

Diversity, participation in focus for Fotoseptiembre

By Elda Silva | August 16, 2017 | Updated: August 17, 2017 9:22am

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Photo: Courtesy Fotoseptiembre USA

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Works by San Antonio based photographer Julysa Sosa are featured in "Trizas," a solo exhibition at AP Art Lab. The show is part of Fotoseptiembre USA.

Organizers of Fotoseptiembre USA wanted to broaden the scope of perspectives presented in the photography festival, so they tried something different: They dropped the registration fee.

“In light of the current state of affairs, we decided to ramp up the ‘eclectic, inclusive and diverse’ traits that have always been integral to the Fotoseptiembre character,” festival director Michael Mehl said via mail. “We felt that the most direct way for us to accomplish this was to encourage even more community participation, leading us to remove our registration fee requirement to see if that would make a difference.”

Mehl believes the strategy was effective. A glance at this year’s schedule seems to confirm as much. All but a handful of the more than 30 exhibits and events feature work by San Antonio-based artists. One notable exception is a survey of work by Pedro Valtierra, an award-winning photojournalist based in Mexico City, at the Mexican Cultural Institute. The first of the shows opens the last weekend in August.

If you want to go into the trenches, you have to go into the trenches,” Mehl said. “You can’t create artwork about the trenches and think that’s going to make a difference. I’m not going to pretend I’m doing that. All I’m saying is, ‘OK. If things are going in the direction they’re going and I don’t particularly believe in the direction they’re going, then what can I do within my context to at least make a little difference?’”

“The thing we can really do is make sure if anybody had a particular expression, then we’re going to allow them that expression,” he said. “The fact of the matter is that by opening up even another notch, you encourage more diversity and eclecticism.”

In its 23rd year, Fotoseptiembre USA was founded by Mehl and his partner, Ann Kinser, “for the exhibition and celebration of photography and photography-based art forms.” The team grew by one in 2002 when Paul Vaughn came onboard as chief technologist when the festival added a website.

“Most of what we do throughout every year is try to adapt to changing circumstances however we can and in a way that’s relevant to what we do and what the context of the city is and all that,” Mehl said. “At the beginning, we thought it was a good thing to have a lot of growth, but then we realized that wasn’t the case, and I’ve said that many times. Really for this to have any kind of validity, any kind of substance, any kind of sustainability, it has to be a grass-roots community regional event.”

Each year themes emerge among the entries. This year Mehl has observed “a renewed, general interest in street photography.”

“This is a trend that’s taken hold internationally,” he said. “Thanks to the internet and social media, the cultural zeitgeist now always fluctuates in tandem.”

“Street Foto’s,” a group exhibit at Hausmann Millworks Creative Community, and “Streets of San Fernando,” a solo exhibition by Mark Sobhani at Mildfire Coffee, are among the offerings in this genre. Sobhani, a former Express-News staff photographer, spent about two years working on his series, photographing people downtown within a two-block radius of San Fernando Cathedral.

“One of the things I really liked about that area is that it’s just a mix of everybody,” said Sobhani, who owns Mildfire Coffee with his wife, Tricia. “You can go to certain parts of downtown San Antonio and all you’ll see is tourists. So to me, that Main Plaza-San Fernando area, you get locals, politicians, lawyers. You have transients; you have tourists; you have food vendors — just everyone and everything. And for me, this visual storytelling and street photography was really what I wanted to go after.”

Also embedded within the festival is a mini tribute to Chuck Ramirez, with a pair of shows of work by the San Antonio artist. The McNay Art Museum is hosting “Chuck Ramirez: All This and Heaven Too,” a survey show, and Ruiz-Healy Art is hosting “Chuck in Context,” focusing on never-before exhibited works.

Ramirez, known for his large-scale photographs of everyday objects, died in 2010. Ruiz-Healy Art is the exclusive representative of his estate.

The show at the Olmos Park gallery features works from the artist’s “Words” series of images emblazoned with a single word identifying the subject.

“We wanted to present something new that the public has not seen, and at the same time show something that the museum is not showing,” said gallerist Patricia Ruiz-Healy. “And then we’re going to have other works, of course.”

As part of Fotoseptiembre USA, Mehl also curates online exhibitions in web galleries on the festival’s website. This year, he pared the digital offerings down to two because he was busy recording his latest album of guitar music, “Blue Sky Blacktop,” available for free download on his personal web site, michaelmehl.com.

The online exhibitions by Jennifer Shaw of New Orleans and Tami Bone of Round Top feature work that is “highly allegorical, reflecting personal narratives,” Mehl said. Shaw’s “Flood State,” a series of surreal, layered images, contemplates the long-term viability of living in a place at the mercy of heavy rains and rising sea levels. Bone’s “Mythos,” a collection of dreamy, blurred photographs, was inspired by her childhood in South Texas.

At \$100, the festival’s registration fee was relatively low, but it did serve to fund the Choice Awards — a certificate and \$500 presented in recognition of best professional practices — now also eliminated. In the past, the fee was also meant to act as a filter.

“Part of the problem we see is quality control, commitment, and all that kind of stuff,” Mehl said. “Since no one had skin in the game, it was easy enough to throw something up on the wall. Again, in light of the current state of affairs, that’s not the issue. The issue is: Afford participation to everyone.”



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