

# THE ROCK AND I

MANUEL ALVAREZ DIESTRO PRESENTS A PHOTOGRAPHIC SERIES FROM THE MIDDLE EAST THAT DISTILLS A LIFE SPENT WALKING AMONG ROCKS IN AN EFFORT TO UNDERSTAND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANDSCAPE AND ARCHITECTURE – AND, IN SOME WAY, HIMSELF

Village against a rocky  
landscape in Northern Oman  
(Wadi Khab, Oman, seen from  
Jebel Harim, 2018  
© Manuel Alvarez Diestro)

**A** S A PHOTOGRAPHER, my relationship with territory is profoundly physical and emotional. I not only have to walk long distances under an unrelenting sun but must also frame the relationship between architecture and landscape. My fascination with rocks began in childhood, watching western films shot in Almería, Spain – those CinemaScope images where small towns looked like scale models set within a

stony landscape. Later I discovered that the volcanic landscapes of the Canary Islands, of Iceland, or the reddish surfaces of Wadi Rum are not simply settings for science fiction, but mirrors and companions to human desolation.

My training in art history reinforced that obsession. In the Leonardo da Vinci paintings projected by my professor in Boston, USA, I understood that geology could become a spiritual structure; in the works of Joaquín Patinir, master of the Northern Renaissance, I saw how mountains reduced the human figure to something almost symbolic, shifting the protagonism toward the landscape. I then understood that rock, beyond its tectonic dimension, is also a symbolic, emotional, and narrative element. →

**When architecture invades**

My personal story was built far from my home in Spain. I spent many years in the Middle East, where I lived with rock during my territorial explorations: camera in hand, litres of bottled water on my back, and always a cap to protect myself from the sun. I climbed the Alborz Mountains in Iran countless times to photograph the Eocene pyroclastic formations rising abruptly beside the megalopolis of Tehran. I crossed the Strait of Hormuz to navigate the Mesozoic limestone rias (drowned river valleys) of Musandam, a Martian-looking karst landscape where dolphins cut through the turquoise waters to remind you that you are still on planet Earth. In Egypt, I crossed the deserts around Greater Cairo, where the fractured limestones of Mokattam seem to lament the great urban botch job advancing over them with no sensitivity or dialogue.

I often touched the rocks, trying to understand their excess of beauty: their sharp edges, their fractures, their geometry. I asked myself what happens when architecture invades that space – whether it is a dialogue, an imposition, or an accident. I encountered multiple scenes: cubic buildings that seemed to have landed from another planet; constructions attempting to assimilate by incorporating local materials; or

“Symbiosis between rock and human beings can appear in the most unexpected places”

dwellings directly excavated into the rock. In these landscapes, I understood that the ultimate symbiosis between rock and human beings can appear in the most unexpected places.

**Living landscape**

My relationship with the territory begins even before stepping on it. From the airplane window during the approach to the destination, I identify possible places to photograph. Landing in Khasab, in Northern Oman, is already an experience itself: the pilot traverses limestone mountains before fitting the aircraft onto a runway wedged between massive rocks. Excitement and adrenaline take over your body. Then I rent a car and cross long distances looking for isolated buildings scattered among vast valleys flanked by seemingly infinite rock walls. The questions then arise: how do those people who sleep just a few metres

from those stone walls live? Do they feel what I feel? Have they ever climbed the rocks? What does rock mean in their lives? Are rocks an obstacle, or an element that helps people reconnect with themselves?

One of the phenomena that most fascinates me is the self-destruction of rock: constant erosion, the fragments that break off, the debris rolling down the slopes and dangerously coexisting with human dwellings. Geology redefines vital space far more than we usually perceive, and walking among these processes reveals to me a living landscape in perpetual transformation.

During these journeys I rarely encounter people. I prefer it this way: in my photographs, human absence allows architecture and landscape to speak for us. The human figure appears through its imprint, its scale, or its constructive errors – not through its direct presence. That distance interests me deeply, and provides the opportunity to find myself alone with the rock.

