

Henry Roy - Impossible Island

Artwork Labels

Henry Roy - Impossible Island is the first survey of this major Paris-based photographer's practice, and includes 117 works produced between 1983 and 2023. In addition to photography, the exhibition debuts four brief video works, several of his allusive text pieces, and his publications. Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1963 and relocating as a child to France with his family, Roy began taking photos at the age of 18. In the early 1980s he began what he calls his 'fantasised journal...the creation of an imaginary world, both sensory and reflective, born from my observations'. Roy says its genesis was in an encounter in Ibiza: 'I had not yet returned to Haiti as my status as a political refugee forbade it. Thus, a kind of transfer occurred. Ibiza, and more specifically, the rocky islet, Es Vedrà, became my lost island, my substitute voodoo island'. From that moment, fact and fiction were intimately linked. Roy's work became widely known in the 1990s through his contributions to the French magazine, *Purple*, and later *Hobo* magazine in America where his images were distinct in their evocative combination of a sense of subtle mystery and a deep pleasure in life, be this in a lo-fi sequence of almost incidental happenings or images of a movie star such as Charlotte Rampling. In addition to Roy's personal revelations and background, his aesthetic vision was inspired by the filmic essays of Chris Marker along with films of the French New Wave; these precursors encouraged him to stage his images as open-ended stories, as questions rather than statements. Roy's dreamlike approach to his work is echoed in the exhibition layout; instead of following a chronological

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course, images from different moments and places float next to each other. This world re-arrangement is also inspired by Roy's understanding of creolisation, animism and spiralism whereby life exists as a wholly animate entity full of various kinds of non-human agency through which histories, futures, geographies and forms of life fold in and over themselves.

Impossible Island evokes my exile and the quest for a metaphorical island, an imaginary refuge where one can escape the brutality of the world. It presents a bittersweet universe where water and sunlight dominate, symbols of both life and death. Here, one confronts a world marked by tension, a wavering between dream and reality, tragedy and sweetness, melancholy and voluptuousness. It reveals the unconscious of a Franco-Haitian artist who does not deny any aspect of his being. It is, above all, visual poetry, a work that appears simple and natural but is not bound by conventional codes. It comprises free, untamed images and texts, animistic prayers.

–Henry Roy

My left hand, Tunisia, 2012

All works by Henry Roy, presented with kind permission of the artist.
Unless otherwise stated, photographs are inkjet prints on Baryta paper

left to right

**Army boat, Democratic Republic of the
Congo, 2004**

**Boy watching, Somewhere in the sky,
2012**

Atlas sky, Morocco, 2013

RESIDUAL IMAGES

There are all those photos I didn't take, all those aborted snapshots, glimpsed but not taken.

These fleeting visions lost in the recesses of my memory, which will never be brought to life, published, or exhibited.

Among them, some would surely deserve to exist.

I dedicate this tribute to them.

May their absence continue to haunt me, inspiring other vibrant discoveries.

left to right

Aminata sleeping, Dakar, Senegal, 2016

**Hand smoking, Paris,
France, 2021**

Two students, Dakar, Senegal, 2016

Wrestlers, Dakar, Senegal, 2016

Men talking, Dakar, Senegal, 2016

left to right

**Boy and swimming pool, Saint-Vincent,
France, 2016**

**Crocodiles, Republic of Côte d'Ivoire,
2016**

Réginald sleeping, Ibiza, Spain, 1983

Flowers and beach, Ibiza, Spain, 2004

**Tania, Zack and friends, Ibiza,
Spain, 2008**

A LIZARD

I watched this lizard, frozen in the whiteness of the camino.

Its fixed gaze was tracking my every move. I stood there, observing it, extremely focused on the outline of its body. It was one of those small green-backed reptiles that abound on the Mediterranean coast. I've always been fond of them because I know they are pest eaters.

