



Paul Cupido

Searching for Mu

Paul Cupido (1972) graduated with honors from the Fotoacademie Amsterdam in 2017. He has since published a handful of books, including the artist's publications *Searching for Mu* (2017) and *Contiuum* (2019) in collaboration with graphic designer Akiko Wakabayashi. Cupido's work has been exhibited widely internationally, among others at Paris Photo, Unseen, and Nordic Light Festival. In 2017 he won the Hariban Jury Award. Cupido is represented by Bildhalle Gallery (Zurich & Amsterdam) and Danziger Gallery (New York City).

The photographic work of Paul Cupido revolves around the principle of *Mu*: a philosophical concept that could be translated to “does not have” but is equally open to countless interpretations. *Mu* can be considered a void, albeit one that holds potential.

Cupido's ongoing photographic and cinematic experiment *Searching for Mu* is at once a personal and universal odyssey of our fleeting existence in relation to the profound emotional experiences of love, time, and death. Instead of presuming to be documents, Cupido's photographs point to transcendent reflections of the soul and of the intermingling of the microscopic and macroscopic.

All images © Paul Cupido, from the ongoing quest *Searching for Mu*.

Left page: Suave 2016
Following spread, left page: Clair de Lune, 2018
Following spread, right page: Hands Together, 2018

I aim to engage with the world with wide-open senses. My work is about the magic moments of life as well as its inconveniences. I want to take pictures while forgetting about the process of photography until I am saturated with an existential sense of life. Every step I take begins with the notion of *mono no aware*: the transience of everything, the gentle melancholy of things, being sensitive to ephemera.

The idea of art as a source of consolation is a notion that really resonates with me - whether that is reached through composition, writing, painting, or photography. I came to photography relatively late in life, and initially used it as my own personal island of 'escape'. The camera was a way to help ground me in the present in a life that was very chaotic at that time. Chaotic is not the right word. Think

of it as a situation with very heavy workloads. Not chaotic, as it was full in control. I loved it even at that time, but to be in control all the time is very stressful — which is killing and very bad for health and well-being. Back then, I was a busy and overloaded sound designer, dealing with relentless deadlines and I was under so much pressure and stressed out all the time. Looking back, it was a period where I was completely detached from my inner self. I couldn't even begin to contemplate or handle the bigger feelings of loss or confront the knowledge that we are all mortal. Through photography, I learned to see and accept the true beauty of the essence of life. The temporary, ephemeral nature of life - the *Éphémère* - is something that I constantly return to. The rhythm of the seasons, the tides, the phases of the moon, the circle of life, these themes are always present in my work.







