

## 'Unsettled' images: Oklahoma City Museum of Art is showcasing uncanny photographs from its permanent collection in the new exhibit 'The Unsettled Lens'



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A woman cloaked in shadows stares around the weatherworn face of a stone statue. A child peers through a bullet hole in a car window. Tall, slender trees take on a wraithlike aura in a night-cloaked Japanese forest.

“These photographs are attractive, but they also make you feel a certain way and they make you think. That's always a nice little combination when you're appreciating art,” said Francesca Giani, the Oklahoma City Museum of Art's curator of modern and contemporary art.

The museum is showcasing photos that are both delightful and disconcerting with its new exhibition “The Unsettled Lens: Photography from the Permanent Collection.” Opening Saturday, the show includes almost 90 images by 16 American and Canadian photographers all exploring the notion of the uncanny.

“The uncanny is an idea, a concept, with which photographers have sort of played with almost from the very beginning of photography. So, the exhibit sort of gives you a visual representation of how it reoccurs in photography throughout time,” Giani said.

“It's loosely described as a sense of attraction that we feel toward something — so in this case, an image — but at the same time a sense of unsettlement that we feel when we look at that image. So

the image might have elements that we recognize, that are familiar to us, that tell us, 'Sure, come here, you know me.' And then at the same time, there are elements that kind of set us off in a sense, that we don't recognize, that make us uneasy.”

### **Permanent showcase**

“The Unsettled Lens” will show concurrently with another exhibit taken from the museum's permanent collection, "After the Floating World: The Enduring Art of Japanese Woodblock Prints.” The exhibits will share the museum's first-floor special exhibitions gallery.

“They are very different. There's not really a common theme that links the two, except we're looking to highlight some aspects of the permanent collection that we don't usually get to show,” Communications Director Becky Weintz said.

The OKC institution is spotlighting this year its permanent collection in a series of exhibits, including "The Complete WPA Collection: 75th Anniversary,” which opened in December. In 2017, the museum is celebrating its 15th anniversary in its downtown home, the Donald W. Reynolds Visual Arts Center, and its permanent collection has been completely reconfigured and reinstalled on the second floor.

“We have around 4,000 objects in the permanent collection, so obviously we can't have all of them out all the time,” Weintz said. “Shows like this are just a great opportunity to showcase different pieces that we don't normally have on view.”

The museum will mark the opening Friday of “The Unsettled Lens” and “After the Floating World” with "An Evening of Art & Performance.” The special preview event will include live music by Norman band Magnificent Bird, performances by RACE Dance Company and Reduxion Theatre Company, poetry on demand by Kerri Shadid, a screening of the Oscar-nominated animated short films and printmaking demonstrations.

“Usually, that's our members-only preview, but we decided to open it to the public to kind of introduce people to what a members

preview is typically like,” Weintz said. “Because we have all these local performers that are coming, we really wanted to get the community involved as much as possible.”

### **Uncanny exploration**

“The Unsettled Lens” will show for the first time several photographs from two recent gifts to the museum. In 2015, the museum received a gift of 50 photographs by Brett Weston from the Christian Keese collection. Since 2004, the Oklahoma City native has donated more than 400 photographs by the noted American artist to the museum.

The exhibit will feature several of Weston's signature high-contrast black-and-white images, especially his eerie landscapes, his mud and rock abstractions and his striking images of dead animals and bones.

“He's taking nature ... and turning it into an abstract image. But his images often are menacing. He gets almost creature-like formations out of the natural details,” Giani said. “He creates such contrast that his photographs have a very graphic quality. It's just black and white ... and sometimes you don't even know what it is that you're looking at. But it's beautiful, and at the same time, it's a little disquieting.”

In 2016, Keese also donated a large gift of Canadian paintings and photographs to the museum. The gift includes photographs from Stan Douglas, Angela Grauerholz and Ambra Polidori that are on view in “The Unsettled Lens.”

Featuring images from the turn of the 20th century to the year 2000, the exhibit also includes works by Ralph Gibson, Wynn Bullock and William A. Garnett. The exhibit's earliest images come from photo secessionist Edward Steichen, who was part of one of the first movements in the medium's history.

“Photo-secessionist photographs adopt a soft focus style. ... They wanted photography to kind of look at painting — a fine art — as a way to elevate photography at a time when photography was not considered a form of art,” Giani said. “Through the soft-focus

technique, he creates very eerie scenes. For example, his photograph of the Flatiron, the iconic building in New York, he stages the photograph and he presents the building a way that makes it look almost like an overwhelming menacing presence. So, in that case, he's referring to the uncanny quality of urban life ... when industrialization was kind of affecting the life of people in the city and there was a sense of uneasiness associated with that.”

Texas-based Tulsa native Amy Blakemore, known for her evocative images captured with cheap, plastic Diana cameras from the 1960s, contributes one of the few color photos in the predominantly black-and-white showcase.

“I think what people will like is that every single photograph has its own really unique story. So there's a story about the photograph, there's a story about the photographer, and there's a story about the uncanny quality of it,” Giani said. “(They're) very engaging photographs from a visual perspective, but also from the point of view of content and this element of the uncanny.”