

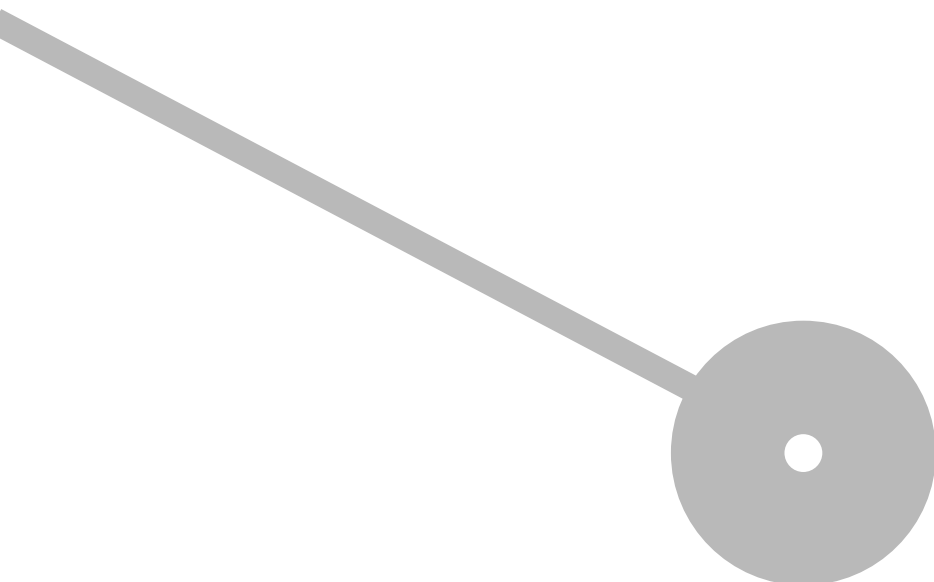
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MESTRADO  
EM CINEMA E FOTOGRAFIA  
ESPECIALIZAÇÃO EM FOTOGRAFIA

# Inner Landscapes: illusion and reality through photography

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**Inner Landscapes: illusion and reality through  
photography**

Master's Thesis of Project

**Master in Film and Photography - Specialization in Photography**

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Vila do Conde, october de 2025

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## RESUMO ANALÍTICO

"Paisagens Interiores: ilusão e realidade através da fotografia" é um projeto dedicado à interpretação, por meio da fotografia, das experiências interiores no contexto da perda de uma realidade estável. O ponto de partida foi a experiência pessoal de migração e de viver entre dois países, acompanhada pela perda do lar e a ruptura com o modo de vida anterior. Nessas circunstâncias, a fotografia torna-se uma prática meditativa e um meio de registrar percepções subjetivas – estados, memórias e respostas emocionais.

O projeto investiga como a memória pessoal, as associações e as sensações visuais moldam uma nova sensibilidade à realidade, que deixa de ser percebida como coesa e estável. Por meio de experimentações com Polaroid e técnicas como dupla exposição, reflexos, transferência de emulsão de Polaroid e cianotipia, são criadas imagens que expressam estados emocionais e mentais.

A linguagem visual do projeto remete para a estética da filosofia wabi-sabi, que valoriza o efêmero, o imperfeito e o incompleto.

Paralelamente à componente visual, o projeto inclui uma investigação teórica sobre as abordagens filosóficas e artísticas da percepção da realidade.

O projeto é uma tentativa de capturar o vestígio visual da paisagem interior – um espaço onde a história pessoal, a memória e o presente se fundem em imagens que expressam a fragilidade e a complexidade da experiência contemporânea. Ilusão e realidade entrelaçam-se nesse contexto: as memórias tornam-se tão significativas quanto os acontecimentos reais, e a imagem visual transforma-se numa forma de existência daquilo que escapa à fixação literal.

**Palavras-chave:** percepção subjetiva; memória; ilusão; realidade; fotografia; Polaroid; wabi-sabi.

## ABSTRACT

"Inner Landscapes: illusion and reality through photography" is a project dedicated to the interpretation through photography of inner experiences in the context of the loss of stable reality. The starting point was the personal experience of migration and living between two countries, accompanied by the loss of home and a break with the former way of life. In these circumstances, photography becomes a meditative practice and a way of recording subjective perceptions – states, memories, emotional responses.

The project explores how personal memory, associations, and visual sensations shape a new sensitivity to reality, which is no longer perceived as coherent and stable. Through experiments with Polaroid and techniques such as double exposure, reflections, Polaroid emulsion lift and cyanotype, images are created that convey emotional and mental states.

The visual language of the project refers to the aesthetics of the wabi-sabi philosophy, which values the ephemeral, imperfect, and incomplete.

Alongside the visual component, the project includes a theoretical investigation of philosophical and artistic approaches to the perception of reality.

The project is an attempt to capture the visual trace of the inner landscape – a space where personal history, memory, and the present merge into images that express the fragility and complexity of contemporary experience. Illusion and reality are intertwined in this context: memories become as significant as real events, and the visual image becomes a form of existence for that which eludes literal fixation.

**Keywords:** subjective perception; memory; illusion; reality; photography; Polaroid; wabi-sabi.

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## INTRODUCTION

The "Inner Landscapes" project emerged as an aesthetic and philosophical reflection on the internal and external changes caused by the loss of home, relocation to another country, and a break with the familiar patterns of life. These experiences led not only to practical changes but also to a profound transformation in perception: reality lost its clarity and integrity, and familiar points of reference ceased to function. In this state, photography ceased to be a tool for recording the external world and became a way of exploring what was happening inside. This gave rise to a desire to explore the boundary between reality and illusion as a zone of personal experience, formed at the intersection of memory, associations, and subjective view.

The general context of the project is related to rethinking the nature of reality in conditions of instability. The experience of migration and living between two countries – Canada and Portugal – as well as the inability to return to my homeland, Ukraine, reinforced the feeling of a gap: between the past and the present, between what was home and the new place you have to fit into while remaining internally outside of it. Home as it was, no longer exists – neither physically nor in feeling. A special state of being arises – living "in between," in uncertainty, where familiar landmarks lose their power. What remains real in this new perception? And is it possible to separate reality from illusion if it is no longer experienced as something complete and reliable, but breaks down into separate fragments, memories, sensations? These questions become the starting point for research.

Memories, sometimes fragmentary and fleeting, play an important role in this process. They become the fabric from which our perception of the present is woven. Having found myself in new places, I begin to see the familiar in the unfamiliar: reflections, light, movements of air – all these triggers are

flashes of memory. These memories are not described directly; rather, they are experienced as visual and physical states, as emotional echoes of the past. The inner landscape is composed precisely from the layering of these temporal strands – past and present, real and imagined.

The project focuses on the gap between the external world and internal perception. The necessity for a new visual language capable of expressing internal sensations arises. This marks a departure from my previous photographic practice, which was centered on capturing visible, external reality in a more direct and representational way. Transition to more introspective, poetic approach is not only aesthetic but also existential – a response to dislocation, uncertainty, and the dissolution of familiar reference points. The main research questions can be formulated as follows: Can photography become a means of expressing subjective experiences and inner states—things that cannot be literally depicted, including memories, associations, and feelings without a clear form? What is reality in conditions of instability—an objective external environment or an individually experienced construct?

The methodological basis of the project is built on the combination of artistic practice and philosophical reflection. Visually, the project is realized through work with Polaroid instant camera and experimental techniques – double exposure, shooting through reflective surfaces, random optical distortions, Polaroid emulsion lift, and cyanotype. The inspiration and methodological guide is the Japanese philosophy of wabi-sabi, which affirms the value of the imperfect, incomplete, and temporary. On a theoretical level, I draw on philosophical concepts of perception of reality (from Plato to postmodernism), as well as the works of photography researchers (Barthes, Bazin, Berger, Sontag, Krauss and others), who look at photography as a space where the objective and subjective are inseparable.

Thus, the research consists of two main parts. The theoretical part is devoted to the analysis of philosophical and photographic concepts of perception, image, and reality. The practical part is a visual study in which images become a way of recording inner experience. The project aims to show how photography can serve as a tool not for representing the external, but for visualizing the internal: memory, state of mind, mood, associative thinking.

In "Inner Landscapes", photography becomes a way and a form of reflection. It merges personal history, images of memory, and internal states that arise at the point of rupture with familiar reality. Changes, losses, shifts – all of this leaves a mark not only on external life, but also on perception. Work with these traces and with what remains inside has become the driving force of the project.

In this project, photography becomes a way and a form of thinking. It blends personal history, images of memory, and inner states that arise at the point of rupture with familiar reality. Changes, losses, shifts—all of this leaves a trail not only in external life, but also in perception. And working with this trace, with what remains inside, became the driving force behind the project.

## **PARTE 1 – Illusion and Reality: Philosophy, Art and Photography**

### **CHAPTER 1: PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF ILLUSION AND REALITY**

#### **1.1 The evolution of concepts from classical philosophy from Plato to postmodernism**

For a deeper understanding of the key concepts of my project—reality and illusion—it is necessary to refer to philosophical approaches that address issues of perception, subjectivity, and human interaction with the surrounding world. Such theoretical reflection allows not only to expand personal exploration of the boundaries between illusion and reality, but also to establish a connection between individual experiences of perception and universal questions of human existence.

The problem of reality occupies one of the central positions in epistemology, and the category “reality” itself has many meanings. Philosophy traditionally distinguishes between objective and subjective reality.

The term “reality” comes from the Latin *realitas* (realness, reality) and is related to the concept of *res* (thing), which indicates something existing, emphasizing the very fact of being. However, the understanding of reality has changed with the passage of time, reflecting the development of philosophical views on the nature of being and perception. Initially, reality was perceived as something material and definite. Over time, it became apparent that reality could exist beyond clear boundaries and object form, becoming more multivalent and complex.

The discourse on the nature of reality dates back to the works of ancient philosophers, among which the central place is occupied by the doctrine of *Plato*. The fundamental basis of his philosophy is the theory of ideas. According to Plato, the world is divided into two spheres: the world of ideas (*eidos*) and the world of sensual things. This concept is most vividly expressed in the allegory of the cave outlined in “*The Republic*” (2016) written around 375 BC. It compares earthly existence to the life of prisoners chained in the depths of a cave. They see

only shadows of objects reflected from the fire on the wall and take them to true reality. However, the real truth lies outside the cave - in the world of ideas, accessible only to rational cognition.

Plato argued that true reality is unchanging and eternal, while the material world is only an imperfect reflection of ideas. This dualism divided philosophers into two camps. Some recognize as real only what is accessible to sensual perception, while others, following the tradition of Plato, believe that the true essence is in the sphere of the immaterial. In the dialogue "The Sophist", Plato describes a dispute between the "giants," who hold a materialist view, believing that only the tangible is real, and their opponents, who argue that true existence lies in the world of intellectually comprehensible ideas and that the material world is only a changeable and transitory area of "becoming" (2022).

The opposite concept was introduced by *Aristotle*. As he noted in the *Treatise on Metaphysics*, the models of reality that existed before him, including Plato's idealism, did not satisfy him (2022). Unlike Plato, Aristotle maintained that the reasons for the Being of things should be found in the things themselves, not in the world of ideas. His model of reality gives self-sufficiency to nature and gives independent existence to physical objects. According to Aristotle, everything consists of four causes: form, substance, purpose, and motive force. This model is called realism.

One of the key concepts of Aristotelian philosophy is motion, which he regards as an inherent characteristic of reality. Movement, in turn, is measured by time, which is a measure of change (2022, p. 261).

Thus, two main models of reality are formed in antique philosophy - Plato's idealism and Aristotle's realism, which will be developed in later epochs and will become the basis of the Western philosophical tradition.

With the development of philosophical thought, views on the nature of reality have undergone significant changes. *David Hume*, for example, questioned the possibility of direct recognition of reality. In his "Treatise on Human Nature", Hume argued that all of our cognitive activity is reduced to perceptions, which he divided into two types: impressions and ideas. Impressions are vivid and vibrant experiences that arise directly from interaction with the world, while ideas are dimmer and weaker copies of these impressions. According to Hume, even our ideas about external objects cannot be shown to be independent of our perceptions.

In this way we do not deal with reality, but with our sensations of this reality, which for us are the real, unconditional and primary reality, that is, reality itself. What is the real world behind them, we will never know, because we are unable to "step out" of our sensations, to perceive what exists without them and apart from them? What do we feel and what is real are far from being the same thing, but only what is felt is available to us? Therefore, it may well be argued that reality is the totality of our sensations. We cannot say anything about real reality and are not able to discover it. We will always be unaware of the causes of what is happening, the connections of objects and events, and the interactions of things. (Gusev, 2014, pp. 65-66).

*John Locke's* doctrine of reality is largely based on his epistemological concept that all knowledge comes from experience. He concludes that reality is the objectively existing external world cognizable through experience. He rejected the existence of inborn ideas, arguing that the mind is tabula rasa from the beginning and that cognition is built on experience, which is made up of sensation and reflection.

An important element of his theory is the division of the qualities of objects into primary and secondary ones. Primary qualities, such as form, extension, motion and number, exist

independently from perception. Secondary qualities, on the other hand, according to Locke, do not belong to the objects themselves, but are only the result of their influence on our senses.

