



En Foco's New Works #10

by Alison Devine Nordstrom, Guest Juror, 2006

“The rise of photography as a vehicle for contemporary art, and the interest in visual art as a vehicle for personal exploration of identity and ethnicity appear to have become inextricably linked over the last two decades. Using a variety of techniques to explore a multiplicity of individual histories and understandings, artists have turned to the camera for its unique ability to connect directly to the real worlds around them. In many cases, such work has been supported by yet another phenomenon of this time, the multicultural arts organization, of which En Foco, established in 1974, is a model.

The seven artists selected for special attention this year use the camera to explore both external and internal landscapes, and to link the present to the past. **Stephen Marc**, one of the winners in this year's competition, establishes a high and exemplary standard with his mature and intelligent body of work. Marc was an early adapter to computer manipulation of his pictures, and his lucid blending of handwritten texts with thoughtfully placed images reflects his longstanding mastery of the graphic element. His broad subject is slavery in America, but his specific concerns include its sites of memorialization, the objects and documents associated with it that persist today, and its relationship to contemporary notions of Africa and Africanness. His research has unearthed shackles, manuscripts, tintypes, wood engravings, statues, and buildings; his method is to organize these fragments into a coherent and evocative formal whole, an act corresponding exactly to the conversion of memory and the stuff of circumstance into history. These are pictures that merit study; the union of disparate elements is not only formal but intellectual. As Marc takes in his own racial and personal history, it is transformed into something of both present and past.

If Marc is examining the internal environment of his own historical knowledge and identity, both **Divya Murthy** and **Meg Escudé**, the two other winners, may be said to address their external environments, albeit in idiosyncratic and profoundly personal ways. Murthy has produced a series of strikingly colored, rigidly formatted 360-degree panoramas of urban sprawl in Houston. They are encyclopedic photographs of nothing, and in their empty inclusivity, reflect both a reality and an emotional state and challenge the photographic conventions relating to subject and planned composition. Escudé, on the other hand, chooses a subject that has been famously photographed around the world: the faces and surroundings of an itinerant circus, in this case, in Argentina, where her father comes from.

Conventional treatment of this subject calls for a precious exoticism and a decided otherness that Escudé successfully avoids in favor of a direct and affectionate embrace. The world she portrays is timeless, honest, and lovingly depicted in a rich color palette that hints at nostalgia. One might conjecture that Escudé's interest in the outsiders of her father's culture may have been fueled by her own experience of growing up half Argentinian the United States.

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En Foco is a non-profit organization that nurtures and supports contemporary photographers of African, Asian, Latino, Native American and Pacific Islander heritage. Founded in 1974, it achieves its mission by introducing its artists to a national audience while facilitating the access of their work to local communities, and creating a cultural synergy with curators and arts professionals.

Like Stephen Marc, **Sonya Lawyer** concerns herself with her personal relationship to the past as manifested by visual aspects of African American history. Her subjects are young and beautiful African American women dressed in fashionable clothing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and posed as though seated for formal portraiture. Each piece in this series repeats a single image, alternating it with quilt-like blocks of subtle color. The colors are also the source of such individual image titles as Golden Black, Better Brown, and Royal Blue, perhaps an allusion to the historical emphasis on shades of skin color in the determination of African American beauty and worth. **William Wilson** turns outward to portray the contemporary landscape that is important to his people and culture, but it is clearly a land in danger. Its inhabitants wear gas masks as well as traditional tribal jewelry. The pastoral of an almost endless herd of sheep is disturbed by ominous and threatening cloud formations.

The worlds of **Emilio Bañuelos** and **LaToya Frazier** are bleak, urban, gritty, and grim, and both are rendered in black and white palettes that intensify this mood. Bañuelos focuses on the liminal and transitory circumstances of the traveling American poor--- the almost-homelessness of late night bus stations and cheap ticket transcontinental travel. He shows us people who are usually almost invisible as they wait for their journeys to begin or end; his complex compositions of reflections, shadows and blurs, defines and dignifies them. Frazier's work is even more personal. These are family photographs in a family so deeply broken by addiction, illness and poverty that it is hard to look at them, although we do. By intimately and affectionately showing us something we would not otherwise see, Frazier, like Bañuelos expands our knowledge, vision, and compassion.

The multicultural photography organization exists for many reasons. It is, to be sure, a way in for the excluded, and a source of guidance, model, and inspiration for those to whom the art world may be daunting or unfamiliar. Of equal importance, however, is the service it performs for the mainstream by making new work and new ideas more easily accessible. Voices we might not otherwise hear, visions we might not otherwise see and worlds we might not otherwise be exposed to are made available to all of us, and we are, thereby, enriched and improved.”

Alison Nordström is the Curator of Photographs at George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, New York. Previously the Director and Senior Curator of the Southeast Museum of Photography in Daytona Beach, Florida, she has curated over one hundred photographic exhibitions. She is the author of "Making a Journey," in Photographs Objects Histories, as well as numerous articles in scholarly journals. She has a particular interest in contemporary art that mixes media and disciplines, and in projects that trace the histories of representation. Nordström holds a BA in English Literature, an MLS with museum emphasis, and a PhD in Cultural and Visual Studies.

New Works acts as a creative incubator, enabling artists to create or complete an in-depth, photographic series exploring themes emanating from their personal experiences, and providing the infrastructure for a professional exhibition in the New York area.

En Foco is a non-profit organization that nurtures and supports contemporary fine art and documentary photographers of diverse cultures, primarily/specifically, U.S. residents of Latino, African and Asian heritage, and Native Peoples of the Americas and the Pacific. Founded in 1974, it introduces artists to local communities and national audiences, creating a cultural synergy with the general public, curators and arts professionals through exhibitions, publications, workshops and events.