

Art review: Join the ‘conversation’ between photo exhibitions at UNE

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By Jorge S. Arango

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“Calvin on couch (home147f14), 29 May 2022,” 6” x 9” toned silver gelatin print, 2022 *Photo by Michael Kolster*

First, a mea culpa: I’ve been remiss about covering shows at University of New England Art Gallery in Portland and Biddeford. The small, two-story, Thomas Larson-designed building in Portland is an elegant and intimate venue for enjoying art. Gallery and exhibitions manager Hilary Irons, herself an intriguing artist, produces consistently good shows here. I have yet to get to the Biddeford campus, but it’s on the ever-growing list of institutions and galleries to visit in a state steeped in artistic riches.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Michael Kolster: Home and Other Realms” and “Work from the Stephen K. Halpert Collection of Photography”

WHERE: University of New England Art Gallery, 716 Stevens Ave., Portland

WHEN: Through Jan. 22

HOURS: Noon to 5 p.m. Thursday through Sunday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-602-3000

There are currently two photography exhibitions at UNE Portland, both through Jan. 22: “Work from the Stephen K. Halpert Collection of Photography” and “Michael Kolster: Home and Other Realms.” Halpert, curator of photography at UNE, sees them as being “in conversation.” But the average gallery goer is likely to find them only tangentially related.

The primary connection is a quartet of Kolster photos recently acquired for the collection that are on exhibit in the first-floor show. There are also synchronies between Kolster’s architectural images upstairs and those of Berenice Abbott downstairs, and an overall sense of human vulnerability and sensitivity to being in the position of “outsider” that wafts through both exhibitions.

The Halpert Collection mixes lesser-known images with famous ones such as Berenice Abbott’s portraits of James Joyce and Edna St. Vincent Millay, Lisette Model’s “Coney Island, Standing” and Danny Lyon’s photo of Bob Dylan’s impromptu performance behind the offices of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1963.

As we circle the gallery, we begin to realize how discouragingly relevant and immediate many of these images remain. Lyon’s photo of Dylan, for example, was taken during a voter-registration drive in the South. Not only are voting rights – specifically for Black Americans – under attack in the post-Trump era, but in the photo Dylan is performing “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” his elegy for the slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers. Evers might be encouraged by the Black Lives Matter movement, but a clear-eyed assessment makes it plain that we have a very long way to go toward equality.

Other images deal with a score of intransigent human issues we still grapple with today. These include poverty (Arthur Rothstein’s “Alabama Sharecropper’s Daughter” from 1937); racism and homelessness (Ernest Withers’ “Tent City Family,” representing one family in a community of African Americans evicted from their homes in 1960 for registering to vote in Tennessee); toxic anti-migrant nationalism (E.O. Golbeck’s “Immigration Patrol” in Laredo, Texas, from 1926); and antisemitism, which is once again distressingly resurgent (Judy Glickman Lauder’s “Exterior, Auschwitz Concentration Camp,” Poland).



"Ali with Bullet Wound," (Afar Rift Valley, Ethiopia), 30" x 40", 1994, silver gelatin print

The underlying social justice theme of the show continues with more contemporary works too. Portland photographer Nanci Kahn's 1994 image "Ali with Bullet Wound" tackles war and/or guerrilla conflict. It shows an Ethiopian man with a machine gun slung across his back. It's a simultaneously beautiful and potentially violent portrait. Were it not for the title, we might miss the depression in the skin of Ali's leg that marks where he was shot.

There are certainly other subtexts in the Halpert Collection show, such as portraiture and human interaction with nature. But it is the social justice images that are the most impactful, primarily because they point up how, no matter how much we think we evolve, primitive human instinct persists in separating the world into us and them.

LIVING A COMPLETE LIFE

The deeply personal quality of Michael Kolster's show is excruciating – that is, excruciatingly painful and excruciatingly poignant in equal measure. It brings together three bodies of this Brunswick-based photographer's work: self-portraits, architectural scenes of Lewiston and photographs of life with his wife, Christy Shake, and their severely disabled son, Calvin.



