

Ce qui fut, ce qui est

Isabelle Giovacchini

Contemporary exhibition

Musée Bourdelle
March 4 to July 27, 2025

Curation: Colin Lemoine



WHAT WAS, WHAT IS

Isabelle Giovacchini has been developing an experimental approach to the image for many years. With a particular attentiveness to photographic material, she frequently manipulates vintage prints — erasing, reframing, or dazzling them with light — to imbue them with new meaning and a heightened sense of poetry. Her subtle interventions seek to divert clichés and subvert conventions, unsettling the viewer's gaze. By reworking silver prints or glass plates, the artist explores the very surface of the photograph — that sensitive layer that first receives her projections, and soon, our own.

Born from an invitation, this contemporary counterpoint allows Isabelle Giovacchini to unfold further her poetics of the accident, woven from gaps and traces. In the storerooms of the Musée Bourdelle, where she spent many hours, the artist selected sculpted and photographic pieces to reflect on the passage of time, which, even as it erodes things, reveals marvelous exhumations. The ruin of time holds a promise: Giovacchini seizes it to offer restitutions and new proposals that invite us to see Bourdelle's photographic work anew, recalling his profound passion for the power of images.

This display, composed of seven series forming a visual narrative, offers an opportunity to grasp the scope of Isabelle Giovacchini's work, which is regularly exhibited in France and abroad.

Ce qui fut, ce qui est Isabelle Giovacchini

4 mars - 27 juillet 2025

Isabelle Giovacchini (née en 1982) élabore depuis des années un travail expérimental sur l'image photographique. Elle manipule des tirages anciens qu'elle efface, recadre ou surexpose afin de leur attribuer un sens nouveau, de les parer d'une poésie de surcroît. Subtiles, ses interventions détournent les clichés et déjouent les lieux communs, contrariant la tranquillité du regard. Tirages argentiques et plaques de verre sont réinvestis pour explorer la surface photographique, cette couche sensible accueillant les projections de l'artiste, puis bientôt les nôtres.

Ce contrepoint contemporain permet à Isabelle Giovacchini de déployer sa poésie de l'accident, faite de lacunes et de traces. Dans les réserves du musée Bourdelle, fréquentées assidûment, l'artiste a prélevé des pièces sculptées ou photographiques. Cette exhumation constitue une réflexion sur la ruine du temps et la fragilité des choses : Isabelle Giovacchini livre ainsi des restitutions et des propositions qui donnent à voir autrement l'œuvre photographique d'Antoine Bourdelle, animé d'une souveraine passion pour le pouvoir des images.

Cet accrochage, composé de sept séries en forme de scénario visuel, offre d'approcher l'ampleur du travail d'Isabelle Giovacchini, dont les œuvres sont présentées régulièrement en France et à l'étranger. À compter du mois de mai, le Centre photographique d'Île-de-France consacre une exposition monographique à l'artiste.



Hélice

Propeller — Photogram on black and white silver print, 24 x 18 cm, matted and framed 50 x 40 cm, 2024

In her attentive quest to capture the spirit of the place — the *genius loci* — Isabelle Giovacchini carefully gathered various botanical specimens from the garden of the Musée Bourdelle, selecting them for their distinctive forms and evocative historical presence. Back in the shadowed quiet of her studio, she composed photograms by arranging these natural fragments — in this case, honeysuckle — on photosensitive paper, briefly allowing them to meet the light before revealing their hidden imprints in the developing process. Invented in the mid-19th century by the pioneers of photography, photograms conjure starkly contrasted images that seem to oscillate between presence and absence. By harnessing two simultaneous sources of light, the artist conjures an illusion of volume, offering a delicate echo of life's fragility captured in a luminous silhouette.

