

4th edition

BIENNALE DELLA FOTOGRAFIA FEMMINILE

LIMINAL

EXHIBITIONS | WORKSHOPS | CONFERENCES | PROJECTIONS

6th – 29th March 2026
Mantua, various locations

PRESS RELEASE NO. 2

Dec. 1st 2025

Now in its fourth edition, the International Biennale of Female Photography of Mantua (BFFMantova) will open on March 6th 2026, confirming itself as a unique event on the world scene. For a month, the Lombard city will become an international showcase that will give space to important artists, some of whom are still little known in our country.

The event, promoted by the La Papessa Association with the patronage of the Lombardy Region, the Province and the Municipality of Mantua, will be directed, as in previous editions, by Alessia Locatelli. This year the BFF team has chosen the title "Liminal", a term that embraces multiple, timely and fascinating meanings.

"Liminal" is the threshold, the undefined space that precedes the arrival at a destination. A limbo to cross to reach a close, but not yet fully outlined, finish line. In this transitional phase, the rules that had been considered valid until then may lose their strength. Those who experience this ambiguous dimension are confronted with uncertainty and disorientation, aware that while the past is already fixed, the present is shifting beneath their feet and the future appears more nebulous than ever, lacking any predictable destination. The only certainty is that a profound process of change is underway, one capable of shaking the very foundations of normality and established order: at times opening up to visions of a bright future, at others bringing back to light dormant darkness stirring in the depths of the world. It is a time when everything is called into question and transformations accelerate, for better or worse.

The International Biennale of Female Photography has always paid special attention to major social and geopolitical issues. These include education, class inequalities, the consequences of migration

— which involve the loss of land, economic resources and civil liberties — up to the dynamics of neo-colonialism.

The 2026 edition follows the same format as the previous ones, with main exhibitions by Italian and international photographers: Nadia Bseiso (Jordan) *Infertile Crescent*, Mackenzie Calle (USA) *The Gay Space Agency*, Lisa Elmaleh (USA) *Tierra Prometida*, Julia Fullerton-Batten (Germany) *Contortion*, Lee Grant (Australia) *Ancestral Constellations*, Pia Paulina Guilmoth (USA) *Flowers Drink the River*, Keerthana Kunnath (India) *Not What You Saw*, Barbara Peacock (USA) *American Bedroom*, Gaia Squarci (Italy) *The Cooling Solution* (research by the ENERGY team, curated by Kublaiklan and coordinated by Elementsix), Abbie Trayler-Smith (United Kingdom) *The Big O* and *Kiss it!* and an archival exhibition titled *Shifting the Focus* that reinterprets the revolutionary work of a pioneer of American photography, Imogen Cunningham (Portland 1883 – San Francisco, 1976). There are numerous other initiatives, including an Open Call for an *Off Circuit*, portfolio readings, workshops, conferences and educational workshops for children.

The venues designated for the exhibitions are Casa di Rigoletto, Casa del Mantegna, Galleria Disegno, Spazio Arrivabene2 and Casa del Pittore.

La Papessa Cultural Association | lapapessa.org

It promotes photographic culture, starting from the city of Mantua, where it was born. The project originates from an idea by Anna Volpi (President) and Chiara Maretti (Vice President), both photographers. The symbol representing the association is the figure of "La Papessa" (The Popess): in the Tarot, a woman of both spiritual and temporal power, the one who imparts knowledge. We are a group of artists, photographers, visual communication experts, but also people passionate about art and culture in general, united by the desire to create new realities and opportunities in the world of photography.

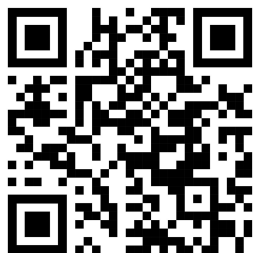
INFORMATION

Biennale della Fotografia Femminile

LIMINAL

6th - 29th March 2026, Mantua (various locations)

www.bffmantova.com



TICKET OFFICE

Casa del Mantegna - Via G. Acerbi, 47

Full ticket: €16

Reduced ticket (under 26 and over 65) €13

La Papessa Members: €12

CRAL members Bondioli-Pavesi, Irfoss, Fotografica aps, Frammenti di Fotografia, La Ghiacciaia, Fotocineclub Mantova, Fiaf, Topis aps: €14

Families: €12.50 per person (4 people: 2 adults and 2 under 18)

Free: up to 12 years and for visitors with disabilities and their accompanying persons

OPENING HOURS

Casa del Mantegna, Via G. Acerbi, 47: from 10 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.

