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"AutoUpdate": The Future of Photographic Arts

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Cincinnati appreciators of art are, at this point, more than likely familiar with the FotoFocus Biennial. Every other year since 2010 FotoFocus has brought compelling, intellectual explorations of "digital technology's impact on photography and video" to the region. FotoFocus commissions exhibitions across the city that work together to explore different artistic ideas that fall under a common thematic umbrella. The 2020 FotoFocus Biennial theme is "light&" which, they write, "explores light and its contrasts in relation to photography and lens-based art, and the world at large." Though the majority of the Biennial will run throughout next year with a concentrated week of programming held through October 1-4, the fifth iteration kicked off early with "AutoUpdate" at The Carnegie, in Covington, KY. "AutoUpdate" began with a detailed symposium of speakers and artists, and consists of a month long exhibition in The Carnegie's gallery space. FotoFocus writes of the exhibition, "In the current age of 'post truth' and artificial intelligence, "AutoUpdate" presents art making practices influenced by technological interventions and investigates how photography and tech have become symbiotic or, at times, synonymous in today's artistic and political climate." As the program alludes, the work ranges from overt political statements, to explorations of personal, liminal and fantastical visual spaces. The exhibition gathers the work of 44 regional artists that apply innovative techniques to video, image printing, image manipulating and beyond. Moving, still and installed images vary from abstract meditations on technology, to political statements about the social and natural world. Inherent to the techniques and manipulations of images is a common acknowledgement of human artifice. For me the most affecting pieces deal with spaces of intersection between the technological and the natural, as well as direct interactions with human subjects. Politically, the strongest work in the exhibition addresses how all three of these elements work together or against each other.

One such "natural" image, "Fire Line (Lovelock, NV)" by Stefan Petranek of Indianapolis, is a typically beautiful image of a mountain range. The background is a clear blue sky and the foreground the grassy plane that leads toward the mountains. In the middle of the image a glowing orange bar cuts through from left to right. It looks like what might happen when a printer begins to run out of ink, producing an image with a section of discoloration. The bar overlaps a line of flame running along the grass. Combining the orange bar and the burning grass seems to directly implicate anthropomorphic causes in the burning. A surface level reading might have one thinking of it as a direct indictment, though there is a strangely attractive glow to the bar that also seems to be aware of some beauty that human artifice creates. Indeed, the form, and digital manipulation of the photograph itself seems to be aware of this. The image might also point toward a more ambiguous vision that's aware that human centric beauty and innovation is only possible at the expense of the natural world.

Stefan Petranek, "Fire Line (Lovelock, NV)," 2019,
Archival Inkjet Print, 20 x 29 inches

Lori Kella, a native of Cleveland, OH, aims for more life in her "natural" images; using paper and translucent glycerin, she creates compelling capsules of Lake Erie water life. She builds, and subsequently photographs, fragile models of a fragile environment. These photos specifically consist of swimming fish, an icy surface and a snake. The images project a visual realism. One that depicts the surface of the Lake when it's frozen might be mistaken as the actual lake had it not been exhibited alongside the slightly more obvious constructions of fish. The images, softly lit in a way that exudes a wintery coldness, use this realism to paradoxically call attention to the artifice of the environment itself. More specifically, Kella's paper fish are susceptible to destruction just as the actual fish in Lake Erie are at the behest of a decaying environment.

Patrizio Martinelli's (Oxford, OH) "Detroit. Urbs in Horto" (or city inside nature) presents a disorienting collage combining images from varying time periods of Detroit's Lafayette Park. At the bottom of the collage we see characters from a classical painting that appear to be sitting on the ground in the park. Moving up, snippets in the middle look to be a new building, perhaps a structure when it was first built. Finally, the top third shows the tops of what look like darker, imposing buildings. By setting the fractured collage in Detroit, a city that knows urban decay well, the artist presents the passage of time both naturally and digitally. The buildings and the environment that it clashes with seem to decay while the collaged image resembles what one might see in a science fiction film when the a simulated environment surrounding characters dissolves. It's an image that, on the surface, doesn't seem to share DNA with Kella's work but actually similarly alludes to natural decay. Here, rather than depicting a specifically natural environment, the viewer is left to meditate on the industrial and the natural together.

Patrizio Martinelli, "Detriot, Urbs in Horto," 2019,
Digital collage, 281/2 x 20 ¾ inches

Dissolving can also be seen in Juan-Si Gonzalez's work "Advertising Remains." For Gonzalez this dissolving reveals, "sudden gaps in transmission, in the daily traffic of televised images that invade our home against our will." The three images from the series appear to be pulled from a televangelist broadcast. They're clearly aware of the common modern

skepticism of often shady televangelists that viewers of the exhibition might hold. In one, a preacher speaks from behind a microphone, waving his hands in front of his chest. Gonzalez, who acknowledges a resisting spirit in his work, distorts the image, blurring part of the preachers' face and chest. As a political piece, the image indicts the preacher by revealing his presence as a broadcast or, like Martinelli's Lafayette Park, a simulation. We might read it as a questioning of the preacher's motives in which the televised self-characterization is dissolving to reveal what the preacher actually wants. Herein, Gonzalez makes social criticism, by putting the lens on individual humans rather than an environment.

Angie Rucker, hailing from Westerville, OH, focuses on the individual in a different way. Her piece, "Private William Anthony Holland," is intriguing in both its presentation and preparation. Retrieved through extensive research at the Library of Congress, Rucker visually manipulates a real image of a civil war soldier and then digitally imposes added elements. The result is then printed onto transfer film that's been transferred to a metal plate. The metal plate is supposed to mimic the way photographs were printed in the historical moment, but here it also functions to collaborate with the photoshop edit to provide a particularly glossy quality. That gloss complements the pink petals that fall around the young, smooth-faced soldier. Herein Rucker feminizes a soldier, subverting typical expectations of soldiers, as well as probably the average citizen during civil war times. This allows her, and the researched soldier himself, to tell a different story of American life in the 1800s. Rucker uses technology to subvert gender and examine the role of artifice and society in creating and following models of individual identity.

Angie Rucker, "Private William Anthony Holland," 2019,
Digital photograph on metal, 20 x 20 inches

"AutoUpdate" is a title that might trigger users to reflect on smartphones. It's a function of our everyday technology that, in theory, leads to useful progression. However, many of us find that it undermines or regresses certain elements of what we use our smartphones for so often. Though only a small sample, these works share with the exhibition interests in change – both progression and regression. This first piece of the FotoFocus Biennial is worth a look just to explore the varying ways that artists can generate images. One might find that it's just as interesting to explore the ways – negative and positive – that we can think about the relationships between technology and the world. The exhibition asks a deep well of questions.

–Josh Beckelhimer

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