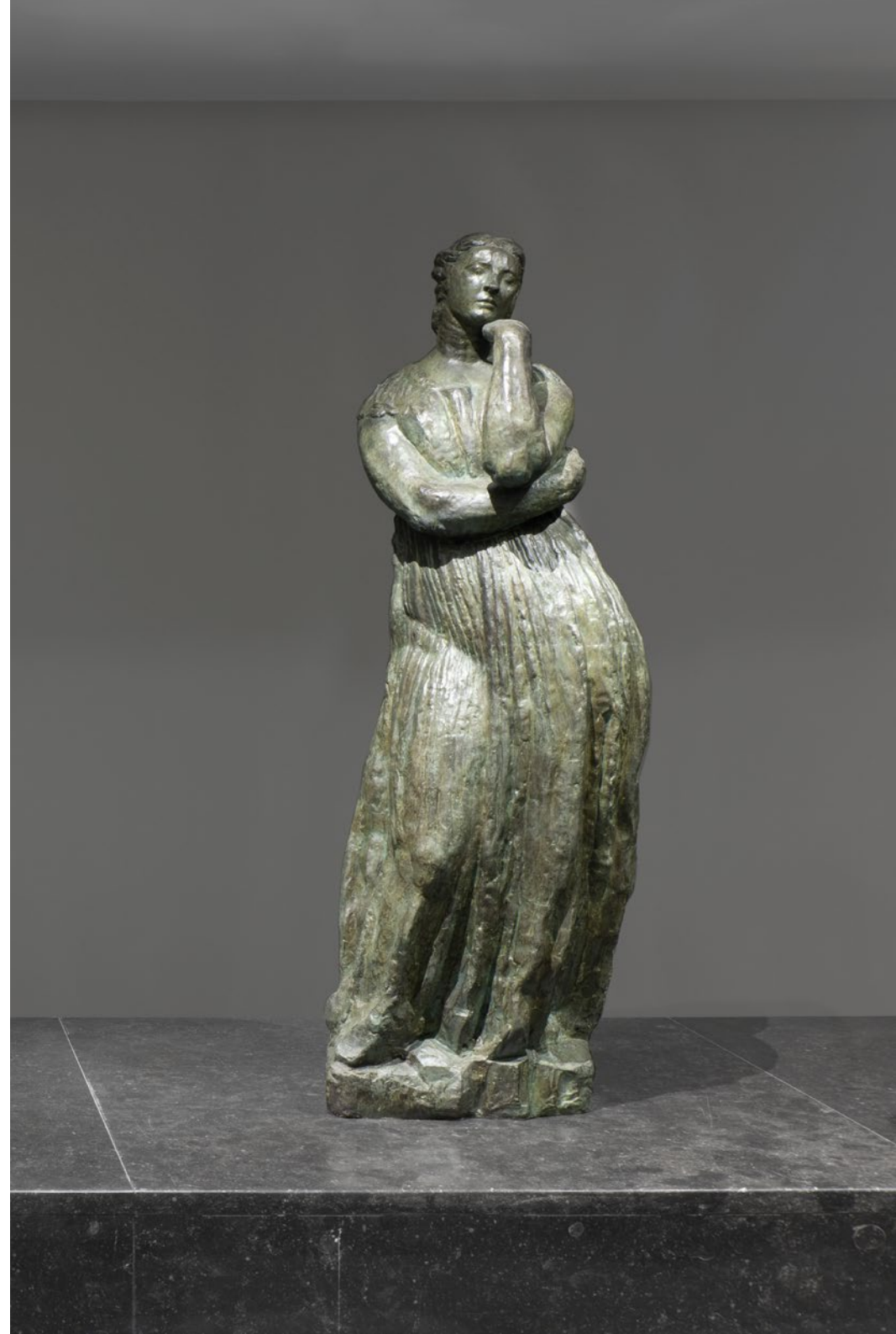


Pénélope n'attend pas

Penelope Won't Wait — Installation based on *Pénélope* (1905-1912), *Femme bras levés* (1907) and *Femme bras dans le dos* (1908) by Antoine Bourdelle, bronze, variable dimensions, 2025

Figure majeure de la sculpture de Bourdelle, *Pénélope* (1905-1912) donna lieu à plusieurs déclinaisons, parmi lesquelles *Femme bras levés* et *Femme bras dans le dos* (*Woman With Arms Behind Her Back*, 1908), qui se distinguent de la première par le mouvement des bras, presque chorégraphique. Dont acte : autour de la figure centrée de Pénélope, Isabelle Giovacchini a disposé deux épreuves de chacune de ces déclinaisons afin de former une danse syncopée qui n'est pas sans évoquer la chronophotographie, cette technique consistant à décomposer le mouvement d'un être ou d'un objet animé. Le titre de cet ensemble, qui fait signe vers le titre originel de la sculpture matricielle – *Pénélope attendant Odysseus* (*Penelope Waiting For Odysseus*) –, semble suggérer que le royaume du Féminin est à défendre, loin de toute immobilité.

