

BEYOND THE WALLS



Words: Allie Haeusslein

A visit to the Diane Arbus retrospective *Revelations*, hosted by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2003, inspired the purchase of Andrew and Mary Pilara's first photograph: a small silver gelatin print from Arbus' stirring *Untitled* series. A little over a decade later, the Pilara Foundation's breathtaking exhibition space – Pier 24 Photography – has grown to become the largest venue devoted exclusively to photography in the United States. Associate Director Allie Haeusslein outlines how this private collection has evolved in the public realm, as well as the symbiotic working relationship between its founders and its new custodians.



My first impression of Pier 24 Photography was that of the people that worked there. After finishing graduate school, I returned home to San Francisco to work at a local gallery. During that time, I connected with Pier 24's Director, Christopher McCall, who ultimately offered me a position. After an initial dinner with the team to discuss my role, I was completely sold! Their enthusiasm for the space and ambitions for its future were both infectious and exhilarating.

Andy and Mary Pilara initially had no aspirations to build something that would be shared with the public, but as the collection outgrew the walls of their home, the Pilaras decided to pursue a venue for the collection. As a San Francisco native, Andy was especially excited by the idea of being able to contribute to an already vibrant arts community in the Bay Area. After months of searching, they came across Pier 24, a former warehouse that had been abandoned for close to thirty years. They had tremendous foresight to be able to look at the building as it was and imagine what it could be. After three years of renovations, Pier 24 Photography opened to the public in the spring of 2010.

When the Pilaras first began collecting, photographer Neil Selkirk offered them a word of advice: 'Photography, like food, should be consumed through the gut.' This idea has guided much of the couple's approach to collecting, which is primarily rooted in emotional, visceral connections to the work. While the collection has grown to almost 5,500 pieces, the process of making new acquisitions remains rooted in the same principles. Now, however, this process also involves discussions among our core team of four about potential works for the collection. Each work that is brought to the table is subsequently presented to the Pilaras, who value our instincts as to what might make a strong addition. Inspiration and ideas can come from anywhere – Andy, for example, often comes into meetings bearing the latest issues of the *Financial Times* or *The New York Times Magazine*, with the images that excite him bookmarked.

Unlike most traditional institutions – whose collections reflect years of various institutional mandates – Pier 24 Photography's collection has been amassed by one couple from a passionate and personal perspective. The Pilaras attach great importance to the individual's experience at Pier 24, particularly in how visitors interact with our space. Visits are organized by appointment to manage the number of people in the space each session, ensuring each visitor has the opportunity to engage with the works in an intimate, quiet environment. We also have a team of trained docents who circulate during each appointment session and are available to answer questions about the works on view, the organisation, or the building's history.

Our goal is not to create a collection that spans the entire history of the medium, but rather to expand upon threads within the collection. While we will continue our focus on core themes – such as portraiture, Bay Area-based photographers and vernacular material – we also maintain an openness to contemporary developments in photography and to regions or concepts that we might not have previously explored. Our primary concern is that our exhibitions reflect an in-depth exploration of an artist's thinking or working process, and that they

thoughtfully illustrate the history of a place or a particular moment in time.

We usually discuss the themes and artists for new exhibitions about nine months to a year before they open – a timeline typically shorter than that of our museum colleagues. Our exhibitions are rooted in the Pilara Foundation’s collection, which is primarily composed of mid-20th century American photography. That said, we also prioritise the inclusion of work by emerging photographers and vernacular images from the collection. By integrating this everyday material – be it mugshots, embroidered postcards or American press photographs from the 1920s and 30s – into our exhibitions, an unexpected counterpoint is added alongside the artistic works on view. New conversations and connections also emerge through the integration of emerging and established photographers in the same space.

In order to continue working at a high conceptual level, we often look beyond the Foundation’s holdings. In addition to including loaned works in some of our exhibitions, we’ve also commissioned artists to create new work. For instance, we’re very proud of our location on San Francisco’s waterfront – directly beneath the Bay Bridge – and have invited artists to reflect on our local setting. This past summer, Dutch photographer Awoiska van der Molen spent time meditating on the city’s urban landscape.

In June, we opened our tenth exhibition – which has prompted us to think about what we want our role to be, not only in our local community but also regarding the wider photography world. It’s important to us that our impact can be experienced beyond the walls of our institution, which has resulted in several projects over the past few years. We’ve started to digitise the Foundation’s entire collection, and we’re planning to create groupings of works around themes that feature prominently in the collection, such as baseball, the Civil Rights Movement or deadpan portraiture. Ultimately, whether the public comes into contact with us through our website or our physical space, we want our community to have easy access to our resources – making the Foundation a valuable resource for colleagues, teachers, students and individuals alike.

p.82 Director Christopher McCall creates a template for installation of Ed Templeton’s photographs
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p.84 Exterior view of Pier 24 Photography, San Francisco
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p.85 Associate Director Allie Haeusslein installs photographs by Corine Vermeulen
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p.86 Associate Director Allie Haeusslein, photographer Ed Templeton, and Director Christopher McCall work on spacing photographs
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