

**SAUVEVETAGE**  
COMMANDE D'ÉCROUEN DE  
SECOURS EST DE L'AUTRE CÔTÉ

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# FROM THE GROUND UP

WORDS NINA STARR PHOTOS MANOLO CHRETIEN

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*Manolo Chretien was raised with the sound of plane engines in his ears and the ambient odour of kerosene and burning-hot tarmac in his nostrils as he watched mythical jets from the 1960s take off and land before his very eyes. The son of the first Western European astronaut, Jean-Loup Chretien would develop a passion for aviation and make a name for himself – not as an aviator – but as a photographer*

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Aircraft are Manolo Chrétien's subject of predilection. But not just any airplane. They must be imbued with soul: for example old planes like the Boeing B-29A SuperFortress, Martin PBM-5A Mariner, Lockheed C-69 Constellation or North American B25 Mitchell "Panchito" that have suffered and survived, machines that have retired along with their bumps and indentations, fuselages in pieces, exhausted cockpits and broken wings that have witnessed extreme violence, as well as new aircraft like the Airbus A380 that captivate with its unexpected grace. The riveted aluminium panels and shapes of aircraft bodies are an endless source of inspiration.

"My artistic language is the translation of my emotions regarding the beauty of aerodynamic and hydrodynamic shapes into images, whether they are created by the hand of man or stemming from nature," the French photographer divulges. "Reflections, brightness, curves and ripples are paramount in my work – I hate straight lines! My goal in each of my creations is to question through original composition, often in detail to approach abstraction, especially to not give an immediate answer to the subject. It is essential that the viewer be perplexed before understanding the photo he is discovering."

As the work of an artist is often a reflection of his personal history, Chrétien's pieces relate his life story: "I grew up at the end of the runway of the Orange air base, and my father who was a test pilot flew over us day

and night, so imagine the influence on his three darlings who admired him doing acrobatics in the sky and eagerly waited for him to come tell us about his exploits! My father had always dreamt of being an artist (pianist), but his mother wouldn't hear of it. He succeeded in conveying to us his passion for music and drawing, which he masters perfectly. I became interested in art rather late, but I'd spent my time drawing airplanes and boats from very young (three years old), and I'd always dreamt of being a creator, inventor, engineer and designer since I was 10 years old."

Born in 1966 on the Orange military air base in southeastern France, Chrétien grew up between the skies of Provence and the seas of the Brittany coast, where he spent his summers. A weak student, he earned his secondary school diploma only thanks to his straight A's in drawing, then studied for three months at an aeronautical engineering school before dropping out, more interested in windsurfing (he enjoys kite surfing today), and subsequently went to the Olivier de Serres School of Applied Arts in Paris. This was where his fascination with materials began, especially details of maritime corrosion, which he would look for with his Soviet-made Lomo (his first-ever camera offered by his father in the early '80s producing strange and random optical effects used at the time by the KGB, which he still uses to this day) at industrial sites, leading to him embarking in 1998 on his first series on corroded marine

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remnants in the shipyards of Brittany called Effets Mer. Since then, he has been chasing metallic ripples in the air, on land and in the sea.

#### REFLECTIONS AND IMPERFECTIONS

Fond of playing with mirror effects, Chrétien has done a series based on UPS and FedEx trucks. Whilst walking in the streets of New York City, he noticed that the reflections on these delivery vans with their riveted aluminium exteriors evoking aircraft structures offered an interesting vision of the atmosphere on the streets, producing random deformations induced by the imperfections of taxis, pedestrians and skyscrapers. He then developed this idea in other cities around the world like Shanghai. Still playing with reflections and light, he returned to his passion for aviation, and ageing airplanes in particular.

Since 2006, Chrétien's pieces have been printed on large-format brushed aluminium sheets to recapture the association with the material and to accentuate the link to old aircraft. He keeps his old cameras with which he continues to work, but the two he uses regularly are a Canon EOS-1D and a medium-format digital Hasselblad H4D-60, the Swedish brand legendary for fans of aviation as it was used by NASA for its Apollo missions.

"The part of my work that takes the longest is getting the right light at the right place at the right time – my perfectionism sometimes makes me 'lose' a lot of time!" he remarks. "However, when all these conditions are met, it allows me to be fully satisfied with the result, and therefore to spend very little time on post-production software because that is what I hate the most in