A major figure in Bourdelle's sculptural work, *Pénélope* (1905–1912) inspired several variations, including *Femme bras levés* (*Woman With Arms Raised*, 1907) and *Femme bras dans le dos* (*Woman with Arms Behind Her Back*, 1908), which diverge from the original through the almost choreographic movement of the arms. In response, Isabelle Giovacchini has arranged two casts of each of these variations around the central figure of Penelope, composing a syncopated dance reminiscent of chronophotography – that technique of breaking down the movement of a living being or object into sequential images. The title of the ensemble, a nod to the original sculpture's name – *Pénélope attendant Odysseus* (*Penelope Waiting For Odysseus*) – seems to suggest that the feminine realm must be claimed, far from any notion of stillness.





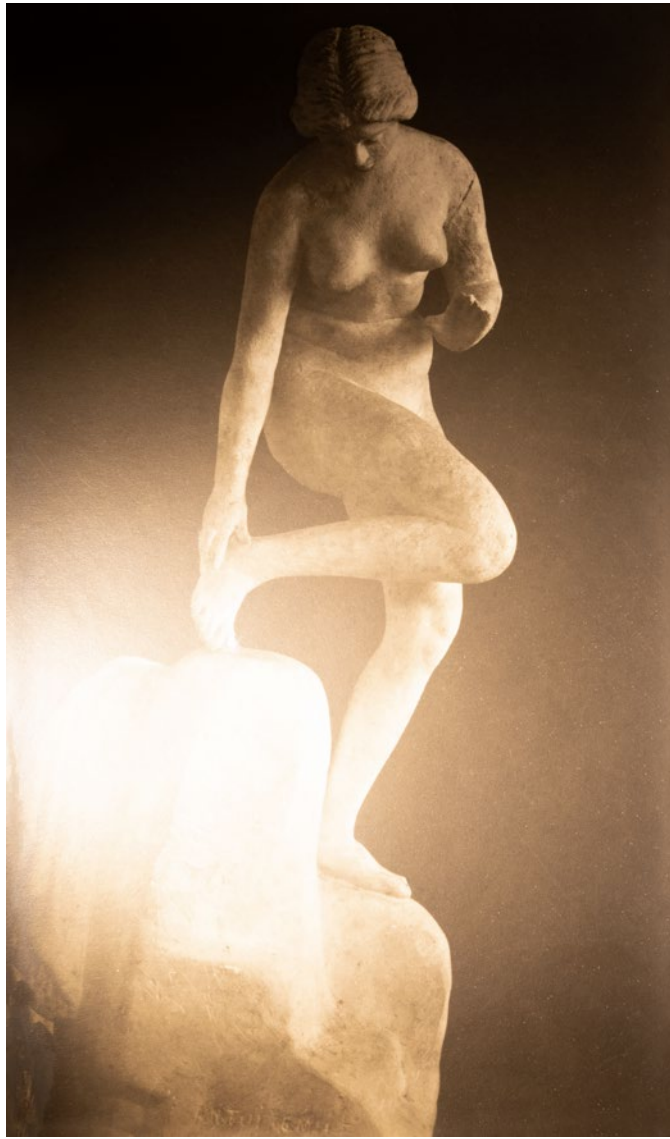
L'Éclipse

Lightning — Polyptych, C-prints, variable dimensions, matted 40 x 30 cm and 50 x 40 cm, 2025

Bourdelle had a particular fondness for a *Vénus à sa toilette* (*Venus at Her Toilette*, 1906), a delicate bather imbued with both classical and Cézannesque accents, to which he dedicated numerous photographs, capturing the sculpture from every angle. Isabelle Giovacchini selected two of these prints and, using a tripod, subjected them to an off-camera light source — sometimes grazing, sometimes frontal. This intuitive play of light conjures whimsical surface effects that at times dazzle the image itself. The artist then inverted the tonal values of the photographs, transforming them into strangely shadowy impressions, akin to photographic negatives.







Virages

Curves — Diptych, C-prints on satin-finish silver paper,
30,5 x 24 cm each, matted, 2025

These photograms were created from two hellebore stems, carefully selected from the garden of the Musée Bourdelle. Where the process traditionally yields purely black and white images — reminiscent of Man Ray's solarisations — this print unexpectedly revealed a delicate rosy hue, likely the result of a subtle chemical imperfection in the fixing bath. Attuned to such accidents and alterations, Isabelle Giovacchini chose to preserve this fortuitous image and even to amplify it: after scanning the print, she produced its inverted counterpart, offering the viewer a contemplative encounter between negative and positive, both born from the unpredictable hand of chance.