Casa di Rigoletto, Piazza Sordello, 23: from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Galleria Disegno, Via G. Mazzini, 34: from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Casa del Pittore, Corso Garibaldi, 46: from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Spazio Arrivabene 2, Via G. Arrivabene, 2: from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Exhibits open every Saturday and Sunday of March: 7th, 8th, 14th, 15th, 21st, 22nd, 28th, 29th

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THE ARTISTS

NADIA BSEISO

Infertile Crescent

Galleria Disegno, 10 - 13 e 15 - 19, Saturdays and Sundays

Once the cradle of civilisation and a paradise of biodiversity, with marshlands and rivers that were an integral part of human history, the so-called “Fertile Land” is today an arid territory marked by conflict. Since the early 19th century, the “Fertile Crescent” has undergone profound geopolitical transformations, fragmenting into small states that now form the contemporary Middle East.

Infertile Crescent documents the surviving villages along Jordan’s liminal territories, where invisible lines drawn by man, ongoing conflicts, and water scarcity have shaped community life and radically transformed the landscape.

Bordering occupied Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, the soil burns every summer, while water is withheld, diverted, and surveilled by those in power. Here, drought becomes the silent weapon of the colonial regime, turning water control into a tool of social and civil oppression, shattering every sense of balance and dignity.

Fires spread beyond borders, dissolving divisions in these lands where the disputed water sources are one with ancient myths, fragile agreements, and the long shadow of military interventions. What will remain of the “Fertile Crescent”?

Nadia Bseiso (Jordan, 1985) is a documentary photographer based in Amman. Her projects explore geopolitics, history, anthropology, and environmental degradation. She studied photography in Florence and joined a residency at Fondazione Fotografia in Modena. In 2024 she became a mentor for the Arab Documentary Photography Program.

MACKENZIE CALLE

The Gay Space Agency

Casa del Mantegna, 10 – 18:30, Saturdays and Sundays

Liminal stages represent an opportunity to rewrite the present according to new rules and suggestions and envision a different future. Starting with the historical evidence of discrimination against gay people within NASA, Mackenzie Calle's mockumentary series acts as an irreverent and critical commentary, challenging prejudices that are still difficult to dismantle. Skillfully mixing photographic genres - the satirical expressiveness of the photomontage combines with more conventional documentary images and still lifes - *The Gay Space Agency* uncovers the disintegration of reality that occurs when people's identities are subject to erasure, and it seeks to rebuild the future, beginning with the past. The inclusion of archival material in the project gives voice to the unspoken truth of a segment of society that has always been present, despite constant discrimination and repression. Calle imagines an alternative agency that propels the queer community in the most liminal of all places, i.e. space, reminiscing about astronaut Sally Ride's words: ‘you can't be what you can't see’.

Mackenzie Calle (USA) is a Brooklyn-based photographer and National Geographic Explorer. Her work focuses on stories analysing power systems, science, and the challenges faced by the queer community.

After graduating from the NYU's Tisch School of the Arts she furthered her studies at ICP. She was awarded at the World Press Photo Contest 2024 and was featured in the special exhibition "Queer Havens".

LISA ELMALEH

Tierra Prometida

Galleria Disegno, 10 - 13 e 15 - 19, Saturdays and Sundays

Since 2020, Lisa Elmaleh has travelled the US-Mexico border to document and explore the myth of the American Dream from the perspective of asylum seekers and the organizations offering them essential life support. ***Promised Land / Tierra Prometida*** takes us to the heart of the liminal condition of millions of people, as hope and uncertainty intertwine under the shadow of the wall. An experience rooted in the artist's biography: the daughter of a Moroccan political refugee and raised in a migrant community in South Florida, Elmaleh carries a legacy of intergenerational disorientation within her. This awareness guides her in investigating the root causes of migration - persecution, violence, climate crisis - and in exposing the contradictions of a country that, albeit being a sought-after destination, persists in excluding asylum seekers. Using large-format analogue photography, Elmaleh carefully composes thoughtful images stemming from her relationships and shared time with her subjects. Her empathetic gaze welcomes the complexity of the matter: migration emerges as a suspended experience, comprising identities in transit, undefined anticipations, and the urgency of a stable future.

Lisa Elmaleh (USA, 1984) is an American visual artist, educator, and documentarian. Specializing in large-format work in tintype, glass negative, and celluloid film, her projects take her across the U.S in a truck containing a portable wet plate darkroom. Her work has been published by Harper's Magazine, CNN, The New York Times, and National Geographic. She is a 2024 Guggenheim Fellow.

