

Die Stimme der Landschaft im Selbstportrait

Interview with Aishling Muller

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Interview by Aileen Wesseley
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Introduction

In conversation with the artist Aishling Muller, a wide range of themes emerge that reflect the breadth of her artistic practice. The discussion touches on self-portraiture that can no longer easily be described simply as portraits of the self, as these images often become expressions of nature and of universal human experience.

The conversation also explores the contrast between natural landscapes and human-made environments, and inevitably the subject of climate change. What influence does it have on artistic practice? How can artists avoid becoming paralysed by fear about the future while still creating work that speaks meaningfully to major social questions?

Hello Aishling, thank you for taking the time to speak with us. Could you begin by telling us a little about yourself - who you are and what you do?

I'm Aishling, a performance artist working with digital media from a small village in rural Ireland. I never formally studied art at school or elsewhere, so I arrived at it somewhat later in life. But ever since I was a little girl, I always had a camera in my hands.

For over fifteen years I have been creating artworks and pursuing this path as an artist. At my core I am a photographer, but over time I have also trained in performance practices and other holistic approaches to self-development. These experiences have gradually become part of the themes within my work.

My projects generally revolve around changing landscapes - both in relation to my own personal development and in relation to climate change and the many ways our external world has been transforming in recent years. They explore universal themes and the recurring cycles of death and rebirth that shape human experience.

How did you first come into contact with photography, and what made you stay with the medium after that initial interest?

There is a photograph of me at the age of nine pointing a camera at something during a holiday in Greece. I also remember wandering through my father's garden at weekends, chasing butterflies

among pink flowers. I read a great deal as a child and often walked around my mother's house with an open book in my hand.

Because I had so little control over my surroundings at home, I probably found great comfort in my imagination, creating my own reality. Text and visual media have always been places where I could build that space for myself. Even today this combination often appears in my work.

Later, during my studies, I encountered photography again while learning darkroom techniques as part of a basic training in print journalism. A few years later photography became one of my elective subjects in audiovisual studies. My tutor constantly questioned every step I took, which irritated me at the time but which I am deeply grateful for today.

He taught me a great deal about visual storytelling while I created projects about controversial developments in Ireland that carried strong social commentary. For years I focused on the image as a document of reality and even examined academically the concept of truth in documentary photography.

After college this path led to an internship with Magnum Photos in New York. One of my colleagues there once told me that I was clearly an artist rather than a photographer. In many ways those three months in New York lit a fire under me that is still burning today.

For a long time I believed documentary photography was my place within the medium. Later, however, I realised I was emotionally too sensitive to immerse myself constantly in the suffering of the world. I began to explore photography in a more conceptual and self-reflective artistic context instead.

Looking back now, it makes sense that I was chasing those butterflies of inner transformation from a very early age.

Your work addresses serious topics such as climate change, which can make many of us feel overwhelmed. How do you work with these themes without becoming paralysed by fear?

I completely understand that feeling, and I see how it might appear contradictory. Recently I realised that the time for being frozen in fear about climate change has already passed. What is happening around us will happen whether we fear it or not.

For years I have instinctively gravitated towards places and topics connected to climate change. I have lived in landscapes where its effects are already very visible. In many ways the work developed naturally from those experiences - sometimes only later do I recognise that climate change has become one of the themes.

I lived in Iceland for three years. There it is easy to forget that the extraordinary beauty of the landscape actually comes from the dramatic story of geological change and melting glaciers. It is easy to become lost in the majesty of the scenery without fully understanding the devastation behind it.

Working in landscapes is generally a very grounding and spiritual experience for me. Much of my work about climate change has grown out of this process.

Over time I have learned that I do not need to begin with a clear narrative. Often the story only emerges later when I look back at the material I have created. And quite often that story turns out to be highly political and deeply connected to what is happening in the world around us.

Can you describe how this process appears in your practice?

Shortly after the forest fires in Greece in 2021, I travelled there. At the time I was working on self-portraits and saw an opportunity to explore climate themes more consciously, though from a certain distance.

The landscapes I encountered became the setting for a kind of fairytale narrative rooted in environments that appeared almost unreal - even though they were tragically very real.

Working through self-portraiture allowed me to create a small emotional distance from the devastation I experienced there. I also produced landscape images and assembled an experimental film exploring forest fires in Greece, melting glaciers in Iceland, peatlands in Ireland and industrial forestry in Sweden.

At some point it felt as though a blindfold had been removed. I realised that I had already been working with many of these themes for years without fully recognising it.

Because we are so overwhelmed by images today, I felt the need to create work that speaks to people in a gentler and more grounded way.

I now see my task as shifting perspectives from fear and anxiety toward inspiration and hope. I believe many people carry powerful ideas within them that could help us navigate the future we are entering.

How does a new project or series develop within your practice?

For me, a work never truly ends. It develops organically into another work, almost like chapters in a book. One chapter closes and contains the seed of the next.