Volte-face

U-Turn — Polyptych, pigment inkjet prints, between 23 x 20 and 50 x 40 cm, four of which are matted, exhibited in dialogue with a photograph by Antoine Bourdelle

The storage rooms of the Musée Bourdelle house countless molds, designed to produce multiple plaster casts from a single model. Essential to the reproduction process of sculpture, these heterogeneous forms resemble curious chrysalises. Isabelle Giovacchini unearthed several of these molds, drawn to them by their resemblance to human faces, their enigmatic contours, or inscriptions such as "Nuage" ("Cloud"), which — much like the absurd poetry of René Magritte — stand at odds with their apparent form. Photographed in the pale, luminous glow of one of the museum's former studios, these molds compose an uncanny gallery of emerging faces, echoing Bourdelle's own marble *Muse*, which he photographed to immortalize both his process and the birth of his creations.















Antoine Bourdelle,
Muse de marbre, original print
from the Musée Bourdelle

Spectres

Spectra — Polyptych, C-Print, 24 x 18 cm each, 2025, in dialogue with one photograph by Antoine Bourdelle

In 1905, within his painting studio, Bourdelle photographed two anonymous women draped in flowing white gowns. On the back of one of the prints, an inscription reveals that these two sisters — "a brunette and a redhead" — had posed for a pastel that has since been lost to time. This handwritten note, intriguingly reintroducing a trace of color into the black-and-white image, inspired a specific approach: at times filtered through red, a light source sweeps across the surface of the original print, tracing a lunar or solar path, diaphanous or flickering. Wrapped in this ectoplasmic halo, the face of the standing woman seems to slip away, to fade into absence — much like in a faded photograph of *Le Baiser* (*The Kiss*), Bourdelle's marble sculpture, which is presented here alongside this polyptych.









Original prints from the Musée Bourdelle



Sans titre

Untitled (Cloud Window) — Installation based on original items from the Musée Bourdelle collections and works by Isabelle Giovacchini, variable dimensions, 2025

This display case offers, in a deliberately scattered arrangement, a glimpse into the layered meanings of Isabelle Giovacchini's work and her deep-rooted fascination with imprints and appropriations. A family photo album, with one page partially veiled beneath a sheet of crumpled tissue paper, enters into dialogue with the plaster cast of a solitary eye — detached from the iconic *Herakles Archer (Herakles the Archer)*. Compositions derived from damaged original glass plates sit alongside a peculiar mold, for which the artist proposes a photographic interpretation displayed nearby. Photograms, crafted from botanical specimens gathered in the gardens of the Musée Bourdelle, celebrate the artifice of photography itself, which captures the fleeting beauty of the natural world. This collection of tools and fragments, at times enigmatic, houses the forms and gestures developed throughout the sequences of the current exhibition.







