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The Meeting Place opens opportunities via portfolio reviews

By Douglas Britt

The most visible part of the FotoFest 2010 Biennial, the country’s largest photography extravaganza, is the vast lineup of exhibitions filling dozens of art spaces across the city. But at least as important to the biennial’s international significance is the Meeting Place, a 16-day series of behind-the-scenes portfolio reviews that wrapped up Thursday between photographers and the people who study, exhibit, publish, buy, sell and promote their work. Each review session lasts 20 minutes.

"HOW WE DECONSTRUCT THE REALITY IN FRONT OF US": David A. Brown shot surreal photographs of Houston cityscapes off window reflections in single exposures.
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It's like speed dating," said Christopher Rauschenberg, board president and a founding member of Blue Sky Gallery, a Portland, Ore., nonprofit photography-exhibition space and community research center.

For reviewers like Rauschenberg, the Meeting Place means discovering fresh talent and returning home armed with proposals for an exhibition committee — or, depending on what kind of working relationship the reviewer seeks, ideas for acquisition, gallery representation, publication or collaboration.

For German photographer Thomas Kellner, it meant having his career skyrocket just as he had begun to consider abandoning it.

Eight years ago, time was running out on a five-year deadline Kellner had given himself to make it as an artist. He spent the last of his money to get to Houston for the 2002 biennial. He summed up the results in two words: "Home run."

He got gallery representation in New York, Chicago and later Los Angeles; a publisher to produce his second book; and an artist's residency. Within eight weeks, he'd landed his first museum show in the United States. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and the Art Institute of Chicago acquired some of his work. His work appeared in magazines around the world. The past three times he's visited the Meeting Place, it's been as a reviewer seeking talent for Photographers: Network, an ongoing curatorial project he launched in 2004.

Additionally, Kellner was featured in the 2004 iteration of Discoveries of the Meeting Place, a group show mounted every biennial that features the favorite finds of 10 reviewers selected by FotoFest from the previous biennial.

We won't know until 2012 who the stars of the 2010 Meeting Place turn out to be. But 2008 reviewers' picks are on view through April 25 in downtown's Allen Center One and Two. They range from photojournalist Sara Terry's project on the life of a former girl soldier in Sierra Leone to Emma Livingstone's elegant images of the Argentine Northwest landscape to Liz Hickok's staged photos of a San Francisco constructed from Jell-O.

Last week Houston photographer David A. Brown went through his own round of speed dating. Like other participants, Brown registered for one four-day session of individual meetings, ranking reviewers he hoped to meet in order of preference. A computer lottery assigned him five formal reviews per day, and he set up informal meetings with reviewers he ran into during breaks at downtown's Doubletree Hotel.

In 20-minute intervals, the number of reviews Brown could fit in a day was two. In the end, he had 11.

BROWN'S camera uses three silicon-embedded layers of photo sensors that absorb red, green and blue light at different respective depths. The surreal imagery that results, he told reviewers, is "an exploration in perception — both the biomechanics and the psychology of how we deconstruct the reality in front of us to navigate through our modern world."

Brown said he found the feedback — which was sometimes contradictory, as different reviewers responded to different aspects of the work — fascinating and mostly helpful. But because his goal is to shoot similar series in other places, ultimately producing "a show that compares and contrasts cities," perhaps his most fruitful meeting was with Mark Sink, a Denver-based curator who said he'll submit Brown's work to the exhibition committee. For RedLine, a nonprofit that offers residencies, exhibits and career development to emerging artists.