ART REVIEW

A Small Brazilian Photo Club That Reached for the Skyline

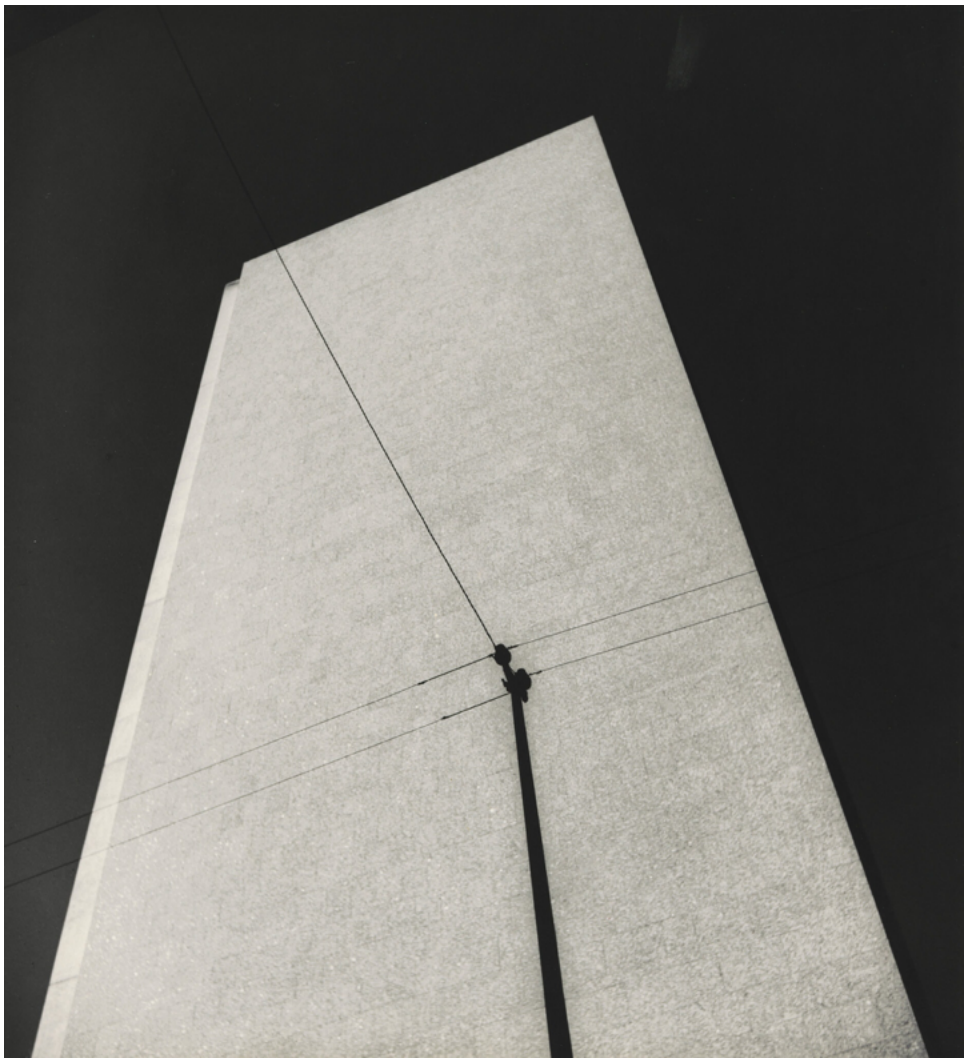
How a group of mostly amateur photographers helped develop Brazil's modernist aesthetic.

By Martha Schwendener

June 17, 2021

Europe was exhausted after World War II, and Brazil was ready to pick up the slack. Dozens of artists had left Europe fleeing fascism, and Brazil's government was ready to support ambitious cultural undertakings, reflected in museums devoted to modern art and the inauguration of the São Paulo Biennial in 1951. This enthusiasm for modern art and new technological forms like photography can be felt even in amateur clubs like Foto-Cine Clube Bandeirante (FCCB), founded in 1939 in São Paulo. A trailblazer in the avant-garde art scene but little known outside the country, the group takes center stage in the show "Fotoclubismo: Brazilian Modernist Photography, 1946-1964" at the Museum of Modern Art.

