

concept was put into place early in the making of this story.

“The biggest difference,” Geiger summarises, “is that nine years ago, when Sarah and I started, we would go into a meeting and talk about the text and the photography, and maybe about graphics and maps. Now we are talking about sound, video, interactive maps and graphics, and 3D Motion. That whole process is done upfront now — it’s a whole new way of thinking.”

National Geographic has also adapted its policies to the changing media landscape. For example, with Instagram (the magazine has more than 2.7m followers on the image-sharing social network) photographers are encouraged to share images while on assignment. In the past, the magazine put a strict embargo on all images until publication. “We’re moving towards the point where we will be publishing earlier on the web and build up to that print moment,” says Leen. “There’s no reason why we wouldn’t use social media tools to try to perpetuate the brand,” adds Geiger. “We have to reach people

where they are, instead of making them come to us,” confirms Chen.

And even though *National Geographic* is not a photography magazine “like a magazine that uses photography to tell stories,” says Leen “it has a profound respect for its photographers, dedicating its October issue to the power of photography. “Our commitment to photography has really been shown in this issue,” she says. “We put it together differently with shorter texts, no graphics, with an emphasis on photographers. We did a whole series of interviews with 44 of them, publishing the interviews online and in our iPad app.”

The special issue opens with the following words: “Photographers use their cameras as tools of exploration, passports to inner sanctums, instruments for change. Their images are proof that photography matters — now more than ever.” For the magazine’s editors, that power translates into a privilege. “We get to work with the best photographers in the world,” says Leen. “It’s awesome.” *BJP*
ngm.nationalgeographic.com

Gold at the end of the bridge

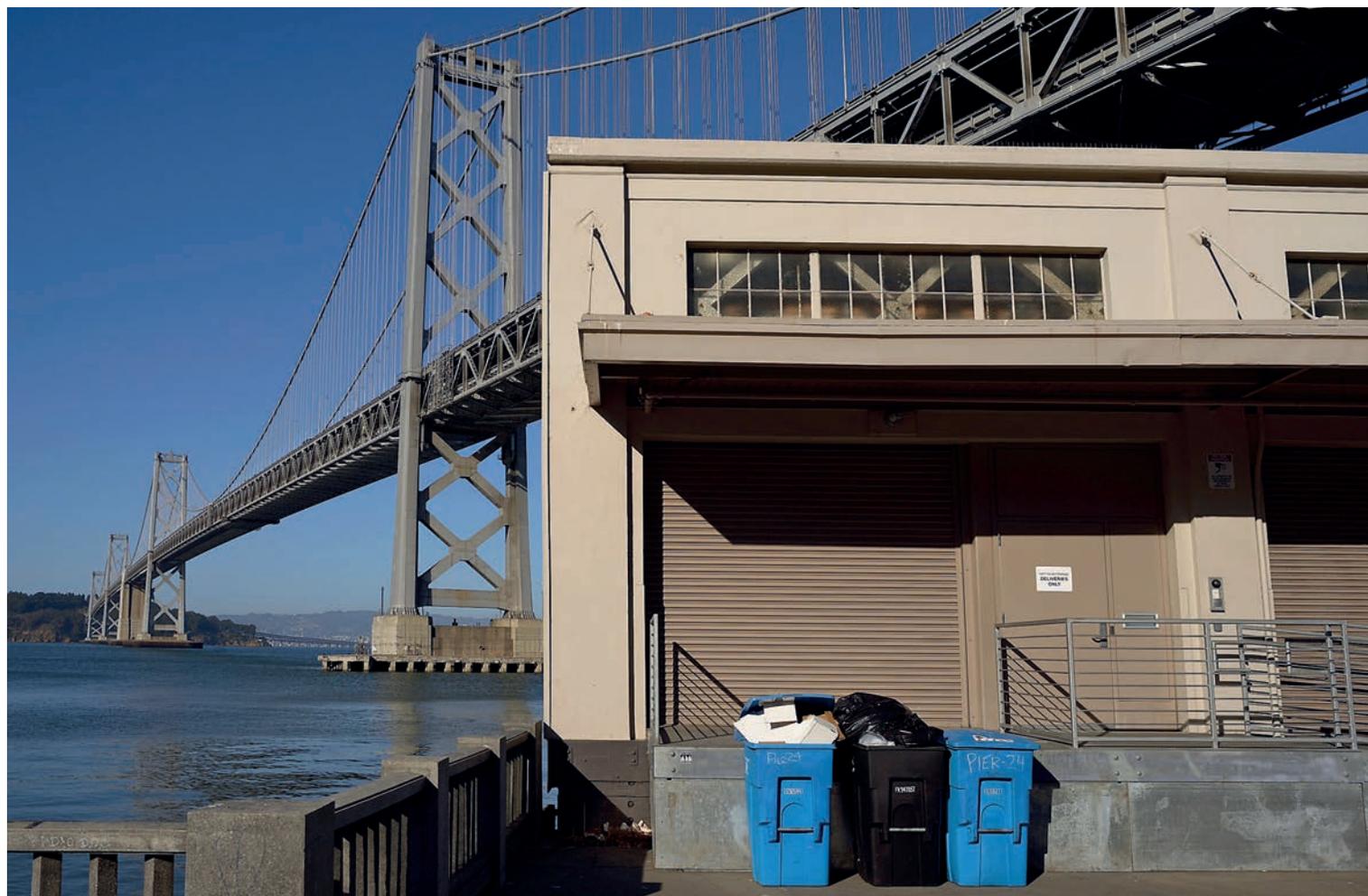
Pier 24, a San Francisco gallery, is an oddball in the photography scene: its opening hours are limited, and only 20 visitors can enjoy the work at any one time. But, finds Stephen McLaren, it offers an unprecedented purity of purpose that makes it one of the best photography galleries in the world

