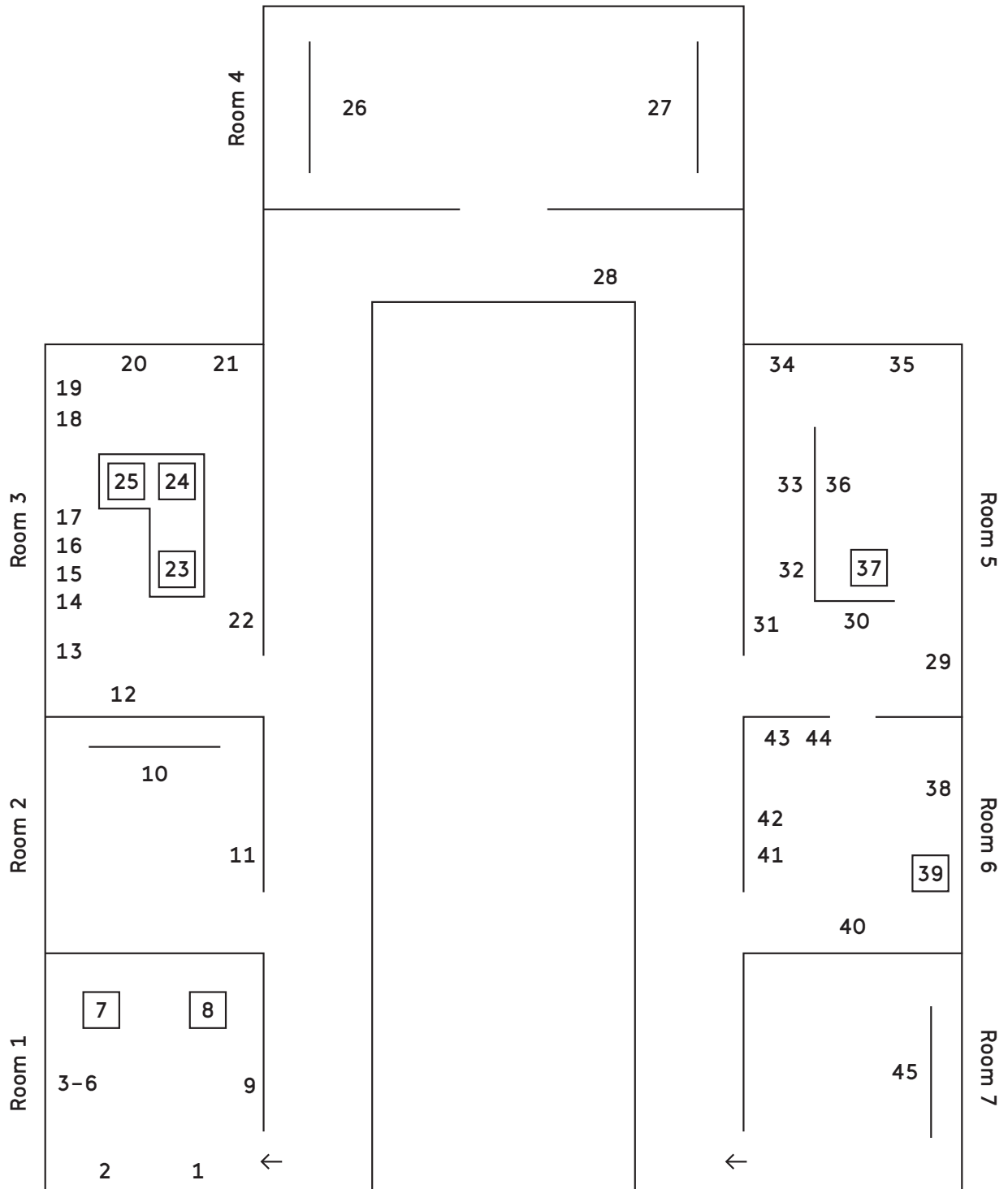


Jean Painlevé

Curated by Ampersand

Gallery 2
23 NOV 2024 – 23 MAR 2025



Room 1

Two years after making his first film *L'Oeuf d'épinoche* [The Stickleback's Egg] (1925), Painlevé set about making a series of short films that he shot simultaneously, with his work process determined by the fortunes of the tides, fishing and frequent accidents during filming (the cracking of an aquarium, the extreme sensibility of creatures to light). The pleasure of anecdote meets the rigour of scientific analysis and meticulous dissection of his subjects (sometimes literally). Painlevé made no secret of his scepticism about the revelatory virtue of the image when projected in front of an unprepared audience and most of his production indulges in an extreme poetic license. His short films won him recognition, exploding in 1935 with the success of *L'Hippocampe* [The Seahorse], distributed in a sound version by Pathé. Painlevé was fascinated by these fellow vertical creatures of "distinguished melancholy" and their extraordinary habits, in particular the male's function of nourishing the embryos and giving birth. This animal became his emblem, conjugated in the form of jewellery, fabrics, and wallpapers.

About *L'Hippocampe* (1935):

"It was a real little Parisian revolution. In the metro, on the bus, you'd hear men say 'Have you seen that male giving birth?', and the other would reply 'Oh yes, I've known that for a long time.'"

1 *Jean Painlevé devant un grand tirage du buste d'hippocampe à la galerie La Pleïade* [Jean Painlevé in front of a large seahorse bust print at the La Pleïade gallery], c. 1933
Gelatin silver print

2 *La pieuvre et son siphon respiratoire* [The octopus and its respiratory siphon], c. 1928
Gelatin silver print

3-6 *La Pieuvre* [The Octopus], c. 1928
Gelatin silver prints

7 *La Pieuvre* [The Octopus], 1929
35 mm film transferred to HD video, b&w, tinted, silent, 10'
Directed and edited by Jean Painlevé assisted by Geneviève Hamon
Cinematography: André Raymond

8 *L'Hippocampe* [The Seahorse], 1931
35 mm film transferred to HD video, b&w, mute, 15'
