

# At Scale

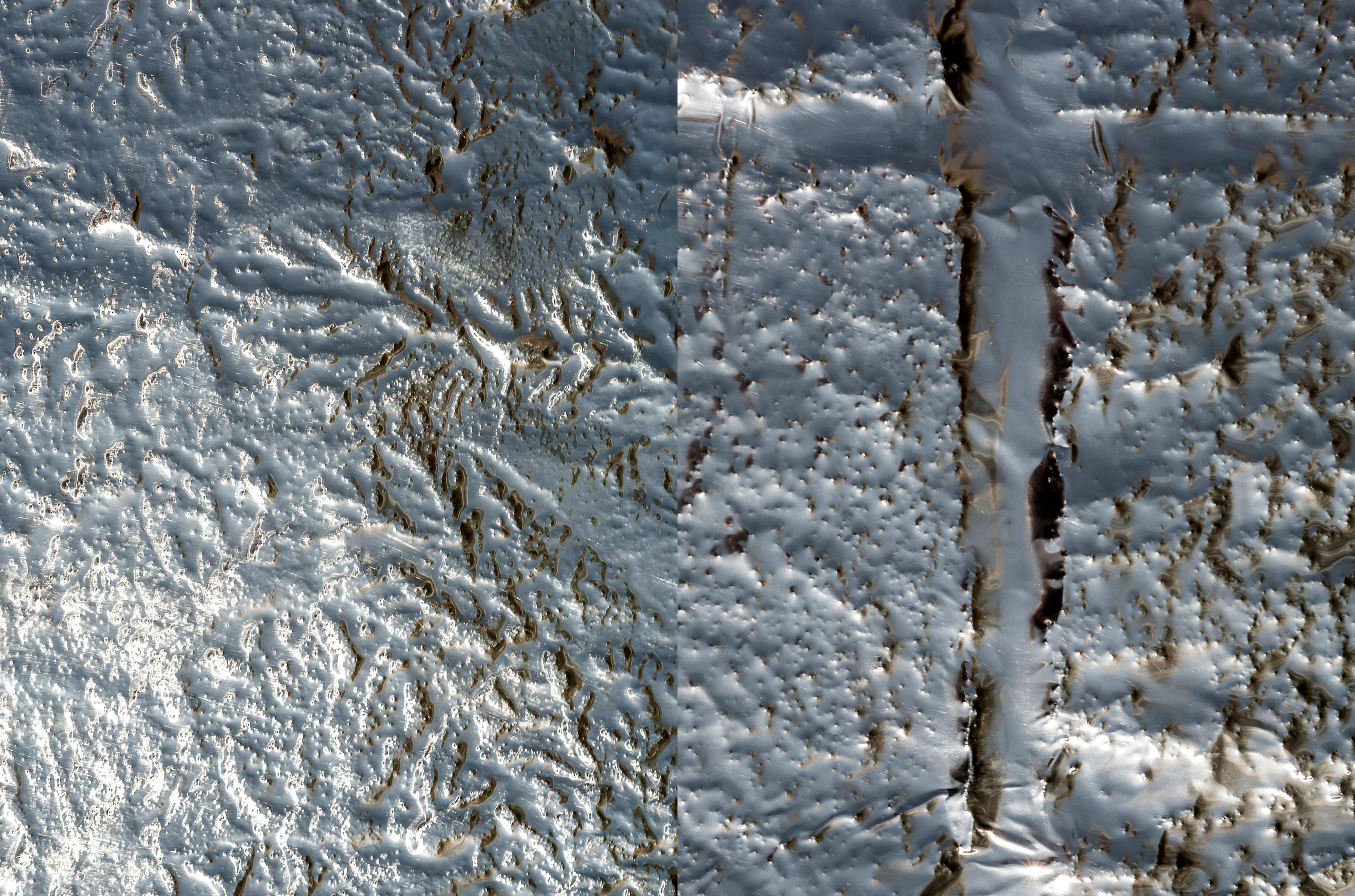
FROTTAGES BY LAKE VERA

