



[TURN T](#) [REVIEWS](#) [FEATURES](#) [MUSIC](#) [SOCIAL](#) [LISTINGS](#) [SEARCH](#)

CHRISTOPHER MCCALL: DIRECTOR, DREAMS IN PHOTOGRAPHS AT SEA LEVEL

Images **As Noted Below** Text **Betty Nguyen**

Pier 24 Photography is a sophisticated environment that offers a contemplative viewing experience "with" photography. Opening its doors three and a half years ago, the space was built exactly to spec considering the ideal environment for photographs to be shown. During its construction, the founders asked themselves, "What kind of experience would the public benefit from most", as well as, "How do we build a community around photography?" Their rigorously curated exhibitions span for approximately one year. During this time, established masters of contemporary photography as well as mid-career artists are often invited to make work especially for the space, visit with students or lecture at the museum, in accordance with their *Larry Sultan Visiting Artists Program*.

The works displayed in their exhibitions stem from the Pilara Foundation, a collection of over 4,000 works of photography based in San Francisco. The founders, Andy and Mary Pilara once visited a Diane Arbus photo retrospective in San Francisco ten years ago and were so moved by one of her images that they were able to acquire one her works from an esteemed gallery. Since, they have become avid and passionate collectors. Not only do they acquire and commission major contemporary works, but Andy and his curatorial team comb through newspapers, eBay, blogs, and books to find interesting works on a daily basis. In their private back room where one can enjoy a view of the Bay at sea level, I sat down to speak with Christopher McCall, Pier 24's Director.

McCall was in his own right a photographer and teacher. He received a Masters of Fine Art at CCA (California College for the Arts), studying with Jim Goldberg and the late photographer, Larry Sultan. He waxes poetic about Andy Pilara's vision and the organic conversations that led to the way things are done at Pier 24 Photography. It's an exemplary model of how passionate, cohesive curatorial work can be matched with great intention and depth.



Defunct railway tracks underneath Pier24 Photo Betty Nguyen

What kind of research did you come across when establishing the fundamental building blocks for Pier 24 as an institution?

Everything that evolves from Pier24 starts with conversations between Andy and Mary Pilara. While the building was under construction, we visited several sites to gain knowledge about what kind of place we wanted to strive for. One of the main influences that resonated with the experience we were after, was presented to us at The Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. From there, a path emerged for us to pursue. We could make a space to let the works breathe. As a viewer, you can be in a gallery by yourself, which is rare nowadays.

Museums in the United States seem somewhat competitive these days with their exhibition-making decisions. What you are doing here, feels more like a European show-more subtle.

Museums have a huge amount of overhead because of the size of their staff and size of their building. We do have 18 rooms to fill, but we don't take traveling exhibitions. We construct them from the Pilara Foundation and utilize a different concept. When we talk with curators at other venues, and they ask about wall text or how many people come to see our shows, it's just not what we're doing. It's not better, it's just that in a city like San Francisco, where we have great museums. We are a component of the museum system, but our intentions are to engage audiences separately.



Installation view "A Sense of Place" Courtesy of Pier 24 Photography, San Francisco

(left) Andreas Gursky, *F1 Pit Stop III*, 2007

(center) Edward Burtynsky, *SOCAR Oil Fields #1a and #2, Baku, Azerbaijan*, 2006

(right) Andreas Gursky, *99 Cent*, 1999

How do you acquire works for the collection?

It's mostly by instinct. Andy (Pilara) will often bring in the New York Times and show me photographs. The staff will research and find the photographers through a variety of sources such as galleries and at auction to bring into the collection

We'll also go on eBay to find works. The entire mug shot room in our last show was purchased from eBay. Two photographs in our current show were bought for 2 dollars on eBay. These works are shown amongst master works. If something feels right for the show, we won't hesitate to show the work and turn people on to them.

Because you have developed your own style of working so intimately and directly with the Collectors and the artists, your exhibitions provide a great sense of freedom. Also, you have independent resources, so the targets only come from within your own value systems.

What you're saying is true. Yes, there's no model for this in the photo world. We visited

sites like Palazzo Fortuny in Venice, Schaulager in Switzerland, places that built their own spaces around a foundation collection and are doing similar things. Instead of giving away a collection to other institutions, like donating a wing, which is how the Met came to be, it's this idea of building a collection and wanting to share it in our own way.

Tell me about the current exhibition, "A Sense of Place" and the artists in it.

The German photographer and artist, Thomas Demand, has three works in the show and each are shown in different contexts—one in its own room, one that deals with family and one with scale. *Grotto*, (2006) is constructed from 35 tons of cut up cardboard and was commissioned originally by the Prada Foundation. It's shown in a room that we actually deemed the "cave" and is close to the original size of the room that the model of the piece was constructed in.



