

Arnaud Lesage

How far can landscapes

Julien Verhaeghe

English translation by Clare Mary Puyfoulhoux

By playing with viewing angles, effects of repetition or resemblance, Arnaud Lesage creates deserted landscapes where enigmatic coincidences appear. The photographed scenes are to be considered as manifestations of fate allowing us to meditate on images' reality.



Divorsus : New Mexico / Nevada 2009 - 2010, pigment print on cotton paper (55 X 144 cm - 21,5 X 55 in)

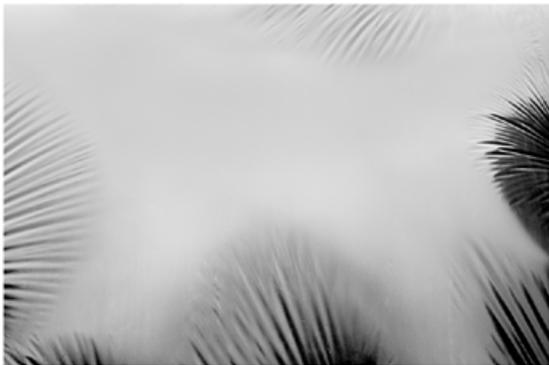
Landscape

Arnaud Lesage's photographic practice emerges from a strong interest in landscape. Part of his approach is to travel many miles around the world in search of solitary experiences, in locations related to wilderness and immeasurable spaces. His photographs, however, do not show grandiose panoramas whose essence the picture would have tried to capture. By playing with viewing points, the photographer instead brings to the fore silent and enigmatic landscapes; sometimes presented in the form of an assemblage, the images quote each other and refer to games of comparison where fortuitous coincidences appear. In other series, the pictures shown alone strike by their subtle and ingenious visual mechanic, as if they had in mind something witty to say.



Decentrations: untitled, pigment print on cotton paper (84 X 60 cm - 23 X 33 in)

These impressions are obtained by favoring shots where formal components are amplified, or by shifting the eye of the photograph in order to align trajectories. In the *Decentration* series, for example, the accidental arrangement of a foliage becomes the exact vanishing point of the road that crosses it; in *Openings*, an old building stranded in the middle of irregular clumps, presenting itself by one of its edges, is similar to a native mask (page 4).



Divorsus: France / Norway 2010 - 2007, pigment print on cotton paper (55 X 144 cm - 21,5 X 55 in)



Openings: untitled (California) 2009, pigment print on cotton paper (84 X 60 cm - 23 X 33 in)



Openings: untitled (France) 2020, pigment print on cotton paper (84 X 60 cm - 23 X 33 in)



Openings: untitled (France) 2015, pigment print on cotton paper (84 X 60 cm - 23 X 33 in)



Mirage Monuments: untitled, 2020, pigment print on cotton paper, variable dimensions

Elsewhere, in *Mirage Monuments*, configurations artificially obtained by symmetry collect strangely disturbing scenes, as are the two-headed spots of the Rorschach tests.

As a result of Arnaud Lesage's approach, reality reveals new dimensions. Landscapes are a little more than landscapes; they seem to be inhabited by unfathomable but ordered principles, where everything is only agreement, geometry and premeditation, as if Nature spoke a secret language.



Mirage Monuments: untitled, 2022, pigment print on cotton paper, variable dimensions



Shore 2016, pigment prints on cotton paper, variable dimensions



Shadow Lock

2016, pigment print on cotton paper, variable dimensions

This winter branch, from the *Openings* series, bent at ninety degrees, sees its shadow cast on the snow modeling a perfect rectangle; these paths that meet like a cross with long arms that would cross the site from one side to the other, seem to scar the landscape. The fact that the artist does not physically intervene on the sites allows him to position his work in the genre of landscape photography. However, since the landscapes are a little more than landscapes, Arnaud Lesage also confronts the viewer to a sort of paradox: does the photographer limit himself to retranscribing a world that already exists, or does he create landscapes from scratch? Is it the landscape that makes the photograph, or on the contrary the photograph that makes the landscape?