Directed and edited by Jean Painlevé assisted by Geneviève Hamon
Cinematography: André Raymond
Production: La Cinégraphie documentaire
Music: Darius Milhaud
The film was shot in 1931 and came out with a sound version produced by Pathé in 1934

9 *Ouverture de la poche ventrale de l'hippocampe mâle* [Opening of the ventral pouch of the male seahorse], c.1932
Gelatin silver print

Wallpaper
Seahorse Family Pattern #5 @JHP
From an original gouache by Geneviève Hamon, 1935
©Documents, Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris

Room 2

Between the first screenings of *L'Hippocampe* [The Seahorse] and *Assassins d'eau douce* [Freshwater Assassins], just over ten years passed, marked by the war. In 1944, Painlevé was appointed General-Director by the French Cinema Liberation Committee and helped several intellectuals. Among them was the film director Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), who described Painlevé as "the only competitor to Our Lady of Lourdes in terms of miracles." The echoes of the fighting reverberate all the way to the marshes encircling the capital, which become in Painlevé a murderous, cannibalistic theatre set to the jaunty tunes of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. "Shell, chew, break, suck, grind, pierce, graze, swallow, a thousand different dangers are at work. Some have mouths, others don't, but everything ends up in the stomach." While *Assassins d'eau douce* lacks neither humour nor enchantment, Painlevé reminds us that "eating and being eaten are the outcome of every moment." There's no point wallowing in self-pity, he warns. "It's just a question of habit: at Saint-Amour, children go to see the pigs scalded." Like in all his movies, notice the refinement of the credits.

About *Assassins d'eau douce* (1947):

"My knowledge of the lake's inhabitants was good enough to write a scenario, but when I started filming, none of what I had expected would ever happen. Perhaps the disturbance was due to the light [...] The film was long and accompanied by the most celebrated jazzmen of 1925–1935".

