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SFMOMA Stakes Out Photography

Following a three-year expansion, SFMOMA will have the largest exhibit space devoted to photography in the U.S.

By Kelly Cros
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When the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art reopens May 14, it will devote more space to exhibiting photographs than any other art museum in the U.S.

Following a nearly three-year, \$305 million expansion, the museum will have 14 galleries spanning 15,000 square feet exhibiting photos—more room than the photography galleries of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art combined. On top of that, the museum has created a new study area for researchers called the Pritzker Center for Photography and added a pair of refrigerated storage vaults for the 18,000 photographs in its collection.

Director Neal Benezra said he hopes such moves will prove that photography is every bit as significant as other art forms. “Photography is one of the foundations on which this house is built,” Mr. Benezra said of the 81-year-old museum. “We want to set it up as the equal of painting here.”

The museum launched its expansion plan seven years ago to make room for the addition of 1,100 works, mainly paintings and sculptures, amassed and lent to the museum by Gap clothing founder Don Fisher and his wife, Doris. But Mr. Benezra said he and his staff seized on the chance to enlarge its galleries for photography as well. Of the 145,000 square feet of total gallery space in the museum, 10% is reserved for photos alone.

Board chair Charles Schwab, who collects photographers like Jeff Wall and Thomas Struth, said, “We need to see photographers as the true artists they are—and we need to remind people that it’s still an affordable way to collect. That’s how I got started, with photos and prints.”

Walking around the 10-story museum’s airy new floors designed by Norwegian firm Snohetta, photographs pop up all over, often in experimental forms: Alison Rossiter’s mysterious landscapes comprise smudges and marks left on century-old photo paper she finds and develops, as is. Just as haunting are Phil Chang’s unfixed photographs, which aren’t fully developed and therefore turn over-exposed black a few hours after they’re displayed. Corey Keller, a photography curator, said the museum bought several sets of Mr. Chang’s work so it can occasionally swap in fresh examples. “It’s terrifying to watch his images disappear,” Ms. Kenner said. “He’s turning a photograph into a performance.”

The museum also enlisted tech firms to amp up some of its photographic displays, a strategy also aimed at nurturing its ties to Silicon Valley. (Yahoo’s chief executive Marissa Mayer is a trustee.) The study center now includes specially commissioned animated videos about some of San Francisco’s pioneering photographers, from Eadweard Muybridge to Carlton Watkins.



The newly expanded SFMOMA, opening May 14 PHOTO: HENRIK KAM/SFMOMA



Phil Chang
Woman, Sitting, 2011

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Nearby sits an Adobe-designed device that looks like a 1980s video-arcade game but actually allows people to arrange small objects on a table—the contents of their pockets, say, or purses—before a camera in the machine snaps and prints a souvenir photo of the objects and the person arranging them. Chad Coerver, the museum’s chief content officer, said the “parlor game” is intended to take the museum selfie a step further. “It’s a chance for people to compose something beyond making a face and saying ‘cheese,’” he said.

Sandy Phillips, the museum’s senior curator of photography, said her team spent months pinpointing and analyzing the collection’s strengths—namely, its holdings of 19th and 20th-century Western landscapes by artists like Ansel Adams as well as postwar Japanese street photography by artists like Daido Moriyama. After that, curators set out to fill in gaps. They’ve since added at least 1,000 photos to its permanent collection, fueled by gifts and purchases.

These include Edward Weston’s classic portrait of a nude woman, “Nude on Dune,” and Dorothea Lange’s landscapes. Curators took trips to Mali to bolster their holdings of African photographers, and a private foundation in Japan gave the museum several hundred pieces by contemporary Japanese photographers.

Curators unearthed hundreds of 1930s-era photographs that had been donated by the Works Progress Administration that had never been studied or shown as well as 5,000 little-seen photos taken during the 1970s, Ms. Keller said. They included some “amazing experiments” by artists like Sonia Landy Sheridan who used photocopiers in their art but aren’t widely known—yet, she said.

All this research informs “About Time: Photography in a Moment of Change,” the eight-gallery rehang of the permanent collection. Instead of a straight chronology, curators juxtaposed images old and new to explore how photographers wrestle with time in their work and use it to their creative advantage. Masterpiece examples include Julia Margaret Cameron’s 19th century languid portrait of a sleeping boy, Muybridge’s motion studies of a walking nude woman and Harold Edgerton’s famous milk splash.

But there’s also newer work like Trevor Paglen’s time-lapse images of surveillance satellites arcing over the sky above Yosemite and Matthew Buckingham’s archaic slideshow projector that will show a single shot of a bronze sculpture of a Danish warrior in Copenhagen—until heat from the projector blanches his slide white.