

WASH PARK ART BLOG

STRANIERO: MAURICE MATTEI'S PICTURES OF ITALY – A CONSIDERATION OF THE FOTOFOCUS2016 THEME, "PHOTOGRAPHY: THE UNDOCUMENT," AND TIME AND BEING

"*Straniero*" is Italian for "foreigner" or "stranger." In addition to classifying someone who's different and not a part of the immediate scene, the word connotes motion, passing through, someone who's there then gone or wasn't there then is. And that, metaphorically, describes photography; the process of capturing a noteworthy moment before it passes in order to have it in the future. The [FotoFocus2016 Biennial](#) theme, "The Undocument," underscores not the documentary authority of photographs, but the fluidity in the viewer's interpretation. The photograph is a static objective image, yet each viewer sees something unique in it.

Maurice shot the exhibited series between 1977 and 2007. More recently, even up until the exhibit opened on September 30th, he curated the black and white film frames into a series of 83 gelatin silver prints. During an [interview](#), Maurice said, "An important thing a photographer should do is wait to edit...You need time to assess what you've taken." What he would've included at the time he took the pictures, what he did include when the series was first curated 6 years ago ([for Wm. Messer and Iris Book Café](#)), and what he included in the current exhibit are different iterations of the effect and importance of time and being. How the images relate to Maurice (his history in the place, his life experience, his plans) varies at different points in time. Also, the artistic evaluation of technique and product varies at different points in time, as the photographer develops his practice and understanding of the medium.

This effect of time is at the crux of what is both personal and universal in the exhibit. Maurice describes the exhibit as documenting the vanishing Italian village life he knew as a child before his family immigrated to the US and again as an adult during his 30-year period of picture taking. The past has become strange and foreign, yet was there in fact, and is here in the photographs, and will be gone again. Just as Maurice's curation changes with time, so does the viewer's perspective. We weren't there when the picture was taken, thus we interpret the documented scene from where we are now; and even if we were there or experienced something similar in time and place, our reminiscence is seen through the lens of our current wisdom. In this way, photographs are both a document of one moment and a culmination of many.

The idiom, "take a photo," is appropo to the consideration of time. The photographer takes a fragment of time and preserves it, yet it cannot exist without the unknown moments that came before and after. Although the immediate intention of a photographer is to keep that moment, the curator and viewer are perhaps more concerned with the surrounding time; how did the scene come about, how did it resolve? The viewer's filling-in of these blanks with their "being" determines the authenticity or value of the actual image. Images that provoke a recognition of or relationship to a particular experience of time have a universal appeal that transcends the actual moment taken and its original significance to the photographer.

The nexus between familiar/foreign, document/undocument is directly proportional and symbiotic: the more you understand what is foreign, the more familiar it becomes; the more you document, the more context goes undocumented; and, you can't have one without the other. The common element and determinant of these relationships is time. Because we each experience time differently (we do different things and different things happen to us,) we are never the same person twice and we are never alike another. We are undocumentable time-travellers. We are *Stranieri*.

STRANIERO is on exhibit until November 13th. Gallery hours: Thu 11-3/5-8; Fri 5-8; Sat 2-5; Sun 2-4.

(Update 10/29: STRANIERO is held over until November 27th)