JULIA FULLERTON-BATTEN

Contortion

Galleria Disegno, 10 - 13 e 15 - 19, Saturdays and Sundays

"Who doesn't marvel at the physical art of contortionists, their elegance and gracefulness, but above all the way they can manipulate their bodies into such unbelievably dramatic positions [...]. Contortionism is one of the oldest physical art forms, dating back to ancient civilization as illustrated in paintings and sculptures from ancient Greece, Rome and Egypt. Apart from the bodily characteristics of flexibility, strength [...] a contortionist requires years of dedication to extremes of discipline and training, often beginning in childhood, to acquire the fluid artistry needed to create a serpentine dance of the human body". With these words, Julia Fullerton-Batten introduces **Contortion**, her original take on the art of contortionists. The British-German artist, a master of staged photography, plays on the dual aspect of liminality: the contorted body taken to its physical limit and the carefully constructed sets in which the lights, colours and poses are chosen and composed with painstaking precision. In this project, she invited a group of young contortionists to show their skills in a performative manner, evoking a scenic space that becomes a threshold of optimism for a better future.

Julia Fullerton-Batten (Germany, 1970) is a fine art photographer renowned for her cinematic visual storytelling. Each image in her projects is a thought-provoking "story", a *tableau vivant* crafted with

meticulous attention to lighting. She is a Hasselblad ambassador, and her work is part of the permanent collection of the National Portrait Gallery in London and the Musée de l'Elysee in Lausanne.

LEE GRANT

Ancestral Constellations

Spazio Arrivabene 2, 10 - 13 e 15 - 19, Saturdays and Sundays

What does it mean to exist at the hyphen? Where do you anchor yourself when you belong simultaneously to multiple worlds and fully to none? ***Ancestral Constellations*** begins with the photographer's family story, when her Australian father, an officer in the RAAF, met her Korean mother in Seoul in 1969. Their encounter, shaped by the aftermath of the Korean War, echoes many others formed in the shadow of conflict and occupation. Korea's turbulent modern history — marked by colonisation, war, foreign military presence, and authoritarian rule — forms the backdrop against which the artist traces the lived and inherited effects of war, migration, and memory.

Working with public and private archives, found photographs, and images made over 15 years of return visits to Korea, Grant explores how memory and history intersect across generations. *Han* (한) — a complex Korean concept of collective sorrow and resilience born from historical suffering — intertwines with *post-memory* and *genealogical imagination*: ways of inheriting trauma and piecing together fragmented histories. Through these layered narratives, she examines how some stories endure while others fade, and how the silences between them can shape diasporic understandings of identity, cultural memory, and the past.

Lee Grant (Australia, 1973) is a Korean-Australian photographer with a background in anthropology. Her work focuses on community, identity and their relationship to the landscape. Past exhibitions include solo and group shows at the Australian Centre for Photography (Sydney) and the National Portrait Gallery (Canberra). She has won several awards, including the National Photographic Portrait Prize.

PIA PAULINA GUILMOTH

Flowers Drink the River

Casa di Rigoletto, 9 - 18, Saturdays and Sundays

Spanning the first two years of her gender transition, Pia Paulina Guilmoth photographs her community in rural Maine and the ambivalence of living as a trans woman in a small American town. Images of moths, glistening spiderwebs, entwined mud-soaked bodies, nocturnal animals, and euphoric rituals give shape to a dreamlike, suspended universe, where the boundaries between people, animals, and the land dissolve in moonlight and camera flash.

Flowers Drink the River is a liminal exploration of beauty, resistance, and magic in a world often stripped of its animist dimension. It is also a love note to the working class, to trans women, lesbians, and queer people, presented through an empathetic and mystical vision that moves within the forests of central Maine.

Shot in large format with sophisticated analogue techniques, Guilmoth's images appear nebulous, punctuated by luminous aberrations and incandescent spectres that hold us in a suspended state—mid-ritual, somewhere between intimacy and apparition.

In the threshold where identities are shaped by uncertainty and longing, Guilmoth builds a utopian refuge that challenges invisibility and the precariousness of life on the margins.

Pia-Paulina Guilmoth (USA, 1993) is a trans woman living with her girlfriend and two cats in rural central Maine. She enjoys laying in the dirt, holding friends, and trespassing in abandoned houses and barns. In 2024/2025 she has major solo exhibitions in London and New York City. She received a Google/Aperture Creator Labs grant and a Peter Reed Foundation grant in photography.

