

ALFRED HITCHCOCK KATE MOSS AND THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

By Iñigo de Amescua

Albert Watson describes himself not as a fashion photographer but as a photographer who sees fashion as an intriguing realm in which to practice his craft. While the fashion world has garnered him international recognition, this Scottish photographer is a true visionary, delving into still life, portraits, landscapes, and a plethora of other subjects. This month, he presented one of his personal projects in London, an immersion into the legendary and beautiful Isle of Skye in the far north of Scotland. His inspiration? Bridging the gap between photography and art, much like a painter.



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"At the beginning of my career, in my first year, I received a commission that would define my approach to work. It came from a company that manufactured hospital equipment, and they needed me to photograph about a hundred of their products. I had never done anything like it in my life. I said yes, of course... and the first thing they sent me was a chrome-plated wedge. Shiny, with a mirror. I eventually managed to capture that image, but I was on the brink of suicide. An entire day of work, out of the five I had in total, was dedicated to that wedge. That's what I call building calluses," Albert Watson shares. He is a passionate photographer, meticulous and detail-oriented. He's got plenty of "calluses" to prove it. His talent has propelled him into the ranks of the world's most successful photographers for decades, capturing the likes of Kate Moss, Mike Tyson, The Rolling Stones, Andy Warhol, Alfred Hitchcock, Naomi Campbell, Jack Nicholson, Queen Elizabeth II, Jay Z, Christy Turlington, and contributing to over a hundred Vogue, Rolling Stone, Harper's Bazaar covers... "I've spent the last sixty years of my life inside a rectangle. Monet, Degas, Gauguin, and Van Gogh did the same. They spent their entire lives inside a rectangle. Sure, there might be one or two circular paintings in the history of art... but 99.9999% of paintings are within a rectangle. The same goes for photography; it's a rectangle. It can be vertical, horizontal, or square, but what's inside that frame is who you are. Sometimes, without even realizing it, your style and graphic approach, the films you've seen, your artistic background, your knowledge, and more, contribute to the layers that form it. It's all about ingredients, two tablespoons of this, one tablespoon of that, and the recipe varies and endures throughout your life."

I personally see some constants that form the

foundation of a significant part of your work throughout your career. For instance, that air of simplicity and elegance, of poetry, which can only be achieved through painstaking attention to detail.

There's a relatively intuitive response to this, or at least one consideration that might explain it. I'm a photographer who, almost from the outset, found the world of fashion to be an intriguing field in which to work. Am I a born fashion photographer? Is it in my genes? I don't think so. However, I took it very seriously and learned a lot to become a photographer who understands fashion. You can't produce work with any value if you don't take it seriously, and that means understanding the difference between high-quality silk and cotton. I felt that was part of my job. If I was going to do fashion, I had to understand the varying values of materials and how they relate to each other: how cotton relates to linen, how linen relates to silk, or how it relates to wool... you also need some knowledge of fashion history and how different pieces fit on the body. I have all that. But what I'm not is a trendsetter. I can't predict or grasp the forces that cause the fashion world to evolve naturally. That's why I always needed a good fashion editor who could convey the philosophy behind those eighteen pages of a production; the stylistic line running beneath the production, so to speak.

In this sense, I've always considered myself a photographer coming into the fashion world from the outside. My starting point was more akin to a photographer who primarily wanted to create something artistic with his images. I didn't want my photos to be just fashion photos. It was always a personal struggle for me to elevate what I did on a magazine page into the concept of a photography book and, from there, open the





possibility for it to be contemplated even in an art gallery. That's my mental framework whenever I delve into fashion.

This distinction is truly fascinating, could you go a bit more into detail?

Certainly, with pleasure. Consider, for instance, one of the greatest photographers of the 20th century, Irving Penn. Would you categorize him as a fashion photographer, or do you believe he was, above all, a remarkable photographer who merely carved out a portion of his career in the fashion world? Without a doubt, Penn falls into the latter category of photographers. He spent over 60 years in the world of fashion, but if you explore the grand retrospectives of his work, you'll find that there isn't an abundance of fashion photography. This is despite him having the privilege of working in the fashion industry during a time when the fashion world and the creators within it were truly exceptional. We're talking about Dior, Chanel... a period spanning the '50s and '60s. Their creations were nothing short of extraordinary. Photographers always rely on external factors, be it the quality and creativity of garments, a model, or even the weather. It's akin to capturing landscape photography. While there's a great deal open to the photographer's interpretation, a significant portion of what influences our final product isn't within our control.