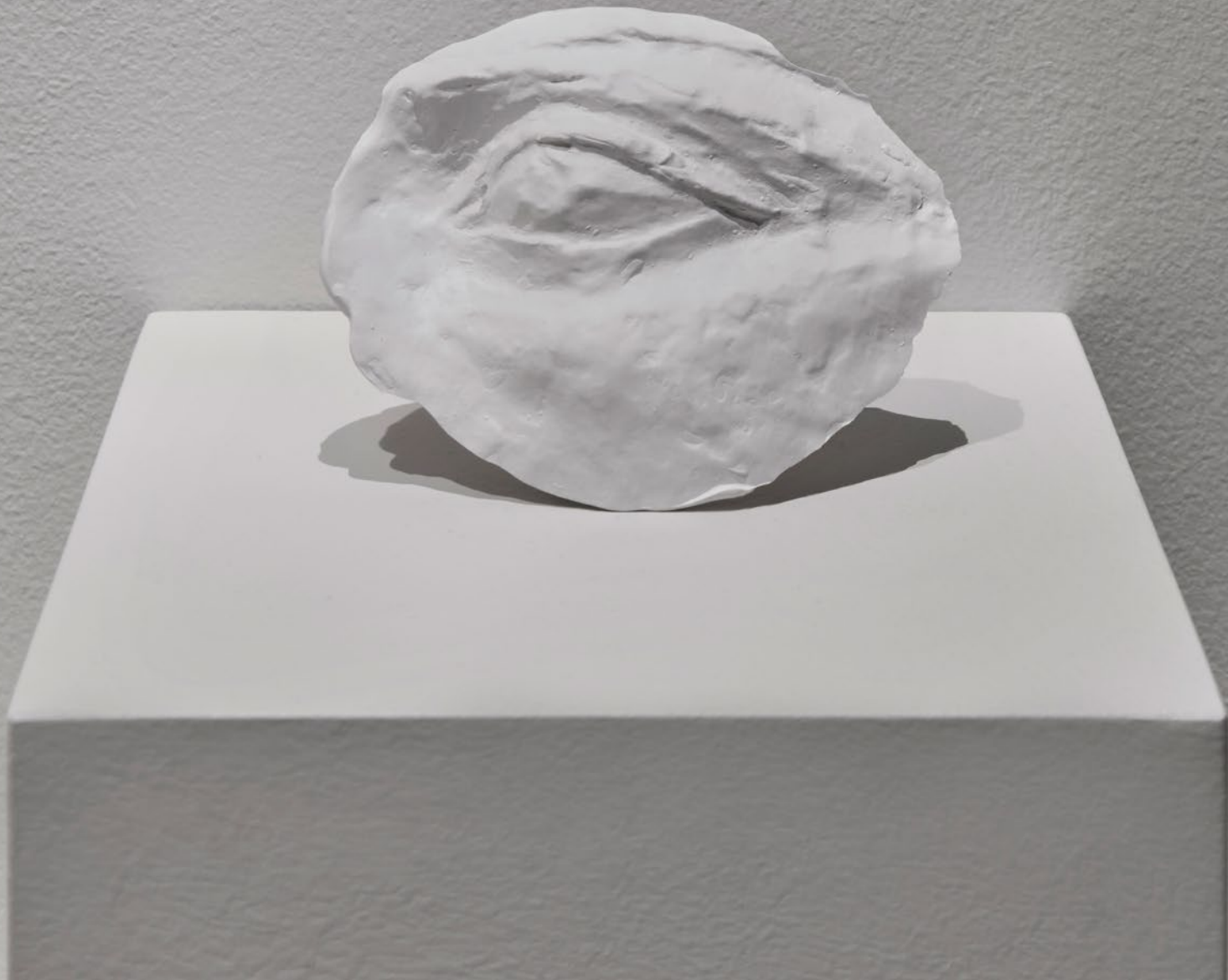


Séance de pose à l'atelier « La Rousse », vers 1890.



« La Rousse » et sa sœur sur la méridienne de l'atelier, vers 1890.





À propos de l'artiste

Isabelle Giovacchini's work with photography is experimental and empirical. She borrows the lexical field of this medium (imprint, fragment, double, spectrum) to divert it from its purely figurative and representational functions.

Her works are derived from objects and photographs found over time, in archives and places she explores. By manipulating them in her studio or laboratory, she tries to find the limit just before their image disappears.

She has exhibited at Frac Sud (2007), Occitanie-Montpellier (2008 and 2022), espace de l'Art concret (Mouans-Sartoux, 2013), Mamac (2013 and 2015, Nice), CCC (2013, Tours), center photographique d'Île-de-France (2015 and 2020), image/imatge (2025, Orthez) and in galleries: Xippas (2010), Isabelle Gounod (2011), les filles du calvaire (2013), in situ Berlin (2014 and 2020).

She has held residencies in France and abroad: Alliance française de São Paulo (2006), Münzstrasse 10 (Berlin, 2008), Frac Lorraine (2011), cité Internationale de Arts (2012). Ella has been supported by the Drac Sud and Champagne-Ardenne, the Centre national des Arts plastiques (Cnap), the Institut français and the Fondation des artistes. In 2020, she was awarded the Epkhrasis Fellowship (Adagp / Aica France) and the Friends of the National Museum of Women in the Arts Fellowship in Washington.

Her work is included in several public collections: Cnap, Société Française de Photographie, Frac Champagne-Ardenne, Frac Franche-Comté, Frac Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and Frac Occitanie-Montpellier.

Since 2020, it has been pursuing a creative project on the archaeological site of Lake Nemi, near Rome. This project, winner of the 2023 Boukris Prize of the Fondation des Artistes, was supported by the Villa Médicis, the Ecole française de Rome, the Institut français and the French Ministry of Culture.

This extensive research will be presented in upcoming solo exhibitions at the Centre photographique d'Île-de-France (Pontault-Combault, September 27-December 21, 2025) and at the Le lait art center (Albi, 2026). At the same time, *Poursuite* will take the form of a monographic publication.

In 2025, the artist is one of the winners of the national photographic commission *Réinventer la photographie*, entrusted to Cnap by the French Ministry of Culture, in the run-up to the celebration of the bicentennial of photography in 2026-2027.



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Open Tuesday through Sunday, 10 am to 6 pm. Last admission: 17:30.
The museum is closed on May 1st.
Admission to the permanent collections is free.
The museum is accessible to persons with reduced mobility.

Cover image:
Volte-face, detail, photographic installation,
pigment inkjet print, 50 x 40 cm, 2025
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