Mastering Photographic Composition, Creativity, and Personal Style

Alain Briot

rockynook

Table of Contents

Foreword

After a decade of leapfrogging technological advances and increasingly expensive high-end digital cameras, we have reached a plateau of sorts. Of course, there will continue to be advances in digital cameras, but the large leaps will be replaced with finer and more precise upgrades. Professional quality DSLRs can produce top quality files for any use, from stock images to fine art prints. But, just having the right equipment and software does not an artist make. Many photographers are great at getting compelling imagery and are marginal at software optimization. Conversely, some average photographers are practically software gurus, relying on their software expertise to create and output outstanding final images. I know only a handful of photographers who are as equally skilled at making great images as they are in bringing the image to fruition through software expertise. Alain Briot is a masterful landscape photographer as well as an expert in using Photoshop to optimize his fine art prints. Alain lives in the moment, creating consistently compelling landscape imagery. He also has an astronomer's knowledge of the skies, a mathematician's ability to determine where and when the sun/moon will appear based on sophisticated calculation tables, a graphic artist's computer/software/design skills, and an artist's detailed eye for composition and color: a rare combination indeed.

The care and expertise applied to every aspect of Alain's work—from planning for the picture, to the final software optimization, and to the final print—is apparent upon viewing his work. Every image is bold, compelling, simple, capturing a moment, and perfectly optimized.

Teaching with Alain made me aware of his humility and generosity in sharing knowledge with students. This book is an extension of that propensity for sharing. Like all of you, I look forward to delving into the wealth of information that is contained herein.

Tony Sweet
June 2009

Preface

When subject matter is forced to fit into preconceived patterns, there can be no freshness of vision. Following rules of composition can only lead to a tedious repetition of pictorial cliches.

Edward Weston

This book is about composition as I see it and as I practice it when I create my photographs. It is not about what I call the *traditional* approach to composition. Instead, it is about composition as I use it in my work; about what I call a new approach to composition. In this sense this book is about how I compose my images.

If you want to learn how I compose my images, then this book is for you. My goal when writing it was that it would open doors to new ways of seeing and composing images, doors that other books have not opened.

This book does not reiterate many of the compositional rules presented in books that approach composition from a more traditional perspective. I see no need to repeat what has already been said. Instead, I see a need to say what has not been said; a need to present a new approach to composition. In doing so, I see my purpose as enlarging the field of photographic composition to include subjects that have not, traditionally, been associated with composition. These subjects include how to compose images with color, with black and white, and with light; how to consider your future audience while creating a photograph; taking your color palette into account, and the nuances of grays you want to use; doing all this, and more, both while capturing a photo-

graph in the field and while processing your photographs in the studio.

In this book I cover taking notes in the field about the colors of the elements in your image, as well as the contrast, the light, and all the other visual elements so that you can later draw on your memory to recreate the emotions you experienced while in the field. Also covered are how color works and how the three variables of color—saturation, hue, and lightness—interact so that you can control the colors in your photographs as if you were a painter in control of your color palette rather than a photographer at the mercy of the camera. Finally, I explain how these elements of composition will help you develop a personal style. All in all, the subjects in this book include learning to control all the elements that have a visual effect in the photograph.

My approach to composition, while specifically addressing photography, comes from my study and practice of painting. In other words, my experience as a painter shapes my approach to photography and to composition. If this approach strikes a chord with you, and if learning to approach photographic composition with the freedom and knowledge of an artist appeals to you, then this book will be a delight. It is my sincerest hope that such is the case.

Composition is a vast subject. Unfortunately, this subject is too often narrowed down to what is referred to as "the rules of composition". Certainly, rules are important. But to limit the entire subject of composition to a set of rules is to limit what composition is as a whole. These rules may also limit how photographers (both newcomers and experienced practitioners) perceive what the field of composition encompasses.

For this reason I prefer to refer to the subject as the *field of composition* rather than as just *composition*. The word "field" implies that there are multiple dimensions to the subject of composition and that, implicitly, composition is not limited only to a set of rules.

Composition is about much more than a set of rules. Composition is about how each photographer uses light, color, and contrast. It is about how each photographer sees the world and how each photographer wants to represent this world to his or her audience. In short, composition—when approached from an individual perspective—is about your way of seeing the world. It is about your way of sharing what you see with your audience; sharing what you see with those that will look at, study, and admire (or criticize) your work.

1

About Composition

Photography is more than a medium for factual communication of ideas. It is a creative art.

Ansel Adams

Figure 1-1: *Sierra Fall*

Art, Facts, and Landscape Photography

In this book I approach photography as an art form. This book is written for people who desire to practice photography as an art form, and who either consider themselves artists or have the desire to become artists. I consider this to be an important statement because photography, like any medium of communication and representation, is not necessarily an art form. Painting, music, sculpture, or any other medium is not imbued with the ability to create art *a priori*. Any medium can have multiple uses. The thing that makes a medium an art form is not the medium itself but the intent of the practitioner who uses this medium.