If I look back and analyze my own career, I'm aware that I made numerous mistakes, as is only natural. For instance, 25 years ago, I would have preferred to make the decision to focus more on my personal projects. I always enjoyed the camaraderie spirit prevalent in major fashion campaigns. I enjoyed it for a long time, and I believe that when you examine my entire body of work, it possesses a quality and personality that sets it apart.

Would you have liked to concentrate more on your personal projects?

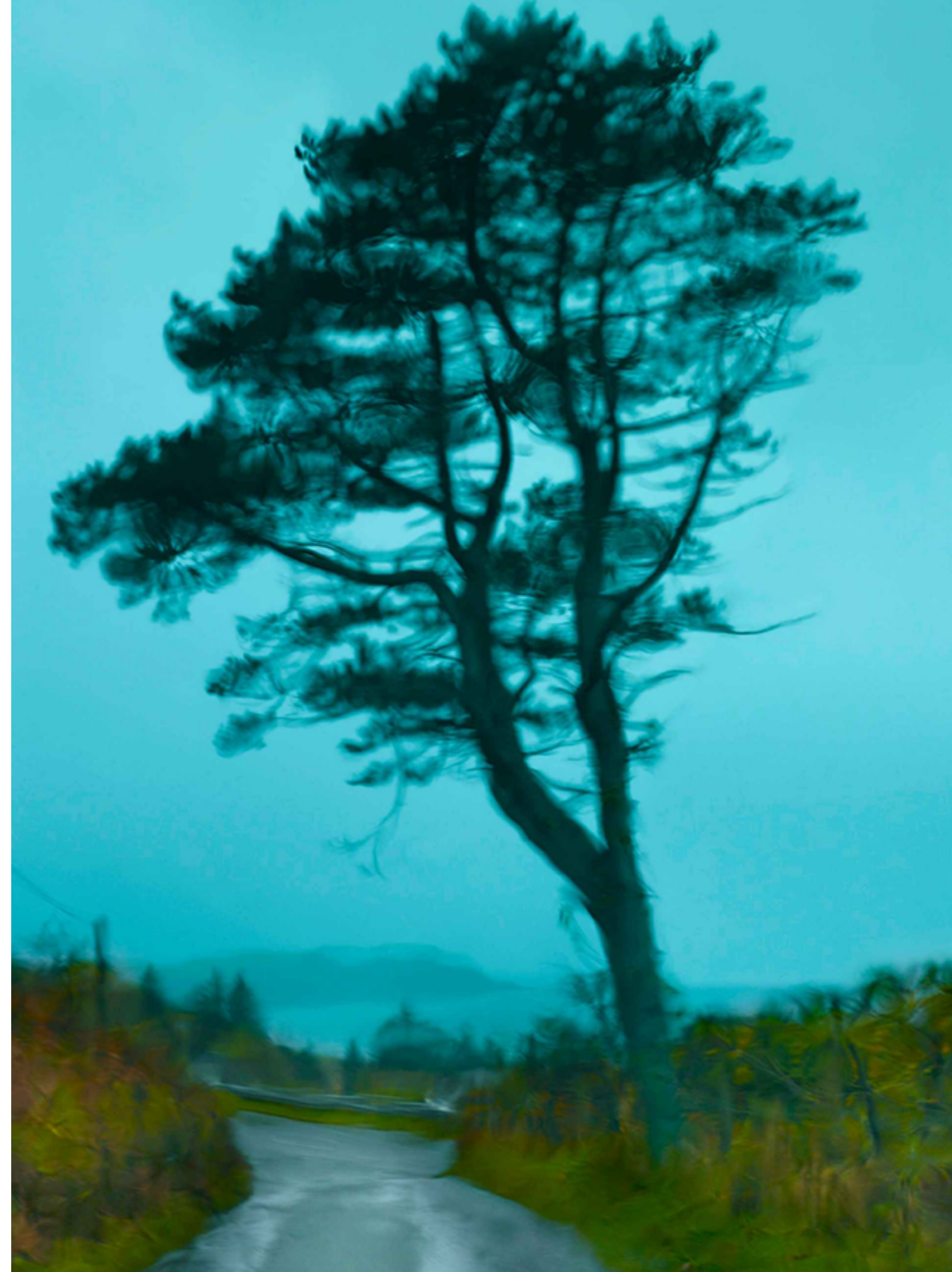
To have been able to halt all my other assignments and sit down to plan out photographic projects for a month? Of course, that's a luxury. I've had so many ideas for personal projects on which I couldn't invest the necessary time... something that I was able to do, for example, for my project in Canada, titled *Cowboys & Indians*. It was a type of adventure I didn't embark on until the early '70s, and it earned me one of the most significant acknowledgments of my life from an art critic, specifically from the *L.A. Times*. He wrote that, for him, my project was ART in capital letters. I approached this project with a purely journalistic or documentary photography perspective. Most importantly, the photos are incredibly

powerful, honest, and direct... Some of them are quite evocative. My intention was to accurately portray the true personality of all the individuals I photographed and the environment in which they moved. I spent six days doing fieldwork, working ten hours each day. I wanted to do it because I was sure this effort would greatly benefit the rest of my work. I'm extremely proud of the images that are part of this project.

