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### PHOTO OP

Thanks to Michael Mehl and Ann Kinser, the Fotoseptiembre Festival has become a major art event

By JASMINA WELLINGHOFF  
Photography JANET ROGERS

Photography may still be viewed by some as the stepchild of the art world, but that's definitely not the case during the Fotoseptiembre USA International Photography Festival, which takes place this month in San Antonio and the Hill Country. The brainchild of photographer/musician Michael Mehl and his graphic artist/illustrator wife, Ann Kinser, the month-long event has grown from a modest 12 exhibitions in 1996 to an international showcase that in 2002 included 62 venues, 75 exhibits and 230 artists.



This year's edition will be somewhat smaller, with about 40 solo and group shows in San Antonio, Boerne and New Braunfels. In addition, Mehl has personally curated nine Web-gallery exhibits featuring artists from Spain, France, Mexico, Singapore, India, Italy and Minnesota. Fotoseptiembre USA is part of the city-promoted Fall Arts Festivals package, another Mehl/Kinser concept designed to appeal to more sophisticated, so-called cultural tourists.

We recently sat down with the two visionary co-founders to talk about the festival, art photography and related topics.

**SA WOMAN:** What prompted you to start Fotoseptiembre in San Antonio?

**Michael Mehl:** In 1986 I moved to San Antonio (from Mexico City) and started a photo business here and began to exhibit my work. But I soon noticed there was no context within which photo artists could exhibit their work and gain more visibility. In Mexico there was already a successful festival in September called Fotoseptiembre. So that gave me the idea. If you provide a forum and context for something, there's more of an impact. Fotoseptiembre USA has helped develop a market for photography here.

**Ann Kinser:** Now it's not unusual for an exhibit to sell out.

**SA WOMAN:** Is the festival's focus art photography?

**MM:** Yes. The notion of art photography, however, has many interpretations. The best way to define it is to think of photographers who decide to pursue a body of work because they have a personal interest in the matter — as opposed to commissioned commercial work — and then produce a series of images that together become a personal form of expression.

It doesn't matter whether they are photographing landscapes, the human figure or whatever, as long as they are compelled to create those images from this individual perspective. Most art forms derive from an inner source, and it's no different with photography. To qualify for the festival a submission must be a coherent body of photo-based work, though other media could be involved. We seek out artists whose work is eclectic and fresh, showing a commitment to craft and vision.

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**SA WOMAN:** How do you approach your own work?

**MM:** Doing a traditional photo of something ceased to appeal to me more than 20 years ago. My intent is to create an abstraction of reality — to use photos of reality as building blocks to create a new composite image. It's the difference between creating and recording.

**SA WOMAN:** What are some of the techniques used by contemporary art photographers?

**MM:** In the most basic sense, there is a lot of pin-hole photography. You can alter reality in various ways using that old technique. Other approaches may involve hand-painted photos; collages, both physical and digital; multiple exposures; layering of images; (staged) tableau photos; and digital manipulation, of course. By the way, people have been manipulating photographs to obtain desired effects since the beginning of photography. Even abstraction is not a modern idea. Cave people were already abstracting images.

**SA WOMAN:** What do you say to people who doubt the value of photography as art because, they think, photos can be reproduced at will?

**MM:** That's an anachronistic argument. Etchings of old masters were also reproductions! Today, a lot of photographers limit their editions to 10 or 12 pieces. Actually, it's unlikely for anyone to sell more than one or two, maybe three, reproductions of the same image. Photography has a huge market.

**SA WOMAN:** How about the longevity of the pictures?

**MM:** Photographers are very concerned about the longevity of their product. The craft requires it. Today, 80 percent to 90 percent of printing is done digitally with archival-quality inks on specialty papers. If not exposed to the sun, these prints will last 100 to 200 years. I print my work on durable plastic (polymeric) sheets and then coat them with another polymeric laminate, which becomes part of the final product. It's a time capsule at this point, indestructible unless you take a knife to it. Artists also print on stone, canvas, metal plates, again with archival inks.

**SA WOMAN:** The impact of digital technology must be considerable, is it not?

**AK:** Yes, huge! It has allowed even amateurs to develop a body of work to exhibit. A digital camera and a computer have made the process of making pictures more accessible, both in terms of needed equipment and financially. You no longer need a darkroom, for instance. You can also manipulate the images more easily if that's what you want to do. Basically, digital technology has leveled the playing field and allowed more people to explore the story they want to tell. It has also allowed us to organize such a large festival, just the two of us, something we could not have done without the Internet. We are a private festival with no funding from outside.

