

Arles dressed up for summer



SEAN O'HAGAN

Les Rencontres D'Arles
Photography 2008
Arles, France, until 14 September

With Christian Lacroix as guest curator, there's as much high-fashion surrealism as cutting-edge photography at this year's Arles festival.

But the gems still shine through...

Ethan Levitas is a formalist at heart, and a master of muted colour. His images of New York subway trains crossing from Brooklyn to Manhattan are taken from the vantage point of nearby rooftops, ladders and fire escapes. The more you look at them, the more you see and, more often than not, what you are seeing is the same moment of private reverie. As with Walker Evans's surreptitiously taken subway shots, the subjects often seem to be staring straight into the camera, as if responding unconsciously to its presence. One man stands nonchalantly between two carriages, smoking and reading a magazine; another, white-bearded and biblical-looking, places his palm against the carriage window as if in acknowledgment of Levitas's lens. Beside him, a figure wreathed in a headscarf looks like a life-size rag doll. The seasons change with their usual New York ferocity, but the burnished rust on the chrome of the carriages is a constant. On one carriage window, the word MAD is scratched; on another the word MALICE. I began wondering what a Martian visitor would make of these frozen moments and their cryptic signs.