10 *Assassins d'eau douce* [Freshwater Assassins], 1947
35 mm film transferred to HD video, b&w, sound, 25'
Directed and edited by Jean Painlevé assisted by Geneviève Hamon
Production: La Cinégraphie documentaire
Music: Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Gene Krupa, Baron Lee, Jimmie Lunceford
Commentary by Jean Painlevé

11 *Geneviève Hamon and Jean Painlevé à la pêche* [Geneviève Hamon and Jean Painlevé fishing], c. 1947
Recent inkjet print
(Photo by Viviane Hamon)

Room 3

Although Painlevé's work is marked by its insistent anthropomorphism (not one creature, not even the most shapeless, withstands the subjectification of the director's comments), it is almost entirely devoid of human figures. When Painlevé finally decides to film his fellow humans, they are subjected to an analytical observation. Bearing witness to this surprising symmetry are his dance films, in which humans appear as automatons (*L'Écriture du mouvement* [Notation for Movement] is a film devoted to a method of choreographic notation by the composer and choreographer Pierre Conté) and the documentary work he made with Dr. Claoué in the early 1930s (a precursor of modern plastic and reconstructive surgery). From the surgeon's experiments to the blossoming of liquid crystals filmed to the music of François de Roubaix, from the resurrection of a dog to the pairs of monozygotic twins he photographed, Painlevé's task is to simply witness the miracles of nature, on all its scales, and to proclaim the equality of all living beings whose existence is caught between his two observations: "All movement is vibratory until extinction" and "We are always someone else's subcontractor."

About *Traitement expérimental d'une hémorragie chez le chien* [Experimental Treatment of a Hemorrhage in a Dog] (1930):

"I met the Surgeon-General Normet in 1925 when he came to offer his resignation to my father: he was disgusted by the way the French Health Service was being run in Indochina. He had invented a polycitrate serum which could be injected in cases with up to 80% blood loss, and which gave excellent results, allowing oxygenation until the blood plasma could be reconstituted in patients 'neither too old nor too fat.' As a demonstration, he had me film the total bleeding of a dog, followed by an injection of his serum, then a second total bleeding until it stretched out its paws, a sign of death; after that the dog, when it was released, jumped off the operation table and rushed towards a bowl of water. In this case, it was a stray dog who later gave birth normally to four puppies."

12 *Jumeaux: gros plan sur l'oreille d'un jeune* [Twins: close-up of a young man's ear], 1937
Recent inkjet print

13 *Chirurgie du Dr. Charles Claoué: sein de femme* [Dr. Charles Claoué's Surgery: Woman's Breast], c. 1930
Recent inkjet print

14 *Jean Painlevé debout à gauche derrière son assistant, André Raymond, sitting and unidentified doctor* [Jean Painlevé with his assistant André Raymond and an unidentified doctor], 1930
Recent inkjet print

15 *Jumeaux, vue de face* [Twins, front view], c. 1937
Recent inkjet print

16 *Dr. Charles Claoué: opération d'un nez de femme* [Dr. Charles Claoué: operation on a woman's nose], 1930
Recent inkjet print

17 *Dr. Charles Claoué: sein de femme* [Dr. Charles Claoué: woman's breast], 1930
Recent inkjet print

18 *Dr. Charles Claoué: opération des seins avant et après* [Dr. Charles Claoué: breasts before and after], 1930
Recent inkjet prints

19 *Jumeaux, vue de face et de profil* [Twins, front and profile view], 1937
Recent inkjet prints

20 *Dr. Charles Claoué: greffe italienne nez d'homme*, [Dr. Charles Claoué: Italian nose transplant], 1930
Recent inkjet print

21 *Anémone de mer* [Sea anemone], c. 1929
Recent inkjet print

22 *Photons patriotiques* [Patriotic photons], 1974
Recent inkjet print

23 *Transition de phase dans les cristaux liquides* [Phase Transition in Liquid Crystals], 1978

16 mm film transferred to HD video, color, sound, 7'
Directed and edited by Jean Painlevé (1972-1978)
Production: Les Documents cinématographiques
Music: François de Roubaix

