

# Dreams of the Rhône

Musée d'art du Valais  
Au Quatrième  
21st May  
to 22nd October 2017

« Before becoming a conscious sight, every landscape is an oneiric experience. Only those scenes that have already appeared in dreams can be viewed with an aesthetic passion. » Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*

To dream of the Rhône, its poetic landscapes. To tame its temperament along a journey of 812 kilometres. From a world of changeable ice to the serene waters of the Geneva Lake, from the meandering river of the past to its present rectilinearity, from the Valais to the Camargue, the exhibition *Dreams of the Rhône* takes its inspiration from French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, and his *Water and Dreams* (1942). Often apprehended from a technical perspective (the third “correction” of its course, security, hydraulic energy, ecosystems, etc.) or disconsidered in favour of the mountains that surround it, the Rhône is presented here from a dreamlike angle, through five chapters that follow its course from fountainhead to delta. Drawn by Bachelard’s meditation on the imagination of water, the exhibition narrates a journey through the river’s poetic dimension.

Artworks by **Charles-Clos Olsommer**, **Abraham Poincheval**, **Raphael Ritz** and **Marie Velardi** have been assembled for the purpose of this temporary exhibition around a group of photographs of the series *Rhodanie* by **Bertrand Stofleth** recently acquired by the Art Museum.

*Born in 1978, Bertrand Stofleth lives and works in Lyon. After studies in art history and theatre arts in Lyon, he graduated from the Arles Ecole Nationale de la Photographie in 2002. His artistic enquiry focuses on ways of inhabiting territories, and interrogates landscapes in their customs and representations. The series Rhodanie was developed between 2007 and 2014. All the images were taken from the same height using a hydraulic elevator, and the series traces the whole course of the Rhône: the river converses with its banks, as dialogue is established between untamed nature and rampant domestication.*

## Ice

« Despite its thousand faces, the river takes on a single destiny; its source takes both the responsibility and the credit for the river’s entire course. The strength comes from the source. The dreamer who sees a river flow by calls up the legendary origin of the river, the far-off source. » Gaston Bachelard

Since the late eighteenth century, the exact location where mountain, glacier and torrent converge -the source of the Rhône- fascinated travellers of the Romantic era. Guidebooks and artists alike solicited dreams of its origins. In this exhibition, the Rhône glacier is represented through three visions of different eras and using varying techniques. In a watercolour drawing on blue paper, **Raphael Ritz** displays a

tiny person balancing right over the spot where the river surges forth, as a witness to the dizzy sensation of the Alpine sublime. **Felix Vallotton's** woodcut presents a world of moving ice, which evokes both the entrails of an originary cavern and an unleashed ocean. **Bertrand Stofleth's** photograph tells the viewer of an era where admiration for purity is melded with ecological concerns. Faced with melting grey ice, the tourist is dressed for hiking, but his wheelie case betrays urban proximity, bearing witness to the symbolic failure of the glacier, destined to disappear within the next ninety years.

1. Félix Vallotton (1865-1925), *Glacier du Rhône*, 1892, woodcut on paper, inv. BA3251, acquired in 2011

2. Raphael Ritz (1829-1894), *Rhone-Gletscher und - Quellen*, 1853, graphite, watercolour and oil pastel on paper, inv. BA D 1406, bequest by the artists' children in 1969

3. Bertrand Stofleth (\*1978), *Alpes, massif du Saint-Gothard, glacier du Rhône*, 2013, photographic print on Hahnemühle baryta paper (1/5), inv. BA 3424, acquired in 2016

## Meanders

« A scene's freshness is a way of looking at it. Doubtless the scene has to contribute too; it must have some greenery and a little water. But material imagination has the longer task. » Gaston Bachelard

An unfettered river, snaking its way through a lush and verdant valley: devoid of swamps or industrial production, such representations exude a strong impression of purity, whose contemplative essence has been rendered by many artists. **Charles-Clos Olsommer**, who settled in Veyras in 1912, draws a serpentine and dreamlike waterway in *La Sainte aux oiseaux*, as well as in the background of a self-portrait. **Gerard de Palézieux's** small oils on canvas, which are clearly situated in the Rhône valley, give a serene vision of the river. **Bertrand Stofleth's** interpretation of the "Bois de Finges" discloses the spiritual dimension of the place: beside a crucifix, the walker is captivated by the almond-shaped alluvial plain, so much so that he forsakes his camera on the bench.

4. Charles-Clos Olsommer (1883-1966), *La Sainte aux oiseaux*, undated (c. 1911-1913), tempura on card, inv. BA 1288, bequest by the artist's children in 1977

5. Gérard de Palézieux (1919-2012), *Rhône*, 1979, oil on canvas marouflaged on wood, inv. BA 3331, donated by Pierre Girardet in 2014

6. Gérard de Palézieux (1919-2012), *Paysage de plaine et fleuve*, undated, oil on canvas stuck on wood-fibre board, inv. BA3380, bequest by Anne-Marie Steiger-Délez, Jean and Anne-Marie Steiger collection, in 2015

7. Bertrand Stofleth (\*1978), *Leuk, Umfahrungsstrasse, calvaire et belvédère sur la forêt de Finges*, 2013, photographic print on Hahnemühle baryta paper (1/5), inv. BA 3425, acquired in 2016

# Cultures

« Water is the most favourable element for illustrating themes involving the combination of powers. It assimilates so many substances, draws so many essences to itself! » Gaston Bachelard

Across the centuries, the Rhône Valley, from the Upper- to the Low-Valais, has conjured up contradictory perceptions between nature and industrialisation, beauty and ugliness, purity of air and insalubrity. Throughout its history, the successive corrections of the Rhône have aimed to master its course and diminish the adverse effects of flooding. Here, **Raphael Ritz's** study in oils brings out the typical masonry of the river's first correction (1863-1894), which followed the devastating floods of 1860.

