

Colorado 1972
(The Divine Light & Strawberry Days Festivals)
Photographs by Arthur Nager



curated by Manuela De Leonardis

Acta International, Roma
May 19 - June 9, 2023

opening with the presence of the photographer
Friday, May 19 6:30 | 8:30 pm

Giovanna Pennacchi is pleased to present *Colorado 1972 (The Divine Light & Strawberry Days Festivals)*, the solo show of the American photographer **Arthur Nager**, curated by Manuela De Leonardis, who is exhibiting his work for the first time in Italy.

This story, or rather these stories take place in the land celebrated by John Denver, Linda Ronstadt and at least ten other country and rock musicians, including the band The Flying Burrito Brothers with their song *Colorado*. Montrose, summer 1972: in the hot dry desert of Colorado, about a 140 miles from Glenwood Springs (and almost double that from Aurora, a Denver suburb, in the same state crossed by the imperious Rocky Mountains) there takes place an event that will be remembered for a long time. In a shop in Aurora among publicity flyers placed in the window, there is one for the Divine Light Festival. In the photograph taken by Arthur Nager, just behind the clerk, a man with an upturned mustache, is juxtaposed with the imposing head of an embalmed deer, close to a clock hanging on the shop wall. The image reflects the contrast between the cowboy culture celebrated by the conservative residents of traditional Colorado towns that participate in the annual Strawberry Days event and the heirs to the counter culture “hippy movement” - heirs to the values of the beat generation in a psychedelic mix in the name of “peace and love” with its longing for a non conventional spirituality - soon to arrive to celebrate the arrival of Guru Maharaji. It was an opportune moment for Nager who in 1972 was working toward a graduate degree in photography at Visual Studies Workshop under the direction of Nathan Lyons. Having obtained a degree in History and Psychology from the University of Rochester, Nager’s documentary work combined a humanistic concern along with a touch of irony. As an attentive observer of society with an empathetic view, Nager was influenced by noted photographers including Diane Arbus, Gary

Winogrand and Lee Friedlander. All these elements gave imprint to his artistic vision. Working in black and white with a 35mm Nikon, Nager arrived by motorcycle and joined thousands of devotees attending the Divine Light Festival in the rugged Montrose desert. The thirteen year old Guru Maharaji (born in 1957 near Haridwar, India) was considered by his followers to be the “divine incarnation” on earth. His first visit to the US was designed to instruct, educate and motivate his followers to build a global following. On July 27, 1972 Nager began by photographing the arrival of the very young Guru with his Indian entourage amidst a procession of cars with the Guru’s portrait affixed to limousine windows. The subsequent images made over four days and nights document the fervor of his young followers and the unique confluence of western and eastern culture in the biblical landscape. The Guru Maharaji’s teachers hold sessions with groups of diverse people sitting on the ground who appear captivated: today the former Guru defines himself “ambassador of peace” under the name of Prem Rawat: author of several best sellers, among which are: *Hear Yourself* and *Peace is Possible*. Standing meditation sessions depict devotees of all ages hand in hand as they sing, and pray. As they cook and eat together, a dog sits nearby observing the scene. No one uses drugs, rather it is meditation and yoga that carries them to a different dimension. In the midst of the gathering a sheriff with a traditional western cowboy hat and star affixed to his chest warily supervises the crowd. The roar of arriving motorbikes is neutralized by the solitary sound of a saxophone played by a musician surrounded by cactus in the isolated desert landscape. Everything seems perfectly normal in this surreal atmosphere. Preparation is in full swing as young people join the gathering from all over the country. The camping area is full of tents, sleeping bags and covers. It’s a small world, where everyone is together. It’s a time capsule which contains many stories, beginning with the place itself: the desert. Arthur Nager takes hundreds of photographs, in an attempt to document the event while capturing the truly bizarre collision of East and West. In a place characterized by the uncontaminated beauty of nature and the landscape, the photographer lingers on the details, on the expendable materials - the tents, the plastic, and the structures which makes up the stage where one reads on a banner “Joy to the world. The Lord has come” – as well as on the faces of the people “illuminated” by the “Young Great Master”. The photographs reflect a view of the event which is truly curious and not judgmental. It is also characteristic of a second group of photographs made during the same time period documenting real life in more urban Colorado towns. In this selection Arthur Nager focuses on Glenwood Springs and the Strawberry Days Festival, a historic event dedicated to the annual harvest of strawberries during the third week of June along with images made in Denver and the surrounding suburbs. Nager’s Strawberry Days photographs provide a very different view of Colorado life in the 70’s. The photographs are reminiscent of the work of Robert Frank whom Nager credits as a major influence. Patriotic crowds line the streets zealously salute the flag. Young men share coffee in a diner surrounded by the display of vintage photographs of the veterans of foreign wars. A cowboy sits astride a cow in traffic as if it’s a commonplace occurrence while people wait on line for amusement park rides. Whether it’s a photograph of a diving competition or a young child on his father’s shoulder looking straight at the camera and winking his nose - Nager is clearly aware of the many acts of the “human comedy” and ready to seize the moment.

