



*Red Mummy in the White Desert-Sahara Desert, 2008. All the Deserts Are My Desert Series.*

# ALFREDO DE STÉFANO

## The House and the Grave in the Landscape

Juan Antonio Molina\*

Alfredo de Stéfano\*\* has consolidated his presence in Mexican photography as one of the artists who has most consistently worked with landscape in recent years. Perhaps the most evident specificity in his case is that his works treat it more as a concept than a topic. That is probably where the malleability that can be seen in landscape as an object of photography comes from. In a certain way, we are talking about a subjectivity that shares a kind of will and expresses itself both spatially and temporally.

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# ALFREDO D



*Ladders to the Sky, 1999. Replenishing Emptiness Series.*

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# ESTÉFANO

The landscape in these photos is not limited to a fragment of space outlined and codified by the photographic framing; it is also the summary of a series of moments that cross each other. It is not only a space; it is a circumstance.

To arrive at this interesting formulation of the concept of landscape, Alfredo de Stéfano has been polishing the resources that allow him to aestheticize the perception of space and time using metaphorical, dramatic elements. In this case, aestheticizing also implies reproducing reality as fiction; that is, superimposing on the reality photographed a layer of meanings that do not necessarily remain autonomous outside the photographic act.

Even when Alfredo de Stéfano's working process includes the organization of formal structures before taking the picture, and even when these structures seem to have sufficient

formal and aesthetic density to be able to function autonomously, like sculptures or installations, for example, the truth is that their full realization only happens in the act of photography.

Actually, what De Stéfano does is to pre-construct the photography and reconstruct the space to be photographed. The important thing here is that what is photographed is marked for photography. The photography becomes a kind of destiny or finality of what is photographed; I mean that Alfredo de Stéfano points to the space as something photographable; he indicates that its destiny is in the image and its origin is in the imagination.

For that reason, I have called these photographs "inscriptions on the landscape," although this concept must not be separated from the notion of intervention. If in a previous



*Blood Offering to the Licancabur-Atacama Desert, 2008. All the Deserts Are My Desert Series.*



stage of this artist's work, putting texts and graphic signs made the viewer think of a strategy of inscriptions on the photography, especially in the 1996 "Vestiges of Paradise" series, now what can be seen is the inscription of photography in space; and this always implies an act of intervention inseparable from the concept of installation.

It is not so much the artificiality in and of itself that gives these operations their character of photographic inscriptions. Actually, more than inscriptions of photography, we are talking about inscriptions for photography. Whereas before the text followed the photo and incrustated itself in it, now these objects and space itself become a text that precedes the photo. Probably the possibility of understanding space as a text is one of the traits characteristic of the new formulations of landscape art in contemporary photography.

Alfredo de Stéfano has been working on that possibility since his first photographic works. But his works tend to make these processes complex to the extent that the conception of space as text is accompanied by a treatment of space as a basis for other significative or textual elements.

In his works from the middle of the last decade, these marks came to have a little more impact, above all because of the protagonist role of light. In addition to the intrusive element of artificial light as a footprint indicating the human presence, several of those photographs incorporated another no less important component: the possibility of metaphorically reading the lighting structure.

We could force the reading of some of those images to find certain implications of violence; that would also help us more precisely define the ecologist discourse often imposed



*Fireflies*, 2003. Brief Chronicle of Light Series.



*Polar Circle in the Desert. 1999. Replenishing Emptiness Series.*

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on Alfredo de Stéfano's photos, which was strengthened above all after his 2002 "Inhabiting the Vacuum" exhibition. In fact, I tend to think of his work not as much as a support for an ecologist position, but as a stimulus for reflecting about the passage of time. If De Stéfano has resorted to the space of the desert to do this, it is precisely because that is an environment where the temporal can be perceived with certain elasticity and where it can be "intervened" or altered. Finally, Alfredo de Stéfano's interventions are not only about

space, but also about time. His references to archaeology or paleontology are in the nature of simulations directed at underlining the temporal dimension in which the phenomena of Nature, and, particularly, existence itself are situated.

When De Stéfano has worked with desiccated animals, when he has placed or represented the bones of dead or extinct animals, and even when he has led to the evocation of absent subjects, he has placed us before the certainty or the possibility of death. In some way, the objects he organizes

before the camera are like simulations of monuments. They have an evocative and commemorative function, somehow an homage to the absent.

The work that Alfredo de Stéfano has done in different deserts of the world since the end of the last decade opens up one of the periods in which his art has evolved most intensely. The idea of death and absence has become more emphatic, marking the desert with implications that involve the landscape not as a geographic but a symbolic space.

In these photographs, the processes of signing that this author uses become more evident, as does his interest in marking the place, in giving it a meaning of localization, of evoking a presence through the absence that the place experiences. Alfredo de Stéfano seems to be re-inhabiting those places, colonizing them in the sense that Heidegger gives the term. This is why he has returned more insistently to structures that we might consider associated with a primitive state: the house, the grave, the monument, and perhaps also the

altar, the place from where the dead are remembered and where their memory is kept (the stone, the burial mound, the pyramid).

If previous works still led us to imagine the desert as a virgin space, little by little, Alfredo de Stéfano has taken us to an image of the desert as a space colonized by the human presence, full of tracks and memories. It is not strange, then, that in this stage, such forceful portraits appear, like those in his 2008 project "Sahara," or that in more recent works the author himself begins to appear in the photographs.

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*Waiting for the Glacier to Melt, Iceland, 2011. All the Deserts Are My Desert Series.*





*Cloud Bag. 2004. Brief Chronicle of Light Series.*

ALFREDO DE STEFANO



*Orix-Namibia Desert, 2011. All the Deserts Are My Desert Series.*



*Waiting for the Sand Storm-Namibia Desert, 2011. All the Deserts Are My Desert Series.*

Despite the dramatic nature of these pieces, I think that a slightly ironic tone can always be intuited, a tone that appears intermittently throughout this author's entire artistic oeuvre. In addition to a particularly effectively channeled sensibility, Alfredo de Stéfano's work demonstrates an intelligent and always imaginative way of re-elaborating not only

representations of space, but also of its most common implications, surprising us every time with new figurations, even when they originate in the most archaic symbologies. Perhaps that is one of the qualities that places him among the most original, versatile creators of contemporary Mexican photography. **MM**