



## Features

### Sixty exhibitions from CAC to CAM at FotoFocus biennial

SARAH ROSE SHARP | TUESDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2016



Artist Roe Ethridge (left), with CAC Director Raphaela Platow (center) and FotoFocus Artistic Director Kevin Moore, at the opening of Roe Ethridge: Nearest Neighbor.



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A daunting 60 [FotoFocus](#) exhibitions and over 100 events tempted Cincinnati's arts crowd at the photography and lens-based 2016 art biennial, "The Undocument," which opened Oct. 1 and runs through January. There's much to savor. Queen City flaneurs might stroll an exhibition that brings to light the surrealism of daily life, regional history or international issues — or try streetcar hopping on a \$2 day [Connector](#) pass.

Local photographer [J. Miles Wolf](#) has created a small route of window installations, beginning at the [Contemporary Arts Center](#) that highlights some of Cincinnati's treasure of architectural details, hidden in plain sight. The tour encourages viewers to guess at the location of these images, and if you're stumped, each image is accompanied by a QR code that will offer a series of clues, connected to a website created by Miles called [Obscure Cincinnati](#). It has a host of interesting architectural information from a photographer who has spent many years documenting the city in intimate detail.

At the [National Underground Railroad Freedom Center](#), at the Banks streetcar stop, the work of Zanele Muholi, a South African photographer, creates a photographic record of LGBTI individuals in South Africa in "Personae."

For Muholi, who identifies as a lesbian, photography is not art so much as "visual activism," and creating a record of marginalized individuals is a starkly political act in a country where, despite the legality of same-sex marriage, some experience hate crimes, including "corrective rape" and fatal beatings.

Lining the walls of the major exhibition space are grids of dozens of individuals, some of whom were on hand opening weekend.

"I encourage them to document their lives on a daily basis because it's the right thing to do," Muholi said. "We can't always depend on the mainstream media to define us." Muholi can reel off the names and stories of everyone presented in her work.

## Challenging the notion of photography as a literal medium

In contrast, at the CAC the work of white male American photographer Roe Ethridge, “Nearest Neighbor” creates a great deal of emotional distance.

Ethridge works both professionally and artistically from a commercial photography background, and his images are highly stylized, stagey and unsentimental — even those that feature his wife and children as subjects. Ethridge pushes forward a subtle surreal sense, translating candid life moments into odd stock photography, adding weird, dislocating details to studio shots (such as a woman waving through a car door floating in space, rather than attached to an actual car), and presenting these works in loose association with each other.

Walking around the CAC, with wide-open spaces feeding into smaller, more intimate galleries, one has the sense of meandering through Ethridge’s mind — things connect in a way that is intuitive rather than explicit.

“The Undocument” challenges the notion of photography as a documental art form, a completely literal medium. And the polarity of the theme plays out dramatically in both of these core exhibits.

Others present photographs taken in a relatively straightforward way, but with the mission of documenting lost or underrepresented elements of culture or society, creating a record of people, locations or objects that were previously undocumented.

The biennial is organized by the FotoFocus team, led by executive director Mary Ellen Goeke; the theme is the invention of second-time returning artistic director and curator [Kevin Moore](#), who personally oversaw the eight core installations of the festival, with assistance from Carissa Barnard, deputy director of exhibitions.

For a wider local view, photo enthusiasts might plan a visit to the [Cincinnati Art Museum](#), where Brian Sholis, curator of photography, has assembled "[Kentucky Renaissance: The Lexington Camera Club and Its Community, 1954-1974](#)." This austere collection of images is unconventional, speaking to the emotional reality more than the direct documentation of rural Kentuckian existence.

As a kind of counterpoint to these mostly narrow-angle images of people and places, "After Industry" at the [Alice F. and Harris K. Weston Art Gallery](#) in the Aronoff Center presents expansive images of post-industrial landscapes, drawn from the extensive collection of collector and Ohio native Gregory Gooding. Perhaps one of the most traditionally documental shows within this year's biennial, curator Moore nonetheless highlights a sense of intent and perspective that varies from photographer to photographer.

The festival's keynote was delivered on the evening of Oct. 6 by [Roxana Marcoci](#), senior curator of MoMA's department of photography. Marcoci's presentation largely focused on her research for "Why Pictures Now," the first New York museum survey of conceptual photographer [Louise Lawler](#), which will open at MoMA in the spring. But her observations on Lawler's perspective of the role of the viewer are extremely relevant in the context of a citywide photo festival.

According to Marcoci, Lawler is concerned with "the life of the artwork within the art system," including and especially the idea that the artist is not the sole author of the artwork's meaning. In Lawler's view, each artwork remains without fixed meaning and open to interpretation at the point where it encounters a viewer — which obviously changes over time, due to physical or political context, or even just the mood and individual perspective of the viewer.

"A collaboration is what comes before you and what comes after you," Lawler said. Which means, for this month, the whole city of Cincinnati has an opportunity to collaborate with dozens of photographers, finishing the work of artists and the FotoFocus team by collaborating in the viewing of these images.

FotoFocus 2016 runs citywide in Cincinnati (and points beyond) throughout the month of October, with many of the core exhibitions running through the new year. Click [here](#) for complete festival information.