(Manuela De Leonardis)

Arthur Nager (Queens, NY, 1949 lives and works between New York City and Fairfield, CT). After taking his diploma in History/Photography at the University of Rochester, NY, he received a MFA in Photography from Visual Studies Workshop at the University of Buffalo, NY where he studied with Nathan Lyons and Syl Labrot. He taught at the Center of the Eye in Aspen, Colorado and the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass, Colorado from 1971–1973. In 1973 Nager became Director of the Photography Program at the University of Bridgeport with the responsibility of developing both a fine art and commercial curriculum. He became a tenured Associate Professor and supervised the expansion of the program and

the establishment of a photography lecture series that brought numerous photographers including Frederick Sommer, Arnold Newman, Ralph Gibson, Roman Vishniac, Lotte Jacobi and Mary Ellen Mark to the University. He received two Research Grants from the University in support of ongoing projects that led to solo exhibitions and was awarded a *National Endowment for the Humanities Grant* for study at Columbia University in a program supervised by the noted Art Historian, Theodore Reff. His research focused on the impact of photography on 19th century impressionism and the work of Edgar Degas.

Public collections: International Museum of Photography, George Eastman House; Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History; South Street Seaport Museum, NYC; Kennebunk Museum, Maine; Westport, Art Collection, CT.

Among his recent exhibitions: 2022 - *New Color Work*, Soleil Gallery, Westport, CT (solo); *Rites and Rituals*, PhotoPlace Gallery, VT; *Art of The Automobile*, Carriage Barn Art Center, CT; Photography Juried Exhibit, Rowayton Arts Center, CT; Annual Juried Photography Exhibit, Carriage Barn Art Center, CT; 2021 - *Weather*, PhotoPlace Gallery, Middlebury, VT; *Color*, PhotoPlace Gallery, Middlebury, VT; *Landscape And Architecture*, Black Box Gallery, Portland, OR; *Liquid Sky*, The Praxis Gallery, MN; *In The City*, Rowayton Arts Center, CT; *Vision: Shadow and Light*, Black Box Gallery, OR; *Letters, Numbers & Symbols*, The Praxis Gallery; 2020 - *New York Color*, Nysten Gallery, CT; 2018 - *Central Park Photographs*, Ikon Art Gallery, NYC (solo); *The Decisive Moment*, The Praxis Gallery, MN; *Empty Spaces: Abandoned Places*, The Praxis Gallery, MN; *Tree Talk*, The Griffin Museum of Photography, MA; *American Splendor*, Ikon Art Gallery, NYC; 2017 - *Times Square Photographs*, Fahey Bodell Gallery, NYC (solo); 2014 - *Street Life*, Norwalk Community College (solo).

Among his published books: *Wrestling Sunnyside Garden Arena, November 27, 1971* (2021), *Central Park Photographs* (2018), *Times Square Photographs* (2017).

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ACTA INTERNATIONAL

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