

Rencontres d'Arles

SO WHERE THEN IS HAPPINESS TO BE FOUND?

What concerns the new generation of photographers in particular? The annual Rencontres d'Arles, with their exhibitions and projections, and the portfolio reviews, now something of an institution, are a perfect guide to current trends in the language of pictures and the choice of themes.

SHE DID NOT HAVE far to go to find her subject. Bénédicte Lassalle, a young Leica photographer in Paris and graduate of the private Centre Iris photographers' school, explored her grandmother's kitchen. That does not sound exactly spectacular. But haven't we learned from the movies how the mildest and gentlest of stories can trigger the most devastating emotional aftershock? What do we see? An artificial hand on the kitchen table, the battered legs of which disappear into the blur. A kitchen clock on floral-pattern wallpaper, the hands pointing to twelve. A well-worn apron. A brush with a barcode that somebody forgot to remove. And, finally, a cracked sink you can tell has seen more than its fair share of dirty dishes. These are signs of a life lived out, metaphors of a yesterday that knows no tomorrow. This was home to someone whose time is up. What was broken is no longer repaired, what was used up no longer replaced. The very objects breathe exhaustion. Some day, in the not too distant future, someone is bound to come and dispose of these mute companions of an existence that was. For one last time the photographer has recorded a condition that is familiar and yet under threat: someone close, reflected only in the mirror of her belongings.

Bénédicte Lassalle was not, not yet, part of the official festival programme. But calling attention to young talents beyond the compass of the exhibitions, colloquia, workshops and projections – this, too, is typical of the Rencontres d'Arles: not by chance does the title include the word 'meetings'. Incidentally, Arles 2006 was marked by the presence of those old 'Compagnons de Route', who had come at the invitation of Raymond Depardon, this year's artistic director of the Rencontres d'Arles. Among them was Leica photographer Guy Le Querrec, whose multi-faceted work, where jazz meets reportage, many people have yet to discover. Or Jean Gaumy, whose dramatic exploration of the sea must be counted among the most exceptional achievements of contemporary Leica photography. Or Claudine Doury, one of the younger generation of dedicated Leica photographers: she, too, is a sensitive observer of non-European cultures.

One of the traditional items on the agenda is the Leica Oskar Barnack Award, where the winner is presented, along with the finalists, at an evening projection. The winner of this year's competition was Tomás Munita, who was born in Santiago (Chile) in 1975, proving once more that unknown photographers, especially the younger ones, have a real chance of winning this award. The only thing that counts is the quality in a coherent, self-contained series. 'Kabul – Leaving the Shadows' was the title Munita gave to a work created between March and November 2005, while he was working as a correspondent for The Associated Press news agency in Afghanistan. What he shows is everyday life in a country that is still far away from peace, but nevertheless also enjoys its moments of civilian life. Munita consistently exploits the possibilities of modern colour photography, relying on the drama

of light to find atmospheric formulas that can be read as highly personal statements in a pictorial language that sometimes borders on abstraction; statements also in opposition to the customised deluge of pictures in our media. On the other hand, the intention of photographer James Whitlow Delano, who lives in Japan, is to overcome the usual patterns of seeing. In a combination of the Leica M and highly sensitive black-and-white film, he has found the technical means for getting closer, in pictorial terms, to the foreign country he has chosen. Japan, a cosmos between tradition and modernity, may for a start be read as a great conundrum. Delano's complex, sometimes perfunctory, pictorial language emphasises the enigmatic nature of a culture that is both fascinating and different, familiar and sometimes irritating.

What is happiness, or rather is anywhere its home? The ancient Greeks knew the way to paradise, which they called Arcadia and which could be found in the highlands of the Peloponnese. A place whose daily challenges amounted to nothing more than tending sheep and which otherwise was free of any kind of earthly demands. The technological era, accustomed to doing what is feasible, creates its own untimely paradises and Andreas Meichsner shows us what they look like. The Berlin photographer, a graduate of the Hanover University of Applied Sciences and Leica Oskar Barnack Award finalist, has found 'his' Arcadia in Holland: a holiday village whose standardised architecture seems to regiment and control the activities of the people who live there. Leisure time as an industrial product, holidays off the peg. One could call Meichsner's work a conceptual report – nothing, as he emphasises, is staged. In short, work with a claim to being documentary that asks questions about individuality and conformity – without suppressing the moment of irony. And one more finalist: Pierre Witt, 41 years old, graduate of the École Nationale Louis Lumière in Paris and a freelance photographer since the late 80s. His photographic work focuses on the exploration of traditional forms of living, or rather their crisis, against the background of ever-increasing technicalisation, automation, urbanisation and globalisation. This is also true of the essay he submitted that examines the life, present and future, of the mountain farmers in the Vanoise. Life in the Haute Savoie has always been one of privation – and the work hard. Only that today nobody is prepared to do it any more. In Pierre Witt's calm, sober pictures, the eye is drawn to a world on the way out and a life in the mountains – far away from the ski slopes and the folklore. Incidentally, the response to the projection from the traditionally critical Arles audience was almost frenetic. Photography pure and simple. *hmk*

Entries are now being accepted for the Leica Oskar Barnack Award 2007. The deadline for entries is the 31st January. Further information online at www.leica-camera.com