Everything happening around and within me merges into a kind of melting pot where ideas slowly develop. I usually return to creative activity for one of three reasons: either I have reached an emotional low point and need to pull myself out through creation, an interesting collaboration opportunity appears, or I encounter a place or situation that resonates strongly with the themes I am exploring.

Projects usually begin with a photographic image and then expand into other media over time. Sometimes I recognise the puzzle pieces as I create them, but often many small projects gradually come together into a larger concept. I try to connect these threads until the larger picture begins to appear.

How did your current intuitive and conceptual working approach develop?

My original education gave me a documentary sensitivity that still informs my work today. My university thesis focused on truth and representation in documentary photography.

Later in New York I had the opportunity to speak with photographers who had been working in the documentary tradition for decades. Those conversations were incredibly valuable and their influence still echoes in my thinking.

A few years later I attended an art school where I began questioning these documentary approaches. I moved away from presenting stories from a position of moral authority and allowed myself to experiment with more abstract and intuitive forms of storytelling.

At the time this shift was challenging. But after more than ten years I feel I have found a way to merge these two narrative structures into a visual language that feels truly my own.

What role does performance play in your photographic work?

As long as I can remember I have enjoyed experimenting with voices, characters and different forms of expression. It was probably inevitable that a performative element would eventually enter my artistic practice.

My self-portraits emerged from a desire to bring a stronger sense of embodiment into my work. They introduced a vitality into the images that pure landscape photography could not provide. They also allowed spontaneity to become an important part of the process.

When performing I feel far more present and embodied in the act of creation. Photography often places me in the position of an observer behind the camera, whereas performance allows my whole being to participate in the work.

In this sense the images are not really portraits of myself. They represent universal experiences and transformations that many people recognise emotionally. Through costumes and characters I step away from my personal identity and allow broader narratives to emerge.

Ultimately the photographs become less about me and more about the voice of the landscape speaking through me.

How do multimedia and installation influence your work?

I often incorporate sound recordings and text into my projects. This transforms the work into a more immersive, multisensory experience when presented in an exhibition.

For me the installation process is just as important as creating the images themselves. It allows me to step beyond the screen and interact physically with the work, shaping the space so that the audience can experience it more directly.

Combining visual imagery with sound and language helps reach viewers on different perceptual levels. Images often speak to the unconscious, while text and spoken language address the conscious mind. When these elements work together the narrative becomes far more powerful.

What role does nature itself play within your installations?

I often bring natural elements into human-made spaces or place artworks within natural environments. I enjoy transforming places that were not originally intended as exhibition spaces.

When working with themes of changing landscapes, the presentation of the work becomes a creative process in itself - almost a cycle of death and rebirth.

I enjoy merging existing environments with creative expression. The result is a dialogue between reality and imagination.

How important is technology within your photographic practice?

Technically I have worked with a digital Leica and fixed lenses for over ten years, usually a 35mm or 21mm lens. I particularly enjoy the cinematic wide perspective of the 21mm lens for storytelling.

Ethically I was trained to photograph what is present in front of the lens and to minimise manipulation afterwards. I rarely remove or add elements in post-production. I try to ensure the image is already right in the camera.

Exposure is usually my biggest challenge, as I often underexpose slightly to preserve highlight detail. Photographing in the charred black forests of Greece was a technical challenge in this respect.

To be honest, my Photoshop skills are terrible. If an image cannot be edited within half an hour, I usually abandon it.

How do sustainability concerns influence your work as a photographer?

Printing photographs has become an ethical dilemma for me because of the environmental impact of the process. I therefore try to work with water-based pigment inks and cotton paper, and I have reduced printing significantly.

Many of my works are now presented digitally or through projections rather than prints. When I do print, I prefer large formats, often at least one metre on the long side.

For one project in Greece I burned the edges of the prints with a small torch. I enjoy adding such elements so that each piece becomes a unique object.

What is your relationship with presenting work online and through social media?

My relationship with social media is somewhat unusual. I see it less as a marketing tool and more as an extension of my creative process.

I studied art within digital culture, so I have always enjoyed experimenting with the boundaries of online spaces. My social media presence is less like a carefully maintained garden and more like a wild landscape that changes with the seasons.

Sometimes it is full of growth and energy; other times it reflects quieter or darker periods. In many ways it functions as a personal and professional diary where ideas emerge and develop.

What are your next projects and long-term aspirations?

I often participate in collaborative projects because they challenge me and deepen my process. It is important never to stop exploring new ways of creative expression.

In the coming months I will collaborate with a carpenter to create something functional. It will push me outside my comfort zone and allow me to explore conceptual, creative and ethical questions about working with wood — a material closely connected to many themes in my work.

The future is difficult to predict. The past few years have brought enormous changes to my personal life and artistic practice. I sense that I am currently entering a new chapter, though I cannot yet see exactly where it will lead.

Our world itself is also undergoing dramatic transformation. I will need time to observe how these changes move within me creatively.

What I do know is that I will continue sharing my work on climate themes with as many people as possible, raising awareness and exploring new possibilities for collaboration and application.