5 Must-See Artists at the Rencontres d’Arles, the ‘Venice Biennale of the Photography World’

From Patrick Wilkooq to Gilbert & George, here’s what you won’t want to miss at the prestigious summer photo festival.

( aftermath.com/about/issue-458, July 6, 2018)

Art World (https://www.artworld.com/art-world)

William Wegman, Cosmic (EVA). Courtesy of the artist and Spazio Oberdan Gallery.

Few places have quite the charm of Arles, a small town in the South of France where the 45th edition of the summer photography festival Les Rencontres d’Arles is now in full swing. Even the facades of the shuttered yellow houses that line the town’s cobbled streets—redecorated in 2015 as part of the Venise Vénitienne exhibition—are adorned with works of art as part of the festival, which sees tens of thousands of visitors each year. The streets of what was once the capital of Cevenol Arles are a medley of medieval churches and chapels, 19th-century industrial workshops, and the modern-day Monoprix supermarket.

The atmosphere is alive with excited chatter as seasoned, road-weary audiences exchange opinions on everything from Adel Abdessemed’s harrowing mammoth ivory sculpture of the iconic Vermeil-era Nubian Girl piece to William Wegman (http://www.artworld.com/about/issue-458), a perhaps overly human-esque photo portrait of his beloved Weimaraners.

Last night, the ruins of a Roman-era open-air theater, festival director Gael Le Boulicaut led a “Happy Birthday’’ chorus for the veteran photographer William Klein (http://www.artworld.com/about/issue-458). In the background played a film tribute to the 95-year-old Frenchman who famously captured the timeless streetwearing of Mohammed Ali in his 1964 film portrait of the pugilist.

Another birthday was celebrated by the Pire Pilet, the 10-year-old photography prize celebrated for documenting issues of sustainability. The work of all the previous prize laureates is being revealed in a major retrospective at the Cosmopolite Arles contemporary art center. Previous winners of the prize have included ‘water’ and ‘earth’ but the Pire Pilet is taking a slightly different approach to its 2019 theme: ‘Hope’.

Looking across the festival, the new theme resonates. After years of bleak offerings at the festival, and in the prestigious prize, there is a more optimistic mood at many of the exhibitions in town. In that spirit, here are five of our favorite photographers to encounter at Les Rencontres d’Arles.

Patrick Wilkooq in ‘Hope: A Collaborative Perspective’ at the Manuel Rivera-Ortiz Foundation
The small southwestern French town of Saint-Martin has just 1,000 residents, 33 of whom have migrated there recently as asylum seekers. For his project at the Marval-Riviere-Orli Foundation, Willocq immersed himself in Saint-Martin for five weeks, getting to know the migrants who came from as far as Chad, Bangladesh, and Ukraine, as well as the native inhabitants, who are by turns welcoming and hostile to the newcomers.

Willocq creates painstakingly elaborate sets—which almost appear photoshopped, but are not—even in which the migrants’ narrative overlaps, cast with local people. The photos demystify how people and places adapt to change, and remind us that many of the native Saint-Martinois themselves once came to France as Spanish migrants. One set of photos shows a traditional French luchette decorated by migrants linedly parachuting into the town. Next to it, the same scene is depicted in a year later, with the new inhabitants now integrated into it, sharing the luchette.

Robert Frank in “Sidelines” at Espace Van Gogh

In a windowless room on the ground floor of the former 18th-century apothecary where Van Gogh briefly lived after cutting off his ear is an exhibition devoted to the Swiss photographer Robert Frank.

The 80 prints published in Frank’s groundbreaking 1958 photo book The Americans are well known. Here, though, unknown shots from the series Frank made while traveling across the US in an open car are on display. On his travels he was often accompanied by his wife, the photographer Michiko Koizumi, who is also on show. The photographs, many of which are unpublished, show a raw sense of frontier and un-American rampant consumerism and injustice in the first half of the 1950s. The striking photographs offer a glimpse of a stark, foreboding sense of alienation in the years leading up to the Civil Rights movement.

Jonas Bendiksen, “The Last Testament,” at the Church of Saint Anne

In a 17th-century church opposite the town’s cathedral, Magnum photographer Jonas Bendiksen presents an exhibition of photography, found
Gilbert and George "The Great Exhibition (1971-2016)" at Lima

A trip to Lima wouldn’t be complete without a visit to check in on the progress of Víctor Hugo’s Lapa Foundation, instantly recognizable on the Avenida la by its gleaming 200-feet-tall from Frank O. Gehry-designed building. Nest to it is the 10-acre Parque de las Ánimas, an exhibition space being constructed inside a former industrial complex, slated for completion in 2020. While construction on the east side of the site is ongoing, the arts duo Gilbert and George have taken over Lima’s Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes with an epic solo retrospective. The idiosyncratic pair, who have been working together for 50 years, spoke of the hostility some of their early work, which used “arty” words and graphic depictions of sexuality, received from both straight and gay communities. Some members of the gay community were offended by their 1976 work Queer, for example, but it can be given a retrospective reading of homophobic. The work was an early attempt to reclaim the word from its original derogatory context. Just a few years later, they saw, the same people offended by their use of the term were walking around wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the phrase “Queer as Folk.”

Marcelo Brodsky, "1966, The Fire of Ideas" at Croisière

Across France, the revolutionary spirit of May 1968 is alive as the country marks 50 years since the historic uprising, which began with student protests in Paris but quickly spread to a broader, general strike. Society was young. The baby-boomers had reached adolescence, and were becoming disaffected with the social mores and values of their elders. Meanwhile, the US was embroiled in the Vietnam War. China was in the midst of its "Cultural Revolution," and the Soviet Union was invading Prague. The youth figured something had to give.

In a show titled "1968: What a Year!" archival photos and text-based works by the Argentine artist and activist Marcelo Brodsky appear alongside historical photos of hardly erupted teargases, magazine covers, and transcripts of radio communications between an outstretched and increasingly desperate police force throughout the period of civil unrest.

The images of this generation of activists, paired with Brodsky’s textual analyses, reveal the possibilities of the passions that are created when young people come together to drive forward social change. The show isn’t held but conjures a sense of today’s atmosphere, with its mass movements such as Black Lives Matter, and the global women’s marches denouncing “what’s up” on another era of unquestioned social norms.

Follow on Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/crenart) or Facebook: (https://www.facebook.com/crenart)