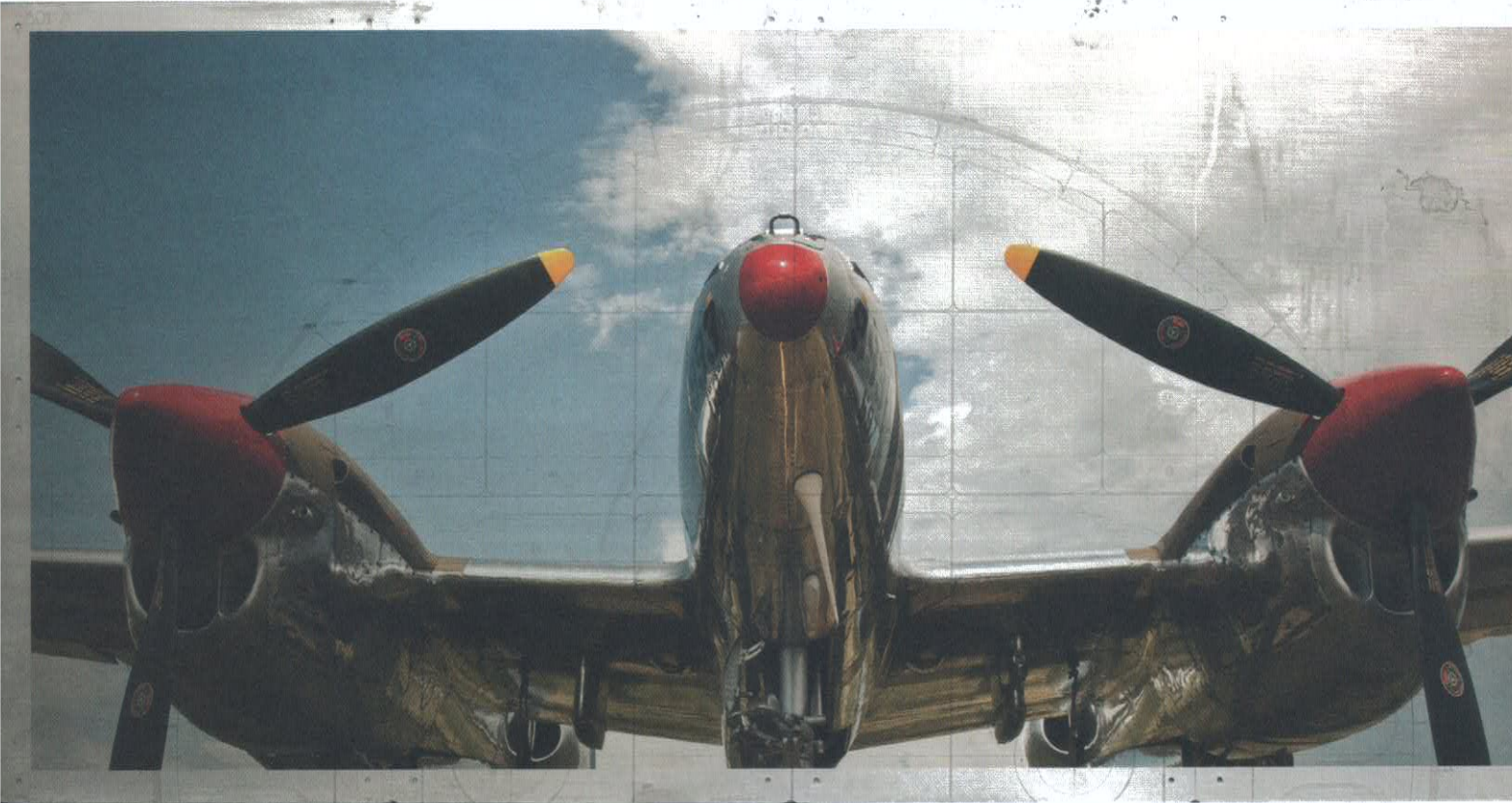
photography. The biggest challenge is to permanently keep a freshness that allows me always to be amazed, free to move and create, without any external constraint." Instead of spending hours digitally manipulating his photos, Chrétien prefers to spend more time adjusting his equipment and working on the composition and the staging of the image and the medium, with a maximum of 10 prints per photo, signed and numbered.

#### A LOVE OF AVIATION

In 1998, Chrétien had returned to the military airbase where the planes that had fired his imagination as a young boy were stocked – Mystère IV, SMB2, Mirage III, Fouga and Noratlas – rediscovering them with the same feeling of amazement. This was when he started his Aluminations series, using a unique technique that is a mixture of aluminium, that of the planes that he has hunted down for over 15 years; illuminations, those due to the magic of the reflection in the riveted metal when it is mirror-polished; and hallucinations due to the effects of visual deformations resulting from the metal's undulations. "The artist is a witness of his time," he explains. "Through his vision of the world, his role is to provoke emotion from the public who will discover his work. Day after day, he must refine his vision and personality to the point where he has his own signature, his own style. What I love about the act of photographing is that it is 'instant painting', which immediately translates a strong emotion that you wish to immortalise."

The Aluminations Juste-Ciel series pays tribute to grounded aircraft bodies at disused aerodromes, condemned to be taken apart and recycled. The salvaged









aluminium then serves as the medium for Chrétien's prints. Along the same lines, he has also brought together an entire collection of planes taken head-on and cut out for the prints, which he named Nouveaux-Nez (New Noses), as a whole series of characters may be found in the faces of these planes that have not been modified in any way with regard to the original.

In 2011, Chrétien returned with *Vol de Nuit* (Night Flight), a collection of photographs inspired by the book of the same name written by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the WWII war hero best known for his novella of universal proportions, *The Little Prince*. "Saint-Exupéry is the very example of the pilot-artist-writer who succeeded in following his path with exemplary talent and perseverance!" he exclaims. This was followed in 2013 by the exhibition, *Légendaires*, where a part of the sales proceeds benefited the Paris-based Antoine de

Saint-Exupéry Youth Foundation, which in the name of the humanist values propagated by Saint-Exupéry, offers practical support to disadvantaged youths worldwide in diverse fields ranging from art and education to sport and culture. The medium used for the artworks were aluminium sheets dating from the 1960s until 1970, on which the templates of the Caravelle, Concorde, Corvette and other legendary aircraft had been traced by hand in the workshops of the Aérospatiale (French state-owned aerospace manufacturer that built both civilian and military aircraft, rockets and satellites now known as Airbus) in Toulouse, and on top of which Chrétien's photos of the P-38 Lightning, Concorde and Caravelle aircraft had been printed, making each piece unique and revealing the richness, beauty and purity of aerodynamic shapes from the 1940 to 1970 period.