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This year, City Paper's annual photography contest joined forces with the new Center for the Photographic Image. CPI, created by Todd Vachon and photographer Dominic Episcopo, is a fledgling nonprofit dedicated to "reaching out to the photo community and creating more of a dialogue with photographers," Episcopo says. "We're trying to create a center for photography in Philadelphia, but we're not funded so the only way we could do that is by having a museum without walls." Pairing up with City Paper allowed CPI to host an exhibit with walls, opening at the end of the month.

CPI asked Peter Hay Halpert to judge the contest. A native Philadelphian now living in New York, Halpert is known for his photography collections, curating and criticism. "When you're based here in New York, it's very easy to get sucked into believing that this is the center of the art universe, and that if it's not here it doesn't exist," says Halpert. "But a competition like this reminds me that's not the case at all."

He was somewhat surprised by the Philly aesthetic. "With this competition, although it's contemporary work, most of the work was not particularly political or confrontational, and there was very little conceptual-based art. [There was] some very traditional work, and I'm not saying that in any pejorative sense." Halpert cites a phrase used to describe 17th-century Dutch genre painters -- "they painted what was at their elbow" -- and insists "that wasn't meant in a demeaning way. Their legacy are some of the most amazing still lifes, what was literally on the table at the time, and what we have here is a chronicle of what's going on in Philadelphia and the surrounding region."

Halpert sorted through slightly less than 600 entries, narrowing the pool to 60 winning shots by 37 artists. He singled out six of those artists for special recognition: Siobhan Edmonds, Candace M. Vivian, Benjamin Harris, Samuel Peltz, Richard Kaplinski and Kirsty Gilbert. Prizes include \$250 gift certificates toward a continuing education course at UArts and a membership to Inliquid.com.

Halpert also singles out one artist whose work particularly struck him. "Shauna Frischkorn did a series called Gameboys.' Each depicts an individual young man looking up, and his face is illuminated by the glow of what apparently is a video game. These are kind of stark portraits set against a dark background, but you almost instantly get what they're about and the statement they're making."

The exhibit of all 60 winning photos opens on First Friday, Nov. 1, at Gallery Siano (309 Arch St.). For more information, visit www.centerforthephotographicimage.com.