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PHOTOGRAPHY

A Place for Snap Judgments

BY WILLIAM MEYERS

Houston

Jake Moody called out, "Time's up. Time's up," and the room at the Doubletree Hotel broke into spontaneous applause. Mr. Moody, with his mellifluous Southern drawl, is the voice of FotoFest, a biennial gathering in Houston of art photographers, museum curators, gallery owners, photo editors, book publishers and collectors. The 2010 event is the 13th iteration and runs to April 25. Mr. Moody, a volunteer since 1990, is responsible for seeing that appointments at the Meeting Place, FotoFest's most important feature, begin and end on time. The Meeting Place is an intense experience, and the 90 or so participants in the room were clapping to congratulate themselves on making it through.

The Meeting Place grew out of informal portfolio reviews that Fred Baldwin and Wendy Watriss observed in 1983 at Les Rencontres d'Arles Photographie in southern France. Photographers showed one another and qualified observers their works to get helpful criticism and advice on how to advance their projects. Mr. Baldwin and Ms. Watriss, successful photojournalists who had recently settled in Houston, decided to create a program that would formalize the review process. Relying on an extensive international network of friends, they organized and raised funds for the first FotoFest Biennial in 1986: It featured exhibitions in six museums, 14 art spaces, 27 commercial galleries and 17 corporate buildings, plus the first, somewhat ad hoc, version of the Meeting Place. This year 630 photographers from 31 countries entered a lottery to be among the 520 included.

At the Meeting Place, photographers sitting at small tables set up in rows have 20 minutes to present their work one-on-one to a reviewer. Mr. Moody starts them off and announces "Time's up" to end the appointments. The reviewers are not only experienced critics but also people able to further the photographers' careers: curators, gallery directors, publishers, etc. Academics are not used as reviewers because they lack that practical ability. The

FotoFest 2010 Biennial

Various Venues
www.fotofest.org
Through April 25

photographers are guaranteed four appointments a day for four successive days. In addition to these 16 formal appointments, serendipitous informal encounters with reviewers take place in the lobby outside the reviewing room. On the evening of the fourth day, the public is invited in to review the portfolios. This year there will be four of the four-day sessions. Photographers pay a fee of \$820 to participate in a session.

The Meeting Place requires great psychic energy from both photographers and reviewers. Sometimes a reviewer is compelled to tell the artist across the table that his project is not ready to be shown, that it needs more work, is not coherent, or even that it should be abandoned. Because the criticism is so candid, students and beginners are discouraged from applying. Most of the photographers are in midcareer, with a record of exhibitions or publications. But they pay the \$820 fee, and the cost of transportation and

lodging, in hopes of making contacts in Houston that will move them forward.

In 2008 Max de Esteban abandoned his successful career in Barcelona as a fashion photographer to make work he loved. His photographs have been shown and published in Spain, but in search of a wider audience he came to FotoFest and sat down for his first Meeting Place appointment with Howard Bossen, a curator at the Kresge Art Museum in Michigan. Mr. Esteban hastily explained that he was taking portraits of young people he found in the streets who considered themselves at odds with society. Mr. Bossen recognized the quality of the work, the technical competence and quiet emotion, and was soon talking about the museum's exhibition schedule; he gave Mr. Esteban no promises, but said they should stay in touch. This audience was positive for both participants, though many, of course, are not.

This year over 180 reviewers came from 24 countries. They have 14 scheduled appointments for each of the four days of their session, and are also available for informal encounters. At the end of one session, I went over to Paul Amador, a New York gallery owner, to ask why he put himself through such a draining—and unremunerated—exercise. Without hesitation he said, "To give back to the community."

The sense of community is palpable: The lobby, halls and elevators of the hotel are alive with the conversations of people wearing color-coded identification badges. The spirit of FotoFest emanates from Mr. Baldwin and Ms. Watriss, who continue as its directors. Amazingly, considering the logistics of coordinating the movements



At the Meeting Place: Nigel Dickson discusses his work with Virginia Heckert of the J. Paul Getty Museum.

of hundreds of people, over 100 exhibitions scattered all around Houston, and many other events, the two are always calm. They chat and make introductions as if they had just invited some dear friends over for a cup of tea. Behind them, dedicated full-time and part-time staffers, and a host of volunteers like Mr. Moody, see that the work of the biennial gets done. I am not aware of any other artistic medium so well organized for mutual support. One measure of the impact of FotoFest and the Meeting Place is that there have been similar events in Canada, Argentina, Romania, Colombia, Denmark, Germany, Mexico, Slovakia, the U.K., Brazil, and elsewhere in the U.S. and around the world.

The day between the first and second Meeting Place sessions was devoted to "Beyond Print: Creative Communications in the Digital Age," workshops organized by Mary Virginia Swanson, a highly regarded consultant. There was a Power-

Point presentation of Facebook, MySpace, Tumblr, Twitter, Flickr and other key Web sites: A standing-room-only audience paid close attention. The Internet makes images instantly available anywhere in the world, so the community expands and stays connected. At other times during FotoFest there would be dialogues with curators from galleries and museums.

At any given moment, Mr. Baldwin is likely to be sitting in the lobby, his straggly white hair almost to his shoulders, reminiscing about having organized a portfolio review in Beijing in 2006, or meeting Václav Havel in Prague in 1989, or traveling to Latin America to find unknown photographers for the 1992 exhibitions. Ms. Watriss sits near him, swathed in one of her dramatic scarves, and quietly checks with a staff member that everything is ready for the book fair, or the auction, or possibly an exhibition opening that evening. Meanwhile, the hubbub of

FotoFest ebbs and flows around them. Remarkable.

Mr. Meyers writes about photography for the Journal. See his works at www.william-meyersphotography.com.

Pepper ... And Salt

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"I'm not his best friend.
But he is on my
extended network."