



Focusing on FotoFocus

Art writer Maria Seda-Reeder reviews four FotoFocus shows she visited during the first full week of the 2016 lens-based art biennial.

MARIA SEDA-REEDER – OCT 12, 2016 3 PM



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

(Editor's note – As part of CityBeat's coverage of the many exhibitions and activities that comprise the October-long FotoFocus Biennial, art writers Maria Seda-Reeder and Kathy Schwartz will be contributing online stories about their experiences attending events. Seda-Reeder will be writing during the first two weeks of October; Schwartz the last two.)

The ultimate result of this can range from quite interesting (Pixote from Miami, for example, in a tumbledown shell of a building and squatting on lookout, peering through the neck of a white T-shirt that covers most of his face) to somewhat of a regurgitation, (Solkær's miniaturist portrait of London-based Slinkachu, whose work already typically is photographic documentation of his own tiny insect-sized "street installations").

The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is hosting the photographic work of South African artist Zanele Muholi and U.S.-born Jackie Nickerson in two separate shows, along with a selection of three short films from Berlin-based South African multimedia artist Robin Rhode.

Muholi, in her overall exhibition *Personae*, has two powerful bodies of work on view: Her series of portraits of black queer and trans persons called *Faces and Phases* and her *Somnyama Ngonyama*, a series of self-portraits in which she heightens the contrast in each photograph, emphasizing "as high a glossy darkness to her skin as the silver gelatin technology will permit," in order to – according to the materials handed out at Muholi's artist lecture on Oct. 9 – allow her to participate in a kind of "performative blackness."

Other FotoFocus events around town likewise demonstrate the ways in which contemporary photographers are engaging with issues of race and visibility as those topics currently challenge American systems of inequality.

On the afternoon of Oct. 9, **21c Museum Hotel** hosted (among several other lectures) a thoughtful conversation regarding "American Civil Rights Then and Now" between Julian Cox, chief curator at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and Atlanta-based photographer Sheila Pree Bright, who in recent years has documented public responses to police shootings in Ferguson, Mo., Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Their chat seemed brief, and I wished that there was some kind of corresponding exhibition of Bright's work curated by Cox, but I wouldn't be surprised to see just such a thing forthcoming – either at the 2018 FotoFocus Biennial or perhaps at a future 21c show.

The group exhibition of work currently on view at 21c, *Shifting Coordinates*, co-curated by FotoFocus Artistic Director and Curator Kevin Moore and 21c Chief Curator Alice Gray Stites, investigates globalism as a political and economic force with the (ostensible) capacity to shrink the world's geography and minimize differences.

Works like the oversized "Portrait of Qusuquzah" by Mickalene Thomas and Spanish artist Germán Gómez's large-scale mixed media photo collage use the figure as a site of politicized representation (much like Muholi's portraits, and perhaps even Solkær's work, do).

For her part, Thomas celebrates black female identity and plays upon art history tropes as much as contemporary visual culture, while Gómez layers together ambiguous representations of maleness based on his portraits of anonymous subjects.

Such work seems apt for a time when the collective conscious has finally been forced to acknowledge the vulnerabilities of non-white, heteronormative bodies in the public sphere.

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