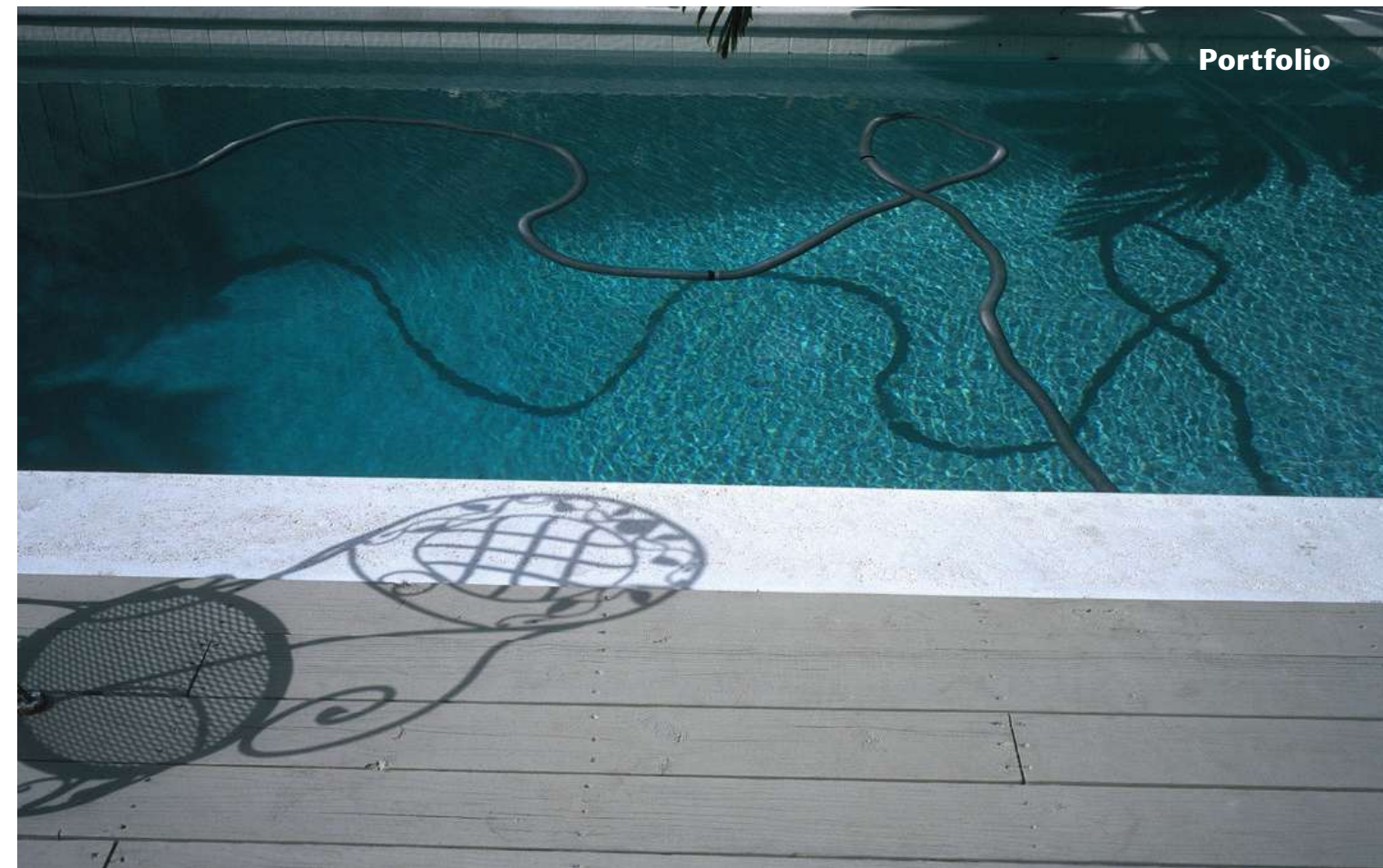


RIPPLE EFFECTS

As writer and curator Lou Stoppard takes a deep dive into the swimming pool for a new show that explores its role as a space for aesthetic, social and political reflection, we focus on its place in the American imagination



I spent my youth swimming laps. They were anxious, rabid dashes from the deep end to the shallow and back, trying to beat the clock or the person in the next lane, holding my breath for one more second as I reached, lightheaded, for the sweet release when my hand slapped tile. So regular were my competitions and training sessions that memories of my childhood bedroom always feature a faded red towel draped over my pillow by my mother, to soak up the water from my wet hair as I slept, my small limbs aching.

