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Review: Georgia Photographers Offer Poetry, Humor, Drama in Group Show

By Felicia Feaster

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Dale Niles' "Mama Al's Painting" is featured in the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia show "Edge to Edge" curated by Atlanta photographer Chip Simone.

I can't say that a show of 62 artists claiming to represent the photographic gifts of the state of Georgia makes me paw at the ground in excitement. Sweeping, bloated, "definitive" shows like this often proclaim more than they deliver.

But "Edge to Edge: Contemporary Georgia Photography," curated by Atlanta-based photographer Chip Simone at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, is a certifiable winner with lots of surprises, some really great work and an ability to touch on the unique visuals of the South without succumbing to the expected regional kitsch of kudzu and rotting barns (though there is some of that, too).

Maybe it just takes one to know one, and the best person to represent the gifts of Georgia photography is another photographer. The truth is, Simone has a good eye. He also likes narrative. And drama. There are some formal experiments in the mix, but overall Simone seems most drawn to photography as the eyeball's literature, short stories linking people in a shared experience of living.

It's a tone that unites artists like Beate Sass, whose loving, tender "Dad at Water Aerobics" presents an elderly man whose delicate alabaster flesh is framed against an almost obnoxiously azure pool. An homage in its own right, it seems of a pair with SCAD alum Ervin Johnson's sumptuous, reverent, gold-dusted portrait acknowledging people who have lost their lives to racist violence, "In Honor of Rudy."



Timothy H. McCoy's "Bridge of Sorrows" (2015).

There's a similar collision of a man and his surroundings in Angela West's both hilarious and slightly scary portrait "Doghouse," in which her father's face is framed in an RV window, peeking out from his metal hive in the midst of a lush green Southern forest, like an outcast from civilization's embrace.

Sass and West celebrate both the grit and fragility of their fathers, in images steeped in the kind of intimacy that characterizes much of the work in "Edge to Edge."

There are big picture issues at work here: death and vulnerability, as seen in Constance Thalken's harrowing self-portrait of her cancer-ravaged body or photographer Alicia Collins' image of her mother's time-ravaged flesh, her abdomen an all-too-real topography of marks and fissures.



Photographer Tobia Makover's "Roundhouse/Boxcar" appears at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia.

Simone tends to avoid the usual artistic black-and-white nudes and instead homes in on the reality of flesh and the complexities of love. Arguably the most famous photographer in the mix, Atlanta's own Harry Callahan, is represented by a very modest, dreamlike portrait, a nude of his wife, titled "Eleanor," that records the beloved geometry of where her legs meet her torso in devastatingly plain, poignant terms.

An unusual intimacy also characterizes unsung documentary photographer Paul Kwilecki, a kind of muse for Simone, in "Edge to Edge," an artist who labored away at his work often without recognition. Bainbridge resident Kwilecki recorded the black and white inhabitants of his small town. His images testify to a love of the overlooked, ordinary people around him, but also demonstrate an incredible access and the value, for many photographers, of keeping it local. "I'm one of them," Kwilecki admits in a short film about his work playing in the gallery.

One of his most memorable images features a cadre of three grannies in their Sunday best standing in the aisle between church pews; fierce, powerful women in their element clearly not messing around when it comes to matters of immortality.

Kwilecki manages to capture the reality of the South but with a distinct edge and a streak of eccentricity, something you could say about many of the talented artists in "Edge to Edge."