It nodded its head slightly, and its heavy eyelids covered its eyes in a brief flutter. These easy preys are always on guard. Constantly on the alert, ready to sneak into the crack of a wall, or the fold of a rock. Neither he, nor I, moved a single iota. As if we were bound by a secret pact. We granted each other a mutual right of scrutiny. With the greatest respect, I tried to see myself in his place, to adopt his lizard point of view.

I don't know what triggered him to run away. It seemed to me that he was responding to a minute stimulus, so subtle that my senses did not perceive it. It undulated with burlesque haste and disappeared as quickly as it could.

I saw dozens of these a day. None of them left me with such a clear impression. I remember a question that had crossed my mind then:

Was it really a lizard? If not, who was it?

left to right

Baobab with light, Senegal, 2016

**Jonas with stones, Dakar,
Senegal, 2010**

**Mireille Delince reading, Ibiza, Spain,
2008**

left to right

Fanny Deblock, Paris, France, 1998

**Self-portrait sitting, Saint-Vincent,
France, 2011**

Ludivine Sagnier, Paris, France, 2003

Jimmy Tomenou, Paris, France, 2016

Britta Uschkamo, Paris, France, 2007

**Julie Rouart smoking, Ibiza,
Spain, 1985**

Claire Denis, Paris, France, 2003

Jonas, Marrakech, Morocco, 2013

**Samy, Brazzaville, Democratic
Republic of the Congo, 2002**

Elisabeth Lebovici, Paris, France, 2007

**Audrey Bertounesque, Paris,
France, 2016**

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Sam Guelimi, Paris, France, 2015

Ive drinking, Ibiza, Spain, 2008

Tamaki Okamoto, Paris, France, 2015

**Jonas Mekas, New York, United State
of America, 1999**

**Nancy, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic
of the Congo, 2004**

Elliott Roy, Paris, France, 2006

left to right

**Coconuts trees in smoke, Jacmel,
Haiti, 2011**

matte wallprint

Man walking, Jacmel, Haiti, 2016

**Naive painting and tap, Jacmel, Haiti,
2011**

**Sébastien Jean, Port-au-Prince, Haiti,
2016**

Is there a plane or a boat to embark on a journey to fiction?

**Nude woman in nature, Ibiza,
Spain, 2008**

**Self-portrait with camera, Ibiza, Spain,
1983**

Ndoho Ange, Paris, France, 2018

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left to right

Axel on a scooter, Ibiza, Spain, 1983

**Paul Schmidt, Kinshasa, Democratic
Republic of the Congo, 2004**

**Tired horse, Marrakech,
Morocco, 2013**

Swimming pool, Jacmel, Haiti, 2011

**Girl sleeping, Brazzaville, Democratic
Republic of the Congo, 2002**

Arm with car, Senegal, 2016

THE ANCESTOR

This morning, I woke up with the memory of a dream.

I was meeting an unknown ancestor. His skin was very dark, and in the depths of his sad eyes persisted a flame. A point that was already glowing at the beginning of the night of times.

Don't forget me, he said. Don't let my wisdom be lost.

What wisdom? I asked.

Then he whispered in my ear:

Dance with chaos. Pervert linearity. Destabilise appearances and identities. Deconstruct the borders. Disrupt time. Consider the visible as a simple reflection, and life as a dream. Dialogue with the trees. Question the stones. Become aware that you are only the fractal element of a whole infinitely larger than your imagination.

Observe with attention, then question your look more than what you see. Do not be predictable. Give yourself the right to opacity.

