

GALLERY WITHOUT WALLS

In the age of the internet do we need a photographic gallery to exist in bricks and mortar? Stephan Schmid of Albumen Gallery argues that accessibility is far more important – and to prove his point he highlights his current exhibition of the work of **Matthias Frei**. Elizabeth Roberts reports.

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The Fag, from California Beaches



Dogpatch Factory, from *West Coast Impressions*

It was appropriate that I met up with Stephan Schmid at Tate Modern in London. He had for the past year or so sent me press releases about his online gallery and the exhibitions he was showing. It was when he sent me through the release on *West Coast Impressions and California Beaches* by Matthias Frei that I decided it was time to find out more, so I gave him a call and we arranged a meeting.

It seems that from the beginning of time the place to view photography – and to buy it – was within the hushed walls of a gallery. But life is changing fast and the worldwide accessibility of the internet has altered the way we purchase anything from a television or a pair of shoes to a painting, a sculpture – or a photograph. Instead of being confined to geographical space we can now access the online galleries that exist around the world, enjoy their exhibitions and even become a client.

Stephan, who came to this country from his native Germany in his early

twenties, married, had children and a successful career in the software industry, made the decision a few years ago that he would open a photographic gallery. 'It came from the tummy up – I pushed it down, it came up, I pushed it down. And finally it won,' he says.

The idea was a serious one and needed to go through a gestation period in which Stephan developed his ideas and came up with a concept within which to work. 'I wanted to represent a balance of photographers – those who are very well known and those who are just emerging.' At present Albumen Gallery shows works by such famous photographers as Brassai and Colin Jones alongside less well known artists such as Ernst Schlogelhofer, Matthias Frei, Robert Conrad and Giulio Magnifico.

Stephan has realistic expectations for the gallery. 'I want it to be commercially viable but I'm happy to let it grow sensibly,' he explains. His

client list is building and he has recently taken on several new photographers. His aim is to grow his reputation. 'I want to distinguish myself a little – selling isn't the most pressing thing,' he explains. In fact, one of his main interests is in educating clients who are new to collecting and he is happy to talk to them about their interests and give them advice on buying. 'In the last 10 years buying fine art photography has become a lot more interesting. Clients don't need to be spending a few million on a Gursky – it is happening in all the layers below that,' he says. 'In general, most clients spend around £500 on a print.' He describes his clientele as being made up of those who pursue photography in a profound way and those who are more casual about it.

Added to his advisory service, Stephan is writing an online journal on the website which has reviews of events and books and other related photographic topics. The whole project is growing slowly and perceptibly. 'I wasn't at Photo London this year, but one day I might be,' he says. >

Dogpatch Abandoned, from *West Coast Impressions*Dogpatch Mercedes, from *West Coast Impressions*



Athletes, from California Beaches



Pickup Driver, from West Coast Impressions

ALBUMEN GALLERY'S ADVICE ON COLLECTING

THE BASICS

- ▣ Learn to understand the different print types, particularly with digital photography.
- ▣ Understand the significance of a vintage / later / posthumous print.
- ▣ Make sure the print is on archival paper.
- ▣ Look for proof of authenticity – artist signed, artist stamp, year.
- ▣ Understand what is meant by an unlimited or a limited edition – particularly in the case of digital photography.

WHAT PERIOD TO BUY

- ▣ Unless you already have an interest in a particular period, go for a broad range.
- ▣ Lower price thresholds are a consideration with respect to contemporary emerging artists.
- ▣ In terms of investment, the period you buy from can be relevant – there has been recent rapid appreciation in 1960s and 70s prints. Second tier central or eastern European photographers from the 60s and 70s can be really good buys.

WHAT TO BUY

- ▣ Buy what you like. For newcomers this is an interesting process of understanding your own tastes and interests. Gallerists can then introduce you to photographers who fall into your area of interest.

PRICE LEVEL

- ▣ Don't be afraid to buy unknowns.
- ▣ Don't blow your budget on one expensive piece – spread it so that you can afford several pieces.
- ▣ Often, photographs that fall into a lower price category appreciate more than the more expensive, better known pieces.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN IMAGE

- ▣ Does the photograph 'speak' to you? Look for the idea that informs the image and gives it depth and complexity, particularly with contemporary photography.

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ALBUMEN GALLERY

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MATTHIAS FREI EXHIBITION
West Coast Impressions and California Beaches is on at the Albumen Gallery (albumen-gallery.com) from 1 to 31 July.

MATTHIAS FREI

To see more of Matthias' work visit freimatthias.com