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October 16th, 2012 By Steven Rosen | Arts | Posted In: Visual Art, COMMUNITY

Finding the FotoFocus Art that Transcends Categories

1 Comment      Tags: FotoFocus, Doug and Mike Starn, Mike Disfarmer, Bill Frisell, 858 Quartet,

Disfarmer's "First Born" - Credit: www.disfarmer.com

After the second full week of FotoFocus, I've begun to realize that there are way more shows and events out there than one person can get to. (Or, if you do get to them all, to remember what you've seen.) It's also clear that you can begin to roughly pair into categories the kinds of shows that are out there — art photography and photojournalism, still photography and video, portraiture and everything else, contemporary work and vintage (or historic).

And then there are those that touch numerous bases — either because that's what the artists intended or because time has changed the meaning or our appreciation of the work. In the former category, and so far the work that towers over everything else I've seen, is Doug and Mike Starn's *Gravity of Light* in the decommissioned Holy Cross Church at Mount Adams Monastery. This installation prominently uses photographs without letting them define what its purpose or meaning is about. I've written about it previously and may do so again, so powerful is it. It's up through year's end, and I hope everyone realizes how important an artwork it is and goes to see it. Go [here](#) for details.

But two other very different exhibits deserve mention in this regard, too. On the second floor of the Emery Theatre, through the end of the month, is an exhibit of estate-authorized prints — from the original glass-plate negatives — of the mysterious Mike Disfarmer's Depression-era portraits of residents of the small Arkansas town of Heber Springs. Here is work that, whatever its original intention, contemporary thought has turned into art photography.

It can be discussed and debated whether Disfarmer, who died in 1959) was engaged in what he thought was a commercial venture or whether he was after something else... his own quest for an artful statement. But the work today is important as something other than straight photo-documentation, though it is that. The photographs are haunting missives from the place Greil Marcus called "the old, weird America" — a spiritual zone, a cosmic baptismal font, from where much of our contemporary culture can trace its origins.

Disfarmer was born Mike Meyers, but seems to have chosen "disfarmer" as a statement that he didn't want to fit into the agricultural lifestyle of his hometown. He taught himself photography and built a studio, first on his mother's back porch and then in the heart of town. According to [the Disfarmer website](#), he obsessed over getting the right light — one wonders what his subjects, for whom time was money, thought as the minutes ticked on.

But they came, sometimes dressed in their best and sometimes dressed in the best they had. What resulted — and we are fortunate his work has been preserved, which itself was a struggle — is a different take on Depression Era poverty than the federal Farm Security Administration photos. Taken by outsiders, those placed — with warmth and humanity — their subjects in their surrounding hardscrabble environment. They have a sociological dimension.

But these remove their subjects from their environment and seem psychological. In a photograph like "First Born," you have to wonder if Disfarmer ever told his subjects to say "cheese." The young father, dressed up nicely and wearing a hat, has a proud but slightly furtive gaze that renders his emotions somewhat inscrutable. He sits, holding a child whose face is almost pouting and whose staring eyes are disturbing. The two look apprehensive, either about the photograph or about what life has in store for them. If Disfarmer was after that effect, maybe he was some kind of prophet.

By the way, I'm not sure how many people know this exhibit is here. FotoFocus literature didn't list it as an ongoing show, but rather a part of a one-day event — last week's Emery concert by guitarist Bill Frisell/858 Quartet of his composition *Musical Portraits from Heber Springs*. But the Emery is keeping it up through the month. To see it, e-mail info@emerytheatre.com with your phone number and times you're available, or call 513-262-8242.

Another show that crosses boundaries in interesting ways is Santeri Tuori's *The Forest* project at University of Cincinnati's Phillip M. Meyers Jr. Memorial Gallery (for hours, go [here](#)). Tuori is from Finland — a welcome international addition to FotoFocus — and this show was curated by Judith Turner-Yamamoto, a FotoFocus staffer, with assistance from the Finnish consulate.

The artist spent five years observing — in film and still photographs — the effect of light, seasonal change and weather on a remote, pristine, Finnish island. In "Forest (Tree and Pond)," his work is condensed via editing into a relatively tight time span and projected onto a gray-painted section of a gallery wall. While it looks like we are watching a specific spot on the island change over the seasons, I'm told it's a composite. (I find that remarkable.) Tuori has created this slightly wavering mirage of an image to show how art can turn what we think of as mundane into something momentous. He has photographed elusive "change."

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I appreciate the thoughtfulness and hard work of this effort — which is accompanied by a soundscape by Mikko Hynninen — but did find the slight blurriness of the piece distracting. I preferred the three smaller-scale pieces in the gallery's other room. Here, video images of trees are projected onto, and over, black-and-white photographs of similar trees, providing a three-dimensional effect — a ghostly sense of movement. That happens even though, unlike "Tree and Pond," these works are not out to simulate an evolving time span.

Photography, like all art, isn't meant to stand still. Tuori is at the forefront of finding new ways to show that.

Watch for Contributing Visual Art Editor Steven Rosen's FotoFocus blog postings all month. Contact him at srosen@citybeat.com.

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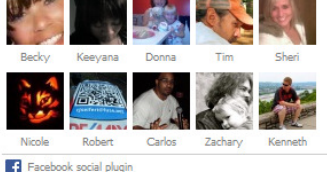
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We've only seen about 5 shows so far, but we to were amazed by the Forest exhibit, a must see!



sabrina
mantle



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