



Foglia in front of his photograph "Acorn With Possum Stew, Wildroots Homestead, North Carolina," which hangs in the "About Face" exhibition at Pier 24 in S.F. Photo: Russell Yip, The Chronicle / SF

About Lucas Foglia in 'About Face'

Sam Whiting

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Lucas Foglia grew up in an extended family that bartered plants for shoes and dentistry. Their farm was off the grid but not far enough. So he left home in search of an "absolute," with his camera and a mattress in a minivan.

He never did find his "absolute," but his image of a man holding a pot of possum stew was absolute enough for Andy Pilara, benefactor of Pier 24 Photography. That

oversize print is now front and center in an exhibition of portraiture titled "About Face" at this free exhibition hall on San Francisco's Embarcadero.

The show is typical of Pier 24 in that it is overwhelmingly comprehensive. There is a room for the 69 political portraits that Richard Avedon shot for Rolling Stone in 1976, and a room for Diane Arbus' freak show. A third room shows the aging process from infant to centenarian, in 100 pictures.

The Foglia print is on a wall with works by Helen Levitt on one side and Larry Clark on the other. Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" is on the opposite wall.

That is one of the most famous rural portraits in American history, but its owner, Pilara, is standing with his back to it. At this moment he is mesmerized by the pale redhead standing in the green forest holding forth his culinary masterpiece.

"Lucas is not only a good photo maker, but his development skills are as good as anybody I've seen," Pilara says as he admires the flecks of varmint chef's beard in the chef's beard.



Only Foglia piece

This is the only Foglia piece among 1,000 in the show. But the Pilara Foundation has bought nine more pictures for future display, and that will expose him to a broad swath of museum directors and collectors. Since its opening in 2010, Pier 24 has had 25,000 visitors, and they are all serious about photography, because an appointment is required and you can't just breeze through its 28,000 square feet.

"This is my first body of work that has been published and exhibited," says Foglia, who spent five years on the project in the backwoods of North Carolina and Tennessee. He could never stay for more than a few months at a time because of the inconvenience of his master's degree in photography, which he was simultaneously pursuing at the Yale University School of Art. The material for his book doubled as his thesis.

The hunters and gatherers Foglia documented move along slowly, but the finished art moved very fast. Foglia drove the minivan to San Francisco on a whim, and within a year a monograph, "A Natural Order," had been released as a coffee-table book.

"Lucas is a deep thinker, and he makes interesting pictures," says Frish Brandt, director and co-owner of Fraenkel Gallery, the city's eminent commercial gallery for photography. "He's a rising star."

Foglia, 29, has found a home among artists in a co-op that grows its own food on the Berkeley-Oakland border. He's also found work teaching a summer course at the San Francisco Art Institute. When that ends, he'll be on the back roads of Montana and Wyoming. He's midway through a project that will be included in the follow-up show at Pier 24, which will be about "place," as opposed to "face."



Wilderness

"I'm interested in the jobs that keep people living on the edge of wilderness in small-town America," Foglia says. "Most recently I've been photographing the interaction between gold miners and cowboys in Eureka, Nev., south of Elko."

Foglia is soft-spoken and intense, and one can only imagine what the roughnecks think when he drives up in his minivan. They probably figure he won't last, which is what the country farmers thought.

The patriarch of a survivalist community in rural Tennessee sized him up and said, "The first day you are a guest. After that you are free labor," says Foglia, who was enticed by the offer. Soon enough, he was cutting wood and tracking deer, carrying the extra weight of his medium-format camera and tripod.

The subjects he sought out were first-generation, having lived with modern conveniences. "They'd grown up in cities and suburbs and responded to the economic recession, global warming, environmental

concerns, religious beliefs by moving off the grid," Foglia says. "It's a lifestyle that's hopeful and severe at the same time."

Sleeping under eight blankets in the van during winter snow was severe. The food was hopeful, including the possum stew. "Greasy but good" is his review. He commuted across state lines, moving freely among a few dozen families, both nuclear and extended, with names like Sassafras Community and Wildroots Homestead.

40,000 images

"Everyone I photographed is either a friend or becomes a friend," he says. But friendship didn't influence the final edit. For that he stacked up 40,000 images and winnowed it down to 45. "The meaning and narrative of the project comes from what the best photographs are," says Foglia, who worked some channels in the photography community to get his work to Nazraeli Press, an Oregon publisher. It was coincidental that Nazraeli chose the same image for the cover that Pilara chose for "About Face."

It is titled "Acorn With Possum Stew," but that doesn't explain whether Acorn is the man or an ingredient. The pictures at Pier 24 don't have wall text, and nothing is for sale. Among the many famous portraits, this has to be the least obvious.

"This is a kid just starting out," Pilara says, "and these things are luscious."

About Face: Through February 2013. Pier 24 Photography. Appointment is required at <http://www.pier24.org/www.pier24.org>.

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