

Lima, Benjamin. "Color Pictures, Fort Worth Contemporary Arts." *Pastelegram* (online), 19 April 2012.

If asked to name important points in the development of color photography, most interested persons would probably list two moments. First, there was color's 1970s rise to acceptance within the New York art-photography establishment, following William Eggleston's controversial 1976 solo show at the Museum of Modern Art.¹ Second, there was the 1980s ascendance of large-format color photography in museums and the market, exemplified by Jeff Wall and the Düsseldorf triad of Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky. This work managed to convince influential art historian Michael Fried, after a decades-long self-imposed absence, that contemporary art was once again worthy of attention. One might expect, therefore, that an exhibition of "color pictures" would center on work from this context.

In this respect *Color Pictures* does not disappoint. It provides the immense thrill of seeing two of the best-known color pictures of all time: Eggleston's *Greenwood, Mississippi* (1973)—which could go toe-to-toe with a Matisse in a contest of redness—and Stephen Shore's *Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, 1975* (1975), which brings transparent lucidity to the anonymous roadside service station, a theme previously explored by both painters (Edward Hopper, Allan D'Arcangelo, Ed Ruscha) and photographers (Ruscha again, Dennis Hopper). Shore's picture also illuminates a historical link; according to a recent study, the Düsseldorf photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher acquired a copy of *Beverly Boulevard*, and for the Bechers and their students (such as Thomas Ruff, who appears in *Color Pictures*), Shore's work was central to their exploration of hue.



William Eggleston, *Greenwood, Mississippi*, 1973; vintage dye transfer print mounted to board; 12.5 in. x 19 in.; collection of Catherine and Will Rose; courtesy of Fort Worth Contemporary Arts.

The show would be worth seeing for Eggleston and Shore alone. Fortunately, there is a good deal more to see and think about. The exhibition gestures toward a prehistory when color technology was available but marginal, with a 1940 image by Russell Lee specially printed from the original transparency for the occasion. It also brings us up to the present moment, with works by Ann Stautberg and Allison V. Smith that engage in a lively dialogue with color history.

Lee's 1940 photograph of squash and root vegetables (among others), carefully tagged and handsomely arranged on a wooden table in Pie Town, NM for a county fair, originated as part of the landmark social documentary project sponsored by the Roosevelt administration during the Great Depression. Detached from that original context, it allows for many possible imaginative responses. There is something uncanny in the way that these bulbous things resemble human body parts (as both folklore and Surrealism recognized); at the same time, the bounty might also serve as a fable of abundance, like Bruegel's sixteenth-century paintings of peasant feasts. There is also something uncanny in Alison V. Smith's engrossing studies of the coastal Maine landscape, from 2009 to 2011, where each image centers around a single natural form that pushes toward the front of the frame. The tightly pruned bush in *Nonesuch. August 2009. Rockport, Maine* (2010), for example, reads as both a specific bush and an abstract elliptical form. However, I think in Smith's case the uncanny has more otherworldly and spiritual overtones than the spooky and subconscious corporality of Lee's vegetables. Smith's scene is almost impossibly lush, in a ruggedly northern way. Like Joel Meyerowitz's classic *Cape Light*—which isn't in *Color Pictures* but easily could be—Smith's work inspires a kind of reverence for the New England shoreline.



Sarah Charlesworth, *Relative Values, Maximum Hues*, 2006; Fuji Crystal Archive print; 41 in. x 31 in.; courtesy of the artist and Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

Finally, *Color Pictures* fills out the presentation of the 1970s–1980s icons like Eggleston and Shore with astutely chosen works by conceptual artists associated with that period who used photography. Works by John Baldessari, Sarah Charlesworth and Thomas Ruff appear here, and offer intellectual puzzles to ponder. Baldessari's two images are hard to make out; they apparently depict something sinister, such as the sunken hull of a shipwreck scarcely visible in the underwater darkness. Actually, Baldessari's images record the reflections in the blue paint job of a 1968 Volvo, before and after a good polishing. Baldessari dangles the possibility of meaning in front of the credulous viewer only to adeptly whisk it away, like Lucy pulling the football away from Charlie Brown. Charlesworth's 2006 *Concrete Color* series presents

arrangements of circular dishes, each one filled with paint of a single primary or secondary color, viewed from above. They are pictures of paint being paint; Charlesworth detaches color from its task of defining the surfaces of things. However, while historical avant-gardists like Kandinsky and Mondrian viewed this detachment as an idealistic liberation that allowed color to represent the transcendental essences of things, Charlesworth shows it in a desublimated way, as nothing more than an output of the technical formulae of color matching.

Ambivalence about color goes a long way back, as for instance in the debates over Florentine *disegno* or Venetian *colore* as well as the Rubenistes against the Poussinistes, in which line and composition (i.e., Michelangelo and Poussin) expressed intellectual understanding while color (i.e., Titian and Rubens) expressed sensual experience. Right through the 1970s, critics were calling color photography “perfectly banal” (Hilton Kramer) or “vulgar” (Walker Evans). One response to this is to embrace color’s sensuality, its potential for vulgarity and hedonism, and abandon oneself to the pleasure of immediate sensual experience. But just as much, color can inspire thoughtful reflection. *Color Pictures* efficiently shows us both sides of this coin. It should inspire many engaged responses.

1. This period has been surveyed by Sally Eauclaire and Kevin Moore. Eauclaire’s *New Color Photography* (Abbeville, 1981) is the catalog to an exhibition at the International Center of Photography, New York; Moore’s *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980* (Hatje Cantz, 2010) is the catalog to an exhibition at the Princeton University Art Museum and the Cincinnati Art Museum. Among the photographers included in both surveys are Eve Sonneman, Harry Callahan, Helen Levitt, Jan Groover, Joel Meyerowitz, Joel Sternfeld, John Divola, John Pfahl, Les Krims, Mitch Epstein, Stephen Shore, William Christenberry, and William Eggleston.

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