

Photo Basel Offers Another Art a ‘Room of Its Own’



Yoko Ikeda's photograph "341-03 Kahoku Town, Yamagata Prefecture." Courtesy of Yoko Ikeda and Ibasho Gallery

By **Nina Siegal**
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Many major “destination” art fairs these days have satellites: fairs that seek to attract at least a glimpse from the big-spending, high-profile art collectors who drop into town for the main event. Art Basel in Switzerland has contemporary art contenders such as Liste, Scope and Volta, offering options from younger and emerging artists, at perhaps more budget-friendly prices, for art aficionados who have time for more than just the big fair.

Photo Basel, now in its fourth year, wants to offer something different: a boutique fair of vintage and fine-art photography, and photography-based art. While Art Basel does feature contemporary photography, with top-notch specialists such as Howard Greenberg Gallery, Fraenkel Gallery and Galerie Thomas Zander, these exhibitors are one element of a sprawling, multidisciplinary contemporary art fair.

“Over time we just realized that we don’t see a lot of photography during Art Basel week in general, so a few colleagues of mine and I started doing this as a hobby,” said Sven Eisenhut, a Basel native who was one of Photo Basel’s founders and is now its director. “We just felt that photography does need space and a room of its own.”

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Photo Basel takes place at the Volkshaus Basel, a recently renovated Art Deco building with a bar, brasserie and beer garden, about a 10-minute walk from the Messeplatz, the central square where Art Basel is held.

This year, the 35 exhibitors from a dozen countries include established international photography galleries such as Galerie Springer Berlin and Esther Woerdehoff from Paris, and newcomers such as Galerie-Peter-Sillem from Frankfurt, and Ibasho Gallery from Antwerp.

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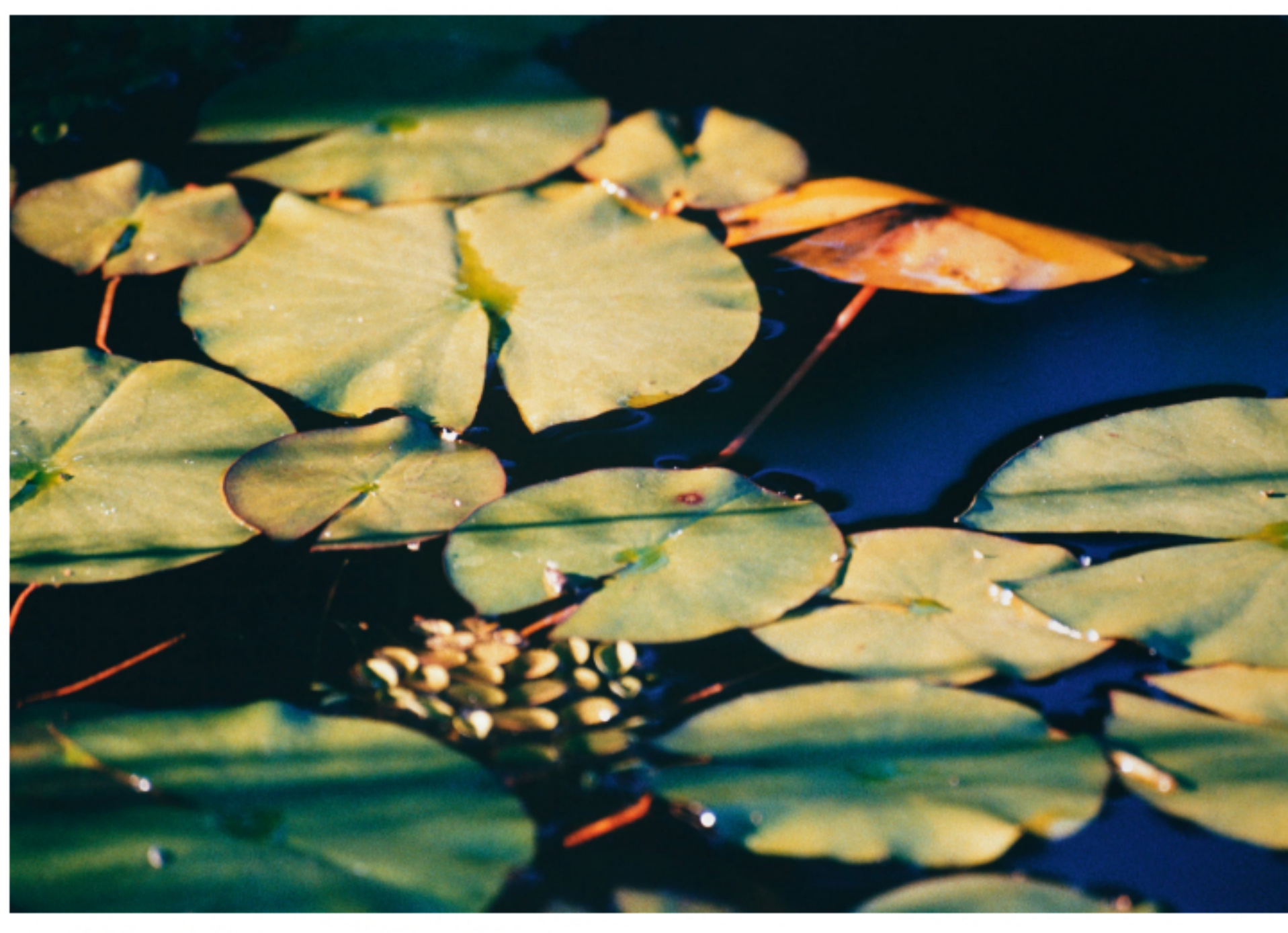
The fair also distinguishes itself by being manageably small, so that it can be visited within just an hour and not exhaust visitors who’ve already been inundated with contemporary art. Its ambitions are humble — it wants to stay relatively small and intimate.