Openings: untitled (Nevada) 2010, pigment print on cotton paper (84 X 60 cm - 23 X 33 in)



Openings: untitled (Quebec) 2012, pigment print on cotton paper, variable dimensions



Openings: untitled (France) 2017, pigment print on cotton paper (84 X 60 cm - 23 X 33 in)



Openings: untitled (South Dakota) 2010, pigment print on cotton paper (84 X 60 cm - 23 X 33 in)

Coincidence

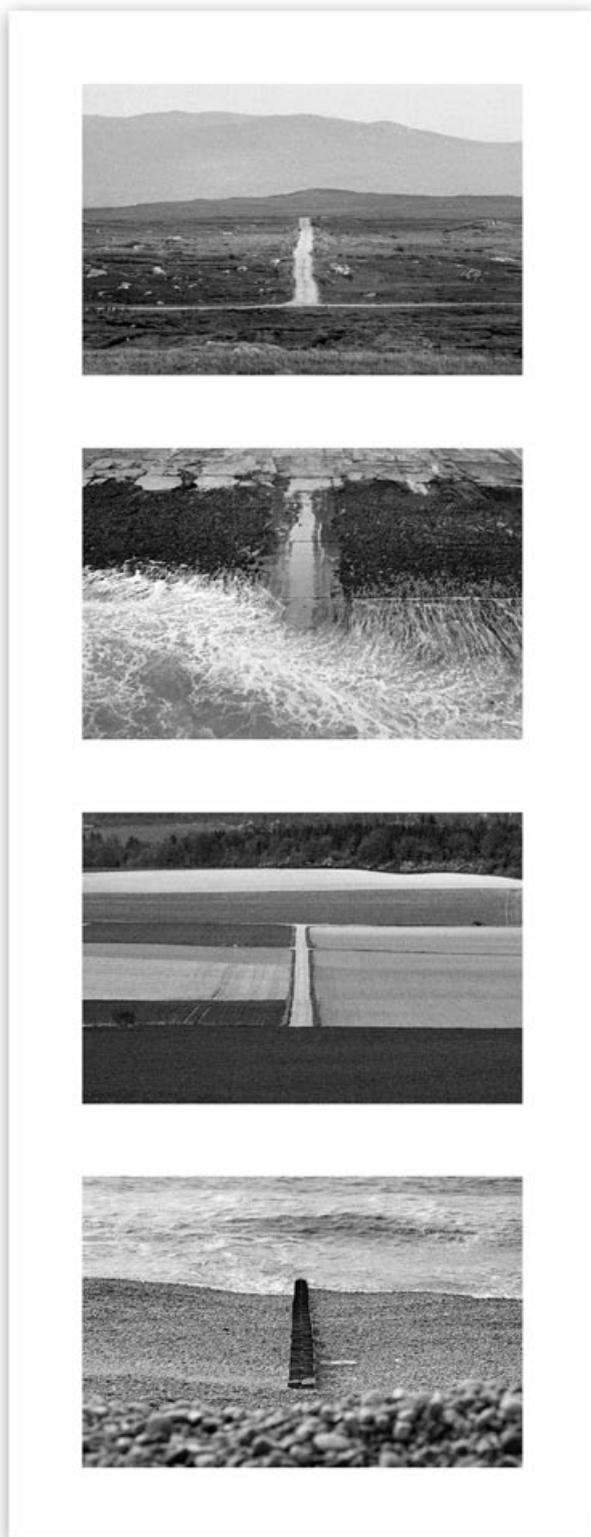
To some extent, the external order referred to in Arnaud Lesage's photographs seems to clash with reason, by summoning principles unfamiliar to mankind, such as fate, destiny or chance. The *Anatopoeia* (*Anatopées*) series, whose name describes a neologism combining the roots of the words «analogy», «anagram» or «anamorphosis», and «topos», is representative of this allusion to destiny forces. One day, in 1996, the artist discovered in his archives two photographs taken in distant locations. On both pictures, however, the same visual framework, a vertical motif planted in the middle of the landscape, in the center of the image. The coincidence incites the artist to collect other similar photographs, crossing many countries, in search of a vaguely erected element of the decor that would protrude and mysteriously resonate with a similar one located somewhere else, sometimes on another continent.



The two shots at the origin of the *Anatopées* series: France 1988 / Ireland 1990

The *Anatopoeias* thus manifest fortuitous conjunctions between places that were not previously destined to meet, especially in view of the thousands of photographs collected over the years and through travel. The low probability of seeing two such distant locations sharing the same visual framework is countered by a laborious work of selection, in the same way that the artist continues to wander the world in search of these landscape abutments. Above all, *Anatopoeias* are presented in the form of assemblages of four photographs themselves arranged vertically; these assemblages constitute visual families which, in addition to sharing the same graphic structure, are characterized by an atmosphere, a narrative or an element of the decor common to the four images.

A graceful pier can thus rise above the waves on a beach in the North of France, and join a long path separating the plains of Ireland; the common denominator being the filiform character in the rectangular structure. Elsewhere, the silhouette of a bird overlooking a sea off Iceland, all wings out, serves as a visual principle capable of reflecting the crest of a Californian dune, but also the discrete relief of a Bulgarian meadow (page 13).



