

ELSA & JOHANNA

CHRONICLES OF THE ORDINARY

OPENING

Thursday, January 18, 2024 from 5 to 9 p.m.

EXHIBITION

from January 18 to March 9, 2024



Elsa & Johanna, *Fire, "The Timeless Story of Moormerland"*, Silver photograph, inkjet print on baryta paper, Edition of 5 + 2 EA, H 73 x W 100 cm, 2021

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Elsa & Johanna, *A Couple of Them*, inkjet printing on baryta paper, 80 x 53 cm, 2014-2016 - 88

1. SAVE THE DATE

ELSA & JOHANNA *CHRONICLES OF THE ORDINARY*

from january 18 to march 9, 2024

Jean de Malherbe and Elsa & Johanna have been working together since 2017. At that time, he organized the first gallery exhibition for the two young artists at Galerie La Forest Divonne in Brussels.

For the PhotoBrussels Festival 2024, they revisit their journey together, spanning through the successive series that have brought recognition to the photographer duo, from «A Couple of Them» (2014-2016) to «Douze heures du jour et de la nuit» (2023), including «The Timeless Story of Moormerland» (2021-2022), «Palace Odyssée» (2020), «Le reflet de la cuillère» (2017) and «Beyond the Shadows» (2018-2019).

Elsa & Johanna are the models of their own images, changing gender, role, age or emotion in turn, to the rhythm of the settings that touch and inspire them. Together, Johanna Benainous and Elsa Parra have created a language and atmosphere that have won them numerous awards and, from 2022, a retrospective at the Städtische Galerie in Karlsruhe and a solo show at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie.



Elsa & Johanna, *Calm Before The Storm* "The Timeless Story of Moormerland", Silver photography, inkjet printing on baryta paper, 73 x 100 cm, 2021

2. BIOGRAPHY

Johanna Benainous (1991) and Elsa Parra (1990) have formed a duo of visual artists, photographers and filmmakers since 2014. They met at the School of Visual Art in New York and received the jury's congratulations from the Beaux-Arts de Paris (ENSBA) in 2015.

«Working at the crossroads of photography, performance and video, since meeting they have been creating visual narratives in which they are the interpreters. The use of autofiction, at the heart of Elsa & Johanna's work, enables them to portray characters freed from their own identity, questioning in the process the contemporary individual, notions of self-representation and anonymity.» Simon Baker, director of the MEP.

Their work has been exhibited at the Salon de Montrouge (2016), the MAC/VAL, Paris Photo and the Festival d'Hyères (2019). In 2020, they were finalists for the Prix Découverte Louis Roederer des Rencontres d'Arles, and entered the Société Générale Contemporary Art Collection. The same year, they were selected by Gaël Charbau for the «Un regard sur la scène française» exhibition at Art Paris, where they created an immersive installation on the Galerie La Forest Divonne stand.

They then carry out a carte blanche commission for the Palais de la Découverte, which gives rise to the «Palace Odysée» series, and are part of the «Staging Identity» exhibition at the Mathildenhöhe Institut in Darmstadt alongside Pipilotti Rist and Cindy Shermann.

In 2021, the artists hold their first retrospective exhibition entitled «The plural life of identity» at the Städtische Galerie in Karlsruhe, Germany. In 2022, Elsa & Johanna open the Saison at the MEP Studio in Paris with an exhibition devoted to their latest project, «The Timeless Story of Moormerland», produced in Germany.

Their photographs are included in the collections of CNAP, Fonds d'art contemporain - Paris Collections, Städtische Galerie Karlsruhe and Société Générale, among others.

This solo show at Galerie La Forest Divonne Brussels follows a third exhibition at Galerie La Forest Divonne Paris, and is part of a busy period for Elsa & Johanna : **prizewinners for the creation of two artistic posters for the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games**, currently on display on Quai de la Mégisserie in Paris's 1st arrondissement; **prizewinners in the Capsule 2023 Residency at Champ des impossibles**, in the Perche region, under the direction of Christine Ollier; selected for the **Grand Paris Express «Tandem» program** to create a perennial work in one of the future metro stations in collaboration with architect Thomas Richez, under the direction of José-Manuel Gonçalves.



