

## PIER 24 PHOTOGRAPHY



Finally, a center for photography that strikes the finer chords of scholarship and connoisseurship without depriving visitors of their rightful expectation of pleasure. All it took was one private collector of photographs with substantial resources and an ambitious idea, an unofficial advisor whose knowledge of the history of photography is animated by a genuine delight in seeing, a formula modeled loosely on the contemporary museum space, and a location that fulfills all three primary rules of real estate.

Pier 24 Photography juts out over the water in the shadow of the Bay Bridge along the Embarcadero in San Francisco—28,000 square feet of pristine gallery space, comprising what is arguably the largest single destination for photography anywhere in the world. Consider these figures: In 2006, Los Angeles's J. Paul Getty Museum, with 58,000 square feet of exhibition space, made a to-do about doubling the size of their galleries devoted exclusively to photography—to 7,000 square feet. The Museum of Modern Art in New York allots some 7,600 square feet to photography, while the International Center of Photography has 6,800 square feet.

The size of Pier 24 may distinguish it from the ranking museums of the world, but the experience of viewing work there truly sets it apart. Everything has been strategically thought out and meticulously executed to optimize the act of looking at photographs—the size of each gallery in relation to the work on the wall, the distance between one photograph and the next, the lighting, the absence of wall labels to focus the viewer's attention on the photographs themselves (not even the names of the photographers are provided).

Andrew Pilara, the wizard behind this photographic Oz, is a highly successful money manager who had no interest in

photography until 2003, when his wife, Mary, took him to the Diane Arbus retrospective *Revelations* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

"I was enjoying the show, but really as a spectator," Pilara told me in a telephone conversation. Then he entered a gallery devoted to Arbus's *Untitled* series, a body of photographs made at institutions for the mentally disabled. "I had an emotional response, and I thought: 'Wait a minute—this is just paper up there with some silver nitrate. How in the hell can that happen?' That's what first generated my interest."

Pilara undertook an on-line search for a way to purchase one of the *Untitled* photographs. Ironically, Fraenkel Gallery, which represents the Arbus estate, was within walking distance of his apartment in downtown San Francisco.

"We'd never had a potential collector approach us asking about an Arbus *Untitled* photograph as their first purchase," recalls Jeffrey Fraenkel, who, as Pilara notes, plays an integral role in photography in San Francisco and beyond, and is therefore integral to what happens at Pier 24. "That was Andy's first acquisition. Extremely unusual."

Pilara, now sixty-nine, had not been much of a collector before that defining moment. He says: "I collected baseball cards [as a child]. . . . It was what a lot of us did when we were twelve."

The Arbus purchase spawned an entire collection of photographs: approximately two thousand images and counting. Along the way, as Pilara acquired more and more work, he had less space in which to view the photographs and to share them with his friends. For almost two years he and his wife sought out a "photography space" in which he could put the work up on the wall. They looked at a variety of places in San Francisco, first at five thousand square feet, then at ten thousand square feet, but nothing seemed appropriate. "Then someone mentioned Pier 24," Pilara says. "It's in a beautiful part of San Francisco. It's very close to the baseball park, which is one of my favorite hobbies. I walked into this space and there were holes in the floor and pigeons flying around. It was a mess and had not been occupied in thirty years—and I said: 'Perfect. I'll take it.' And that's kind of how it all started. Three years of tears and a lot of arm-wrestling

THIS PAGE: Southeast view of Pier 24's exterior from San Francisco's Embarcadero; OPPOSITE: Installation view at Pier 24's exhibition *Pilara Foundation Collection: The Inaugural Exhibition*; PAGE 20, LEFT TO RIGHT: Chris McCall, Pier 24's Director; Seth Curcio, the venue's Program Manager; Andrew Pilara.

Pages 18 and 19: photographs by Tom O'Connor; page 20: photograph by Paul Kalis



got us to the point where we can open this space. And it has just been wonderful."

When Pilara conceived the idea of Pier 24, he wanted to devote one room to a group of images by Arbus he had acquired at the sale of Richard Avedon's private collection of photographs after his death in 2004. Avedon had been the first to purchase the so-called "Box of Ten Photographs," the portfolio of works selected from the breadth of Arbus's career that she assembled (in an edition of fifty) in 1970. The photographs came in a clear Plexiglas box designed by their mutual friend Marvin Israel. For Avedon, Arbus crossed out the word "ten" on the cover sheet and wrote "eleven" above it, along with the footnote "especially for RA." She inscribed it: "At a Halloween party for mentally retarded women, a lady in a wheelchair, masked, 1969." Fraenkel recalls seeing the portfolio during a visit to Avedon's home, where he "kept it under his bed." Avedon told Fraenkel that Arbus described the clear Plexiglas box as "almost like ice."

Pilara walked me through the first installation at Pier 24, which was up during the first six months after the venue's opening last spring. The Arbus portfolio was exhibited in its own room. It features a number of her best-known images, but its singularity is determined by its provenance and of course by that unique eleventh print.

