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## Alejandro Chaskielberg: All That Remains in Otsuchi, Japan

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By Conor Risch



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"Three Generations," 2013. Alejandro Chaskielberg photographed Tomoko Hida, Sana Hida and Yoshimi Hida in the remains of their home in the village of Otsuchi, which was destroyed by the 2011 Japanese tsunami. Over two years, Chaskielberg photographed the town's residents and its bleak landscape, and documented hundreds of family photographs damaged by the disaster.

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In his new book *Otsuchi: Future Memories*, Alejandro Chaskielberg delves into a Japanese community's struggle to rebuild both physically and psychologically following the 2011 tsunami. His night photographs, showing locals posed in the landscapes where their homes and businesses once stood, are mixed with found family photographs, creating a work that reaches across time and which references photography's significance in the formation of identity, family and community histories, and collective memory.

Chaskielberg first learned about Otsuchi, a small fishing village sandwiched between the sea and mountains in northeastern Japan, from curator Ihiro Hayami. Chaskielberg worked with Hayami on an exhibition in Tokyo in 2012. Hayami, who has relatives in Otsuchi, told Chaskielberg about the community, which was still trying to rebuild a year and a half after the disaster. "When I arrived, there were still houses half demolished, there were still entrances of houses [with] red flags where they marked the bodies that they found, dead people," Chaskielberg explained from his home in Argentina. In one home he found a "wet and smelly" photo album. "It was like a dead animal more than a family album," he recalls. "All the photographs looked like watercolors. The images were blurry, but the colors were mixing one with the other. It was very impressive and representative of what the tsunami did to the city and to the people."

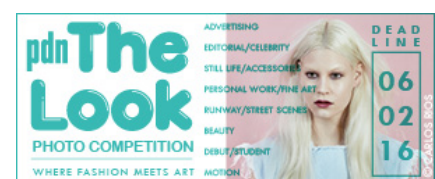


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"DEBRIS #4," 2012. Chaskielberg photographed the packed piles of leftover detritus. "For me it was like paintings," he says, "arbitrary shapes and colors put together." Photo © Alejandro Chaskielberg

During his first trip, Chaskielberg traveled to Otsuchi with his ex-wife and their four-month-old daughter, who helped the photographer connect with the people who remained in Otsuchi. "There were no babies in the city," he explains, because all the families with young children had moved due to the lack of services. He worked with Hayami's family, then was introduced to other families, and the community opened up to him. Chaskielberg made a total of four trips over two years, donating money to the recovery and teaching photography workshops there. "One of my students started doing photography after he lost his father in the tsunami, and he lost also all the photographs of his father. He lost basically all his memories, all his photographic memories, so he decided to start shooting and became a photographer." Chaskielberg hired another student who had lost her parents in the tsunami.

Chaskielberg used three photographic approaches in creating his project. He made color photographs of piles of debris, and those images open the book. Visually packed, they show tangles of fishing nets, bicycles and other detritus. "There is a lot of information, and at the same time it's so visually shocking and beautiful that it for me was like paintings, arbitrary shapes and colors put all together," he explains.

The long exposures made at night, for which Chaskielberg is most known, are a mixture of black-and-white and color. Chaskielberg began photographing the residents amid the foundations of their lost homes and businesses in black-and-white. "When I started doing this project I felt that there were no colors in the city, everything was so depressive and sad," he explains. He later made color landscapes, and also decided to color elements of the black-and-white photographs to connect them to the found photographs he included in the book.

The waterlogged family album Chaskielberg had found influenced his decision. He noticed that when he pressed the plastic page covers of the album, the water and colors would swirl together. "It was something very shocking to see how the colors somehow survive and mix one with the another," he says. When he found an NGO that was preserving found photographs and trying to find their owners, he decided to include lost images in the book. In a space lent to him in a government building, he built a small studio and re-photographed 400 images while he made his portraits of local people.

Back at home, he created color palettes in Photoshop using the colors from the found photographs, then colored the black-and-white photographs. In the book, found photographs often appear next to Chaskielberg's portraits, which are connected by color, composition and subject matter. An image of local firefighters standing in the foundation of the destroyed firehouse where two of their colleagues died, sits opposite an old photo of training exercises. A found image of three deer running up a hillside faces a photo of two dancers in traditional deer costumes.

Chaskielberg submitted the work to Spanish publisher [RM Verlag's](#) Iberoamerican Photobook Competition in 2014, and it was selected for publication by a panel of judges that included [Daido Moriyama](#), who wrote the introduction to the book. In it, Moriyama comments on the mixture of "real image" and "copied image" in Chaskielberg's book. "At the crossroads of the photographed moment, past, present and future configure an eternal spiral, which transmits genuine memories to those of us who look at the images," Moriyama writes.

Nearly five years after the tsunami, Otsuchi is still far from reestablished, something Chaskielberg hopes to call attention to with his book. He also believes the tragedy puts the role of photographs into relief. "I would like to talk about Otsuchi but also to make a more general statement about the importance of

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photography when these kinds of tragedies happen," he says. Chaskielberg plans to exhibit the work in Otsuchi in September to celebrate the opening of a school. The show will include "an action with the kids of the school, to work with photography," he says.

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