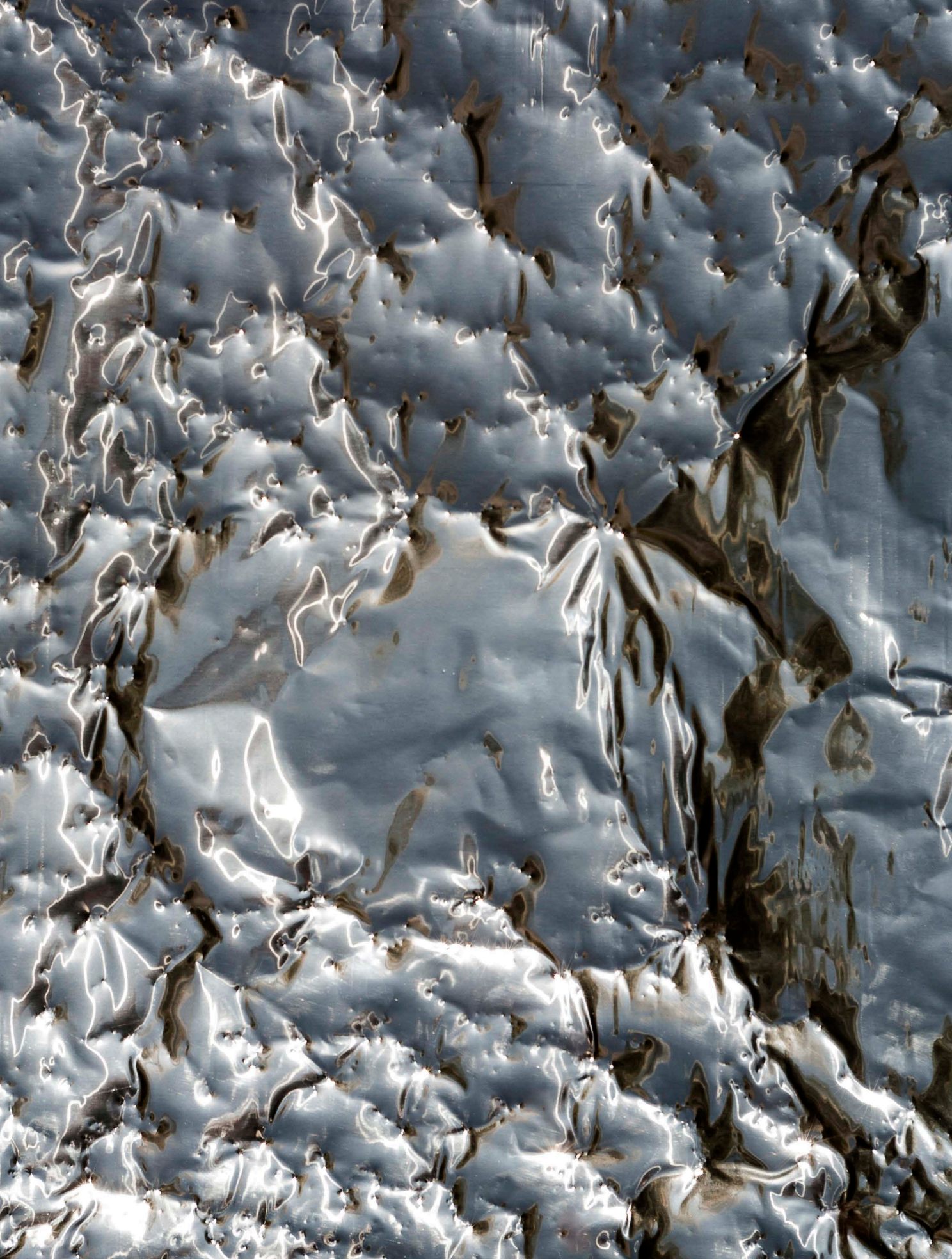
TEXT: FEDERICA ZANCO / PHOTOGRAPHS: LAKE VERA











