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Arles photography festival offers flashes of brilliance, from digital sunsets to Japanese pioneers

Sprawling Rencontres d'Arles spotlights global politics and female artists, but is quiet about contemporary France

'Self-Portrait (Full-Figured, Yet Not Full-Term)' (2001) by Yurie Nagashima, featured in 'I'm So Happy You Are Here' © Courtesy the artist/Maho Kubota Gallery, Tokyo/Aperture

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Each summer, as photography obsessives descend on the Provençal town of Arles, its elegant limestone walls disappear beneath a kaleidoscope of posters: flyers for fringe shows, the Instagram handles of artists trying to snag a visiting Parisian curator, QR codes advertising photobooks, invectives against corporate sponsors.

This year, though, it was the election signs that were everywhere. The second round of France's snap parliamentary vote coincided with the end of opening week; the space beneath one venue had been repurposed as a polling station. "Marseille emmerde le Front National" read a flyer near the station. No translation required.

The curious thing was, despite this year's Rencontres d'Arles festival featuring more than 40 exhibitions (several museum-scale), insights into the never-ending psychodrama of Macron-era politics were hard to find. While French artists and curators are as present as ever, glimpses of France itself seemed wedged in aspic. Historic black-and-white photos of *pétanque* matches fill the town museum; an SNCF-supported show in the tiny Croisière venue is devoted to archive images of railway restaurant cars (extravagantly sideburned waiters, woebegone sandwiches).

A cynic might think that the French cultural world does not wish to look too hard at what is happening in the country right now, for fear of what it might find. Possibly the aspic tells its own story.

'The One That Left' (2021) by Cristina de Middel, part of the 'Journey to the Centre' project © Courtesy the artist/Magnum Photos

Other countries' psychodramas, though? Inescapable, whether your interest is Beirut (Randa Mirza), Trump's US (Debi Cornwall) or Syria (Stephen Dock). This focus on global turmoil did not always feel like the denial of problems at home; occasionally it seemed a way of talking about those same issues in a different key. One of the festival's standout exhibitions, *Journey to the Centre*, gorgeously installed in the airy vault of the Église des Frères Prêcheurs, is by Magnum photographer Cristina de Middel, best known for *The Afronauts* (2012), which documented an eccentric 1960s attempt by a Zambian science teacher to train Africa's first space crew. De Middel's latest multi-year project also uses playfulness to investigate one of the great subjects of our era, focusing on the migrant trail from Tapachula in Mexico to the US.

'Number One, "Save America" Rally, Youngstown, Ohio' (2022) by Debi Cornwall © Courtesy the artist

Instead of casting this as a border “crisis” caused by faceless “illegals”, she frames the journey as a heroic quest in the mould of Tolkien or Jules Verne, populating it with the people and stories she encountered en route. In one image, a young woman stands next to a section of border fence, sporting a sweatshirt emblazoned with the furious orange squish of Donald Trump’s face. In another, a member of the Athletic Club of Tijuana practises the pole vault on a beach next to the wall (if only making it across the border were that easy).

‘Kissing in a Bar, New York City’ (1977) by Mary Ellen Mark © Courtesy the Mary Ellen Mark Foundation and Howard Greenberg Gallery

Many of these photographs have a fantastical, surrealist edge that makes you wonder whether they are documentary or something more confected. But other exhibits here are deadly real: in one vitrine, de Middel assembles stark black-and-white images of personal effects found on the bodies of people who have died trying to cross the southern Arizona desert. One plastic wallet contains little more than a religious icon, spare change and toothpaste. “Unidentified”, reads the label.

Female photographers are a major presence in the Arles line-up this year, more of them — and in larger spaces — than I can remember. There’s a generous retrospective of the American portraitist Mary Ellen Mark and a concentrated yet powerful exhibition by Ishiuchi Miyako devoted to poignant, close-focus pictures of the belongings of people who’ve died (among her subjects are her mother and Frida Kahlo).

