

Alpine Modern

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Elevated Living

Design

Home

Journeys

Architecture



15⁰⁰ USA

18⁰⁰ Canada

Issue 06

Quarterly



0 74470 29374 3

06 >

Over the

Words by Emily O'Brien
Photos by Sébastien Montaz-Rosset



French filmmaker Sébastien Montaz-Rosset dangles off cliffs and races across mountaintops to capture his swashbuckling subjects' daring stunts but also to convey an intimate look at their fears, failures, and triumphs.

Edge

Watching the spellbinding work of French filmmaker Sébastien Montaz-Rosset, you want to cover your eyes but can't look away all the same. The majestic mountaintop views immediately draw you in. But what mercilessly demands your soul and every fiber of your body is the heart-pounding terror that comes from witnessing death-taunting stunts; his subjects flirt with doom at every turn. This action-adventure-extreme-sports filmmaker captures shots from breathtaking angles most other filmmakers would never even dream of—say, dangling off a cliff or running along steep alpine ridges at full tilt. An athlete himself, Montaz-Rosset climbs—alongside his daredevil subjects—to virtually inaccessible locations thought to be beyond the realms of possibility.

That Montaz-Rosset is a passionate mountaineer, rock climber, runner, and skier goes along with the territory. It takes a high level of outdoor expertise and mountaineering skills coupled with innovative equipment to allow him to accompany people on their enthralling journeys. His work has been steadily gaining worldwide attention, most notably in the category of highlining, a combination of rock climbing, slacklining, and tightrope walking at treacherous heights, such as between two skyscrapers or mountain peaks. To slackliners, this is the pinnacle of the sport and something that's attempted only after years of experience. Any small shift in weight or wind can easily send the cord into trampoline-like motion. Swift falls happen often, and while some use a fall leash to tether them to the main line, others pack only a small parachute as protection. The filmmaker and his athletes can't plan ahead too much as the troupe pioneers this new evolution of the sport. Montaz-Rosset's work requires quick thinking, improvising, and a remarkable amount of knowledge and training in wilderness safety.

The mountain guide turned adventure filmmaker got his start shooting clients during mountain excursions in France. "I was born in Les Arcs in the French Alps and have always lived in the mountains. Skiing and climbing was what we all did growing up, and I became a mountain

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guide and ski instructor, like a lot of people who grow up in these areas," says Montaz-Rosset.

In addition to shooting commercials, Montaz-Rosset also recently filmed the first-ever attempt at suspending a highline between two hot-air balloons high above the Pyrenees. He strives to tell extraordinary stories about real people performing acts that trigger an avalanche of emotions in the athletes and their spectators. His work is aesthetically breathtaking, but it runs much deeper than thrilling action shots. It's about letting the viewer behind the curtain to see the laughter, fear, triumphs, and failures. It's about finding the strength to pursue aspirations. The filmmaker's trick is to show the athletes' point of view—the passion—so the viewer has an emotional connection while watching their gut-wrenching maneuvers; and sheer, raw vivaciousness bleeds into every frame of his films.

While high anxiety is a natural element of any extreme sport, Montaz-Rosset's films show how the athletes react to and embrace it. "The people I film are so expert at what they do, fear isn't really a big factor. It's always present, but it helps you to concentrate on what you're doing...it brings focus."

The twist is that the athletes themselves don't know if their stunt will be successful or not. The films are about the attempt and all the internal and external obstacles that go along with the journey.

"I love telling stories, and I get inspired wherever there's an interesting and different story to tell. It doesn't have to be adventure sports, but that's the environment I've grown up and live in, so the stories I tell are about the people in this environment," he says.

So who are the subjects who fuel this high-octane artwork? Enter The Flying Frenchies, a wild and gregarious bunch of twenty or so lively, flamboyant characters. All are entertainers in their own right; each is equipped with her or his own skill and zeal. Performance art marries adventure



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sport in Montaz-Rosset’s film *The Flying Frenchies: Back to the Fjords*, where this gang of extreme athletes and performers bands together to create an outdoor alpine extravaganza like no other.