**SA WOMAN:** Let's talk some more about that market. What's the range of prices buyers have paid here and elsewhere for photo-based artwork?

**MM:** Here in San Antonio from, say, \$100 to \$5,000, depending on the artist. But San Antonio is not a big art or collectors' market. The prices paid here are not comparable to Houston or New York. In the general U.S. and world market, the price range goes from the low hundreds to the upper hundred thousands, and in some cases into the millions. Vintage photos at auctions have been going up consistently, reaching last year the millions level. But for the most part, in the art market as a whole, there are only a few individuals at any given time whose work commands high prices.

**SA WOMAN:** Could you describe the selection process?

**MM:** We are a decentralized event, and that's what makes us unique. Other festivals in the world are controlled by a single organization or governmental agency with rather rigid rules. The selection in our case is done on three different levels. Some galleries/museums organize their own exhibits in the September time slot and simply register with the festival. We also get submissions directly and then present them to venues in San Antonio. Typically, that involves us as curators. This year we are not doing that.

The third level is our Web galleries. Those represent our curatorial statement. In fact, our Web presence gives us top ranking in Google searches. Also, we don't pick a theme. Themes don't allow for the eclecticism that we like to promote. The festival really has its own cycles and rhythms, and we let it go the way it goes; it's very organic. We avoid being gatekeepers, seeing ourselves instead as door-openers, providing equal opportunities for every participating artist.

**SA WOMAN:** Fotoseptiembre has grown over the years. Is it where you want it to be?

**AK:** Each time after the first festival it doubled in size. It got really big in 2002 with 75 exhibits and hundreds of artists. For the last several years it has fluctuated between 40 and 50 shows. We wanted to bring it down



a bit to a more manageable size.

**SA WOMAN:** Besides the Web, how do you promote it?

**MM:** Our Christmas cards (designed by Kinser) and Ann's apple pie are internationally renowned. They are most effective PR tools. We get appreciative notes about her apple pie.

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**SA WOMAN:** You mean you entertain all the artists who participate?

**MM and AK** smile and nod.

**SA WOMAN:** Are there any new developments this year?

**MM:** What's new this year is that all three museums (the Witte, San Antonio Museum of Art and the McNay) are participating. Also, we have more participation in the Hill Country. Boerne alone has several shows. As you have noticed, the local galleries will show mostly, but not exclusively, local and regional artists. That's the result of us not curating exhibits this year. We are the ones who usually bring in that balance with artists from other countries. The Web galleries, however, are all international artists. But it's good that so many regional photographers are being showcased. Remember, the idea behind Fotoseptiembre was to create a forum for local and regional artists to present their work.

**SA WOMAN:** Could you mention a few specific exhibits of interest?

**MM:** The (poet and Beat generation photographer) Allen Ginsberg show at the San Antonio Museum of Art is a comprehensive exhibit supported by additional events such as a dramatic reading, a poetry performance and a lecture. That's certainly an important exhibit.

At the Witte, they will be displaying for the first time old photos of life on the Texas frontier from their historical collection. At the Mexican Cultural Institute we'll have the Mariana Yampolsky show put together by the foundation that takes care of her estate. It's a show that has legs. For those not familiar with Yampolsky's work, she was an American-born Mexican artist whose photos eloquently captured Mexican traditional imagery in a more abstract style. (Living artists are represented in most other venues.) The C-Art Studio is just a small place, but it presents really good work. This time it's the work of San Antonio College instructor Rebecca Dietz. Doug Fogelson from Chicago is also an interesting artist based on what I have seen of his work. He uses in-camera multiple exposures to create graphically very interesting patterns. That's at the International Center. There are also Richard Kline at the Southwest School of Art and Craft, John Moler at the New Braunfels Public Library, Al Rendon at Rendon Photography & Fine Art and so much more.



Generally speaking, we try to equalize the range of work presented so that no particular exhibit has undue importance. We discourage blockbuster shows; they detract from the rest of the participants, inversely impacting the festival's sustainability and recognition as a whole. (For complete listings go to [www.fotoseptiembreusa.com](http://www.fotoseptiembreusa.com)).

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**SA WOMAN:** Is the exhibited artwork for sale?

**MM:** Yes, for the most part. The museum exhibits, such as the ones at the Witte and SAMA, are obviously the exceptions.

**SA WOMAN:** What gives you, the two co-founders, the most satisfaction?

**AK:** When Michael and I go to the openings and we see people of all ages and walks of life carrying around our program booklet, discussing and comparing the various exhibits, talking about the ones they plan to see or not — seeing that our festival resonates with the public and creates a buzz every September — this gives us great pleasure and a satisfying sense of accomplishment.



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