Photography can have many uses. Photographs can be used to record scenes or events. Photographs can be used to create visual documents for future study or research. Photographs can be used as forensic evidence. Photographs can be used on passports, ID cards, and for other administrative purposes. Photographs can be used to document news articles. Photographs can be taken for record keeping, for insurance purposes, as souvenirs, and for many other uses.

Hardly any of these uses can be considered art. Why? Because the photographer did not intend to express an emotional response to the subjects being photographed. Instead, the goal of the photographer was to record a place, an event, a person, or an object.

Art is not concerned with record keeping. Art is concerned with expressing emotions, feelings, and opinions. Record keeping is based on facts, and is concerned with capturing reality and recording things as they are. Art is non-factual and is concerned with interpreting reality rather than with capturing reality as-is.

Record keeping is a necessity. We use photographs to document forensic analysis, legal evidence, research findings, and news reports, for example. We use images of our belongings and of ourselves for insurance purposes, for official identification, and for many other purposes.

Art is not a necessity. Art is something we want, not something we need. Artists create art because they want to, not because they have to. Similarly, collectors purchase art because they want to, not because they have to. We all can live without making or collecting art. Arguably, our lives may be less enjoyable and less meaningful without art, but without it we would not perish the way we would if we did not have food, clothing, or shelter.

These two different goals—factual and artistic representations—result in two drastically different approaches to photography. While factual representation is concerned with documenting facts, artistic representation is concerned with expressing emotions.

When capturing facts one must be careful not to distort reality so as not to modify the facts being recorded. The value of a factual photograph lies in how accurately it depicts the scene, the object, the people, or the event represented in the image. A factual photograph is about the subject of the photograph, not about the person who took the photograph. As such, the person taking the photograph must be careful not to allow his emotions to become mixed with the facts being recorded. In many ways the factual photographer must remove himself from the process so as to become "invisible" to those seeing the photograph. His presence or personality must not be felt when looking at the photograph.

Section A:

The Differences Between
What We See and
What the Camera Sees
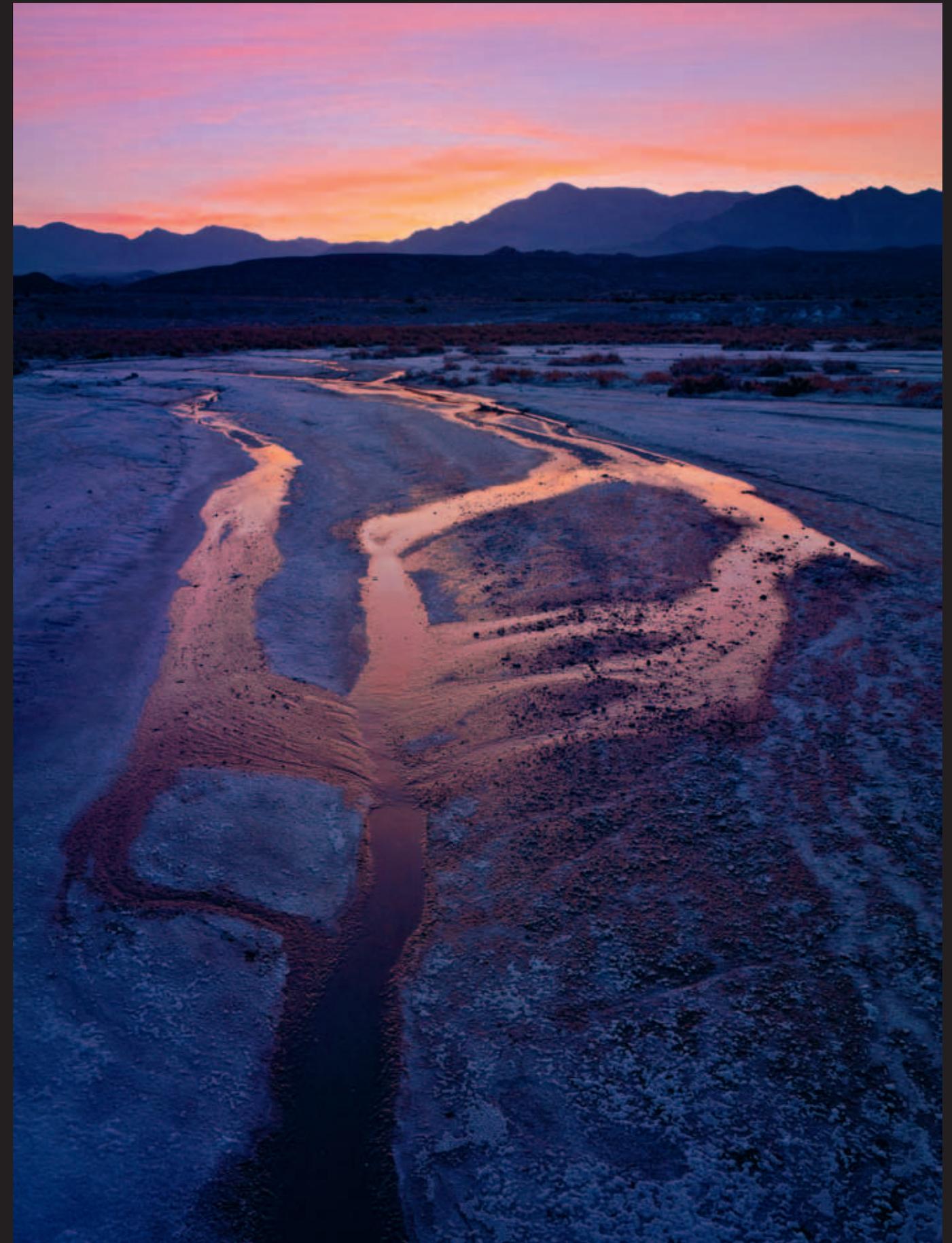
2

