

A Future in Focus

Cincinnati's FotoFocus Biennial widens its scope as a top recurring photography event

BY STEVEN ROSEN · OCTOBER 1ST, 2014 · COVER STORY



Hill Sreet - Photo: Onorato Krebs

Just by adding the word "Biennial" to its official name for 2014, FotoFocus — which occurs this month in some 50 venues throughout Greater Cincinnati — is aiming to raise its importance and artistic significance.

After going without that word in 2012, FotoFocus is now making a statement: it's more than just a local celebration of any and all kinds of photography and lens-based visual art, great as that may be. It's now also ambitiously looking for national, even international, attention as a discerning event, a la the Venice Biennale, Whitney Biennial, Chicago Architecture Biennial and Brighton (England) Photo Biennial. The name alteration also states that this event intends to be here every two years — a vital part of Cincinnati's cultural calendar.

In 2012, its first year, FotoFocus primarily was an umbrella organization encouraging and supporting (sometimes financially) lots of arts venues that staged their own shows, many of which were free. There was contemporary art, historical photography, traditional photo-documentation/photojournalism and various hybrids.

This time FotoFocus is also curating its own high profile "featured exhibitions." To do so, it hired its own artistic director, Kevin Moore of New York, whose past accomplishments include curating the Cincinnati Art Museum's excellent 2010 show of color photography in the 1970s, *Starburst*.



"Untitled"
Photo: Dan Ransohoff

"We're forward-thinking and with Kevin as our artistic director and curator, we're creating a model that will go well into the future," says Mary Ellen Goeke, executive director. (FotoFocus was founded by Tom Schiff, a photographer as well as a collector who owns Lightborne Studios in Over-the-Rhine and is a former *CityBeat* owner.)

For his part, Moore has a sophisticated and worldly sense of photography's place in art and art's place in life. It is progressively contemporary, yes, but not confrontational. In conversation about photography, he uses the word "beautiful" frequently.

"I think art needs to be salvational in some sense — it can't just be a dour critique of the world," he says.

Moore has given FotoFocus 2014 its focus by concentrating on photography and film as a contemporary fine art form that sometimes responds to its own past. It can be a subject for artists as well as a medium.

Moore's vision will be emphasized through five featured exhibitions he has curated or organized, plus five days of special programming (Oct. 8-12) at Memorial Hall. That includes a centerpiece event on Oct. 11, when filmmaker/provocateur John Waters presents his *This Filthy World* performance, and an Oct. 10 keynote address by Jeff L. Rosenheim, photography curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, on "Shadow and Substance: Photography and the American Civil War."

The five Moore-originated featured exhibitions are Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs' *One-Eyed Thief* at Contemporary Arts Center, on display now through Feb. 15, 2015; *Screenings*, a selection of 12 art films showing continuously on two screens at Lightborne Oct. 8-12; *Stills*, which aims to show how a photograph is like a film still (and vice versa) by capturing and isolating a moment in time, now through Nov. 1 at downtown's Michael Lowe Gallery; David Benjamin Sherry's "psychedelic" take on Western photography, *Western Romance*, in a vacant 3CDC-owned Over-the-Rhine building at 1500 Elm St., now through Nov. 1; and *Vivian Maier: A Quiet Pursuit*, also now through Nov. 1 at a building at 1400 Elm St. that once housed a violin shop. (See information box on page 21 for details.)

Especially newsworthy is the Maier exhibit, which features 48 of her photographs. Many are self-portraits and surreptitious views of women on the street. In a sense, Maier is a new photographer, although she died in 2009 at age 83 in Chicago. Her work was virtually unknown during her lifetime and it wasn't until collector John Maloof acquired her personal property, including negatives, that her remarkable pursuit of street photography began to emerge. He and Charlie Siskel made a recent documentary about her, *Finding Vivian Maier*.

But there has been controversy, too — another collector is contesting Maloof's right to sell prints. (The FotoFocus show comes from Maloof.)

"Photography is always resurrecting people who didn't necessarily take pictures within an art discourse, but get absorbed into the history of photography at some point," Moore says. "It doesn't fit the typical model of art history where people like Picasso and Braque are painting and responding to each other's ideas. But photographers often work more in isolation, and then become visible whenever they do and then become influential."