Portrait Elsa & Johanna

3. A COUPLE OF THEM

A Couple of Them *Une inconnue d'avance, Villa Emerige, 2016* Gaël Charbau

Elsa parra and Johanna Benainous met in New York when they were still students. Very soon, they started sharing a seemingly mundane mutual passion: people watching. However, when the majority of us would stop the exercise at the diffuse pleasure of a drink with friends on a terrace, they, on the other hand, decided to turn it into a filmic and photographic work of a rare intensity. *The A Couple of Them* (2014-2015) series thus forms a sort of journey which they started in the depths of alterity, through a hundred photographic portraits and 23 video portraits that take us to the heart of a generation of teenagers, of young adults, boys and girls, whom we guess are couples, friends, brothers and sisters, cousins maybe... The most striking particularity of those portraits lies in that they are all personified by the artists themselves with each details of their faces, bodies, clothes they wear and the environment that welcomes them cannot give in to the weight of our capacity to deconstruct these images.

In fact, each one of them acts as a real-life story in which each word seems to be delivered by a detail of what fits in the frame, as if here, P rec's meticulousness when formulating Things was encountering a geographical extension. And yet, and rightly so, it is all very mundane! A couple in bushes, a young woman on a bench, a girl in a tracksuit in front of a football goal post, a teenage boy wearing a battledress in the middle of a corn field...

We assume they are somewhere in the United States but nothing is ever spectacular and no movement or situation should, in theory, be worthy of enticing our eyes weary of Instagram. Through who knows what light and composition effect, and by doing just enough rather than too much, a kind of tension appears which convinces us that it is all true when we actually know that we are looking at a trick.

And then there are the eyes: as if full of melancholic weariness. Almost all those faces have an element of that paradoxical gravity, that erosion of adolescence full of convictions and awkwardness. Full of the impossible innocence of a pulsating body.



Elsa & Johanna, *A Couple of Them*, inkjet on baryta paper, 90 x 63 cm, 2014-2016



Elsa & Johanna, *A Couple of Them*, inkjet on baryta paper, 90 x 63 cm, 2014-2016

4. LE REFLET DE LA CUILLÈRE

Libération, November 2017
Jérémy Piette

The smell of the ashtray that no-one has thought to empty fills the bar, mixed with the heady aroma of the polished parquet flooring, covered in the countless splashes of alcohol spilt the night before. A head rests against the suede jacket: a mixture of fatigue, trinkets and hugs. The images of Johanna Benainous and Elsa Parra succeed so well at shaking up a collective, olfactory and nostalgic imagination, that one could be tempted (if in doubt) to sniff the images. Serial chameleons, they are the creators of a plethora of avatars and different personifications, captured by photography and assuming various anonymous embodiments and lives, from yesterday and today.

Here, a nuanced version of Emma Peel crowned with a Liza Minnelli bob lies stupefied against her soul sister with the sunken eyes. The previous series by the two artists, *A Couple of Them*, already depicted a sample group of typical incarnations that bombarded us with impressions of déjà-vu and gave us the vague belief of having met one of these souls with their familiar features at the corner of a street. Asked to offer their vision of the Saint-Germain-des-Prés neighbourhood as part of the Festival Photo Saint-Germain, they are the worthy heiresses of Cindy Sherman (Untitled Film Stills period and her detective novel aura), still as inspired by the gender fluidity of Claude Cahun and ready to dig up the ghosts from the past and the many faces of fate.