'Mother's #35' by Ishiuchi Miyako, part of the 'Mother's' series © Courtesy the artist/The Third Gallery Aya

But for me the highlight was a group show devoted to female Japanese photographers from the 1950s onwards, *I'm So Happy You Are Here*. Despite the country possessing one of the most vibrant photography scenes in the world, a mere handful of the artists featured have been exhibited internationally; only one, the luminously talented colourist Rinko Kawauchi, has been shown in Arles' 54-year history.

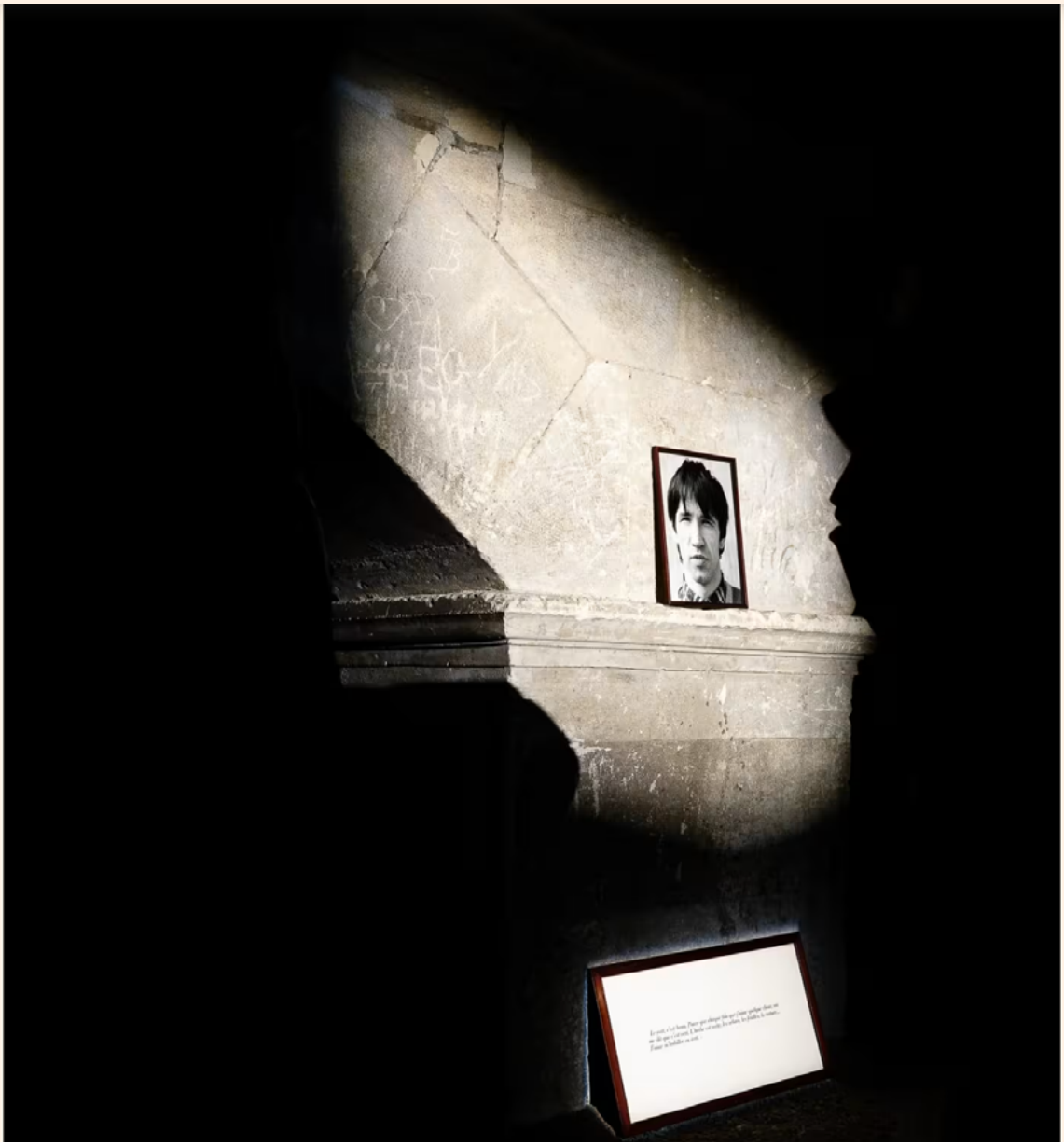
It's quite the party: 26 artists, seven decades, a noisy riot of styles. The grandmother of them all, Toyoko Tokiwa (1928-2019), is rightfully honoured in the opening room, represented by her courageous photobook *Kiken na Adabana* (*Poison Flowers*, 1957), which caused a scandal for illuminating the shadowy lives of sex workers in postwar Yokohama. But there are revelations at every turn. Toshiko Okanoue, who was permitted a brief career in the 1950s before it was ended by marriage, produced sly, spare collages worthy of Dora Maar or Hannah Höch; she has only recently been discovered.

