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Fotoseptiembre offers the bright, mundane

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By **Elda Silva** - Express-News

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A wrong number led James L. Gonzalez to the right place.

After about two years of preparation, the photographer was ready to show his work. He had the stamp of approval from Michael Mehl, director of Fotoseptiembre USA. All he needed was a venue to secure a spot in the festival lineup. He thought he was calling a place that might have a studio for rent. Instead he got the American Payroll Association.

"This may be your lucky day," the voice at the other end of the line said.

And Gonzalez does, indeed, feel fortunate to have found a home for "Pictures Without a Story," now on view at the association's office at 660 N. Main Ave.

"I was pleased as could be that it was in such a nice building that had lots of art already in it," Gonzalez says.

Now in its 15th year, the international photography festival — which takes place largely in September, as the name indicates — features dozens of exhibits and events.

Gonzalez's show is one of Fotoseptiembre's signature exhibitions, that is, an exhibit of work selected and sanctioned by the organizers. It is also one of two shows curated by Mehl featuring work by photographers graduating from the ranks of what he calls "accomplished amateurs." Mehl worked with Gonzalez and John Keoni Viriyapunt, whose exhibit "Alapi'i" is at Silo, 1133 Austin Highway.

"This has to do with our notion of being a community festival," Mehl says. "They're many layers to that notion of being a community festival. One of them in this case is being able to develop what we would term 'accomplished amateurs.' Which at this point — once they've had their first (curated) exhibit in a large festival — they're not amateurs anymore. They're accomplished photographers."

In a way, Gonzalez, 54, has been preparing for this exhibit for much longer than two years. He has been an avid photographer since he was in his early teens, shooting images with a borrowed World War II-era Argus C3 rangefinder camera.

"My photography since I was a kid was about trying to show things as art — everyday objects as art," says Gonzalez, a software engineer.

For "Pictures Without Stories," he opted to train his lens on the ground, shooting several of the photographs in a parking lot one sweltering day last July while waiting on a car repair. He uses parking curbs and lines, geometric shapes and arrows painted on the asphalt to create abstract images. In "Purgatory, Utah," "Sun II," and "What we know of the universe," Gonzalez gives a patch in the pavement the Warhol treatment in vibrant red, yellow and black.

"My pictures to me, especially in this show, are more of a blend of minimalism and pop art," he says. "Especially right here, you can see the pop art aspect of it, and that's why the colors, too, are very saturated. In Warhol pop art, it's images that are more commercially made. These are commercially made, but without a brand name on it, but it's the same idea of trying to create an icon — iconic image with things that are found every day."

"Pictures Without a Story" represents a milestone for the photographer.

"It's a quantum leap to go from not showing to showing," he says. "It seems like it's a small difference, but to get there takes so much energy and a kind of

Fotoseptiembre snapshots

More highlights from the 15th anniversary Fotoseptiembre USA:

Already open

"Small Town Texas," poetic scenes of Floresville, Devine, Cuero and other towns photographed by Ricardo Romo. Through Oct. 4. Witte Museum, 3801 Broadway, (210) 357-1900.

Photography by Kemp Davis and Jaroslav Poncar and paintings by Sylvia Benitez. Through Sept. 26. Gallery Nord, 2009 N.W. Military Hwy., (210) 348-0088.

Tuesday

"There and Back Again: Celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the Moon Landing," photographs by Apollo 11 astronauts Neil Armstrong, Edwin Aldrin and Michael Collins. Through Sept. 30. Artistic Endeavors Gallery, 418 Villita, Building 24. (210) 222-2497.

Wednesday

"Far Places Close: Photographic Essays of South Asia" by Brenda Davidson-Shaddox, Thomas Neff and Luisa Wheeler. Through Oct. 11. Art Gallery, UTSA, 6900 N. Loop 1604 W., (210) 458-4402.

Thursday

"The History of the Future," photographs by Nancy Sutor, Michael Berman and Julian Cardona focused on the desert Southwest and border issues. Through Nov. 14. Also: "Black Sites 1" by Ron Binks and "Extensions" by Jason Willome. Blue Star Contemporary Art Center, Blue Star Arts Complex, 1400 S. Alamo St., No. 116, (210) 227-6960.