In the bodies themselves, there is nothing resembling these our ideas. In the bodies, which we name according to these ideas, there is only a power to produce those sensations in us (1960, p. 128).

Thereby, Locke concludes that human perception of the world is not an accurate reflection of reality. According to his concept, we do not perceive reality directly, but only through the prism of our sensations and experiences. A. Pirogov admits in his article devoted to Locke's epistemological concept:

Despite the fact that he did not define the reality existing in our consciousness as a concept, he definitely came to the conclusion about the inconsistency of judgments about the images of objects of the real world and their qualities, which caused the difference between the reality reflected in our consciousness and reality itself (2017, pp. 57-58).

In other words, Locke's reality is a set of objects possessing primary qualities, but perceived by us through secondary qualities that depend on the peculiarities of human perception.

The studies conducted by *I. Kant* were of no less importance in the development of ideas about reality. In Kant's works "reality" has two meanings. The first one consists in the opposition "reality - negation" and is accepted as a pure category of reason, determining the existence (of the object of experience) in time. When we perceive something (like seeing or hearing), we can say that this object exists, that it is real, because it exists in our perception and appears in time. This is what Kant calls reality as Being.

Reality, in the pure concept of the understanding, is that which corresponds to sensation in general; that is, a concept whose very nature points to existence in time. Negation is a concept that represents non-existence in time... The opposition of being and non-being lies in the distinction within one and the same time - in one case filled, in the other empty (2007, p. 161).

The second sense of reality is realized through the opposition "real - ideal" and is equated with objective reality. In this sense, reality is a qualitative characteristic of experience, it has intensity and degree. For example, sound can be loud or quiet, light bright or dim - all these are "degrees of reality" in our perception.

The transition from reality to negation makes it possible to represent all reality as a magnitude, and the scheme of reality as a quantity of something that fills time is precisely this continuous and monotonous generation of quantity in time, which consists in the fact that we gradually proceed in time from a sensation having a certain degree to its disappearance or from its negation to its magnitude (Kant, 1999, pp. 183-184).

Thus, Kant shows that reality in experience is not simply "is" or "is not" ("Being" or "Non-being"), but has a degree of expression, flooding time with one or another intensity of sensation. Reality in Kant is a category of quality.

Reality is inseparable from phenomena - things as they are for us. The world of appearances is confined to the subject; it is constituted by the subject (Kant, 2007, p. 80). Consequently, there are no phenomena (reality) outside the subject of the world. Reality is the way of human existence in the world. The human being is confined among the things that appear (Kant, 2007, p. 71). The thing itself is not given, so the comprehension of the world occurs through appearances, which largely depend on the cognitive abilities of a person.

In *Hegel's* philosophy, reality is not just things, but the space in which reason is realized. Unlike Kant, he does not see reality as subjectively constructed, he sees it as a meaningful and ordered reality in which the rational idea manifests itself.

Hegel distinguishes between reality and validity. The mere existence of a thing does not make it real. Only that what obeys the laws of reason and carries a certain idea can be real. According to I. Ilyin, in *Hegel's* philosophy, what is real is that which consists of essence (Wesen) and existence (Existenz). According to this, what consists of pure essence - philosophical

science in general and Logic in particular - retains the highest title of "reality" or "being". The combination of essence and existence will be called "real". However, not every combination of essence and existence deserves the "exalted" title of "reality." Only that what can be fully grasped through concepts is considered truly real in the world. First, this includes phenomena that completely conform to the laws of reason and logic. Second, it includes other phenomena only to the extent that they are involved in the life of reason and thought. Everything else that remains outside this framework is not fully real - it simply exists. However, this existence is not an illusion. It is also part of reason, although it depends on experience and time, and does not completely coincide with the concept. Only that what fully corresponds to its concept and is a manifestation of pure reason is real in the full sense (Ilyin, 1994, p. 224).

Reality according to Hegel is "the unity of essence and existence" (2005, p. 482). He distinguishes between absolute reality, formal reality, and real reality. Formal reality determines form, so "it contains directly in itself being, or possibility" (2005, p. 495). In other words, formal reality contains potency as a possibility of real reality.

Real reality, as such, is first of all a thing with many qualities, an existing world; but it is not an existence that dissolves in phenomena, and as reality it is at the same time in-itself-existence and reflection-in-itself; it persists in the variety of mere existence; its external is an internal relation only to itself (2005, p. 499).

In postmodernism, against the background of changes in society and culture, the idea emerges that reality is not something stable and fixed.

Since the 1970s, French philosopher *Jean Baudrillard* has been developing an original system of understanding reality in terms of "simulacrum" and "hyper reality", which serve as the basis for his critique of postmodern culture. In his famous work "Simulacrum and Simulations" (1981), he solves for himself the

problem of reference, the search for the "reality" and "real equivalent" of the sign.

As V. Serkova notes, he defines four stages of the interaction of the sign with reality: the reflection by the sign of some underlying reality; its distortion in the sign; masking the loss of connection with reality, the violation of referential relations; the loss of the basis in reality and the transition to forms of simulation and simulacra (2017, p. 94).

Baudrillard introduces the concept of "simulacrum", which he borrows from the vocabulary of the Stoics, and which he uses as a correlate of reality as a characteristic of authenticity, surrogate, absence and substitution of reality by its copies (Serkova, 2017, p. 94). The simulacrum ontologically perverts that it imitates and what can be conventionally called "primary reality". "Degradation into the inauthentic" is a direct consequence of the simulacrum's ability to reproduce reality. The simulacrum manifests "the perfect form of that immateriality, that marginal differentiation through which the personalized relation of the individual to his things can be operated" (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 58).

In Baudrillard's interpretation, simulation means the acquisition of self-sufficient reality by signs, images and symbols. J. Baudrillard believes that today the development of human civilization is going in the direction of establishing a world of simulations, which literally spread to all spheres of social life (1981, c. 56).

The situation with the approval and spread of simulations of the real world, which is now difficult or almost impossible to describe with the help of traditionally accepted, rational scientific tools. It becomes impossible to answer the question of which reality is true, or at least which is more real. But it is obvious that simulations have become, to put it mildly, certain realities that blur the meanings of contemporary and

historical events, deprive people of memory, of their aspirations to comprehend the truth.

As Baudrillard writes: "The very definition of reality says: it is what can be equivalently reproduced" (1981, c. 194). This definition emerged at the same time with science, which postulates that any process can be accurately reproduced under given conditions. As a result of this reproductive process, it turns out that reality is not just something that can be reproduced, but something that is always already reproduced.

Philosophy thus offers us various ways to understand reality, from its objective existence to its representation as a construct of perception or illusion. Reality for us is not only what exists independently of us, but also what we create in the process of perception, communication and interpretation. The nature of true reality remains a contested issue, with each philosophical framework proposing its own interpretation of this enduring question. The deeper a person understands the world, the easier it is for him to comprehend the complexity of the real world. It is not reality that becomes more complex, but our knowledge of it. Reality is not homogeneous, it includes certain states that become actual in the circumstances corresponding to them.

In the process of conceptualizing my practice, I discovered an internal tension between two seemingly opposing philosophical positions - Plato's idea of a true reality existing beyond sensory experience, and Jean Baudrillard's postmodern view that, in the contemporary world, all reality dissolves into endless representations and simulacra.

On the one hand, I feel a strong affinity with Plato's notion of a higher, immaterial truth that lies beyond our direct perception but can be approached through contemplation and reflection. This philosophical aspiration is mirrored in my photographic search for the "authentic" - whether it be the feeling of home, a lost sense of peace, or an elusive emotional

state. These elements appear to me as "reflections" of something more real than the reality in which I exist.

On the other hand, I cannot ignore Baudrillard's perspective, which argues that in contemporary culture, the boundary between reality and its image has disappeared. We live in a world where signs and images replace reality, and personal memory, media, and visual codes become the primary mediators of perception.

## **1.2 The role of subjective perception of reality: as a philosophical basis for art.**

The relationship between objective and subjective elements in creative expression is one of the central themes in philosophical and aesthetic discourse. The relationship between objective and subjective elements in a creative expression is one of the central themes in philosophical and aesthetic discourse. Roza Tukayeva, in her article "*Objective and Subjective in Pictorial Reality*" (2017, pp. 115-121), explores how these two aspects coexist in the artistic process. She argues that the artist's vision is inevitably shaped by personal experience, emotions, and cultural background, all of which contribute to the uniqueness of the outcome. At the same time, even the most subjective responses retain traces of objectivity, as they emerge through interaction with the external world.

To create a work of art means to make a new reality which is not identical with either nature or the artist, and which adds to both what each owes to the other. To create an artwork means to add to the repertoire of known objects some unforeseen thing which has no other purpose than aesthetic and no other laws than those of plasticity (Ovsyannikov, 1975, p. 172).

Every visual work contains objective, material components: in painting—canvas, pigment, brushes; in sculpture — stone, metal, or clay; in photography — light, lens, and sensor. However, a meaningful creation is not a simple accumulation of materials. Rather, it is the result of the author's personal interpretation and subjective engagement with the world.

The creative act involves more than mere representation. An author does not just mirror external reality—they filter it through memory, emotion, and imagination. Canvas and paint, form and texture, light and shadow become vehicles for expressing inner vision. Even when working with seemingly objective forms, the maker infuses them with meaning by selecting what to highlight, how to interpret what is seen, and what to emphasize.

In addition, the process of creating is not just a mechanical application of paint to canvas or working with stone and light, but an act of interpretation. The artist does not fix reality as it is, but reinterprets it, transforming it into a new image. Even if the work strives for realism, it remains subjective, because the very selection of elements, foreshortening, and accents is already an act of the author's will.

Sigmund Freud, considering the role of art in the psychology of the artist, viewer or reader, comes to the conclusion that art is evidence of the artist's unconscious conflicts. For Freud, art is a symbol of some state of the mind to be deciphered, primarily a manifestation of the unconscious that needs to be realized. From Freud's point of view, art is driven to its creator by deep unconscious experiences, and the effect of an artwork lies in releasing the viewer or reader from such psychological tension. But the artist, in most cases, does not simply express his unconscious drives, in the process of creation he softens, masks with the help of means that evoke aesthetic pleasures, that is, artistic form, technique, and so on.

Such a pleasure offered to us, such an attraction offered to us, making possible the birth with it of a greater pleasure from deep-seated psychic sources, may be called an enticing premium or preliminary pleasure. In my opinion, all aesthetic pleasure given to us by an artist is of the character of such preliminary pleasure, and the real pleasure of an artistic work arises from the release of tensions in our souls (Freud, 1995, pp. 12-13).

Agreeing with Tukaeva's position, it can be stated that the process of creation is an interaction between the external world and the author's inner perception and has both objective and subjective sides. Creativity is the production of the new comprehension of unknown connections between the subjects and phenomena of the external and internal world. At the same time, as Tukayeva notes, the material for creating and comprehending the new is the information accumulated and fixed in memory, engrams that are formed and stored for use in the future (2017). These marks from the external world, refracted through personal perception, take material form in a visual work, creating a new representational reality. This new reality combines both material and ideal elements: it cannot exist without physical means of expression (canvas, paints, etc.), which allow the creator to realize their ideas. However, these materials themselves do not turn into artwork if the author's mind has not formed an image of the future creation.

The theory of subjectivity in art is also supported by Marcel Duchamp. He argues that art is not just "things made up of colors on canvas and framed in frames" (Cabanne, 2019, p. 9), but any new subjectivity that the artist strives to show to others, creativity is now not necessarily creation, but it is incomparably more - a worldview and its transmission to others.

In the process of creating a work, the artist not only realizes his/her ideas, but also, perhaps, solves personal inner questions. Similarly, the spectator, perceiving art, finds something in it that responds to his or her individual perception, helping to make sense of his or her own experiences. In this sense, art can even serve as a way to release mental tension, a point that Sigmund Freud wrote about.

Each work carries the idea of its creator, but each viewer interprets it in his or her own way, filling it with new meaning. Objective and subjective aspects of art are closely intertwined: a work is created due to the author's individual vision and his

choice of means, and then it is reconsidered by each new viewer, passing through the prism of his perception. This interaction makes art alive and multifaceted.

The importance of this interaction between author and viewer in the process of creating art was also emphasized by Duchamp. He considered that a work of art is not complete without the participation of the perceiver, who brings his or her own personal experience and interpretation. Moreover, Duchamp admits that the primary place in art is occupied by the viewer. "... art is declared to be art by those who look at it" (Cabanne, 2019, pp. 170-171). The interaction between the spectator and the creator is always important, but the viewer is still the first one who gives value to the painting by evaluating it. In this regard, Duchamp states: "The viewer always has the last word" (Hugill, 2017, p. 51).

## **CHAPTER 2: WABI-SABI AS A WAY TO INVESTIGATE REALITY THROUGH IMPERFECTION**

### **2.1 Archetype of Beauty in Wabi-Sabi Philosophy**

In the context of studying the perception of reality and illusion, the aesthetics of wabi-sabi take on special significance. This philosophy presents a unique vision of the world in which imperfection and transience become sources of beauty and profound meaning. This worldview allows us to move from abstract concepts to more sensual and intuitive perceptions of truth, emphasizing that reality is not a static and objective entity, but a dynamic process that combines stability and change, clarity and ambiguity, fact and interpretation.

