Unhitching pigment and dye from the seemingly natural relationship they currently enjoy with photography, the show adeptly denaturalizes color. In prodding the general amnesia on this point, “Starburst” also accounts for the monumental Gurskys and Struths of the 1990s, worlds away from Shore’s drugstore prints, yet arguably the apotheoses of color photography’s chameleonic history.

— Leora Maltz-Leca



Stephen Shore, *West Ninth Avenue, Amarillo, Texas, October 2, 1974*, color photograph, 8 x 10".