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## America Great Again!

### A French Photo Festival Takes on the US



Raymond Depardon, *Sioux City, Iowa*, (1968). Courtesy of Raymond Depardon/Magnum Photos

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Arles is to photography what Cannes is to film. Since 1970 this Provençal city has hosted a world-class photography festival, [Les Rencontres de la Photographie](#), and, this summer, a group of shows collectively titled “America Great Again!” looks at the US through the lenses of five foreign-born photographers. Some are famous—Robert Frank, Raymond Depardon—others, such as Laura Henno, are emerging talents. All show America in a sober light.

## Alone, Together



Raymond Depardon, *Manhattan*, New York (1981). Courtesy Raymond Depardon/Magnum Photos.

As his Parisian contemporaries were covering the student riots of 1968, French photographer Raymond Depardon was in Chicago taking photographs of anti-Vietnam protesters. But the pictures by Depardon on view in Arles ("[Depardon USA, 1968-1999](#)", until 23 September) largely focus on the America of the early 1980s, when he was sending pictures back to the French newspaper *Libération*. He photographed pedestrians on Manhattan sidewalks, consumed by their thoughts or their newspaper, scowling and suspicious of passers-by. These figures are alone, together. In White Sands, New Mexico, he finds a family eats in a drive-in picnic shelter—one party, one car, one bench. It shows no society, only the nuclear family in isolation. In Colorado, a diner eats on his own, casting a wary eye at an old man in a hat: it's an image of distrust across the years. In the background a neon sign reads: "Home-made chilli". But in Depardon's pictures we see a country of roads, not homes.

## Whitewashed or Shimmering



Paul Graham, *New Orleans*, from the *a shimmer of possibility* series (2003-06). Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York; Carlier | Gebauer, Berlin; Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

In the late 1990s and early 2000s English photographer Paul Graham completed three projects in America, brought together in Arles as *"The Whiteness of the Whale"* (2 July-26 August 2018). The exhibition's curator emphasizes Graham's interest in "racial and social inequality, the texture of everyday life, and the nature of sight, perception, and photography itself". His large-format prints of the less salubrious streets in New York are often deliberately over-exposed. This bleached—or whitewashed—palette references racial tension but also highlights the elemental harshness, the sun beating down on those living on the streets.

Graham blends a jagged *vérité* with artistic allusions. This is street photography with an angle. Neighborhood corners become loitering grounds for the hopeless. Sequences of photographs are taken of the same spot, highlighting the repetition in urban life and the different experiences—and options—of citizens. Graham uses consecutive frames to highlight social schisms. And yet he remains positive that his images also capture "a shimmer of possibility".

## A Frank Look



Robert Frank, *New York City*, (1951-55). Collection Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur. Gift of the artist

Few photographers are as synonymous with America as Robert Frank; the writer Jack Kerouac celebrated “the humour, the sadness, the EVERYTHING-ness and American-ness” of his pictures. But Frank was born in Switzerland in 1924, where he began taking pictures during the Second World War. He arrived in New York in his early 20s, taking commissions for *Harper's Bazaar*, but continued to travel overseas on assignments. The Arles show, “*Sidelines*” (until 23 September), brings together many works that are little known, taken both in and outside of America during the post-war years.

In Europe, Frank snapped solitary chairs in Parisian parks and horse-drawn carts on cobbles. In London, he spotted top-hatted figures in the City. The tone is tranquil. But in America the volume and tension is turned up: cars barrel down streets in New York; aging cowboys cluster around bars in New Mexico like work horses at a water trough; a snapshot taken at a Detroit bus stop hints at the unremarkable nature of racial division. He photographs a hard land.

## Off-Grid Humanity



Laura Henno, *Ethan*, Slab City USA, (2017). Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Les Filles du Calvaire

In Slab City, French photographer Laura Henno found a pocket of America that is lost and raw. This makeshift camp in the Sonoran Desert in California is home to some 150 permanent residents, while several thousand come for the winter. The slabs in the name refer to the ruined remnants of a 1940s Marine Corps barracks, around which people have set up lean-tos and caravans. The site has no running water or electricity. Henno's bittersweet photographs in "[Redemption](#)" (2 July-26 August 2018) are humanistic and non-judgmental. Her subjects—living off-grid in feral conditions—are pictured within the context of a community, albeit an unlikely one. They are all named and photographed with a painterly sensibility: Connie in the rosy light of a shack doorway; Annie asleep on an abandoned sofa, Rubenesque and peaceful; Raven and Michael sitting proudly in front of their broken-down bus. Henno's Slab City is precarious, playful, desperate and beautiful in equal measure.

## **Contradictions and Consolations**



Taysir Batniji, from *Home Away from Home* (Aperture/Fondation d'entreprise Hermès, 2018) © Taysir Batniji

"I'm a physician first of all, and I'm Palestinian by birth and I'm American by choice," says Dr. Kamal Batniji of Newport Coast, California. In "My American Cousins", Palestinian photographer Taysir Batniji looks at the lives of several relatives who left Palestine for America in the 1960s. He photographs the domestic and work environments of cousins who became doctors in California and deli owners in Florida, pictures that form part of a larger presentation entitled "[Gaza to America: Home Away From Home](#)" (until 23 September). Batniji has a fine eye for an illuminating detail: the handgun behind the deli counter; a tray of mint tea; the joy of feeding birds on the beach; a Reagan/Bush 1984 campaign hat. His photographs record a small family diaspora and all the contradictions and consolations inherent in émigré life. They illuminate, notes Batniji, the "dislocation between the past that haunts us and the present that inhabits us". It is his cousin Kamal's "choice" that reverberates through the five exhibitions that make up "America Great Again!": the choice to be American and the perseverance and endurance it can often require.

\**Les Recontres de la Photographie* is on in Arles until 23 September