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Fotoseptiembre kicks off in San Antonio

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Photography might be the most prevalent art form. At least that's what Michael Mehl saw 15 years ago when he started the international photography festival Fotoseptiembre USA.

"Back when I started the festival, I wrote that photography was the most pervasive art form of society. It was nothing surprising because you could see the moment coming," Mehl, Fotoseptiembre director and founder, said. "Electronics have made us a visual society."

Now people can take pictures with camera phones, upload images to Facebook and share them on Flickr. Anyone can take and share a photograph.

Mehl's Fotoseptiembre also is prolific and democratic. Seeping into late August and early November, the festival features works of roughly 65 photographers and 50 different venues. If people can meet the deadline requirements, they can be involved.

"One of the important things about our festival is that we really pride ourselves in being inclusive and eclectic," Mehl said. "It was really important that if we were a festival, we would be artist-driven."

That involves including as many exhibits as possible not making judgments of who can participate; and giving the public free access to exhibits. It's what Mehl calls a "plug-and-play" festival.

Exhibits also aren't in traditional galleries. Photos will hang in restaurants and offices, the city's airport and the Episcopal Church of Reconciliation. There are even exhibits in New Braunfels and Boerne.

The photos can be documentary-style or creative endeavors. Ramin Samandari has a Fotoseptiembre event at his Blue Star studio space, Magical Realism, and a non-Fotoseptiembre exhibit at the Joan Grona Gallery.

Samandari's works at Magical Realism are large black-and-white digital prints of clouds. The ones at Joan Grona depict local and Austin demonstrations after the presidential election in Iran, in which incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad emerged as the victor under a cloud of international suspicion.

Clouds were something Samandari noticed during his childhood in Iran. He left Iran at 17, a year before the country's monarchy was overthrown.

"We used to sleep outside in the summertime and look up at the sky," Samandari said.

Rebecca Dietz's "Closer," a series of solarized black-and-white prints, will be on display at the High Wire Arts Gallery. In a world of digital proliferation, Dietz works primarily in film, which she said offers ample opportunities.

"I think you start to have a lot of range to experiment with," Dietz said. "Digital does really well, but it does one slice of the pie."

The Instituto Cultural de México in HemisFair Park features one of the signature exhibits, "The Way I Sí It." The exhibit consists of the work of older students and recent alumni of Say Sí, who range in age from 17 to 21. The students have worked with photography for at least a year.

"The students are definitely looking through the camera in so many different ways," said Guillermina Zabala, media arts director of SAY Sí and curator of the SAY Sí photography exhibit. "A lot of the students are very creative. We try to encourage them to not just be technically prepared but explore and be creative."

The festival stretches into the realm of film. Cambridge independent filmmaker Allie Humenuk will present her documentary "Shadow of the House," which follows the Cuban-born, now-American photographer Abelardo Morell.

The Southwest School of Art & Craft will preview the film, with Humenuk and Morell present at the opening.

"The Universe Next Door," an exhibit of Morell's works, will open Sept. 17 at the school.

To Humenuk, the two fields have stark differences.

"The nature of moving images is that you see time. You see 24 frames per second. You're moving through space," Humenuk said.

But the two aren't all different. Morell is renowned for using slow shutter speeds, sometimes allowing light to leak onto the frame for seven or eight hours.



COURTESY

Clouds are a recurring theme in the photographs of Ramin Samandari.

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"That's where I feel like his process mirrors mine," Humenuk said. "In that sense, he's playing with time."

Emily Messer | 210SA contributor

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