Don't name what you do. But when asked, just pretend it's poetry.

left to right

Mirror, Ibiza, Spain, 2004

Julie and Jonas, Paris, France, 2006

Umbrellas, Jacmel, Haiti, 2011

Hair Washing, Ibiza, Spain, 2012

Stormy weather, Ibiza, Spain, 2004

Es Vedrà – Grey, Ibiza, Spain, 2004

left to right

Table and window, Thailand, 2015

**Man sleeping, Hong Kong, Peoples
Republic of China, 2008**

Explosion, Thailand, 2008

Sail, Normandy, France, 2014

left to right

River, Prague, Czech Republic, 2016

Mati Diop, Paris, France, 2014

left to right

Woman floating, Paris, France, 2010

Man in the water, Congo, 2003

Swimming pool, Paris, France, 2010

**White towel, Kinshasa, Democratic
Republic of the Congo, 2004**

left to right

Ferns, Chaumont, France, 2019

Seaweeds, Yeu, France, 2021

**Sans titre #21, Casamance,
Senegal, 2023**

left to right

Es Vedrà – Blue, Ibiza, Spain, 2012

Samy thinking, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2003

Iguana on table, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2011

Two men talking, Barcelona, Spain, 2005

Man Thinking, Yaounde, Cameroon, 2002

Woman with glass, Paris, France, 2006

Self-portrait with camera Ibiza, Spain, 2008

Danielle Schlader, Tunisia, 2012

left to right

Julie pregnant, Ibiza, Spain, 2004

Axel sleeping, Ibiza, Spain 2004

Lunch on the beach, Ibiza, Spain, 1985

left to right

Basins, Thailand, 2015

Aminata sitting, Dakar, Senegal, 2016

Reflection, Marrakech, Morocco, 2013

Dead lizard, Ibiza, Spain, 2013

Aloe vera, Paris, France, 2015

left to right

Yaounde airport, Cameroon, 2002

Family dinner, Ibiza, Spain, 1985

Julie and Jonas, Ibiza, Spain, 2005

Puddle, Ibiza, 2004

Es Vedrà – Orange, Ibiza, Spain, 2004

Jellyfish, Ibiza, Spain, 2008

top to bottom

Wooden parrot, Ibiza, Spain, 2012

Wet table, Ibiza, Spain, 2012

left to right

**Man sleeping, Yaounde,
Cameroon, 2002**

Dog on a camino, Ibiza, Spain, 2004

**Charlotte Rampling, Paris,
France, 2004**

left to right

Julie laughing, Ibiza, Spain, 2004

Thank you, Ibiza, Spain, 2008

Jonas playing, Ibiza, Spain, 2009

Children's games, Ibiza, Spain, 2009

Cactus and stones, Ibiza, Spain, 2004

Men smoking, Ibiza, Spain, 1985

left to right

Silver beach 1, Normandy, France, 2015

Pink leaf, Jacmel, Haiti, 2016

left to right

Jonas through glass windows, Ibiza, Spain, 2009

Julie sitting, Ibiza, Spain, 2012

Okapi, Vincennes, France, 2007

Playing in the rocks, Ibiza, Spain, 1985

Woman sleeping, Paris, France, 2005

Haitian voodoo trance, Martinique, Haiti, 1995

Man sleeping, Paris, France, 2017

left to right

**Réginald and Nicolas, Ibiza,
Spain, 1983**

Cendrine and Julie, Ibiza, Spain, 1985

Es Vedrà – Purple, Ibiza, Spain, 2009

Olive tree, Ibiza, Spain, 2000

Es Vedrà smoking, Ibiza, Spain, 2004

Gaëlle Métélus Portrait, 2017

moving image with sound, 4 min 29 sec

sound composition by Pietro Lindley

Soundtrack, 2024

projection with sound, 3 min 22 sec

text by Henry Roy, 2021; read by Eliana Vagalau

The spirit of the place, 2024

projection with sound, 2 min 18 sec

text by Henry Roy, 2021; performed by Mila Ruozo

Water, 2024

projection with sound, 1 min 25 sec

text by Henry Roy, 2021; performed by Mila Ruozo

**Henry Roy, 2019,
Chaumont, Echos Editions**

Henry Roy, publications and printed matter

For full details visit artgallery.wa.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/henry-roy-impossible-island