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## **A Look at the Rural Portrait Through Magical Realism**

Olhar do Retrato Rural Através do Realismo Mágico

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# A Look at the Rural Portrait Through Magical Realism

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*TERRA: Paisaje Valenciano en el Guadalquivir* (LAND: Valencian Landscape in the Guadalquivir) is a visual essay that utilises photographic portraiture as a means to navigate between the visible and the invisible, the real and the magical. Far from being merely a physical representation, each portrait serves as an allegory, an open door to the symbolic, where identity is expressed not only through the face or pose but also through the invisible bond that unites each portrayed person with the land they inhabit.

**Keywords:** landscape, portrait, photography, magical realism, rural

## ***Olhar do Retrato Rural Através do Realismo Mágico***

*TERRA: Paisaje Valenciano en el Guadalquivir* (*TERRA: Paisagem Valenciana no Guadalquivir*) é um ensaio visual onde o retrato fotográfico se torna uma ferramenta para transitar entre o visível e o invisível, entre o real e o mágico. Longe de ser uma mera representação física, cada retrato é uma alegoria, uma porta aberta ao simbólico, onde a identidade se expressa não apenas através do rosto ou da pose, mas também por meio do vínculo invisível que une cada pessoa retratada à terra que habita.

**Palavras-chave:** paisagem, retrato, fotografia, realismo mágico, rural

## Descriptive Memory

*TERRA: Paisaje Valenciano en el Guadalquivir*<sup>1</sup> (LAND: Valencian Landscape in the Guadalquivir) is a photographic project born from a personal and collective need to preserve the memory of a rural community tied to the Guadalquivir marshes, Isla Mayor (Seville), a territory defined by its agricultural tradition, particularly rice farming. Rooted in a familial experience, the project draws on the influence of my grandparents and ancestors, as well as the earth-bound, lifelong bond they shared.

The project is presented as a visual archive that seeks to recover and keep alive the voices, gestures, and traces of those who inhabit — and have inhabited — this landscape. Thus, *TERRA* manifests as an artistic practice that explores memory from an affective and poetic perspective, where images function as symbols that transcend the documentary to construct a space of resistance against forgetting and cultural homogenisation.

A key aesthetic and conceptual element of the project is the creation of a photographic series in a magical realist vein. Magical realism is a movement that emerged in the early 20th century in Ibero-American literature. Concerning reality, it has been said that this movement offers a new angle of vision, as well as an attitude towards it or a narrative distance between the narrator and the story. It has also been defined as a mythical perspective that does not distinguish the magical from the real; the identification of the extraordinary as real, or vice versa. Regarding narrative logic, it involves a return to pre-logic, the construction of a senseless universe that does not find fantastical elements strange but normalises them. Ultimately, it is about familiarising the magical, naturalising the peculiar, without offering any justification (Llarena, 1993). As in the famous scene (Figure 1) from *Amanece, que No Es Poco* (It's Daybreak, Believe It or Not; Cuerda, 1989).

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<sup>1</sup>To simplify, henceforth, the project's full title will be referred to as *TERRA*.



Figure 1: *Still from Amanece, que No Es Poco*  
Source. From *Amanece, que No Es Poco*, by J. L. Cuerda, 1989, 00:27:15

Throughout the project, portraits are constructed as visual allegories, where the land, agricultural tools, and religious symbols become signs that dialogue with one another and with personal and collective histories.

In short, this project is not merely a collection of photographs but an emotional archive built as an act of resistance against forgetting, dispossession, and homogenisation. Through photographic portraiture — the central element of this project — it seeks to preserve and value the memory of a specific rural community, revealing the affective and symbolic bonds between people and the land they inhabit. The photographic staging does not detract from truthfulness. However, it amplifies and renders visible aspects that are often invisible, such as grief, faith, belonging, and heritage, thereby linking artistic practice to the living memory of a community.

This intimate, personal, and magical archive invites viewers to see the landscape and its people with fresh eyes, where the land is not merely a physical space but a sacred place of rootedness, belonging, and collective memory.