Thomas Demand, *Grotto*, 2006

Courtesy of Pier 24 Photography, San Francisco

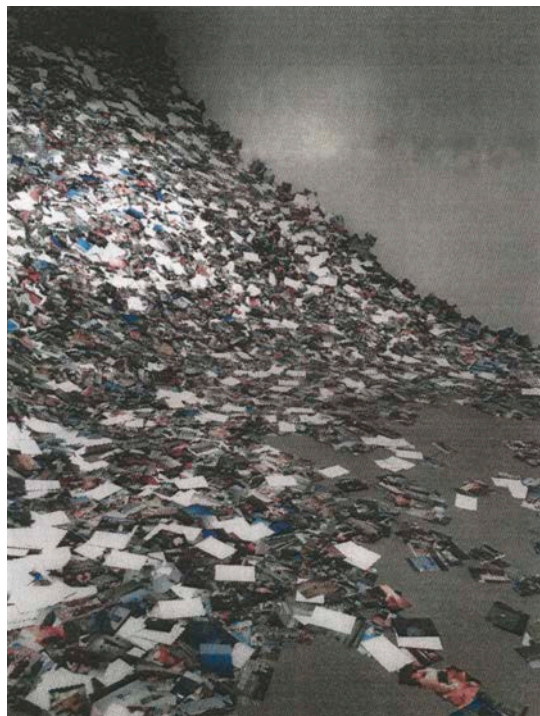
Initially, viewers might think it's a documentation of this life-size cave, but as you get closer, some viewers think that it's pixelated or has been taken from the Internet. What you're actually seeing are the cardboard's square edges used to make the image composite. It took about a year to cut and assemble these several hundred thousand cardboard pieces stacked together. Demand's obsessiveness with constructing a work, to then, photograph and destroy them, is remarkable.

Photography can be powerful and tricky, because the viewers themselves believe what they are looking at, is the truth. Demand presents an image and takes away that truth visually. He doesn't need a wall text to explain what he just did. They've simply experienced it by looking.

Robert Rauschenberg discussed the art of photography as a way of presenting an

idea. That it's not necessarily about "perfecting" an image using the light, the object and contrast, etc. because that's a dead end in and of itself for art. Instead, it's a truth that artists are connecting, not *the* truth necessarily.

The back room now houses Eric Kessel's astounding installation. The sheer volume overwhelmed me. There's so much happening with new photography in terms of content, process and presentation. We've gone from a story beginning with Diane Arbus, to this room, with over 350,000 works that are user-generated from the photo site, Flickr.



Erik Kessels, *24 HRS in Photos*, 2013 Photo
Betty Nguyen

That room shatters all the rules. The amount of photos one person can have on a phone now is mind-boggling. Erik Kessel is really the first person, I'm aware of, that can wrap our minds around the amount of images being taken and shared daily. People have no problem surfing into people's private albums online but it feels different in a room with real photos. If you take this throwaway culture, and print them out in an art world context, it becomes more precious. We have to encourage people to walk on the photos. We've seen something magical happen when people start looking through them. They've curated mini groupings inside of the room. Eric is in the hotbed of photography right now in Amsterdam. His generation grew up in a very visual world of design and now that they are moving

into the art world, they can execute their concepts precisely.

Let's discuss the origins of the *Larry Sultan Visiting Artist's Program*.

Pier 24 is community-based and we opened at a crucial time in the Bay Area's photo scene. Larry Sultan had just passed away and he met with Andy during its building process. He was so excited that this was happening in his backyard. It was Larry who actually recommended bringing me in to see the space. We all realized how short life can be and so, we initiated the *Larry Sultan Visiting Artist's Program* partnering with SFMOMA, and CCA, that brings well-known photographers to engage with students in non-traditional ways.

Yes! Rinko Kawauchi invited me to the beach and for drinks with her class. So cool! The people and that interaction, is the highlight for me as a curator.

Exactly, it brings the human side to the arts just as Larry would have engaged with people and his students. It allows us to work with photographers in a different way. They can make prints for our shows and we can show more prints the way they really want them to

be seen. Rinko Kawauchi and Eric Kessel are artists from the show up now, who have been part of this program.

I'm seeing a real transition in photography. Some artists like Wolfgang Tillmans and Rinko Kawauchi are learning digital photography to add to their toolbox.

Those are personal issues that have to be resolved by those artists. I remember not wanting to leave the darkroom, but then I realized I could print on any material with a digital printer. People like Lee Friedlander will never work digitally. Artists like John Chiara have to purchase a lifetime supply of paper in order to continue to work. But others like Wolfgang and Rinko are trying to figure things out and to keep going and retain the look they want. Tillmans pushed things with the medium that he hasn't ever been given credit for, presentationwise. He has influenced a lot of people. We worked very hard to get that still life for this show at a specific scale. He finally did that, so we brought the work into the collection.



Wolfgang Tillmans, *summer still life*, 1995 Courtesy of Regen Projects

Tillmans has always been the one to push viewers and to broaden the vocabulary of photography from all accepted stand points. It's an exciting time for photography in particular right now.

The question of, "What is photography?" is done with. It's art. People like Lee Friedlander, Steven Shore and Paul Graham established a more traditional way of working with the medium, but now it has been explored by artists as a completely stand alone practice. Photography has been a technology-based medium from the start. Artists use the computer just like dodging tools in the darkroom.

It's become part of the process and there's a new era of "internet artists". Does the Pilara Foundation collect digital works?

Some of the photos have been touched by computers or printed out on one. So it's difficult to answer. For us, it's about the final product and who is looking at the world in a new way.



Asako Narahashi, *Kawaguchiko #6*, 2003 / © Asako Narahashi, Courtesy Rose Gallery, Los Angeles

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