24 *L'Écriture du mouvement* [Notation for Movement], 1949
35 mm film transferred to HD video, b&w, sound, 15'
Directed and edited by Jean Painlevé
Cinematography: Marcel Fradéal
Production: La Cinégraphie documentaire

25 *Le Sérum du docteur Normet: traitement expérimental d'une hémorragie chez le chien* [Experimental Treatment of a Hemorrhage in a Dog (The Normet Serum)], 1930
35 mm film transferred to HD video, b&w, silent with intertitles, 4'
Directed by Jean Painlevé

Wallpaper

Crab Pattern #2 @JHP
From an original gouache by Geneviève Hamon, 1935
©Documents, Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris

Room 4

Thirty years after making their first film about the Octopus nicknamed "The Lady who embraces tightly," Hamon and Painlevé began to work on *Les Amours de la pieuvre* [The Love Life of the Octopus] in 1958, a project that would last almost ten years. Painlevé had a particular fondness for this animal, which he said had given him his vocation (their first meeting was in 1911 at the Roscoff biological station). It was also one of his favourite dishes: "its tentacles, well beaten beforehand, are delicious with a sauce américaine." Opposite the "most astute of cowboys" is another of his colourful masterpieces: *Barbe bleue* [Blue Beard], the first animated sculpture film, an "opera buffa" made between 1935 and 1938 from a score by Maurice Jaubert and sculptures by René Bertrand and his three children aged six, seven and eight. We recognise his taste for music, morbid tales and delightful tricks.

About *Barbe bleue* (1938):

"The film was Gasparcolor. The Gaspar brothers, Hungarian refugees, had invented this extraordinary color film; non-inflammable, unshrinkable, with magnificent permanent and saturated colours, but which could only be used for shooting one frame at a time. It was exactly right for *Barbe bleue*. When war was about to break out, the Gaspar brothers emigrated to London [...] They then went to the United States, to escape the German bombardment of Britain, leaving all their equipment and several films with Customs. In fact, it took me three years to find the elements of *Barbe bleue* [...] But to get hold of them, I had to pay for everything the Gaspar brothers had left with Customs."

26 *Barbe bleue* [Blue Beard], 1938
35 mm film transferred to HD video, color [Gaspacolor], sound, 13'
Directed and edited by René Bertrand
Production: Jean Painlevé
Music: Maurice Jaubert

27 *Les Amours de la pieuvre* [The Love Life of the Octopus], 1967
35 mm film transferred to HD video, color, sound, 13'
Directed and edited by Jean Painlevé and Geneviève Hamon (1955-1967)
Production: Les Documents cinématographiques
Music: Pierre Henry

28 *Hippocampe femelle* [female seahorse], c. 1932
Recent inkjet print

Room 5

Fish mouths, bat wings, shrimp eyes and tails and hairy spiders are just some of the subjects Painlevé photographs. For those who don't have access to the magic of the microscopic or underwater world in everyday life, Painlevé offers a simple solution: "On a starry summer's evening, all you have to do is lie flat in the cut hay, facing the sky, and wait, staring intently until the stars blink with fatigue. Soon a numbness frees the body, the celestial vault bends it along its dome, gravity disappears, you feel sucked into infinity and the journey begins while the familiar crickets play the music of the spheres with their poorly oiled gears. Everything is simplified and explained: the full was empty and the empty was full. Matter is just a hole. When you return from this adventure, you think you've been dreaming, and that's why so few people worthy of the faith are willing to testify!"

About *Vampire* [The Vampire] (1945):

"It's Vampire time, the time of all killer legends, and since bad reputations are usually caught on the corner of a wood, it's at the edge of the Chaco forest that the vampire creates his own... His calling card reads: 'paralyzing rabies and home sleeping sickness'."