Learning to See Like a Camera

Each problem that I solved became a rule which served afterwards to solve other problems.

Rene Descartes

Figure 2-1: *Blue Canyon*

Of Cameras and Art

I hear it regularly at art shows: "Your photographs are amazing. You must have a very good camera". I often hear, "Your colors are beautiful, you must use filters". And finally, I also hear, "Your images are fantastic! You must use Photoshop". These statements come in different variations, but the message is essentially the same: for a certain audience, the reason why my work is beautiful is not due to my artistic skills but to the equipment I use.

At first I was dumfounded. Later on I was insulted. After talking to other photographers and learning that they received the same comments, I started wondering why people think this. I now believe I have the answer.

Good Cameras Equal Good Photographs

The fact that part of the public believes that the camera is responsible for the quality of my work left me dumbfounded at first. How could they believe that? After all, the camera is but a tool, a mechanical recording device and nothing more. The comments kept coming under difference guises, some commenting on how good my camera must be, others commenting on how bad theirs was, resulting in the consensus that my photos were better than theirs only because I owned a better camera. This left me feeling insulted, so I argued that years of work and study, and not simply ownership of a good camera, were responsible for the work I had on display. I also argued that my early photographs, some of which are on display at my shows, were not taken with that great of a camera because I could not afford one when

I started. All this explaining was to no avail. While some believed me, most left the show still convinced that a good camera was the key to getting good photographs and that if they had the camera I had, they would get good photographs too.

The fact that they did not have the camera I had made them revel in the fact that their theory, which really was an entrenched belief, was at no risk of being challenged. I could have loaned them my camera, told them to take a couple of photographs with it, but unless I followed them home, waited for them to get their film developed and their photos printed, I would not be in a position to make my point. What point? That their photos were not as good as mine even though they were using the same camera? And how do you compare? By putting a print made at the local drugstore next to a print made by a master printer, both from transparencies taken with the same camera?

Suspicions in the public at large about the veracity of photographs and about potential reasons for cameras delivering results that are significantly superior to those of the general public have been around for a long time. To follow my theory that the non-initiated public believes that everything happens in the camera, let me bring up the matter of filters.

A Matter of Filters

If at a show of my work someone doesn't tell me that I must have a good camera, chances are that someone will ask which filters I used. The assumption is that professional photographers use filters to magically turn an average scene into a stunning photograph. With this belief, the audience follows the same logic as

3

The Eye and the Camera

The difference in "seeing" between the eye and the lens should make it obvious that a photographer who merely points his camera at an appealing subject and expects to get an appealing picture in return, may be headed for a disappointment.

ANDREAS FEININGER

Figure 3-1: *Dawn at Mono Lake*

The Difference Between Photography and Reality

Students and photographers often ask me, "What should be done to a photograph to make it match what we saw?" This is an important question because it addresses the difference between what we see and what the camera captures. It addresses the difference between our visual apparatus—our eyes and brain—and the camera's image-capture apparatus—the lens, filters, camera, film, or sensor (from now on referred to as "the camera"). The differences between the two are not only notable, they are also damaging to the reality we see because the camera introduces numerous changes to this reality.

In order to create an image that *matches what we saw*, we not only have to become aware of what this damage is, we also need to learn how we can fix this damage. Only then will we be able to create an image that not only "matches what we saw" but also expresses how we felt when we took the photograph. Only then will we be able to create an image that represents what our eyes and brain saw and not just what the camera captured, an image which is not only a factual record of what was in front of the camera, but also a visual expression of our emotional response to the scene we photographed.

Two Categories of Differences

The differences between what we see and what the camera captures fit into two categories: art and science. In this chapter we will see what the differences in each category consists of, starting with the science category that encompasses all things technical about photography

and continuing with the artistic category that encompasses all things related to our emotions, our inspiration and our personal style. As I move along from one area to the next, I will point out solutions that can be used to fix defects in the way cameras record reality. As I point out these solutions, I will only do so in passing and make no effort to delve into a detailed technical explanation of how these solutions can be implemented. In doing so I will follow my premise that this is a chapter on the differences between what we see and what the camera captures, not on the workflow needed to fix these differences. If you are interested in learning how to transform a RAW file or scan into a fine art print I have created a DVD titled *The Printing Mastery Workshop on DVD*.

