

paul pouvreau

ciel
→ *cellophane*

A special partnership:

ciel cellophane

As part of the AR(t)CHIPEL festival, photographer Paul Pouvreau's exhibition *Ciel cellophane* is being held in the three glass-enclosed walkways surrounding the art center.

Three distinct sets of photographs, printed on blue backs, punctuate the rhythm of the galleries.

The first set of eight photos, from the series entitled *Les permanentes* (2023), depicts bouquets of flowers made from colored plastic bags collected during regular shopping trips to local stores. Like an unnatural flower bed, they are offered up to the gaze of passersby.

A second set of eight photos is from the series *Mascarades* (2015-2021): tragicomic composite masks made from advertisements for major cosmetics and fashion brands published in the press. Here, the ideal of beauty is stripped away in a disturbing way.

The third set, *Cosmogonie végétale* (2025), resembles a floral frieze, composed of natural elements, tree leaves, flower petals, accompanied by small effigies modeled in paper. Between ornament and adornment, this visual and poetic arabesque evokes the tenuous and fragile link between nature and the cosmos to which we are bound.

After dismantling reality, Paul Pouvreau reconstructs it and subjects our gaze to a sensitive and critical examination of this new reality.

text: Anne-Laure Chamboissier

Paul Pouvreau was born in 1956 in Aulnay-sous-Bois. He lives and works in Argenton-sur-Creuse. Until 2021, he taught at the National School of Photography in Arles (ENSP). His work has been exhibited extensively in France and abroad.

the infra-ordinary in resistance

Paul Povvreau's work arises from the interstices of reality, where nothing seems worthy of attention: a plastic bag suspended in midair, a folded cardboard box, dust accumulated on the floor. These fragments of everyday life, often perceived as waste or residual traces, are here reappropriated as signs that convey a narrative. Through photography, but also drawing, collage, and installation, Paul Povvreau elevates what is considered negligible in terms of thought and fiction.

His approach is not only poetic: it is critical. By shifting the gaze towards these mundane objects, the artist highlights the silent violence of a world saturated by consumption and its signs. Logos, packaging, printed surfaces: so many advertising motifs that colonize our visual landscapes. But in his images, these markers of the economy turn against themselves. The bag, the cardboard box, the dust become materials for an ironic staging, revealing both the absurdity and the fragility of our systems.

This work acts as a gentle form of resistance, a strategy of subversion through displacement. It uses humor and displacement to question our perceptual habits. By playing with the codes of representation, Paul Povvreau blurs the boundary between the real and its double, between the object and its image. His photographs create a fertile confusion: they force us to doubt what we see, to wonder if the landscape is still a landscape, if the shadow is not an apparition.

Beneath this apparent lightness lies a meditation on the economy of the gaze. For what the artist brings into play is indeed the hierarchy of our attentions: what do we choose to give value to? What do we still see in a world saturated with signs? Paul Povvreau answers these questions by overturning scales, placing the tiny at the center, making the margins a territory of creation. His poetics of the derisory is not an escape from the world, but a way of resisting it in a different way: by revealing that reality, even in its refuse, already carries within it a charge of meaning, where beauty and critical dimension are intertwined. In the darkness of a neutral background, a simple plastic bag stands upright. Crumpled and dented, it seems to stand alone, without support, like a body without a skeleton or a voice without a story. And yet it grabs your attention; it is food for thought. [...]

For although the plastic bag is silent here, it is not empty. It is one of the most globalized objects in the contemporary world. It can be found in markets, alleys, ports, and margins. It circulates, sometimes without destination. It contains, it transports, it clutters. It sometimes becomes the only suitcase for a journey, an exile, an informal trade, of a precarious life. This work [...] does not speak directly of migration, colonialism, or displacement—but it allows them to surface, implicitly. This bag becomes a form of spectral presence: that of what has been exploited, displaced, abandoned. This is not an ironic or conceptual gesture. It is a gesture of attention. Paul Povvreau does not seek to speak on behalf of other narratives; he offers a form, a way of listening through images, a discreet shift in focus.

text: Paul Povvreau, 2025

interview between anne-laure chamboissier and paul pouvreau, september 2025

Anne-Laure Chamboissier:

The space in which you are invited to exhibit at the CCC OD involves several constraints: the works can only be viewed from a certain distance, behind glass, and the hanging options are limited by the geometry of the space. How much did these constraints influence the development of your project?