'Untitled' by Rinko Kawauchi from 'the eyes, the ears' (2002-04) © Courtesy the artist/Aperture

Four decades later, Hiromi Toshikawa, who punkily rebranded herself as Hiromix, appalled Japan's blokeish 1990s photo scene with her off-kilter, often out-of-focus pictures (cats, selfies, delirious cityscapes, migrainous colours). At the time they were sneeringly branded as "Girly Photos". But they still stop you in your tracks, dirtier and far more dangerous than the *kawaii* cuteness they were accused of.

Yet it is perhaps Yurie Nagashima's images that most embody the rebellious spirit of this show. One large colour print dominates: a 2001 self-portrait that shows the artist, cigarette in mouth and wearing a black leather jacket, exhibiting her heavily pregnant belly and flipping her middle finger at the viewer. Happy to be here? Well, it's complicated.

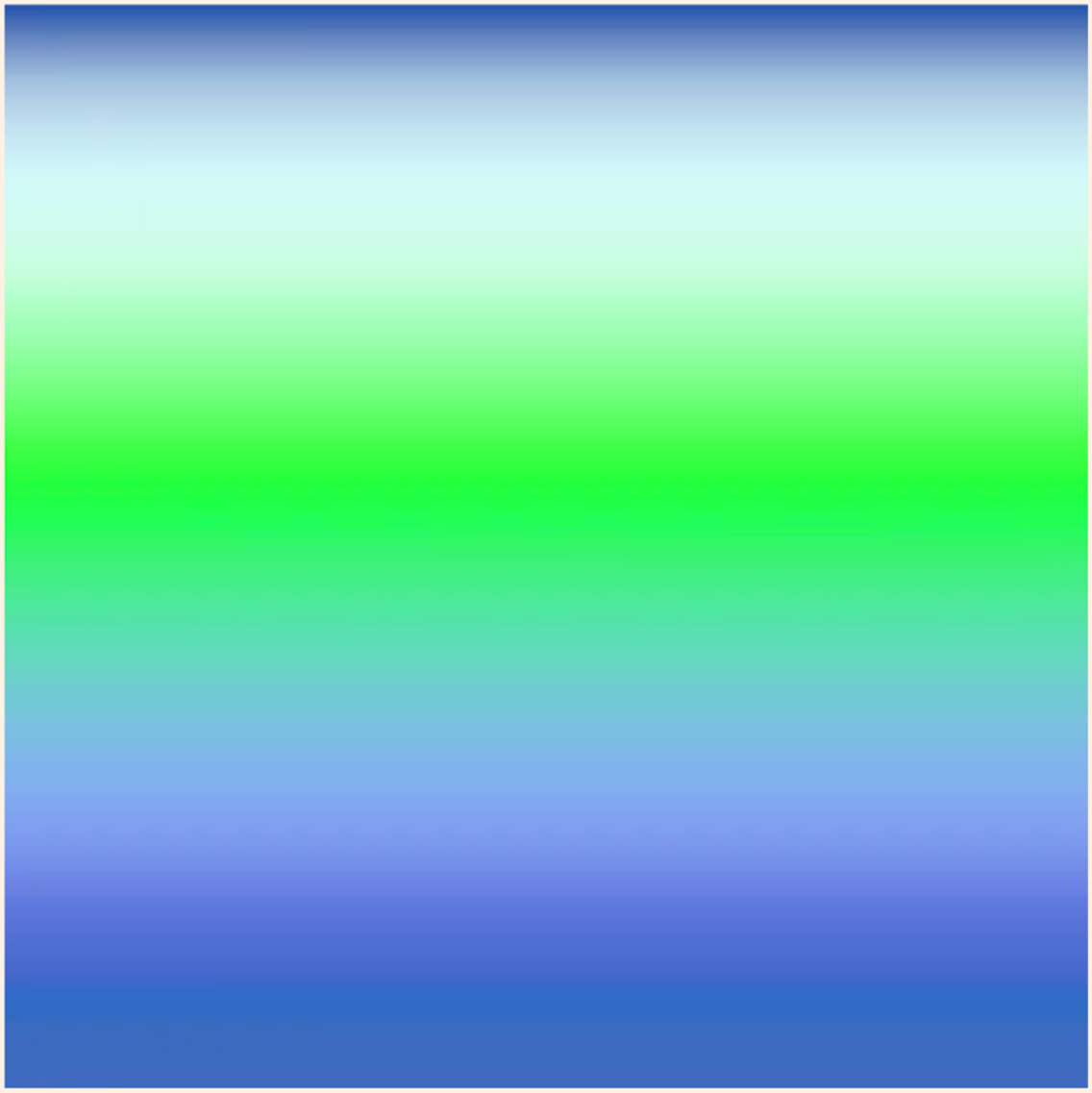
To experience another exhibition, Sophie Calle's *Neither Give Nor Throw Away*, you have to enter the swaggering 17th-century Hôtel de Ville and clamber down into the bowels of the building. These dark, dank vaults were originally Roman cellars, but Calle reimagines them as a personal catacomb or memorial, scattering them with individual possessions, spotlit in the dark — a single red shoe she once shoplifted, furred with mould, the mauve dress she wore on her 50th birthday, paintings of the last word her mother spoke, a suitcase tantalisingly labelled "Journaux Intimes" (a surprise for veteran watchers of this most confessional of artists: it appears to be locked).