## Essay

To define “magical realism”, we must first clarify what “realism” and “magic” mean. Defining realism is straightforward: it is the artistic expression that seeks to imitate reality. However, what happens when the word “magical” is added? In its usual sense, the magical is the art or knowledge that aims to master beings or natural forces and produce, through specific practices and formulas, effects contrary to natural laws (Chiampì, 1983). Concerning reality, it has been

said that magical realism offers a new angle of vision, considered an attitude towards reality itself or a narrative distance between the narrator and the story. It has also been defined as a mythical perspective that does not distinguish the magical from the real; an identification of the extraordinary as real, or vice versa. Regarding narrative logic, it involves a return to pre-logic, the construction of a senseless universe that does not find fantastical elements strange but normalises them. Thus, it is about familiarising the magical, naturalising the peculiar, without offering any justification (Llarena, 1993).

Since its emergence, two positions have existed: those who consider magical realism exclusive to literature and those who believe it can be transferred to other cultures and artistic disciplines (Hurley, 2013). This movement began in painting, gained popularity in literature, and was later transposed to other artistic languages, such as photography. Furthermore, some contemporary photographers whose works may dialogue with the aesthetics of magical realism include Graciela Iturbide, known for images combining the everyday with the symbolic and mythical; Charles Fréger, whose portraits often explore collective identities and rituals with a strong, almost fantastical visual component; and Alec Soth, who captures evocative atmospheres and narratives that transcend immediate reality in his portraits and landscapes.

This transposition of magical realism to the photographic medium allows new ways of narrating memory and identity. It is precisely in this context that I developed the photographic project *TERRA*, which emerges from the need to portray and preserve the collective and intimate memory of a rural community deeply tied to rice farming in Andalusia. Through carefully composed portraits, *TERRA* recovers the voices and everyday gestures of a community of and for the land. Each picture is an allegory, a visual construction in a magical realist vein, reflecting the spirituality, devotion, heritage, and resistance of those who inhabit this territory.

The first photograph of the project, “Terrateniente”<sup>2</sup> (Landowner; Figure 2), marked its beginning in 2019. In it, my grandfather Antonio Ferri appears half-buried, leaning on his staff. The image suggests his fusion with the land he cultivated, his proximity to death, and the dignity with which he observes his fields. Like the grandfather Irigibel in *Vacas* (Cows; Medem, 1992), he seems to inhabit both worlds: that of the living and the dead. This image, like many others, arises from an unconscious need, with its meanings emerging over time. The magic manifests in the viewer’s reaction, as they are surprised by the impossible being shown with such naturalness.

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<sup>2</sup>The original title in Spanish is “terrateniente”, the equivalent of “landowner” in English — a term used to designate a large landowner. The choice of the title *TERRA* not only evokes the physical bond with the territory but also proposes a poetic and symbolic reading of ownership and belonging, distancing itself from the historical figure of the landowner and moving closer to a more affective, ancestral, and spiritual relationship with the land.



Figure 2: "*Terrateniente*" Credits. Alicia Palacios-Ferri (2019)

It was to him that I dedicated my doctoral dissertation, a central figure in my work. The dissertation, titled *A Este Lado Vacas, al Otro Lado TERRA. La Semiótica del Paisaje Mito-Mágico de Julio Medem y Reminiscencias en la Producción Propia* (This Side *Vacas*, on the Other Side LAND: The Semiotics of Julio Medem's Mytho-Magical Landscape and Reminiscences in My Own Production; Palacios-Ferri, 2025) addresses magical realism in the context of rural landscapes, in both cinema and photography. I draw a parallel between the film *Vacas* and my photographic project *TERRA*, exploring how both construct visual narratives that reflect memory, identity, and a profound relationship with the land through the lens of magical realism.

I am like the young Cristina in *Vacas*, who accompanies her grandfather in the forest and builds, under his care, a barn of branches and straw. I am that girl who grows up, still immersed in the forest; I am the living legacy he left in me; I am that woman who is still a girl, the same one who accompanied her grandfather to the forest so he could die where he wished; now he is the forest, and one day she will be too. In Cristina, I find the curious Alicia — named after Lewis Carroll's Alice — who tried to understand the master by her side and absorb all his wisdom while it was still possible. In the gaze of grandfather Irigibel, I recognise the gaze of my grandfather. This gaze sees beyond what the eyes can perceive, one that concentrates an entire universe within the landscape. Now, that gaze lives on

through me. (Palacios-Ferri, 2025, p. 584)

Viewers who saw this photograph for the first time were astonished, as it contains something that does not belong in our everyday normality. That man, with a hat and a weathered face, appears sunk into the earth. It is in this strange insertion into the land that the magic lies. This photograph could have been ordinary: a picture of a veteran farmer smiling, showing the fruit of his labour. However, I wanted to go further; I wanted to capture his earth-bound bond through a poetic image.

