

The Center for Photography at Woodstock's First Upstate Photography Biennial

This summer, the Center for Photography at Woodstock has launched the first Upstate Photography Biennial, a landmark new exhibition series celebrating the diversity and vitality of photographic practices in upstate New York.

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by Robert E. Gerhardt



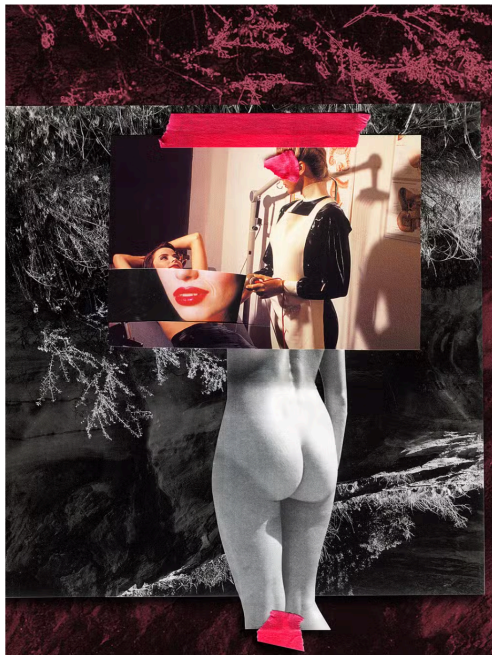
Morgan Gwenwald's series "The Revolution Will Not be Televised" was originally her BFA thesis project, where she photographed fellow members of a lesbian feminist collective as she taught them how to shoot rifles in the nearby woods against the backdrop of the 1970s liberation movements. But in the end, the work was rejected by the program, and she turned away from the art world, but did not stop photographing. She contributed her photographs to grassroots efforts and it was published in small presses of women's and queer communities from the 1970s through the 1990s.

"By the time my work was formally rejected by the art department I knew that the art world was not interested in documentation of the lesbian activist community. My viewpoint was treated as irrelevant. I was not interested in a career in commercial photography and did not want to make images for products or weddings," Gwenwald says. "I wanted to focus on the life and activities of the women around me. Even though I had very few avenues in which to share my work while living in Tallahassee in the 1970s I kept making photographs. I felt we were on a unique and important journey that deserved to be documented. I saw my photography as a central part of my activism."

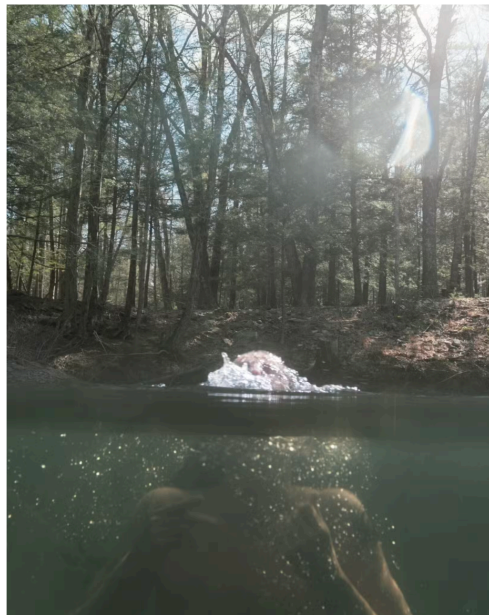




from the series 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised', 1974 © Morgan Gwenwald



I Feel Everything, 2025 © Allison DeBritz



From the series Through a River Darkly, 2025 © Adrianna Ault



Portrait of Laura, from the series 'Placements', 2024 © Seth David Rubin

Now the series is part of the First Upstate Photography Biennial on view at the [The Center for Photography at Woodstock \(CPW\)](#). Organized by curators Adam Giles Ryan and Marina Chao, the exhibitions bring together the work of 39 artists who use photography in its many forms to explore many issues relevant in the world today, from identity and the meaning of place, healthcare and the fragility of the human body, climate change and the physical and psychic spaces we inhabit.

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The idea for the biennial came from the open call that the CV held when it opened its new building in Kingston, New York in January of 2025. Then they received more than 300 submissions from local artists for space in one of the galleries. The idea of giving these local artists more space in the gallery was a logical next step. “We selected the vast majority of the artists in the exhibition through an open call, along with several artists that we invited,” Ryan and Chao explain. “We reviewed every submission of the over 400 we received and responded to a number of things, including the visual and conceptual impact the work made on both of us and the way the work and approaches to photography worked together as a group. We wanted to represent as much of the state above New York City as we could, based primarily on the submissions.”

Many of the artists selected also produced their photographic work through historic processes, tintypes, pinhole cameras, and cyanotypes. Black and white photography is also well represented, along with longer form documentary projects, both newly undertaken and some that are more historical, like Gwenwald’s. And the artists themselves are equally as diverse, and all have their own stories on how their work came to be.



Six Legs on Bar Le Bain New York NY, 2025 © Meryl Meisler



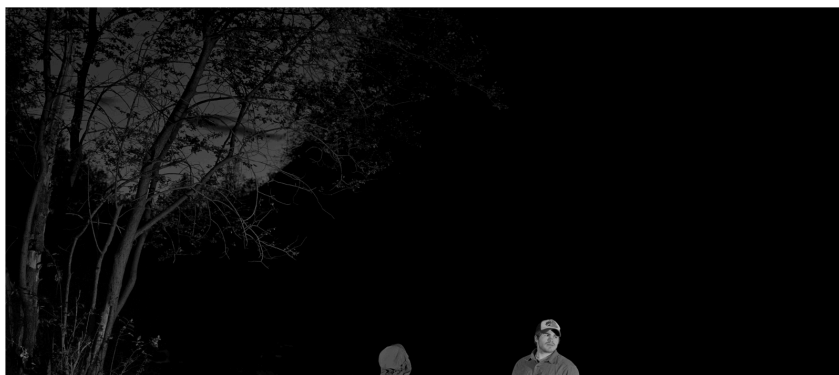
Red shorts (Stay Ready), New Orleans, 2021 © Sasha Phylars-Burgess