Wabi-sabi is in some ways a mysterious and elusive aesthetic worldview that influences Eastern lifestyles, especially in Japan. However, its principles resonate far beyond Japanese culture as well.

Defining wabi-sabi is not easy. It is like trying to explain what love is. We can say what love means to us and how we experience it, but everyone will only understand the true meaning by feeling it for themselves.

According to the Japanese, it is an elusive sense of true beauty that permeates all living things and is unattainable for everything "polished" and symmetrical (Kanagawa, 2020, p. 6).

As Leonard Koren points out although almost every Japanese claims to understand the feeling of wabi-sabi - very few can articulate it (Koren, 2008, p. 15).

According to Andrew Juniper, wabi-sabi can be defined as "if an object or expression can bring about, within us, a sense of serene melancholy and a spiritual longing" (Juniper, 2003).

Beth Kempton, in her book "Wabi Sabi. Japanese Secrets to True Happiness in a Non-ideal World", calls wabi-sabi an intuitive response to beauty that reflects the true nature of life. It is a state of heart that allows one to accept and appreciate the impermanent, imperfect, and incomplete beauty of

all things (2018, pp. 15-18). She emphasizes that wabi-sabi is not about looking from the outside, but about total immersion, abandoning strategy in favor of feeling, being willing to slow down and pay attention (Kempton, 2018, p. 19).

Its impact is felt in everything, but you won't be able to notice it anywhere. People instinctively understand what the concept of wabi-sabi is, but only a few talk about it aloud - it is a remarkable mystery that whispers deep wisdom to those who can slow down enough to hear the whisper and embrace it with an open heart. In other words, it is not what we see, but how we see.

This perception of the beauty of the unobvious, elusive and imperfect was perfectly expressed by the Yoshida Kenko, a Buddhist monk:

Cherry blossoms are better after they scatter, the moon is better on nights when it rains (Kempton, 2018, p. 29).

These words are the core of the philosophy: beauty is not in the lushness of the blossom, but in its completion, not in the clear moon, but in its shade. Beauty lives in silence, in the rainy night, in the scattered petals, in those moments that are easy to miss if we do not learn to see differently.

Andrew Juniper explains modern man's attraction to this Eastern worldview:

It's a call to appreciate a cracked vase, a quiet rainy day, the impermanence of things. It is an alternative to today's world - fast-changing, mass-oriented. Wabi-sabi reminds us to slow down and look for comfort in the simple things around us (Kanagawa, 2020, p. 7).

In the same vein, Kanagawa (2020) highlights that Japanese philosophy encourages us to focus on the great value of every moment of our life - sadly, a rather short one - and to find pleasure and peace in it. To do this, all we have to do is to accept everything as it is (Kanagawa, 2020, p. 7).

At its core, wabi-sabi is not a single concept, but rather a combination of two separate but interrelated aesthetic ideas:

wabi and sabi. Understanding these separate components is key to realizing the overall philosophy.

"Wabi" originally meant the unhappiness and loneliness of living in nature, away from society. Meanwhile, "sabi" meant cold, thin and wilted. Over time, these words took on a more positive connotation as they became closely associated with Zen Buddhism and the spiritual richness of material poverty.

Wabi is beauty in simplicity, finding spiritual richness and serenity through detachment from the material world. Sabi is related to the passage of time: everything grows, changes, ages, decays. The aging changes the visual nature of all things (*Kempton, 2018, p. 24*).

In the 16th century, the tea master Sen-no Rikyu established the three fundamental principles of wabi-sabi: 1) Nothing is eternal; 2) Nothing is complete; 3) Nothing is perfect (*Ignatovich, 1997, p. 233*). These principles reflect the underlying notion that beauty exists not in grandeur, but in subtle, often overlooked details.

At least once in our lives, each of us has felt that subtle, hard-to-explain feeling when our eyes linger on something touchingly imperfect: a fading flower, a worn coat with scuffs, or a house warped by time. At such moments it becomes both warm and a little sad. A special, quiet emotional range emerges, in which nostalgia, tenderness and calmness intertwine. We don't have a word to express it, but the Japanese do.

"Greatness" exists in inconspicuous and overlooked details. Wabi-sabi represents the exact opposite of the Western ideal of great beauty as something monumental, spectacular, and enduring. Wabi-sabi is not found in nature at moments of bloom and lushness, but at moments of inception or subsiding. Wabi-sabi is not about gorgeous flowers, majestic trees, or bold landscapes. Wabi-sabi is about the minor and the hidden, the tentative and the ephemeral: things so subtle and evanescent they are invisible to vulgar eyes (*Koren, 2008, p. 50*).

Wabi-sabi appears not only as a philosophical category, but also as a tangible aesthetic expressed through the material world. It is embodied in objects that deny brilliance, symmetry

and perfection in favor of simplicity, naturalness and traces of time.

Things wabi-sabi are expressions of time frozen. They are made of materials that are visibly vulnerable to the effects of weathering and human treatment. They record the sun, wind, rain, heat, and cold in a language of discoloration, rust, tarnish, stain, warping, shrinking, shriveling, and cracking. Their nicks, chips, bruises, scars, dents, peeling, and other forms of attrition are a testament to histories of use and misuse (Koren, 2008, p. 62).

Materials are often chosen to emphasize the fluidity and vulnerability of life: raw wood, clay, stone, paper, metal with a patina of oxidation. Scuffs, cracks, patina are not defects, but evidence of time lived. In this logic, aging becomes not destruction, but enrichment, accumulation of experience.

Also, Koren notes that the color palette of wabi-sabi is characterized by an endless spectrum of grays, browns, and blacks. Rarely, wabi-sabi items may also be in light, almost pastel colors, which is associated with a recent emergence from oblivion (Koren, 2008, p. 71).

Wabi-sabi aesthetics rejects brightness and excess in favor of silence and pause. It values space, understatement, unfilledness. What is left "raw," "unfinished," does not require to be completed - on the other hand, that is its beauty. This is how a special type of contemplation emerges: not admiration of perfection, but a warm acceptance of the imperfect, the temporary, the fragile.

Wabi-sabi is an antidote to the slick, glamorous aesthetics of contemporary consumer society. It teaches that value and beauty are found not despite imperfections, but because of them. It encourages us to accept and appreciate life as it is, in all its fragility, imperfection, and transience.

Accepting fleeting beauty may be colored by a slight melancholy, but the lesson of this philosophy is in the ability to enjoy the moment for what it is, without expecting perfection. Our scratches, dents, failures are reminders of experience. And

to erase them is to reject the very essence of a life lived. Wabi-sabi encourages us not to wait for the perfect moment, but to appreciate the here and now.

We are all unique: our life experiences, strengths and weaknesses, mistakes and triumphs add up to a complex but whole person. It is our imperfections and vulnerabilities that make us truly beautiful. We don't have to be perfect to live and appreciate ourselves. We can move forward by changing and growing, accepting ourselves and the world around us in all its non-ideal but living and real wholeness.

For a long time, I have strived to build an ideal picture of my life. Everything had to be right, beautiful, logical - as if according to some script that I wrote myself or borrowed from others. But life, as it turned out, does not obey these schemes. It makes its own changes - sharp, unexpected, sometimes painful. And the more I tried to hold on to this illusion of an ideal, the clearer I felt how everything was slipping away.

Discovering the philosophy of wabi-sabi was a moment of liberation for me. It allowed me to see that we don't have to be perfect, just as life itself is not about perfection, but about fluidity, about cracks, about instability. And that's exactly where beauty lies. These swings between hope and disappointment, between light and shadow - they are what make the experience alive. Because if you scrub everything to a shine, leaving only the smooth, shiny "sweetness" - at some point it becomes luscious. Like cotton candy that beckons at first and then leaves a slight nausea.

And in the imperfections - my decisions, my path, my perspective - I began to find authenticity. And that authenticity turned out to make more sense than any perfect picture. Realizing that everything is temporary, imperfect, and not subject to rules allows me to see myself and my experiences as inherently unique - and therefore beautiful. Life ceased to be a linear project

with a final point of idealization and began to be perceived as a process open to change, mistakes, unexpected turns.

Thus, wabi-sabi becomes not just a philosophical reference point, but also a tool for realizing personal identity.

The realization of imperfection and impermanence became the key to a different perception of memory. Memories are not frozen images, but moving, fragile structures, subject to distortion by time and emotion. Wabi-sabi made it possible to see in these mosaics of the past not loss but value: in the half-erased images, in sensations that cannot be reproduced accurately, a genuine connection to what was. These scraps of memory, incomplete and shaky, form an internal topography in which change, loss and chance make sense. They do not require a perfect form - they live in the cracks and pauses, preserving the warmth of the lived.

## **2.2 Wabi-Sabi in contemporary photography**

As Cooper writes in his article "The Wabi Sabi Way: Antidote for a Dualistic Culture?": "Wabi sabi art challenges, it does not simply present objects for contemplation. The challenge is to view things with muga (no mind), thus seeing them as they truly are and involve oneself in understanding the metaphorical representations of universal forces of impermanence, imperfection, and the cycle of creation and decay. The challenge is to unlearn reason and simply see clearly, without pretense and without intellect" (2018, p. 17).

Wabi-sabi is not so much the physical aesthetics of objects as it is the practice of seeing: the ability of the observer to notice that imperfect, temporary, and elusive things are the ones with the true beauty. In photography, this worldview can manifest itself both in the choice of subjects and in the technical realization of the image itself.

Imperfection can be captured in the object - in the marks of time on the wall, in the dim light, in the cracked ceramics. Or it can be integrated into the image-making process - through

imperfect cameras, intentional "mistakes", distortions and manipulations, whether during filming or in printing.

We can speak about two main approaches to the embodiment of wabi-sabi in the technique of photography:

1. Philosophical (organic) - emphasis on slowing down, acceptance and contemplation. This approach is expressed through the use of analog photography, hand printing, and working with imperfect materials. Photography becomes not so much a document as a meditative practice, or ritual.

2 Technological (intentional) - conscious use of technical "defects": high ISO, blurring through camera movement, long exposures or multiple exposures, optical distortions, incorrect white balance. These techniques become a tool to express instability and transience.

So, wabi-sabi in contemporary photography is an area of freedom, a space for experimentation, where imperfections are not eliminated, but carefully emphasized and used as an expressive tool.

Inspired by this aesthetic, contemporary photographers are increasingly looking to escape from the technically "perfect" image. Blurriness, noise, defects in developing or printing become an opportunity rather than a mistake. It is an aesthetic not of a hermetic form, but of a breathable trace as if a faded memory.

Even those who do not refer directly to the philosophy of wabi-sabi often intuitively share its spirit. In their images we see an acceptance of imperfection, the honesty of the moment, and emotional vulnerability. Examples include Dolores Marat, whose images seem composed of color and breath, and Nan Goldin, whose visual confessions are imbued with sincerity and traces of life.

Although *Nan Goldin* may not be directly oriented to the wabi-sabi aesthetic, her photographs intuitively resonate with its core principles of acceptance of imperfection, authenticity,

and emotional honesty. Her most famous work "*The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*" (1986) is a raw visual diary of the photographer's own life and her intimate circle, reflecting the extremes of human experience—from tenderness to turmoil, from love to loss. Goldin's photographs often violate the traditional canons of photography: they are slightly out of focus, shot in bad lighting, with blur or noise, in violation of compositional "rules". But this is what gives them their power. These images can be called "unpolished intimacy" - they don't just show; they make us feel. A technically perfect photo could be a clear representation of a scene, but it would lose its vividness, emotional density and sense of spontaneity. Imperfection here becomes an expressive tool that gives birth to individuality and makes each picture meaningful.

In this way, Goldin's work can be seen as an example of intuitive wabi-sabi - one that does not rely on philosophical treatises, but embodies the essence: honesty, uninviting, respect for the fragility of life and the emotional trace of the moment. As in wabi-sabi aesthetics, there is no striving for the ideal, but rather an acceptance of reality as it is, with all its roughness, pain and warmth.



Font: (Goldin, 2012)

Figure 1 - Greer and Robert on the bed, New York City. Photograph (Goldin, 1982)

*Dolores Marat* is known for her dreamy, poetic images that capture fleeting moments with a feeling of mystery and nostalgia. Her work is characterized by a soft, almost airy color palette, often achieved through the use of unconventional printing techniques.

Marat's work, in my opinion, resonates deeply with the philosophy we are considering. Her photographs are far from glossy perfection, they are imbued with a sense of the fragility of the moment, personal memory and the elusive poetry of the everyday.

She describes herself as an instinctive photographer and doesn't set strict rules for herself. She lets her impressions be the guide. Her work is formed as a spontaneous emotional response to the world - it is a visual diary of feelings that have arisen during accidental meetings, wanderings, or in everyday silence. It is a rejection of intentionality and acceptance of chance as the essence of the process. Marat is not

so much interested in the outward appearance of things as in how they respond in herself. She says: "I don't retouch, I don't crop, I don't change the color, I only keep the photos that convey the emotions I feel. If there is no emotion, I throw them away" (Muriel, 2013).

