A Contemporary View

Panel to help audience picture issues in documenting Appalachia

Put four contemporary photographers at a table at one time and they are likely to discuss their recent work and trends in photography. Four professional photographers, from the region and distant locales, will gather in ETSU’s Reece Museum at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 21 – and campus and community members can be privy to their perspectives, conversations and most contemporary work.

As the last of seven events in this fall’s The DeVault Tavern exhibition at Reece Museum, this “Contemporary Photography Panel Discussion” will bring together ETSU Art & Design Photography Professor Michael Smith and Visiting Professor of Photography Joshua Dudley Greer, Ken Abbott of Asheville and Stacy Kranitz, who lives in Florida at present. All four photographers have turned their focus on Appalachia, its culture, history, people or places, says Smith.

The panelists will also discuss the imagery of The DeVault Tavern exhibition, a documentary project exploring the history of an iconic 19th-century house in Leesburg, Tenn., about 5 miles west of Jonesborough. The exhibit and companion book include the photographs of Paul Kennedy, a New York photographer who grew up in Jonesborough. These images draw upon a trove of family photos, letters and materials. The exhibition runs through Dec. 12 at ETSU’s Reece Museum.

“Paul Kennedy’s contemporary photographs of the tavern underpin The DeVault Tavern exhibition. As Diana Stoll says in her essay, ‘The Lives of Houses’ … ‘[The exhibition] is part chronicle, part documentary, part anthropological study, part archival undertaking.’

“As more and more artists push the boundaries of media and discipline, we thought it would be interesting to hear what other photographers working in Appalachia have to say about their work and how it relates or does not relate to Mr. Kennedy’s photographs.”

Kennedy’s work will provide a jumping off point for the panelists’ discussion. “The discussion is going to take place in Reece Museum,” Smith says. “We’re going to encourage the audience to look at the work and fold into the conversation discussions related to that type of historical references in photography.
“Ken is a great addition to the panel because his work deals with that type of multi-dimensional historical references to contemporary places and things. Certainly my work deals with Appalachian culture and Stacy’s work does, as well.”

Kranitz’s recent photo essay titled *As It Was Give(n) to Me* – which candidly documents life, culture and stereotypes in Central Appalachia – homes in on social issues, while commenting on tradition and challenging boundaries.

Abbott’s lens has documented musical gatherings and neighborhoods in the Southern Appalachian mountains, such as Hickory Nut Gap Farm in Fairview, outside of Asheville, which resulted in the 2014 book *Useful Work: Photographs of Hickory Nut Gap Farm*.

Recent exhibitions by Greer include his Point Pleasant project, in which he photographed the haunting “beauty, mystery and violence” of the long-abandoned West Virginia Ordnance Work, a World War II T.N.T. plant, while Smith’s creative research has produced an extensive archive of photographs describing, with a personal point of view, the culture and landscape of the region.

“We’re all contemporary artists, thus the title of the discussion,” Smith says. “We’re going to present our work briefly and discuss our points of view relative to that work and open the questions to trends and how each of us might relate to a larger trend in contemporary photography. We’re not out to define ‘contemporary,’ but we feel that we can speak to our own work and how it pertains to the general ebb and flow of things out there.”

In keeping with the ongoing exhibition’s currency, Smith, Greer, Kranitz and Abbott will all focus on their most “contemporary” projects.

“In addition to discussing Paul’s work, we have agreed to show very current work preferably from the last couple of months,” says Smith, who has been friends with Kennedy for about a decade. “It’s going to be ‘contemporary.’ It’s going to be working artists showing their most recent efforts. That might be interesting, too.

“A good amount of the work we’ve shown in the past is already present in some form on the Internet. Ongoing work and works in progress are less formed, finished or polished, perhaps in the edit stage ... That could be fun. You might get a preview of something that might come down the pike later.”

Funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Mary B. Martin School of the Arts, the exhibition and related programming are co-sponsored with the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services and the Reece Museum.

*For more information about The DeVault Tavern Exhibition and its events, visit [www.etsu.edu/cass/reece](http://www.etsu.edu/cass/reece) or call 423-439-4392.*

*For information about the ETSU Mary B. Martin School of the Arts, call 423-439-TKTS (8587) or visit [www.etsu.edu/martin](http://www.etsu.edu/martin). Please “Like” ETSU Mary B. Martin School of the Arts on Facebook and follow it on Twitter and Instagram @ArtsAtETSU.*