Elsa & Johanna, *Sans titre*, "Le reflet de la cuillère", Pigment ink on baryta paper 8 ex + 2EA, 11 x 9 cm, 2017



Elsa & Johanna, *Pêché*, "Le reflet de la cuillère", Pigment ink on baryta paper, 8 ex + 2EA, 11 x 9 cm, 2017

«The black and white waiter dropped a glass at the feet of a pretty woman. Her feet did not move, they remained fixed in their small red and black-varnished shoes. A little further in the coffee shop, I noticed that the yellow color heater fits perfectly with the gentleman's pink and white striped shirt next to it. I could listen for hours to the rattles of the spoons hitting Richard's coffee cups. I could listen for hours to the spoons rattles that hit the coffee cups. Conversations are often banal but sometimes, when you dwell on it a little bit, you don't regret having heard them. I don't see many colours in these historic streets but when I notice that an almond green skirt suits perfectly with the blue sky color of the carriage gate at the 179 boulevard Saint-Germain, that amazes me. »

5. BEYOND THE SHADOWS

Rhythm, time and space
Ann Stouvenel

The photographic series *Beyond the Shadows* (2018-2019) could be likened to a travelogue, a frantic escape. It plunges us into a story comprised of actions, breaths and expectations. The snaps of emblematic characters are mixed with shots of a surrounding static nature. The landscapes, still lifes and interiors resemble stage sets, resembling North American suburban and rural areas. They create a contrast with the bodies caught in mid-movement, or the striking languorous or nonchalant poses. The suggestive attitudes of the protagonists establish a narration reinforced by the intrusion of deafening silences. This sets a rhythm in the series, reminiscent of the film world.

The setting changes and indicates the passing of time, from autumn to winter, when melancholy sets in, of a fading living form. In this dynamic process, all the characters, played by the same actresses - who are none other than Elsa and Johanna -, change personality, rather like David Lynch's characters in his mind-blowing film *Mulholland Drive*. In some shots, the protagonists' gaze reaches beyond the frame, while in others, they stare at us, inviting us to cross over to the other side and leave reality behind.

The scenes anchored in a shortened, instantaneous moment in time, suggestively synthesise a specific context. The separation or reunion of a couple. The end of the holidays. The wait for a spring yet to arrive. The start of an endless night. A secret. A promise. A gruesome act. A beauty treatment that fails to rejuvenate. Remembering a fond memory. Failures. Wanderings. The related scenes seem to have so much to say that they are each a story in themselves, a window that could swallow us up. We are therefore faced with a gaping hole, a bottomless pit, a place of dreams.



Elsa & Johanna, *Sidewalk* "Beyond the shadows", Semi-matte inkjet printing on baryta paper, 60 x 90 cm, 2018

6. PALACE ODYSSÉE

The series, entitled «Palace Odyssée», was created upon the invitation of Gaël Charbau, artistic advisor for Universcience (Palais de la découverte and Cité des Sciences Paris) in the context of the renovation of the Palais, which has closed its doors for four years. Elsa & Johanna performed for a two-week period inside the Palais de la Découverte during the summer of 2020.

Through imagined stories, the artists embodied characters inspired by the museum's universe: anonymous visitors, workers, employees, imaginary characters... They immersed themselves in the rooms, the objects, the employees they met, the animals, the scientific and biological experiments featured in the museum to poetically retranscribe the magic of the place and the history of the building.

In 2019, the Palais de la découverte, in anticipation of its renovation, has entrusted the artist duo Elsa&Johanna with the task of inscribing its history in our memory. For weeks, the two visual artists immersed themselves in the spaces and settings of the institution's rooms and backstage areas. Immersed in the daily life of the Palais, they captured the life of the workshops, mingled with the public, and roamed the rooms after closing time. Their research, begun in January 2020, was extended during the months of confinement.

Faithful to their investigations of the creation and incarnation of fictional individualities in a real environment, their work offers a singular vision of this place that has marked so many imaginations.

Playing on nostalgia and humour, often tinged with a strange and surreal note, they have projected themselves into the imaginary bodies of teenagers, mediators or administrative staff. The meticulously composed stagings awaken our cinematic memory and summon up characters that we imagine to be taken from fairy tales, fantastic stories or science fiction.

By blurring temporalities in this way, the series paints a portrait that is in no way documentary, but which reflects with great freedom the diversity of the theatres and their atmospheres, some of which are reminiscent of their creation in 1937.

Among the forty photographs in «Palace Odyssée», the Palais has acquired sixteen original prints. They now form the link between the past history of the Palais de la découverte and its future.