There are two additional featured exhibitions not involving Moore's input. Cincinnati Art Museum's *Eyes on the Street* (opening Oct. 10) is organized by Brian Sholis, associate photography curator, and will be featured in the Oct. 8 issue of *CityBeat*. Taft Art Museum's *Paris Night & Day* (opening Friday) was organized by art2art Circulating Exhibitions and features vintage prints by such famous Paris-based photographers as Man Ray, Brassai, Jacques-Henri Lartigue, Eugene Atget and André Kertész.



"All the Words Float in Sequence"
Photo: David Benjamin Sherry

Beyond that, other venues will have FotoFocus-related exhibitions, ranging from Antioch College in Yellow Springs to La Poste Eatery in Clifton, with many of the area's most noteworthy commercial galleries and nonprofit spaces included.

(See sidebar on page 20 for some recommendations about these shows.)

Perhaps the most significant exhibition that Moore has curated for FotoFocus is Onorato and Krebs' *One-Eyed Thief* at CAC, which, as their first large U.S. museum show, is both an introduction to the Germany-based Swiss artists and a retrospective of their mysteriously appealing, sometimes bizarre work.

It primarily consists of images from their various series, but also contains such surprises as a film whose "soundtrack" turns out to be emanating from a contraption hidden in one of the Zaha Hadid-designed building's out-of-the-way pockets. There's also a display of the duo's sculptural cameras made from such parts as turtle shells and books.

Their project that gets pride of place at CAC is the photo book *The Great Unreal*, based on American road trips they took in the first decade of this millennium, partly as homage to *The Americans*, the influential project the Swiss-born photographer and filmmaker Robert Frank made in the 1950s. Their "Hill Street" from *The Great Unreal* is on *CityBeat*'s cover and it's the kind of sweepingly dramatic, lonely highway shot you see so often when photographers turn their lens to America's wide open spaces.

Except it's not. The "street" is made out of cardboard, placed on a metal stand in a barren area with a mountain range in the distance, and then photographed in perspective. The shot, as you see it, is a construction — something the duo does repeatedly and cleverly throughout *The Great Unreal*.

"Photography for them *is* a subject," Moore says. "It's a symbol for modernism. It's our way of interacting with the modern world, of understanding reality in the modern world."

As Krebs explains via email, "We made *The Great Unreal* because we were fascinated by America as a mystified place and its own global representation through its enormous cultural output. The construction and deconstruction of this myth turned out to be one of the prime interests in this project."

As a prime example of the kind of powerful effect FotoFocus will have on viewers, Moore singles out one of the 12 art films in *Screenings* — Rainer Ganahl's 55-minute *El Mundo: A Classical Music Concert*. In it, musicians perform in a slated-for-demolition Harlem discount store that was once an elegant theater.

"The opening moments of it bring tears to my eyes every time I see it," Moore says. "His piece is to stage the concert in this unheated space full of duct work and stacks of linens and clothes. The audience is around these racks of clothes, in their coats, watching these performers do this concert. And it's on a double screen, so you're often looking at performers on one screen and the other pans around to all the stuff. It's a very beautiful piece."

An unusual new component of FotoFocus is ArtHub, a temporary cubic structure in Washington Park designed by Cincinnati architect Jose Garcia. It will serve as a lounge and have a screen with a live feed of photos taken at FotoFocus events tagged with #FotoFocus2014 on Instagram. There will be 20 official "Fotogrammers." But, as Moore says, "Any kid with a phone and an Instagram account can do it."

So you, too, can be one of the 2014 FotoFocus Biennial's featured photographers. That should look impressive on a resume for anyone who wants a job in the arts.

More to See

With some 50 venues offering FotoFocus Biennial-related shows this month, you can travel all over Greater Cincinnati (and into Dayton/Springfield) to see photography exhibits.

But there is one that is coming to you. *Touching Strangers*, an ArtWorks-sponsored project for which New York photographer Richard Renaldi worked with local youth apprentices and an art educator to get people on the street to physically interact with strangers, will be featured on Metro bus shelters and one bus wrap. Having done similar projects elsewhere, and publishing a book of his work, Renaldi has developed a national following that sees in his efforts an affirmation of the inherent kindness of strangers amid all the terrible news about violence and economic hardships. As his photos begin to be seen here, they are sure to prompt community conversation.

To see images featured in *Touching Strangers: Cincinnati* and a map of bus shelter locations, visit artworkscincinnati.org/touching-strangers-cincinnati.

Now, here are 10 other recommended shows at "participating venues," as the FotoFocus website calls them. Watch for coverage about them and others in coming weeks at citybeat.com. For information about the venues and lectures related to individual shows, visit fotofocusbiennial.org.