I was in my early teens when I first read John Cheever's 1964 classic short story *The Swimmer*, in which protagonist Neddy Merrill, in a feat of tenuous optimism, decides to swim home, across Westchester County, New York, traversing the backyard pools of his wealthy friends and neighbours. It was not the twist on Narcissus – a man fixated on, and yet losing himself in, water – that spoke to me, or indeed the vision of faded suburban glamour, of someone falling apart under the weight of their aspirations, but the subtler sense of an endless pursuit: a never-ending stretch of blue possibility. Once one has come to love the feeling of being a body in water, one is forever enraptured. One dreams of finding somewhere to dive in, to escape, addicted to the suspension of time, sound, life that comes with being underwater.

When I fly to some sunny place, I like to look down at the postage stamp squares of blue or the azure kidney beans that punctuate expanses of green. I imagine the characters surrounding these spaces as tiny Lego figures: the bored housewives, elegant and cruel in their sunshine finery, lazing on loungers with their cocktails, as in the popular images of Slim Aarons; or the teenager skateboarders, marking their territory by chipping the edges of empty backyard pools; or the solitary thinkers, finally at peace, as in Stephen Shore's famous image of his wife Ginger at the Causeway Inn, in Tampa, Florida.

Numerous artists and writers have experienced this obsession, returning to the pool again and again as a motif. David Hockney, Ed Ruscha, Larry Sultan, Joel Sternfeld, Anastasia Samoylova: all have helped define the pool as a trope within visual culture, creating works that have, in turn, been referenced and reworked by other artists: a cycle of homages and reverberations that mimics the repetitive aspects of the pool and its inhabitants, the lapping swimmers, turning back on themselves for more.

To these artists, the pool is an ambivalent space: glamorous, decrepit, picturesque, sinister. It is a space of beauty and of promise: glamour, sex, leisure, parties, wealth, calm and joy. As Joan Didion writes, in her 1977 essay *Holy Water*, which is something of a

defence of the pool, against accusations of water waste or excess, 'A pool is, for many of us in the West, a symbol not of affluence but of order, of control over the uncontrollable. A pool is water, made available and useful, and is, as such, infinitely soothing to the western eye.' And yet, the pool is also a place of threat, of anxiety: accidents, drownings, a body floating face down, green algae growing on the grout of sad drained boxes, a global water crisis mounting.

When I began researching for a new exhibition I am curating, which considers why so many artists – like those contained in this portfolio – focus on the pool as a location and subject, I came to realise that it is because it is much like an art gallery or museum, a space where behaviour is directed and managed, where one moves in ordered forms, takes predefined and set routes. And, to the side, someone sits and watches carefully in a place of authority – a lifeguard, an invigilator – slightly elevated, either physically or by suggestion, keeping watch for movements or touches that break rules, that threaten to disturb the peace. In both spaces, there is a fragile veneer of freedom: intoxicating and unfulfilled, even if briefly dazzling. ★
'For One Solid Time, Wet: The Swimming Pool in the Imagination', co-curated with Federica Chiocchetti, will be on show from 2 October-21 February at MBAL, mbal.ch, loustoppard.com

Above, *American Color* (Key West, FL), 2000, by Constantine Manos
Opposite, *Untitled*, 1982, from the series *Swimmers*, 1978-82, by Larry Sultan





Above, *Jay Adams*, West Los Angeles, 1976, by Glen E Friedman
 Opposite, *Ashley*, 2009, by Deanna Templeton