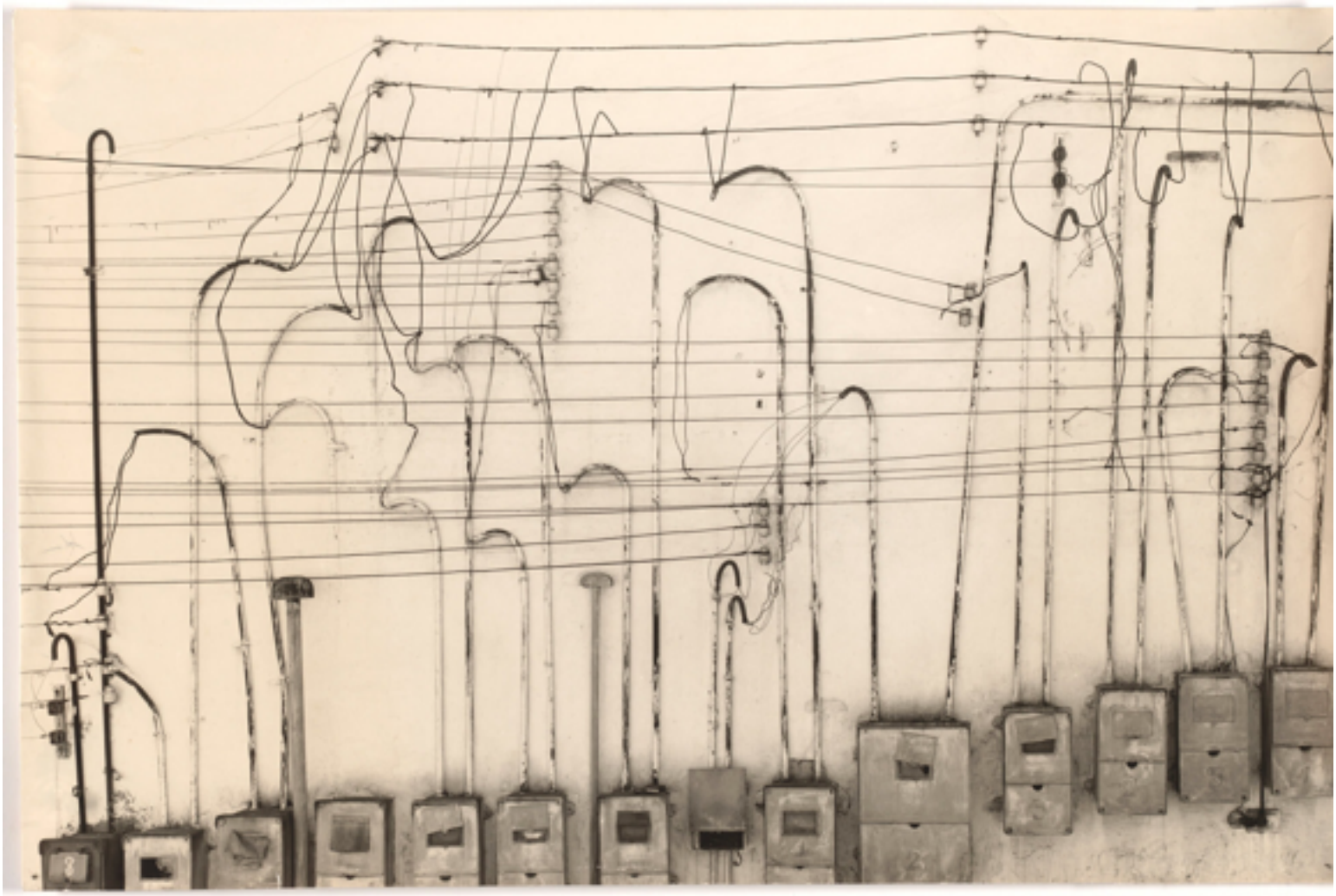
This exhibition of more than 60 photographs, paintings and ephemera is the first American museum show about the FCCB, which consisted mostly of hobbyists: journalists, scientists and businessmen and women who traveled together on weekends, taking pictures and creating workshops, exhibitions and publications to promote photography as an art form. The club included several professional artists — or photographers who later became pros — in its ranks, as well as a diversity of photographs from the growing immigrant communities. It's abundantly clear that these photographers were ambitious in their approach. Using new techniques and abstract motifs, they signaled that they were aware of developments in art not only in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, but also in Paris, Moscow and New York.