Gaël Charbeau



Elsa & Johanna, *Electrokinésie*, *Palace Odyssée* 2/5, Ppigment ink digital hotoigraphy on baryta paper, Ed. 5ex + 2EA, 80 x 120 cm, 2020

7. THE TIMELESS STORY OF MOORMERLAND

Realized in Germany in May 2021, in a context still constrained by the health situation, Elsa & Johanna conceived the series «The Timeless Story of Moormerland» as a family album, mixing indoor portraits, spontaneous photographs, landscapes or still lifes that give birth to multiple visual narratives. Over a four-week period, the two artists travelled to twenty different regions of Germany. Moormerland, a small German town close to the Dutch border, particularly captivated them.

These images of waiting places and solitude in seemingly characterless surroundings stimulate our imagination and trigger our emotions at first glance.

This time around, the photographic duo use film and natural light, resulting in striking, highly saturated color renditions. The unexpected viewpoints and fine color tones are reminiscent of the work of William Eggleston, a photographer who has greatly inspired the young artists.



Elsa & Johanna, *The Sound of The Belltower «The Timeless Story of Moormerland»*, Silver photography, inkjet printing on baryta paper, 88 x 120 cm, 2021

8. LES DOUZE HEURES DU JOUR ET DE LA NUIT

«What would become of our country the day when women found themselves diverted from their natural destiny, when young girls could assume that there was anything else for them than the noble and holy mission of being wives and mothers?» wrote Éline Roche in 1893, introducing the book *Ce que vaut une femme* (What a Woman Is Worth), which was handed out to every young girl in school in France.

In response to the rigidity of this manual of good conduct, Elsa and Johanna have created a corpus to enclose «The twelve hours of day and night» of a woman who is one and plural, identical but always different. Surprised by the denial of women's humanity and unique sensibilities, the two photographers explored a range of female personalities to give them back the freedom to feel, open up the palette of emotions and broaden the field of possibilities.

Over the course of twenty-four hours, Elsa and Johanna took turns slipping into the costumes of twenty-four women they played and photographed in the confines of the home. Elsa and Johanna's choice of black-and-white argentic photography, unprecedented in their work, is intended to ensure the timelessness of these women and their emotions.

It's up to us to delve into the portraits and guess, behind the sensuality of the prudish Rachel, the fierceness of the graceful Adda, or in the languorous euphoria of Michelle, all the life that is carried by each of them. For through these emotions, the ultimate singularity of each woman is rendered. Women no longer have to be reduced to a single essence of gentleness, compassion and sacrifice for others; there is no such thing as a woman, but there are women, and it is they who are manifested in all their plurality and complexity.

Les douze heures du jour et de la nuit offers us a pictorial mythology of feeling women. All that's left for the viewer to do is elucidate the story behind this mythology - too long buried behind the unambiguous veil of what has come to be known as feminine nature.

Léone Sallé de Chou



Elsa & Johanna, *Isabelle, Le Jardin, IV*, "Les douze heures du jour et de la nuit", 1-5, Semi-matte inkjet printing on baryta paper, 107 x 80 cm, 2022



Elsa & Johanna, *Michelle, le sous-sol I*, "Les douze heures du jour et de la nuit", Semi-matte inkjet printing on baryta paper, 107 x 80 cm, 2022

Johanna Benainous was born in Paris in 1991 and
Elsa Parra was born in Bayonne in 1990.
They live and work in Paris.