Marat consciously refuses to interfere in the image - her shots remain as they were at the moment of experiencing, with preserving all their "raw" emotional texture. This acceptance of chance and relinquishment of control is the essence of wabi-sabi in practice. In addition, as in Japanese aesthetics, where silence and emptiness as a space for contemplation play an important role, Marat's photographs are dominated by muted, soft light and shadow. Her subjects are often solitary figures, animals, shadowy alleys, forgotten spaces - everything that exists as if on the border of the visible. These images seem as if they are holding their breath, they whisper rather than shout, opening up space for the viewer to make personal associations.

Marat says: "When I see something, I tell stories to me. More or less fabricated memories..." (Muriel, 2013). This resonates with the wabi-sabi principle that things do not speak directly, but only hint, leaving a space for an inner response.

In an era of digital oversaturation of visual information, where speed and impact are valued, the works of Dolores Marat do the opposite - they slow down. In this, too, the Japanese philosophy can be read. Her images are not a document, but a meditative space where it is possible to stop and listen to the silence. Thus, Marat's visual language is not only formally but also philosophically close to wabi-sabi aesthetics. Her photographs reveal the ideas of impermanence, ambiguity and beauty of an imperfect world - a world seen through the prism of personal vulnerability and poetic perception.



Figure 2 - The New York Opera Dancer. Photograph (Marat, 2000). Source: [https://www.visavisphoto.com/archives2009/marat\\_march09/marat4.html](https://www.visavisphoto.com/archives2009/marat_march09/marat4.html)



Figure 3 - Exiting the Les Gobelins Metro Station, Paris. Photograph (Marat, 1996). Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2023/aug/02/dolores-marat-dreamlike-colours-in-pictures>

Japanese photographer *Masao Yamamoto* occupies a special place. His photographs do not just correspond to the spirit of wabi-sabi - they embody it on a profound level. His works can be characterized as poetic, intimate and deeply meditative, they are reminiscent of traditional Chinese painting, especially his ruthless use of negative space and emptiness not only within but also outside the frames of his images. His photography is not simply visual art, but rather a philosophical reflection, a subtle attempt to capture the elusive. His images are often weathered, scratched, tea tinted, hand aged, as if they have already lived a life. The trace of time can be felt in them.

Yamamoto explores the emotional power of photography, creating small-scale silver gelatin prints that highlight the relationship between photography and memory. He works with a range of subject matter, from the nude female body to the landscapes and natural wildlife that he encounters in the Japanese countryside (Yancey Richardson Gallery, n.d.).

As he says in his interviews:

Japanese haiku poems, established in Edo Period, consist of only 17 syllables. They are probably the shortest poetry in the world. Photography is often compared to haiku, which I have come to realize myself. ... I make my photographs with as little information as possible and invite viewers to use my images to create their inner peace (Ong, 2024).

As you can see, my photos are small and seem old. In fact, I work so that they're like that. I could wait 30 years before using them, but that's impossible. So, I must age them. I take them out with me on walks, I rub them with my hands, this is what gives me my desired expression. This is called the process of forgetting or the production of memory. Because in old photos the memories are completely manipulated and it's this that interests me and this is the reason that I do this work (LensCulture, n.d.)



Figure 4 - A Box of Ku #155. Photograph (Yamamoto, 1995). Gelatin silver print. Source: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/yamamoto-masao-a-box-of-ku-number-155>



Figure 5 - AM#30. Photograph (Yamamoto, n.d.). Ambrotype printed. Source: <https://www.gallery51.com/exhibition/yamamoto-masao-tomosu/>

### CHAPTER 3: PHILOSOPHY OF PHOTOGRAPHY: EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE REAL

Historically, photography has been seen as an objective evidence of reality. However, with the development of philosophy and arts criticism, it became clear that photography was more than just a mechanical recording of reality.

French film theorist and critic *André Bazin*, in his essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1945), considers photography as a transfer of the reality of an object into its reproduction. According to him, an image may be blurred, fuzzy, or even lacking documentary value, but it still has the power of impact due to the process of its emergence and its ontological relationship with the model (Savchuk, 2005, p. 25). Instead of analyzing criteria of truth and representation of an image, Bazin suggests that photography should be seen as an addition to reality: "Photography adds something to the natural creation, rather than substituting it with another" (Savchuk, 2005, p. 25). He emphasizes that the aesthetic power of photography lies in its ability to reveal the real, capturing fleeting details and gestures that might otherwise remain unnoticed in the complex structures of the everyday world (Savchuk, 2005, p. 25).

*Siegfried Kracauer* - German writer, sociologist, film theorist, also recognizing the absolute independence of the world of photographic images, declares the closeness of photography to reality:

The specific, distinctive properties of photography are its realistic tendency with alienating reproduction and form-forming possibilities. At the same time, it has affinity with "non-staged reality", striving for "emphasizing the accidental", for elements of the 'infinite' and 'indefinable' in the flow of life (1964, p. 42).

Kracauer was one of the first to introduce the concept of the "photographic" into academic discourse, by which he meant a special quality inherent both in the photograph itself and in the process of its creation. As noted by A. Guk in his article

"Ontological Aspects of Photography in the Context of Foreign Studies of the Twentieth Century" Kracauer's concept of the photographic is revealed in three aspects: 1) in relation to the material of photography (i.e., actual reality); 2) in relation to its inherent tendencies; 3) in terms of the particular appeal of photographic images (2024, p. 18).

According to Kracauer, the true essence of photography is revealed when the photographer focuses not on personal interpretation of reality, but on careful observation and disclosure of nature itself. The author should not strive for artistic expression in the conventional sense; their task is to uncover meaning through selection and observation. This selection involves choosing the subject, defining the frame boundaries, selecting the optics, and determining the type of photosensitive medium. Thus, the photographer's formative activity lies not in inventing something new, but in the precise and deliberate extraction of elements from the real world.

Photographic thinking requires a particular state of mind – one he describes as melancholic. This is not so much an emotional sadness as it is a disposition toward a distanced perception of the world, allowing the photographer to dissolve into the surrounding environment and avoid imposing their own ego. In this approach, the photographer abandons any pre-constructed concept and remains open to the unpredictability of the moment.

Photography aimed at capturing genuine life, by its very nature, drawn to recording the accidental and the spontaneous. This is reflected in the image through a sense of incompleteness or open-endedness in what is depicted, which in turn evokes in the viewer a feeling of semantic openness. According to Kracauer, it is precisely this quality that endows photography with special significance: it becomes not only a means of preserving memory, but also a way of aesthetically comprehending the world.

This dual quality – the combination of realism and estrangement – gives photography its unique expressive power. On the one hand, photography is capable of accurately recording the external world, including its unpredictable and uncontrollable fragments. On the other hand, it always contains an element of interpretation and transformation, which emerges already at the moment of choosing the angle, focal length, or composition of the frame. It is precisely this that allows photography to go beyond mere documentary reproduction, granting the captured moments a philosophical depth.

*Roland Barthes* takes a complex position on photography, viewing it both as evidence of authenticity and as a system of signs open to interpretation: "Photography does not invent anything, it is the very assertion of authenticity" (1997, p. 48).

At this level, photography is perceived by Barthes as a direct denotation, that is, a literal representation of reality without code. Photography exists as a trace, as an imprint of what has happened, and in this sense is closer to reality than any other image.

However, in other works – specifically, in the articles "The Imagination of the Sign" and "The Photographic Message" – Barthes introduces a more complex understanding of photography as a dual phenomenon.

The paradox of photography lies in the coexistence of two messages – one without a code (the photographic analog of reality) and the other with a code ("art", processing, "writing", the rhetoric of photography) (2003, p. 206).

In other words, photography operates on two levels. The first is its basic meaning (denotation), that is the literal depiction of reality. The second is its hidden meaning (connotation), which depends on the historical and cultural context (Barthes, 1991, p. 142). "Connotation is the overlaying of a secondary meaning onto the photo message itself" (Barthes, 2003, p. 207), and this meaning is always created by a particular

society, which means that the perception of photography changes with time.

"The connotative code appears to be neither "natural" nor "artificial", but historical - or rather, cultural; gestures, postures, expressions, colors, or effects are its signs, which are endowed with certain meanings by reason of their application in a particular society" (2003, p. 210).

It is precisely on this second level that photography becomes a system of signs, subject to interpretation, manipulation, and cultural encoding. At this point, it is no longer merely a reflection of reality, but a representation that creates an illusory sense of objectivity. To explain how this illusion of naturalness is constructed, Barthes introduces the concept of myth - a key category in his semiotic theory.

According to Barthes, myth is the process of transforming historically conditioned ideas into something that appears "natural" and self-evident. "Myth is not a lie, neither a sincere confession, it is a distortion" (1989, p. 95). This distortion enables myth, as Barthes notes, "to eliminate reality" (1991, p. 45), replacing it with signs, symbols, and codes that are taken for granted. In this way, the function of myth becomes one of concealing the historical and cultural construction of meaning - "the function of myth is to deform" (1989, p. 86) - and to present these meanings as if they were part of a natural and unquestionable order. Photography, he notes, is among the material supports through which mythical meaning is conveyed (1989, p. 78). So, it may appear to be a pure document, but its content is always shaped by cultural codes.

In this way, the ontology of photography in Barthes is inherently dual. On the one hand, it is an empirical trace - a record of what has been, a direct imprint of the real. On the other hand, it is always subject to interpretation, coding, and ideological framing, capable of participating in the

construction of myths. For Barthes, photography is both reality and its cultural interpretation.

In "On Photography" (1977), *Susan Sontag* explores the nature and role of photographs in society and their impact on our perception of reality.

Once created as a way of truthfully capturing and preserving reality, photography simultaneously irreversibly alters that reality, and our perception of it, and ultimately our thinking itself.

She considers photography as a tool that both expands and limits our perception of reality. Photography, according to Sontag, changes the whole way we interact with the world. It trains us to see, but it does so in a particular way - through images that appear objective but in fact are interpretations. It refers back to Plato's idea: the people in the cave mistake shadows for reality, just as we often mistake photographs for truth itself. And it is with this reference that her book begins:

Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth. But being educated by photographs is not like being educated by older, more artisanal images.... Insatiability of the photographing eye changes the terms of confinement in the cave, our world.... In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe (2013, p. 12).

However, photography doesn't just create an illusion - it shapes a new reality. It does not only capture the world, but also sets what is worth of attention. The camera guides the gaze, and thus the photographic image becomes not only a reflection but also a construct of reality. In this sense, we can say that photography is not just an illusion, but something more: a tool for creating a new perception of the world. Sontag emphasizes the paradox of photography: on the one hand, it has the illusion of authenticity, and on the other hand, it is the product of artistic choice, manipulation, and interpretation.

Despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work

that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth (Sontag, 2013, p. 16).

We trust the photographic image as much as we trust our eyes. But Sontag reminds us that the photographer is not just an observer, but a creator who makes decisions: what to include in the frame and what to leave out; what perspective and composition to choose; what exposure, color treatment, or effect to apply. These decisions turn photography into an act of artistic expression, not just a mirror image of reality (2013, p. 17).

As Sontag emphasizes, "the photograph is a thin slice of space as well as time". In a world dominated by the photographic image, the boundaries of the frame become open to arbitrariness: everything can be separated from everything else by simply enclosing it in a frame, and vice versa.

The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. Each photograph is a surface, but it is the surface that encourages the viewer to think: what is hidden behind this outer layer? What is reality if it looks like this? The photograph becomes not a document, but a provocation for the senses and intuition, a visual stimulus for reflection. The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: 'There is the surface. Now think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way' (Sontag, 2013, pp. 37-38)

*John Berger* notes that photography always holds a duality: on the one hand, it is an attempt to "capture what is seen" and on the other hand, by its very nature, it always refers to what is not visible. It isolates, preserves and presents a moment taken out of the continuum. The power of photography is determined by its internal references. Its reference to the natural world beyond the painted surface is never direct - it operates with equivalents (2014, pp. 9-10)

Berger emphasizes that photography does not possess its own language in the way painting does, which "translates" the world into artistic forms. He writes: "You learn to read photographs like you learn to read footprints or cardiograms" (2014, pp. 9-10).

The meaning of the image, therefore, is always external to it and shaped by the context in which it is perceived.

Although a photograph appears to be a direct witness of reality, its power lies in its ability to show not only what is present in the image, but also what remains beyond it.

A photograph is effective when the chosen moment which it records contains a quantum of truth which is generally applicable, which is as revealing about what is absent from the photograph as about what is present in it. This truth can manifest itself in various ways - through facial expression, gesture, juxtaposition of images, visual ambiguity, or compositional structure. However, its existence is not objective; it depends on the viewer's ability to interpret and reconstruct the meaning of the photograph (Berger, 2014, p. 10)

Photography has a unique position between art, document and image of reality. As Berger writes, "photographs appear to us as works of art, as testimonies of concrete truth, as images that bear a resemblance to news stories" (2014, p. 11). However, photography is not only a way of capturing reality, but also a tool for making sense of it. "In fact, every photograph is a tool for verifying, confirming and constructing a self-contained judgment of reality. It does not simply reflect the world, but offers an interpretation of it, forcing the viewer to reassess the boundaries of the visible and invisible (2014, p. 11).

