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A Look at Cincinnati's FotoFocus Biennial

By Natalie Rinn

Cincinnati might not be the first city that comes to mind as a defender of challenging photography, but in 1990, the city's **Contemporary Arts Center** was on trial for exhibiting sexually explicit images by **Robert Mapplethorpe**. A conservative county government indicted the museum and its director on charges of using minors in pornography. But after two swift hours of deliberation, a jury of eight acquitted both parties, and the city became an emblem of free photographic expression.

Last weekend, almost 25 years later, **FotoFocus Biennial 2014** reanimated Cincinnati's enthusiasm for boundary-pushing photography with six exhibitions of some of the most exciting photographs being made today and of rediscovered classics that remain fresh. In the shows staged in and around a newly-revitalized Over-the-Rhine district, FotoFocus artistic director and New York City-based curator **Kevin Moore** explores photography in dialogue. The biennial illuminates how and why people use cameras: not merely to capture the world, but as an expression of individual experience within it.

To that end, some exhibitions particularly shine. In "**Vivian Maier**, A Quiet Pursuit," black-and-white snapshots from the posthumously-discovered photographer—who made a living as a nanny in New York and Chicago—ingeniously meld quotidian street scene and self-portraiture. With a camera slung around her neck that rested, slyly, at ribcage level, Maier injects her own image onto daily outings. Her somber gaze is reflected on retail windows, phone booths, and yard ornaments, and it becomes part of the overall landscape. Yet, it is not the public scene but Maier's private experience that captivates. Unexpectedly, all that is outside her camera becomes a reflection on her inner psychology.

In “Stills,” Moore uses a single image, a pair, or a group of images from 13 contemporary artists that tell stories of isolated moments, but it is up to the viewer to complete the narrative. Six of **Matthew Porter**’s flying racecars, frozen shockingly high above urban streets, conjure a frightening scenario before the trick is revealed: Porter digitally overlays toy racecars onto the scene. The fabrication is seamless and it is a fast reminder that things, especially when they seem to be too *something*, likely are.

Perhaps more than any other presentation, Moore’s selection of **David Benjamin Sherry**’s landscapes in “Western Romance” is a striking demonstration of how the camera both measures what is literally outside of us, and simultaneously manifests an inner emotional world.

Arranged among classic black-and-white landscapes from **Ansel Adams**, **Edward Weston**, **Minor White**, and **Carleton E. Watkins**, Sherry’s analog images are immediately different. Printed in large-format, his colossal mountains, endless deserts, and rock-and-water formations are saturated in gold, candy-apple green, and blood red filtrations. The addition of color onto classic landscapes evokes an emotional response that startles, and shifts the viewer’s focus to the emotional world of the man behind the camera more than on the geography he captures.

Sherry, 33, is from Woodstock, New York and studied photography at the **Rhode Island School of Design** and **Yale**. His work recently appeared on the Cover of *The New York Times Magazine* and, outside Cincinnati, he has two additional shows at **Salon 94**’s outposts in Manhattan.

Sherry was initially drawn to traditional photography canons, and especially to landscape, he says, because of the incredible scale of nature in the west. He loved being outdoors, among the giant forms, but the more he learned about traditional darkroom practices, the more he wanted to break the rules. Tampering with filters was an easy yet blatantly transgressive way to do it.

Each trek Sherry takes into nature is meticulously planned, and he records notes about his impressions along the way. Later they serve as a guide for

the filters he applies in the darkroom. "I'll make recordings of things I see around me—grey moths, full moon, blue night—and sometimes I write down how I feel that day," said Sherry, lounging on a couch inside of his Cincinnati hotel. "When I'm printing, they merge together and a picture is born. It's like cooking: I add these ingredients, and something comes out of the oven."

Despite the obvious subjects of the pictures—cacti, rocks, an endless valley—Sherry says it is often not about the geography at all. "Sometimes it's about connectedness, and consciousness, and the entire world," he said. "I try to keep it open ended. A picture can be a metaphor."

A 91 x 72 inch print made this year of a Sierra Nevada peak called *Putting Grapes Back On The Vine* is a stunning example of this phenomenon. Sherry took the image just before a winter storm blew in. In the darkroom, his first instinct was to develop the film with a blue filter to recall the brewing weather and the experience of being in the cold. But the result, he said, was too obvious. "As soon as I started adding this purple-y magenta tone, it became more sensitive, and the mountain opened up to me."

Standing in front of Sherry's magenta peak, the form becomes secondary to a melancholy that washes over it. "I feel devastated when I look at it because it becomes human in a way, too," said Sherry. "Poor, beautiful mountain," he said, with a laughter that was knowing, rather than joyful. "That's the kind of language I'm interested in looking at the world with."

Through color, the human element is unmistakably added to Sherry's landscapes. But, ultimately, he is aiming at something beyond the geography or the emotion alone. "I like the idea that my pictures could act as this hybrid connection between humans, technology, and earth," said Sherry. "Those are the three things we're really dealing with in society."

If that sounds like new terrain in landscape photography—and picture taking generally—then Cincinnati is a good place for it. Sherry's show is staged in the city's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, which has been dramatically transformed in the past decade from a drug-ridden dead-

zone into an idyllic spread of handsome halls, churches, and—a newly revitalized social hub—Washington Park.

It's an astonishing urban turnaround that required mounds of cash; but more than that, it required vision—not dissimilar to that displayed by the Contemporary Arts Center in 1990.

That story has become Cincinnati legend, but one of its less-known plot points belongs to FotoFocus founder, **Tom Schiff**. His post-production business, Lightborne Studios, located in remodeled laundry business near Washington Park, was the only corporate sponsor to stand with the CAC as the Mapplethorpe debacle unfolded. More than two decades later, Schiff created FotoFocus. A photographer in his own right, he envisioned its first iteration in 2012 as an opportunity for the entire city, once again, to celebrate photography at its best—with images that bend rules, change expectation, and create vision. This year, the celebration continues through November 1.