“These guys are always thinking up new ideas for stunts and things to push themselves in what they do. Several of them are circus performers, or they’re climbers and mountaineers, essentially. So what I’ve filmed is just a small part of what they do.”

Engineers, along with BASE jumpers, wingsuiters, and musicians, make up the colorful pack. In Montaz-Rosset’s film, he follows the group as they travel through the fjords of Norway on a monthlong trip, embarking on various new extreme-sport-style adventures. Although at first glance it all feels very whimsical and impulsive—perhaps because they intermittently don clown costumes and props—months of painstaking preparation have gone into planning the journey, including intricate mathematical calculations and rigorous testing phases.

The Flying Frenchies travel across the country in a vintage red circus bus that has been renovated and packed to the gills with enough food for roughly a month. They also strongly value leaving zero waste as they go along, which takes additional planning. At night, the crew sleeps in tents, battling wind and rain and sometimes unexpectedly harsh elements. Montaz-Rosset captures outbursts of laughter and impromptu dancing, juxtaposing those scenes against hushed moments of stomach-knotting stunts in progress. On one rough night, gusting winds hurled a tent filled with camera equipment off the top of the mountain. “It was more of a setback timewise...we lost some things, but there was enough gear to be able to replace what was lost,” he says.

Left: Sébastien Montaz-Rosset’s *The Flying Frenchies: Back to the Fjords*, shows a gang of extreme athletes creating an outdoor alpine extravaganza.

The worlds of performance and mountain sports collide when filming visually stunning footage of athletes running and cartwheeling off the mountain's edge before parachuting down into the valley. Beautifully blending artistry and athleticism, the film embodies—and embraces—doing the impossible. Clowns and acrobats climb peaks; other performers BASE jump off slacklines. It's about watching people push themselves to the brink of their physical and mental abilities—to witness what unleashes a landslide of emotion from within their souls and sets their spirits free—that we feel an incredible, intangible connection to them. “I just let them do their thing and try and be as unobtrusive as possible. You never know what you're going to get filming them, so it's always fun,” says Montaz-Rosset.

The summit of the adventure in *Back to the Fjords* occurs when The Flying Frenchies assemble and test an enormous human catapult they've dreamed up and meticulously engineered to launch each other off the mountain. It's carried piece by piece up to the peak and assembled near the edge, a colossal experiment. The vision was to shoot performers skyward—all the while hoping they wouldn't pass out from bearing up against 10 Gs—so they'd still be able to safely deploy their parachutes to float down to the valley below.

The filmmaker says, “Most of the people I film are people I know as friends, or have gotten to know from working and living in the mountains. The extreme sports are what they do, but it isn't who they are...so filming the sports is a way of telling their stories. And, of course, these sports have a big visual impact.” There is intimacy in watching someone embark on the unknown. The viewer feels the sensation of being set free along with the performer and

