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## INTERVIEW WITH ALBARRAN CABRERA

By Sofía Granados Dyer



#444, *The Mouth of Krishna, Mallorca*, 2016. Pigment print on gampi paper and gold leaf.

**Sofía Granados Dyer:** *Can you talk about your start in photography? And how your two aesthetic visions came together?*

**Albarrán Cabrera:** We come from entirely different backgrounds. Angel is a mathematician and engineer. I'm a linguist. Apart from workshops, we have taught ourselves everything by reading. When we met in 1987, we began with Ansel Adams's three famous books about the print, the negative and the camera. Through our studies in photography, we have discovered that everything is interconnected. By studying the history of platinum and palladium printing for example, we have also learned about the supply of platinum during World War I. That is why we use photography. It serves as a tool for understanding our everyday realities. We feel fortunate that we did not attend an official university program where an instructor might tell you what aesthetic path to take. Sometimes a structured education can prevent you from reaching your own conclusions or making the mistakes that in the end, are positive. No one gave us established ideas, we had to find them.

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**SGD:** *You've developed your beliefs from a wide range of literary, visual, and philosophical sources. Your aesthetic seems particularly shaped by Japanese sources: modernists like Junichiro Tanizaki and Kansuke Yamamoto, as well as the philosophy behind calligraphy. How did this interest start?*

**AC:** There is no dispute that people have individual differences -- that is what makes us individuals. But we also live within larger and somewhat homogenous cultures. The Western World, for example, draws from Greek and Roman culture that still impacts the way we view our surroundings now. But Japanese culture, that draws from its own distinct aesthetic and philosophical sources, provides an entirely different interpretation of the world. This is evident in the philosophical underpinnings of Japanese language and calligraphy, that place a value on the process, or the path (in Japanese, *shodo*), of creating meaning. Another example, is the way that the Japanese perceive the term "darkness." If you go to Wikipedia and search for a term, you will find similar descriptions in Spanish, English and German. But if you go to the Japanese explanation of darkness, the interpretation is completely different. We have educated ourselves about Japanese culture because it allows us to see the world with fresh eyes, and recalling Octavio Paz after he visited Japan -- allows us "the possibility of becoming a different person."

**SGD:** *You have mentioned that what draws you specifically to photography is that it relies on associative links between images, and on memory – and that this is most impactful way to express your ideas. Yet a reliance on triggering memory is one of photography's intrinsic qualities. Can you talk about your interest in memory?*

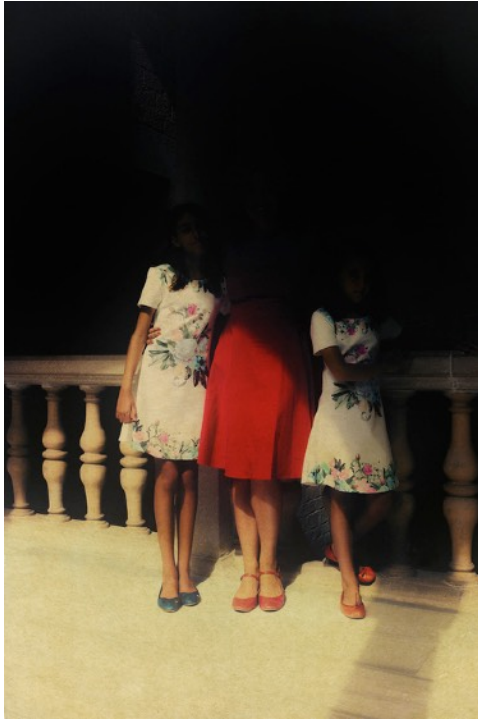
**AC:** We are but our memories. You are your first anniversary, you are the memories of your mother, you are the memories of your school. You are all of this. Even the way we conceptualize time and how we understand reality is based on memories. For instance, this is evident with people who suffer from memory loss. For them, time doesn't exist. We hope that our photographs trigger subconscious associations in the viewer based on their memories. Surely, the viewer will interpret our photographs in a different way than we have imagined. They will create a new idea for themselves.

We'd like to refer to this photograph to show how different people can interpret the same image.

In the photograph, we see two fish swimming in a pond. The fish however, are only visible in the dark areas of the photograph rather than in the light. This observation is not the way that Western aesthetics has trained us to read images. We search for an image's content in the light. Even the word enlightenment suggests knowledge and a positive idea of light. However in Japanese aesthetics, it is said that darkness is the origin of everything. We can find a perfect example of this in the book *In the Praise of Shadows* by Junichiro Tanizaki: the most important thing are the subtleties in the shadows. It's fascinating how Eastern viewers understand that the main focus of our photographs lie in the darkness. But Westerners are sometimes shocked, thinking "why can't I see the fish?" This goes to say, that depending on your culture, knowledge and memories, you will have different associations with a photograph.

**SGD:** *We see the question of memory especially in the series This is You. In this case, the photograph might trigger an association for the viewer, but the series also recalls family photographs that we look at to remember a specific moment or person.*

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**LEFT:** #145, *This is You [HERE]*. Pigment print on gampi paper and gold leaf.

**RIGHT:** #278, *The Mouth of Krishna*, Tokyo, 2015. Pigment print on gampi paper and gold leaf.

**AC:** This series was inspired by discarded negatives that we found in the garbage. When we created prints from them, we found that the negatives were underexposed, so you couldn't see the faces of the people photographed. Observing the photographs, we couldn't help thinking, this man could be my father, or this woman could be my mother. I don't know who they are, they could be anyone. People naturally identify others by their faces and without the image of the face, you can invent your own narrative about the person and how they are related to you. It reminds us of the original *Bladerunner* where the replicants don't have memories. They're given memories, and to reinforce the memories, they are given photographs. You see the importance of photographs in this film. The replicants treasure the photographs because it's their only link to a possible past – the only way for them to feel they're human.