The Sochi Project: An Atlas of War and Tourism in the Caucasus

DAAP Galleries (Reed Gallery), University of Cincinnati, now through Oct. 19

For five years leading up to the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia, Dutch photojournalist Rob Hornstra and writer Arnold van Bruggen visited the region to see how and if its people were preparing for the world stage.

Neither Here Nor There

Manifest Gallery, now through Oct. 24

This juried show explores location as a photographic subject and features 17 artists from eight states and three countries. They were selected from submissions by 181 artists.

Emily Hanako Momohara: Heirloom

Weston Art Gallery, now through Nov. 30

Momohara, who formerly headed Art Academy of Cincinnati's photography department, uses found, altered and fabricated images in photographs and videos to reference her Okinawan and Japanese lineage.

Jody Zellen: Time Jitters

Carl Solway Gallery, now through Dec. 20

In a wall-grid installation that addresses image saturation in contemporary society, Zellen traces photos from *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* and then digitally manipulates them. She also makes gouaches based on her photos.

Blue Roots and Uncommon Wealth: The Kentucky Photographs of Carey Gough and Guy Mendes

Iris BookCafe, Oct. 3-Jan. 25

Mendes has been photographing landscapes and portraits, often of authors and musicians, since the 1970s, while Gough's work focuses on Kentucky's musical heritage.

Cincinnati: Shadow and Light

Kennedy Heights Arts Center, Oct. 4-Nov. 15

Longtime (now retired) *Enquirer* photographer Michael Keating shares some 50 black-and-white and color images from his book *Shadow and Light*. They capture both the city's beauty and the difficult life that many of its citizens often bear.

Douglas Kirkland: A Life in Pictures

Miller Gallery, Oct. 4-Oct. 18

In a long career that has included working for *Look* and *Life* magazines in the 1960s and 1970s, Kirkland has photographed countless celebrities and been an on-set photographer for some 100 movies. (He will be at the Cincinnati Art Museum 6-8 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 2.)

Input/Output

DAAP Galleries (Sycamore Gallery), Downtown, Oct. 10-31

In this conceptual piece curated by DAAP Assistant Professor of Art Jordan Tate and DAAP Galleries Program Director Aaron Cowan, artists will reverse the typical process of creating a sculpture and then documenting it by photograph. Instead, the curators will make actual sculptures based on artist photographs.

Charlie Engman

Phyllis Weston Gallery, Oct. 16-Nov. 20

Recently named a "photographer to watch" by *British Journal of Photography* and *Photo District News*, Engman's primary reputation is as a fashion photographer, but he also does personal work such as studies of his mother, Kathleen McCain Engman.

Documenting Cincinnati's Neighborhoods

Skirball Museum and Jacob Rader Marcus Center at Hebrew Union College, Oct. 22-Dec. 21

Three Cincinnati photographers long overdue for shows — George Rosenthal, Dan Ransohoff and Ben Rosen — get them. Rosenthal's work from the 1950s documenting the West End's architecture before neighborhoods were destroyed for I-75 is a great, lost project now finally revived. ©

FOTOFOCUS FEATURED GALLERY EXHIBITIONS

All exhibitions are open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursday-Sunday now until Oct. 5; 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday Oct. 8-12; and 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursday-Sunday Oct. 16-Nov. 1.

Vivian Maier: A Quiet Pursuit: Free. 1400 Elm St., Over-the-Rhine.

David Benjamin Sherry: Western Romance: Free. 1500 Elm St., Over-the-Rhine.

Stills: Free. Michael Lowe Gallery, 905 Vine St., Downtown.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Screenings: 2-8 p.m. Oct. 8; 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Oct. 9-12. Free. Lightborne Studios, 212 14th St., Over-the-Rhine.

FotoGram @ ArHub: 5-8 p.m. Oct. 8; 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Oct. 9-12. Free. Washington Park, 1230 Elm St., Over-the-Rhine, plus satellite locations at Memorial Hall, Neons, Japp's and the 21c Museum Hotel.

Memorial Hall Programming: Various times Oct. 8-12. All activities require a \$25 Flash or \$75 Zoom passport ticket, which is also good for admission to John Waters' 8 p.m. Oct. 11 performance and to the art museums with FotoFocus shows. Memorial Hall, 1225 Elm St., Over-the-Rhine.

Find more info at fotofocusbiennial.org