Agricultural work often appears in the farmer's life as an inherited legacy. In this case, the model is my paternal uncle, Julio Daniel Palacios, who stars in two photographs that revolve around the same theme (Figure 3 and Figure 4): heritage. Although Julio has knowledge and training in metalwork, excelling in his artisanal skills, he dedicated his entire life to agriculture, as it was presented to him as a legacy.



Figure 3: *"Herencia I"* Credits. Alicia Palacios-Ferri (2019)



Figure 4: *"Herencia II"* Credits. Alicia Palacios-Ferri (2019)

In these images, we observe the model posing with elements that form part of his everyday landscape. In Figure 3, he looks at the camera while holding, with his farmer's hands — imbued with a metalworker's skill — the steering wheel of one of the oldest tractors in all of Andalusia. In Figure 4, tractor wheels scattered across the land serve as a pedestal for a figure that rises like an inert sculpture. These are tyres several metres in circumference, so accustomed to the land where they rest that grass grows inside them. He climbs onto them, as I did in my childhood, finding in that resistant — but-treacherous — stepping the joy of play.

In both cases, we find physical evidence of a vital heritage. One refers to ancient agriculture, the other to contemporary agriculture. It is not just a farmer on tractor wheels strewn across the land, staring at us intently — there is something in that posture that invites us to imagine stories, to feel that there is a heritage there, an ancient gesture that persists in the present.

This is the magic we spoke of earlier: the normality of his face might lead us to think that what he is doing before us is habitual, though in reality it is not. This tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between the natural gesture and the almost dreamlike setting, is precisely what brings us closer to magical realism. The scene seems possible but carries a symbolic density that transcends visible reality.

His poses with these objects — one a tractor, that became a relic, the other objects that may one day become relics — express his reality. That of someone who, with hands close to a piece of iron, can work magic but chooses to pursue the most beautiful heritage of all: cultivating the lands his father once tilled with his own hands, and his grandfather before him.



Rice production also gives rise to other professions. One inspired the following photograph (Figure 5). Miguel Ferrer, from El Palmar (Valencia), dedicated his life to both agriculture and weaving nets for catching crabs. Reflecting on how someone became immersed in such a laborious craft throughout their life, the image emerged, once again, unannounced. Miguel and Vicenta posed with complete naturalness, caught — but — free under one of the many nets woven under their home's roof. I portrayed them enveloped by the landscape that saw them thrive and where their eyes and hands so often rested.



Figure 5: "*Atarraya*" Credits. Alicia Palacios-Ferri (2019)

This image is distinctly magical realist and leaves no one indifferent. Nevertheless, following the proposed definition of this term — presenting the abnormal with complete normality — we must highlight something: when I explained the idea to them, approaching with the net that Miguel himself had woven; when I covered them completely with it, they did not hesitate for a moment. They did not ask why or suggest a more conventional staging; on the contrary, they embraced the unusual with the naturalness of those who have lived enough to know that reality can also be fantastical. They assumed the magic of that image alongside the normality of those who live with magic every day. In *TERRA*, there is also talk of love, faith, and devotion.

This is the case with “María de Sales” (Figure 6), an allegorical image in homage to my maternal grandmother. The protagonist is my aunt María de Sales, my mother’s sister. Throughout my life, I thought it was a common name. However,

I was far from correct. Legend has it that, over 600 years ago, a farmer named Andrés de Sales i Ferri discovered an image of the Virgin, who was later named after him and became known as the Virgin of Sales. It is celebrated annually on 8 September. As my grandfather's sister is also named Sales, I assumed my aunt's name was inherited; I was mistaken again. My grandmother was young and inexperienced. During her first childbirth, she experienced such fear and pain that — by her own words — she “surrendered to her Virgin”: if the girl were born healthy, she would bear her name. Thus, my aunt carries the name of the devotion my grandmother felt. This devotion did not fade, despite the passage of time and distance. The devotion to this Virgin led hundreds of women to bear her name and prompted a replica of her to be brought to the marshes of the Guadalquivir. One issue this photograph addresses is how Valencian culture is reflected in names, as seen in the case of Sales.



