



FotoFocus exhibitions document 'world famous' of four eras

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Herb Ritts: "Cindy Crawford, Ferre 3, Malibu," 1993. Medium Gelatin silver print / The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Gift of Her

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In 1968, pop artist Andy Warhol (1928-1987) famously remarked, "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes."

But photography can make time stand still. Four FotoFocus exhibitions document the "world-famous" of four time periods. It starts with Star Power: Edward Steichen's Glamour Photography at the Taft Museum of Art.

Then in the 1980s, Warhol himself recorded the rich and famous in his Polaroids exhibited in Image Machine: Andy Warhol and Photography at the Contemporary Arts Center.

Herb Ritts (1952-2002) took over as documentarian of celebrity in the late 1980s, including photographing for Warhol's magazine, "Interview." He continued through the beginning of the 21st century as seen in Herb Ritts: L. A. Style at the Cincinnati Art Museum.

And another L. A. photographer, Tyler Shields (1982-2012), is recording today's bold-faced names. His exhibition at Miller Gallery is called "Controlled Chaos."

Oddly that's how Charles Churchward, a design and art director who worked closely with Ritts, decried the current state of photography: "We have been left with makers of controlled chaos."

Nast offered Steichen first break

Best to start with Steichen. Well respected as a painter and photographer, in 1923 magazine magnate Condé Nast offered him the position of chief photographer for Vanity Fair and Vogue magazine to shoot fashion and VIPs.

William A. Ewing in the 2008 "Edward Steichen: In High Fashion, the Condé Nast Years 1923-1937" dubbed Steichen "the de facto inventor of glamour, an aesthetic category that has very much come to the fore in art and photography in the last fifteen years."

Bookending the 20th century's obsession with celebrity, in contrast, Ritts, who also photographed for Condé Nast publications, invented a "relaxed, antighlamour style of celebrity portraiture," according to Paul Martineau in "Herb Ritts: L. A. Style."

In the last decade, Shields has doubled-down on Ritts's "antighlamour" aesthetic in his photographs of Hollywood's royalty, for example, his photos of Lindsay Lohan with a bloody knife and blood dripping from her mouth like a vampire.

Pair photographed 'essence' of models

But let me focus on Steichen and Ritts for their similarities despite their superficial differences. One talent they shared was the ability to capture the "essence" of their sitters.

In 1900 the critic Sadakichi Hartmann called Steichen's portraits "intellectually vivacious . . . he gives us a commentary on the sitter. He is not satisfied showing us how a person looks, but how he thinks the person should look."

Ritts explained in a 1991 interview for the "Santa Fe New Mexican" that "it's not the celebrity quality of the person that makes the photograph interesting. It's letting the true person through that makes the photograph interesting and lasting."

These approaches can be seen in Ritts's portraits of Richard Gere taken in 1977, the first of his photos to attract attention, and Steichen's 1930 half-torso portrait of Gary Cooper.

Cooper stands relaxed, with his hands in his pockets, impeccably dressed in a suit and tie. He engages the viewer with a gaze that is nothing short of smoldering.

Ritts captures a similar look but in Richard Gere Close-Up, the young actor is dressed in a wife-beater t-shirt and actually looks more vulnerable than Cooper.

These aren't the only two pictures I could pluck out of these photographers' bodies of work that are remarkably the similar.

Steichen's iconic 1924 portrait of Gloria Swanson, just her face covered by a lacy veil and staring out so intensely that she's a little frightening, has to be compared with Ritts's Tatjana, Veiled Head, Joshua Tree, 1988. Practically the only difference is the model Tatjana is less focused and a little sleepy-eyed.

Ritts' male nudes like abstract studies

A large portion of the Ritts exhibition is devoted to his male nudes, his conscious bid for art-world legitimacy. He wasn't the only photographer at the time to focus on the male nude as an object of desire.

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Fellow fashion photographer Bruce Weber offered a wholesome, boy-next-door, and Robert Mapplethorpe's nudes are erotic, even pornographic to some.

Ritts's nudes are practically abstract studies. It's not that they aren't graphic, but they could be cropped to make it impossible to identify a body part.

Steichen didn't share Ritts' fixation on the male body, but there is one photo that bears comparison.

In Heavyweight Boxing Champion Primo Camera, 1934, Steichen shows a dramatically lit bare-chested fighter with his head resting on his beefy right hand, a little like the famous Thinker by Rodin.

The light and shadows emphasize the fighter's musculature and it becomes almost abstract, like a Ritts, but it remains a compelling portrait.

FotoFocus in Northern Kentucky

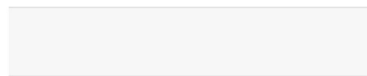
Here are some FotoFocus exhibitions in Northern Kentucky.

At **Baker Hunt Art & Cultural Center**, local photographer Gordon Baer takes A Look Back at a Life in Pictures, which presents his 50+ years documenting the area. Through Oct. 31. 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday. 620 Greenup St., Covington. 859-431-0020, www.bakerhunt.com.

Check out Brad Austin Smith's Flags at the **Behringer-Crawford Museum** in the 700-acre Devou Park. This series of 30 photographs focuses on the American flag in Cincinnati and its neighboring communities. Through Jan. 20, 2013. 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Tuesday-Friday, 1 p.m.-5 p.m., Sunday. 1600 Montague Rd., Covington. 859-491-4003, www.bcmuseum.org.

Reporting Back: A Survey of Documentary Photography at the **Northern Kentucky University Visual Arts Galleries** presents the work of 14 photographers who recorded the good, the bad and the ugly in our world. Through Oct. 26. 9 a.m.-9 p.m., Monday-Friday. Dept. of Visual Arts, Nunn Dr., Highland Heights. 859-572-5148, www.nku.edu.

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