Once, a woman who was very much in love with one of our *This is You* portraits, later wrote to us expressing that she finally understood why the photograph evoked such a strong reaction: She discovered that in the only photograph she had of her grandmother, the dress was similar to the one in the photograph we had created. Our photograph is not of her grandmother, but in a way, it is still a link to her grandmother.

**SGD:** *That is what is so magical about this series. There's the temptation to give a photograph a scholarly reading or an impersonal interpretation. But in your case, you return intimate experience back to the photograph, which how photographs often should function.*

**AC:** In the past, before internet allowed us to quickly transfer images across enormous distances, we needed photographs. You had physical copies. Maybe by relying on computers and a hard drive, we are losing a little bit of the meaning of photography. We are not against digital and we use it. But there's an important distinction to be made. One thing is an image, another thing is a print. We as photographers

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produce prints. We don't make images, where depending on your computer and color profile you will see something different. We create a physical object which is able to recall your best memories. That is what we would like to achieve with a photograph.

**SGD:** *I see this play with memory even in the object itself. They have weight and suggest their own histories. They hold evidence of being constructed.*

**AC:** The difference between the image and the print is important for us. By painting the borders of the prints, for example, we reinforce the fact that the photograph is a three-dimensional object.

It is important to engage all five senses with a work of art. Photography is not just sight. It's also tactile. In pottery for example, you can create a vessel from which you drink and whose materiality can conjure many associations. The shape, the glaze, the color, the fact that you are holding something in your hands, the feeling of the material on your fingers. All of this has significance. That's why we selected Japanese gampi paper, cotton paper and materials and processes such as acrylics, platinum, palladium, silver halide, cyanotype, etc.

**SGD:** *I'm struck by a remarkable light your photographs emit and that you don't find in other artworks. It reminds me of what Junichiro Tanizaki calls the "fragile beauty of a feeble light." What do you think a subdued light can offer to a photograph, or to a work of art?*

**AC:** The Japanese concept of *Yūgen* combines the mystery of a dim light, and the sublime found in the shadows. You cannot explain it but you can feel it. This concept describes the way we create our prints. Our artworks ideally express something that is hidden, that's in the shadows, that you can feel, but you cannot explain. There's a poem by Zeami Motokiyo that articulates this very well. One verse says: — "And, subtle shadows of bamboo on bamboo". *Yūgen* is said to mean "a profound, mysterious sense of the beauty of the universe ... and the sad beauty of human suffering."

**SGD:** *I can't help but recall the line from Camera Lucida, where Barthes says that the power of the photograph is that it cannot say what it lets us see.*

**AC:** Yes, it's exactly this! *Yūgen* describes the beauty in objects of this world from some higher plane of existence. Experiencing an object can give rise to feelings and sensations, that as humans, we cannot put into words. This reminds us of the question proposed by the writer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt: when you have a mountain and a river, where does the mountain end and the river start? It's an interesting question. This area between the river and the mountain — what is it called? There is such beauty in this middle region that you can see, but that you cannot properly describe with words. People tend to categorize everything because it allows us to take control of our surroundings, but there is an ambiguous middle region that we cannot categorize. This is where the most beautiful things can be found.

**SGD:** *Do you find important for a larger viewing public to understand how the work was made? Or is making the object something of personal significance?*

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**TOP:** #106, *This is You [HERE]*. Pigment print on gampi paper and gold leaf.

**LEFT:** # 11, *This is You*. Pigment print on gampi paper and gold leaf.

**RIGHT:** #139, *This is You [HERE]*. Pigment print on gampi paper and gold leaf.

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**AC:** When we show our artworks for exhibition and fairs, we normally have to specify how it was created. We don't intend to hide from the public how we craft our prints — but when you see a Picasso, for example, you don't have to know how to paint with oil to appreciate it.

We use craftsmanship because that is the only way to achieve our desired aesthetic. If the process is not available, then we need to invent it. We love testing everything. When we tried toners for our gelatin silver prints, for example, we saved all of our experiments in a big catalog. The pages were filled with big squares that showed samples of different toners, different chemistry, different developers. I remember the first time we studied in a workshop with a distinguished teacher. We showed him the catalog and he responded, “what is this!” Partial toners, duplicate toners, multiple toners, redeveloping and bleaching. It gives you a lot of power when creating a photograph.

**SGD:** *Finally, you launched your first monograph, Remembering the Future, published by Editorial RM at Unseen Amsterdam. Can you discuss the concept behind this project?*

**AC:** When we remember, we do not simply recall a perfect representation of the past. A memory is not a snapshot or movie of our lives. We reconstruct our memories based on a set of things that happened, combined with what we perceived and imagined. What those perceptions are depends, in turn, on our past experiences, our knowledge, and our selves. Consequently, each time we recall an event, we change it. We construct a skeleton with the most important facts and fill in the gaps with our imaginations. So, the memory recreated is not a perfect representation of the past event. Our memories are flawed but we do not even realize it.

Thinking about the future is one of the main characteristics of being human. We plan ahead. We visualize the future: imagining what will happen and how we'll react.

Thinking about the past and future can seem like different activities, but when we think about the future, we do the same mental work as when we remember. We just remember a future that has not happened yet.

These two activities, remembering the past and remembering the future, are deeply connected and never stop. We perform these activities throughout our lives, in a more or less conscious way, in order to define ourselves and to understand our world.

In the book we play with memory and constructed the book like a mirror. Considering the center of the book as the axis of this “mirror” – the images going forward and backward echo each other. That's also why we have created the book in English and Japanese. While Westerners would read the book left to right, the Japanese would read it right to left. Depending on the way you read the book, you will see the same photographs, but perceive a different reality.