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Les Rencontres d'Arles 2017

With a strong surrealist strain, and including a welcome number of female artists, highlights from the 48th edition of the photography festival

BY ELA BITTENCOURT

Forty-eight years in existence, with venues ranging from medieval churches to vast post-industrial spaces, and featuring more than 25 exhibitions, plus the opening week's parallel live presentations, screenings, photography-book competitions and panels, Les Rencontres de la Photographie d'Arles has become *the* defining photography festival – the Cannes of photography.

Naturally, with prestige comes scrutiny. Just as Cannes has come under fire for its inadequate representation of women, non-European and young filmmakers, (and while Les Rencontres generally fares much better) Western or Europe-based photographers still dominate the competitive New Discovery Award section (even if some of the projects have taken the shortlisted photographers to Africa, Latin America and the Middle East). This year's retrospectives of Latin American and Iranian photography, however, help to broaden the overall scope.



Roman Cieřlewicz, from the series
'Photosculptures', 1971

Curated by Karolina Ziebinska-Lewandowska, 'The Specter of Surrealism' exhibition is an illuminating lens taking in numerous images from the movement. Alongside consecrated surrealists such as Man Ray, the show also makes surprising connections. The juxtaposition of Jacques-André Boiffard's *Big Toe* (1929) – a blowup of a blackened, warped nail – hung next to Gabriel Orozco's much later *Horseshit* (1992), in which a pull ring from a tin can is incongruously stuck in a large turd, eschews a traditional, strictly historical frame, and highlights the surrealists' fascination with objects, abjection and taboos. This continues in the series 'Photosculptures' (1971) by Roman Cieřlewicz that document Alina Szapocznikow's gum sculptures. Though referencing poised classical art, the images can repulse – a sticky, spat-out mass.

Ziebinska-Lewandowska explained over email her desire to show overlooked artists, such as Dora Maar, Pablo Picasso's lover whose own photographic practice was largely ignored: 'Photography was very little present in surrealist exhibitions in the 1920s and 1930s, but much more so in surrealist magazines and books.'



Germaine Dulac, *The seashell and the clergyman*, 1927, film still

The show's most refreshing aspect is its consistent inclusion of international women artists, from surrealist French filmmaker Germaine Dulac (*The seashell and the clergyman*, 1927) to Brazilian artist Anna Maria Maiolino (*Street Performance, Rua Cardoso Junior*, 1981), Czech artist Eva Kot'átkova (*Not How People Move But What Moves Them*, 2013), and the Belgian Agnès Geoffray ('Metamorphoses' series, 2014-2016) and from the US, Cindy Sherman (*Untitled #141*, 1985).



Aneta Grzeszykowska, *Holes*, 2011. Courtesy: Raster gallery, Warsaw

In Aneta Grzeszykowska's video, *Holes* (2011), which highlights how fluidly photography installations incorporate video, the female body is subdivided – mouth, breast, eye – the parts abstracted from the whole, and evoking both scopophilic, voyeuristic pleasure and occasional aversion. In one sequence, an unnaturally long, phallic finger enters the mouth, accentuated by red lipstick and shown alone against a white background. In another more gleeful image, multiple breasts float in the air and recall Carol Rama's fetishistic obsessions.



Alix Cléo Roubaud, from the series 'If Something Black', c.1980, silver gelatin print. Courtesy: © Centre Pompidou, Paris

A separate section spotlights the oneiric aspect. Finnish photographer Ulla Jokisalo's *Birds I-III* (2000) consists of three sketchbooks of watercolours on paper. With bird-headed women in austere dresses, her gorgeous dreamy work mixes surrealism with Hieronymous Bosch-like horror. Another revelation is the series 'If Something Black' (c.1980) by French photographer, Alix Cléo Roubaud, whose nude self-portraits bring to mind the illusive, spectral works of Francesca Woodman. Roubaud used double exposure to evoke haunted interiors and psychoanalytic duality – a sense of not being oneself. In one photo, a naked woman lies on the floor, her face turned to us, while in the doorway hovers an image of a young girl. In another, Roubaud squats naked by a window, while her 'double' lies on the floor, enclosed by light, as if entombed.

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Masahisa Fukase, *Ravens: Noctambulant Flight*, 1980, from the series 'Ravens', 1975-82. Courtesy: Michael Hoppen Gallery, London © Masahisa Fukase Archives

'I feel very strongly that history helps me understand the now,' said Ziebinska-Lewandowska. Indeed, the surrealists' poetics and penchant for experimentation permeates the entire festival. In the first European show of major Japanese photographer, Masahisa Fukase, we see him move effortlessly from the provocative yet fairly contained portraits of his family in the early 1970s – in which he includes his elderly father alongside a female nude – to his acclaimed series, 'Ravens' which he began in 1976. The latter betrays numerous surrealist accents. Fukase uses a telephoto lens to reduce a flock to a single solitary bird. In one case, he also flips the image, so that the bird appears 'standing up,' its claws raised – a striking anthropomorphic form that suggests either aggression or, perhaps, vulnerability and self defence. In another image, a girl's black hair blowing in the wind, captured from behind, for an instant powerfully evokes a raven. Yet another photo shows a cat hungrily devouring a bird – an image that perhaps comes closest to the Edgar Allan Poe-esque terror of death and carnality that so fascinated the surrealists. The series' curators Simon Baker and Tomo Kosuga stress Fukase's obsessive study of and intense identification with the birds that echoes the surrealist painters' fixation on objects.



Shadi Ghadirian, from the series 'Nil Nil', 2008. Courtesy of the artist and Silk Road Gallery, Tehran

In the 'Iran 38 Years' exhibition, alongside photographs that document war and oppression in a more photojournalistic fashion, we also find works with a strong surrealist bend. In her series, 'Nil, Nil' (2008), Shadi Ghadirian juxtaposes ordinary domestic objects with bullets, knives and military boots to catch the 'surreal' experience of being caught up in a war as a child, and to convey how violence is woven into the fabric of everyday life, and persists as trauma. In one image, Ghadirian shows an elegant porcelain setting except, instead of regular cutlery, the knife is large and bloodied, a murder weapon.



Azadeh Akhlaghi, from the series 'Eyewitness', 2012

Anahita Ghabaian Etehadied and Newsha Tavakolian, the exhibition curators, dedicate an entire section to photographs that convey how Iranians have tried to abstract themselves from the violence by creating inward, dreamlike shells. Still other images, such as the two photographs from the 2012 series 'Eyewitness' by Azadeh Akhlaghi, are elaborate uncanny stagings of real events: in one, a violent suppression of a protest in Tehran against President Nixon, in 1953. Aklaghi's *mise-en-scène* is so minute, the gestures so precise and expressive, we immediately identify the works as staged tableaux. Yet it is impossible to shake off their nightmarish power. The juxtaposition of Akhlaghi's dreamy surrealism with the grim, surreal absurdity of another photojournalistic image that shows a young killer pardoned in the midst of his public execution, his family removing the noose still around his neck (Arash Khamooshi, *Act of Forgiveness*, 2014), is a virtuoso curatorial gesture, demonstrating how the surreal is still part and parcel of our daily vernacular.

Les Rencontres de la Photographie d'Arles <<https://www.rencontres-arles.com/>> runs from 3 July to 24 September, 2017.

Main image: Alix Cléo Roubaud, from the series 'If Something Black' (detail), c.1980, silver gelatin print. Courtesy: © Centre Pompidou, Paris

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