

SELECTIONS

ARTS / STYLE / CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND



THE COLOURS ISSUE

• COLOUR AND MATERIAL • CURATED BY VENETIA PORTER • IMMORTALISING AL-MUTANABBI STREET •
• CHRYSTYNA SALAM'S WORLD OF CERAMICS • IN DISCUSSION WITH MUSTAPHA AZEROUAL AND CAROLINE TABET •

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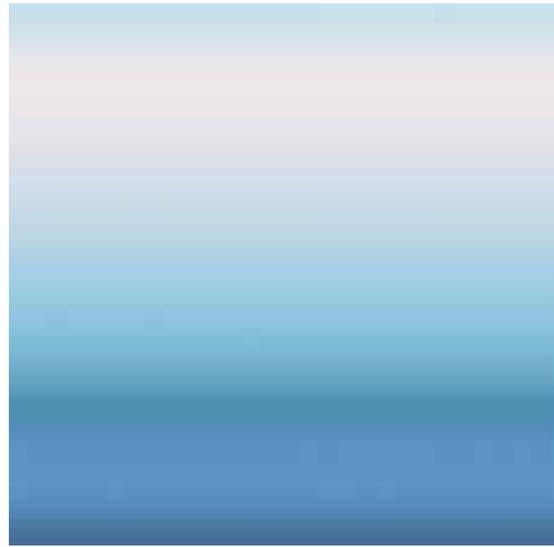


EXPERIMENTAL IMAGES

By India Stoughton

Selections listens in on a conversation between photographers
Mustapha Azeroual and **Caroline Tabet**

Caroline Tabet,
Perdre la Vue,
2012, courtesy
the artist



In his *Relief* series, photographer Mustapha Azeroual takes identical prints of the same digital photograph — a gentle wash of autumnal colours taken on his camera phone — and transforms them into unique works of art, draping them from wall hooks or over plinths to create individual sculptures. Whether digital or analogue, Azeroual's photographs are always experimental, time-consuming and challenging to the viewer. These qualities are something the Paris-based Lebanese photographer shares with Beirut-based photographer and filmmaker Caroline Tabet. The two are exhibiting together with Moroccan artist Zineb Andress Arraki this winter in Paris, as part of the first Biennial of Photography from the Arab World, organised by the Maison Européenne de la Photographie and the Institut du Monde Arabe. Like Azeroual, Tabet thrives on experimentation. Each series seemingly hinges on a new technique — painstaking hours spent alone in the dark room, doctoring negatives with sprays and Chinese ink or mastering a complex antique process.

The two photographers allowed Selections share extracts from their meandering discussion about medium, material and photography in the digital age.

India Stoughton: You both started out doing commercial photography in Paris and have moved into something much more artistic and abstract. What is it that drives you both to go beyond the initial image and create something more complex and layered?

Caroline Tabet: For me, it's the interest in working with materials. I like to work a bit with my hands and to reinterpret photographs using techniques which are quite free and experimental. I like to work with different materials, like sprays, Chinese ink and different papers — I think that through these layers you get another way of approaching photography, which is a mixed media between a bit of painting and a bit of photography... I like to go beyond the square approach, where you have this sharp, well-balanced image that represents reality.



top: Mustapha Azeroual, *Radiance*, mixed medium digital photograph & digigraphy on Kozo paper, 59 x 59 cm, 2014, courtesy of Art Factum Gallery

above: Caroline Tabet, polaroid from the *Land* series, 2007 - ongoing, courtesy the artist

Mustapha Azeroual, *Radiance*, mixed medium digital photograph & digigraphy on Kozo paper, 59 x 59 cm, 2014, courtesy of Art Factum Gallery

Mustapha Azeroual, *Phenomenon*, mixed medium digital photograph & gelatin silver sheet-film, 13×18 cm, lightbox, 2014, courtesy of Art Factum Gallery



Mustapha Azeroual: I think I remember part of our discussion in Paris and I remember that I told you that those are all things that I explore too — the possibility of photography to create more than just a reproduction of reality — something like an addition or a subtraction, like rewriting something that has already been written.

CT: I'm always very interested when I see your work with gum bichromate, because I think this is such a delicate and difficult technique and the result has something that really goes beyond photography and is very organic.

MA: What you say about it being organic is very important, because the materials that we use are organic. It's gum arabic, so tree sap, and the pigments are earth, so the colour is earth, in the end... That's one of the reasons why I use this technique. My work is a reflection on the medium of photography, so I try to analyse and to deconstruct this medium and all its composites — the time, the colour, the perception, the recording, the representation, the point of view. So using old processes to question photography is important for me. Gum bichromate is a process that was invented in around 1850, so really from the beginning of photography. The pictures are really removed from the moment of capture... To create just one print takes about a week or more, so you're really making something. It's at this point we meet each other, I think, Caroline, because what we create really gets away from the moment of capture, so it's something that's not of one instant, but a longer temporality.



Caroline Tabet, *Recueil*, 2012, courtesy the artist

CT: Yeah, it's a long process. It takes time, but also it creates unique pieces, because each time it's going to be different. You don't have this repetition and automatism that you would have with other processes, like digital photography and printing. With analogue photography you have the wait between taking the photo and developing the film, and then printing the actual photo, so it's also about being patient and being ready to have some imperfections or surprises... Even if you have a perfect image in your mind it's going to take time until you get it, and sometimes you won't get exactly this one, but what you will find will be maybe even more interesting or unexpected.

IS: How does the process change when it comes to digital photography? Could you get the same effects using digital editing as you get using a more time-consuming, hands-on approach?

CT: For me, with digital photography I don't try to have the same effects as I do with analogue photography. It would never be my main medium because I find it a bit too flat, too sharp. But there again you can find ways of using it in a different way. Sometimes the overexposure, or underexposure, or working at night is very interesting with digital images. How about you, Mustapha? Do you work with digital photography?

MA: Yes, sometimes, but it's really to analyse the changing way of building images. It brings, as you say, a flatness and sharpness to the image, and for me digital photography is about effects, whereas analogue you are working with chemicals, so it's a recording of light. I have some artworks where I'm using the camera on my mobile phone. What I want to show is the structure of the image. In digital photography you have a flat image



Caroline Tabet, *Within*, 2012, courtesy the artist



Mustapha Azeroual, *Radiance*, mixed medium digital photograph & digigraphy on Kozo paper, 59×59 cm, 2014, courtesy of Art Factum Gallery

built by pixels, and in analogue processes you have a sculptural apparition of the image in the depths of the emulsion... As I said earlier, with gum bichromate the material is important, just as when you are building a sculpture with earth or with stone. So for me there is something that you have in black-and-white or in analogue photography that you don't have in digital, where you have an image that is totally immaterial.

CT: The thing also is that all the analogue processes react to temperature, to humidity. It's like a living thing. That is something that you don't find in digital... It's very abstract. It's really two different bodies of work that have nothing to do with each other. But that's also the interesting thing. We have digital to be a tool that is economical, fast, reliable. It's a more consumerist approach, where you use a lot of things without really thinking about what you're doing and still have a good result. It's really a reflection of our time and the demands of today. ■