Although Berger and Sontag share many similarities in their views on photography, both authors agree that photography has an impact on the perception of the world. Berger notes that photography is "a means of verifying, confirming, and constructing a self-contained judgment of reality." Sontag speaks of the "insatiability of the photographic gaze" that forms a new picture of the world, changing the very nature of how we see. However, Berger speaks of photography as a fragment of reality that can contain "a sliver of truth" while revealing the absence of something beyond it. Sontag, on the other hand, is more skeptical: she views photography as a means of illusion, comparing it to the shadows on the wall of Plato's cave.

Photographs give a sense of reality, but they can also distort it, distracting viewers from a deeper understanding.

*Rosalind Krauss's* reflections on the nature of photography (2003) in many ways develop Roland Barthes' ideas, especially in understanding its dual nature—as a trace of reality and its representation. Together, they affirm the indexical nature of photography and note the simultaneous presence and absence of reality in the photographic image. However, in analyzing the practice of the surrealists, Krauss refines and deepens the concept of the “surrealistic” quality of photography.

Photography produces the paradox of reality constructed as a sign - or of presence transformed into absence, into representation(...) Photographs do not interpret reality(...) photographs represent this reality itself as given, or encrypted, or recorded. In this way, the experience of nature as sign, or nature as representation, comes 'naturally' into the territory of photography" (2003, p. 119).

The photographic image produces a visual image filled with a certain structure, code, and scenario - that is, a text. This circumstance gives Krauss grounds to speak of the surrealistic nature of photography.

American philosopher and a leading figure in contemporary philosophy of art *Noel Carroll* in his book “Theorizing the Moving Image” (1996) discusses how we perceive photography and its relationship to reality. He argues that before we can say that a photograph accurately reflects reality, we must first understand how it is used and what qualities of a photograph are important for each particular situation. For example, a photograph does not always accurately replicate reality because it can be blurred or darkened, and this already changes the perception.

Carroll wants to break the stereotype that photography is an exact replica of reality. He says photographs are often far from the sharpness and clarity available to the human eye. Sometimes photographers may use blurriness or other effects to create a mood, and that's part of the artistic intent, too.

Also, the photos are not unique. Many prints can be made from a single negative, and this destroys the idea that there is only one "original." The idea of photography as an accurate and only representation of reality becomes questionable. What we see in a photograph is not always what was in reality, and one cannot claim that a photograph conveys the exact state of things as they were.

Carroll attempts to deconstruct (demolish) ideas that a photograph always truthfully and directly conveys reality to show that reality in a photograph is always distorted or transformed.

He criticizes common ideas about photography as an unquestionable testimony to reality. He is against statements such as "Photography documents reality" because photography always brings something of its own to the perception, which means that it cannot be a completely objective representation of what is happening.

The theoretical approaches presented here do not claim to be an exhaustive analysis of photography, but rather outline the space of reflection in which my project is born. For me, photography is a multi-layered, multi-meaning phenomena. On the one hand, it maintains a connection with reality, being an imprint, a trace of time and light. On the other hand, it always balances on the edge of personal perception and deep symbolic meanings, turning into visual text, interpretation, and reflection of the inner world.

This duality - photography as evidence and as an artistic construct - becomes the heart of my work. My photographs are not simply frozen moments, but a fleeting space between memory and the present, where reality dissolves into a delicate mist of feelings and memories.

Following Krakauer's thoughts, I see photography as a way to reveal hidden meanings concealed in the very fabric of the world. My goal is not to construct a strict narrative, but to

allow memories and images to spontaneously interact with each other. I strive for what Krakauer called "photographic" - an image that maintains a connection with reality but remains open, fragmentary, unfinished. Coincidences, imperfections, and gaps are not mistakes, but parts of that hidden truth that slips through the external order of things. Chance, imperfections, and breaks are not errors but parts of that hidden truth slipping through the surface order of things. Simple, almost everyday details in my photographs awaken associations with memory, loss, and a home to which one cannot return.

My polaroids, in turn, illustrate the duality Roland Barthes wrote about. On the one hand, they capture a moment - a direct trace of reality, a fragile imprint of time. On the other - their unique, imperfect aesthetics, the play of color and texture, create a distinct cultural code - weaving these images into the fabric of memory and emotion. The polaroid becomes not just evidence but a space of connotation - deep, personal interpretation. It intertwines documentary and metaphor, objectivity and sensibility, the real and the felt.

In my frames, details such as light, color, reflections, and blur often appear - not to be read literally but to evoke profound personal and collective associations.

It is within this fragile space of duality that my practice is born - an attempt to catch the subtle boundary between the external and internal, between fact and memory, the real and the illusory; an attempt to seize the ephemerality of the moment, hear its whisper, and give it life on the edge between the visible and the hidden.

## CHAPTER 4: POLAROID: BETWEEN REALITY AND POETIC IMAGINATION

The image is not a certain meaning, expressing by the director, but the entire world reflected as in a drop of water (Tarkovsky, 2006, p. 12)

Polaroid photography is a unique space of visual expression, where documentary coexists with poetry and the immediacy of fixation with the depth of personal experience. This format lies on the borderline between the fixation of the real and its interpretation: it does not simply reflect the external world, but transforms it into an image saturated with subjective meaning. The mechanism of instantaneous manifestation, the physical materiality of the image, the specific colors, softness and occasional imperfections turn each Polaroid into a unique visual event. This dialog between technique and sensitivity reveals its special ability not so much to reproduce reality as to create a new, internally experienced version of it.

Inspired by the dual nature of instant photography, this part analyzes Polaroid images by *Andrei Tarkovsky*, *Sybille Bergemann*, and *Jem Cohen* to show how this technique transforms photography from a means of documentation into a form of poetic reflection on reality.

As Tonio Guerra in his essay "A Fond Farewell" (2002) in "Instant Light: Tarkovsky Polaroids" notes:

Tarkovsky often reflected on the way that time flies and this is precisely what he wanted: to stop it, even with these quick Polaroid shots. Now here we are, enjoying this part of his work. Images like clouds of butterflies around the eyes of someone who felt the brevity of life, a perception unconnected with his illness, which as yet lay in the future, but linked to his awareness that everything is made up of fleeting glances, to be kept close at hand for a journey that sometimes gets rough (2006, p. 7).

Taken in Russia and Italy between 1979 and 1984, the images range from romantic landscapes and staged portraits to personal snapshots of family members and friends from the world of cinema. Many of the Polaroids taken in Russia are reminiscences of scenes

from the film 'Mirror' (1974). Images taken by Tarkovsky in Italy when he and Tonino Guerra were preparing to film 'Nostalgia' (1983) recall the most dramatic period of Tarkovsky's life away from Russia and his family.



Source: (Tarkovsky, 2006, p. 31)

Figure 6 - Myasnoye, Sept. 26. Polaroid (Tarkovsky, 1981)

The images taken in Russia breathe the fresh air of a tranquil harmony in which his family - his wife, his son and their dog - take center stage. As much as these pictures convey domestic harmony, they also convey a sense of melancholy, a premonition of parting. These photographs were taken shortly before he left to Italy - a country from which he would never return to his homeland. The visual lightness of these scenes contrasts with their underlying dramatism. As Gawan Fagard writes in his attempt to analyze Polaroids of Tarkovsky:

As such, the pictures are seemingly picturesque documents of what turned out to be Tarkovsky's most intimate and dramatic trauma: the impossibility of domestic happiness in his life, and by extension, the forlornness of his whole generation that grew up in the absence of their

fathers during and after the Second World War (2012, p. 2).

Certainly, this statement touches on an important aspect: Tarkovsky's personal trauma is really inseparable from the historical context in which he lived and created. The theme of fatherlessness, as well as a broader sense of loss and disconnection, are important motifs of his artistic world. However, we believe that to attribute a purely collective-historical dimension to Polaroid images is to miss their deeply personal, contemplative character. These images are more likely to speak of an inner state - a melancholy, a longing for home, an attempt to stop time - than of the concrete social drama of an entire generation.

It is interesting that the process of Polaroid creation itself reinforces this feeling. Unlike traditional photography, the Polaroid snapshot makes the instant obvious, literally turning the present moment into its tangible twin. But in this same process lies a paradox: the image simultaneously captures the "here and now" and creates distance, turning reality into the past at the very moment it is captured. This effect creates a kind of punctum in the spirit of Roland Barthes - not so much an incidental detail that touches the viewer, but the very awareness of loss embedded in the materiality of the image.



Source: (Tarkovsky, 2006, p. 15)

Figure 7 - Myasnoye, Sept. Polaroid  
(Tarkovsky, 1980)



Source: (Tarkovsky, 2006, p. 53)

Figure 8 - Myasnoye, August 28.  
Polaroid (Tarkovsky, 1981)

From an aesthetic point of view, Tarkovsky's Polaroids tell us a lot about how he composed the images in his films. However, it seems that in the still image he gives himself more room for idealization. The framing and lighting reflect the director's perspective, and they reveal much about Tarkovsky's aesthetic sensibility beyond documentary value. As Boris Groys noted, Tarkovsky's series of Polaroids from Myasnoe do not so much express the desire to immortalize reality, as they try to recreate a whole new reality referring to the aesthetics of 19th century romanticism (Fagard, 2012, p. 3).

A similar attitude to the medium of instant photography - as a tool for creating a subjective, emotionally intense reality - can be seen in the works of Sybille Bergemann (one of the most important German artists of the past decades and internationally the most famous representative of GDR<sup>1</sup> photography). Her Polaroids occupy a special place in her photography. Unlike the

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<sup>1</sup> *GDR photography* refers to photographic practices in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany, 1949-1990)

more documentary part of her legacy, these images show a focus on the transience of the present and the personal experience of time, turning the photographs into intimate visual reflections. The photographer has captured in them what is essentially impossible to capture. In following way her Polaroids are characterized by the publisher Hatje Cantz Verlag:

Beautiful moments that do not want to remain. Just as fleeting as the medium on which their contours emerge. The result is a series of fairytale-like and tender images that defy oblivion and classification in terms of time and space (Fischer, 2011).

Bergemann uses the Polaroid not as a technical tool, but as a medium of memory, nostalgia and poetic transformation of the ordinary. The colors of her images are soft and transparent - turquoise, pink, lemon - they do not mix, but flow, creating a "suspended space" in which the viewer lingers as if in a dream. The characters in her Polaroids do not pose, they simply exist, immersed in an atmosphere in which feeling, not eventuality, is important. Little girls, old dolls, home interiors with vases of dried roses and random objects - all this becomes part of a multi-layered visual narrative that refers to childhood memories, half-forgotten dreams and ephemeral emotions that are difficult to capture in words.

The fragility of these images is emphasized by the medium itself: Polaroid, by its nature, is unstable, fades, becomes more and more ghostly. And in this, perhaps, lies its poetic power - its ability to capture what is elusive. Bergemann herself said:

It's the fringes of the world that interest me, not its center. The noninterchangeable is my concern. When there is something in faces or landscapes that doesn't quite fit (C/O Berlin, 2011).

Utilizing the Polaroid's ability to photographically capture a very specific moment while simultaneously functioning as an almost sculptural object with its own physicality, Bergemann permanently but ephemerally buries the past present of these "marginal" spaces and subjects (Munn, 2011).

Sybille Bergemann has used this tool with lyricism and empathy to capture the contours of the moment, and the result is a corpus of dreamlike and sensitive documentary works that speak out against oblivion. They seem to be wrapped in a kind of veil that eludes temporal or spatial categorization. Bergemann's photographs are multilayered - they speak of fates, the passage of time, and the surrounding circumstances. In this way, they can be seen and understood over and over again.



Source: (Bergemann, 2011)

Figure 9 - Untitled. Polaroid  
(Bergemann, n.d.)



Source: (Bergemann, 2011)

Figure 10- Untitled. Polaroid  
(Bergemann, n.d.)

Her Polaroid series is not just a collection of photographs, but a delicate visual diary that both speaks of time and goes beyond its boundaries. There is no aggressive aestheticization in them, but honesty, poetry, a slight melancholy and deep empathy. They are images that you want to return to, to discover something new in them each time, as in a memory where the real and the fictional, the present and the past exist inseparably.

A special place among the authors who work with the aesthetics of instant photography is occupied by Jem Cohen, an independent filmmaker and photographer whose visual works exist on the shaky line between document and dream. Beginning in 1980 and for the next 30 years, Jem Cohen captured images of New York City through the lens of his Polaroid camera. The result is a collection of photographs that seem to capture these moments of the past in a dream-like state, with small, blurred color images of long-forgotten objects. These works exist as if suspended between past and present, truth and fiction, reality and memory.



Figure 11 - Untitled. Polaroid (Jem Cohen, n.d.). Retrieved from This Long Century. Source: <http://www.thislongcentury.com/jem-cohen-nominated-by-luc-sante>



Figure 12 - Untitled. Polaroid (Jem Cohen, n.d.). Retrieved from This Long Century. Source: <http://www.thislongcentury.com/jem-cohen-nominated-by-luc-sante>

"To me, they're almost like a sleepwalker's view of the city," the filmmaker Jem Cohen said of the ghostly Polaroids (Feuer, 2012).