The repeated appearances of these motifs at the center of the image convey unfathomability; summoning the black monolith of *2001: A Space Odyssey* – as the artist confirms – which precisely arouses the desire to understand and alludes to extra-human truths. Thus the existential or metaphysical incidences regarding the way to apprehend these coincidences. What remains surprising in Arnaud Lesage's approach is the fact that these apparitions have no consistency of their own. They exist, so to speak, only through the eyes of the mind, or for those who know how to see them, and seem to confirm the thesis of the invention of landscape.



Long Distance Calls #1: France / New Zealand 2013 - 2014
pigment print on cotton paper, variable dimensions

Anatopées

Switzerland

California

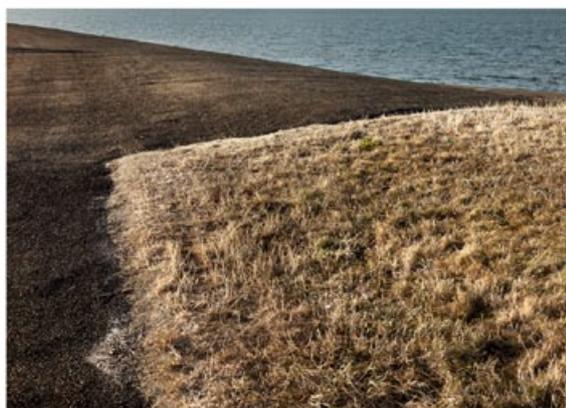
Bulgaria

Iceland

2002 - 2009

The Oulipian

The *Anatopoeias* play on an ambiguity: on the one hand, the photographs highlight the surprising, if not unheard-of character of any encounter. Fate seems to say in each assemblage that the objects of reality compose a cosmic plot foreign to human life. In this, Arnaud Lesage's visual overlaps are (to be) conceived as discoveries; the artist would have managed to get his hands on an order of things, and to reveal it at the end of a long work. On the other hand, however, the photographs are perhaps really only coincidences, or the expression of a too strong will to interpret. The act of perception indeed supposes a cognitive dimension able to explain the phenomena of fortuitous recognition, as in the case of the pareidolia where ink spots and scattered clouds are enough to evoke familiar faces. From this point of view, these landscapes are also and above all constructions that aim to promote meaning where there is none.



Curve: Netherlands 2018 - Spain 2017, pigment print on cotton paper, variable dimensions

On closer inspection, Arnaud Lesage's photographs employ a number of physical or geometric manipulations: repetition, symmetry, juxtaposition, alignment, etc., while the shots are meticulous. The *Anatopoeias* moreover underline a strong protocol dimension, in the final presentation of the assemblages, as well as in the preliminary arrangements which are similar to constraints set up with the aim of supporting the act of creation. It is among other things what would allow to glimpse a proximity with the conceptual art or the Oulipo, except that it is neither letters nor words which are constrained, repeated, put in situation, but fragments of image and elements of the reality carefully observed by the eye of the artist. If, with Arnaud Lesage, the question is of imagining a possible "Ouvroir de Photographie Potentielle"¹, that enables us to identify a less spontaneous artistic filiation of his work, in so far as it seems, from the outset, to respond to a history of photography where rigor, frontality and seriality predominate.

¹ OULIPO is short for « Ouvroir de littérature potentielle » that one usually translates as "Workshop for Potential Literature". Julien Verhaeghe suggests the use of the denomination "Workshop for potential photography" as a means of linking Arnaud Lesage's work to the Oulipian methods.



X-Change

France 2020, pigment print on cotton paper, variable dimensions

As the artist himself says, the question of «what to photograph» was there from the start. The fact of having been confronted with diverse and admirable landscapes, where everything is worthy of interest for the eye of a photographer, has undoubtedly consolidated the impression of having to deal with realities too ample to be enclosed in a single image. The passage through voluntary constraints is therefore seen as a way to contain the great number of possibilities offered by reality. Playing with combinations and repetitions, favoring processes of comparison and sticking to protocols are indeed ways of moderating a form of prodigality. However, to restrict the possibilities is still to propose other possibilities, the imposed constraints describing less ends in themselves than points of departure towards pictorial destinations still unknown. Does this mean that an artistic project of this type is in itself an invitation to travel? In any case, Arnaud Lesage's approach takes on the appearance of a photographic quest that tends never to end, with thousands of photographs waiting in his archives, and no less than countless landscapes that remain to be explored.