KEERTHANA KUNNATH

Not What You Saw

Casa del Mantegna, 10 – 18:30, Saturdays and Sundays

In the heart of Kerala, bodies sculpted by strength emerge in familiar settings — beaches, lakes, and domestic courtyards — far from the conventional spaces of gyms. Despite facing social and cultural pressures, the bodybuilders portrayed by Keerthana Kunnath, dressed in traditional attire, embody an active presence that disrupts the binary between masculinity and femininity. Their muscularity, deemed “non-conforming” for the female body, becomes a symbol of liminality, challenging the social and visual boundaries of gender stereotypes. In these shots, strength stops being a male prerogative and gives way to a new fluidity, which rejects essentialism and opens up to alternative paradigms. The poses, inspired by popular Indian film posters, express power and complexity, breaking with the male gaze that traditionally assigns women passive roles. ***Not What You Saw*** invites to deconstruct cultural models related to gender and aesthetics, creating a space of transformation where strength becomes an act of self-determination and plurality of expression of the female body, emancipating from the “beauty myth”.

Keerthana Kunnath (India, 1995) is a visual artist based between London and India. Engaging with the visual rhetoric of post-colonial Indian mainstream media, she deconstructs and reimagines narratives, thereby challenging the entrenched societal norms. Kunnath’s work is deeply rooted in personal and collective memories, exploring the intersections of intimacy, queerness, and community.

BARBARA PEACOCK

American Bedroom

Casa del Mantegna, 10 – 18:30, Saturdays and Sundays

Rooms as a sanctuary, a place of healing, a space for catharsis or a cage reflecting inner suffering. Barbara Peacock tiptoes into the bedrooms of Americans, creating layered tableaux that pay homage to the humanist photography collected by E. Steichen in ‘The Family of Man’. In ***American Bedroom***, the photographer stands in the liminal zone before a private microcosm, suspended between observation and creation. As soon as she closes the door behind her, that instant of reality she has memorialised dissolves - a fleeting theatrical piece condensing both the most human and the most contradictory aspects of American society. Barbara Peacock traversed the United States over several years, meeting people of different ethnicities and social and economic backgrounds, in search of our core sense of what is most intimate and universally shared, hidden within the four walls of a bedroom. In this collective portrait past the usual narrative surrounding the American dream, she has revealed the shared sorrows and aspirations of her country people, whose lives alternate possibilities for redemption with systemic deprivation.

Barbara Peacock (USA) is a photographer living in Portland. She began as a street photographer and gradually became an assignment lifestyle photographer. She received the Getty Editorial Grant, the Women Photograph/Getty Grant and three LensCulture Awards. She founded *The Nightingale Project*, a non-profit organisation that teaches art and photography to disadvantaged children.

GAIA SQUARCI

The Cooling Solution

Casa del Pittore, 10 - 13 e 15 - 19, Saturdays and Sundays

The global climate crisis can still be an elusive phenomenon to understand in its entirety. Day after day and season after season, the changes follow one another as if unstoppable, with effects of varying intensity depending on the geographical area. We live in a liminal zone, one step away from an environmental catastrophe that could bring the whole of humanity to its knees. Meanwhile, our memory remains firmly tied to a concept of 'normality' impossible to sustain. ***The Cooling Solution*** explores the effects of global warming on populations from north to south, and the different methods they employ to adapt to an increasingly hostile environment. In this multidisciplinary project - born from a scientific research project conducted by Prof. Enrica De Cian (Ca' Foscari University) and the ENERGYA group - Gaia Squarci's photographs capture the physical sensation of heat and humidity that we have increasingly experienced on our skin in recent years. A human-made environmental crisis exacerbating the systemic limitations and inequalities inherent in the current social and economic order - the search for a cooling solution is not so much a collective strategy as it is the survival response to an emergency.

Gaia Squarci (Italy, 1988) is a photographer and videomaker based in Milan and New York, teaching Digital Storytelling at ICP. Her personal approach moves away from the descriptive narrative tradition in documentary photography and video. Her work focuses on the relationship between people and the environment, aging and family. She is a Prospekt member and an IWMF fellow.

ABBIE TRAYLER-SMITH

The Big O e Kiss It!

Casa di Rigoletto, 9 - 18, Saturdays and Sundays

Bodies evolve and change, leaving childhood behind as they begin the slow transition into adulthood. Adolescence is the most liminal period in our development as human beings: an unavoidable threshold in the formation of identity and our relationship with the world. Facing contemporary society is brutal and makes no concessions. With *The Big O* and *Kiss It*, Abbie Trayler-Smith captures an intimate, honest and direct exploration of what it means to live in a world obsessed with thinness and flawlessness, especially with a 'non-conforming' body. The collective unconscious considers bodies as acceptable only if attractive, as if adherence to standardised canons of beauty meant achieving the highest value. The photographer deconstructs a multigenerational pain that does not disappear with adulthood but reverberates through the years to come. Starting from her own experience as a teenager, she establishes a personal relationship with the girls and boys she portrays, capturing them in their everyday life, softly lit, in all their strength and dignity.