PERSONAL EXHIBITIONS

- 2023** *Blurring days, The Timeless Story Of Moormerland*, Galerie La Forest Divonne - Paris
Beyond the Shadow, BAG Gallery, T3 Photo Festival Tokyo, Japon,
Samples, Moulin Blanchard, Champ des Impossibles Perche-en-Nocé, France
Palace Odyssée, by invitation of RATP and Palais de la Découverte, Champs-Élysées Clémenceau metro station, Paris
A Couple Of Them, at the invitation of Fonds d'art contemporain - Paris Collections open-air exhibition on the Pont Saint Ange, Paris, France
- 2022** *Ce que vaut une femme : les douze heures du jour et de la nuit*, Maison Auguste Comte, Paris, France
The timeless story of Moormerland, Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, France
The Plural Life of Identity, Städtische Galerie, Karlsruhe, Germany
Palace Odyssée, Les Etincelles du Palais de la découverte, Paris, France
- 2021** *Palace Odyssée*, Galerie La Forest Divonne, Paris, France
PARIS PHOTO, Grand Palais, Galerie La Forest Divonne, Paris, France
Festival air de fête, invited by FRAC Bretagne, Saint-Briac-sur-Mer, France
A Couple of Them, FMAC Paris, Caserne Baudoyer, Paris, France
- 2020** *Silver Springs*, Galerie La Forest Divonne, Brussels, Belgium
Find the truth, Les Rencontres d'Arles, exhibition with Galerie La Forest Divonne
- 2019** *PARIS PHOTO*, Galerie La Forest Divonne, Grand Palais, Paris, France
Rosarium - C'est le soleil qui finira par nous perdre, curated by Ann Stouvenel, Mains d'Oeuvres, Saint Ouen, France
- 2018** *A Cross Perspective*, Galerie La Forest Divonne, Festival Photo Saint-Germain, Paris, France
- 2017** *Le Reflet de la cuillère*, Espace des femmes, Festival Photo Saint-Germain, Paris, France
Los Ojos Vendados, Etro, Saint-Germain, Paris, France
- 2015** *A Couple of Them*, Beaux-arts de Paris, France

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2023** Artistic posters for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, Quai de la Mégisserie, Paris, France
Art Brussels, La Forest Divonne Gallery, Brussels, Belgium
Expo Chicago, La Forest Divonne Gallery, Chicago, USA
- 2022** *Entre les mondes*, Palacete Santo Estêvão, Alfama, Lisbon, Portugal
- 2021** *Per Se*, Galerie La Forest Divonne, Paris, France
Art Paris Art Fair, Galerie La Forest Divonne, Grand Palais éphémère, Paris, France
Je te laisse les clefs, H Gallery, Paris, France

- 2020** *Art Paris Art Fair*, in the section «Un regard sur la scène française», curated by Gaël Charbau, Galerie La Forest Divonne, Grand Palais, Paris, France
Staging Identity, Institut Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt, Germany
Find the truth, Jimei X Arles, Jimei Photo Festival, Jimei, China
Not so Crazy Girls, Espace Futur, Paris, France
Ensemble, Galerie La Forest Divonne Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium
Paris Photo New York, Galerie La Forest Divonne, online exhibition
- 2019** *Some of us*, curated by Jérôme Cotinet-Alphaize, Carlshütte, Büdelsdorf, Germany
Festival International de Journalisme, Couthures-sur-Garonne, France
34ème Festival International de Photographie de Hyères, Villa Noailles, France
Qu'est-ce que tu regardes ?, Espace Beaurepaire, Paris, France
Art Paris Art Fair, Galerie La Forest Divonne, Grand Palais, Paris, France
Lignes de vies, une exposition de légendes, curated by Franck Lamy, Museum of Contemporary Art of Val-de-Marne (MAC / VAL), Vitry-sur-Seine, France
100% L'Expo - Sorties d'écoles, Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris, France
POSTURES - La figure seule, Galerie La Forest Divonne, Brussels, Belgium
- 2018** *FIAC 2018 - FMAC's booth*, Grand Palais, Paris, France
30 ans - Anniversaire de la Galerie La Forest Divonne, Galerie La Forest Divonne, Paris, France
Prix Picto de la mode, Palais Galliera, Paris, France
Les Apparences, La Graineterie, Houilles, France
L'homme qui marchait dans la couleur, Galerie du Crous, Paris, France
La figure seule, Château de Poncé, Poncé, France
Millennials au féminin, Galerie Havas, Puteaux, France
Le redoublement, Artinkk, Brussels, Belgium
Profils, Pavillon Blanc, Henri Molina Art Center, Colomiers, France
- 2017** *Kaléidoscope*, Galerie La Forest Divonne, Brussels, Belgium
Morceaux choisis, Galerie La Forest Divonne, Brussels, Belgium
La Galerie du Club des AD, Arles, France
Jeune création 67, Paris, France
Ubique, les vacances immobiles, Glassbox, Paris, France
Proyecta, Imaginando otros posibles, curated by Sandra Maunac, Madrid, Espagne
Le quatrième sexe, curated by Marie Maertens, Espace Coeur, Paris, France
Festival Circulation(s) #7, le Centquatre, Paris, France
- 2016** *Une inconnue d'avance*, curated by Gaël Charbau, Villa Emerige, Paris, France
Felicità, curated by Alexia Fabre, Palais des beaux-arts, Paris, France
Dress codes, curated by Alexandra Dhainaut, Mains d'OEuvre, Saint-Ouen, France
Parcours Saint-Germain, Le Mont St Michel, Paris, France
Vertige en terrain plat, curated by « Mathilde s'expose », Fondation Brownstone, Paris, France
Salon de Montrouge #61, curated by Ami Barrack, Beffroi de Montrouge, France

