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**LIGHTING A LABYRINTH**

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**WORDS | ADRIAN HATWELL**
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.

“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.”

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...
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.
Committed as he is to night photography, the artist has a distinct way of working. Chaskielberg understands the tools 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 veinte aesthetic lingering from his time as photojournalist, Alejandro has had cause to deliberate on photography’s ongoing dispute 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 skis no such territory.

“The thing is not to lie: I say this is what I do, this is what 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.”

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