



Stacy Kranitz, *Pine Mountain*, 2016, archival pigment print, 16 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

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GALLERY GUIDE

Stacy Kranitz: *Ain't No Grave Gonna Hold My Body Down*

September 25, 2026–January 23, 2027

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Pulitzer Prize–winning photographer Stacy Kranitz’s newest body of work, *Ain’t No Grave Gonna Hold My Body Down (ANGGHMBD)*, examines how Appalachia has been seen, and misseen, across generations. Premiering simultaneously at The Contemporary Dayton and two partner institutions, the exhibition brings together more than 40 photographs drawn from historic archives and Kranitz’s own images, alongside historic texts, installation, and film.

The result is a layered portrait of a region shaped by myth, exploitation, resilience, and the uneasy tension between representation and reality.

The Long View

Presented as part of the 2026 FotoFocus Biennial: *The Long View*, the exhibition considers how histories of poverty, environmental exploitation, and systemic neglect continue to shape the present. Kranitz’s project is grounded in more than a decade of sustained engagement with Appalachian communities, allowing her to look beyond isolated moments and examine the forces that unfold over generations. The work traces the enduring consequences of disinvestment in rural Appalachia, including the decline of medical and dental care, black lung disease, medical debt, hospital closures, and the intertwined crises of drug use and inadequate treatment. Yet Kranitz’s photographs do not present Appalachia solely through the lens of crisis. Her long-term relationships with the people she photographs reveal the strategies, contradictions, and resilience of individuals and communities navigating these conditions.

By working over extended periods of time, Kranitz creates an archive that embodies *The Long View*. Her

photographs ask us to consider how the past remains active in the present, and how the stories we tell about a place can influence how that place is understood.

The Myth of the Mountaineer

The exhibition begins, in part, with the complicated legacy of writer and legislator Harry M. Caudill (1922-1990) and his influential 1963 book, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*. Caudill documented the exploitation of Appalachian land and labor by coal operators and brought national attention to the region’s persistent poverty.

Caudill initially portrayed the “Mountaineer,” a figure associated with descendants of Scots-Irish, English, and German settlers who sought independence in the Appalachian mountains, as a victim of industrial exploitation. But as he became increasingly frustrated by the lack of meaningful change, his thinking shifted. Caudill eventually embraced eugenic ideology, arguing that poverty was hereditary and advocating for sterilization programs.

This transformation reveals how the mythology of Appalachia has shifted over time: from the image of the self-reliant frontiersman, to the impoverished victim, to the person blamed for their own circumstances. These narratives have had a lasting influence on how Appalachian communities are perceived and understood.

Kranitz places these histories in conversation with contemporary debates about poverty, personal responsibility, and structural inequality, asking how ideas developed in the past continue to shape the ways communities are represented today.

Photography and Representation

Photography has played a significant role in constructing public images of Appalachia. Early photographs of mountain communities and homesteaders were followed by images produced for the coal industry, Farm Security Administration documentation during the Great Depression in the 1930s, and media campaigns associated with the War on Poverty in the 1960s.

While these photographs often brought attention to real conditions, they could also reduce complex lives to recognizable symbols of poverty, hardship, or isolation. The camera can document a moment with extraordinary specificity, yet a single image can never contain the full circumstances of a person's life.

Kranitz's photographs engage directly with this tension. Her long-term relationships within Appalachian communities allow her to photograph people not simply as subjects of documentation, but as individuals whose lives cannot be reduced to a single image or narrative. Kranitz asks viewers to question what photographs reveal, and what they leave unseen.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

The title *Ain't No Grave Gonna Hold My Body Down* references the traditional gospel song "Ain't No Grave," made widely known through Johnny Cash's recording. Its evocation of persistence and resistance runs throughout the project.

Kranitz's work looks backward to histories that continue to shape Appalachian communities, while remaining grounded in the lived realities of the present. Historic photographs appear alongside contemporary images, creating connections across generations and challenging the idea that the past is finished or separate from the present.

This perspective has particular resonance in Dayton. Throughout the twentieth century, many people migrated from Appalachia to Dayton in search of industrial employment and economic opportunity.

Today, countless Dayton-area residents trace their family histories to the region. The histories, struggles, cultural traditions, and resilience represented in Kranitz's work therefore have a direct connection to our own community.

Ultimately, *Ain't No Grave Gonna Hold My Body Down* asks us to look more carefully. Who is looking? Who is being looked at? What assumptions do we bring to an image? And what happens when a photograph comes to stand in for an entire community?

Kranitz's work reminds us that photographs can document, reveal, and preserve, but they can also simplify, stereotype, and obscure. By confronting both the power and limitations of the photographic image, *Ain't No Grave Gonna Hold My Body Down* invites us to reconsider not only how we see Appalachia, but how we understand the people and histories behind the images.



Courtesy of the artist.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Stacy Kranitz is a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer whose work focuses on communities and landscapes in Appalachia. Born in Kentucky and now based in the Appalachian Mountains of eastern Tennessee, she has spent more than a decade developing relationships with people and communities throughout the region.

Kranitz is the recipient of a Pulitzer Prize, Guggenheim Fellowship, and Images Vevey Book Award. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally at venues including the Tennessee Triennial in Chattanooga, Tennessee; Rencontres d'Arles in Arles, France; and Cortona On The Move in Cortona, Italy. Her photographs are held in the collections of the Harvard Art Museums, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and Duke University's Archive of Documentary Arts, among others.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Ain't No Grave Gonna Hold My Body Down is presented simultaneously at The Contemporary Dayton and two partner institutions: The Gallatin Galleries at New York University and the Biennial Images Vevey in Vevey, Switzerland.

The project was recognized with the Images Vevey Book Award, and a monograph accompanying the exhibition is available for purchase in The Contemporary Dayton's CoSHOP.

ABOUT THE FOTOFOCUS BIENNIAL

The FotoFocus Biennial, now in its eighth iteration, activates over 70 exhibitions at museums, galleries, universities, and public spaces throughout Greater Cincinnati, Dayton, Columbus, and Northern Kentucky in October 2026. Each Biennial is structured around a unifying theme; the 2026 theme, *The Long View*, considers aspects of time and perspective in photography and film, and how these mediums shape our understanding of the world.

FotoFocus welcomes global artists, curators, critics, educators, and visitors to Cincinnati with exhibitions, talks, performances, screenings, and panel discussions during its Biennial Opening Events, October, 1–3, 2026.