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Fotoseptiembre USA calls on photographers to 'step up'

By Elda Silva

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It's a leaner, meaner Fotoseptiembre USA.

In part, that's because organizers opted to drop the annual photography festival's signature exhibits this year because of the expense.

It's also a consequence of new entry guidelines. Conceived as a populist festival, Fotoseptiembre previously was open to all, so long as the exhibit or event was registered by the July 1 deadline. Participants had the option to pay for expanded listings in the official calendar. But this year, organizers instituted an across-the-board \$100 fee as a way to up the ante.

“We started the festival with the sole mission of providing an equal platform for



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everybody participating,” said director Michael Mehl who organizes the festival with coordinator Ann Kinser and technologist Paul Vaughn. “What happened, in short, is that we saw the bar wasn't being raised and our effort to provide equal footing was being met by very mediocre efforts. People had no skin in the game, so all they were doing was slapping things together and then sometimes we'd go to an opening and there was no exhibit.”

The festival started in 1995 with about 12 events. It grew to more than 70 at peak size, before settling at about 50 events. Mehl estimates this year's festival is about 30 percent smaller.

“We're in a transition mode as we have been several times before,” he said. “(This) transition point is different from all the other ones, because in all the others, we were trying to figure out the festival. Now we're saying the context of the community has to change.”

People who are serious about exhibiting their work need to “step up,” Mehl said. “Because a lot of people are looking at what we do. In fact, a lot of festivals that have sprung up in the last five years mimic what we do.”

Those who do will have a crack at a Choice Award, new this year. Up to four awards will be presented to acknowledge the best professional practices of artists and curators. Each is \$500.

In 2008, Fotoseptiembre introduced its signature exhibits to showcase work by international artists. The festival partnered with the city and the Taipei Cultural Center in New York in 2011 to present a host 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 those exhibits at the Instituto de México and the city's International Center.

“That was really the apex because we had time to get to that point,” Mehl said. “As an offshoot of that, I curated several exhibits for the Taiwanese government, specifically at their government offices in New York and Taiwan.”

The cost of the signature exhibits, however, became prohibitive.

“It's very expensive and we were footing most of the bill to the detriment of our lifestyle,” Mehl said.

Instead, Fotoseptiembre has increased its offerings online, with 16 exhibits in its web galleries, including two curated by Taiwanese photographer Chang Chaotang and one curated by Polish

photographer Krzysztof Jurecki.

“What I wanted to do was bring in work by people I really like, and personally I really like the work of Chas Ray Krider, who does these noir-ish style sexy photographs, and then there's a French guy, Michel Lagarde, who does really, really technically brilliant digital imaging. Then I've brought in Chang Chaotang again as an exhibiting artist and as a curator, because he is a major figure in his country. He's the pre-eminent guy.”

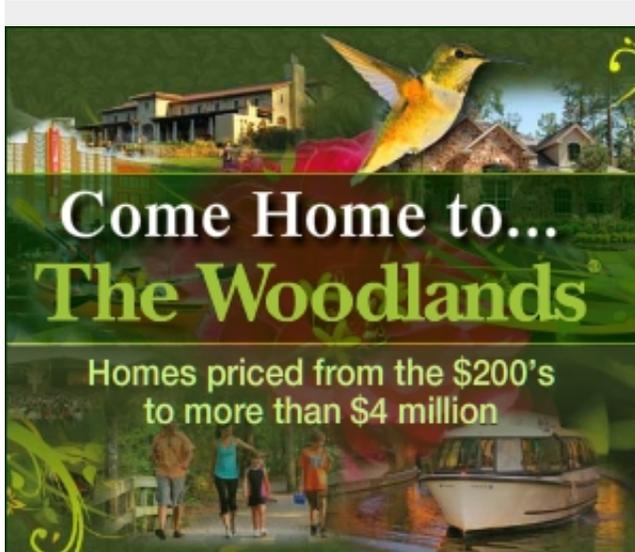
The signature exhibits may or may not return at some point. Either way, the festival itself will be back.

“We're not going to stop doing this in some kind of fashion,” Mehl said. “How we do it just depends on how things move. If we have to go online 100 percent, we go online 100 percent.”

Fotoseptiembre USA runs throughout September with events and exhibits at venues throughout the city. For more information, go to www.fotoseptiembreusa.com.

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Fotoseptiembre USA



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