As I often say, rule number 1: one step at a time. Rule number 2: before we can fix the problem we first have to define the problem. This chapter is aimed at following rules number 1 and 2 by taking a step by step approach in defining the problem that preoccupies us today.

What the Camera Captures that the Eye Never Sees

The camera does not see the way we do. I address what the general differences between the two are in chapter 1 of my book *Mastering Landscape Photography*. In this section I want to focus on differences that I did not detail in my earlier book. These differences are found when a close inspection of a photograph is conducted and when the result of this inspection is compared to a close inspection of what we see with our eyes. The differences between the two are numerous and I will try to list as many as I can, in no particular order.

Section B:

New Rules of Composition

4 Composing with Light

You have to get away from relying only on the subject. Light is the imagination's main tool. It is something you work with in defining anything you want to, whether subject or landscape.

DAVID MUENCH, OUTDOOR PHOTOGRAPHER MAGAZINE

Essential Elements

Every art or craft makes use of an essential material that is at the foundation of that art or craft. It is the nature and the treatment of this fundamental material that will define the quality of the finished product.

For the winemaker, the essential element is the grapes. It is not the recipe used in the creation of the wine, nor the barrels in which the wine is kept, nor the aging process, nor the conditions in which the wine is aged, although all of these are very important. The material at the basis of wine making is the grapes. Without grapes there would be no wine, no matter how skilled the winemaker, how good his equipment, or how extensive his knowledge might be. And without good grapes there would be no good wine. A master winemaker knows more about grapes than about anything else in his trade. A master winemaker loves grapes and everything that surrounds their growth, their history, and a million other details that, to those who do not share his passion, seem uselessly boring and unnecessary to remember.

For a chef the essential element is the products that are to be cooked; the vegetables, fruits, poultry, meats, cheeses, spices, herbs, and countless other products that are necessary to complete each dish. It is not the pots and pans, nor the recipes, nor the years of training, although all of these are very important. It is the products used in the making of the dishes that are essential, because without the finest products one cannot cook the finest dishes. No amount of sauce, spice, or skill can turn a poor quality product into a great dish. Nothing can duplicate the taste of a grain-fed chicken that was raised in the farmyard and allowed to roam freely. Nothing can duplicate the taste of garden-grown, fertilizer-free vegetables. Nothing can take the place of hormone-free beef or whole, non-pasteurized milk and butter. To some these are simply unnecessarily expensive and troublesome to purchase. To a chef they are indispensable.

The artist's essential material does not have to be physical. For example, a musician's essential element is sound. Regardless of the instrument played, a fine musician pays more attention to the sound produced by his instrument than to any other variable. In that respect the instrument itself is also important because it is the instrument that creates the sound. But the love a musician has for sound exceeds the love he has for his instrument because sound can exist without an instrument. Sound is found in nature, in the wind, the rustle of leaves in the forest, the babble of a creek, the sounds of birds, of animals and of other beings. The instrument is a way to reproduce sound but the instrument is not all that sound is. Therefore, a musician seeks to learn as much about sound as possible. A musician loves sound; both sound created by nature and sound created by musical instruments. For a musician the quality of the sound is of primordial importance.

For a photographer the essential element is light. The essential element is not the camera, nor the film, nor the digital processing software, nor the chemicals used in the darkroom, although all these are very important. It is light, because without light there would be no photograph.

The word "photography" literally means writing with light; derived from the Greek *Photos* (light) and *Graphos* (writing or drawing). Light is photography and photography is light. A fine photographer who desires to advance his art as far as possible will seek

Figure 4-1: *Summer Solstice, Hanlibinkya*

5 Composing with Color

Figure 5-1: *Antelope Canyon Glow*

Color Vision

The prejudice many photographers have against colour photography comes from not thinking of colour as form. You can say things with colour that can't be said in black and white... Those who say that colour will eventually replace black and white are talking nonsense. The two do not compete with each other. They are different means to different ends.

EDWARD WESTON

Color is all around us. And yet when we photograph in color we rarely consider color as an element of composition. Certainly, we do see the color in the scenes, the objects, and the elements that we include in our images. However, we do not (at least not without training) see color as an element that changes the composition of our photographs depending on how we use it.

This attitude regarding color sharply contrasts with the attitude of photographers who work in black and white. Photographers working in black and white make a significant effort toward developing an awareness of black and white tones. They want to know how specific colors will appear in black and white and which shades of gray these colors will be. They want to know which areas of the image will be the darkest and the lightest. In short, they want to visualize the image in black and white prior to taking the photograph. To this end, they use black and white viewing filters and they meter specific areas of the scene with the goal of learning how different brightness areas will translate into shades of gray and how these different areas will relate to each other in terms of black and white.

