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FotoFocus Takes Cincinnati By Storm



A Hawk and a Hacksaw - Mindy Rosen

Having wrapped up a very busy first (extended) weekend of FotoFocus activities, I'm humbled by the fact that I only got to a portion of the exhibits and events occurring under the month-long, regional photography festival's umbrella.

Before it's over, more than 70 shows and related special events — like this Wednesday's concert at the Emery Theatre by Bill Frisell/858 Quarter, featuring musical portraits inspired by photographer Mike Disfarmer's work — will have taken place. I'm wondering if FotoFocus, like the National Park Service, should have a passport that can be stamped at each site of a sponsored activity. (Quite a few exhibits will continue past October — check [here](#) for schedules.)

"Umbrella," by the way, is an apt word to use in one respect. Sideshow, the thoroughly charming outdoor kick-off party that took place Friday night, was bedeviled by rain and cold temperatures. As a result, attendance was small. That was disappointing because the alleys of downtown's Backstage Theatre District had been turned into a colorful, imaginative, Fellini-esque carnival for the evening, with handmade booths, games of chance and photography opportunities.

A stage with a theatrical backdrop served to host A Hawk and a Hacksaw, a New Mexico duo — Jeremy Barnes on accordion and Heather Trost on violin — whose music had an East European/Middle Eastern flavor and whose musicianship was impeccable. They would have fit well at MidPoint. In fact, the Backstage Theatre District would make a great outdoor venue next year for MidPoint, which, as [Mike Breen pointed out](#), needs a stronger downtown presence.

On Wednesday, I attended the preview opening of Doug and Mike Starn's *Gravity of Light* in Holy Cross Church at the Mount Adams Monastery. I had gone a couple weeks earlier for a test, which I described in last week's [Big Picture](#) column, where the noise and flying sparks from the giant carbon arc lamp's scared me even as the magnitude and, well, gravity of the monumental photographs that its light illuminated astonished me.

On my second visit, with maybe two dozen other guests present, *Gravity of Light* wasn't quite as scary — not when you see people using the carbon arc lamp's brilliant white light to read their smart phone email. Ah, technology! But it's still a profound exhibit — a major installation that uses photography as an intrinsic part of a created environment — and I can't imagine that anyone interested in contemporary art or FotoFocus would want to miss it. And afterward, you'll want to discuss what it means.

Two other exhibits I attended over the weekend were Anthony Luensman's TAINT at the Weston Art Gallery and *Let's Face It: Photographic Portraits* by Melvin Grier, Michael Kearns and Michael Wilson at Kennedy Heights Art Center. Luensman is one of our most talented local artists, especially ingenious with installations involving sound and light, but I didn't get a clear indication of how or why the presence of photography (and video) is supposed to crucially matter in this mixed-media show.

The Kennedy Heights exhibit had some remarkable large-scale black-and-white portraits by all three accomplished local photographers. Grier and Wilson, in their Giclee prints made from film negatives, got remarkable expressiveness their subjects like "Robert" and "Tony" (Grier) and "Thomas" and "Lamayah" (Wilson). Those Wilson photos, and some others, frame the pupils of their subjects' eyes with a tiny white square, a stunning effect. In several of his large Giclee prints from digital photographs, Kearns achieves clarity of detail so rich (on "Chuck," which is Wussy's Chuck Cleaver, and "Andre") that you could stand there and count every strand of the subjects' hair. I don't know who Andre is, but the way he is posed with head slightly upward and a triumphant smile emerging from a mouth that appears to be missing some teeth makes him heroically human. It's a meaningful show.

On Thursday, I attended the Cincinnati Art Museum's reception for *Herb Ritts: L.A. Style*, the Getty Center-organized show of the late photographer's black-and-white prints. Beautifully installed, this exhibit features Ritts' fashion and celebrity work, as well as his stylized, erotically charged studies of the nude male and female torso. The show doesn't so much chart his "progression" from high fashion to high art as it spotlights the connection between fashion and art. It also underscores that the eternal human quest for perfection is about the body as much as the mind. (Kathy Schwartz will have more on this show soon.)

For opening weekend, the art museum's Chief Curator James Crump — also FotoFocus' co-chair — brought to town Paul Martineau, the Getty's curator for the Ritts exhibit, and Charles Churchward, a magazine design and art director who knew Ritts and has written *Herb Ritts: The Golden Hour*.

Martineau, it turns out, is at work on a major Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit to be presented by the Getty and Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2016. (Getty Research Institute and LACMA recently acquired some 2,000 of his photographs, and the Getty already had acquired the archives of Sam Wagstaff, Mapplethorpe's collector/lover.)

Martineau told me it might travel. Cincinnati would be a perfect venue for it — Crump has made a documentary about Mapplethorpe and Wagstaff, the authoritative *Black White + Gray*. Is it too early to start a Facebook campaign to bring that Mapplethorpe exhibit to Cincinnati? Any volunteers?