

Glimpses of a different age



Bygone era: Canyon Country, California, June 1983, from American Prospects by Joel Sternfeld

By [Nick Hackworth](#) [Evening Standard](#) | 05 April 2012



EXHIBITION REVIEW: Citigroup Photography Prize at The Photographer's Gallery, WC2

For photography the age of ubiquity has begun, when everyone is a photographer and everything has been photographed.

Trending

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2 Cases down by third in half

But 2004's strong shortlist for the Citigroup Prize, worth £20,000 and now in its eighth year, is a eulogy to the time before ubiquity. Three of the four shortlisted artists, who can be of any age or nationality but must have staged an exhibition or released a publication in the UK in the past year, are highly influential documentary photographers, aged from 60 to 74.

Though different, the work of Americans Robert Adams and Joel Sternfeld and the South African David Goldblatt shares a powerful sense of freshness and authenticity. They create images unburdened by irony or self-consciousness, which stand in contrast to the work of previous, highly fashionable winners of this prize, such as Boris Mikhailov, Juergen Teller and Richard Billingham.

Each contender here has a strong claim. The near-legendary Adams is the connoisseur's choice. His brilliantly understated black-and-white images from the early Seventies dissect the endless suburbia of shopping malls and uniform houses crudely grafted onto the landscape of the American West.

David Goldblatt recorded the world of apartheid with a gentle and highly critical touch, knowing that when injustice is that large, it is manifest in the smallest of things.

If a winner must be announced on 4 March, however, it should be Joel Sternfeld, for his images that are full of wonder. The best were taken during an eight-year road trip through the US in the Seventies and Eighties: a photograph of a runaway circus elephant that collapsed in the middle of a rural American road, another of a firefighter picking pumpkins from a stall while a house fiercely burns in the background. They are beautiful fragments of the lyrically strange.

The work of the fourth contender, Britain's Peter Fraser, 51, is the odd one out. His large, sumptuously coloured images present the oddity of the myriad small objects and scenes that surround us, whether under a carpet or on the oil-slicked bonnet of a car. Though good photographs, they suffer more than the rest from the age of ubiquity, unsurprisingly, for they are the most contemporary images here.

Until 28 March. Information: 020 7831 1772.
