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Starburst: Color Photography In America 1970-1980



Synopsis

It is hard to imagine today that the artistic value of color photography was once questioned and controversial, even as recently as the 1980s. William Eggleston's watershed exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1976, generated plenty of scorn and confusion, as spectators struggled to accept his seemingly ordinary-looking color images of Southern life as art. Early photographs by Stephen Shore, Helen Levitt, Joel Meyerowitz and others received similarly hostile or ambivalent reviews. Color photography also had opponents within photography, most notoriously in Henri Cartier-Bresson. But as color processes both diversified and grew more sophisticated, and further approaches to the medium developed, the floodgates were opened wide. Starburst examines the first great practitioners of artistic color photography in the United States: Eggleston, Shore, Levitt, Meyerowitz, plus Joel Sternfeld, William Christenberry, John Divola, Mitch Epstein, Jan Groover, Robert Heinecken, Barbara Kasten, Les Krim, Richard Misrach, John Pfahl, Leo Rubinfien, Neal Slavin, Eve Sonneman and many more. Grounded in reviews of sources from the 1970s, and with an abundance of images, this survey makes a thorough assessment of this paradigm shift in the history of art photography.

Book Information

Hardcover: 272 pages

Publisher: Hatje Cantz (April 30, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 3775724907

ISBN-13: 978-3775724906

Product Dimensions: 1.2 x 10.2 x 12.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 4.4 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,056,749 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #96 in Books > Arts &

Photography > Photography & Video > Equipment, Techniques & Reference > Color #328

in Books > Arts & Photography > Photography & Video > Criticism & Essays #1246 in Books >

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Customer Reviews

Sally Eaucclair, in her two books, the 1984: A New Color New Work: 18 Photographic Essays and the 1987: A American Independents: Eighteen Color Photographers covered many of the artists in 'Starburst' and a common element in the three books is that they all consider eighteen

photographers, eight are in all three. Kevin Moore's book is very comprehensive with 301 photos in color and he writes a detailed twenty-nine page historical essay outlining the changes from a slow color start in the early seventies to a full blown acceptance by the start of the eighties. William Eggleston could probably be considered the photographer to really get things going with his 1976 MoMA exhibition and as Moore says, few people, at the time, "got it". Wasn't color just for family snaps, magazine covers and the ads inside? Art photography was black and white, end of story. Looking at Eggleston's 1973 photo of the red ceiling, light bulb and wires perhaps it was understandable that folks didn't get it. After Moore's essay and another twelve pages with contributions by Leo Rubinfien and James Crump each of the eighteen gets a portfolio of their work, all of it interesting and nicely, rather typical of each person's output. There are, though a couple of oddities: Robert Heinecken gets twenty-four examples, including a very repetitive eighteen, of his anti-war Vietnam soldier overprinted on cosmetic and fashion ads and Stephen Shore has all ten of his fake postcards he had printed for the road trip across the country in 1971, surely the six pages for these could have been better used for more of his real work. Predictably with this photographic style overview there are going to be some artists that you'll appreciate more than others. I find Robert Heinecken ads, Les Krim's Polaroid work and Richard Misrach's Hawaii jungle none too fascinating but I was amazed at John Pfahl's altered landscapes, Harry Callahan's eleven stunning 1977 exterior shots of houses and Neal Slavin's lovely group portraits. The subject matter of these eighteen photographers is incredibly varied, though landscapes are perhaps a dominant theme. 'Starburst' covers its subject well but I thought that the book had a rather cold presentation. It is predictably over-designed: the text is in one column using a rather stark sans face (Avenir); with tiny page numbers (five point); footnotes (in six point) at the back of the book instead of being placed in the very generous margins on each relevant page. Worst of all though, the pages are the wrong format. Because it is upright the ninety-six landscape photos, the dominant format, all sit rather uneasily on the page with too much white space above and below them. If the book had been landscape all these photos could have been larger and it would have easily accommodated all the other photos as well. I think I still prefer Sally Eacuclaire's coverage of these photographers rather than the 'Starburst' version. Her two books, with 327 images, present each photograph in a more sympathetic landscape format. ***SEE SOME INSIDE PAGES by clicking 'customer images' under the cover.

I think this was a thorough and important review of a pivotal time in photography. The medium was stuck in the "black and white" ghetto until Shore, Eggleston and others forged this new path. There

are good essays and lots of fun, colorful, and provocative photos. It is fun to browse and adds to our knowledge of how photography got to today.

I concur 100% with Robin Benson's review. Nothing to add to it really, I can only second his every point. I just wish Sally Eauclore had done another book on the subject (i.e. I'd have much preferred her to have done this one)

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