Certainly, there isn't just one approach and methodology to photography but as many

approaches and methodologies as there are photographers. However, what I am talking about here is what could be called "commonly used practices" that most people follow when photographing in black and white and in color.

It has been said that there is more need for visualization in black and white than there is in color photography, because we do not see the world in black and white. Therefore, to achieve successful black and white photographs one must first find out how the colors in the scene will translate into black, gray, and white tones. Good point. However, the same point can be made, in reverse, about color photography. While we do see in color, there are significant differences between what we see and what the camera sees, which affect how color is represented in photographs.

We see in color, yet, if we gave everyone a camera, not everyone would create great color photographs. In fact, we don't really need to conduct this experiment. All we have to do is look at the photographs taken by friends, relatives, and other photographers. The fact that we see in color is not enough to give us the ability to create stunning color photographs.

The same could be said about any natural ability. The fact that we can run does not qualify us to be Olympic athletes. The fact that we can talk, does not qualify us to be professional singers or orators. The fact that we can crack jokes does not qualify us to be comedians. Clearly, education and training are required in order to turn a natural ability into a profession. Athletes, singers, and comedians must train and study in order to develop their natural abilities. And color photographers must also train and study in order to develop their natural abilities.

In short, just because we have a natural ability does not make us an expert in that

6 Composing in Black and White

Black and white are the colors of photography. To me they symbolize the alternatives of hope and despair to which mankind is forever subjected.

ROBERT FRANK

Introduction

I am often asked which is more difficult: color or black and white photography. The answer is that one is not more difficult than the other. They are simply difficult in different ways.

In the film days, color or black and white was a choice that had to be made in the field, before taking the photograph. Today, with digital photography, this decision can be made after image capture. All digital cameras capture images in color, and if you want a black and white image, you can convert it to black and white during RAW conversion or during image optimization. This means that you can always go from color to black and white and, inversely, that you can plan to make an image black and white then later change your mind and keep it in color.

With digital, the decision to do color or black and white is reversible and can be made at any time, with one exception. The only time that you have to make a non-reversible decision regarding photographing in black and white is when you photograph with an infrared camera. Infrared digital cameras are designed to capture only infrared photographs, and in that case the resulting image will not be reversible to a full-color image.

Black and White Is Color with One Variable

As we saw in the previous chapter, "Composing with Color", black and white is color with only one variable: lightness. Black and white has no hue and no saturation. The only variable that photographers working in black and white have at their disposal is lightness. They have to do everything with one variable that

color photographers do with three. In a sense, it is easier because you only have one variable to control. On the other hand, it is more difficult because you must do everything with fewer tools. Black, white, and shades of gray are all you have to work with.

Seeing the World without Color

Why would anyone want to photograph an indisputably colourful world in monochrome? If colour film had been invented first, would anybody even contemplate photographing in black and white?

RUSSELL MILLER

Besides giving you only one variable to work with, black and white offers another big challenge: you have to see the world in black and white values, which means in shades of gray. Since we naturally see the world in color, seeing the world in black and white means being able to change reality from color to black and white. Black and white is a departure from reality, one that the photographer has to learn to perform. Black and white is an abstraction, an alteration of reality, a manipulation if you will. It involves seeing the world without color.

Composing in black and white is also quite different from composing with color. Clearly, what I said about composing in color in the previous chapter no longer applies here since there are no colors in black and white. Instead of composing with color we have to compose with tone and contrast, which I will talk about how to do later on in this chapter.

Figure 6-1: *Sierra Arch*

7 Important Elements of a Strong Composition

Composition is the strongest way of seeing.
EDWARD WESTON

Introduction

Certain aspects of composition are what I call "foundational". That is, they form the foundation of good compositions. These are the aspects you have to consider each time you create a new composition. Rather than devote a chapter to each of these aspects, which would have made this book unnecessarily lengthy, I decided to bring them together in a single chapter and present them as a checklist. I also added short remarks after each item on this list. This list is designed to be used both at home, as a formal study of photography, and in the field, during the creation of new photographs. I like to refer to it as a checklist designed to guide you toward the creation of strong compositions.

Edward Weston said that "composition is the strongest way of seeing". This was his definition of composition. While this definition is helpful, it does not give you any details about what makes a strong composition. My goal when writing this checklist was to fill in the details about the things that make a strong composition.

This chapter has two parts. Part 1 is the checklist itself and in Part 2 are examples that expand on the checklist by providing you with insights on how I composed seven specific photographs. In the example section I talk about what inspired me and what I was thinking about as I created each photograph.

Part 1 – The Checklist

Strong Compositions Checklist

Composition Is a Machine
- To work efficiently this machine cannot have broken, misplaced, or unnecessary parts
- The machine must be designed to be simple and efficient

Keep it Simple
- Often less is more in art and in photography
- Making something simple is often more difficult than making something complicated
- The ability to simplify is a quality
- Remove distracting and unnecessary elements from the image until only what matters most remains
- What doesn't add detracts. A strong image is one in which nothing detracts. Remove all the elements that are distracting to the viewer's eye.