Frottage is an old, simple technique quite effective for producing a reliable full-scale representation of a surface's fragment or detail. The experimental art duo Lake Verea decided to apply it to three buildings in Mexico City designed by some of their favorite architects, namely Mario Pani, Luis Barragán, and Teodoro González de León in 1946, 1948, and 1981, respectively. The chosen details belong to walls, floors, kitchen, and doors; in other words, to some of the basic elements that compose and complement the architectural spaces.

The usual way of representing architecture generally relies on drawings, models, and photography. Scale drawings reduce the three-dimensional objects to rather abstract bi-dimensional diagrams, based on orthogonal projections. Models provide scale miniatures of external and internal volumes. Both techniques provide precise information on physical dimensions, geometric composition and constructive detail, irrespective of whether the architecture actually exists, or remains in the realm of design. Photography conveys a more comprehensive, un-scaled visual representation of the realized building, or space, and its context. It can also focus on elements, details and materials, while registering a time-specific outlook of the built volumes. It can result in an illusion, both in terms of dimension and condition.

Skilled, as they are, at investigating the outcome of Modernism by means of candid photographic portrayals of buildings, taken almost casually, the artists felt the need to complement this eminently visual approach with a more direct, engaging physical interaction. The method of rubbing off a surface by pressing against it a sheet of paper or, in this case, aluminium, produces a full-scale impression of a fragment of the existing texture, while at the same time extracting it from its physical environment and transferring it to a non-contextual, different type of support.

Architecture is, of course, more than the texture of its own surfaces, and more than its overall, edited photographic appearance. Still, the combination of these two different approaches manages to shine light upon the essential, humble components of architecture. Over the centuries these structures (mostly timber, brick, mortar, stone), as well as the building techniques used to construct them (carpentry, masonry, metal work), have remained pretty much the same, with some occasional innovation.

The three architects Lake Verea chose to study knew this archaic process all too well, and not only

accepted its challenges with competence, but infused it with unique individual creativity. Under the strong light of the Mexican sun, textures and chiaroscuro reveal all their expressive potential, and ideally blend in with the plasticity of modern concrete. Each architect can be associated with his signature surface: Barragán with rough plaster, Pani with refined brickwork, González de León with porous concrete skin. Each building, however, combines the same materials differently, and each design integrates a number of recurring materials, solutions, and details very peculiar to each working practice.

From the simple ceramic and metal elements applied by Barragán to each of the functional spaces of his masterpieces, to the widely available lava-stone square slabs, to the planks of simple untreated pine or the typologies of various industrial-glass panes used by all three of the architects—these individual choices and combinations of materials illuminate a specific building culture. Indeed, while sharing with the rest of the world some of the revolutionary construction principles fostered by pioneers of the International Style, Mexico carved its own declination of modernity, forging a specific identity to which these three architects greatly contributed, each one in his own way.

By extracting these full-scale fragments from their original context, the duo Lake Verea propose another way of looking at the common thread of modern architecture, which is often presented as a rather heroic sequence of individual masterpieces. By choosing the abstraction of almost anonymous, full-scale textures, the artists seek a way to equalize, rather than stress, the individuality of each author's distinct professional profile. Looking at these frottages together, the eye focuses on analogies and likenesses, rather than distinctions, where the mosaic of textures hints to the common language of available materials and components, technical treatments and finishes, artisanal skills and manual capacity; all of which are the very essence of any work of architecture.

As a result of a collective effort governed by the talent and vision of individual creators, architecture has, indeed, the capacity of blending all of these disparate elements together and, while infusing them with meaning and expression, of providing the setting of daily life for the individual and the community.

It is wonderful to be reminded that so much can be achieved with so little. +