Thomaz Farkas's "Ministry of Education (Ministério da Educação)" in Rio de Janeiro, circa 1945, a virtually abstract view of what is considered to be Brazil's first modernist building. Thomaz Farkas

Brazil's drive to become a "developed" nation — that is, more industrialized and with a larger presence on the geopolitical stage — is made obvious here. There are photographs of people in expanding cities, automobiles and lots of images featuring the rudiments of modern building: concrete, steel and glass.

The photograph "Ministry of Education" (circa 1945) by the Hungarian-born Thomaz Farkas is a virtually abstract, sculptural view of what is considered to be the first modernist building in the country. Called the Gustavo Capanema Palace in Rio de Janeiro (also known as the Ministry of Education and Health Building), its design team included the architects Lúcio Costa, Roberto Burle Marx and Oscar Niemeyer, with the French architect Le Corbusier acting as a consultant. (Niemeyer would go on to design Brasília, the country's new modernist capital, in the late '50s.) Images from the club's field trip to the newly developed housing complex Várzea do Carmo are slightly more humble, but they show the photographers pointing their cameras at the same subject, which nurtured a sense of camaraderie and competition.

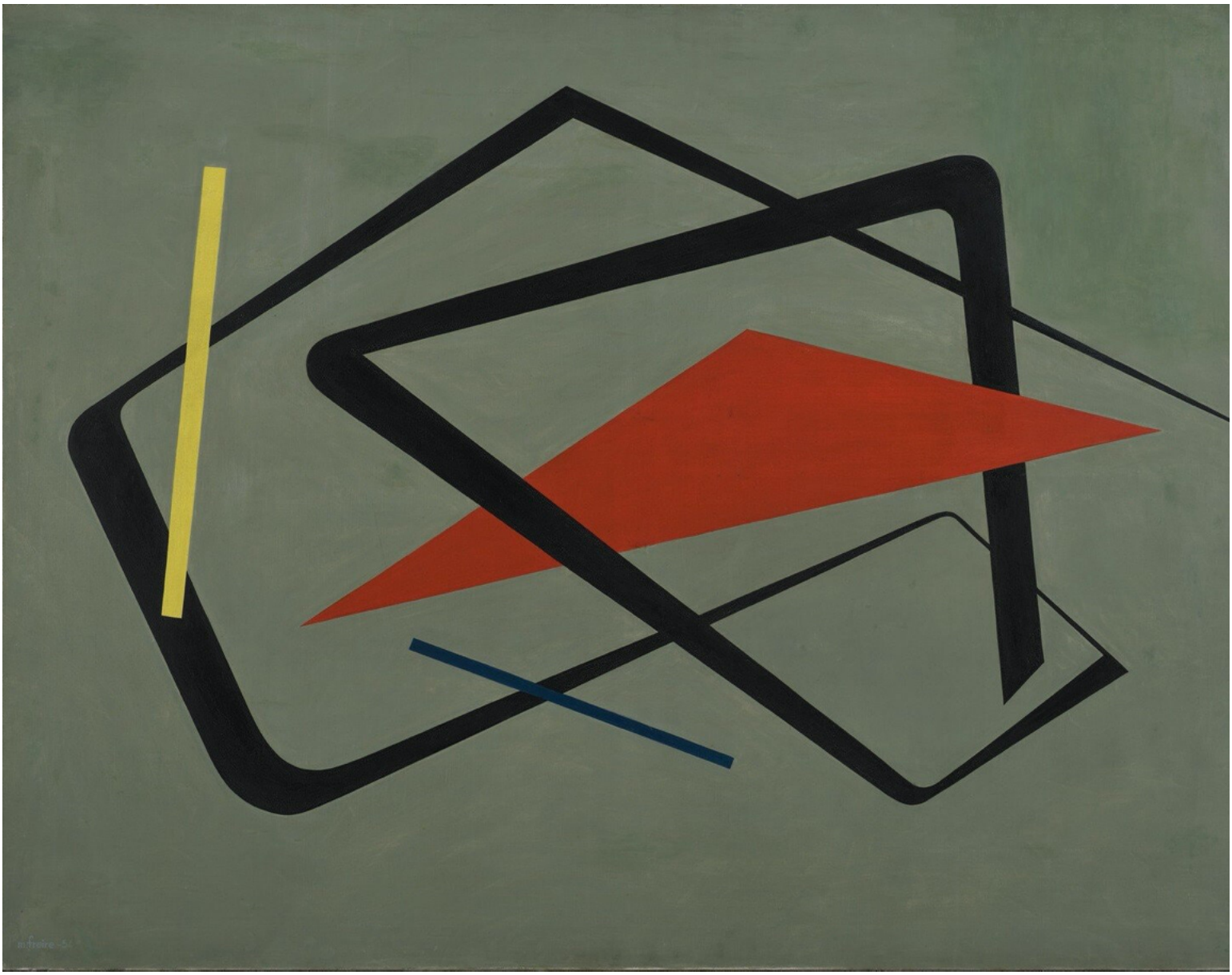


Marcel Giró's "Light and Power (Luz e Força)." circa 1950, featuring a series of delicate wires and power boxes. Estate of Marcel Giró

The psychic ruptures of a society trying to achieve warp-speed development can also be seen in images like Marcel Giró's "Light and Power" from around 1950. The photograph is like an abstract illustration and detail of development, with power lines perhaps serving as metaphors for people and policies.

Many of the works here echo modernist photography experiments from North America and Europe, like the activities that took place at the Bauhaus in Germany or Russian avant-garde practices in the 1920s, exemplified by artists like László Moholy-Nagy or Alexander Rodchenko.

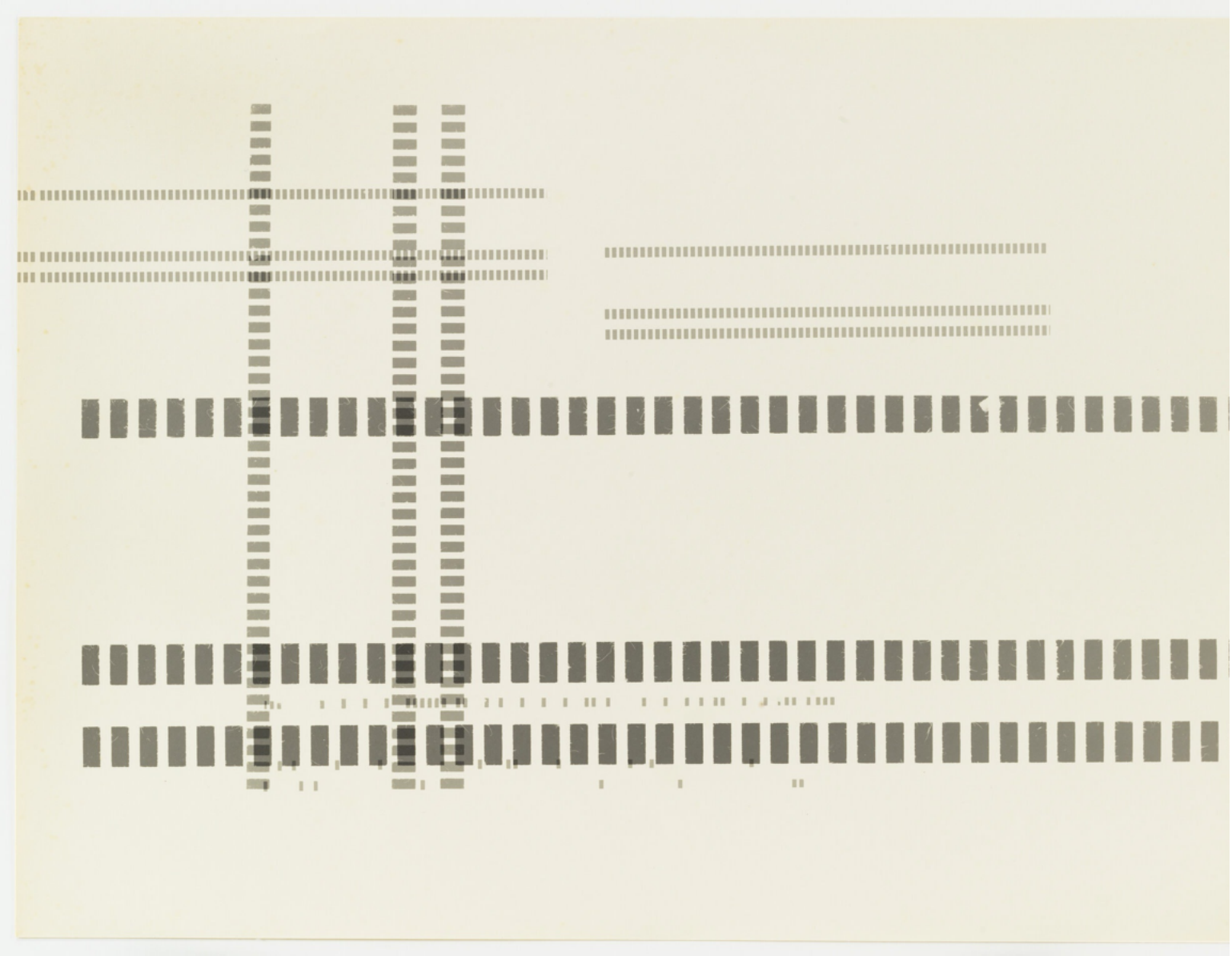
Another touchstone is Surrealist photography from the '30s, which aimed for more dreamy, psychedelic effects. Germán Lorca's "Solarized Portrait" from around 1953 is reminiscent of this practice. Lorca belonged to the club for four years, from 1948 to 1952, and left to open a professional commercial studio. "Solarized Portrait" uses an experimental technique that was popular with Surrealists: turning the lights on in the darkroom during the developing process to get a reversal of tones that adds an ethereal aura to the sitter's profile.



