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Photo fest gaining audience on the Web Web Posted: 08/26/2008 5:59 CDT

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Over the past four years or so, the organizers of FOTOSEPTIEMBRE USA have noticed "substantial increases" in traffic to the Web site for the annual photography festival.

"It got to the point where I was saying, 'We really need to do something about it,'" says festival director Michael Mehl.

That led to a redesign of the festival's site — www.fotoseptiembreusa.com — a project that took about six months.

"We've added a whole lot of functionality to it, and it's very simple, very fast," says Mehl, who produces the annual month-long festival with coordinator Ann Kinser and Web designer Paul Vaughn.

They also made the site PDA-friendly with the festival's international audience in mind.

"One of the things we figured is we need to make this more nimble and more accessible to all kinds of viewers," Mehl says. "And our Asian viewership and European viewership (are) accessing the Web site through their phones and PDAs besides their computers at home."

The redesign was also important because this year organizers decided to stop printing a full program. It is now available online as a PDF along with a "quick sheet" listing of events and a Web calendar.

The festival started in 1996 with about 12 events. This year, it features about 50 events with exhibitions at various venues around San Antonio and beyond.

A "populist" festival, FOTOSEPTIEMBRE USA is open to all so long as the exhibit or event is registered by the July 1 deadline. But this year, organizers decided to introduce a series of "signature" shows, among them "The Mini Series," a group of exhibitions curated by Mehl on display at the Intituto Cultural de México. "The Mini Series" features the work of six photographers, including dreamlike images by Japanese photographer Reiko Imoto and erotic portraits by Spanish photographer Marcelo Isarrualde.

"Those are artists that I selected from my international pool of artists. I'm not going to use the word 'young' because that doesn't apply, but they're all exploring their own personal aesthetics, and it's kind of their own fresh approach to what they're doing," Mehl says. "And I have to open a big parenthesis here. I do not think that anybody is doing anything different anywhere in the world in any art form that hasn't been done before. But having said that, what we look for then are people who have a commitment to their craft, who have a commitment to developing their body of work, who have a commitment to developing new visions within their own bodies of work, and who consistently produce work."

"That's important to us. We have never believed in the notion of a blockbuster artist or a blockbuster event. That completely negates the purpose of the festival," he says. "The festival is in our minds a big equalizer of artists, and it provides equal opportunity for everybody to hang themselves with their own rope."

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