On moving to San Francisco last year, a friend living locally boasted that his hometown had recently acquired the world’s best photography gallery, bar none. Better yet, it was free of charge and exhibitions featured complete sets of pictures by many of my all-time favourite photographers. Pier 24 was this alleged photo Nirvana, and within days of arriving in the Bay Area I sought out its website and made a viewing appointment. How would I locate it? My friend, a repeat visitor, told me the sound of mournful fog horns from ships

gliding under the massive Bay Bridge would guide me to its door.

Dedicated spaces devoted to photography are under pressure these days. Many are in a financially precarious position, and their creative remits often appear confused and lacking in confidence. As the medium has fragmented, so an avant garde arms race among curators has spawned an often bewildering range of genres and lens-based practices, leaving exhibition audiences uncertain of where the actual photography resides. Furthermore, a new generation of digital natives regarding their handheld screens as the photo portal of choice experience the “rectangles on a white wall” model as quaint, analogue and slow. As for funding, well, the free-to-enter model only really holds in the UK these days, though budget cuts have imperilled the whole ethos of supporting dedicated spaces where quality photography can be savoured.

Examining and contemplating a long-form series of images in which a photographer lays out a coherent



Pier 24 is located below San Francisco’s Bay Bridge and offers an unrivalled experience for photography enthusiasts. © Stephen McLaren

and compelling vision remains a peak experience. Although the ever-growing international circuit of photography festivals offers ambitious programmes for mobile audiences, for those who yearn for a well-lit, generously proportioned space to view exhibition prints, the options have been narrowing.

Pier 24 is a 28,000-square foot exhibition space and archival centre solely devoted to photography and located on a recently remodelled stretch of San Francisco's waterfront. The suspension bridge linking to Oakland hums overhead and seagulls wheel above as you press the intercom. You are then swished into a climate-controlled warehouse that in a past life processed cargo from ocean-going ships. Once inside, you and about 20 other pilgrims are allotted two hours to wander at will among the 18 specially designed rooms.

The current exhibition, *A Sense of Place*, is only the fifth exhibition to be hosted at Pier 24 in three years, and it is essentially a landscape and environment-based presentation featuring work from big hitters such as Paul Graham, Jeff Wall and

Andreas Gursky. There are also contributions from less familiar names such as John Chiara and Eric William Carroll. A whole room devoted to Friedlander's *America by Car* series is a head-spinning puzzle-box of a room. A stunningly lit space containing pristine new prints of Stephen Shore's *Uncommon Places* makes the images in my copy of the book feel flat and insubstantial by comparison.

Unlike many conventional photography galleries, there are no grand theoretical conceits on display, no crowds to contest with, and surprisingly no accompanying text on the walls at all — only a huge space filled with beguiling images. You wander, you look, you think. Two hours fly by.

Paul Graham, a regular visitor to Pier 24, whose recent series *The Present* is stunningly showcased in the present exhibition, is a notable supporter of the ambition behind this venture.

Well, of course it is simply a dream space for photography, says Graham. Ever the understudy waiting in the wings of the art world, the medium is finally given centre-stage, and allowed to be

what it is. The programme is remarkable in its dedication to the core of the medium at its highest and purest form. Photography can be itself here.

So what is the back story to this remarkable venue, by far and away the largest space devoted to displaying photography in the world? Ostensibly Pier 24 is a home for the Pilara Foundation's Photographic Collection, which is owned by Andy Pilara, a local investment banker who fell in love with photography after seeing Diane Arbus's series *Untitled* in 2003 at San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA).

By all accounts it was a Damascene moment as Pilara contemplated those disturbing and ambiguous images of people in mental institutions. For the money man with no previously expressed interest in photography, Arbus's taboo-breaking series seemingly ignited a love affair with the medium. In short order he bought a whole series of Arbus classics and then found himself writing cheques for whole sets from Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand, Richard Avedon and others

lodged firmly in the American photographic canon.