All Areas of the Image Are Important
- Each area of the image—corners, center, borders, etc.—is equally important
- There is no area that is not important

Figure 7-1: *Bisti Badlands Panorama*

Section C:

The Creative Process

8 Finding Inspiration

I learned... that inspiration does not come like a bolt, nor is it kinetic, energetic striving, but it comes into us slowly and quietly and all the time, though we must regularly and every day give it a little chance to start flowing, prime it with a little solitude and idleness.

BRENDA UELAND

Figure 8-1: *Hoodoos Panorama*

Introduction

How do you find inspiration? This question, which may seem benign at first, is important because inspiration is at the origin of any work of art. As we will see in this chapter, inspiration is the spark that motivates an artist to create new work. It is the spark that, in turn, will lead this artist to formulate a vision for his work, a vision that will eventually define his personal style.

When I started writing about inspiration for this book, I believed that inspiration encompassed the entire creative process. However, as I reflected further upon the subject of inspiration, I realized that inspiration is only one aspect of the creative process, and this process includes other equally important aspects. Furthermore, I realized the different aspects of the creative process are all interconnected and each part of the process depends upon the other parts to work.

At the time of this writing I have defined four parts to the creative process. They are as follows: inspiration, creativity, vision, and personal style. I have decided to devote one section to each of these four parts. In these sections I will be exploring what each of these four parts consists of and how they interact with each other.

This book is intended to work as a whole, with each chapter being a different part of a single metaphorical machine. I like to call this machine, for simplicity's sake, *the artistic process.*

Inspiration, Creativity, Vision, and Personal Style

Inspiration lights the spark of creativity. Together, if well integrated, they result in a personal vision for our work. In turn, personal style allows us to express our vision in a unique manner.

ALAIN BRIOT

When I started reflecting and writing about inspiration and all that it entails, I thought I was addressing only the act of being inspired. However, I realized I was also writing about the act of being creative, about the discovery of a personal vision, and also about the development of a personal style.

Why make things more complicated you may ask? Why not keep things under one name—inspiration—and write about all of this at once? Because breaking it up is really the only way to make this subject easier to understand. Separating what is usually considered a single subject into four parts allows me to study this subject in greater detail and this approach allows me to share better insights upon the artistic process and upon how each part of this process dovetails into the other parts. In the end, I believe this is the only way to truly address this important subject with the depth of thinking it requires. I will start by explaining the differences between inspiration, creativity, vision, and personal style.

Inspiration without Creativity

One can find a wonderful source of inspiration and be motivated to create art without knowing how to physically translate the ideas generated by this inspiration into a work of art. In photography, one can be inspired by a beautiful landscape or a stunning sunset without seeing a specific composition and without

9 Exercising Creativity

Creativity grows out of two things: curiosity & imagination.

BENNY GOODMAN

Figure 9-1: *Trees in Capitol Reef*
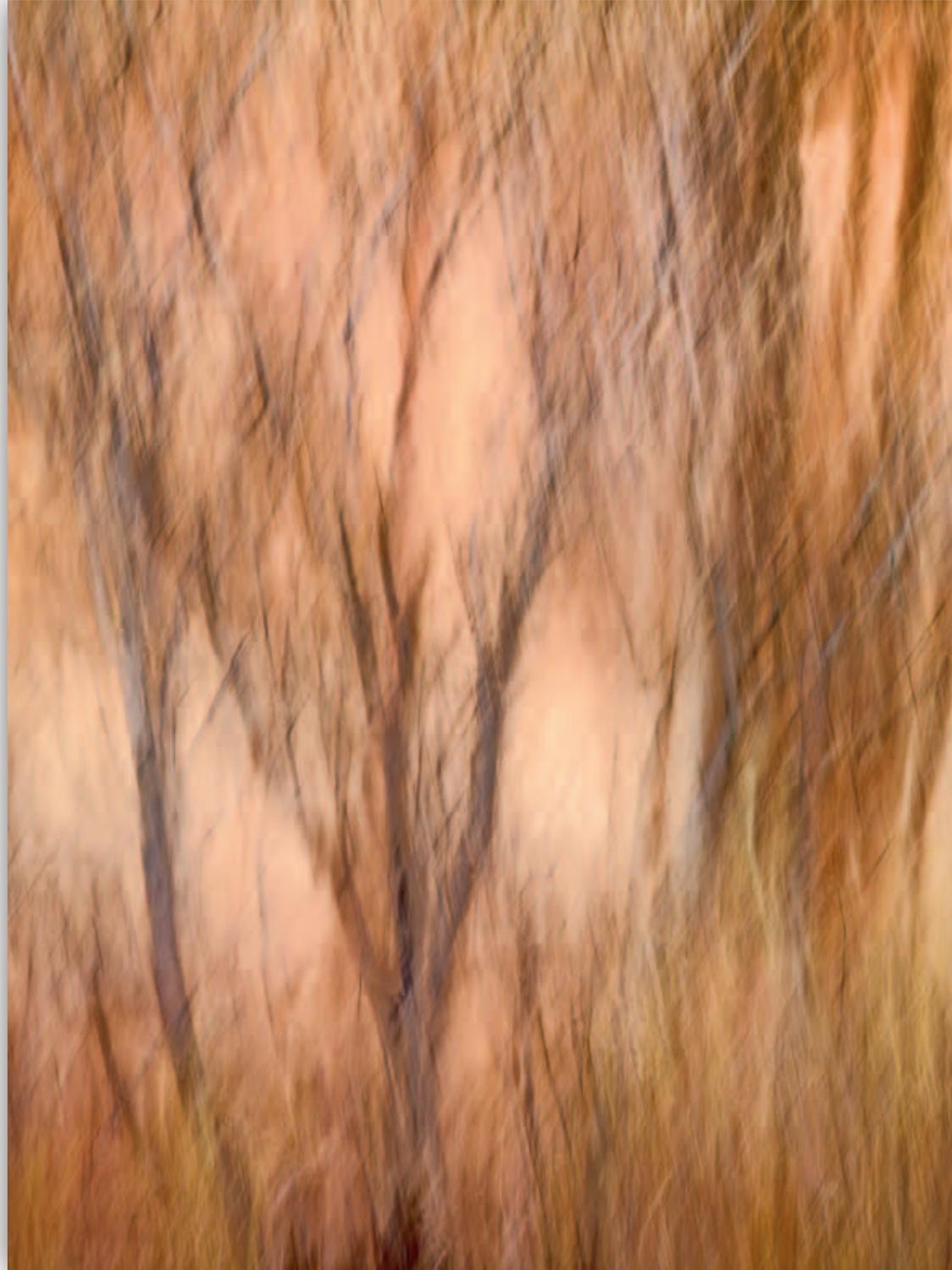
Introduction

