

FotoFocus' Sharp, Smart Programming at Memorial Hall



The centerpiece of the FotoFocus Biennial's programming was its five days of events at Memorial Hall — films, panel discussions, lectures and a Saturday-night performance of *This Filthy World* by John Waters.

As the Wednesday-Sunday events coincided with other key FotoFocus events — the excellent *Screenings* exhibit of short art films curated by the biennial's artistic director, Kevin Moore, was at Lightborne Studios during the same period — it was hard to attend everything.

But what I did attend was really rewarding — thought-provoking discussions about photography that centered on ideas and thus were of interest to everyone. In fact, that's a point I think needs to be made about FotoFocus as it seeks to grow its following: It isn't a narrow-focused event for photography professionals; it's for anyone who likes the visual arts. That should be everyone.

Here are some of the highlights of what I was able to attend:

A panel discussion on FotoFocus' *Vivian Maier: A Quiet Pursuit* exhibition, about the secretive Chicago street photographer whose work has only recently been discovered since her death. One guest

was Howard Greenberg, the New York fine-art photography dealer who represents John Maloof, the Chicago owner of much of Maier's archives of unpublished work. Regarding a current dispute with another party over who has the right to print and sell her work, Greenberg said he and Maloof were close to an agreement with the city of Chicago-appointed attorney for the Maier estate to let sales of prints resume while the dispute proceeds, since the income would benefit the estate.

A conversation with photographer **Elena Dorfman**, whose recent *Empire Falling* project documented old Rust Belt quarries but then manipulated the images into something slightly ethereal, offered stimulating ideas about how post-industrial ruins have become melancholy pilgrimage sites — accidental earthworks to rival "Spiral Jetty" or "Lightning Field."

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Friday night’s keynote lecture on “**Shadow and Substance: Photography and the Civil War,**” by Jeff L. Rosenheim of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was fantastically involving. He was an engaged and engaging speaker. For instance, he explained why there are so few actual photographs of battles — with both sides blasting away, sometimes imprecisely, at each other on battlefields, few photographers wanted to set up their cumbersome equipment along the dangerous sides to capture the action. But once a battle was over, it wasn’t so difficult to document the bodies on the ground.

A panel discussion on the growth of **Instagram**, tied to a FotoFocus-sponsored “**Fotogram**” project for which Instagram photos were fed into a screen at the temporary ArtHub structure in Washington Park, had food for thought. Jose Garcia, the ArtHub’s architect, somewhat jokingly characterized Instagram selfies as “a cry for help.” And Nion McEvoy, chairman and CEO of San Francisco’s Chronicle Books, observed that new technology — with its emphasis on swiftly delivered virtual transmissions rather than carefully crafted physical objects — has been met with a healthy, growing counter-movement encompassing vinyl records, locavore-oriented slow foods, letterpress printing and more. And, he said, Chronicle Books’ main business is still print.

John Waters drew a big crowd to Memorial Hall — FotoFocus had sold 200 more passes than seats (a pass was good for all Memorial Hall events, not just Waters) and was worried.

Fortunately, not every passholder came to his Saturday night show — there were some empty seats on the sides. His show lived up to its *This Filthy World* title, as he joked about seemingly every sex act known to the human race (and maybe some known only to aliens).

But he also made humorous references to artists — he’s an art connoisseur — and some of his political observations had the kind of shocking in-your-face bite reminiscent of Lenny Bruce. For instance, on abortion, he said (and I paraphrase a little, since I didn’t take notes), “If you’re not going to love your child, don’t have him. I don’t want him to grow up to kill me.”

Afterwards, he signed objects for fans and then joined a small group of FotoFocus organizers, supporters and guests for a late dinner on the Memorial Hall stage. As fate would have it, he sat next to me. Charming man.