

FOTOFEST

Houston's International Month of Photography

Photography, famous French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson once said is "an opportunity of plunging into the reality of today. It is one's guess of what life is..."

Throughout March, FotoFest '96, Houston's sixth International Month of Photography, takes a whopping big guess about life by plunging an expected 200,000 visitors into intriguing images from some of the world's top photographers. The month-long, biennial photo extravaganza spotlights important but little-known contemporary and historical photography from around the world. In the process, Houston-based FotoFest focuses international attention on art in its hometown.

The Texas Commission on the Arts named FotoFest the state's "best cultural organization," and, as the only international photo festival of its kind in the U.S., FotoFest has developed into one of the world's largest and most respected visual arts events.

Rather than staging this year's more than 60 exhibits in a single convention hall, FotoFest planners clustered them throughout the central city--in effect, making Houston an integral part of the show.

"We want people not only to see the photographic exhibits, but also to discover Houston, especially our historic downtown," says Fred Baldwin, festival co-founder and president.

Adds artistic director and curator Wendy Watriss: "Art is an important part of the total life here. Exhibit visitors come to enjoy all that the city has to offer--interesting public spaces and attractions, diverse cultures, entertainment, and dining."

Scattered primarily around downtown, the museum district, and a historic ethnic neighborhood, FotoFest exhibits appear on traditional museum and gallery walls, as well as unexpected places.

Sidewalk display windows on bustling downtown streets, for instance, boast not fashions or furniture, but fine art photography. Historic structures under renovation, exterior facades, and even intersections sport photographic works and avant-garde multimedia installations. Shows hang in old warehouses-become-art studios, while others turn up in skyscraper lobbies and trendy eateries.

Add to that a series of art and architecture walking tours, a symposium on children and photography, a fine print auction, and photographic portfolio reviews, and Houston becomes a combination photo gallery and workshop.

To pull it off, FotoFest worked with more than 60 local organizations--including the Houston Downtown Management Corp., Downtown Historic District, Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, American Institute of Architects, and Rice Design Alliance.

The collective effort offers an array of photographic art in innovative settings to stimulate one-on-one, cross-cultural dialogue about the works, say Fred Baldwin and Wendy Watriss.

An international freelance photographer for almost 40 years, Fred knows something about innovation. On a photo shoot near the North Pole, he became the first person to photograph polar bears under water. Formerly a documentary photography instructor at the University of Texas and photojournalism program director at the University of Houston, Fred teamed up with Wendy in 1971 on a four-year photo/oral history project in Texas. The work appeared as "Coming to Terms; The German Hill

Country of Texas." (Texas A&M University Press, 1991) Wendy also edited the more recent "Image and Memory; Photography from Latin America." (Rice University Press, 1994) She has worked as a freelance documentary photographer and writer since the mid-Sixties on diverse international and local projects--including a look at three Texas cultures (Hispanic, Afro-American, and German-American), and a study of black cowboys in the Southwest.

Since the first FotoFest a decade ago (modeled after a similar event in Paris, France called "Mois de la Photo"), the event has explored how photography influences (and is influenced by) history and culture. In 1990 it tackled the dramatic political and social upheavals taking place in central and eastern Europe; one exhibit even replicated the Berlin Wall. FotoFest '94 examined, in part, changes in the global environment; one exhibit featured 120 illuminated standing globes on how people affect earth's resources.

Between FotoFests, the nonprofit photographic arts and education organization (funded by grants and individual donations) sponsors "Literacy through Photography." The ongoing program in Houston public schools uses photography to enhance students' reading and writing skills.

FotoFest '96 showcases varied works of photographers, both well-known and undiscovered, from more than a dozen countries. A festival brochure/map leads visitors to three primary clusters of exhibit venues.

Discover Downtown

This year's theme, "Discover Photography, Discover Houston," rings truest downtown with 21 exhibits on display.

Six central business district skyscrapers show, among others, the Fifties and Sixties-era works of top European fashion photographer Frank Horvat and leading African portraitist Seydou Keita.

In downtown's warehouse district, modern and ancient images mingle at five exhibits, including "cyberWhat?" an interactive digital still and video production

viewed on computer monitors. Promising Mexican photographer Gerardo Suter's one-man exhibit, "Anáhuac," mixes pre-Columbian symbols with images of the human body in luminous black and white prints.

Around Market Square (the city's retail center in the late 1800s) and North Main Street, unoccupied historic buildings, some of which are being renovated, have been transformed into galleries to house 10 diverse exhibits and photographic installations. In the Sweeny and Coombs Building, "Magnum and the Cinema" takes an behind-the-scenes look at 50 years of movies and their stars as seen by Magnum photographers, some of the industry's most respected. In the Kennedy/Foley Building, "Biographies/Biografías" offers one of the first U.S. showings of South American mixed-media artists Patricia Bravo and Oscar Muñoz.

Throughout downtown's Market Square/North Main Street and warehouse districts, a group of Houston artists present mixed-media installations on exterior walls, window displays, and interiors of historic buildings to draw attention to early Houston's architectural treasures.

"When you install photographic works in these fantastic old buildings," says Wendy Watriss, "there's a transformation of art and architecture. It changes the way people view both."

Midtown/Third Ward

A short drive south of downtown, discover five unusual exhibits in the Midtown area, developed in the early 1900s, now one of Houston's oldest African-American neighborhoods. An exhibit at Houston Community College's central campus features 19th century Mexican landscape photography on loan for the first time from private collections in Mexico. In the nearby Third Ward area, Project Row Houses (several restored Thirties-era dog-run houses, now an art center) hosts "The Universal Family Album" project and exhibit. In the show, noted African-American artist Pat Ward Williams views the Third Ward as seen through local residents' family photos.

Project Row Houses also hosts promising American photographer Albert Chong's mixed-media installations, which reflect his Asian and Afro-Caribbean ancestry.

Museum District

Some three dozen exhibitions, the largest number in a single cluster, blanket Houston's large museum district.

At Children's Museum, the "Children's Perspectives, Cross-Cultural Views" exhibit shows photos of and by children living in a Guatemalan garbage dump, a project coordinated by American photographer Nancy McGirr. The exhibit also displays contrasting "life experience" photos done by children in the Houston and Galveston area. A related one-day symposium explores the role of photography in childrens' lives.

Rice Media Center hosts a show and residency by mainland Chinese photographer name to come that chronicles life in mountainous Yunnan province. The Menil Collection houses another cultural portrait--a view of 150 years of the Kurdish people's history, done by well-known U.S. photojournalist Susan Meiselas.

Delve deeper into FotoFest's exhibits, as well as its main venues, on weekend walking tours. Experts in architecture, art, and photography answer questions about selected exhibits. Enroute between exhibits, they also discuss the architectural angles and cultural features of sights along the way. (*Note: not enough details available yet to elaborate.*)

World-class photographs receive scrutiny from different angles at two events for serious photo devotees. First, recognized works from Latin American, European, and Japanese photographers go on sale during a fine print auction conducted by Sotheby's. Then, aspiring photographers from around the world put their portfolios on the line for critique by leading international museum curators, gallery directors, editors, and photo collectors. The nine-day "International Meeting Place" has proved pivotal in many

photographers' careers, several of which rate special attention this year at a new "Discoveries of the Meeting Place" exhibit.

Henri Cartier-Bresson said that successful photography occurs at "the decisive moment," that instant when light, form, and a photographer's perception come together to make a memorable picture.

FotoFest '96 exposes festival-goers to hundreds of life's decisive photographic moments, captured in the far corners of the world...while also shedding light on the heritage and culture found right in its own backyard.