

New cities and extensions

(Tafilalet region, Moroccan desert)



For almost ten years now I have wandered through and researched the various aspects of the landscapes of Southern Morocco, more precisely of the desert region scattered with oases of Tafilalet. The area is partly stuck between two ranges of the Atlas, one of which, on the northeast, opens up onto the vast Algerian part of the Sahara.

I was often asked why I have had such a particular bond to that region for such a long time now. It did not start with anything intentional from my side. It is a family history that made it all begin and gave a starting point to discover the region. To avoid cumbersome and reasonable explanations and cut a long story short, I can say this: the encounter that started this work also belonged to the realm of sensations. It was like love at first sight, so to speak, a bolt of lightning that surprised me upon entering a small village just after a shower of rain – a rarity there. The rain had washed away the dust from the landscape, revived its colours and materials and polished both its light and my eyesight. From then on, I was urged to come back as often as possible, just to check in a more thought-through manner what I could make out of this very first striking sensation. And also to make it live on inside me. Every time I go back, every time I start prospecting there again, the space I document through photography opens up a little more.

As time goes by, the specificities of the territory I roam through become more accurate inside me. The series of photographs give birth to new series, and in the meantime, knowledge acquired through readings about the life of the region, its geography, its economy, its manners and customs enrich and support my gaze. My interests become more precise. Gradually, tiny details become more eloquent and my descriptions of the territory grow more complex. Every new opening leads to another opening. From this point on, the journey can become endless.

A territory, a landscape or a site are never made up of a series of prefabricated and frozen signs that photography would only have to harvest in order to utter some ultimate conclusion or truth. They change, are reborn and reinvented with every new step. First and foremost, they are the product of the free experience of a gaze. It is this process of a gaze refining itself thanks to passing time and growing knowledge which I try to capture with accuracy and lucidity through my photographic work.

It was while driving from Ouarzazate to Rissani via the main road N10 that I noticed for the first time the beginnings of construction works for a new suburban residential area along the road. It was a few kilometers away from the West entrance to the city of Tinghir. The site was isolated in the middle of the desert and cut away from the city. At that time, it looked like a forest of utility poles erected in the midst of a levelled-off and extremely arid land with ochre earth. The sharp contrast between the dryness of the land, the colour of the earth and this artificial forest of poles intrigued me. There was something desolate about that place. It has the austere and sinister aspect of a camp. I wasn't sure if it was the beginning of something or its remains.

Every year I went back to that place to observe how the new residential area was developing. In a rather chaotic fashion, I took pictures of the first buildings rising out from the earth. Gradually, the first streets took shape and the structure of the overall plan became visible. My series of photographs tells the story of that mutation of a space while insisting on the architectural elements composing it. These new houses devoid of signature or prestige are built by the lower middle class and are rather homogenous overall. Each one takes up very roughly some of the stylistic specificities of the traditional houses in the country.

At first sight, one can consider them as degenerate versions of traditional homes whose crude modernity forms a sharp contrast to the authenticity of the

surrounding desert. But when giving them a closer look, one notices that these new houses are more than the product of a radical breakup between old and new. Each one of them, in its own special way, recycles and blends some elements specific to the vernacular culture with other features coming from entirely different cultural backgrounds.

On the walls of the houses in Tinghir one can see a good deal of Berber signs and symbols with magical functions: a cross to keep the evil eye away, a stylised sun as guardian of the home, comb-shaped patterns decorated with dots and symbolizing prosperity, etc... All these signs and symbols do not belong to the traditional architectural vocabulary, but are inspired by the patterns on Berber rugs or tattoos. The porches in front of the houses are often very ornate, like the doors of the ancient *Ksours*. Many of them now present pediments shaped like triangles after the Greco-roman fashion but keep a row of tiles spilling over on their top in a fashion typical for the region. One can also notice that the towers which remind of the architecture of the ancient *Kasbahs* made of rammed earth are sometimes still present, although in a more discreet version. The range of wrought iron fences before the windows is now extremely eclectic. In the region, there are now some wrought iron fences whose rigorous geometry reminds of Mondrian. Some of them have taken up patterns which come from the colonial decorative arts of the Twenties while others bear metallic roses in relief. This latter feature is not at all out of place, since some oases close by are growing roses.

The long standing tradition of leaving a jug of water for thirsty travelers outside houses isolated in the middle of the desert is still practiced in these new urban areas, and still has the same function. And like in all the places of the world where cars have become popular, old tires are scattered around frail plants close to the houses.

In order to be protected from the sun, these new houses usually have openings on one side only and if viewed

from a specific angle, they appear in the landscape as huge minimalistic coloured blocs. This series of photographs tries to show in detail that urban mutations and their housing types are the product of multifaceted and complex socio-cultural changes which carry with them layers after layers of a memory made of continuity and changes, a memory which invites us to think of time as a highly heterogeneous continuum.

These works, by their attention to accuracy and their descriptive richness deliberately follow the trend of documentary photography as practiced by the “new topographers” during the Seventies. The photographs of Lewis Baltz have always interested and impressed me a lot, as have those of the Becher and of Joe Deal.



1 – série paysage Tinghir Maroc 2017



2 – série nouvelles constructions Tinghir Maroc 2017



3 – série nouvelles constructions Tinghir Maroc 2017



4 – série nouvelles constructions Rissani Maroc 2017



5 – série nouvelles constructions Tinghir Maroc 2017