Wet n' Wild Aquatic Theme
Park, Orlando, Florida,
1980, by Joel Sternfeld

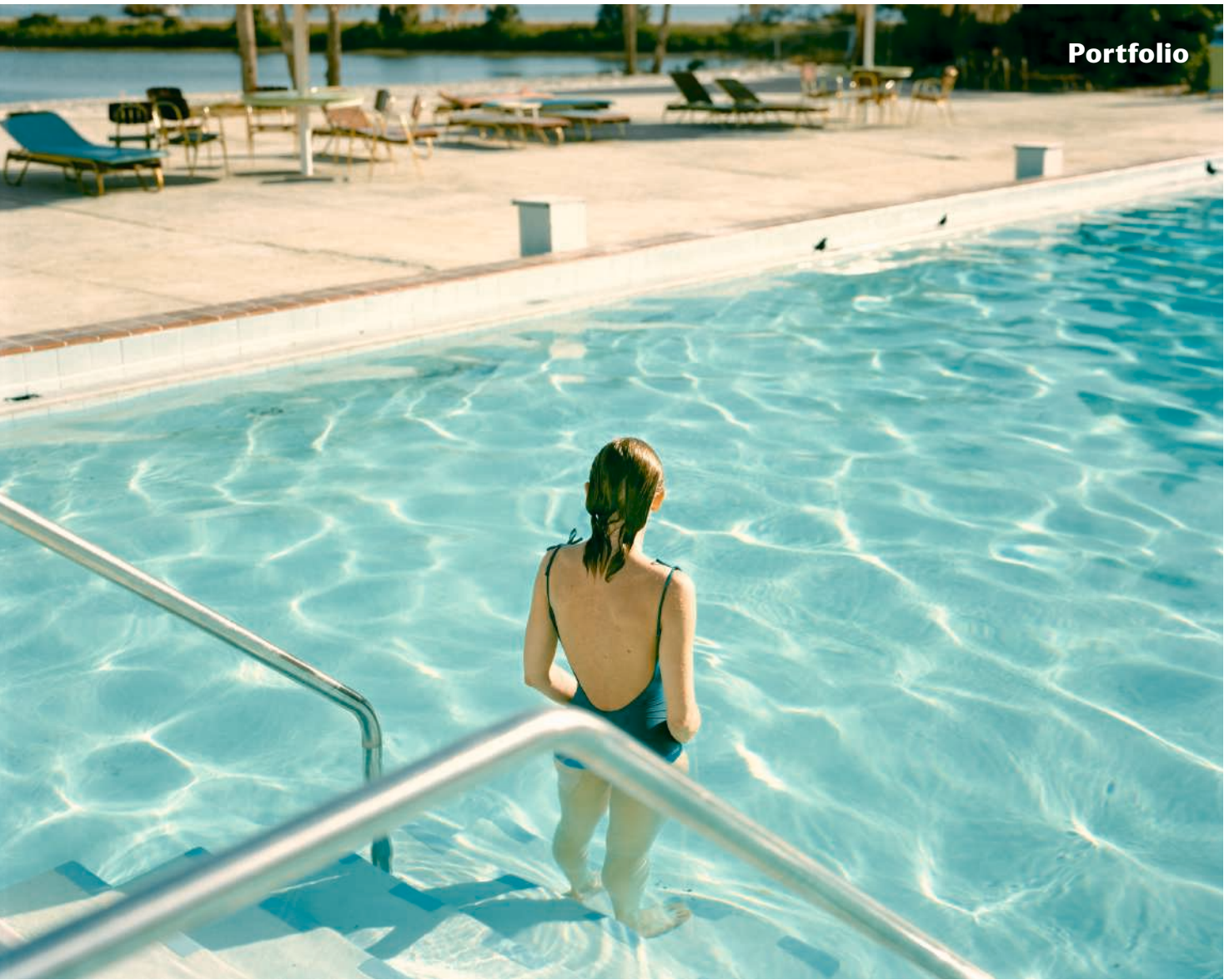




Above, *Relaxing at photographer Larry Fink's Farm, Pennsylvania*, 2010, by Peter van Agtmael
Opposite, *Amy, Phil and Brian*, 1980, by Tina Barney



*A pool cleaner operating
in a swimming pool
with reflections on the
water surface, 2017,
by Christian Werner*



Above, *Ginger Shore, Causeway Inn, Tampa, Florida, 1977*, by Stephen Shore
Opposite, *Miami Beach, Florida, 1978*, by Joel Meyerowitz

Photography credits: © Jeff Burton, courtesy of Casey Kaplan Gallery / © the estate of Larry Sultan, courtesy of Zander Galerie, Cologne / © Constantine Manos/Magnum Photos / © Anastasia Samoylova, courtesy of Galerie Caroline O'Brien / © Glen E Friedman from *DogTown: The Legend of the Z-Boys* / © Joel Sternfeld from *American Prospects* / © Peter van Agtmael/Magnum Photos / © Christian Werner/Connected Archives / © Joel Meyerowitz, courtesy of Howard Greenberg Gallery / © Stephen Shore, courtesy of 303 Gallery, New York