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Joni Sternbach
The Surfing Landscape
Von Lintel Gallery
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by Jody Zellen



In much of her work, New York–based photographer Joni Sternbach experiments with historical photographic processes, specifically tintypes, direct positive images created on thin pieces of metal. Tintypes were popular in late-19th-century photography studios since the immediate results meant sitters could quickly see their likeness. To make her modern-day tintypes, Sternbach carries a large-format camera all over the world to photograph surfers at the shorelines of beaches. Included in the exhibition, the photographs in her “Surf Land Series” are representative of her travels to Australia, Uruguay, England, France, Hawaii and America’s east and west coasts. Sternbach’s subjects include the female body and themes of domesticity, gender, identity and feminism as well as abstract images of the ocean (seen in her series *Ocean Details*). That said, she is best known for later series depicting surfers and their surfboards—current-day surf culture. While these images feel historical and antique because of the processes Sternbach uses, in actuality they represent the present.

The exhibition features a selection of tintypes from 2009–22, as well as a nine-minute, two-channel projection, *Making Pictures* (2023), that documents her experiences in the field and the process of posing her subjects and creating the images. What is striking about this presentation is the contrast between the color film, the awkwardness of her subjects—who are required to stand still for very long exposures—and the highly detailed, small-scale, monochromatic photographs on the wall.

It is impossible not to smile and wonder what is going on when looking at *11.03.17 #3 The Mers (Kazzie + Max)* (2011), an image of a man and a woman posed as mermaids at the sea’s edge. Facing opposite directions, the long-haired figures’ lower bodies and legs have become mermaid tails. For *16.08.18 #3 Georgica Line up* (2016), she posed one female and five male surfers on the sand, with all but one holding their surfboards on their heads. *15.07.14 #2, 3 & 4, Dirt Lot* (2015) is a triptych, the panels of which depict bikini-wearing surfers on the sand by their giant surfboards in front of miscellaneous trucks and other surfers and surfboards. Most of

Sternbach's images show surfers with their boards on the beach rather than catching waves. The work is about the pose, encapsulating a moment of stillness, and presenting it as a monochrome on a piece of coated tin, rather than about the nuances of the colors of the sea or the motion of the waves.

What is remarkable about Sternbach's project is not only the range of subjects and locations she has visited but the relationship between the contemporary and the antique. While her subjects are immersed in modern-day surf culture, her work harkens back to the 19th century. In many ways, the process is a celebration as well as a public performance between subject and photographer who engage in a collaborative moment during the making of the image.

<https://artillerymag.com/joni-sternbach/>