

Review: Center for Photography at Woodstock's first Upstate Photography Biennial is ambitious, uneven

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Meryl Meisler – Ram Belle With Madam Pride Statue and Disco Ball, La Victoria, NY, NY, June 2025

re portrait of upstate New York as seen through the lenses of 39 artists living and working throughout the region. The [Upstate Photography Biennial](#), the first of its kind, seeks to highlight the breadth and depth of its artistic traditions.

Taken as a whole, the work that sprawls across CPW's two first-floor galleries counters the Edenic images of, say, Frederic Church or Thomas Cole, instead conjuring an unstable terrain that flickers and fractures with each new intervention. What emerges is an uneasy relationship to the idea of the "natural": organic matter rendered unfamiliar, objects crafted from dead trees ripped from the ground near an artist's home, gender pushed far beyond its essentialized assignment.

In the first gallery, amid an onslaught of dizzying geometries and landscapes caught between devastation and regrowth, the eye settles on a spartan, wood-framed image with the texture and tone of graphite. Seven wooden stools arranged in a circle, each marked with an "x," occupy an uneven ground slanted toward the viewer. Across the gallery, three stools echoing those in the image are clustered on the wood floor around a square white column.

Sam Margevicius' project began with the simple, repeated gesture of creating a stool by hand using wood from fallen trees near his home in Bearsville. The stools proliferate in various iterations throughout CPW, and - while they may fall short of their stated aim to "invite... rest and conversation," in part due to their diminutive size and stature - their "Where's Waldo"-esque recurrence brings a welcome air of self-aware unseriousness.

The subtle surrealism of Elizabeth Pedinotti Haynes takes shape in sun-drenched scenes of unkempt domesticity on the adjacent wall. Mangled cut-out paper forks loom precariously over loose crumbs; coffee grounds cohere into a face peering apprehensively up at us from the kitchen sink; a tiny wishbone - or is it a cherry stem? - protrudes from a rotting yellow fruit like a spindly leg in a too-big shoe. Haynes' tablescapes find curious reverberation in the disorienting "Placements" of Seth David Rubin across the gallery, in which he uses mirrors and reflective panes of glass to create the illusion of collage.

A grid of Meryl Meisler's black-and-white images of queer New York nightlife line the passage leading from the first space to the second. I admit I was initially indignant to see her corseted queens with their mile-high hair relegated to this nondescript no-man's-land between galleries.

But as I paused to study the carefully tended hands that snake through the work - some taloned, a few sheathed in faux-leather fingerless gloves, one grasping her lover's well-defined jawline - I recollected a story Meisler has often told in interviews. As she was eating lunch at Bizarre bar in Bushwick with a friend one day, the owner, Jean-Stephane Sauvaire, approached her and proposed that she show her work in the bar's basement. Meisler initially turned him down; her photographs had by this point been shown in proper museums and galleries, where it was sure not to be drunkenly torn off the wall. He admonished her not to be a snob.

Meisler later had an epiphany as she gazed up at a disco ball glittering above her in the bar's bathroom, suddenly realizing this was exactly where her work was meant to be seen. Bizarre went on to exhibit her photographs and serve as the publisher of her 2014 book *A Tale of Two Cities: Disco Era Bushwick*.

Intentional or not, the informality of the work's CPW reprisal is quite fitting after all.

Yet I couldn't help dream of alternate configurations: What would emerge if "Ram Belle With Madam Pride Statue and Disco Ball" were placed in conversation with the Dante-inspired, tree-branch-and-hair entanglements of Tanya Marcuse on view in the front gallery? And is it too on-the-nose to wish the languid forms of Lyle Ashton Harris' reclining lovers (occupying a back corner of the second space) were paired with Meisler's high-femme performers?

The back gallery is filled to the brim with portraits and still lifes, negatives and collages - some framed, a few pinned directly to the wall, others relegated to vitrines and interspersed with books and zines. Viktorsha Uliyanova's "Nina" (part of her installation "Quieter than Water, Lower than Grass"), suspended in the center of the space, commands attention. Nearly floor-to-ceiling sheaths of recycled fabric, cyanotype-printed with photographs of Soviet panel buildings, hang in a layered, rectangular configuration, creating a series of partially

Kate Steciw's fractured still lifes echo the collage-based installation of Troy's Allison DeBritz - though, positioned diagonally from one another with Uliyanova's installation in between, it is difficult to draw comparisons. Steciw, based in Willow, drew images from stock libraries and social media in addition to her own archive. She printed them on canvas, which she then cut and collaged onto large panels. The resulting compositions evoke product photography, though their interior logic and exterior function crumble upon closer inspection, eliciting questions of circulation, manipulation, and transmission.

At CPW, there's something for everyone, to be sure, if only you can focus your eye for long enough to find it. Biennials are by definition plagued by sensory overload, and at CPW, the curators are working with limited space. But paring back the number of works - in many cases, there were several per artist - would perhaps have allowed for visual and conceptual echoes across works to emerge organically.

Before exiting, I happened to venture into the stairway off the Meisler-dominated passage. Above me hovered another Margevicius stool, in the form of a chromogenic print in a painted pine frame, installed awkwardly on the underside of the staircase.

It is this unassuming alcove, inside the museum but beyond the gallery, that best captures the spirit of the region's artistic legacy. Utilitarian yet sparsely elegant, with a single gesture toward craft and an air of wry humor, the makeshift gallery is a fertile reprieve for those who find themselves off the beaten path.