

Les Rencontres d'Arles 2014 review – a fascination with the traditional

Arles, France

This year's standout work includes Kechun Zhang's evocative Yellow River landscapes and an oddball social history of America through its photographic ephemera

[Arles 2014: best of the festival – in pictures](#)

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The 45th [Rencontres d'Arles](#) is a pivotal one: the swan song of its director, [François Hébel](#), who took charge of the ailing festival in 2001 and transformed it into the most popular and important annual [photography](#) event in Europe. Hébel has defiantly subtitled his final Rencontres "[Parade](#)", though he is leaving in somewhat fractious circumstances.

Rencontres d'Arles 2014

Starts 7 July 2014
Until 21 September 2014

[More details](#)

The festival has had change forced upon it by the local council, which gave the go-ahead for the construction of a Frank Gehry-designed conceptual art gallery bankrolled by the Luma Foundation. It will be built on the eight-hectare (20-acre) site on the edge of town where, until now, a sizeable proportion of the photography

exhibition was situated. A few sheds remain this year but the rest is rubble. One hopes this is not a metaphor for the future of the Rencontres.

(...)

A word, too, for *Eternal Friendship*, an exhibition of propaganda photographs of China in the time of Mao Zedong made by three visiting Albanian photographers. The images are taken from a photonovel of the same name, in which they recorded their trip in glowing terms. As an example of the inexorable sweep of history, they are illuminating: what once was deadly serious and unquestioned propaganda now seems quaint and almost unbelievable.

Again, though, it is photography's former functions that are at the heart of this exhibition. The archival shot, the found photograph and the vernacular image continue to exert a hold on our imagination at a time when, as the Discovery award selection shows, much contemporary photography has become obsessed with the conceptual process.

François Hébel departs for new ground at an interesting time for the discipline of curation as well as photography. I wish him luck, and hope the festival that he did so much to reinvent and revitalise continues to flourish.