

HYPERALLERGIC

The Photographer as Archivist

It is heartening to see the FotoFocus Biennial continue to gain ground as it endeavors to present a wider range of visions.

Sarah Rose Sharp [November 7, 2018](#)



Goshka Macula, "Log Collage of Girl Drawing" (2008), part of *Wide Angle: Photography out of Bounds* for FotoFocus 2018, at the Weston Art Gallery (all images by the author for Hyperallergic)

CINCINNATI — This year's [FotoFocus Biennial](#) at the Taft Museum of Art kicked off with side-by-side surveys of works by American photographer Berenice Abbott and French photographer Eugène Atget. The pairing hinges on their chance connection while Abbott was Man Ray's studio assistant. This encounter proved greatly significant to the emerging discipline of documentary photography, focused on place, in the 1920s and early 1930s.



One of Berenice Abbott's images of New York City, from her 1930s iconic series, *Changing New York*. Abbott was plagued with comparisons to Atget throughout her career, but many examples of her work on display at the Taft reveal her own perspective and singular skills in photo-documental style.

This exhibition is one of two curated by returning FotoFocus Artistic Director and curator [Kevin Moore](#), under the theme Open Archive. In a change from the previous iteration, FotoFocus opened the field to guest curators at some of its anchor venues, rather than Moore alone curating the core of the biennial. This included a pair of shows at the Alice F. and Harris K. Weston Gallery curated by FotoFocus Deputy Director Carissa Barnard: a solo Chris Engman show, titled *Prospect and Refuge*, and a group show, *Wide Angle: Photography Out of Bounds*. If the Abbott-Atget survey presented a foreseeable interpretation of the photographic archive, *Wide Angle* — and indeed, much of the other festival programming — presented work that pushes the boundaries of photography as a medium and the archive as a construct. From [Rick Mallette's](#) playfully weird snowman

doodles, executed in acrylic and marker on commercial postcards and Polaroids, to the intimate and reflective “Log Collage of Girl Drawing” (2008) by Goshka Macuga, to the multilayered performance-turned-photo collages of Sheida Soleimani, the works in *Wide Angle* treat photography as just one in a series of steps that activate an idea, and the artists’ bodies of work are archives of thought, rather than documentation of fixed reality.



Two works by Sheida Soleimani in *Wide Angle: Photography Out of Bounds*. During her opening remarks, Soleimani instructed the reception attendees to Google “falcons on a plane” to reveal an unbelievable-but-true image of a Qatar Airlines flight with its entire first-class section dedicated to some 80 trained falcons and their handlers, being transported for a Saudi Prince.

Standing out among a strong and eclectic field, deftly assembled by Barnard around a subtle horizon line that enabled installation of works anywhere from floor to ceiling in a crowded gallery, are a collection of thought archives by Estonian artist Sigrid Viir. Viir has a serious countenance, but her works approach ideas playfully. A collection of six similar images (from a series of 12) are mounted on stands anchored by concrete-filled 2-liter bottles. The image is lifted from a book featuring the work of Hans Silvester, a German-born photographer known for his extended efforts to capture images of African subjects, including the Surma and Mursi people of the Omo Valley in southern Ethiopia. Originally part of the 2016 *Import Export* show presented by Temnikova & Kasela, Viir’s *Hans_55* series comments on the exoticism of cultural difference, and how work like Silvester’s may have encouraged a level of exhibitionism among African people as a source of tourist-based income (a topic dealt with thoughtfully in the article “Tourists Taking Pictures” by Bliss Broyard). In addition to printing the color image clip in black and white and mounting it on stands of varying head heights, Viir has applied an intervention-object into each image — a post-it in “Marquee”; a fleshy eraser protruding like an impudent tongue in “Erase” — meant to represent various Photoshop tools.



Sigrid Viir, from the *Hans_55* series (6 of 12)

Moore also curated *Mamma Andersson: Memory Bank* — an odd choice for a photo biennial, as it is ostensibly a painting survey by the Swedish artist. But Andersson takes the familiar notion of source material a step further, incorporating bits of existing imagery and ephemera into her paintings, or taking stacks of reference material and working spaces littered with these materials as her subject. This exhibition at Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center is paired with another program, *Akram Zaatari: The Fold – Space, time and the image*, guest curated for FotoFocus by CAC curator Steven Matijcio. Zaatari grapples conceptually with an actual archive — that of the Arab Image Foundation, which he founded in 1997. The “fold,” with which he is fascinated, refers to the unseen moments revealed by an archive — those that collapse time and space, those that tell a story only through adjacent details, and those that become evident through inadvertent damage by either the photographer or the storage conditions. Among the most arresting items in the exhibition are a pair of large-scale photographic prints made from 35mm scratched negatives. The negatives were found in the archives of commercial portrait photographer Hashem el Madani. An angry husband demanded that the portrait taken of his wife without his permission be destroyed. The first scratched image is a misfire — the husband mistook an image of a different woman for that of his wife — thus intensifying the narrative: so overwhelming was the husband's rage that he committed an act of violence against not only his wife's image, but that of an unrelated third party. Disfigured by dark slashes, both images feel all too relevant to the current climate surrounding gender relations.



Akram Zaatari, "Damaged Negatives: Scratched Portrait of Mrs. Baquari and her friend" (2012), 35mm scratched negative from the Hashem el Madani archive

These are just a few of the major exhibitions in this year's FotoFocus, which has benefitted tremendously from featuring more curators — no doubt Moore appreciates having the responsibility distributed among more curators, as well. Exhibitions connected to the festival extend all over the city, including Wave Pool in the farther-afield Camp Washington neighborhood; a terrific program being screened at the charming Mini Microcinema in the high-traffic Over-the-Rhine area; and even across the river at The Carnegie in Covington, Kentucky. It is heartening to see the festival continue to gain ground as it endeavors to present a wider range of visions. After all, though it cannot be said that every photographer is an artist, FotoFocus 2018 makes a compelling argument that every photographer is, perhaps, an archivist.



Image by Forealism Tribe on display at The Carnegie

Paris to New York: Photographs by Eugène Atget and Berenice Abbott continues at the Taft Museum of Art (316 Pike St., Cincinnati, Ohio) through January 20, 2019; Akram Zaatari: The Fold – Space, time and the image and Mamma Andersson: Memory Banks continue at CAC Cincinnati (44 E. 6th St., Cincinnati, Ohio) through February 10, 2019. Numerous programs related to FotoFocus 2018 continue beyond the festival run.