“A Monster in the shape of a woman”#10, 2022 © Judit German-Heins



© Raymond Meeks





Dan and Paul by the River, 2025 © Kevin Williamson

Meryl Meisler, whose project “Queer Friendly Nightlife Now” is included in the exhibition, was inspired by Brassi’s photographs of Paris nightlife in the 1930’s. Meisler began the project when she attended her first major disco event in 1977: COYOTE Hooker’s Masquerade Ball at the Copacabana. “I dressed in my childhood Girl Scout uniform and brought my camera. It was exhilarating,” Meisler recalls. “I immediately knew this queer-friendly disco scene was for me. I loved the variety of fabulous people—of all ages, genders, sexual identities, races, and ethnicities. The fashion, music, and atmosphere were unforgettable.”

Meisler returned to her darkroom roots after a multi-decade break while working on her first book. She credits Larry Lewis, the operations manager at CPW at the time with reacquainting her with the darkroom and getting back into printing. “Today, I’m back in the saddle, using the same medium-format 6×6 camera, flash, film, and paper that I used in the 1970s to photograph queer-friendly nightlife,” she tells. “The only differences are multigrade filters, updated chemistry, and the wisdom and hindsight that come with age.”



Truck Load Out, 2006 © An-My Lê

Adam Ryan and Marina Chao did not go into the planning of the exhibition thinking the works on view would highlight historical processes specifically, but when they received numerous submissions that worked in those forms, it became a thread that drew the exhibition together. “It speaks to the uniquely technological foundation of photography in terms of artistic practices born before the digital age and the relatively short history of the medium,” say Ryan and Chao. “Photographers working today are not so far away from its origins, though of course that is changing more and more rapidly, as papers disappear and analogue processing becomes less readily available commercially. The insistence on analogue processes pushes against these losses and the march towards a frictionless, AI-inflected image landscape and is a political statement as well as an artistic one.”

Onaje Benjamin’s series “Storytelling in black and White” looks to document the work of SNUG Community Outreach, a program focused on reducing gun violence. He was drawn to the story after working for almost two decades as a re-entry counselor for the Dutchess County Sheriff’s

... office at the jail, and his lived experience as a survivor of America's system of mass incarceration.

"My artistic intentions have been to accurately represent all aspects of the SNUG initiative to reduce gun violence," says Onaje Benjamin. "I have sought to capture the responses held at the sites of shootings, the sense of safety and community at gatherings and the grief rituals and vigils held to honor those harmed and killed; in addition to the support of politicians, religious leaders, victims and former offenders to end gun violence. They are visual representations of the adage 'It Takes a Village.'"



Untitled, 2024 © Onaje Benjamin



Untitled, 2024 © Onaje Benjamin



From the series 'Dead Letter Room', 2022 © Allie Tsubota

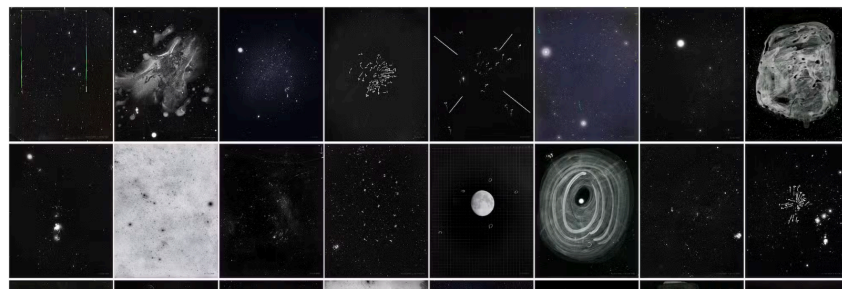


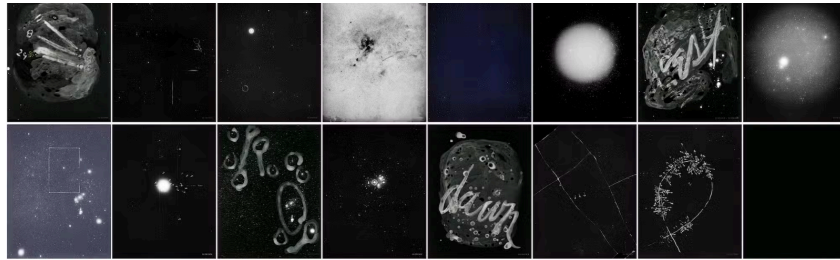
© Sofia Peeters

That adage holds true for the CPW as well. The Center is more than just an exhibition space. It works as a community space that interacts with many local photographers regularly through talks, workshops, digital media lab, and book press. It is this community that makes the CPW such an important, and vibrant, space. "The many thoughtful and ambitious artists included in the biennial reflect the remarkable strength of the photographic community that has taken root here," tell Ryan and Chao. "Our hope is that visitors to the exhibition leave with a greater understanding of the photographic community upstate, though this is of course only one iteration of the show and one slice through it, which will continue as the series does."

The Center for Photography at Woodstock's 1st Upstate Photography Biennial is on view through September 6, 2026. More information can be found on its [website](#).

There will also be a catalog accompanying the Biennial, which will be available soon for sale on CPW online [shop](#).





Night Studio: Temporal Dislocations – 365 Days; January, 2025 © Ann BurkeDaly and Marion Belanger



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Robert Gerhardt is a New York based photographer and freelance writer. His photographs and writings have been published nationally and internationally including in The Hong Kong Free Press, The Guardian, The New York Times, and The Diplomat.

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