Paul Pouvreau: Obviously, the constraints of the space require me to think about how to present my work. The constraint I focused on a little more is the fact that it is an outdoor space, i.e., a place for walking around, a place of circulation. In a way, I considered the windows that surround the CCC OD as shop windows. There are three glass walls facing in different directions, one to the north, one to the south, and one to the west, which also prevents you from seeing the whole picture. So I wanted to propose three sets of photographs with a connection between them, without it necessarily being a formal connection.

With the first set, I present *Les Permanentes*, bouquets of flowers made from plastic bags, playing on a certain seductiveness through colors and materials. The eye can immediately latch onto them as if they were real bouquets. I wanted to design this north window as a flowerbed visible from afar, at least as identified by the viewer at first glance. But as they get closer, they will notice that these bouquets are made from plastic bags. I am interested in counteracting, in a way, this notion of beauty and seduction. An element that comes across a bit like a grain of sand, since we're talking about plastic bags, and plastic bags are invasive, annoying, and very present in our daily lives. These containers and packaging are also significant markers of our consumer society. These notions of seduction and beauty can also be found in the other two proposals.

On the other façade, I present the series *Les Mascarades*. For this series, I take an almost opposite approach to that of *Les Permanentes*. It is based on advertisements for major beauty and fashion brands, where the notion of harmony and an idealized, perfect image persists. Here again, I come I counteract this by intervening directly on these documents, adding common and mundane materials, nothing very precious. These elements are like a kind of re-make up on images that have already been made up, which is why I called this series *Mascarades*. It appears grotesque, a little harsh, a little severe, a little unsightly.

The last set is entitled *Cosmogonie végétale* and links the two previous photographic sets. First of all, from a formal point of view, since it features plant elements and figures. These are two floral friezes, each consisting of a branch of tomato clusters. Here again, the working process is still rooted in a space that is a living environment, that is to say, everyone's living environment, a space close to the elements that surround us. These small tomato branches represent, in a

way, very concrete constellations. A way of reminding us that plants are part of what we are. We are on earth because plants allow us to breathe. That is why I included small human-shaped effigies in each of these friezes. One emerges directly from a petal and the other is a figurine that I modeled in papier-mâché, placed on a leaf. It resembles a vanitas, the face almost looking like a skull. This second constellation is more disturbing. What links these series once again is this notion of very simple beauty, which I re-examine in a somewhat naive way, like a child's gaze. I always pay attention to the things around me, to forms that are supposedly insignificant, in order to make them unique. I have an almost emotional relationship with things. I wanted to position this series on the west facade, because it's the side where the sun sets, so it seemed appropriate to make the starry sky appear there.

Anne-Laure Chamboissier:

You talk about still lifes, bouquets, vanities. You refer to broad categories that have to do with painting. What exactly is your relationship to painting? Is it a kind of nod to it?

Paul Pouvreau: In my work, I don't make too much distinction between the medium of photography, painting, and sculpture. These broad categories that come from the past persist, remain relevant, and are constantly being re-examined. And if someone asks me if I'm a photographer, I answer that I don't feel any more like a photographer than I do a painter.

But indeed, the pictorial dimension is very effective in my work. Gerhard Richter said in an interview that he made photography with painting. I feel that in some of my works, I am painting with photography.

Anne-Laure Chamboissier:

You continually bring into play the representation of reality. I see in this a conceptual, compositional, and artisanal dimension. Can you tell us about this phase of your creative process?

Paul Pouvreau: These three dimensions constantly coexist in my work. I consider the work to be "finished" when there is a tension between the concept, the composition, and the manual gesture, without any one of these elements taking precedence over the others. A kind of balance is created and constructed as the work progresses. The artisanal dimension is a bit like the lifeblood for me. With the photographic medium, the lens puts me at a distance from things, so this artisanal aspect is a way of reconnecting with the concrete. The same goes for composition; there has to be a strong and credible presence in the final image.

Anne-Laure Chamboissier:

You don't play with any form of artificiality. This manipulation of the image is achieved through a craft-like gesture, as we mentioned earlier.

Paul Pouvreau: I ask myself the same question with the emergence of artificial intelligence. I'm always a little skeptical about images. I never stop questioning them; I constantly question it; I constantly pose it as an actor in reality, and reality in turn disrupts the unambiguous, centered perspective of the photographic image. Images are everywhere, increasingly occupying our universe, such as the facades of the city, which come alive like images. I love this relationship with reality and the transformation that photography brings about. Some people ask me why I bother with plastic bags that I can't shape, rather than using Photoshop or artificial intelligence. But what I love is this resistance of reality to becoming an image, which I try to work with. When I say I compose, I mean that I pose with things. I am not outside, I am inside. For me, "composing" is literally "posing with." With this difficulty of things that resist, and which lead me, through the manipulation of these materials, to other insights about these same things.