An installation view of 'Neither Give nor Throw Away' by Sophie Calle © Courtesy Anne Fourès

The idea, she intones in a voiceover, is that these items will steadily rot; some might even disappear. The inspiration came from preparations for a show at the Musée Picasso in Paris last year, during which a storeroom became inundated with water and works were damaged — but, as ever with Calle, it's hard to know where the theatrics end, or indeed begin.

After this — not to mention the relentless assault of imagery that characterises Arles during photo season — you'd be forgiven for wanting to give your retinas a rest. *The Green Ray*, a modest installation in the Romanesque cloisters of the old cathedral by the French-Moroccan artist Mustapha Azeroual and the Parisian curator Marjolaine Lévy, provides soothing visual balm.



'Gradiant 22' by Mustapha Azeroual, part of 'The Green Ray' © Courtesy the artist/BMW Art Makers

Named for an elusive optical phenomenon, the brief flash of green that can occasionally be glimpsed at sunrise or sunset, the piece — part of the BMW Art Makers programme — was assembled from around 80 photographs of the sun taken by people at sea in far-flung oceans, their colour extracted and digitally remixed, pixel by pixel.

In the stone space, two printed screens face each other, shimmering with what appears to be every hue in existence. One, an abstract sunrise, is dominated by cool yellows, blues and pinks. Opposite, Azeroual's version of sunset is hotter and more intense, from angry persimmons and scarlets and corals down to lavenders and gentian.

As you move between them, the colours morph and swim before your eyes, never entirely solid. It's like trying to train your eyes on a soap bubble as it floats past, and equally impossible. You might think of Turner or Rothko. Or you might simply want to shut your eyes — this time for the right reasons.

Les Rencontres d'Arles runs until September 29; rencontres-arles.com