

# Emotional Documentary: Andy Pilara's Photography Collection

Posted by Margan Mulvihill on December 6th, 2010



In a renovated storage pier just under San Francisco's Bay Bridge, an impressive photography collection both grounds and lifts those who are lucky enough to get an appointment.

Six years ago, the investment banker Andy Pilara walked into Fraenkel Gallery and purchased his first of what would become some 2,000 photographs. On view at pier 24 until July 16th is roughly sixteen percent of his collection that focuses primarily on twentieth and twenty-first centuries photographs. The Pilara Foundation invites the public, twenty persons at a time, to experience photography without the distraction of wall labels, the shuffle of feet, or the hustle of museums on a weekend. With 28,000 square feet of exhibition space, Pier 24 promotes photography and its manifestations through exhibitions, scholarship and programming. The goal is to foster a deeper understanding of the medium.

With exposed rafters, white walls and concrete flooring, the dimly lit space maintains the original function of the pier as a storage facility but expands the notion of warehouse into a place for quiet contemplation. Upon entering, I was greeted by the piercing eyes and rough elegance of a drifter by Richard Avedon, a long counter with two interns, and twelve photographs of mentally retarded individuals by Diane Arbus. These photographs help set the tone for the

collection, not only because Arbus' *Untitled* series (1969-71) includes the first photograph Pilara purchased, but also because the work demonstrates Pilara's personal approach to collecting. Pilara is attracted to what moves him emotionally, rather than what he should buy. And fortunately for us, Pilara, who does not use an art advisor, has a good eye and a philanthropic desire to share his powerful photography collection. As a result, Arbus' work, which is challenging and at times uncomfortable, provides a jumping off point for the exhibition and insight into the vision of the collector.

As I continued through the exhibition, past Avedon's drifter, there is a large gallery displaying images of industry and workers. For Pilara, showcasing the social and topographical effects of industrialization, was an obvious choice when he, the curator Jeffrey Fraenkel, and the Foundation's Director Christopher McCall were organizing the show. The exhibition layout, which in this gallery gives the images of industry room to breathe, not only advances contemplation through the physical space but also through the juxtaposition of artists, time periods and photographic techniques. As an example, a large black-and-white Richard Avedon and a color photograph by Jackie Nickerson, a local photographer who Pilara and McCall are following, flank a small Lewis Hine (*Breaker Boys*, 1911). The formal differences in the installation of this wall are distinct—the variation in print size causes the viewer to step back, lean in close and step back again—but all three photographs articulate the same theme: a sensitivity to laborers and the human condition. The curatorial vision is essential to the expression and experience of the imagery. In other galleries, photographic series wrap around 3-walls in a double-parabola shape and others are hung salon style. The theme of shifting landscapes is a common thread through much of the exhibition, whether it is recording San Francisco's history, documenting tract homes and diners of the American West, exposing Teenage Lust, revealing the narrowing technological effects of *Little Screens*, cataloguing German water towers (Bernd and Hilla Becher), or chronicling the physical changes of a Dutch girl over twenty years.

After completing the one-hour guided tour, I was rewarded the freedom to stand peacefully alone in the center of the portrait gallery. Here, I most intimately experienced what Pilara refers to as "emotional documentary." With fourteen sets of eyes on me, the feeling was intense, powerful and reciprocal. Just as the photographer once subjected these individuals, the people in the photographs looked at me and probed my inner being. Although I was alone, I was inundated by a human, emotional and artistic presence.

Currently, the Pilara Foundation is in the programming stage and acts as a think tank for the entire photographic community with a special interest in what is happening in San Francisco. The Foundation endorses photography outside of their exhibitions by sponsoring artist lectures at universities and hosting round table discussions. The next exhibition at Pier 24 is the photography collection of Bob Fisher, the son of Gap founder Donald Fisher. Unlike Pilara, Bob Fisher has been collecting for 30 years. The exhibition is planned in conjunction with the exhibition of the Donald Fisher Collection at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It opens in September and will have a considerably longer run (six months) than this inaugural show.

Tags: [20th and 21st Century Photographs](#), [andy pilara](#), [Diane Arbus](#), [Donald Fisher Collection](#), [Fraenkel Gallery](#), [Jackie Nickerson](#), [Pilara Foundation](#), [Richard Avedon](#)