Figure 6: "*María de Sales*" Credits. Alicia Palacios-Ferri (2022)

Initially, the opportunity to photograph the Virgin's replica — kept and protected by its faithful — in the church of the village of Alfonso XIII, just 4 km from Isla Mayor, occupied my thoughts. However, I knew that image would be too obvious. On the other hand, in my field notebook, one of the many prints of the Virgin of Sales that my grandmother cherished was taped to a page. I knew that, somehow, I would reflect the story I wanted to tell through the landscape.

Finally, on a September evening — when the rice was beginning to turn golden — I achieved what I had envisioned with such detail and clarity. In it, we see

three indispensable women in my life: on the left, my eldest cousin, Miriam Sabaté; in the centre, the undeniable protagonist, my aunt Sales Ferri; and on the right, my mother, Vicenta Ferri, who this time traded her eternal role as a photography assistant for that of a model. In my aunt's arms, playing the role of the baby Jesus, is my nephew Hipólito Viana.

The central figures are framed by an arch crafted from palm branches, alluding to those offered to the Virgin of Sueca on 8 September. In my aunt's hands is a staff mimicking the one the original Virgin holds, though far less ornate. It is, moreover, the same staff from the first image of this project: the one my grandfather has in "Terrateniente". In some way, its presence honours its owner, who is no longer with us.

The magic, once again, infiltrates the image, appearing in the form of enormous palm branches — carefully chosen and cut for this shot — that serve as a natural arch protecting a figure reminiscent of a print taped to a field notebook. It is also in the solicitous postures of its bearers, in a cloak placed over the shoulders that serves as a cape, mimicking a red velvet cape with golden embroidery, and in a child who, for the first time all day, remains still, looking at the camera.

Everyone in front of and behind the camera knew my grandmother and witnessed her devotion to the Virgin. A large image of the Virgin stood at her home's entrance; she prayed to it whenever my grandfather's departure loomed, and it was for her that, every September, we drove 700 km. In this photograph, my grandmother may not appear, but she is present in every small detail.

From one allegory to another, from a biblical image to a political one: the coat of arms of Andalusia. This image arises from reclamation. I realised a photograph was missing in this project, one that reclaimed Andalusia. I recalled the coat of arms (Figure 7), which Blas Infante once drew in his home and which every Andalusian has coloured at school at the end of February<sup>3</sup>. I needed a Hercules, two lions, and an arch to embrace them, and I realised they were right before me. Thus, for this photograph, I chose my uncle David Ferri, my mother's brother, as the model (Figure 8). He is my Hercules. His skin is made of rice husks, his hair of grass. His veins are tributaries of the Guadalquivir, and his flesh is moist earth. He is a protector and guardian. He smiles when it rains and weeps when the sky does not.

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<sup>3</sup>28 February is Andalusia Day.



Figure 7: *Flag of Andalusia*

Source. La Sexta. ([https://www.lasexta.com/viajestic/curioso/razon-que-hercules-sale-escudo-andalucia\\_2024022865df0b37566e5f00019526ee.html](https://www.lasexta.com/viajestic/curioso/razon-que-hercules-sale-escudo-andalucia_2024022865df0b37566e5f00019526ee.html))



Figure 8: *"Tierra y Libertad"* Credits. Alicia Palacios-Ferri (2022)

Thus, in each portrait, the rural gaze becomes a threshold between the ordinary and the strange, the visible and the invisible—exactly as magical realism proposes: a reality that does not break but expands, making room for the extraordinary within the everyday. *TERRA*, in its fusion of the rural with the magical, offers a gaze that not only observes but also honours, re-signifies the everyday, and

sows, revealing the hidden magic in simple life and transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary.

**Machine Translation Post-Editing: Anabela Delgado**

## Biographical Note

Alicia Palacios-Ferri holds a Cum Laude doctorate in Fine Arts. She studied Fine Arts at the University of Seville. She relocated to Valencia to complete a master's degree in Photography, Art and Technique, and a master's in Artistic Production at the Polytechnic University of Valencia, where she currently works as a senior research technician. Her interests focus on the cinematic and photographic landscape as an aesthetic and affective space, a perspective reflected in both her artistic production and research work. She works with various artistic media, including installation and video, although her practice is primarily based in photography. She has participated in numerous exhibitions and has received awards in several competitions, such as the UHU Contemporary Projects Award, the Madrid Young Creators Contest, Valencia Crea, the Blas de Otero Foundation, and the Loyola University Photography Prize.

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