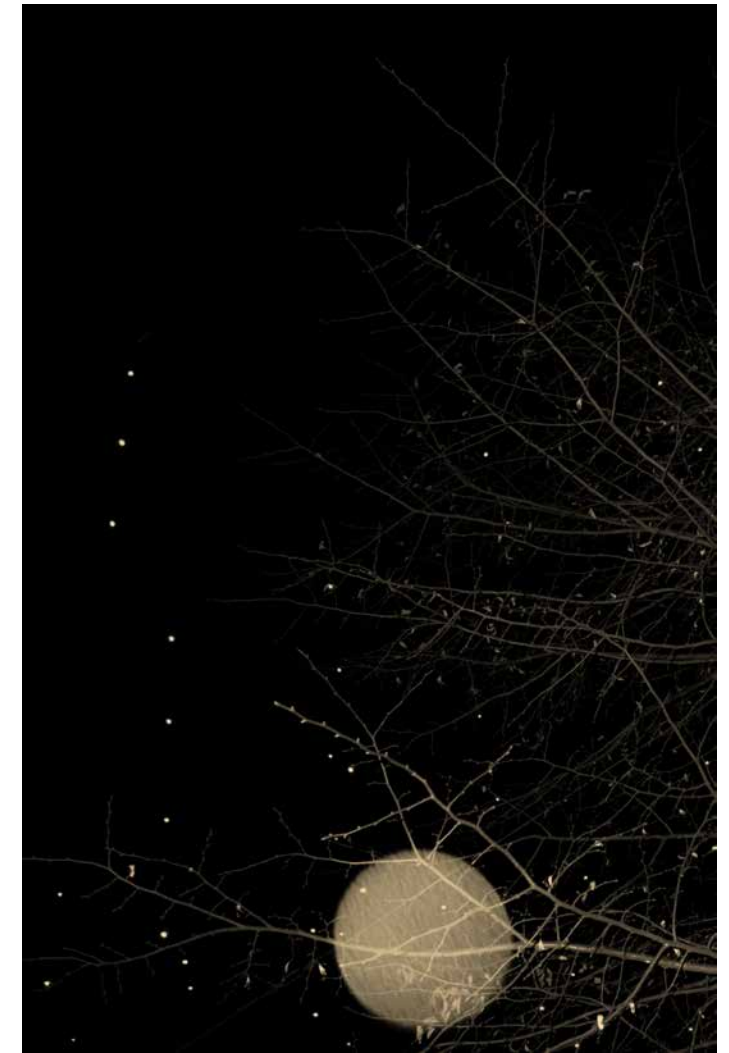
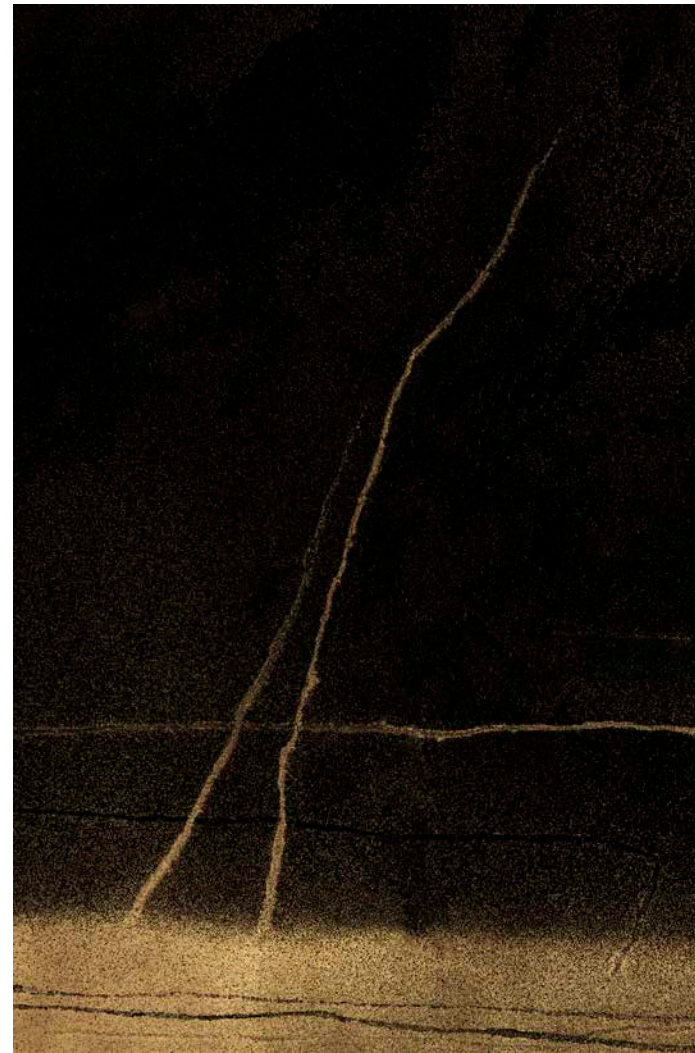
Searching for Mu is the larger framework I work from, but I cannot really capture in words what that is precisely, because by its very nature, it is essentially a paradox. *Mu* is the eternal: neither on nor off, ever-present, and existing entirely devoid of ego. In my work, I want to reveal a journey or a process, an attempt to discover how the very basics of life work. To me, this means exploring the universal desire for love, the sublime,

the transcendent, the primal vibration. This may sound a bit out there and pretentious, but that is absolutely not how I mean it. It is about that very basic and universal human desire to search and discover. Ultimately, every single person wants to be happy, and has deep questions about why we are here. But this human pursuit of happiness opens up the entire spectrum of emotions, including the difficult and uncomfortable ones. So that

is what I am trying to capture, but when it comes to expression and technique, I am very simple and have an almost naive approach in a way. The photos that appeal to me most are the ones a child could take.

Japanese photography has had a major impact on my work, both aesthetically speaking (*wabi-sabi*), as well as in their incredible dedication to the craft of printing techniques. Machiel Botman (1955) also made a big impression on

me when I first came across one of his books. I could not stop wandering through the pages, and it really inspired and evoked feelings of liberty in me. Recently, I discovered Maya Deren (1958), a very progressive avant-garde artist, who was way ahead of her time. Punk is another source of inspiration as is looking at contemporary work on Instagram and also listening to the composer Erik Satie, another rebel.



