

AMA LUR

Reviewed by Colin Pantall.

The title of Jon Cazenave's first book is Ama Lur. That's Basque for Native Land, and that is exactly what his book is about, the land of the Basque Country, and how it is lived, experienced and seen.

Cazenave's landscape narrative is pinned down by a series of images of cave paintings. These paintings might not be far from the surface, but Cazenave takes us deep into the earth, a fact emphasised by the deep black vignetting found at the edges of the images. The lines, the dots and the primitive designs look as though they have been illuminated by flashlight, adding to the exploratory nature of the images; the idea is that Cazenave is getting on his hands and knees and trawling into a kind of Basque subconscious.

A picture of a handprint emphasises both the tactile element apparent in the making of the pictures and the way in which identity and landscape are so strongly connected. So we see a series of cave interiors, a painting leads to stalactites and then a shot of an opening to the world above. But with the light streaming in from outside, everything becomes upside down and it looks like glowing magma; we're in the bowels of the earth, and the primal rules. Flick the page and we see the palms of two hands, all prints and lines and texture. It's a mirror of the rock we see in the next image, its surface scratched by lines that might have been left 20,000 years ago, but were probably made by Cazenave himself. Kinship with the past is claimed.

There are more matchings. A picture of wet horse hair, all matted and spiked and swirled like an over-gelled adolescent is matched with the texture of a stippled rock. Only this time the rock looks like the belly of a turtle. Maybe it is the belly of a turtle, because the sea gets a look in, in both close up and medium shot, its waves all fluffy and blurred as they merge into the rocks of the shore. The elements get mixed up as the sea turns to cloud, and a picture of the moon (or is it the sun – they look so similar in dark photographs) shows it cutting through a black skyscape. The capillaries of tree branches are echoed in pictures of what might be cave paintings or might be rocks veined with minerals.

We can't tell and as the book goes on the human and the geological come together.

The elements become inseparable till we don't know what is water, rock, cloud, or fire. We can see the snow covered slopes of a mountain, but which way round does it go? And what is that in the picture that precedes it? Is it a flooded underwater cavern or a flipped picture of the seabed? And is that rock at the top or seaweed?

The world is merging together. A glitter of dust (maybe) mirrors the night sky, the flesh of a woman's buttocks and thighs mirrors that of cave rock, and the cave rock in turn is lit to look like the upturned neck of a human. Ama Lur is the latest in a line of photobooks where landscapes, histories and identity are merged in deep blacks and speckled greys. And that is the idea behind Ama Lur, that we are born of the land and though the land may not care for us, if you rip us from the land then you rip our historical hearts out.

COLIN PANTALL is a UK-based writer and photographer. He is a contributing writer for the British Journal of Photography and a Senior Lecturer in Photography at the University of Wales.