

LIGHTING A LABYRINTH

Argentinian photographer Alejandro Chaskielberg's forthcoming photobook *Laberinto* sees photojournalism married with artful experimentation, illustrating that all realities have light and shade. Now, thanks to the Auckland Festival of Photography and the Argentinian foreign affairs ministry, local audiences will be granted a first look at the publication

WORDS | ADRIAN HATWELL



LABERINTO, 2017. AN AERIAL VIEW OF THE LABYRINTH OF EL HOYO, A MAZE THAT WAS GROWN SECRETLY BY A FAMILY OVER THE COURSE OF 20 YEARS, CHUBUT, PATAGONIA ARGENTINA

“I always wanted to be an architect, to construct, to build something material,” he explains, “but I work with light, so I thought, let’s use this space to create structures with light, to create visible structures that were not possible to do physically”

A tiny village tucked in among the grassy plains and craggy hills of Patagonia, El Hoyo is host to a remarkable secret. Amid the scenic forestry, pleasant mountain slopes, and crystalline waters of the southernmost region of South America where El Hoyo is located is hidden an 8000m² labyrinth: 2200m of winding pathway surrounded by immaculately manicured shrubbery walls.

This secreted labyrinth is currently muse to renowned Argentinian photographer Alejandro Chaskielberg. Known for his long-exposure night-time photography, combining photojournalism with an artistic curiosity, the photographer was naturally seduced by the maze’s combination of natural beauty, sacred geometry, and romanticism.

Having found the labyrinth by chance while on a camping trip with his daughter, the photographer experienced something magical within its floral walls and resolved to make it the subject of his next project. Using his signature manipulation of light across a midnight canvas, Alejandro set out to visualize the mythic intoxication of this singular destination.

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to build something material,” he explains, “but I work with light, so I thought, let’s use this space to create structures with light, to create visible structures that were not possible to do physically.”

The results of the project are collected in his forthcoming photobook, *Laberinto*, and thanks to Photobook Friday at this year’s Auckland Festival of Photography, local audiences will be the first in the world to see the publication exhibited. As one of the major guests this year, Alejandro will be presenting both *Laberinto* and his previous book project, *Otsuchi: Future Memories*, at the event, running May 31 to June 22.

The *Otsuchi* project was another long-term work for the photographer. Following the 9.0-magnitude earthquake that struck Japan in 2011, the largest the island nation had ever experienced, Alejandro travelled to the decimated fishing town of Otsuchi to document the fallout in his unique style. It wasn’t until his second visit to the community that he happened on the key to visualizing the mix of despair and hope he could sense in this town—he found a family photo album that had been destroyed, its images running



THE CREATORS, 2017. CLAUDIO LEVI AND DORIS ROMERA, THE COUPLE THAT CREATED THE LABYRINTH, PHOTOGRAPHED WITH THEIR RELATIVES AND FRIENDS, EL HOYO, PATAGONIA, ARGENTINA
HABITANTS, 2017. A GROUP OF EIGHT PEOPLE HOLDING THEIR HANDS, PHOTOGRAPHED SEQUENTIALLY IN THE LABYRINTH OF EL HOYO, PATAGONIA, ARGENTINA



together like watercolour abstracts.

“In the worst scenarios, I always try to pick up something that could tell the story in a positive way, and those images tell the story of Otsuchi, of the people. Even though the images were blurred, the colours were strong, and some new colours appeared after the tsunami,” he says.

This inspired the artist to embark on a process he calls ‘colour archaeology’. He would invite surviving town members to return to where their houses once stood, posing them in the devastated remains, creating night-time environmental portraits. He would then use the colours extracted from photos unearthed in the debris to colourize these new prints.

“I am always thinking in colours,” Alejandro says, “so I decided to use those colours I found to make a connection between my own photography — because I came from the other side of the world — and the photography from the local community.

“It’s about recovering something, specifically the colours, and bringing it back to life in my photographs.”

This thoughtful, time-intensive process is

exemplary of the distinct practice that the photographer has been evolving since he laid hands on a camera as a pre-teen. His first professional work was in newspaper and magazine photojournalism, but Alejandro quickly found that the superficiality demanded by the market robbed him of enthusiasm for the craft. Ironically, quitting photography to study violin at the classical-music conservatory is what brought him back into the fold with renewed vigour.

