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## **ART**

**MMoCA's *Focal Points* photography show examines American life from many angles**

*Jennifer A. Smith on Wednesday 05/22/2013 1:47 pm*

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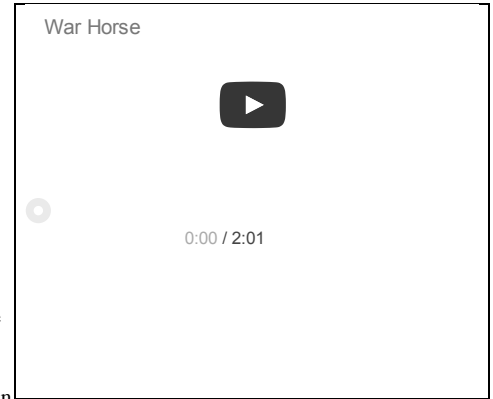
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American faces and places are the heart of the newest [Madison Museum of Contemporary Art](#) show, *Focal Points: American Photography Since 1950* (through Sept. 1). On display are more than 100 works from the museum's permanent collection. Taken collectively, they're an intriguing record of our country over the last half-century or so. From city streets to remote woods, from youth to old age, from artful nude to surrealist montage, the exhibition boasts enough variety to draw almost anyone in.

The show is organized clearly into seven themes, like "City and Suburb," "Nature" and "The Body." In "City and Suburb," I was captivated by a pair of 1999 color photographs by Amir Zaki. In these untitled photos, the artist makes use of a high, hovering, off-center viewpoint to heighten the drama of nighttime urban scenes. Zaki's subjects are an ordinary gas station and a drab, run-down apartment building that is almost prison-like with bars on the first-floor windows. Both settings suggest human activity, but people are not the focus here. In these lonely tableaux, one's eye is drawn to lights shining out into the darkness from these mundane buildings. In a photograph from his famed 1956 series *The Americans*, Robert Frank takes a different approach to what also could have been a lonely scene. In his black-and-white photograph *Coffee Shop, Railroad Station-Indianapolis*, a young waitress turns towards the photographer (and, by extension, the viewer) with a look of gentle expectation. She humanizes an otherwise empty, institutional setting of gleaming stainless surfaces and fluorescent lights. Frank's photo captures a moment of one-on-one human connection in a place marked by transience.

One standout in the nature section is Wynn Bullock's 1969 black-and-white photo simply called *Tree Trunk*. A dead old trunk in a densely wooded area has been taken over by moss and other new growth. While this could be a trite or forgettable image, the precise detail of Bullock's gelatin silver print captures an eerie beauty that is primordial and timeless.

There's plenty to take in, including work by numerous Wisconsin photographers. Included are Milwaukee's [Cecelia Condit](#), the Appleton duo of [Shimon & Lindemann](#), Madison's own [Lewis Koch](#) and [Greg Conniff](#), and Hudson's [Carl Corey](#), a keen chronicler of small-town taverns. As with any show of this size and scope, not everything speaks to me, and there's no reason it should. Part of the beauty of a show like this is the chance to freely dip in and out of various lives, landscapes and eras, all of which have their own light to shed on this American life.



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