

The 2016 FotoFocus Biennial offers works of long-lasting value

Forty-nine venues here and in the surrounding region will host lens-based art exhibitions throughout October revolving around the theme "the undocument."

STEVEN ROSEN — SEP 28, 2016 12 PM



"Double Jess Gold" by Roe Ethridge

Tom Schiff, co-founder of October's FotoFocus Biennial as well as a longtime photo collector and photographer, was amazed to recently read that 1.8 billion — yes, billion — photographs are uploaded and shared on social media every day.

Considering that he and James Crump (then a Cincinnati Art Museum curator) started FotoFocus in 2012 so that people here could see more photography, it would seem the goal has been met. The city, like the entire world, is awash in such visual imagery every second of the day.

"Of course, a lot of those are of dogs and cats and people's lunch, but there are a lot of photographers making a lot of photographs today," Schiff says. "The proliferation of photography is something people haven't been able to fully grasp yet."

So one might think nobody needs the gatekeepers of photography any longer, especially the curated exhibitions at museums and galleries that have become the hallmark of FotoFocus. After all, life *is* a photo exhibition now — the exhibitions are on your smartphone.

But maybe the opposite is true. Maybe people need curation more than ever.

"It is pretty easy to make a photograph these days," Schiff says. "That makes it difficult to have a photograph that's truly unique and stands out from all the others — one that's made by a photographer who is serious, with a philosophy and methodology that is important."

As for all those digital images not saved with an eye toward preservation? "A lot of them will just fade away," Schiff says.

Really, the motto for this FotoFocus should be, to quote Buddy Holly, "Not Fade Away." When the photographic image has become so much digital clutter, how do we know what deserves to stand out and be remembered?

During October — and in some cases afterward, too — 49 venues here and in the surrounding region will host lens-based art exhibitions that organizers believe offer work of long-lasting value. These range from the large and venerable institutions, like the Cincinnati, Dayton and Columbus art museums and the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, to places like Over-the-Rhine's Robin Imaging Services and the West End's Betts House that you might not even be familiar with.

Even the very streets of downtown are one big venue. In J. Miles Wolf's *Obscure Cincinnati*, an October-long interactive project sponsored by Downtown Cincinnati Inc., he is displaying on vacant storefront windows large photographic prints of unfamiliar area places and encouraging viewers to guess the locale.

This year's FotoFocus has a theme, "the undocument," so that participants have something to respond to in shaping their exhibitions. However, FotoFocus artistic director Kevin Moore cautions that the theme wasn't meant to be so strong as to stifle or limit anyone.

"I was just meaning for it to get people to question the documentary character of photography," Moore says.

And actually, exhibition themes have as broad a range as the venues — from something as gravely confrontational as Cincinnati Skirball Museum's *12 Nazi Concentration Camps: Photographs by James Friedman* (Oct. 13-Jan. 29, 2017) to something as full of good vibrations as *Surface by Søren Solkær*, a colorful portrait of contemporary street artists and their work at Covington's BLDG through Nov. 11.



"D*Face (England), London" by Søren Solkær at BLDG

Honoring still-active Cincinnati photographers is an important aspect of FotoFocus. Some examples this year include longtime photojournalist Melvin Grier's collection of work chronicling the Jazz world, *Homage to a Sound*, at the Kennedy Heights Arts Center (Oct. 1-Nov. 12), and photographer/video producer Ann Segal's filmed conversation with photographers Anita Douthat and Cal Kowal at the Xavier University Art Gallery at the A.B. Cohen Center (Sept. 30-Oct. 28).

Exhibitions can feature cutting-edge Contemporary work that is intellectualized and deeply conceptual. At Wave Pool, where the show about our surveillance society, *The Peeled Eye*, already has opened, one of the artists — Paolo Cirio — captures a Google Street View image of a person and then creates a “Street Ghost” life-size vinyl print of it, which he attaches to the very spot where the original image was taken. There will be an example in the gallery.

Or, shows can be straightforwardly historical, like the Taft Museum of Art’s *Picturing the West: Masterworks of 19th-Century Landscape Photography* (Oct. 22-Jan. 15). Shows can also be a mix of the historical and the conceptual, such as the eagerly awaited *Evidence* at the Art Academy of Cincinnati (Sept. 30-Nov. 4). This features reproductions of the images used in a landmark 1977 San Francisco exhibition, also called *Evidence*, in which Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan displayed found photographs removed of all context.

The marquee FotoFocus shows for the most part are the ones in the major museums — besides the Taft, these include the Cincinnati Art Museum’s *Kentucky Renaissance: The Lexington Camera Club and Its Community, 1954-1974* (Oct. 8-Jan. 1), the Columbus Museum of Art’s *The Sun Placed in the Abyss* (Oct. 7-Jan. 8) and the Dayton Art Institute’s *Ravaged Sublime: Landscape Photography in the 21st Century* (Oct. 15-Jan. 8).

Moore, FotoFocus’ New York-based artistic director, curated several of the highest-profile exhibitions himself. Arguably, FotoFocus’ single most important exhibition is the Moore-curated *Roe Ethridge: Nearest Neighbor*, which will be at the Contemporary Arts Center (Oct. 7-March 12). This is the first solo museum show for the New York-based Ethridge, who has been called a “Post-Modernist” for the unsettling and challenging way he uses his art photography to repurpose and comment upon his commercial work.