Anne-Laure Chamboissier:

This tension also seems to reside in your approach:
questioning the medium also means putting it under tension.

Paul Pouvreau: Each creation, each work finds a balance between critical thinking and formal logic. How the medium and these elements of reality become images or resist becoming images. This also involves a sensitive practice, which is a very important dimension of my work.

Anne-Laure Chamboissier:

You develop visual artworks on the interference of visual signs in our daily lives and the changes they bring about in our perception of reality. You collect waste from our consumer society (plastic bags, advertising images, old paper, etc.). Is this a political act?

Paul Pouvreau: I think every act is political, and yet that doesn't mean anything. If I look at my early work, such as *Les scènes de ménage*, a series about dust, I have always sought to see what we are told not to look at. Dust is something despised by photographers, but I wanted to see what it was all about. The same goes for waste. I'm not an activist. But I do see that our society is still a consumer society. Why so much attention to packaging, which is both the most cumbersome and the most ephemeral object? This consideration has taken on real importance in my work. Obviously, nowadays, ecological issues are putting us on alert. One might think that what I do is undoubtedly a political act, but I don't claim it as a slogan. I simply highlight it and develop a space for artistic reflection on the components of our consumer society that have a profound impact on our daily lives. What also appears to be a political act in my work is that in an art economy where the monumental and the spectacular have taken precedence, I use extremely simple and inexpensive materials where the idea of recycling is also present. This question of economy of means is eminently political for me, as art does not need to be protected by a kind of aura that prevents any questioning of its economy.

Anne-Laure Chamboissier:

You start with very affordable materials to create your images. And you end up with photography, which today is far from being the most affordable medium due to the cost of prints.

Paul Pouvreau: When I talk about composing, I am also caught up in this contradiction. The paradox of photography is that it is a medium that was technically designed to be a medium for democratic use—anyone can take a photograph—but in its materiality, prints are expensive. I could use Instagram to share my work, which I do to some extent, but I'm not completely convinced. It seems to me that it remains in the realm of information. For me, the presence of the works is central. Encountering a work of art is a special, unique moment that cannot be experienced through a screen. I have had some deeply moving encounters because I saw certain works physically, in a museum or art center, and I don't think that can be replaced. However, I should point out that for this project at the CCCOD, I used a much less expensive medium than traditional printing, since we are talking about blue backs here, posters, basically.

Anne-Laure Chamboissier:

Before we wrap up this interview, I'd like you to come back to the importance of titles in your work.

Paul Pouvreau: They are as important as what we see. Language designates something, but if we designate it with our index finger, it becomes a kind of injunction. And so a way of imposing a reduction on the richness of what there is to see. Whereas in fact, the word is much richer and cannot be reduced to a simple definition. On the contrary, from the outset, through its etymology and history, it is closer to the polysemy of the elements it designates, in the same way as visual language. That's why I try to have titles whose meaning remains open, so that there is a kind of ambivalent fluctuation between the title and what there is to see.

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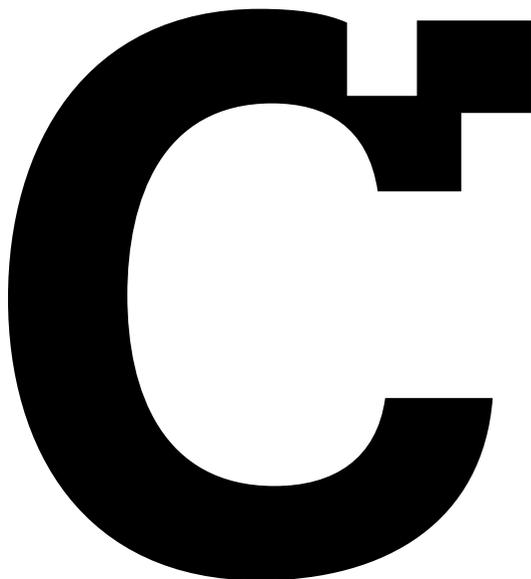
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available at the [cccod bookstore](#)

- > Paul Pouvreau, *Alphabet*, éditions Lendroit, 2020.
- > Paul Pouvreau, Antonia Birnbaum, *Le Monde à Plat*, éditions Loco, 2018.

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