Flag

Grand Canyon, Arizona 2009 / Ocean of Storms, 1969 (photo credit Nasa)



The outdoor workshop

A morning of bivouac in Nevada, before the search of shapes, appearances, visual anomalies (2010)



The indoor workshop

10,000 photos representing a vertical shape to sort and arrange (2012)

Anatopées

Belgium

Ireland

Estonia

France

2004 - 2007

Anatopées

Netherlands

Northern Ireland

France

Spain

1998 -2008

Anatopées

Romania

France

New Mexico

Mali

2007 - 2010



Openings: untitled (New Zealand) 2014, pigment print on cotton paper (84 X 60 cm - 23 X 33 in)



Openings: untitled (California) 2009, pigment print on cotton paper (84 X 60 cm - 23 X 33 in)

- 2022** *Ekphrasis* grant (partnership between ADAGP and AICA France): publication of the critical text of Julien Verhaeghe in *Le Quotidien de L'Art* n°2388: "Arnaud Lesage, Les possibles du paysage"; English translation by Clare Mary Puyfoulhoux: "Arnaud Lesage, How far can landscapes"
- 2021** *10 years of photography*, collective exhibition and catalog, La Chambre, Strasbourg (France)
- 2019** *Landings / Toucher Terre*, solo exhibition, galerie Maubert, Paris
"1 immeuble 1 œuvre" ministry of Culture acquisition program
Acquisitions by the National Library of France
Hors les murs - sur les murs: Poster n°18, a galerie S.Mortier (Paris) project
- 2018** Paris Photo, Grand Palais (Paris), Galerie Maubert
Preselected for the Niépce Prize
- 2017** Paris Photo, Grand Palais (Paris), Galerie Maubert
Art Toronto, Metro Toronto Convention Centre (La Castiglione gallery, Montreal)
À l'Orée, Fine Arts Museum, Caen (France), season 2017-2018
La Fabrique photographique des paysages, Monique Sicard (CNRS), Hermann Publisher, Paris
D'un côté l'autre, solo exhibition, La Chambre, Strasbourg (France)
- 2016** YIA Art Fair, Le Carreau du Temple, Paris (Galerie Maubert)
Biennale de l'Image Possible - Off, Galerie Quai4, Liège (Belgium)
Long Distance Calls, solo exhibition, École supérieure d'art et de design, Amiens
- 2015** *Insight Out*, Galerie Maubert, Paris. Solo exhibition, supported by the Centre National des Arts Plastiques
Explorations photographiques, collective exhibition, Galerie La Castiglione, Montreal
- 2014** Art Paris Art Fair, Grand Palais, Paris (Galerie Maubert)
- 2013** Jeune Création, international contemporary art exhibition, Le Centquatre, Paris
Photo Off - Young and upcoming Photography, La Bellevilloise, Paris (Galerie Maubert)
Lesage, Arnaud, *Anatopées*, text by Yves Pagès, Gang, Ivry-sur-Seine, 2013
- 2012** Art Souterrain, collective exhibition, and *Nuit Blanche* (White Night), Montréal
- 2011** Acquisitions by the National Library of France
- 2010** *Anatopées*, solo exhibition, Art Center «Le Safran», Amiens
Preselected for HSBC Photography Prize
- 2009** Villa Medici *Hors les murs* grant (International residency program of "Institut français")
- 2008** Images'08 Festival, Vevey (Switzerland)
"Leica-Reportage" Prize of Images'08 International photography competition, Vevey
- 2006** Paris Photo, Carrousel du Louvre (Agathe Gaillard Gallery)
Fotografia Festival Internazionale di Roma, National Museum of Modern Art of Italy, Rome
Mutations itinérantes, solo exhibition, Fnac Montparnasse, Paris. Tour in "Galeries photo de la Fnac" from 2006 to 2007 : Leuven, Antwerp (Belgium), Barcelona (Spain), Verona, Naples (Italy)
- 2005** Winner of European Fnac Photography Prize
Preselected for the Niépce Prize
Text by Bernard Marcelis: "Arnaud Lesage, des mutations visuelles aux associations séquentielles"
"Arnaud Lesage, Prix Fnac européen de la photographie", in *Le Courrier International* n°780
- 1994-2003** Employed by the Regional Fund of Contemporary Art of Picardy (France)
- 1989-1992** Fine Arts and Photography studies, University of Paris 8
- 1972** Born in Amiens (France)

This text by **Julien Verhaeghe**, published in **Le Quotidien de l'Art** of May 12, 2022,
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Julien Verhaeghe's text has been translated by **Clare Mary Puyfoulhoux**.
Other translations (captions, biography, etc.) by A.L.

Arnaud Lesage is represented by **galerie Maubert**, Paris

Picture above : American Museum of Natural History, New York, 2010

Photo credit : © Arnaud Lesage / ADAGP, Paris 2022