“Untitled” (1954) by the Uruguayan artist María Freire, who had pushed for “much more abstract, much less figurative work.” María Freire

The abstract paintings in “Fotoclubismo” forge the link between photographers doing it for fun or amusement and those trying to create a new and modern artistic statement. Geraldo de Barros’s membership in FCCB predated his renown as a painter and as a co-founder in 1952 of Grupo Ruptura, which identified with geometric abstraction and Concrete art. His austere painting, “Diagonal Function” (1952), a composition of black and white geometric forms, echoes the work of Piet Mondrian, a huge influence on Latin American artists who wanted to show their rigor and cultural advancement rather than the looser, gestural painting of the Abstract Expressionists up in North America.

Another abstract geometric painting here, “Untitled” (1954), by the Uruguayan artist Maria Freire, features black and yellow lines intertwining with a red triangle on a gray-green background. Freire had reviewed an exhibition of FCCB photographs in the group’s influential publication, Boletim Foto Cine, arguing that the organizers could’ve gone further in showing off “much more abstract, much less figurative work.”



Geraldo de Barros. “Fotoforma,” circa 1952-53, gelatin silver print. Arquivo Geraldo de Barros, via Luciana Brito Galeria

You can see this Concrete art approach extending into de Barros’s photography work. “Fotoforma” (1952-1953) is a black and white gelatin silver print that uses the same geometric precision as his paintings. His day job at Banco do Brasil informs images like “Fotoforma,” in which he uses a bank punch card that he brought into the darkroom, shining light through the perforations onto photographic paper to create his abstract image.

One of the standouts here is Gertrudes Altschul, a German-born artist who had fled Nazi persecution and settled in São Paulo. In Brazil, Altschul revived her business — making artificial flowers for women’s hats — and many of her photographs hew to this botanical (or botanically inspired) interest. Several of her works, however, also focus on architectural features, framing them like elements in a geometric painting, or unidentified objects that become, for the sake of photography, a beautiful abstract composition.

Gertrudes Altschul, “Untitled,” circa 1955. Part of a small contingent of female artists within the photo club, she photographed a diverse range of subjects, from botanically inspired compositions to architectural features. Estate of Gertrudes Altschul

But where are the more amateur photographers and their works? Viewing the display cases with the club’s bulletin, you can see more mundane — and frankly less skilled — photographs of people, places and things. These don’t quite have the kick or zing or experimentalism of the photographs mounted on the wall. (It is MoMA, after all.) But the works in the club’s Boletim reveal the fervor and enthusiasm of its members. Some were more talented and committed than others, but the FCCB was also a harbinger of the role of photography, both as a valued art medium and a way for everyone else to capture in images — and momentarily arrest — the fleeting and rapidly changing world around them.

Fotoclubismo: Brazilian Modernist Photography, 1946-1964

Through Sept. 26 at the Museum of Modern Art; (212) 708-9400, moma.org.