29 *Gueule de poisson de profil* [Fish mouth in profile], c. 1931
Gelatin silver print

30 *Araignée avec profil de Jean Painlevé* [Spider with Jean Painlevé's profile], c. 1931
Gelatin silver print

31 *Geneviève Hamon avec des pinces de homard* [Geneviève Hamon with lobster claws], c. 1928
Recent inkjet print

32 *Sauterelle de face* [Grasshopper from the front], c. 1931
Gelatin silver print

33 *La pieuvre, tentacules* [Octopus tentacles], 1928
Recent inkjet print

34 *Tête de crevette de face* [Front of shrimp head], c. 1930
Gelatin silver print

35 *Étoile de mer* [Starfish], c. 1930
Gelatin silver print

36 *Antennes de la tête de la crevette* [Shrimp head antennae], c. 1930
Gelatin silver print

37 *Le Vampire* [The Vampire], 1945
35 mm film transferred to HD video, b&w, sound, 9'
Directed and edited by Jean Painlevé assisted by Geneviève Hamon.
Cinematography: André Raymond
Production: La Cinégraphie documentaire
Music: Duke Ellington
The movie filmed in 1935 would only be edited and soundtracked during the summer of 1945.

Wallpaper
Crab Pattern #1 @JHP
From an original gouache by Geneviève Hamon, 1935
©Documents, Archives Jean Painlevé, Paris

Room 6

A few quotes from Painlevé to ponder:

1. "Ignorance is normal, it's nothing to boast about."
2. "Secrets are always at the service of dirty tricks."
3. "Clumsy by birth, but relentless, I love magicians. There's a trick, but I can't detect it. There's always a trick, in everything, for everything."
4. "Religions are the expression of a lazy mind."
5. "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, contradictory terms."
6. "Useful life, effective life. The right to knowledge... the height of your knowledge. Balance in your uncertainties. Equality in the application of laws. Taxes, minimum subsistence: nutrition, protection (shelter, health). Old age. Company. Two suicidal periods: adolescence, senescence."
7. "Novelist, historian: difference in nerve."
8. "Having nothing to say, it's good to say it backwards."
9. "Let's not ask documentaries, in a public room, for anything other than a curious moment or beautiful images."

38 *Queue de crevette en croisillon* [Crisscross tail shrimp], c. 1930
Gelatin silver print

39 *Limailles* [Filings], 1972
35 mm film transferred to HD video, color, sound, 6'
Directed, filmed, and edited by Jean Painlevé and Geneviève Hamon
Production:
Les Documents cinématographiques
Music: Super Bastringuo
Filmed as an exercise for film students at the Université de Paris 8-Vincennes, not distributed.

40 *Comatule, proche parent de l'étoile de mer* [Comaturem, close relative of the starfish], c. 1930
Gelatin silver print

41 *Tête poilue d'araignée à l'œil composé* [Hairy spider head with eyes], c.1932
Recent inkjet print

42 *Nervures d'une aile de sauterelle* [Nervure of a grasshopper wing], c. 1932
Recent inkjet print

43 *Pince de Galathée* [Squat lobster claw], c. 1931
Recent inkjet print

44 *Panache respiratoire du ver spirographe* [Great fan worm's breathing plume], c. 1931
Gelatin silver print

Wallpaper
Crab Pattern #1 ©JHP
From an original gouache by Geneviève Hamon, 1935
©Documents, Archives
Jean Painlevé, Paris

Room 7

Acéras ou le bal des sorcières [Acera or the Witches' Dance] is Painlevé's last underwater film. At first sight, the molluscs appear rather repulsive and their banal life consists of crawling through the mud on which they feed. Painlevé initially thought of filming their massacre by merciless predators, but the undertaking was technically too complicated. The company of the animals led to a surprising discovery. Just before they reproduce, the molluscs slowly detach themselves from the ground and dance, putting themselves at risk of exposure. Painlevé was fascinated by the mixture of beauty and raciness: molluscs resemble human genitals and have the particularity of being "simultaneous reciprocal functional hermaphrodites" that reproduce in a chain. The lead animal plays the role of female, the one that finishes the role of male, and the intermediates play a double role, female with the next, male with the previous, creating an extended linear orgy. The film says something about Painlevé's optimism: even the most fragile and ungrateful creatures are entitled to their fifteen minutes of fame. At the end of the day, for them as for us, it's all about learning to "stand out among the thousands of little monkeys."