Elusive, impressionistic, full of vaporous landscapes, acid colors, deadpan close-ups and long, lonesome vistas, Coen's images could be said to capture those parts of the city its residents have forgotten – or even, if such a thing is possible, what the city has forgotten about itself. The images emerge, like chemical memories,

from a far-off or sometimes not-so-distant past: an aerial view of a fruit cart, a corner of the stage at CBGB, industrial ruins, a deliveryman in Chinatown, Brooklyn fog (Feuer, 2012).

Cohen's Polaroids are not merely visual sketches, but immersive experiences of an elusive reality in which imperfection becomes an integral part of expression. He amplifies the inherent "errors" of instant photography: unnatural colors, blurred shapes, artifacts, and glare of time by enlarging the images to large formats, thus paradoxically making them even more fragile, delicate, and painterly, more like memories than definitive proofs. Here is how Cohen talks about his Polaroids:

(...)to me Polaroid shots are something like miniatures in painting. They lack distinctness, the pictured space is amusingly flattened, the colors rarely look natural, there are mysterious flashes and imperfections; but they somehow manage to get to the essence of the subject - in a very different way than other forms of photography do. I enlarge them, carefully preserving and even enhancing their special qualities; the pictures become even more delicate, picturesque, more like memories than exhaustive proofs (Photographer.ru, 2018).

Cohen perceives instant photography as a personal zone of creativity, as if freed from the pressure of film language. His work is an example of a contemporary artist turning to the medium with the intention of preserving something elusive, a memory that is more akin to a poetic recording of emotion than a document of reality. It is an intuitive meditation, like a form of spontaneous visual writing in which it is not events but subtle feelings and moods that are important. In one of his interviews, he talks about his fascination with Polaroid as an "obsession" (i-d.co, n.d.), emphasizing the connection between the materiality of the image and its poetic nature.

His Polaroids exist in a suspended space between truth and imagination, between an intimate gaze and urban fragmentation. They are not only visual diaries, but also an exploration of how an image can resist unambiguity while remaining shaky and open.

Cohen's work is not only visual diaries, but also an exploration of how an image can resist unambiguity while remaining shaky, multivalent and open to interpretation. They are an attempt to record not facts but a state, an atmosphere, an experience. They balance between an intimate view and urban fragmentation, between reality and fantasy.

An editor and writer John Haber compares his shots to visual requiems:

The frame of a high rise under construction looks like a monument worn down by time. A sidewalk newsstand looks like a mausoleum for its vendor. The plain rectangles of walls and construction fences look like gravestones. A bearded man stuck in the lower corner of a photograph at the MET could be their bewildered caretaker. Cohen exploits the warm, faded palette of a color Polaroid under strong artificial light. It gives faces the sculptural simplicity of wooden saints (Haber, n.d.).

Of course, there are other authors besides those mentioned above for whom polaroid became an important way to capture reality. However, I have limited my selection to these three authors, as their work resonated with me the most, both aesthetically and conceptually. Their use of instant photography demonstrates an attention to elusive moments, personal memory, and subjective reality - themes that are central to my practice. In their images, I find a special quietness and attentiveness to the fleeting. Their photographs are not simply a way of capturing a moment, but rather an internal pause, when the photographer listens to the moment - and at the same time to themselves. These images convey an attempt to grasp something genuine - something elusive, not obvious, but very valuable. I am drawn to this form of dialogue with reality, in which photography becomes not a way to stop time, but an opportunity to feel its movement within itself.

## **PARTE 2 – INNER LANDSCAPES - IDEA AND REALIZATION**

### **CHAPTER 5: Work methodology**

The project “Inner Landscapes” is a visual reflection on the boundaries between reality and illusion, on the perception of the world through the prism of personal experience, memory and loss. It was born as an attempt to make sense of the profound internal changes caused by moving, losing my home and the destruction of my sense of stability. It was not important for me to capture specific events or objects - rather, I aimed to reflect how they are imprinted within, in an inner landscape of experience. In this part I will discuss the methodological approach given to the photographic work.

#### **5.1 Conceptual grounding**

After I left Ukraine, the surrounding reality lost its clarity: everything that had previously seemed to be stable and definite became shaky and temporary. The war increased this feeling, intensified the sense of loss and thinned the boundary between past and present. For the last few years I have been living between two countries, Canada and Portugal, and this state of “between” has become part of my everyday life. It has created a sense of constant temporality, of being outside of reference points, between memory and the present moment.

It was this condition of living “on the edge” that became the starting point of my project. I wanted to visually express what is difficult to convey in words: the experience of loss, adaptation, the search for the familiar in the unfamiliar. My previous reality, based on stability and habitual coordinates, had lost its clarity. What used to seem like an undeniable truth became shaky and shifting. At this time, I began to feel how external reality became distorted in my perception, and these changes were not only external but also internal, leading me to deep reflections on what reality is and how it is perceived.

My focus was on how memory, emotions, cultural baggage and subjective perception shape the "reality" we truly live in. The landscape I depict is not external, but internal. Illusion and reality in it are not opposites, but synonyms for different ways of looking at the same thing.

The theme of illusion and reality took on personal significance for me precisely as a way of realizing and exploring the changes that had occurred within me. This realization became part of what I was looking for in the process of working on the project: an attempt to "catch" a moment that may have been lost, but still continues to exist in my memory and perception.

In my search for an expressive language, I rely on an autoethnographic approach, but not as a form of narration, rather as a method of research. Here, personal experience is not just a background, but a field in which a visual statement emerges. The images that appear in this process reflect the inner vibrations of memory, feelings, and intuitive perception. I consider personal experience – the loss of home, adaptation to new conditions, and the perception of instability – as an integral part of the research process. This allows me to use subjectivity as a method, relying on intuition, memory, and sensory perception.

At the beginning of the project, the title "Between illusion and reality" was chosen to emphasize the ambiguity and multiplicity of perception. It reflected the idea that reality, as it appears to us, is often only a surface – a fragment of a deeper, shifting, and partially hidden truth.

However, as I continued to work on the project, the title began to feel too narrow and rigid to me. My work no longer represented only the process of concealing or distorting reality. Instead, the project became deeper and more layered, exploring not only illusions and loss, but also the inner landscape of my experiences. It was a journey from abstract, undefined images to a more personal and experienced perception.

The title "Inner Landscapes" emerged as a reflection of this transformation. It conveys the idea that the reality I am exploring exists not only in what we see externally, but also in how we perceive and experience it within ourselves.

"Inner landscapes" has become a metaphor for the space that a person creates in their head and heart, not tied to a physical place, but filled with memories, experiences, and reflections. These landscapes are not always clear, their lines are often blurred and their shapes can change. They remain in the realm of subjective perception and personal experience, which perfectly reflects the essence of my project.

## 5.2 Technical Approach

For me, the process of creating a project was not the fulfillment of a clear plan, but an intuitive search in which I allowed myself to be as open as possible to my own experiences. I didn't record specific events and I didn't set up shooting routes – I just picked up my camera (and sometimes my phone) and followed my inner response. The camera in this process was not a tool for documentation, but a medium through which I made sense of myself and what was happening around me. I photographed what triggered my inner response – fleeting scenes, fragments of light, unexpected reflections or shapes that seemed to activate my memory or senses.

Among the techniques used in the beginning were those that help to break the illusion of "objective" reality. These included shooting through glass, mirrors, reflective surfaces, using blurs, double exposures, intentional camera movement (ICM), working with focus and light (*Figures 13 and 14*). These techniques helped to create images where the visible and the experienced are intertwined, and imperfection became an important part of an aesthetic close to the philosophy of wabi-sabi. Although these shots were not included in the final selection, it was through this experimental phase that my understanding of the visual

language of the project and what is really important - to convey inner feelings and instability of perception - was formed (Appendix B-Visual Research and Experiments).



Figure 13 - Untitled, Chinatown, Toronto, Canada, October 2024. Technique: Intentional Camera Movement (ICM). Image by the author



Figure 14 - Untitled, Vila do Conde, Portugal, January 2025. Shot through a filter smeared with Vaseline. Image by the author

In November 2024, I managed to find a Polaroid 636 CloseUp camera (Appendix A - Technical sheet of cameras and films were used) in a second hand shop. Inspired by the snapshots of Andrei Tarkovsky and Sybil Bergman that I mentioned in chapter 4, I wanted to experiment with this technique as part of the project. As I took the images, it became clearer and clearer that the Polaroid was the most accurate way to capture the essence of my idea. The image quality is blurry, the colors are muted or unnatural, and the composition is intuitive. But this is what is valuable: such a photograph does not claim to be authentic, it captures the essence of the experience, its trace, its residual echo.

The decision to work with instant photography stems not only from its visual characteristics, but also from the meditative nature of the process itself. Polaroid requires slowing down, concentrating and accepting randomness, which directly correlates to the philosophy of wabi-sabi. The lack of

opportunity for retouching or post-processing turns every mistake - a misalignment, a backlight, a non-ideal exposure - into an act of artistic expression. These elements are not corrected, but accepted as parts of the composition.

The instant camera has become not just a tool, but a way of thinking and my visual meditation, in which it is not so much the subject itself that matters, but my inner state, the response that arises between me and reality. Working with this device is deeply in tune with the philosophy of wabi-sabi: spontaneity, imperfection, and the uniqueness of each frame - all of this resonated in my perception. Polaroid as a medium became a practice of acceptance and contemplation. This imperfect and unpredictable process, with no right to correction, requires pause, trust and a willingness to accept what has been realized. It refuses to submit to the desire for control and the "perfect" outcome, and that is what makes it valuable. It teaches us to see the beauty in an accident, in a slight mishap, in a crooked frame or a faded spot. This aesthetic - in its fragility and understatement - has become not only the visual language of my project, but also a reflection of my inner state.

In this photography, it is impossible to correct a mistake, reshoot, or change anything. Each photograph is the result of the here and now, with its vulnerability, fragility, and emotional intensity. It is like a slice of time that cannot be revisited. I remembered a story from school, when I received an unsatisfactory grade for the final test in chemistry. I approached the teacher with a question: can I retake it? She looked at me and calmly asked: "Can you live yesterday all over again?" Years later, holding a Polaroid in my hands, I truly understood the meaning of those words for the first time. That's what the Polaroid is about. The impossibility of repetition. The value of what happens once. There are no mistakes, only the imprint of what you've lived.

Gradually I came to accept that in life, as in instant photography, there are no mistakes in the usual sense. Even if it seems to us that "we could have made a different choice", "we could have made a different decision" - all these are just hypotheses. We always choose based on who we were at that moment, what we felt, what we wanted. And that's why everything that happened is the only possible thing.

Sometimes it seemed that the shot didn't work out - it blurred, lit up, went off to the side. But that's where I found its special beauty. Over time, I came to realize that unfortunate moments are not failures, but a necessary part of the journey, not a mistake, but a change in the direction. If you perceive it not as a defect, but as part of the overall rhythm, your attitude to life changes.

Polaroid taught me to accept unpredictability: you can never know in advance how a shot will turn out, where the next step will lead. Everything is difficult to calculate, foresee or correct - and that is where its value and miracle lies.

Life is like this process - full of surprises, changes and unpredictable turns. And it is in accepting this uncertainty and imperfection that true beauty is revealed.

I vividly remember the first time I loaded a cartridge into my Polaroid and took my first picture. At the time, I didn't yet realize how important this instrument would become for me. The scene was routine - a cat, a ray of sunshine, the random order of things (*Figure 15*). But it was this combination of coziness and transience that made me press the button. For me, it was not just a snapshot, but an attempt to hold on to the feeling of a moment meaningful purely on the level of feeling.



Figure 15 - Luna. Canada, November 2024. Polaroid 600 film. Image buy the author

With this episode began a different way of interacting with photography. Unlike a digital camera, a Polaroid requires slowing down and focusing: each frame becomes a choice, a gesture, a moment of doubt. There were weeks when I carried the camera with me and didn't take a single picture - not because nothing was happening, but because nothing was responding internally. The process stopped being documentation - it became a search. In this intuitive way, the approach of Dolores Marat is close to me, where it is not the technique that defines a photograph, but the inner impulse, the feeling of the moment. Her aesthetic of imperfection, chance and poetic understatement resonates with my own view. For me, photography is not a means of fixation, but a way of feeling and expressing what words often cannot convey. It's not so much looking at the world as looking

through it - inward, into memory, into the subtle emotional layers of experience. The Polaroid allowed me to approach these states most honestly and accurately.



Figure 16 - The Horse from the Agricultural Show. Photograph (Marat, 1997).  
Archival pigment print on Japanese Paper. Source:  
<https://loeildelaphotographie.com/en/peter-fetterman-gallery-dolores-marat/>

After the photographs were taken, the question of converting them to digital format arose (Appendix E - Final Images of the project). I chose high-resolution scanning (2400 dpi) to preserve maximum image quality. However, because both the surface of the Polaroid and the scanner glass are glossy, Newton's rings appear when they come into contact, distorting the image. To avoid this effect, a special frame was made to slightly raise the photo and thus eliminate direct contact between the surfaces.

In the image processing, I limited myself to minimal adjustments, such as removing dust and scratches, as well as slight color correction on a few images. The main goal was to

preserve the natural uniqueness and unpredictability of each print, in accordance with the project's philosophy.

