

# New SBMA Curator Charlie Wylie

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Paul Wellman

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By [Charles Donelan](#)

It was tragic when the Santa Barbara Museum of Art ( SBMA) lost its longtime curator of photography Karen Sinsheimer to cancer a year ago, but thanks to her extraordinary gifts as a collector, it was a tragedy that also created an important opportunity. For 25 years, Sinsheimer exerted her considerable acumen in acquiring a substantial and wide-ranging body of photographic work for the museum's permanent collection, thus establishing the SBMA as a major player in this increasingly important field of art history.

In April of 2016, the museum announced the appointment of Charles Wylie to the newly renamed position of curator of photography and new media. Wylie, who goes by Charlie in his professional life, comes to us from Dallas, where he served as Lupe Murchison curator of contemporary art at the Dallas Museum of Art for 15 years. On Sunday, September 18, Wylie will open the first show he has organized here, Cecil Beaton's *London's Honourable Scars: Photographs of the Blitz*. Although it's a relatively small show — 15 haunting images — it's a big step, as with it the museum enters a new era in which the category of fine art photography will merge not only with new media, such as video and the Internet, but with multiple larger trends visible across the dynamic spectrum of contemporary art practice.

To be clear, Wylie has sterling credentials when it comes to the traditional category of photography. While at the Getty Center, he cataloged thousands of images by the great German photographer August Sander, and organized

an important collection of the photos of the influential team Bernd and Hilla Becher. In fact, it was his study of German photographers and of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (where Bernd Becher mentored Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky, among others) that led Wylie to his role in Dallas, where he curated successful traveling exhibitions of such major contemporary artists as Brice Marden, Robert Ryman, Gerhard Richter, and Sigmar Polke.

Speaking with him in the museum's basement conference room this fall, I was impressed with Wylie's breadth of interests, his knowledge of the international scope of contemporary art, and particularly with the ease with which he navigated conversational transitions between the abstruse (e.g., the philosophical basis of German objectivism) and the popular (Wylie curated the Dallas Cowboys Art Collection that's now on view in AT&T Stadium). When asked if his relationship with the Jones family depended on his knowledge of football, Wylie smiled and offered the characteristically humble observation that his bachelor's degree from the University of Notre Dame "didn't hurt."

Going forward, visitors to the SBMA can expect to feel Wylie's impact through a combination of things: shows like *London's Honourable Scars* designed to highlight the museum's extensive and all too often hidden existing strengths in photography, thoughtful investigations of contemporary work involving moving images and sound, and shows introducing Santa Barbara to genre-defying international artists such as Willie Doherty and Leo Villareal. With the upcoming show of wartime work by Cecil Beaton, a gift from the museum's former director Ala Story, he has made a splendid start.

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