"Nancy" from the Contemporary Arts Center's "Roe Ethridge: Nearest Neighbor"

"I think he is the most important photographer of his generation," Moore says. "He's been difficult for people to understand, because his work looks very familiar and kind of ordinary in a commercial way. It is glossy, but there are a lot of ideas living beneath the surface."

"He makes pictures often in a commercial setting, often as a job for hire with a model like Pamela Anderson, for instance," Moore continues. "But then he reorganizes them and creates these narratives that are highly personal. He's very restless and constantly recombining his imagery."

The show, Moore says, will occupy multiple galleries at the CAC and use each to reveal how Ethridge's work can be thematic and tell a story. (For those who want more, the artist will be at the CAC himself at 7 p.m. Oct. 7 to participate in a panel discussion about his work.)

"She's very sensitive to a person's physiognomy — the way the work they do, the landscape they live in and the food they eat sculpts them," Moore says. "She treats her subjects in a monumental way; some pictures are quite large. She has a vision of Africans as being individuals who are stylish and dignified. They just put together off-hand outfits and go to work in the field in a proud and dignified way."



"Chipo" from "Jackie Nickerson: August" at the Freedom Center

Moore also believes his show *After Industry*, at the Weston Art Gallery now through Nov. 27, is a major one. Drawn from the collection of Gregory Gooding, it consists of photographs that investigate the relationship between our built environment and the natural landscape.

But Moore's *Roe Ethridge* show will have competition for attention from the exhibition that Brian Sholis, the Cincinnati Art Museum's departing photography curator, is organizing. The museum is hoping *Kentucky Renaissance: The Lexington Camera Club and Its Community, 1954-1974* will be groundbreaking and earn national attention. Sholis aims to show how Lexington became an influential Modernist haven because of the way innovative, explorative photographers like Ralph Meatyard, Van Deren Coke and Guy Mendes mingled with such writers as Thomas Merton, Wendell Berry and Guy Davenport.

Sholis sees the Camera Club as an important Middle American link to the artists of the 1950s, like photographer Robert Frank and the Beats, who rebelled against the conformist temper of the times.

"In the mid-1950s, the biggest photography project in the world was *The Family of Man* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art," he says. "It was a 'We Are the World' document-of-humanity kind of thing — a vision of the world countering the divisiveness of Cold War rhetoric.

"But many thought that was a narrow use of photography — it could be so much more," Sholis continues. "These guys believed that photography was a tool of creative expression, just like painting or other art mediums."

FotoFocus' Moore is keeping very busy by curating seven additional exhibitions besides *Roe Ethridge*. Zanele Muholi: *Personae* (Oct. 1-Jan. 23) at the Freedom Center is an introduction to an important South African photographer, whose *Faces and Phases* series offers dynamic portraits of confident South African lesbians. (Muholi will be at the Freedom Center for a reception at 5:30 p.m. Oct. 8.)

"In South Africa, it's dangerous to be lesbian or transgender," Moore says. "Muholi was an activist first and started being a photographer. These are very straightforward black-and-white photographs, and (the subjects) are very active looking. A lot of these women are very strong with non-traditional gender looks. They are very brave in declaring their sexuality and difference — that puts them in danger. This is a very heroic series, and it's very easy for people to comprehend what it's about."

Another Moore-curated show at the Freedom Center is also Africa-related: *Jackie Nickerson: August* (Oct. 1-Jan. 23). This consists of two series of color photographs portraying the lives of farm workers. A photographer who was born in Boston and raised in Great Britain, Nickerson has done projects in Ireland and Africa, and also collaborated with Kanye West. She was a successful fashion photographer who decided she needed a change and spent several years on a farm in Zimbabwe. That prompted her work here.

For instance, in the 1920s the German photographer Albert Renger-Patzsch saw beauty and optimistic Modernism in the new factories; in his photographs, he compared them favorably with trees. But by the 1970s, photographer Robert Adams found the new housing developments of the American West horrifying.

Moore's other curated exhibitions are *New Slideshow*, a three-day (Oct. 6-9) exhibition at the CAC featuring artists including Nan Goldin, who base film narratives on still photographs; *Robin Rhode: Three Films* at the Freedom Center (Oct. 1-Jan. 23); *Marlo Pascual: Three Works* at the Weston Art Gallery (through Jan. 23); and *Shifting Coordinates*, which he and 21c Museum Hotel Curator Alice Gray Stites organized from its own collection (through Jan. 2).

In addition to the exhibitions, there is the special FotoFocus Biennial 2016 Program occurring Oct. 6-9 at various sites downtown. It gets underway at 6:30 p.m. on Oct. 6 when with guest speaker Roxana Marcoci, senior photography curator at the Museum of Modern Art, will speak on "The Re-Presentation of Louise Lawler's Work" at the Jarson-Kaplan Theater in the Aronoff Center for the Arts. (Lawler is a contemporary photographer whom Marcoci is considering for an upcoming exhibition in New York.)

Besides the opportunity to see and learn about the history and current state of photography, FotoFocus executive director Mary Ellen Goeke believes something else will come out of Biennial 2016.

"I'm very proud, after this third iteration of FotoFocus, that there's this spirit of collaboration in the city among all the institutions we work with," she says. "Not just the three art museums, but even with new spaces. FotoFocus sees itself as a modest nonprofit that has become an agent in bringing about this collaboration through its interest in photography."

Passports for admission to all fee-charging venues during **FOTOFOCUS BIENNIEL** are \$25. More info: fotofocusbiennial.org.
