

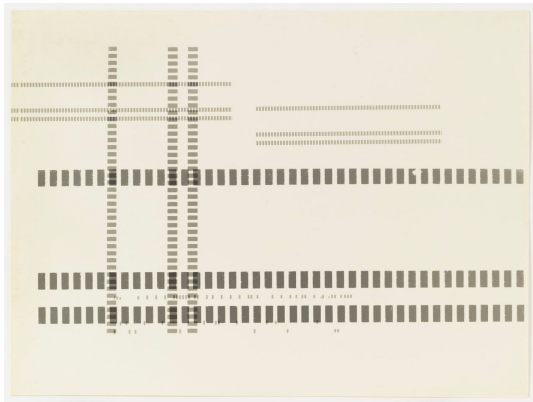
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ART REVIEW

‘Fotoclubismo: Brazilian Modernist Photography, 1946-1964’ Review: The São Paulo Style

Take a trip to MoMA and experience the abstract beauty of these 60 amateur photographs from postwar Brazil, never before seen in the U.S.



Geraldo de Barros's 'Fotoforma' (1952-53)

PHOTO: ARQUIVO GERALDO DE BARROS/MOMA, N.Y.

By *Richard B. Woodward*

June 16, 2021 5:17 pm ET

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New York

With the introduction in the late 19th century of low-cost, handheld cameras, amateur photographers quickly began to outnumber professionals. Societies of enthusiasts sprang up by the hundreds around the world, offering classes, publishing newsletters, awarding prizes. Several of these clubs, such as the Photo League in New York City, shaped the course of 20th-century art.

One influential group of amateurs, which few outside South America have known much about until recently, is the subject of the compact but illuminating exhibition “Fotoclubismo: Brazilian Modernist Photography, 1946-1964” at the Museum of Modern Art.

Founded in 1939, with fewer than a hundred members, the Foto-Clube Bandeirante (FCB) was headquartered in downtown São Paulo’s first skyscraper. By 1946, after the club had

added a cinema and a “women’s” division, it became the Foto-Cine Clube Bandeirante (FCCB) and held salons that accommodated Pictorialists as well as an avant-garde. (“Bandeirantes” means “standard bearers” in Portuguese, but also, more odiously, is the term for 18th- and 19th-century Brazilian expeditions launched to enslave indigenous people. These photographers saw themselves as pioneers and adopted the swaggering word into their club name because at the time it wasn’t considered as offensive as it is now.)



Installation view of ‘Fotoclubismo: Brazilian Modernist Photography, 1946-1964’

PHOTO: MOMA, N.Y./JONATHAN MUZIKAR

MoMA’s curator Sarah Hermanson Meister has concentrated on the photographers, and on the postwar decades when São Paulo swelled into a megacity. The show examines how one FCCB faction interpreted its country’s transformation through the lens of European and American Modernism, building on an imported stylistic framework with its own resourceful panache.

The 60 black-and-white prints, many double-hung in a gallery on the museum’s fifth floor, are arranged thematically. Within headings such as “Solitude,” “Daily Life” and “Experimental Processes,” Ms. Meister has embedded small bodies of work by six individuals— Gertrudes Altschul, Geraldo de Barros, Thomaz Farkas, Marcel Giró, German Lorca and José Yalenti —along with samples from about a dozen others. Vitrines in the center of the room contain illustrated bulletins published by the club.

Fotoclubismo: Brazilian Modernist Photography, 1946–1964

*Museum of Modern Art
Through Sept. 26*

the shadows of the steps against a wall are elongated, as if the steel were melting in the strong Brazilian sun.

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Much of the work on the walls is informed by the graphic language taught in the 1920s and ’30s at the Bauhaus. Objects are recognizable but often abstracted—windows in buildings cropped into jittery patterns of squares; street-car rails rendered as delicate, swooping curves. In a 1950s picture by Altschul of a metal staircase,

the shadows of the steps against a wall are elongated, as if the steel were melting in the strong Brazilian sun.

The spread of modern architecture seems to have provoked ambivalent responses. An apartment complex was photographed in the early ’50s by Eduardo Salvatore, FCCB’s president for decades, as a row of Orwellian concrete boxes, devoid of comfort or warmth. On the other hand, in a 1961 photograph by Lorca of a São Paulo airport, a soigné crowd is at home in the glass-walled surroundings.

The overwhelming majority of FCCB members were men. Proud amateurs, they worked as doctors, engineers or journalists and had money to lavish on a serious hobby. Anyone who

earned a living from commercial photography was viewed as tainted and barred from joining, a snobbish attitude inherited, Ms. Meister thinks, from the edicts of Alfred Stieglitz.

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Andre Carneiro 'Rails (Trilhos),' (1951) PHOTO: ESTATE OF ANDRE CARNEIRO/MOMA, N.Y.



Thomaz Farkas 'Ministry of Education (Ministerio da Educacao) [Rio de Janeiro]' (c. 1945) PHOTO: MOMA, N.Y.



Roberto Yoshida 'Skyscrapers (Arranha-ceus),' (1959) PHOTO: ESTATE OF ROBERTO YOSHIDA/MOMA, N.Y.



Julio Agostinelli 'Circus (Circense),' (1951) PHOTO: ESTATE OF JULIO AGOSTINELLI/MOMA, N.Y.



Fotoclubismo: Brazilian Modernist Photography, 1946-1964 PHOTO: MOMA, N.Y./JONATHAN MUZIKAR

De Barros, for instance, had a job at the Banco do Brasil that couldn't have been too taxing. To make his startlingly inventive "Fotoforma" (1952-53), he cut holes in a computer punch card with his employer's calculating machine. The perforated paper then became a negative for printing a rectilinear abstraction—a monochrome Mondrian.

Darkroom experimentation was encouraged. The tonality in many prints veers between stark white and pitch-black. Photographers saw material in nature as well as the street. The "Rushing Water" studies by Farkas from the mid-'40s glorified dispersive energy, while Giró aimed his camera at his feet and made fractured order out of "Asphalt" (c. 1950) and "Mud" (c. 1957).

Altschul, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, found work in São Paulo making artificial flowers for women's hats. Several botanical species in her new country became the basis for photographs, including her exquisite "Filigree" (1953), a study of the veins in a papaya leaf. It's the cover image of the superb catalog, which offers a more detailed perspective

(140 images) on the club's fervent activities.

During the 1950s, MoMA's then director of photography, Edward Steichen, bought prints by several FCCB members but included none of them in his 1955 blockbuster exhibition and book, "Family of Man." One reason may be a penchant among members for impersonal abstraction. There are only two true portraits in "Fotoclubismo," and both are more surreal (one is a solarized head) than humanistic.

Ms. Meister admits in her essay that her unsentimental selection is less than comprehensive. A 2015 exhibition about the FCCB at the Museum of Art in São Paulo featured 279 prints. But as MoMA served as the lodestar of Modernism in all the arts during the middle years of the 20th century, it is fitting that it be the first museum outside of Brazil to showcase these skilled amateurs and their unfailingly elegant photographs.

—*Mr. Woodward is an arts critic in New York.*

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UPCOMING EVENTS

June
24
2021

11:00 AM - 5:00 PM EDT
Global Food Forum

June
30
2021

1:00 PM - 1:45 PM EDT
WSJ Pro Cybersecurity Webinar: Aligning IT and Cybersecurity

June
30
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7:00 PM - 7:45 PM EDT
WSJ+ Live: Daniel Kahneman and His Co-Authors on the Crisis of 'Noise'

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