

Toronto's Contact photography festival: 10 shows to see

With over 1,500 artists in 175 venues, the world's premier photography festival can be an overwhelming feast for the eyes. Here's what you shouldn't miss

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One of the pleasures of moving through Toronto during May's month-long photography festival is the unexpected encounter with an image: in bars, business lobbies, stores and cafes, as well as the extensive public exhibitions. Suburban commuters will be confronted with Alejandro Cartagena's posters of Mexican carpoolers and cookie-cutter homes in a subway station. On the waterfront, Sarah Anne Johnson's 144ft mural Best Beach will clad the side of a hotel. The visual is made conscious everywhere, on billboards at prominent intersections (and in eight cities across Canada), street-level kiosks, TV screens on subway platforms and the halls of Union Station, Toronto's busiest transit hub.

When the Scotiabank Contact Photography Festival first began in 1997, anyone with a few bucks could participate. "It was very democratic," says Edward Burtynsky, the internationally renowned photographer and festival board member. "It was so democratic that it wasn't getting any attention. Other institutions weren't really interested."

An early move to curate themed editions started to attract cultural weight and momentum quickly grew. The festival, now in its 19th year, is the largest photography event in the world, with over 1,500 artists exhibited in more than 175 venues. The size and quality of the offerings reflects Toronto's rise as a global hub of image-making over the past decade.

For the first time this year, the festival has avoided any theme, which had lately become an often futile endeavor given the scope. And yet throughout the thousands of images one can detect a strain of existential anxiety in photography's purpose among its ubiquity, says Burtynsky. "Artists are asking, How do you work in a medium where almost everything has been photographed, and if it hasn't it will be soon?"

This fact, says Robert Burley, a prominent Toronto photographer and professor, creates a tension and dialogue between those - mostly older - who continue in the medium's traditions of interpreting the world around them and those younger artists who explore photography in conjunction with other forms to create novel ideas in visual culture. "Increasingly photography is less about the world," he says. "And more about re-sampling and reworking the pre-existing cache of images and ideas which have defined the medium."

From this torrent of images, here are 10 shows not to miss.

Memory Unearthed: The Lodz Ghetto photographs - Henryk Ross

Alongside his official duties taking photographs for identity cards and promoting the industry of the ghetto, Ross risked his life documenting surreptitiously the everyday horrors Polish Jews experienced under the Nazis. Culled from 3,000 negatives that Ross buried to protect and recovered later, the images of suffering and deportations alongside intimate family portraits can elicit ambiguous interpretations and offer a rare look into lives occupied by survival and the end.

Surveillance - André Kértész

Kértész's pioneering work - his unusual compositions and photo essays - created much of the visual language still used today. This exhibition focuses on one of his recurring themes, assembling for the first time images that resonate with longing, intimacy and the menacing leer of the unseen watcher.

The Unseen Seen - Reiner Riedler

Given access to the archives of the Deutsche Kinemathek Museum in Berlin, Riedler manipulates the disappearing materiality of film by photographing backlit reels of famous 35mm movies. The results are mesmerizing irises that often resonate with the film's title in colour and pattern.

Part Picture

Curator Chris Wiley has collected a group of young North American photographers who, in response to the omnipresent and ethereal nature of the digital image, have turned to mediums such as painting and sculpture to form hybrid pictures. Building on the practices of established artists like Jan Groover and James Welling, these works explore the processes and the materiality of photography, often eschewing the camera itself. Light, colour and texture play in abstraction to ask what potentials photography still contains.

Past Picture: Photography and the Chemistry of Intention

Paired with Part Picture, this collection of late 19th and early 20th-century photographs spans 150 years of technique and innovation of such seminal artists as Man Ray, William Henry Fox Talbot and Paul Strand. From cyanotypes to calotypes, the works here reveal photography's interest in transforming everyday objects rather than representing them.

Mark Ruwedel

Winner of the annual \$50,000 Scotiabank Photography Award, American-Canadian Mark Ruwedel has spent his career documenting the intersection of human and geological effects on the western landscapes of the United States and Canada. His stark black and white photos capture the traces, both transitory and long lasting, of human presence on the land, from a ceremonial path through the desert to the empiric railways cut through the continent.

Generations - Annu Palakunnathu Matthew

Collecting 20 years of film and photography work, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's Generations

explores her tripartite British-Indian-American identity through the family photograph. In one series, she uses digital technology to overlap the ghosts of multiple generations to question the interplay of past and present. In another, she creates diptych portraits of American Indian and subcontinental Indian identities, finding similar assumptions and prejudices under the colonial gaze.

Beaux Gestes - Yto Barrada

Engaging with her home city of Tangier through her French-Moroccan identity, Barrada's documentary approach captures the unspectacular of everyday life. But rather than being banal, her photos stand as composed metaphors for the longing and escape that pervade this dead-end city on the edge of fortress Europe.

Watchers, Seekers, Keepers - Vanley Burke

Known as the grandfather of black British photography, Jamaican-born Burke has documented the African diaspora for four decades. Shooting from the insider perspective of a community member, his iconic images intimately reflect back to the community their struggles and their value in creating a new culture in a foreign land.

Broken Steps and Haunted Screens

Of the hundreds of millions of photos taken every day, few are concerned with fine art and yet vernacular photography has long influenced artists. Displaying utilitarian photographs - mugshots, UFO sightings, insurance evidence - alongside Penelope Umbrico's constructed images built from internet photos like Craigslist classifieds, this exhibition makes us question our quotidian relationship with images, and how we've used and created them from past to present.

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