When the Rhône joins Geneva Lake at a place called "la Bataillère," its tumultuous brown waters mingle with the tranquil blue expanse of the waters of the lake, in a contest between two forces of nature. It is here that exploitation of the river's natural resources benefits from its bed, as in the Port-Valais quarry captured by **Bertrand Stofleth**.

Meanwhile, tourist resorts inspire dreams of holidays, as sustained by the *Souvenir de Bouveret-Plage*, a small earthenware box bearing a modern Venus motif

8. *Souvenir de Bouveret-Plage*, twentieth century, earthenware box, Sion, Valais History Museum, inv. MV 9023

9. Raphael Ritz (1829-1894), *Le Rhône près de Rarogne* (painted study for Correction du Rhône près de Rarogne), 1886, oil on canvas, inv. BA2920, bequest by the heirs of Pierre Darioli-Ritz in 2008

10. Bertrand Stofleth (\*1978), *Port-Valais, route de la Plage, arrivée du Rhône au lac Léman*, 2013, photographic print on Hahnemühle baryta paper (1/7), inv. BA 3426, acquired in 2016

# Immersions

« I always experience the same melancholy in the presence of dormant water, a very special melancholy whose colour is that of a stagnant pond in a rain-soaked forest, a melancholy not oppressive but dreamy, slow, and calm. » Gaston Bachelard

After the meanders of the intermittently muddy river, the lake is a space of physical and aesthetic purification. "Fast-flowing river" is the etymological signification of the river's name, and as the Rhône flows into Geneva Lake, its waters summon us to calm and leisure, as in **Alexandre Calame's** lacustrine vision, whilst **Bertrand Stofleth's** photograph is crossed by a jet ski and horse-riders. A nuclear power-station, built on the banks of the river in order to use its waters to cool the reactor, perturbs the quietness of the sleeping waters.

11. Alexandre Calame (1810-1864), *Voile sur le Léman à St-Gingolph*, undated (19th century), oil on canvas, inv. BA 342

12. Bertrand Stofleth (\*1978), *Ancône, île de l'Homme d'Armes, digues et centrale nucléaire de Cruas*, 2007, photographic print on Hahnemühle baryta paper (2/5), inv. BA 3427, acquired in 2016

# Affluents

« Water from the sky, fine rain, the friendly and salutary spring give more direct hints than all the water in the sea. It is a perversion that has put salt in the sea. Salt hampers a reverie, the reverie of sweetness, one of the most material and most natural reveries existing. Natural reverie will always give preference to fresh water, water that refreshes, water that quenches thirst. » Gaston Bachelard

After an 812 kilometres journey, the Rhône meets the Mediterranean Sea, plunging freshwater into salt, creating unexpected links and reunions: not far from the Rhône delta in the Camargue region, **Bertrand Stofleth** captures the encounter between a horde of tourists and a group of Camargue bulls. In *Terre-Mer / Arles, Saintes-Marie-de-la-Mer*, taken from the *Terre-Mer* series, **Marie Velardi** imagines displacing the coastal demarcation line between land and sea, focussing on liminal spaces that are at times under the sea, at times on land. Thus, the artist questions this fluctuation and the future of human settlement in these uncertain territories.

13. Marie Velardi (\*1977), *Terre-Mer (Arles, Saintes-Marie-de-la-Mer)*, 2015, pencil and watercolour on paper, on loan from the collection hôtel Mas de la Chapelle, Arles

14. Bertrand Stofleth (\*1978), *Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, lieu-dit le Reculat, le Petit Rhône*, 2011, photographic print on Hahnemühle baryta paper (1/5), inv. BA 3428, acquired in 2016

15. Abraham Poincheval (\*1972), *Bouteille*, 2017, installation, artist's personal collection

For a few days in August 2017, as part of the **Triennale Valais Wallis 2017** at the Relais du Saint Bernard near to Martigny, the French artist Abraham Poincheval will live in perfect self-sufficiency, in a giant bottle. The installation *Bouteille* from *Dreams of the Rhône's* exhibition echoes this performance by bringing together a drawing of the bottle created by the artist, and the river's journey on a map. Abraham Poincheval inverts the river's natural course in this work, tracing it from the Mediterranean sea to its source in the glacier.

## Bibliographie

Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (1942). Trans. Edith R. Farrell. Michigan US, The Pegasus Foundation, 1983.

Ariane Devanthéry, « Entre source poétique et marais insalubres. Le Rhône ambigu des guides de voyage au XIXe siècle », dans *Le Rhône, entre nature et société*, Sion, Cahiers de Vallesia, Archives de l'Etat du Valais, 2015, pp. 259-275.