

DOCUMENT

Above The Fold

Inside the sixth FotoFocus biennial, as told by an art world outsider

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Text by
Madison Bulnes
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The lady next to me on the plane didn't say a word until I offered to pass her trash to the flight attendant. As we descended from the cotton-candy sky to the grounds of Ohio, she asked if I was flying back home or to school. When I told her I was actually heading to FotoFocus's 2022 Biennial, I learned she was an artist herself: a retired painter who originally moved to New York from Finland when she was my age. Now she lives in Cincinnati, the city home to the nonprofit organization bringing contemporary, lens-based art and photographic history to the Midwest. FotoFocus started in 2010, when such work and education were lacking in the area. Twelve years later, for their sixth edition, they are presenting more than a hundred projects featuring over 600 artists and curators, many of which are free to the public.

This year, the biennial's theme is *World Record*, in reference to "photography's extensive record of life on earth, humankind's impact on the natural world, and the choices we now face as a global community." The largest biennial of its kind in America, the month-long celebration aims to bring purposely-forgotten stories to our collective memory at venues across Greater Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky, Dayton, and Columbus.

Upon my arrival at Michael Lowe Gallery, I quickly realized that I was one of the only young people in a room full of established curators, prolific artists, lifelong collectors, and art critics. Alone I stood, turning to the tea-time buffet as an excuse to be antisocial. I found comfort in Rice Krispies treats, and overheard the woman next to me say to her partner, "I guess it's okay for us to eat Rice Krispies now, like we're school kids at lunch."

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As I walked down the stairs, and found myself fully immersed in the clear blue sea the gallery had been transformed into. On the right, waves crashing onto the shore were projected; on the left, Tony Oursler's glistening *Merma* serenaded visitors, with their voices akin to Gollum from Lord of the Rings. *Merma* is beautiful in a horrifying way, or perhaps horrifying in a beautiful way. They were the star of the *Crossing Neptune* exhibition, where multiple cultural mythologies of water came together for what Oursler calls "magical thinking."

From the gallery, a shuttle took us across the state border to the Carnegie Museum of Art, for a tour of *These Things Are Connected*. Exhibitions director Matt Distel had invited four curators for a group show, with the mandate that each of them had to bring an artist working in the area with one who was not. It's part of a practice the Carnegie continues to follow, which is to bring opportunities to local artists while developing relationships with curatorial voices that provide new context to their work.

As if our shared Salvadorian roots were a guiding light, I was immediately drawn to multidisciplinary artist Lorena Molina's shot of a girl drinking what appeared to be Agua de Jamaica from a baggy, probably purchased from a neighborhood elotero. She's showing off a plastic, sparkly butterfly ring and baby pink acrylics. The image reminded me of my hometown in Southeast LA, and of the hot, Latina baddies I aspire to emulate. Viewing her in a museum, under the context of high-brow art, only made me want to be her more.

As the trip continued, I started embracing the fact that I felt out of place, and began revealing my secret to others: I was sent as an amateur writer to review a culture I knew little about. Another, more experienced writer revealed to me an even bigger secret: "It's good to come in like that. You can experience everything fresh."

We finished the day at the Contemporary Arts Center. We took an elevator to the top floor for the expansive group exhibition, *On the Line: Documents of Risk and Faith*. The room was spacious, filled with art from Northern Canada to Southern Brazil, in an attempt to erase borders. There were photographs, mixed media pieces, videos, stills, and a ball of trashed magazines, clothing, books, and headphones held together by rubber bands that visual artist Mary Mattingly literally dragged through the streets of Brooklyn.

Non-human experiences are incorporated as well, such as contemporary artist Xaviera Simmons's *Gain* (*Consider, For Example, The Nature Of Joy*), which features photographs of predatory animals in the midst of capturing their prey. Simmons uses it as a metaphor for our human civilization, stating, "Photographers are witnesses; and whiteness witnesses rather than acts in a just manner." When she's talking during the exhibition conversation, I feel her eyes locking with mine, as she directs her statements towards the few young people in the crowd.

The lower floor held *Images on which to build, 1970s-1990s*, where curator Ariel Goldberg recreated the lesbian and queer knowledge that was passed around through images, groups, zines, and fliers, and a digitized version of photographer Joan E. Biren's *The Dyke Show*. This visual community was built solely on the necessity of a world where they could live safely. Not a single part of it was funded or supported by institutions, and a lot of the people involved didn't know other people in other places were doing the same thing.

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I didn't get a chance to fully throw myself into the work and contemplate each individual piece before viewing video artist Dara Friendman's *Dancer* (2011). In the short, ahead-of-its-time film, dances occur in random locations, such as a grocery store aisle where today's edgy kids record TikToks. Afterwards, she talked with Gang Gang Dance's frontwoman, Lizzi Bougatsos, who sounded like a liberal arts freshman smoking weed for the first time.

The next morning, we snuck in a quick visit to the Cincinnati Art Museum to check out *Natural World*, an exhibition featuring the works of photographer John Edmonds and visual artist David Hartt. They actively critique the museum's collection while presenting pieces that add to the conversation of what we perceive to be natural within the world. Most are featured in a singular gallery room, but a few are placed like puzzle pieces throughout the museum. While walking through a room featuring traditional European art, we saw a 2022 photograph of young Black men, circled around a hurt elder. The cause of his pain is unknown, as well as the outcome, but the grief, trauma, and care are loud within the still shot.

It was refreshing to finally see marginalized artists be given a space in esoteric places. Still, sometimes it felt wrong, viewing the exhibitions beside an older, white generation. Why is the art displayed for them? I was reminded of Claudia Rankine's *The White Card*, a play about white curators exploiting Black artists for the sake of being seen as 'good' white people.

However, the more I listened to conversations and read descriptions written with care, my mind started to change. The board of FotoFocus is calling these Black and Brown artists to share all parts of their stories—not just the ones about suffering. FotoFocus wants to hear, listen, and help in all ways it can, so they are bringing such art to private institutions. The museums, the founders, and the visitors are the ones who need to see it, anyways—everyone else has already lived it.