

The New York Times® Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY



August 6, 2010

Tracking the Rise of Color on Film

By SAMANTHA SCHWENDENER

“Black and white are the colors of photography,” Robert Frank declared. “Color photography is vulgar,” Walker Evans once wrote in an essay. And Ansel Adams weighed in on a William Eggleston photograph this way: “If you can’t make it good, make it red.”

Thus spoke the antagonists of color photography.

And why would they support it? Evans, Adams and Mr. Frank forged great careers in black and white photography from the 1930s to the 1950s, breaking through the barrier of institutional art history. When color came calling in the '60s and '70s, there was no reason for them to answer. But a younger generation did. These are the artists represented in “Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980” at the Princeton Museum, organized by Kevin Moore, an independent curator.

The rise of color in the '70s had virtually nothing to do with technological advances. The Lumière brothers introduced Autochrome, a color process, in 1907; Kodak’s 35-millimeter color film, Kodachrome, arrived in 1936. Color had been shunned for an entirely different reason: It was used by advertising and amateurs, a liability for a medium struggling to be accepted as art.

In the '70s, however, mediums themselves were becoming contested categories. Photojournalism and art photography were already fused in the work of figures like Henri Cartier-Bresson and Diane Arbus. Color became the new frontier.

Not all the 18 artists in “Starburst” were young when color arrived on the scene. Harry Callahan, a prominent midcentury photographer, adopted color in his 60s, as Mr. Moore writes in his catalog essay, essentially as a “retirement project.” Helen Levitt tried out her renowned street photography in color. Other artists in the show include Barbara Kasten, Jan Groover, Joel Meyerowitz, John Divola, Joel Sternfeld, Stephen Shore and Richard Misrach.

Despite a fantastic premise and a stellar lineup of artists, however, “Starburst” is often puzzling

and frustrating. One reason is that it has been shoehorned into the museum's "Inner Sanctum," a catacomb-like space perfect for telling old-school linear narratives — not so great for purportedly radical art histories.

The show also hews too closely to chronology, which means it opens with Robert Heinecken's 1970 video with television news footage of the Vietnam War; a black and white image of a nude female torso is attached to the screen. The whole thing feels glaringly anachronistic in an age when feminism was on the rise. Next up is a project of postcards with images of Amarillo, Tex., printed up by Mr. Shore in 1971, a series that pales compared to his later road trip photographs.

There are classic '70s color images, like Mr. Shore's ode to banal car culture, "[Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975](#)" and Mr. Sternfeld's "[Wet'n Wild Aquatic Theme Park, Orlando, Florida, September 1980](#)." John Divola and Richard Misrach offer spectral visions of nature marred by culture; Mitch Epstein effectively translates the social commentary of his teacher, Garry Winogrand, into color.

What's hard to shake, though, is the sense that this was a transitional decade; many of the projects here would be fully realized by other artists in subsequent years, who benefited from developments in color photography. Mr. Meyerowitz's photographs of isolated people on the beach at Coney Island uncannily foretell Rineke Dijkstra's more nuanced portraits of beachgoing teens. His theatrically lighted Cape Cod images suggest [Gregory Crewdson](#) — or, in kitschier moments, the self-aware stylings of Roe Ethridge. Mr. Sternfeld's agitated street portraits taken with a strobe were astutely packaged by Philip-Lorca diCorcia.

Even near-perfect pictures have their implicit successors. Ms. Kasten's and Ms. Groover's back-to-modernist aesthetics have become templates for artists like Eileen Quinlan and Sara VanDerBeek. Neal Slavin's fantastic mid-'70s post-conceptual photographs of organizations — the "[International Twins Association](#)" or the über-photogenic stable of Wilhelmina Models — predict much of the work on view at galleries like [Julie Saul](#) or [Yancey Richardson](#).

And everywhere, from Les Krims's Polaroids — Mr. Krims suffers eternal identification as [Cindy Sherman](#)'s professor — to Mr. Shore's postcards, the [Pictures Generation](#), which Mr. Moore calls the "younger half-sibling" of '70s color photography, looms.

A gallery of "legacy" photographs hints at these developments, but its meager selections don't offer a satisfying explanation of how color photography was absorbed into mainstream art and transformed via digital manipulation and photographic prints the size of easel paintings.

Moreover, Mr. Moore's assertion that the work of the photographers here was a search "toward the rediscovery of something ennobling and purposeful in modern American life" feels disingenuous and off base.

While sometimes disappointing, "Starburst" still documents an important shift, not just in aesthetics but in philosophy, similar to the late '50s and early '60s move from Abstract Expressionist angst to Pop irony. Mr. Eggleston, Mr. Sternfeld and Mr. Epstein identified the tedium and boredom at the center of American life, when the war was stale, the economy bad and ordinary people were drenched in the "electronic palette" (Callahan's term) of television. Color photography turned out to be the perfect apparatus for staring into that spiritual abyss.

"Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980," Princeton University Art Museum, through Sept. 26. Information: princetonartmuseum.org or (609) 258-3788.