“Let’s be honest; there’s Art Basel and nothing compares to that,” Mr. Eisenhut said. “These folks draw about 100,000 visitors a year, and we’re not even 10 percent of that. I wouldn’t complain if we get even more people, but for now it’s truly O.K.”

Mr. Eisenhut said he doesn’t like the word “satellite” and prefers to define his fair as “the only photography fair in German-speaking Europe” (Switzerland, Germany, Austria) that “happens to overlap with Art Basel.” This year, Photo Basel opened to the public on June 12, two days before Art Basel, and both run through June 17.

He sees the fair as a good starting point for collectors who may not be able to spend six or seven figures on a work of art — something of the standard at Art Basel. Prices at Photo Basel tend to be in the range of 4,000 to 10,000 Swiss Francs (about \$4,030 to \$10,077), but there are also pieces for several hundred Swiss Francs, and some priced over 25,000, he added. “It’s a kind of entry-level art that you can afford, and it might be the first item in an art collection that you start,” Mr. Eisenhut said. “Photography can be that bridge.”

This year the fair will include a new curated section, Master Cabinet, featuring rare vintage photographs by historically significant documentary photographers. The theme is Pivotal Moments, with works by Stuart Franklin, Leonard Freed, Jill Freedman and Ute Mahler. And the Aperture Foundation, which produces Aperture photography magazine in the United States, will display the 35 shortlisted and winning photography books from its [2017 PhotoBook Awards](#).



Frank Mädler's photograph "Viele mit Blau." Galerie-Peter-Sillem

Annemarie Zethof and Martijn van Pieteron, the Dutch co-owners of [Ibasho Gallery](#), which is devoted to Japanese photography, are to bring works by seven contemporary Japanese women — both emerging and established photographers — priced from about 500 to 10,000 Swiss Francs.

“We thought that an all-female program would be something quite unique,” Mr. van Pieteron said. “It’s a male-dominated world, not only in Japan, but we felt there are really excellent female photographers out there that haven’t achieved a platform yet.”

He said they decided to take part in Photo Basel for the first time for several reasons. “Over the last few years, we’ve had quite a lot of activity with Swiss collectors, and at the same time we’ve seen Photo Basel develop from a small to a much better organized fair, so the timing for us was right to step in.”

[Clair Gallery](#) from Munich, which works exclusively with original photographs from the estates of photographers, is also participating in Photo Basel for the first time this year. It’s actually the first fair that the 10-year-old gallery has ever attended, said its director, Anna-Patricia Kahn. She said she was attracted to the fair for its size and its location.

“Photographs aren’t always big, and vintage photography tends to be small,” Ms. Kahn said in a telephone interview. “I liked the idea of a small fair, combined with the fact that Art Basel is the mecca for all kinds of art collectors.”

Peter Sillem, a former journalist who shifted careers last year at age 50 and started a gallery for contemporary photography in Frankfurt, said he was attracted to the fair for its “smallness, its focus and its selectivity.”

“It’s a very good group of international galleries, and I thought it was just the perfect fair for me to start,” he said in a telephone interview. “It’s quite dense, and I like the idea of that — not having to visit a hundred different booths but just 30 or so.”

He will be presenting a solo show by the contemporary Leipzig-based photographer Frank Mädler, whose abstract realist images of water lilies “explore color, space and the elements,” Mr. Sillem said. “He also reflects on the medium of photography, and that’s what I find so interesting about him.”

Although they all appreciate the proximity to Art Basel, some of the dealers attending Photo Basel are keeping their expectations in check about how likely they are to attract the major collectors.

“I think you have to be quite realistic that a lot of the big collectors have a big program already and may still buy at one of the other fairs, but there are quite a lot of other fairs,” said Mr. van Pieteron from Ibasho Gallery.

“But there is a growing number of enthusiasts for photography in Switzerland and there will be the customer base coming to the other photography galleries,” he said. “We’re quite confident that we’ll see quite a lot of people who have an interest in photography.”

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