For me, taking photos is very much about release. I learned to let go of my inner perfectionist and any personal pressure to be a good technical photographer (which I am definitely not). Having said that, when it comes to postproduction, I am very precise. I love analogue techniques and I am a total paper addict, especially Japanese paper. To produce really good quality prints, I like to

work with print masters in the Netherlands and Japan. For example, I released a series of platinum palladium prints together with the renowned Amanasalto printing atelier in Japan. For the toning, we used a special mix of natural pigments. Now, I am working on carbon printing and the use of ultramarine and gold. The Toyobo technique is my favourite, because it is completely non-toxic.

Left page: Mu #12, 2021
Right page, left: Mu #35
Right page, right: Mu #34, 2019

I work both with analogue film and digitally. I mostly use a small Leica camera but also often reach for a simple point-and-shoot. There is a purity to it, and it allows me to work intuitively and act on impulse without the unnecessary complexity and hassle getting in the way.

Sometimes, I have an idea in my head, but it never really works out as I initially imagined. But I never see that as a problem nor as wasted energy, as it can spark something else unexpected and wonderful. By starting out with a particular idea, you set boundaries and conditions or a situation, and from those initial constraints something magical can happen. That is the really fascinating thing about photography. When you open up, are receptive, and allow yourself to be playful, you create the perfect conditions for coincidence. This is how I like to approach photography, or I just go travel and let myself wander and take photos non-stop. No staging, no planning - nothing. Once I am back home, I deliberately wait a few months so I can approach the images with a more open and objective perspective. Then, I start to really play with the images. The next stage is the edit and sequencing which also involves a big element of playfulness as this

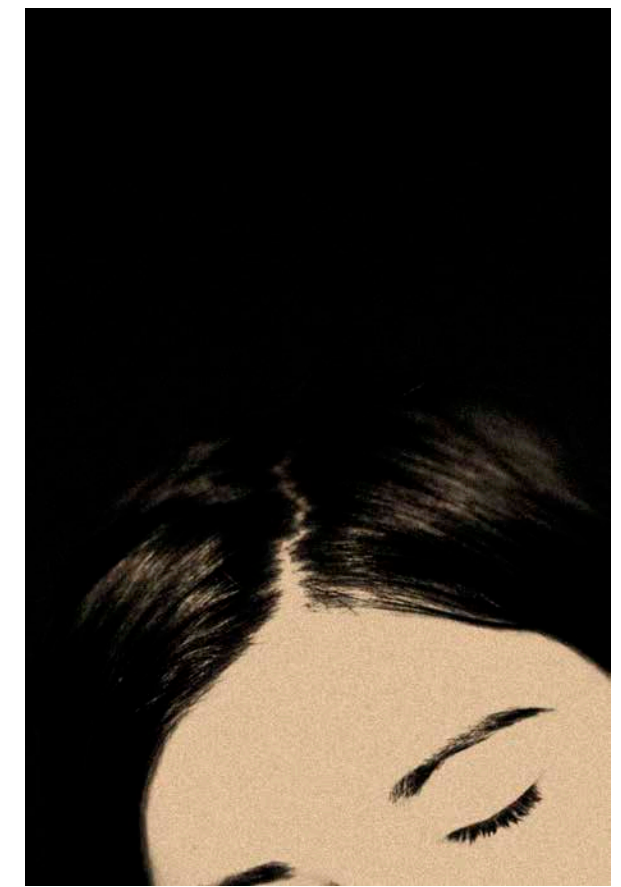
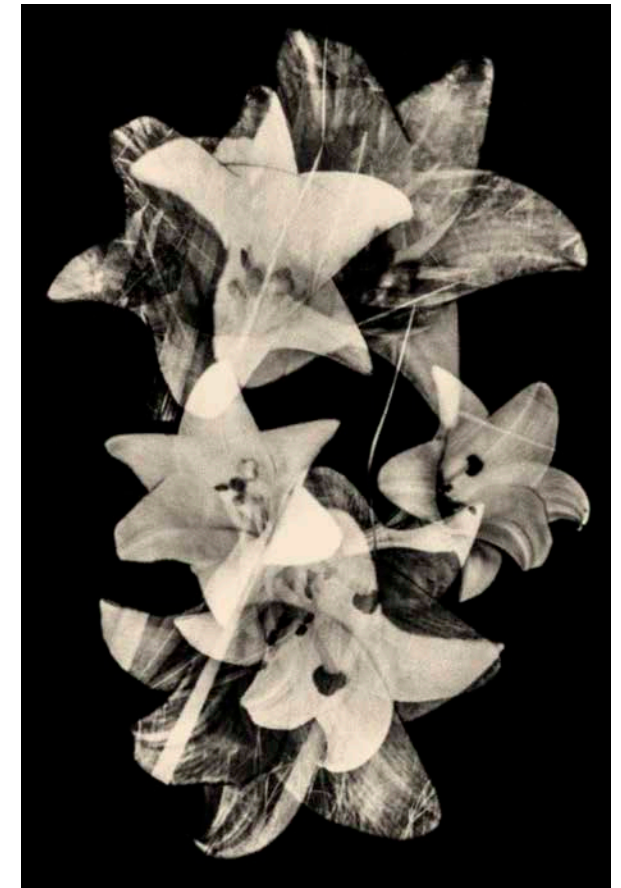
is where you begin to see how the individual photographs interact and relate to each other. This process is incredible. Machiel Botman put it really well when he said, "Starting with building something, without knowing what it is going to be." That pretty much captures my creative process. To me, there are also so many parallels with sound composition.

