

Picture perfect

Intuit explores the art of the snapshot

By Ruth Lopez



Untitled vintage image from "Accidental Mysteries," c. 1955.

Artists are generally the first to spot aesthetic merit in objects not intended as works of art. This is particularly true with outsider art—Jean Dubuffet coined the term *art brut* ("raw art") in 1945 to refer to work made by untrained, (mostly) unstable individuals.

St. Louis graphic designer John Foster began picking up stuff he considered unusual at flea markets in the 1970s. He started to gravitate toward folk art 15 years ago, developing a large and notable collection with his wife, Teenuh.

"Almost all artists are scroungers," says Foster during a recent interview. "Everybody I know who is an artist picks up things. You see things differently when you are an artist." Over time, Foster became more discerning and noticed certain names that were becoming prominent in the art brut canon. (For the most part, and with great argument in the field, the terms *folk*, *outsider*, *self-taught* and *art brut* have been used interchangeably).

Foster also picked up photographs in flea markets, but it took time before he felt he had a

collection worthy of an exhibition. "My eyes weren't clear," he says. Not only that; "I wasn't collecting rabidly like now."

More than 75 treasures from his found snapshot stash have

These images are not only found objects ... they are folk art.

been pulled together for the exhibition "Accidental Mysteries: Vernacular Photographs from the Collection of John and Teenuh Foster" at Intuit, which opens Friday 13.

Foster says he picked up pictures way back when and gave them to friends as gifts. When he was an undergraduate in the art department at Washington University in 1976, he exhibited a set of prints he made using found X-rays. "I realized that they were negatives but I looked at them as found objects," he says. That he would become a collector of pictures that straddle the worlds of folk/outsider art and photography makes sense. "All of these

experiences had their tentacles attached to me."

Just a few years ago Foster began collecting pictures with a little more passion. "I could see that these snapshots were actually not only found objects; I saw that they were folk art," he says. And that's folk art in the truest sense: We've all grown up with cameras; photography is a shared experience with cameras documenting the special occasions in our lives, from school pictures to birthday parties. "Sooner or later we get our own camera and we make our own pictures and that is where the intuitive part comes in," says Foster, referring to the decisions made from positioning the subject to capturing light.

While the found images in "Accidental Mysteries" were never intended as art, they contain an aesthetic power. It hasn't exactly been easy for Foster to find great pictures. "This world is knee-deep in poorly composed, badly exposed, boringly trite, banal images," he says.

For Foster, sorting through boxes of photographs in flea markets and antique stores is "like looking at sand on the beach." He says he is lucky to find one out of a 1,000 that meets his criteria.

In addition to the vintage snapshots, Foster has enlarged about a dozen vintage prints for the exhibition. Purists may frown on this, but Foster is clear about his motive. "I want to invite people to experience the power the images from across the room," he says.

Foster isn't sure how many images are in his collection—maybe a couple thousand. "They are not all special. But they are all worthy of coming in out of the rain. It's a big orphanage," Foster says of his collection. "I have taken them all in and given them a home because they have something in them that is worthy."

"Accidental Mysteries: Extraordinary Vernacular Photographs from the Collection of John and Teenuh Foster" opens Friday 13 from 5 to 8pm at Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art. See Museums & Institutions. A conversation with the Fosters follows on Saturday 14 at 10am. See Events.