### **5.3 Polaroid emulsion lift technique**

I also mentioned in the proposal that I wanted to use the Polaroid emulsion lift technique. However, after trying it out (*Figure 17*), I realized that I wanted a different, more intuitive and experimental approach. Instead of carefully transferring the image, I simply dipped the images in water, allowing the image to gradually peel off. The emulsion would become mobile, fluid, lose its shape - and in this birth of a new, unpredictable image, I found a reflection of my project. A new image emerged that had been deliberately "corrupted" - or, rather, freed from its original precision (*Figure 18*).

Sometimes I took damaged images and combined them with others that I wanted to put more meaning into. I layered bad Polaroids and transferred fragments of them, in whole or in part, onto the finished photographs (*Figure 19*). In this way, the images were created in which two moments, two emotions, two versions of reality collided. Why did I do this? Perhaps to give every mistake - every failure - a chance to become something new, important, real.



Figure 17 - Mona Lisa. Canada, November 2024. Polaroid emulsion lift. Image by the author



Figure 18 - Untitled. Porto, February 2025. Polaroid film developed in water. Image by the author



Figure 19 - Mirage. Polaroid film. Póvoa de Varzim, April 2025.  
Image by the author

#### 5.4 Cyanotype technique

In addition, I planned to incorporate the cyanotype technique into my work—a process that produces deep blue images through the reaction of a light-sensitive solution to ultraviolet light. This is not merely a way to create aesthetically pleasing blue prints; I see in this technique a reflection of my project's philosophy. In my view, cyanotype, despite its apparent simplicity, embodies the core principles of the wabi-sabi aesthetic — particularly the value of imperfection, ephemerality, and uniqueness. Each print in this technique is unrepeatable: it depends on a multitude of such factors as ultraviolet light intensity, exposure time, paper texture, humidity level, and the method of applying the solution. Even when using the same negative, it is impossible to achieve identical results. This unpredictability, which lies beyond full

artistic control, resonates with the idea of *wabi* – a striving for simplicity and spiritually infused ambiguity.

Furthermore, the visual instability of the print – such as irregular stains, leaks, or soft edges of exposure – is not seen as a technical flaw but as part of the expressive language. Here the principle of *sabi* emerges the beauty that arises from time, wear, traces of loss, and changeability.

As in life, we cannot fully control the outcome – we can only observe, record, and accept. The color palette of cyanotype itself is deep, sometimes ghostly blue that adds a sense of slowness, a nearly meditative perception. It evokes a feeling of an in-between state, suspended between the past and the present.

At the initial stage, I conducted a series of technical tests: I selected digital photographs taken with a camera and smartphone, converted them into negatives, and printed them on transparent film. These transparencies were then used as photonegatives for contact printing in the cyanotype process (Appendix C-Experimentation with cyanotype technique). Later, I became interested in integrating this technique with Polaroid images—particularly those that, for various reasons, had failed to develop or had become stuck in the camera. Rather than discarding them, I carefully separated the image layers and preserved only the transparent top layer, which I then used as a base for cyanotype printing (*Figures 20 and 21*).

The base was coated with a 4% gelatin solution, evenly distributed across the surface. After the gelatin layer was applied, the material was left to dry horizontally for 24 hours. Once the surface had dried completely, I applied the cyanotype sensitizer (a standard mixture of ammonium iron (III) citrate and potassium ferricyanide) and left the material to dry again in darkness for another 24 hours. A pre-prepared negative was then placed on top of the sensitized surface. For exposure, I used an ultraviolet lamp, with an exposure time of 12 minutes. After exposure, the image was washed in a water bath under

running water to remove any unfixed solution. A 10% hydrogen peroxide solution was then applied to activate the color, intensifying the blue tone of the print. The prints were subsequently dried at room temperature.

In the final stage, some of the works underwent additional treatment: I applied a thin layer of acrylic paint over the image surface.

All that process became an important metaphor for me. Life sometimes fails. Everything seems to be ruined, broken, irrevocable. But it is at that moment that the opportunity to start again, to restart oneself, to find new meaning arises. Several times in my life I've started from scratch - and I know I'll have to do it again. But now I look at it differently: not as an end, but as a beginning.



Figure 20 - Shards. France, January 2025. Cyanotype transfer on Polaroid film. Image by the author



Figure 21 - Maria. Munich, March 2025. Cyanotype transfer on Polaroid film. Image by the author

### 5.5 Double exposure technique

In some of my shots, I deliberately used the double exposure technique. It allowed me to combine two different states, two images, two views of the same thing in one frame. Sometimes they complemented each other, sometimes they contradicted each other, but it was in this intersection that something new was born, something shaky, ambiguous, not subject to unambiguous interpretation. For me, this technique is like the visual equivalent of memory or experience: we don't perceive the past as a clear sequence of images. It comes in waves, superimposed, erased, intensified. Double exposure became a way of showing how one experience overlaps with another, how the present can be permeated with ghosts of the past, and vice versa - how the past can suddenly reveal something from the present.

In one of the shots, the double exposure effect was an accident (*Figure 22*) the shot didn't come out of the camera, and when I took the next one, the two overlapped. In digital photography, this would be considered a mistake, a technical glitch. But here - it turned out to be an unexpected gift. This shot became for me a reminder of how many things in life happen beyond our will, beyond our control, but they do not lose their value. On the contrary, such accidents are often the most expressive ones.



Figure 22 - Self-Portrait. Polaroid i-type film. Porto, Spring 2025.  
Image by the author

This is another proof that mistakes do not exist, or if they do, they are a part of the process and should be embraced. There is only what happened. And then it is a matter of perception: whether to accept it as a failure or as an unexpected opportunity to see more than you had planned. The important thing is not to seek to correct or rewrite the past, but to learn to accept it as it is, seeing the beauty and depth in the accidents and imperfections. Just as a Polaroid does not give you the opportunity to re-take a picture, life does not offer repeated takes - there is only the present moment, which is worth to live completely.

## **5.6 From Accidental to Meaningful**

The project includes several images with subtle depictions of my mother. These images initially appeared to be a metaphor for a fleeting presence, but subsequently acquired additional meaning: shortly after the photos were taken, she had a stroke that significantly affected her memory. Thus, in this case, photography became not only a form of visual expression, but also took on an important, deeply personal meaning for me. This transformation of the accidental into the meaningful became an important part of my methodology: working with the image as a space of multilayered meanings, capable of revealing in the future what was impossible to comprehend at the moment of shooting. This experience intensified my attention to the theme of disappearance, loss, and the instability of perception.



Figure 23 - Untitled. Porto, May 2025. Polaroid i-type film. Image by the author

## 5.7 Practical implementation

One of the forms of the project's implementation is a photo book with 48 polaroids with the title "Inner landscapes". It includes both single images and diptychs, as well as short text inserts that complement the visual narrative. The rhythm of the book is built in with breaks – blank pages and white space – that act as pauses in the story. They work like the breathing of the story and also create an intimate feeling, letting each spread become its own emotional episode, like an inner dialogue and a space for reflection.

The texts accompanying some of the images are brief reflections by the author. They were written by hand and then scanned. This gesture preserves the personal cadence and emphasizes the vitality and incompleteness of the statement. The texts also serve as an additional code to the image, allowing the viewer to find their own experience in it and recognize their own memory trace. They provide an entry point through which

everyone can find their own meaning, recognize a familiar experience, or a forgotten image.

During the working process, it was decided to abandon the typical white frame of the original format. This allowed the images to be free from visual codes that automatically evoke certain associations and narrow perception. In my opinion, this approach will allow the viewer to focus on the content of the image and will enhance its emotional power. Thus, each photograph is perceived not as an artifact, but as an independent visual fragment of the inner world. The book format is square and its size is 20 × 20 cm and it has 88 pages.

The cover is made using cyanotype technique and scanned in high resolution (2400 dpi). The title and author's name are printed in a restrained modern font, emphasizing the personal, contemplative nature of the project.

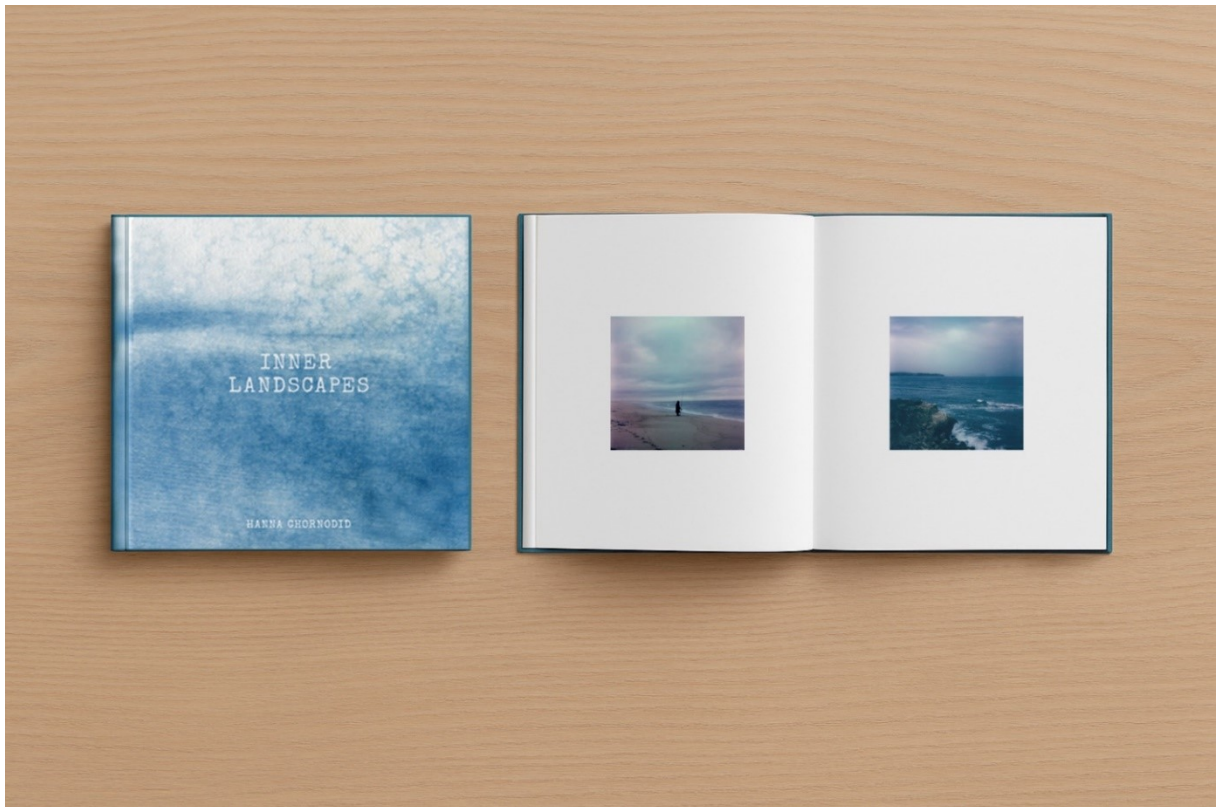


Figure 24 - Mockup of the book layout made with artificial intelligence

Two works from the project have already been presented at the group exhibition "*Próxima Estação*", organized by the *Cerveira Art Biennial Foundation*, which runs from June 28 to September 14, 2025 ([Appendix D](#) - Exhibition participant list). The images were printed on matte fine art paper in a 20 × 20 cm format and framed in 32 × 32 cm frames (*Figure 25*).



Figure 25 - Installation view: Two works from the project on display at the group exhibition "*Próxima Estação*", *Cerveira Art Biennial Foundation*, 2025. Image made by the author

The next stage of the project's implementation is planned to be a solo exhibition. Currently, negotiations are underway to organize it, tentatively scheduled to take place from *September 19 to October 31, 2025*, at the gallery of *Fundação Inatel*, located at *Rua do Bonjardim, 501, Porto*.

Two display options are being considered for presenting 15-20 works:

Option 1: the photographs will be printed on matte fine art paper in 20 × 20 cm and 32 × 32 cm formats. All works will be framed in minimalist 32 × 32 cm aluminum frames (Figure 26).

Option 2: the photographs will be printed in 50 × 50 cm format and mounted on PVC boards.

The photobook, previously discussed, will be presented in its physical form during the final defense. If the dates of the exhibition won't fit the academic calendar, it will be organized after the jury occurs.



Figure 26 - Mockup of exhibition layout made with artificial intelligence.

## FINAL REMARKS

This project became not only a visual and theoretical study, but also a philosophical reflection, born out of a personal experience of loss of stability and inner transformation.

Through photography, I aimed to reflect not so much the visible surface of reality as the elusive – fragments of memory, emotional traces, fleeting sensations, and the ambiguity of lived experience. In the process of working, photography revealed itself not merely as a way of documenting the external world, but as a mirror of the internal state, in which form gives way to feeling.

One of the main questions underlying the project—whether photography can become a means of expressing things that do not have a clear form, such as memories, inner states, and subjective perceptions—proved decisive for both the concept and the visual language of the work. I was looking for the answer to this question through an intuitive, sometimes imperfect form, where imperfection becomes part of the meaning. That is why working with Polaroid instant film played an important role in the project – its visual instability, softness, unpredictability, and sometimes technical defects that helped to express the fragility of the moment, the unspoken, the fluidity of memory.