You may wonder why a chapter on creativity follows a chapter on inspiration. After all, is there really a difference between the two? I wondered about this as well while I was working on this chapter.

In fact, I originally titled the chapter on inspiration "Creativity and Inspiration". However, while I was writing, I found it increasingly difficult to write about both inspiration and creativity at the same time. I found that although these two subjects are usually presented together, there are many things that separate them.

First, being creative is not the same as being inspired. On the one hand, one can be inspired and not exercise his or her creativity. On the other hand, one can be creative without being able to find inspiration. The first situation is comparable to staring at a blank canvas. The desire is there but the implementation is lacking. The second situation results in unsatisfying output, in artwork that goes into all sorts of different directions but lacks a specific and unifying source of inspiration.

Second, inspiration by itself does not necessarily result in the creation of new work. Inspiration is a spark that can potentially lead to a creative fire. However, for the fire to be lit one has to nurse the ember generated by creativity until it becomes a raging fire. If not, this amber may die a quick death, carrying with it the hopes of our newborn inspiration.

Third, creativity carries with it certain risks. The most notable is being creative for creativity's sake, without following a specific inspiration and without catering to the needs of a specific vision.

In other words, those two terms, inspiration and creativity, are not identical. Although they are commonly used interchangeably, they really address two separate parts of the artistic process. It is for this reason I decided to devote a separate section to each of them.

The Difference Between Inspiration and Creativity

The aim of creative photography is to make a visual interpretation of an experience, not just to record an image.

MONTE NAGLER

Inspiration is the flame that lights our creative fire. How that flame is born is the purpose of my previous chapter, "Finding Inspiration". What to do once the flame is lit is the purpose of this chapter, "Exercising Creativity".

Inspiration is the motivating factor that makes an artist want to create new work. However, by itself inspiration is just that: a motivating factor, a thought, and a desire. It may be a burning desire, but it is not a physical reality.

What makes inspiration a reality, what turns inspiration into a work of art, is creativity. Creativity in this regard is the logical outcome of inspiration. Creativity is what makes inspiration a physical reality. It is therefore through creativity that you will make your inspiration come to life into a work of art.

Creativity may be described as focused freedom. On the one hand you are free to create, on the other hand you are focused upon your work and your vision. It is a mix of two opposite directional forces in a way. In that respect it is a challenging state to find, to experience, and to make happen. However, once you are in this state, magical things can take place that would not otherwise happen to you.

10 Developing Your Vision

Vision is the art of seeing what is invisible to others.
Jonathan Swift

Introduction

Inspiration lights the spark of creativity. Together, if well integrated, inspiration and creativity result in a personal vision for your work. Your vision, when expressed successfully, results in the achievement of your personal style.

This is a four part process. In the previous chapters we looked at the first two parts: inspiration and creativity. It is now time to look at the third part: vision.