About *Acéras ou le bal des sorcières* (1978):
"The composer, Pierre Jansen, wrote the music after seeing the film only once."

45 *Acéra ou le bal des sorcières* [Acera or the Witches' Dance], 1978
35 mm film transferred to HD video, color, sound, 13'
Directed and edited by Jean Painlevé and Geneviève Hamon (1969-1978)
Production: Les Documents cinématographiques
Music: Pierre Jansen

Biography

Jean Painlevé was born in Paris on 20 November 1902. After studying medicine, he joined the Roscoff biological station, in northern Brittany. A year before making his first research film, *The Stickleback's Egg* (1925), he wrote a short text entitled "Drame néo-zoologique" for the magazine *Surréalisme*, edited by Ivan Goll. The magazine featured articles by Guillaume Apollinaire, René Crevel and Robert Delaunay. That same year, Painlevé met Geneviève Hamon who became his partner and closest collaborator.

At the same time, Painlevé tried his hand at acting, starring alongside Michel Simon and Tania Fédor in *L'Inconnue des six jours* (1925), and Antonin Artaud in *Mathusalem* (1927), for which Hamon also designed some of the sets. His first public film, *The Octopus*, was screened in 1928. A dozen short films followed, including *The Sea Urchins*, *The Hermit Crab*, *The Daphnia*, *Crabs and Shrimps*, *Hyas and Stenorrhynchus*, *Caprelles et Les Pantopodes*. They were shown in Paris, along with those of René Clair, Germaine Dullac and Jean Vigo, one of his closest friends. These films won him the admiration of artists of his time such as Alexander Calder and Man Ray, as well as film critics like André Bazin. During this period, he began collaborating with cinematographers Éli Lotar, André Raymond and one of the best masters of special effects of the time, Achille-Pierre Dufour.

To guarantee his independence, Painlevé set up his own production company in 1930, La Cinégraphie Documentaire, later renamed Les Documents Cinématographiques. In 1934, the company produced his most successful film to date, *The Sea Horse*, which coincided with the death of Vigo and the creation, with Commandant le Prieur (who had just invented the first aqualung) of an underwater diving club on the Mediterranean. Made up of mostly amateurs, they called themselves the Underwater Club and set out to promote and develop underwater filming techniques.

The rise of fascism in Europe prompted Painlevé to take a stand. As part of the Commission of Enquiry set up by the World Committee against War and Fascism, Painlevé was commissioned to investigate Austrian intellectual circles during civil war. A year later, he travelled to Poland as part of a commission to study the German prison and concentration camp system in that country. Among his many titles, he was appointed head of the film department at the Palais de la Découverte.

Apart from a few news films, Jean Painlevé ceased all cinematographic activity during the Occupation and joined the Resistance. He was to be found in Corrèze, Dordogne and on the Mediterranean coast, in Alsace and near the Spanish border, where he made several news films. Following the Liberation, he became Director General of French Cinematography, a post he soon relinquished in May 1945 to return to making films. Always a fervent advocate of popular education, he was appointed president of the Fédération Française des Ciné-Clubs and, in 1948, founded the World Union of Documentarist, with Joris Ivens and Henri Storck.

To finance his films, Painlevé toured France and abroad lecturing, showing his own and other filmmaker's work and appearing in television programmes. In the 1970s, he taught film technique at the University of Paris 8 Vincennes. His last film was on the pigeons of Paris (*The Pigeons in the Square*, 1982), and he left behind an unfinished project on African women's hairstyles. He died on 2 July 1989 in Neuilly-sur-Seine, two years after Geneviève Hamon.

This exhibition was organized with the help of Birgitte Berg (Documents, Archives Jean Painlevé) and the support of Air de Paris gallery.

It was curated by Ampersand – a program looking at artistic enterprise, including but not limited to exhibitions – founded by Alice Dusapin and Martin Laborde in Lisbon in 2017. This exhibition is curated by Alice Dusapin, Martin Laborde and Baptiste Pinteaux.

Program

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