“Calvin and me on floor by couch (home101f29), 27 Dec 2021,” 7” x 7” toned silver gelatin print, 2021
Photo by Michael Kolster

The most challenging are those of Calvin, who has suffered multiple disabilities and illnesses for the entire 18-and-a-half years of his life. He is rarely smiling or untroubled. Yet there is tenderness along with the anguish in images such as “Calvin and me on the floor by couch (home101f29), 27 Dec 2021,” where father and son roughhouse in their home, and “Christy and Calvin (hug, home118f36), 29 Jan 2022,” where Calvin squeezes his mother tightly to him while she nuzzles her son’s cheek.

So many of these images elicit emotions that are not easy to endure – embarrassment, heartbreak, sympathy, sorrow. Even an image like “Calvin on the couch (home147f14) 29 May 2022” can evoke sadness. It depicts Calvin’s torso seemingly relaxing on the sofa. Yet

we intuit the collapsed exhaustion of his body and the tension in his contorted fingers.

We might be struck with the impulse to turn away, especially after reading wall text by Shake that chronicles the daily routine of wiping up Calvin's perpetually secreted bodily fluids, changing diapers and onesies, medicating, calming her child's uncomprehending distress and irritation, feeding and burping him ... and on and on. We sense the fatigue Calvin's parents experience in their constant vigilance and caretaking.

Yet reading Shake's aching daily log highlights something about photography too: that its documentary aims can but skate the surface of the actual suffering and lassitude involved in parenting Calvin, not to mention Calvin's own restlessness and physical pain. This is true for some of the images in the Halpert collection, too. We can experience outrage and sadness for parents and children in "Tent City Family," but our outrage and sadness are impotent against their actual predicament.

Incredibly, Kolster emerges more hopeful about the medium. "What might at first seem like 'touching' into a series of questions about the limits of the photograph to complement our desire to understand ourselves and each other," he wrote me before I saw the show, turns out to be "both a critique and celebration of the power of the photograph."

That power comes through loud and clear in Kolster's self-portraits, where he often focuses on a tight cropping of body parts – a bent torso, a quarter of his face, a fist thrust between his legs. These are formally beautiful in their composition and sharply defined areas of darkness and light. But what they convey is the ultimate vulnerability of the body. It absorbs Calvin's suffering and Kolster's own. It ages and wrinkles. It is, literally, nakedly defenseless.

These and the photos of Calvin also convey the family's outsider status, something shared with various images downstairs. They telegraph the self-imposed isolation demanded by their situation, the inability to go to a restaurant without a care or shop for groceries without having to also manage Calvin's untamable behavior or endure people staring, even sympathetically.



“Centerville Parking Garage, Lewiston (LE23f9), 13 Aug 2021,” 7” x 7” toned silver gelatin print, 2021
Photo by Michael Kolster

The third body of work, the Lewiston images, also exude a sense of isolation, even desolation. Save for one, they are unpopulated. Also formally elegant, we see in them, as in Abbott’s architectural photos downstairs, the way Kolster views buildings, hedges, pavement and fences abstractly, as intersections and arrangements of dark and light planes (compare them to Abbott’s “4, 6 and 8 Fifth Avenue” downstairs).

The installment of the Kolster show is also worth noting. On the wall dedicated to Calvin, Kolster staggers the photos in groupings of twos and threes and singly. It mimics the “stop-go” cadence of their lives between vigilance and relaxation, as well as those moments of peace (the space between groupings). Finally, two walls mix images from all three series. It

is an immensely affecting strategy because it enhances our understanding of how the various strands of Kolster's experience – introspection, work, caretaking, parenting – interweave to form a complete life. It is a summation all of us can relate to, no matter what our particular convergences.

Jorge S. Arango has written about art, design and architecture for over 35 years. He lives in Portland. He can be reached at: [\[email protected\]](#)

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