“In a way, it was about listening to myself for four years; getting to know myself,” Alejandro says of his musical studies. “When I started doing photography again, it was like I had learned how to understand my own music.”

And the photographer let that internal symphony ring out with his first long-term project, *La Creciente*, in which he spent two-and-a-half years living among the island community of the Paraná River Delta, near Buenos Aires. Concurrent work in cinematography and videography instilled in Alejandro a flair for storytelling and helped birth his dramatically colourful nightscape aesthetic — and saw him take home a slew of big international photography awards for his trouble.

EPUYEN LAKE, 2017. A VIEW OF THE LAKE EPUYEN AND THE TOWNS OF LAGO PUELO AND EL HOYO LIGHTING THE BACKGROUND, CHUBUT, PATAGONIA, ARGENTINA

PUERTO PATRIADA, 2017. THOUSANDS OF PINE TREES GROWING IN THE BURNED FORESTS OF PUERTO PATRIADA, A REGION THAT WAS DEVASTATED A YEAR BEFORE THIS IMAGE, CHUBUT, PATAGONIA, ARGENTINA

Committed as he is to night photography, the artist has a distinct way of working. Chief among his tools is an impressive array of different coloured flashes — from neutral white to lights tinged with blue, red, or yellow balances — which he uses to dynamically paint a scene (with assistance from the moon). He shoots with both digital and film; the former to best understand the exposure needed in difficult mixed lighting conditions, and the latter to create brilliant luminance via positive film. The process also requires his subjects to remain still for upwards of 10 minutes per exposure.

Because of the meticulous directing required for his scenes, mingled with the vérité aesthetic lingering from his time as photojournalist,

Alejandro has had cause to deliberate on photography’s ongoing debate over truth and objectivity versus fabrication and fiction. He acknowledges that there are definitely shady ways photographers can and do go about presenting their work but believes his own approach skirts no such territory.

“The thing is not to lie: I say this is what I do, this is the way I do it, and this is my story; the story I want to tell,” the photographer exclaims. “Of course it’s not the truth; the truth is filtered by your subjectivity.

“But it’s *my* truth.”



MAGIC LANDING, 2017. A NIGHT PHOTOGRAPH OF A TIPI TENT HIDDEN IN THE WOODLANDS OF EPUYEN, CHUBUT, PATAGONIA, ARGENTINA



ROBERTA THORNLEY, SEAN, 2010, ARCHIVAL PIGMENT INK PHOTOGRAPH ON ILFORD GALERIE GOLD FIBRE SILK PAPER, MOUNTED ON ALUMINIUM, 865MM X 605MM, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TIM MELVILLE GALLERY

Herlinde Koelbl — *Targets*
Silo 6, Wynyard Quarter

Documentary photographer Herlinde Koelbl’s latest series, *Targets*, has seen her travel far and wide, photographing primitive targets made of fabric, cardboard, and paper made by semi-legal armies, as well as motorized and remote-controlled figures on wheels engineered by militant forces. Together, the images tell a fascinating story, not just about the training of young recruits around the world to shoot to kill, but so too about the changing face of warfare in the technological age.

Talking Culture
Various locations throughout Auckland

Talking Culture by Leica presents a public programme to foster the interaction between artists, curators, photographers, and audiences, creating a gathering point for the artform with talks, projections, screenings, and conversations. Keynote speakers include American photojournalist Maggie Steber, and founder and artistic director of Photolux Festival, Enrico Stefanelli. Maggie has worked on cultural-historical projects in 66 countries, and in 2013 named as one of eleven Women of Vision by National Geographic. Maggie’s photo book *Dancing on Fire: Photographs from Haiti* provides a pictorial chronicle of Haiti and its tumultuous history. Enrico Stefanelli is a photographer, curator, and founder of Photolux, an international photography festival that takes place in Lucca, Tuscany. Photolux brings together masters, experts, and lovers of photography, with a focus on new and emerging talents and cutting-edge artistic practices.

Roberta Thornley — *Roberta Thornley*
Pah Homestead, TSB Bank Wallace Arts Centre

In 2017, Roberta Thornley was awarded the Marti Friedlander Photographic Award by the Arts Foundation of New Zealand. As recognition, this exhibition presents some key themes in Thornley’s work tracing ten years of practice. Portraiture is a recurring motif, with her subjects exhibiting their

own psyches. Still life, domestic scenes, and drapery are enveloped in deep tonality and subdued lighting. Landscapes have the appearance of first light or dusk, highlights captured within shadow. The photographs in this exhibition are selected from the Wallace Arts Trust Collection, the Auckland Festival of Photography Collection (2011 Annual Commission) and the Tim Melville Gallery.