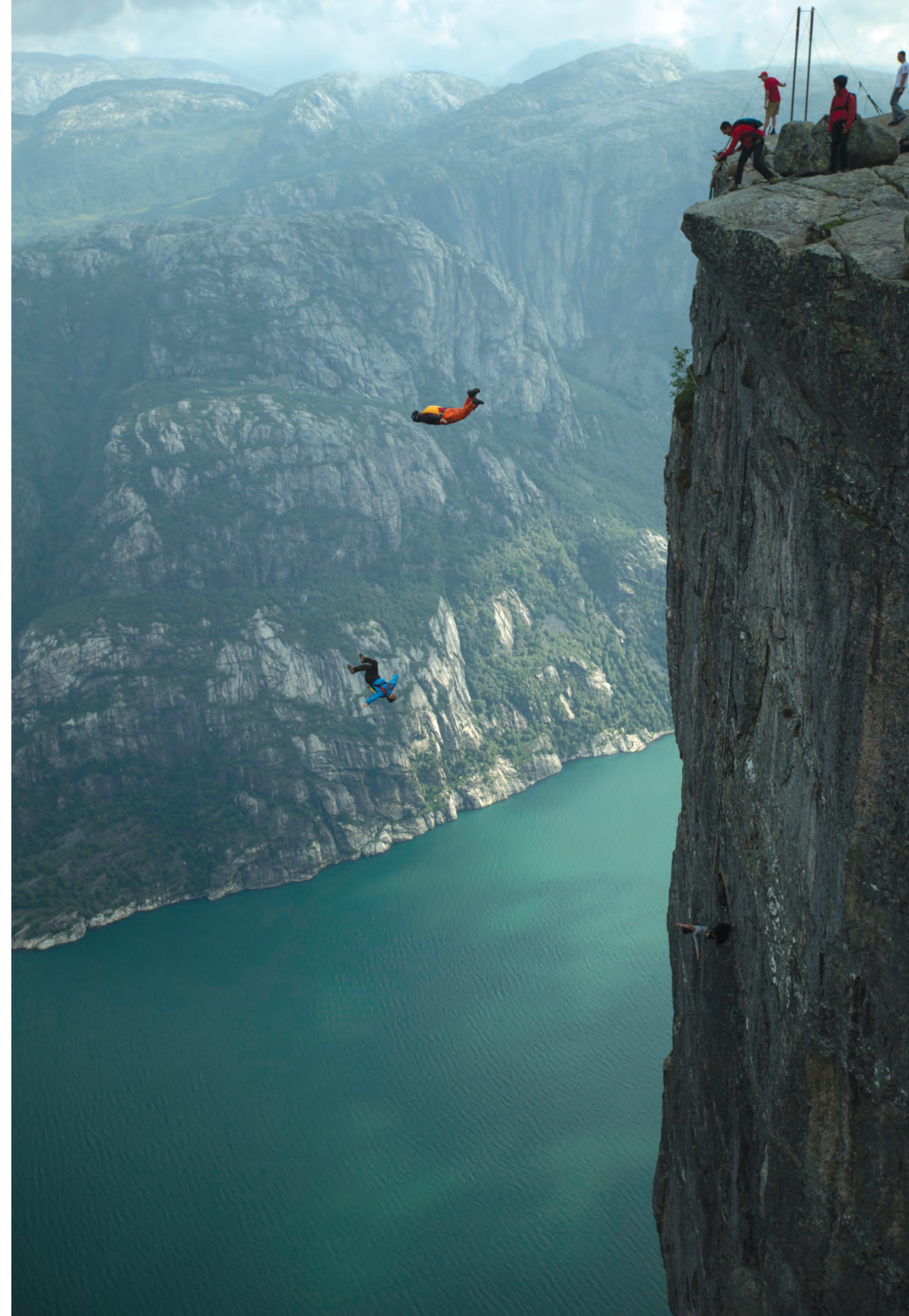
can experience, in tandem, a refreshing jolt of the liberation that comes from propelling at breakneck speed through the air, arms and legs flailing about.

Seeing The Frenchies feed off and inspire one another, their sense of camaraderie and friendship is palpable. Montaz-Rosset shows how these friends test the boundaries of their bodies and their relationships. The filmmaker and his subjects together push the confines of their sport and their personal lives. Pioneers in adventure-filmmaking and new sports, they transform viewers by manifesting that the impossible is possible.

In Memoriam Tancrède Melet

With the heaviest of hearts, we are sharing with you that shortly after this story was written, we learned Flying Frenchie Tancrède Melet died while preparing for a hot-air balloon stunt in Drôme, France, in January. The 32-year-old expert slackliner, BASE jumper, and wingsuiter accidentally fell approximately 100 feet (ca. 30 meters) when the balloon abruptly sprang off the ground. Melet leaves behind a life companion and a young daughter. His death is a stark reminder of how all too fragile life truly is and that no matter how trained we are, how meticulous, how dynamic, how invaluable to others—the unthinkable still happens. ☹

Right: Engineers, BASE jumpers, wingsuiters, and musicians make up the colorful troupe the French filmmaker follows around with his camera.





Above: The Flying Frenchies inspire one another, test the boundaries of their bodies, and push the confines of their sport and their personal lives.