

## The 'undocument'

### FotoFocus Biennial drives the power of image through Dayton

By Ashley Jonas

**Photo:** 'Selfie' by Kayleigh Harris

In 1990, the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati presented Robert Mapplethorpe's retrospective *The Perfect Moment*. Mapplethorpe was a photographer, so he made images. He made images of the body, flowers, homoeroticism, interracial figure studies, celebrity portraits, and self-portraits. Offense was taken and controversy sparked, leading to the indictment of the CAC on obscenity charges. This was the first time a museum had been criminally charged, which led to national debate about censorship and public funding of the arts. The CAC was acquitted and an enormous number of people saw *The Perfect Moment*. Last year was the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *The Perfect Moment*, and so the CAC and FotoFocus revisited not only the historic exhibition and trial, but also Mapplethorpe's life, art, and career through the works of other artists who knew or were inspired by him. The exhibition *The Perfect Moment: 25 Years Later* was funny, magical, sad, lovely, and all other things human. It was accompanied by a symposium that made meaningful connections between censorship, art history, curation, and, of course, Mapplethorpe's work. *The Perfect Moment: 25 Years Later* was a pretty big deal, thanks to FotoFocus.

FotoFocus is a nonprofit arts organization based in Cincinnati, whose mission is to bring artistically, intellectually, and academically rigorous photography and lens-based works and practices to the greater Cincinnati region. Their mission culminates in a number of different ways, including the FotoFocus Biennial. The biennial, launched in 2012, aims to bring together communities to explore and celebrate photography in October every other year. The biennial can be broken down into three essential parts: the FotoFocus Curated Exhibitions (eight exhibitions curated by FotoFocus Artistic Director and Curator Kevin Moore), the Biennial Program (four days of events and programs pertaining to the biennial and its theme), and Participating Venues (exhibitions that are curated independently of FotoFocus, but support the theme and mission of the Biennial). These parts come together as a whole and culminate in over 60 exhibitions and more than 100 events taking place in Cincinnati and the surrounding region.

The theme of this year's Biennial is "Photography, the Undocument." "Photography has been fairly narrowly defined as something that is documentary in basis," Moore says. His curatorial theme for this year's biennial allows for the expansion of that definition. The theme brings to question the identity of photography as objectively realistic or purely documentary. While a photograph can and does bring to us an image that documents time and place, it can also bend and distort those things. A photograph can bring to light that which lives under the surface, perhaps a fantasy or a perspective we

have been ignorant of. Moore has put together eight exhibitions in Cincinnati that carry these questions and function as the cornerstone to the biennial.

These exhibitions include Roe Ethridge's first solo museum exhibit at the CAC and South African artist and visual activist Zanele Muholi at the National Underground Freedom Railroad Center.

The Biennial Program, which is the series of events that supports the exhibitions, runs Oct. 6-9, at various venues in Cincinnati and promises to be rich and robust. Those four days will include keynote lectures, panel discussions, exhibition tours, screenings, and performances. Curator Moore notes that this programming is meant to be inclusive and encourage dialogue about conceptual undercurrents in contemporary art, as well as the nuts and bolts of things, like "How did you carry that huge camera up a mountain?"

Six of FotoFocus' Participating Venues are in the Dayton Area, one of which is *Ravaged Sublime: Landscape Photography in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* at the Dayton Art Institute. The exhibition features the gorgeous, striking, and monumental works of Edward Burtynsky and Richard Mosse. Curator Katherine Ryckman Siegwarth speaks of the work: "Both of these photographers are really focusing on scenes that are outside of our everyday views. It is crucial that we consider the content because we are implicated in a lot of these images, whether it be mass consumption or a forgotten conflict that has taken almost six million people's lives." The work has undertones that beg us to ask questions about our relationship with the world.

Let us consider what an image can do...

Robert Mapplethorpe's images brought a museum to criminal court. We look at images of our families and ancestors in order to find familiarity, comfort, and a sense of belonging. Viral images of the Syrian War and refugee crisis has thrown us into shock and forced us to ask how we might be able to help people that are so far away. An image has power. We are lucky to have this biennial in our backyard.

*For more information about FotoFocus 2016 Biennial Photography: the Undocument or to buy a FotoFocus Passport, please visit [FotoFocusBiennial.org](http://FotoFocusBiennial.org).*

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