Kate van der Drift — *Water Slows as It Rounds the Bend*
Sanderson Contemporary Art Gallery

Water Slows as It Rounds the Bend is part of Kate van der Drift’s ongoing project investigating the fragile ecology and layered past of the Hauraki Plains. The floodwater of the present day plains is tightly controlled by drains, canals, pump houses, and stopbanks, ensuring that what was once water remains solid ground today. Few clues remain of the ancient fertile wetland, yet concealed in its center of the gridded farmland lays Kopuatai Peat Dome, the largest unaltered restiad peat bog in New Zealand, and unique globally. By traversing the wetland by foot and kayak, van der Drift pictures areas once full of giant Kahikatea trees that have been crowded out by willow.

Car Wash Group — *Meet You at Merce*
Allpress Studio

Covering landscapes, portraiture, documentary, and themes of identity and belonging, this group exhibition offers the viewer a chance to see life through the lens of 9 photographers representing all the corners of Auckland.

Mary McPherson — *The Long View*
Pah Homestead, TSB Bank Wallace Arts Centre

The Long View harks back to the 19th century when artists such as Alfred Sharpe and John Kinder were making images of Auckland as a city-in-progress. One and a half centuries later, the still-young city continues to make and remake itself — and it is this process which Macpherson’s photographs inhabit. A vision emerges that is at once restless, unresolved and paradoxical, yet somehow capable of moments of transcendence.

Spiros Poros — *Idols Through Elements*
Becroft Gallery, Lake House Arts

Greek national turned Auckland resident Spiros Poros discovered his passion for photography during a world trip photographing locals in their own environment. Described as having a cinematographic appeal, his photography excels in portraying the mood of the protagonist, as well as his deep respect for his subjects. Gaining notoriety in the US and Greece for his unique and constantly evolving photography, Poros has become a favourite of fashion houses and celebrities, shooting for magazines such as Vogue, InStyle, Esquire, and Flaunt. He featured in the 2014 Auckland Festival of Photography with his exhibition *Love and Strife = Cosmic Cycle*.

Marie Shannon — *Marie Shannon*
Trish Clark Gallery

Marie Shannon’s first solo exhibition in Auckland after many years will feature photographs and

moving images from throughout the artist’s oeuvre. Shannon photographs subjects with a focus on the narrative or poetic resonance of the object. Taking inspiration from her immediate domestic environment, with subjects including her son’s love notes, her own childhood drawings, and her late partner’s plaster cast, her photography is recognized for its intimacy and thoughtfulness.

Janet Hafoka — *Ephemeral: A Reflection on the Impermanent and Short Lived*
Studio 541

Auckland-based visual artist Janet Hafoka explores memory and its fallibility, drawing on objects from the past as her subjects. Her latest exhibition, *Ephemeral*, explores the centuries-long fascination with the ‘golden hour’, the brief period shortly after sunrise or before sunset when the sun casts a soft, golden light. Artists have long been inspired by this transient time, often depicting this light when it otherwise would not have been. Hafoka explores the idea of transience and questions the nature of our experiences; whether they are truly as we remember, or seen through a lens of our choosing.

Tommy Hamilton — *Steady Stream of Condolences*
Whitespace

With an interest in memory, identity, and place, Hamilton’s exhibition explores the multitude of ways in which people and spaces inhabit the world. With reference to the connection between memories of places and our sense of self, Hamilton offers to the viewer experiences that are both fleeting and constant, with the intention of allowing space to share these observations, and allow others to manifest.

Tuafale Tanoa’l aka Linda T — *Storytelling as Koha: Consolidating Community Memories*
Corban Estate Arts Centre

Through photography, Linda T aims to make visible those that are often misrepresented in mainstream society, with a special focus on Pacific and Māori people and LGBTQJ communities. Drawing on experience and material gathered as an archivist, community documenter, and artist, a ‘living archive’ is created, consisting of interviews, photographs, and sound recordings, allowing viewers an insight into the personal and political lives of those who may otherwise be hidden behind the mask of the mainstream media.



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