Another important question raised in the project is: what is reality in conditions of instability? When life unfolds between countries, languages, and internal states, reality is no longer perceived as something objective and unchanging. It becomes fragile, fluid, dependent on internal perception. For me, reality increasingly appears not as an external constant, but as an individually experienced construct in which absence can be felt more strongly than presence. Photography has allowed me to make this instability visible – to show not what the world looks like, but how it feels when the ground beneath your feet becomes unstable.

My project does not claim to provide definitive answers. Rather, it confirms that photography, like memory, does not have to be accurate to be true. The blurred contours and muted tones of the images convey the subtlety of inner experience, in which clarity often eludes us and meaning emerges over time – through contemplation. It is in this contemplative dimension, in the acceptance of understatement and imperfection, that the project's proximity to the aesthetics of wabi-sabi is revealed. Thus, the work affirms that photography can indeed become a means of expressing the subjective and invisible – not as a static fixation, but as a space for resonance, ambivalence, and emotional truth.

It is important to admit that this project was a turning point for me in my creative process. It taught me to accept vulnerability as part of the creative process and to trust images that arise not from clarity, but from the depths of feeling. What began as a personal attempt to make sense of my own state of mind became an artistic shift – a new way of seeing and expressing myself. Now I perceive photography not only as a view on the external world, but also as a tool for self-reflection, poetic thinking, and inner exploration. The perfection of form has lost its priority for me – now I strive for images that reveal inner vibration and emotional truth, and their imperfection becomes part of their unique expressiveness.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix A - Technical sheet of cameras and films were used

#### Cameras:

##### 1. Polaroid CloseUp 636

Type: Instant film camera

Film Format: Polaroid 600

Lens: Single-element plastic lens, 116 mm

Focus: Fixed focus (approx. 1.2 m to infinity), close-up switch for 0.6-1.2 m

Maximum Aperture: f/11

Shutter Speed: Electronic; range approx. 1/4 to 1/200 s (automatic)

ISO: 600 (depends on film - Polaroid 600)

Flash: Built-in automatic electronic flash

##### 2. Polaroid Now+

Type: Instant film camera with Bluetooth connectivity

Film Format: Polaroid i-Type and 600

Lens: Dual lens system, 35 mm (equivalent)

Focus: Autofocus (two-zone: standard and close-up)

Aperture: f/11 and f/32 (automatic depending on lighting; manual mode allows limited adjustments via the Polaroid app)

Shutter Speed: 1/200 to 1 second (up to 30 sec with app/manual mode)

ISO: 640 (depends on film)

Flash: Built-in automatic flash.

#### Film Types:

##### 1. Polaroid 600 Film

Type: Instant integral color film

ISO: 640

Image Area: 79 × 79 mm

Total Frame Size: 88 × 107 mm

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Development Time: 10-15 minutes

Color Sensitivity: Color

Battery: Included in film pack (for older cameras)

Finish: Glossy

## 2. Polaroid i-Type Film

Type: Instant integral color film

ISO: 640

Image Area: 79 × 79 mm

Total Frame Size: 88 × 107 mm

Development Time: 10-15 minutes

Color Sensitivity: Color

Finish: Glossy

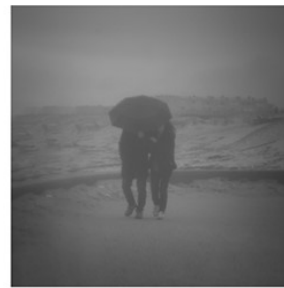
## Appendix B - Visual Research and Experiments



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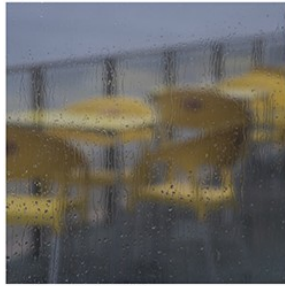
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DSC\_0369 копия.jpg



DSC\_0377 копия.jpg



DSC\_0385 копия.jpg



DSC\_0388 копия.jpg



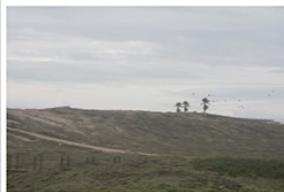
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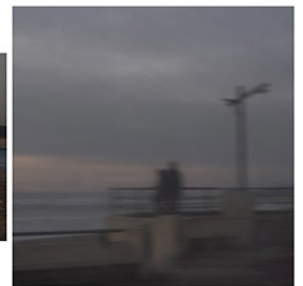
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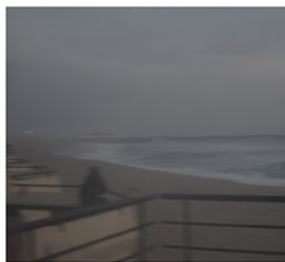
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DSC\_0693.jpg



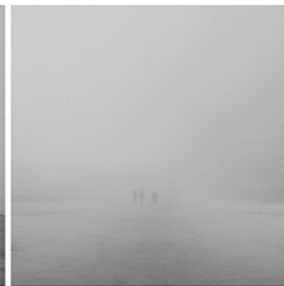
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DSC\_0707 копия 2.jpg



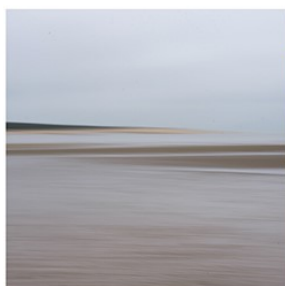
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DSC\_0709.jpg



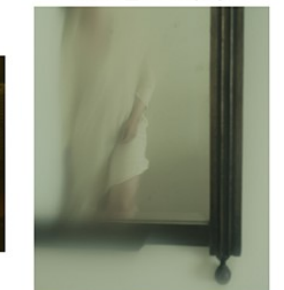
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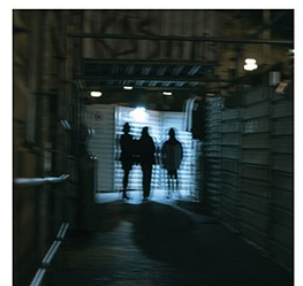
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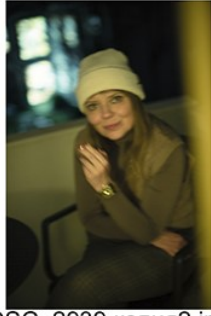
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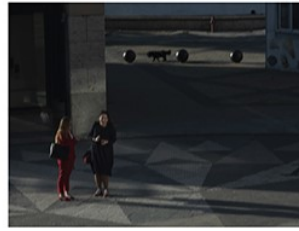
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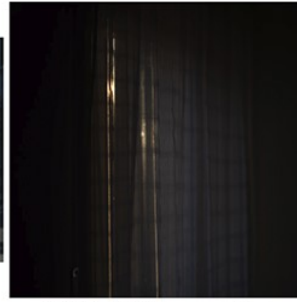
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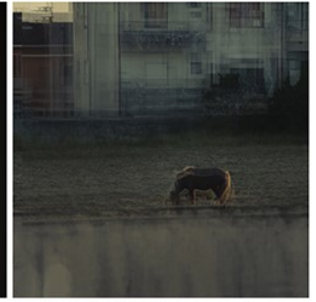
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DSC\_3943 копия.jpg



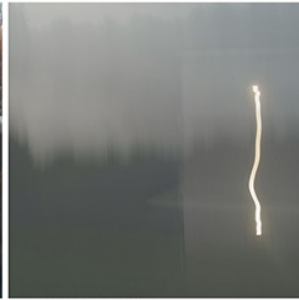
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DSC\_6062 копия.jpg



DSC\_7424 копия.jpg



DSC\_7658 копия.jpg



DSC\_7696 копия.jpg



DSC\_7765 копия.jpg



DSC\_8680 копия.jpg



DSC\_8787-Edit.jpg



DSC\_9069-2.jpg



DSC\_9104 копия.jpg



DSC\_9115копия.jpg



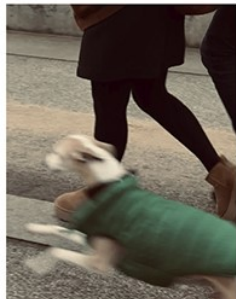
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IMG\_3222.JPG



IMG\_3230.JPG



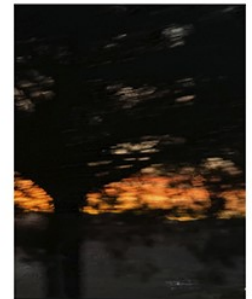
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IMG\_4688.JPG

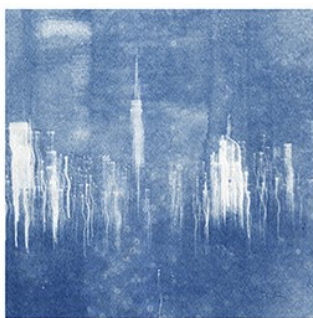


IMG\_4837.JPG



IMG\_7818.JPG

### Appendix C - Experimentation with cyanotype technique



img062.jpg



img064.jpg



img081.jpg



img082.jpg



img116.jpg



img117 копия.jpg



img118 копия.jpg



img119.jpg



img120.jpg

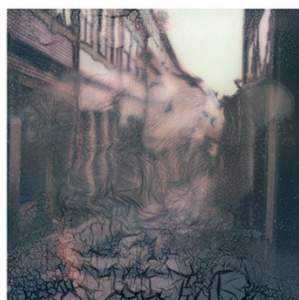


img121.jpg



## Appendix E - Final Images of the project

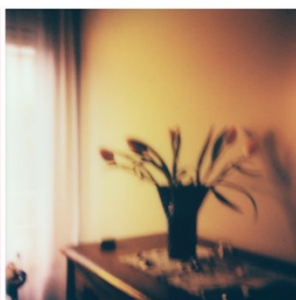
[jpeg H.Chornodid InnerLandscapes 2025](#)



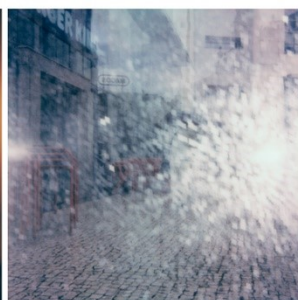
2.jpg



3.jpg



4.jpg



5.jpg



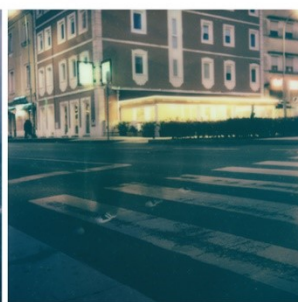
6\_.jpg



7.jpg



8.jpg



9.jpg



10.jpg



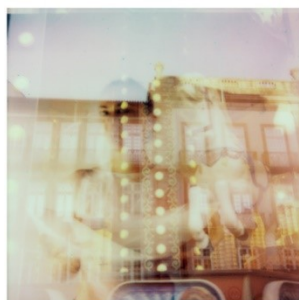
11.jpg



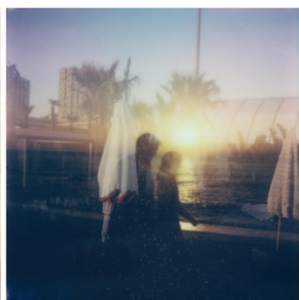
12.jpg



13.jpg



14.jpg



15.jpg



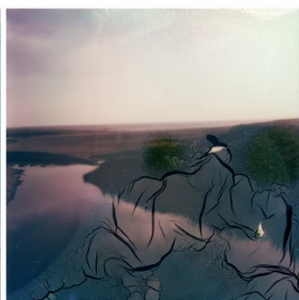
17.jpg



18.jpg



20.jpg



21-Edit.jpg



22 копия.jpg



23.jpg



24.jpg



26-2.jpg



27.jpg



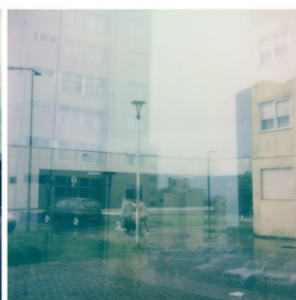
29.jpg



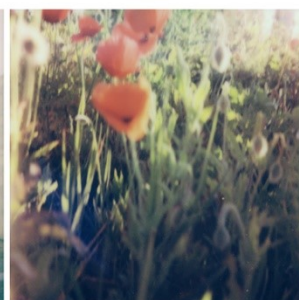
31 копия.jpg



32.jpg



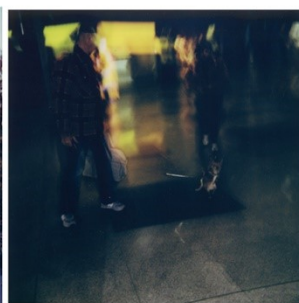
33.jpg



34.jpg



36.jpg



37.jpg



38.jpg



39.jpg



40.jpg



41.jpg



42.jpg



46.jpg



47.jpg



48.jpg



49.jpg



51.jpg



52.jpg



Img -001 копия.jpg



Img -002 (доработать).jpg



img075.jpg



img076 .jpg



img079.jpg



img080.jpg



img089.jpg



img090.jpg



img094.jpg



img095.jpg



img95.jpg



img096.jpg



img96.jpg



img097.jpg



img98.jpg



img99.jpg