Which brings us directly to Skye, the project you're currently unveiling at the Hamilton Gallery in London.

I've always been profoundly intrigued by the process through which a painter can depict a hill, even a mundane one, and create a piece that perfectly aligns with their creative vision. I traveled to the Isle of Skye with only one book in my luggage, an edition that showcases landscapes painted by Degas. A book I find particularly beautiful, among other things, because through his interpretation, that dull hill takes on a different meaning. If someone had been there at the same time and taken a photograph of the same hill, it would undoubtedly be a dull image. Unless, of course, our imaginary photographer was fortunate enough for dramatic-looking clouds to form around it, for example, or for a whimsical gust of wind to rustle the grass around it. I've always believed that, in this respect, photographers are at a significant disadvantage. As I mentioned earlier in one of my responses, we depend on what's in front of us, on our raw material. Unless you decide to camp out in that place for three weeks and, additionally, are lucky enough to run into perfect lighting or beautiful sunsets or sunrises, and everything falls in your favor regarding the weather... it's impossible to achieve something akin to what a painter can do.

With this project, my aim was to immerse myself in the working methods of Degas, the Victorian romantics, or Turner. A painter can pause and create something entirely new from their own vision. In other words, their creation comes from within, and what they paint is an interpretation of what's before them. It's not realistic. Do you know Monet's series of haystacks? If you analyze those works, you can sense that he painted some of them, for instance, early in the morning when the light was cooler... yet he painted them in shades of blues and purples. If we had been there with him while he painted, we might have whispered something like, "Excuse me, Mr. Monet, but haystacks aren't that blue. I'm looking at them right now, and they're not that blue." But Monet was creating his own subjective reality. I wanted to get closer to this way of working; that's why I assembled a team of three individuals to enable me to be quick enough to capture what I liked.





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Photographers are often compelled to rely more on what's before them than other types of artists. But, even so, they also create their own reality.

That's right. Some photographers spend a lot of time waiting for dramatic landscapes, whereas a painter, if they believe their work needs some clouds to reflect their personal vision, can paint them as needed. They don't rely on the randomness of the weather in that regard. That's why the philosophy behind my Skye project seeks to merge both worlds. In other words, there's a landscape that I like. Now, how can I add something to the scene, through my own effort and work, that transcends that reality? I needed to be very flexible and quick to attempt to capture moments that were unique and may never happen again. This way of working conflicts with what some purist photographers consider appropriate, but I wanted to do something no one else could, even if they took a picture right next to me at the same moment. I didn't want to depend so much on the event itself. It's similar to what we were discussing about Degas earlier. A photographer can use a plethora of tools to recreate their vision of what's in front of the camera: lenses, distortions, sensitivity, camera type, thousands of different filters...

I was interested in the mystery, the drama, and the distortion because essentially that's what the Impressionists did—they distorted things and then, of course, tried to form their own vision. The German Expressionists took these principles even further. What I wanted with Skye was to somehow alter reality, but still, I had a tree, a mountain, a path in front of me, and I can take you to that place with my photo. I'm not turning a hill into Mount Everest, but I am creating an interpretation based on my own creative vision.

How do you think this project fits into the rest of your career and body of work?

It's all about the way I interpret reality. Throughout my career, you can discern a series of threads that weave a continuous narrative over time. I was trained as a graphic designer, and everything I learned during that period of my life is etched in my brain like a tattoo. Sometimes you're very aware of that influence, but at other times, what you've been exposed to emerges unconsciously. You do it automatically. I'm sure that

if you take the time to examine a substantial part of my body of work, you can see this influence of graphic visual arts in almost every photograph.

On the other hand, I spent nearly 45 years in a darkroom developing film, so I'm confident that if you look at my images, you'll also notice the influence of someone dedicated to printing and enlarging photographs. I'm an expert in this field. In fact, in my studio, we take care of printing and enlarging our work ourselves, unless the projects require a very special medium, for example. Both in the digital and analog aspects. For me, all this experience gives me a significant advantage in everything related to workflow within a photography studio, as I've had the opportunity to witness the development of tools that are now fundamental even from a technological standpoint, such as photo editing software. •