The experience of crossing these Middle Eastern geographies, of finding constructions that resemble anticipated ruins, inevitably leads me to surrealism, particularly to the dreamlike landscapes of Salvador Dalí depicting the rocks of northeastern Spain’s Costa Brava in his native Girona. Photographing such scenes demands absolute attention. I risk getting lost, but in that exercise, I find beauty and the sublime. In the most absolute solitude, I can release my emotions and, why not, shout into the open sky out of sheer happiness. I remember so many occasions when the unbearable heat made my sweat burn my eyes, not knowing whether I was crying from irritation or from the emotion of witnessing such landscapes. Photographing far from my roots becomes a method of personal relocation: understanding who I am in relation to a landscape that is not part of my childhood memories in Northern Spain. These aesthetic raptures, difficult to explain, transport me →



New residential developments under construction in Egypt’s desert (New Cairo, Egypt, 2012 © Manuel Alvarez Diestro)

Unfinished residential  
tower outside Tehran  
(Pardis, Iran, 2018  
© Manuel Alvarez Diestro)

“ Are rocks an  
obstacle, or an  
element that helps  
people reconnect with  
themselves? ”





Rocks overlooking the  
endless metropolis of Tehran  
(Tehran from the Alborz  
Mountain Range, 2017  
© Manuel Alvarez Diestro)

to another world where, for me, life becomes absolutely wonderful and full of meaning.

### Photographic dance

When I descend a rocky mountain and find an isolated building in the middle of nowhere, the photographic dance begins. I circle the structure, attentive to every angle, following Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier's concept of 'promenade architecturale', but rather than perceiving space through movement, here the dialogue is between architecture and geology. I observe how the building embeds itself in the terrain, identify strata, slopes, shadows projected onto limestone or basalt. Then I move away to contextualise it. Finally, I seek height, climbing a nearby rock to obtain a polyhedral, almost cubist view and take the photograph. At that moment, I often use a telephoto lens to generate a sense of merging between the construction and the rock, leaving the image flat, where the human presence fuses with stone.

As in the films of Werner Herzog and Akira Kurosawa, I seek to show human fragility: although I cannot film rolling rocks, I can photograph those that seem on the verge of falling. In the Alborz, many rocks appear to watch Tehran with dangerous patience, reminding the city's inhabitants of its precariousness – here, the threat is constant.

I have seen that geology is seldom integrated into architecture. In Egypt, where I lived for years, I saw new urban developments destroying native rock with no consideration for the environment. That rock could have been integrated sensitively, generating an organic dialogue and creating contextual architecture. In Cairo's Zabbaleen district, at the foot of the Mokattam Plateau, informal dwellings cling to the hillside, establishing a duel in which the precarious →

**“ I generate a sense of merging between the construction and the rock, leaving the image flat, where the human presence fuses with stone ”**

constructions are doomed to lose. From above, on the great rock, the visual drama is exceptional: the history of humanity compressed into a single panorama where pyramids, medieval mosques, the City of the Dead, colonial expansions, and 21st-century skyscrapers coexist in this great architectural genesis.


## Walking man

I am aware of my limitations in the field of geology. I cannot scientifically explain the origin of these formations, but I can relate to them from vulnerability. In the erosion of rock, I perceive the erosion of the human soul. The Swiss artist Giacometti expressed this condition in his elongated figures, eroded inside and out, in constant

movement. In some way, I too am that walking man: a minimal and fragile body in an immense landscape, aware of its smallness and yet compelled to move forward. Walking on rock is accepting the real scale of the world.

I have no geological training, but many years spent walking through arid territories have taught me to recognise essential patterns: the alternation of lithologies, the distinctive limestones, the sandstones that redden at sunset, the basalts that scar the hillsides, the fractures announcing future rockfalls, the aeolian erosion, the thermal weathering. In Beirut, Lebanon, I began to apply geological logic to urban collapse: bombed buildings whose folded slabs resembled fragile strata subjected to extreme pressures.

Photography is my intuitive way of understanding deep time. Each image captures an instant that nonetheless belongs to a territory that continues to change. Between that instant and that geological time opens the space where I try to situate my photographic work.

In the end, understanding rock is not a scientific matter for me, but one of presence. Each landscape reminds me that we are brief visitors in territories that took millions of years to form. Rock teaches me my own physical and temporal limitations. Erosion speaks of our existential wear but also of our possibility to continue. And architecture reveals our need to dialogue with something greater than ourselves. 

A Cairo neighbourhood interacts with rock (Zabaleen district seen from Mokattam, Cairo, Egypt 2021 © Manuel Alvarez Diestro)



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