RESIDENCES

- 2023** Les Champs des Impossibles, 'Résidence Capsule 2023', Perche, France
- 2018-2019** Mains d'OEuvres Art Center, Saint-Ouen, Paris, France

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

CNAP - Centre National d'Art Plastiques
Musée d'Art Moderne, Städtische Gallery
Palais de la Découverte
Crédit Agricole Art Collection
Société Générale Contemporary Art Collection
FMAC (Municipal fund of contemporary art of the City of Paris), France
Palais Galliera (Fashion Museum of the City of Paris), France
Departmental collection of contemporary art of Seine Saint-Denis, France
Villa Noailles Photographic Collection
Foundation Picto Collection
Dior Lady Art Collection

AWARDS

2023 Winners of the Grand Paris Express «Tandem» program for the creation of a permanent work in one of the future metro stations, in collaboration with architect Thomas Richez, under the direction of José-Manuel Gonçalves.

Winners for the creation of two artistic posters for the Olympic and Paralympic Games 2024

2021 Nominated for Prix Balzac 2021 (Prize of the Friends of Balzac)

2020 Nominated for the Roederer Prize, Rencontres d'Arles

2019 Winners of the Public Prize of the 34th International Festival of Hyères

2017 Winners of Prix Picto de la mode 2017
White card «Etro
Selected for the official visuals of the «Festival Photo Saint-Germain
Selected by « La Galerie du club des AD 2017
Invited to the « Festival Circulation(s) 2017

2016 Nominated for the «Emerige Revelations Grant
Nominated for the «61st Salon de Montrouge
Finalists for the «HSBC Prize for Photography

BIBLIOGRAPHY(selection)

2022 Elsa & Johanna, *Ce que vaut une femme : les douze heures du jour et de la nuit*, The Eyes, 2022, 176p
Text by Marie Robert, chief curator at the Musée d'Orsay, in charge of photography

2021 Elsa & Johanna, Fanny Taillandier, *La Martinière*, collection «Percevoir» under the direction of Simon Baker, preface by Simon Baker, 2021, 128p

Beyond The Shadows, editions H2L2, texts by Gael Charbau, Texts by Salomé Brustein, Eugénie Adda, Baptiste Gourden, Arthur Larrue, 2021, 174p

2017 *Kaléidoscope*, texte d'Arthur Larrue, éditions Galerie La Forest Divonne, 30p

10. PRACTICAL INFORMATION

ELSA & JOHANNA

CHRONICLES OF THE ORDINARY

EXHIBITION

from January 18 to March 9, 2024

OPENING

Thursday, January 18, 2024, from 5pm to 9pm



*An exhibition as part of the
PhotoBrussels Festival 2024*



Elsa & Johanna, *Coincidence*, "Le reflet de la cuillère", Encre pigmentaire sur papier baryté 8 ex + 2EA, 11 x 9 cm, 2017

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