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Taiwanese artists play pivotal part in photography festival

Organizers honor partnership with sister city.

By Elda Silva
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The name is Fotoseptiembre USA, but organizers Michael Mehl and Ann Kinser learned long ago that a single month isn't enough to contain the photography festival that since its inception has grown to occupy more calendar space.

That means no summer vacation for the duo.

"We can't go anywhere," says Mehl, director of the festival. "Technically we can't go anywhere between May and September, but this year, even more so."

That's because the festival is partnering with the city and the Taipei Cultural Center in New York to present a slew of exhibits by Taiwanese artists for the Year of Taiwan, a cultural exchange between San Antonio and sister city Kaohsiung, Taiwan. Mehl curated all but one of the

exhibits. We talked to Mehl about those shows and the rest of the festival, which, it turns out, is dominated by female energy this year.

Q: What can you tell me about the Taiwan shows?

A: In very broad strokes, we followed a pattern we've done in the past, which is ... we look for an established artist, we look for a mid-career artist, and we look for a young artist.

My approach is to provide a more comprehensive overview of what photography is about in Taiwan. So in the case of Chang Chaotang, who is at the International Center and the Instituto (Cultural de México), he is a national treasure in Taiwan. He has been awarded two of the most important national art prizes, the only photographer to ever have that happen. So we've got him as the elder statesman of photography in Taiwan, and then we have Cheng-Chang Wu, who is a mid-career artist ... and his work is much more experimental. ... And then we have Isa Ho — her Chinese name is Meng-Chuan Ho — and she's kind of a younger, hip photographic artist, peripatetic, doing stuff here and there. Her approach is very counter-traditional in the sense that she's trying to upend stereotypes. But they're all very, very accomplished artists.

Q: How has the festival evolved since 1995?

A: We started out thinking that we were pretty much the heirs of a north-south axis relationship, or rather we were the cultural bearers of that kind of relationship because of San Antonio's place geographically and historically and its relationship to Mexico and all that. And we thought from the beginning, we are pretty much a conduit for Mexican-Latin American

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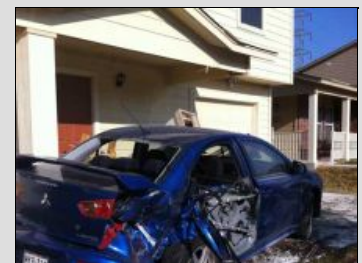
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photography, if we have to define ourselves in any particular way. Early on — it wasn't just recently — we started seeing a different shift. We were seeing a trend toward the European and the Asian. We receive the bulk of our proposals from Asia and Europe.

Q: What do you attribute that to?

A: We have no idea. And the only thing I can think of is we're not a traditional, hierarchical, elitist, top-down festival. That's the only thing I can think of, that because of a lot of these other festivals, you really have to be either recommended or you know someone. We have an open call for portfolios. Anybody can send us a portfolio at any time. Of course, since our exhibition spaces are limited, we have a really long wait. We have a three-year wait pretty much for people who want to exhibit in the festival.

Q: Doesn't that democratic, open-call approach make things harder for you as the organizers?

A: I know this sounds trite, but customer service is very important, so we deal with these people one on one. Somebody sends a portfolio, they get a response; they get maybe a little advice or a little critique. Sometimes they get offended, because we're very straightforward about it, but most of the time, they know they can just send us stuff, and we're going to give them an answer. Good luck getting answers from other places where you send your work to. So yes, it's a lot more work, but it provides that eclecticism that we've always used to define our festival.

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