As the collection rapidly swelled into the thousands, he sought a venue to store his treasure trove and then decided to make the collection visible by putting much of it on display to the public with biannual exhibitions.

And so now San Francisco has Pier 24, which is unique in not being a public museum or gallery with a board of trustees, or a commercial venture with prints to sell and a bottom line to sustain. As Pilara told the *San Francisco Chronicle*: "In the investment world, I look at every number to the penny, but this is not an investment so I don't really pay attention to what it costs."

But Pier 24 is not just a vanity project with Pilara throwing money at whatever turns his head. He has been advised closely, especially by Chris McCall, who is Pier 24's director. McCall, a youthful curator who studied under local photography legend, Larry Sultan, has helped focus the exhibiting potential of the Pilara collection, which now counts over 5000 pieces.

Andy became obsessed by the medium, not only collecting, but



Cynthia Soto's *Tramo el Saborcito*, 2005, in the current exhibition, *Sense of Place*. Images on this spread © courtesy of Pier 24 Photography

also understanding it and how it impacts our culture," says McCall. "That is the core of it — to not only have a space but to be engaged in the dialogue around the medium. In doing that, we not only put up exhibitions but work with artists and partner with other institutions and become part of the community of curators, thinkers and writers around the medium. The upside for us is that in that process we can share stuff but also learn a tremendous amount from the people who have not only created the history but are still in the process of defining it, which is even more of a challenge now as photography is everywhere."

So, in addition to exhibitions, Pier 24 instigates lecture series involving luminaries such as Tod Papageorge, Martin Parr and Rinko Kawauchi. In addition, they sponsor work projects like the *Postcards from America* marathons undertaken by Magnum photographers. And to prove you don't need to be a big name to enter the collection, they also purchase and commission new work from relative unknowns.

"Often Andy comes in with magazine and newspaper images

that moved or challenged him and wants me to find out more about the photographer and bring it into the collection," says McCall. "A lot of times these photographs do not exist in the gallery world and the photographer doesn't have representation in the fine art world. With him as a collector, limitations on where to source pictures are not there: it's not a case of going to certain galleries or certain circles. Any image out there would be considered for the collection if it challenges him."

The Bay Area is fortunate to have a thriving and knowledgeable community of photographers, curators, collectors and galleries. Garry Winogrand's retrospective opened this year at SFMOMA, Jim Goldberg has his studio in the Mission District, and Richard Misrach hosts regular salon events. There are also several local publishers of note, including TBW Books, Little Big Man, Hamburger Eyes and J&L Books. And now there is Pier 24 to cement the area's profile as a photography centre of global stature.

"You are virtually alone with the photographs, which is the opposite

of the usual blockbuster museum or gallery experience," says local photographer Jack Simon, a regular visitor to Pier 24 since it opened.

"There's nothing cluttering the walls other than the photographs, and there are knowledgeable docents around that you can ask questions of. If photography is ever going to have a spiritual dimension, well here you are in this dark, beautifully lit space. My impression is that they want you to have a unique experience with the art and not be distracted by writing on the walls or people — just look."

Wayne Bremser, a local photography fan, whose Tumblr, *It's Never Summer*, is one of the most eclectic and all-encompassing photography resources on the web, is another regular visitor. While he is quick to mention how much he enjoys the diverse range of imagery in each exhibition, he has noticed one downside. "I go to a lot of exhibitions in other more established venues, and it's true that Pier 24 shows work that has been seen in these places first, so in some respects it is not breaking new curatorial ground," he explains. "We seen

elsewhere lots of the Avedons and Friedlanders they've shown. That's not to say I don't enjoy seeing them in this amazing space, but they have become familiar."

Given Pier 24's origins in the personal conversion of a wealthy man into a photography obsessive, it is perhaps not surprising that its photography buffs who are best served by the venue. As the number of attendees are highly restricted, and opening hours are very much limited to working hours, Monday to Thursday, there is not a sense that Pier 24 is overly bothered about embracing a wider audience of non-enthusiasts. So, in some respects, it performs the role of a spiritual space for the already converted.

This purity of purpose would not work in the wider gallery scene, which is always chasing new audiences to access public funds or serve a varied range of art concerns. However, for those of us who enjoy contemplating some of the medium's landmark achievements in a unique and peaceful space, Pier 24 in San Francisco is an unforgettable experience. *BJP*

A Sense of Place runs until May 2014.
www.pier24.org



Andreas Gursky's *F1 Pit Stop III*, 2007 (left), Edward Burtynsky's *SOCAR Oil Fields #1a and #2, Baku, Azerbaijan*, 2006 (middle), and Andreas Gursky's *99 Cent*, 1999 (right)