Abbie Trayler-Smith (UK, 1977) is a British photographer known for her compelling documentary style. After a Law degree, she started to explore themes of resilience, humanity and connection, becoming a prominent voice in contemporary photography. She worked with prestigious publications and clients and she garnered several awards in the Taylor Wessing Portrait Prize and World Press Photo Award.

IMOGEN CUNNINGHAM

Shifting the Focus

Casa del Mantegna, 10 – 18:30, Saturdays and Sundays

Imogen Cunningham's work marked fundamental cornerstones in the evolution of photography during a tumultuous and transitional period of human history: all her early intuitions became the basis of her extensive career. ***Shifting the Focus*** delves into the Cunningham Archive and re-visits the artist's revolutionary work, highlighting the research and the ideas without end that characterised her liminal approach, from the Pictorialist beginnings to the Modernist transition. Deeply attuned to the sensitivities of German art of the 1920s and the impulses coming from the American photographic movements, Cunningham never allowed any influence to lock her into a single genre or style, with the precise intention of preserving her artistic independence and experimentation. An extraordinary capacity for analytical synthesis, combined with an aesthetic sensitivity, allowed her to interpret the suggestions of her time in a completely original way, moving between very different genres. As an artist, she explored a simple scientific invention, transforming it into an innovative expressive medium with its own visual grammar. Imogen Cunningham was a 'frontier woman' who crossed the threshold of artistic and social conventions to transfigure the world through the power of her gaze.

Imogen Cunningham (USA, 1883 - 1976) was a pioneer of photography and a founding member of the f/64 Group. After her degree in chemistry at the University of Washington and studying photographic processes at the Technische Hochschule in Dresden, she opened her studio in Seattle in 1910. Her seventy-year artistic career crossed some of the most influential art movements of the 20th century.

BFF MANTOVA PARTNERS WITH FOTOFESTIVAL LENZBURG

As part of the collaboration launched in 2024 between the International Biennale of Female Photography in Mantua and the Fotofestival Lenzburg in Switzerland, this edition will host the special project of Swiss photographer Maria Giovanna Giugliano, *Ordinary Pleasures*.

The Lenzburg Photofestival is a festival dedicated to emerging photography that takes place every year in the historic city of Lenzburg, in the heart of German-speaking Switzerland. For a month, every September, it brings together experts, photographers and an attentive and passionate audience. The proximity of Lenzburg to the artistic metropolises of Zurich and Basel favours the participation of visitors from both the regional and international contexts.

Casa del Mantegna (Garden), 10 a.m. – 6:30 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays

MUSA AWARD FOR WOMEN PHOTOGRAPHERS

The Musa Award, now in its seventh edition, is dedicated to the production of portfolios and projects by Italian photographers, with the aim of facilitating female photography in Italy. The 2024 winners: in the "Research Category" Emanuela Cherchi with the *Tumbarino* project; "Reportage Category" Alessia Capasso with the project *Odissea dorata*; "Portrait Category" Elisa Mariotti with the *Yes, we do* project; Honorable mention to Francesca Fontana for the project *El peso del estoque*. The 2025 winners: in the "Research Category" Chiara Innocenti with the project *Torneranno le lucciole?*; "Reportage Category" Martina Simonato with the project *L'infinito* instante; "Portrait Category" Luciana Trappolino with the project *Tra-me*; Honorable mention to Marialucia Campanella with the project *Non ti scordar di me* and to Elena Zottola with the project *Stanotte il cielo è un mandorlo fiorito*.

Screened throughout the entire duration of the festival at Casa del Mantegna

OFF-CIRCUIT

The Off-Circuit is the result of an international Open Call for everyone who is, is becoming, or has become a woman. The selection is made by the BFF team, based on quality and relevance to the theme. The goal of the Off-Circuit is to provide a showcase for emerging female photographers and to enrich the program with exhibitions open to the public, not just to BFF ticket holders. Submissions came from all over the world, with more than 200 projects in total.

Present artists include: Diana Bagnoli – *Pellegrini*, Federica Coseschi – *FEMØ*, Heather Evans Smith – *Skipping Sundays*, Florence Goupil – *The Whisper of Maize*, Sveta Kaverina – *The Three of Us*, Sofia Samoylova – *Serafima & Jevhen*, Sèraphine Sallin-Mason – *Together, we belong the road*, Anna Sagramola – *Hidden in plain sight*, Tanya Sharapova – *Kolsky*, Moe Suzuki – *Aabuku*.