"Photographic Encounters: Humanity in Nature," works by Arturo Almeida, Yolanda Andrade, Carlos Betancourt, Alicia Candiani, Alfredo de Stefano and Cecilia Paredes. Through Sept. 30. San Antonio International Center, 203 S. St. Mary's St.

Friday

"SueOos," photos by Roxanne R. Haynes. Through Sept. 30. El Sol Studios, 936 S. Alamo St., (210) 226-9700.

Saturday

"El MEXico de Leo Matiz," images by the Colombian photographer who became world renowned, with work in Look and Life, after he moved to Mexico City. Also: "The Mini-Series II," exhibits by Fernanda Chemale. Tom

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confidence that once you're done, you're sort of changed, because now you know you can do it."

Like Gonzalez, Viriyapunt finds beauty in the mundane in "Alapai'i — Series 2." The name of the show comes from the Hawaiian word for steps or stairs, and that's exactly what the Aloha State native shot for in the exhibit.

"I've just always been fascinated with stairs," says Viriyapunt, 41, a graphic designer who runs his own advertising business.

Viriyapunt began working on the images for the show in September, shooting stairways in San Antonio, Las Vegas, New York and Bangkok. He digitally manipulates his photographs to amp up the color in images such as "Green McNay," taken in the Stieren Center. He also injects color into images such as "Blue Apple," a photograph of the glass staircase at the flagship Apple Store in New York. Photographed from below, the stairs fan out like a palm frond, a blur of feet visible through the translucent steps.

"The color really adds that extra level to the photo," Viriyapunt says. "It's very mysterious, very ghosted. People say 'What is that?' I say, 'Oh, they're steps; they're feet.'"

In "Red Dream," taken at a hotel in Bangkok, the distorted image of a red sofa is reflected in glass panels like a mirage.

"For me, the composition is very important," Viriyapunt says. "It's very geometric. I like to capture a moment. For me, it's seeing things that I think other people don't see."

Viriyapunt earned a degree in photography from the San Antonio Art Institute.

"And then, I said, 'What am I going to do with this, being a fine art photographer?' " he says. "So I went to San Antonio College and I got my degree in advertising there."

Last year, when business began to slow down, Viriyapunt decided to refocus on his first love. He approached Mehl about doing a show for Fotoseptiembre USA.

"I told him, 'I want to get back into this. What do I need to do to get into Fotoseptiembre?'" Viriyapunt says. "And he said, 'Well, you need to come up with a series of work.'"

Viriyapunt exhibited "Alapai'i ñ Series I" at Silo in July. He plans to put together a coffee table book of his stair-themed images.

"I think I will probably always be known as the guy who takes pictures of stairs," he says. "I'm going to Italy next month for a wedding, and everyone says, 'They have great stairs over there.' And I get these e-mails and text messages and calls from friends that say, 'I saw the greatest stairs.' It's really funny."

"Pictures Without a Story" is at the American Payroll Association through Nov. 24. "Alapai'i ñ Series 2" is at Silo through Oct. 30. For a complete schedule of Fotoseptiembre USA exhibits and events go to www.safotofestival.com.

Drahos, Alastair Magnaldo, Philipp Scholz Rittermann, Erwin Staeheli and Berthold Steinhilber. "Nueveo LeUn," images from the archives of the Fototeca de Nuevo LeUn. And "The Way I Sl It," photography by SAY Si students and alumni. Through Oct. 25. Instituto Cultural de MExico, Hemis-Fair Park, (210) 223-5100.

Sept. 10
"So Much Art, So Little Time," a 30-year retrospective of works by Joan Frederick. Through Sept. 30. Carver Community Cultural Center, 226 N. Hackberry St., (210) 207-2719.

Sept. 11
"Culinary Delights," still-life compositions, including food by New Orleans photographer David Halliday. Through Feb. 21. San Antonio Museum of Art, 200 W. Jones Ave., (210) 978-8100.

Sept. 17
"The Universe Next Door," photographs by Abelardo Morell that discover magic in ordinary objects and scenes. Also: A solo exhibition of photos by Kim Borst. Through Nov. 8. Southwest School of Art & Craft, 300 Augusta St., (210) 224-1848.

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