I was struck by three other galleries in which complete sets of work by a single photographer were exhibited as well: one devoted entirely to Lee Friedlander's set of thirty-four images referred to

informally as his "Little Screens," in which a television screen appears in every picture; a second presenting Garry Winogrand's *The Animals* series in full; and a third with the complete set of *Teenage Lust* by Larry Clark.

Winogrand's *The Animals* was a 1969 book put together by John Szarkowski of the Museum of Modern Art. Reassembling the complete set of prints for Pilara's collection took several years and required patience, according to Fraenkel. "A portion of those pictures came up at auction from the Seagram Collection," he explains. "Other prints came directly from the Winogrand estate. But I don't think it would be possible to put a complete set of *The Animals* together again today. The pictures just aren't out there."

While a book provides the intimacy of looking at a series of pictures one at a time, viewing an entire series on the wall at Pier 24 allows the viewer to see the images *all at once*. Not only is it an intelligent way of presenting work, it's a wholly satisfying experience to absorb a photographer's visual frequency in one collective observation. The full sets of vintage prints provide a layer of history and a peek at the anatomy of the medium—that is, light exposed to film—now rendered all but obsolete by digital technology.

Pilara understands the value of being able to focus on photographs in autonomous spaces—as if the gallery were a version of a portfolio box. "When we talked about the design of the space, we were thinking about these 'boxes,'" he says. "The architect was thinking about these boxes; they would be discrete



spaces, and by that I mean we could be in [one] box and have an idea different from the box across the way. And we would still be able to communicate what we're trying to communicate, which is really an absorption in one idea, one artist, one series [at a time]."

Pier 24, while owned by a private collector, functions in the public sphere as a museum. But, since Pilara is also a trustee of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I wondered if a conflict of interest arose with his opening Pier 24. Sandra S. Phillips, curator of photography at SFMOMA, says, however, that she doesn't see a conflict; indeed, she notes that as a trustee, Pilara "is interested in helping our museum acquire work, so it is good for us." I asked if she thought if Pier 24 might someday compete for visitors with SFMOMA, but Phillips said that Pier 24 doesn't have anything near the museum's attendance numbers, nor does Pilara want it to. Indeed, although admission is free, visitors must make an appointment to see the collection, in groups of no more than twenty, which naturally limits the attendance (at the time of this writing, in early December 2010, all visiting hours for the general public were booked into early January). Phillips also suggested that Pier 24 might be a possible venue for SFMOMA's own exhibitions when the museum closes for its upcoming renovation and expansion.

Pilara insists that Pier 24 is not a museum. And it isn't a gallery. "It's just a place where we want people to experience photography, a place maybe to study, and to quietly contemplate. I think the latter point—to quietly contemplate photography—that's the distinguishing part. For the majority of people that walk in, we want them to experience it on a more visceral level. Does that distinguish it from a museum? I don't know. I know where I wanted to go with it and that's where we went with it." To that end, installations stay up for six-month stretches. Furthermore, there is no board to answer to and there are no long-term programming requirements at Pier 24.

Several months into the inaugural installation at Pier 24, which presented perhaps 15 percent of his collection, Pilara had an unusual idea for the second rotating exhibition. Since SFMOMA was planning to exhibit works from the extensive art collection of

Don and Doris Fisher, Pilara offered the entire space at Pier 24 to their son, Bob Fisher, and his wife, Randi, to exhibit their own formidable collection of photography. That installation ran from September 2010 through February 2011. "We are about inviting contributions from the photography community," Pilara says. "And that means collectors as well as photographers, curators, and writers, a kind of ecumenical space for photography ideas and discussion."

In a city that boasts a number of significant museums—SFMOMA, the de Young, the Oakland Museum, the University Art Museum at Berkeley—all with serious photography collections, the idea of opening a private photography center might have

seemed beside the point. But each of those museums exhibits work in classic museum form. "Andy is willing to do things that no museum can do because of the premium on wall space in a museum," Fraenkel says. "He's willing to give an entire wall to one picture."

Last year, Pilara told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that one of his ambitions with photography and the Pier 24 venture was "to exercise the other part of my brain." What questions does he ask himself now about how it is evolving? "Why didn't I do this earlier?" he says. "Because it has really changed the way I look at the world, changed how I appreciate images—and they don't all have to be photographic images, they could be painting or sculptural images, video images. My primary image-changer

has been Lee Friedlander himself. Viewing his work, how witty he is, is hard to put in words. We talk about 'visual literacy' a lot. I guess I was in visual-literacy kindergarten before I started all this; maybe now I'm in visual-literacy fifth grade."

On the contrary, in terms of visual literacy, many experts in the world of photography could surely benefit from Andy Pilara's lucidity.📍

—Philip Gefter



Pier 24 Photography will present an exhibition of Bay Area images and photographers, opening this spring and running through the end of 2011. For further information, please visit [www.pier24.org](http://www.pier24.org).

Philip Gefter is the author of *Photography After Frank* (Aperture, 2009). He produced the documentary *Bill Cunningham New York*, currently in theaters.