

Contact Festival: Plenty of eye candy in the ‘brothel without walls’

Massive annual photography fest pays apt tribute to city’s favourite soothsayer, Marshall McLuhan

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Barbara Probst's "Exposures" series, showing at Jessica Bradley Art + Projects, captures the same scenes from different perspectives.

Murray Whyte, Visual Art Critic

Here we go again: 200-plus venues, 1,000-plus photographers, 10 times as many pictures, and one city lucky to have all of them. I'm talking, of course, about the [Contact Photography Festival](#), which all but takes over Toronto every May, as it has for the past 14 years. Recent years have brought increased curatorial rigour and a growing roster of international superstars — this year includes brilliant media satirist Barbara Kruger at the AGO and slick big-time fashion shooter David LaChapelle at MOCCA, to name a couple.

The festival's strength is in its balance. In its earliest days, Contact was an everyone-in-the-pool grab bag of snapshots and amateur enthusiasts, but even now, with the city's

heavyweight institutions on board and featuring international luminaries, Contact remains true to its roots.

In the festival's omnibus catalogue, those same enthusiasts, showing at bookstores, cafes, restaurants and schools, share page space with museums and established galleries. Where other festivals in the city's full slate make you line up for tickets and pay through the nose, Contact is an open invitation to mix and mingle, see whatever you want, and at your leisure. Almost without exception, Contact is also free, free, free.

Now that's a festival I can get behind. There's next to no chance you'll get to all the shows here — and neither will I — but I can steer you to some. But above all, happy hunting — part of the joy's in your own discoveries.

1. The Mechanical Bride, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art: The festival is heavy on Marshall McLuhan this year — the exhibition title is borrowed from the legendary media theorist's book of the same name — and, in a nutshell, tries to embody his remarkably prescient notion that photography was being enslaved by an advertising industry amping up seductive lifestyle appeals as a way to push product, with the female form as the main lure. Imagine that. Here, 60 years on, artists like LaChapelle, with a disturbingly robotic image of Lady Gaga, and Dana Claxton, who filters the appropriative gloss of marketing through her lens of First Nations' experience, underscore McLuhan's role as a soothsayer, proving him right, only more so. May 1

2. The Brothel Without Walls, University of Toronto Art Centre: Further on the McLuhan theme — in his landmark 1964 book *Understanding Media*, he called photographs exactly that, and “dreams money can buy” — this show includes work by, among others, Douglas Coupland, Jessica Dimmock and Evan Baden, whose images of amateur online exhibitionists seem to take McLuhan's notion, of an artificial reality spurred by the easy ubiquity of picture-making, to its logical extreme. May 1

3. Untitled (It), Art Gallery of Ontario, Dundas St. façade: For decades — long before it became a de rigueur street-art standard—Barbara Kruger's withering satires of advertising in the public realm made her an art-world superstar. Kruger's iconic aesthetic of text and found images speaks advertising's language of vapid non-sequitur-ese so fluently, at first glance, as to be near-indistinguishable; a double-take yields results both hilarious and sobering. Here, she festoons the AGO's 90-metre-long Dundas St. glass awning with a new work commissioned specifically for the festival — a coup.

4. REWind, The Department, 1389 Dundas St. W.: Three photographers from the Chicago Women in Photography Collective explore photography's essential nature as a nostalgic medium, capturing times past, and our urge to hang on to them — literally, in some cases: Jennifer Greenburg's images of a community devoted to the aesthetic of '50s Americana have the weird double-edge of displacement — current, captured and past, all at once. May 1

5. The Pervasive View, Stephen Bulger Gallery, 1026 Queen St. W.: It's the first time that *National Geographic* has shown vintage prints from its vast collection in Canada, and some of these are truly remarkable: Ranging from 1880 through the 1940s, there are

60 pictures, including Herbert Ponting's shots of Robert Falcon Scott's disastrous 1910 South Pole expedition, and Alexander Graham Bell's own photos of his experiments with flight. May 1

6. Exposures, Jessica Bradley Art + Projects, 1450 Dundas St. W.: Barbara Probst's "Exposures" series has her capture the same scene simultaneously from different perspectives — in one, a woman lies prone at the bottom of a staircase, seemingly in distress; beside it, the same woman, in close-up, is relaxing with a smile — making clear what we should all know by now: that the truth of a photograph exists only in its frame, with a world of difference around. April 24

7. Silver Ghost, Jane Corkin Gallery, 55 Mill Street, Bldg. 61: Thaddeus Holownia offers a gentle elegy for — and quiet warning of — the fate of the Pacific salmon with a suite of haunting, oblique images as chilling as they are seductive, in luminously cool black and white. May 1

8. Carlos & Jason Sanchez, Nicholas Metivier Gallery, 451 King St. W.: Let it not be said that the Sanchezes are going soft: From recent macabre images, mostly drenched with blood, they move to the scrubbed-up sites of cataclysmic inhumanity, from Nazi gas chambers to Hiroshima's A-bomb Dome, all perfectly lit and seductively framed in a tight, disconcerting package. April 29

9. Congo on the Wire, CBC Broadcast Centre, 55 Front St. W.: The catalogue of the Democratic Republic of Congo's miseries are well-documented, so when Finbarr O'Reilly, a Canadian photographer for Reuters in Africa, made his return there in 2008, it was with a mind to capture some of the much-maligned nation's humanity and capacity for joy — something he knew well, having lived there for two years. May 3

10. What does it mean to be a human being?, aboard TTC streetcars: Photographer Jordan Bowers is as earnest as a kindergarten teacher — did you read the title? — but I'll give him credit for it. All that sunshine got his work aboard the TTC, which is as democratic a forum for an exhibition as you'll ever find. And some of his pictures — developing-world kids at play, weddings in India — while cliché, are actually pretty good. May 3