

## Even Without a Chicken Dance, FotoFocus is a Worthy ‘Octoberfest’



Contained: Gateway Arts Festival

From now on, when anyone mentions “Octoberfest” in Cincinnati, I’m going to think first of FotoFocus. This year, its first, it has clearly established itself as an artistically meaningful and rewarding addition to Cincinnati’s cultural calendar. The next is planned for 2014. It is also, like that other Oktoberfest (which actually occurs in September), fun. No, it doesn’t have the World’s Largest Chicken Dance, but it may have come up with something even better in Contained: Gateway Arts Festival, which opened last Saturday and continues with limited hours through Nov. 3.

It was produced by the Requiem Project, which is managing and hoping to restore Over-the-Rhine’s Emery Theatre (where there is a Mike Disfarmer photo exhibit that I blogged about last week). Saturday’s opening was hampered by cold weather that kept attendance small on the grounds of Grammer’s in Over-the-Rhine. (Grammer’s is a place that’s probably seen quite a few Oktoberfests in its day.) But the weather didn’t dampen the creative imagination that went into the event.

Using 11 trailer-size steel shipping containers as gallery walls, artists displayed their photography and video-based work, some interactive, as visitors wandered in and out. The standards were quite high and one project — David Rosenthal’s “Everything at Home Depot (Series)” — struck me as outstanding.

Installed in vertical pieces on fiberboard along the interior sides of the container, the color heat-transfer prints set out to do what the title suggests. In this environment — with the container’s metal sides, the wood floor and glaring fluorescent lights — the whole project looked just right — a melding of the artistic and the industrial, the soulful and the soulless. If this is part of a larger series (as the title suggests), it deserves to be seen in total. But one hopes future showings will get an environment as cool as this.

In a corner of the grounds, behind one crate and out of direct view, a band played suitably spacey music. After awhile, musicians moved atop a crate to play music with a pronounced electronic component. Meanwhile, video projections were displayed high off the building’s sides — you could see the images when approaching the site and it was really exciting.

The whole festival, itself, worked as an art installation. It will be open again this Friday from 6-10 p.m. (it’s ideal at dark), 2-5 p.m. Saturday and Nov. 3 by appointment at [info@emerytheatre.com](mailto:info@emerytheatre.com). It’s definitely worth a visit, even if not that easy to get to.

Another show you need to see — partly because of its excellence and partly because it’s in a space rarely open to the public — is the Using Photography exhibit at downtown’s Michael Lowe Gallery. He is a private dealer, so it’s a treat to see his elegant, uncluttered two-floor gallery open to the public. Drawing on his own collection, he’s put together a show that works as both top-notch fine-art photography and as a historical exhibition.

In this case, the history that the show addresses is that of the conceptual/performance art world of the 1970s. Pivotal names in international contemporary art’s development are represented here — Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci, Gerhard Richter, Michael Kelly, Ed Ruscha, Gilbert and George and many more.

With the richness of work represented, and the way it stretches our definition of photography and time-based art, it’s one of FotoFocus’ best shows. To just pick one piece, I was especially moved by Christian Boltanski’s five touched-up photographs comprising 1974’s “Anniversaire,” or “The Birthday.” I am used to the French artist’s solemn, sobering, heart-rending installations that use photography to remember the Holocaust. They are so strong you wonder if they must drain the artist of all *joie de vivre*. Yet here he is happy in this work, and the meaning of that happiness is revelatory if you know his history. Even if you don’t, it’s a generous and warm piece.

This show originally was going to be open just briefly, but Lowe has agreed to stay open noon-4 p.m. weekdays through the end of the month. His gallery is at 905 Vine St. Plan a downtown lunch trip around it.

Meanwhile, only up through this Thursday is Photogenus at the Reed Gallery inside University of Cincinnati’s College of Design, Art, Architecture & Planning. Put together by Jordan Tate, DAAP photography professor, and gallery director Aaron Cowan, this looks at how today’s international artists use photography in a digital age.

It’s a nice companion to Lowe’s show, as one chronicles breakthroughs from the 1970s (some of which we’re still trying to understand) and one shows how today’s international artists are using photography to make new breakthroughs. Much of it is quite out-there and left me quizzical about individual work’s obscure intent and technique. But some were very striking, like Anthony Lepore’s pairing of a photo (an archival ink print) of a salt field with a piece of carpet of roughly the same color.

I had written earlier about how eager I was to see Nancy Rexroth’s photographs at downtown’s YWCA Women’s Art Gallery as part of FotoFocus. The show consists of previously unprinted images from her influential Iowa project of the early 1970s — she used a toy camera to capture fleeting glimpses of everyday life in rural Ohio.

There was always the chance the black-and-white work had been left unprinted for a reason all these decades, but I’m happy to report it’s an excellent, evocative show — underscoring just how strong a body of work Iowa is. Besides the ghostly “Clara in the Closet, Carpenter, OH,” previously published in CityBeat, I also loved “House Vibration, Dayton, OH, 1976,” in which the blurry focus produces an unsteady image that makes one think an earthquake is occurring. It’s a great metaphor for the here-today-gone-tomorrow nature of life. This show will be up through Jan. 10 — Rexroth shares the space with Judi Parks and Jane Alden Stevens.

Watch for Contributing Visual Art Editor Steven Rosen’s FotoFocus blog postings all month. Contact him at [srosen@citybeat.com](mailto:srosen@citybeat.com).