There is something about the studio environment that is too controlled and triggers the inner perfectionist in me. I prefer to embrace the freedom of the outdoors and enjoy looking at the world. I love the way a simple, and sometimes even accidental snapshot, can be far more touching than a perfectly produced studio photo. It is about connecting with a deeper and purer emotion, and not about aspiring for technical perfection, for the perfect photo. Another paradox, as I strive for the prints to be perfect... On the technical side, I work with a small reporter flash, and love to use the full moon as my natural light source during the night.

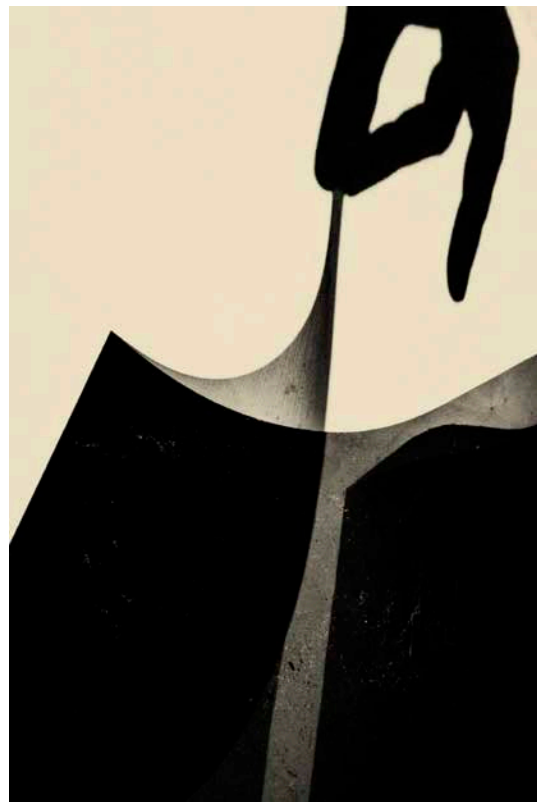
Studio work can be wonderful though. The statement above is personal, and it is just what works best for me. I do not want to bring down studio photographers here.

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Right page, top left: Rose To Mirjam, 2019
Right page, bottom left: Moonvoyage, 2018
Right page, top right: Obscuras, 2018
Right page, bottom right: River Runs Always, 2019



At the moment, I am working on a new artist book which I am hoping to have ready in the Fall. It will be my third after *Searching for Mu* and *Continuum*. Looking back across these books, I have really noticed a quiet evolution in my work. I think I am becoming more restrained - not in terms of the number of photos, but more in terms of the mood. There is a calmness to my work. Maybe I am finally getting closer to the elusive essence of *Mu* that I have been searching for. But of course, the true beauty is in the search and in the journey, so I hope I never entirely reach it!



Above, top right: Hajime (Tree), 2018
Above, bottom left: Ishikawa, 2019
Above, bottom right: House, 2019
Right page: Mika At Sea