Vision is a subject that is rarely discussed in photography, yet, as we are going to see, it is a very important subject because without vision an artist will create commonplace photographs; they may be the most technically perfect photographs one can take, but they will still be commonplace. With vision your photographs go beyond being just commonplace images. They become the conveyors of ideas. How this process takes place and what is involved when it happens is the subject of this chapter.

What Is Vision?

It is a terrible thing to see and have no vision.
Helen Keller

Vision is the art of seeing the invisible. In this respect, vision is not just seeing; it is not just "sight". Instead, vision is *insight*. It is the ability to see something that only you can see, something that others do not see because this something does not have a physical reality. It is something you see in your mind's eye, something that exists in your imagination, something that is within yourself.

A vision is something abstract: an idea or a concept. Vision is made real through creative work. In photography it is made real through the creation of photographs that express your vision. The goal of these photographs is to share your ideas, your concepts, your *vision* with your audience.

A vision can come about in any field of human endeavor. In regard to photography, vision is made real through the photographs you create. How clear your vision is, and how closely your photographs follow this vision, defines how successful you will be in conveying your vision to others.

Vision is inspiration made into reality. Vision is using photography to express something otherwise invisible. Vision is making poetry with photographs. It is going beyond the technical knowledge of the medium and reaching the artistic level. It is going beyond mastery of the medium and reaching improvisation and self-expression.

Finding and expressing your vision can be a challenging process. Because your vision is something that is invisible to others, it is a process you have to go through essentially by yourself.

Vision demands an unwavering commitment to your art. It also demands that you back up this commitment with work, because only through work will you be able to share your vision with others and thereby prove you are truly committed to this vision.

Vision is message. It is not just creating an image but creating a story through the image. This message can be about sharing an emotion, a feeling, a belief, or a particular way of looking at the world. It is not just about sharing an image with your audience. It is also about sharing the meaning of this image with your audience. This image means something

Figure 10-1: *Boulder Mountain Trees*

11 Achieving Your Personal Style

The great thing about this thing we call art is that it has no rules.

Kim Weston

Figure 11-1: *Sandstone Swirls*

Introduction

Personal style is the venue through which you share your vision with your audience. Your personal style develops, expands, and becomes more unique as you continue making your vision a reality. As we saw in the three previous chapters, vision and personal style are related to inspiration and creativity. The more fertile your inspiration and creativity are, the faster your vision and your personal style will grow.

Achieving a personal style represents a significant amount of work. As you work toward making your vision a reality, you will become bolder. To compensate for the detractors that will most likely come your way, you will find courage and motivation in your successes at describing your vision and sharing it with your audience.

As you become bolder you find new ways to express and share this vision. Each new artistic statement, each new piece, will be another step toward achieving your personal style. Each attempt is but one small step, but the sum of your attempts creates a stairway that will lead you to heights you could not have climbed in a single step. The only way to get to the top of this stairway is work as hard as you can at developing your style.

About four years ago I wrote my first essay on personal style and it was published in my book *Mastering Landscape Photography.* If you have not read this essay I recommend you do so because it features information that is not repeated in this chapter. Following is the result of my continued thinking on this subject over the past few years.

This is the conclusion of the four parts of the artistic process about inspiration, creativity, vision, and personal style.

What is a Personal Style?

I am steadily surprised that there are so many photographers that reject manipulating reality, as if that was wrong. Change reality! If you don't find it, invent it!

Pete Turner

A personal style is the translation of your vision into an actual work of art, or in this instance, into a photograph in this instance. It is the translation of your ideas into something that others can see, something that you can share with your audience, something that represents the closest rendition of your vision that you are capable of producing at a given time.

The language you are using to create this translation is photography. Photography is a visual language that uses composition, tone, color, contrast, subject, light, angle, approach, and more to translate your vision into images that others can see. As with any translation, something is often lost, modified, or left out. Therefore, each new translation, each new photograph, is a new attempt toward a more accurate translation or toward a translation that your audience understands better. It is also a new attempt at defining the language you are using to make this translation. As an artist who is expressing your vision through a personal style, you are not just sharing a message through the language of your choice. As your vision becomes more refined and unique, so does your language. Eventually, the language you use becomes yours only. You invent it as you move toward an ever-finer representation of the ideas in your mind.

You are both the inventor of a new vision and the inventor of a new language to translate and express this vision. You are the

12 Just Say Yes

If you can't see it, it doesn't count.

CTEIN,
TALKING ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUE

Figure 12-1: *Dusk at Zabriskie Point*

Introduction

As a digital photographer, if you haven't already been asked this question you eventually will: "Do you manipulate your photographs?" Sometimes it comes under another aspect: "Do you change the colors?" And occasionally it goes straight to the heart of the matter: "Is this real?"

A certain percentage of the public believes that fine art photographs must represent reality. There are those who do not know there are differences between what is seen and what the camera captures. Finally, there are individuals who do not understand that a photograph is a two dimensional representation of reality and not reality itself, because reality is far more complex and perceived by us through five senses and not just one.

Some people are willing to change their minds when these things are explained to them. Others have their minds made up and do not want to be bothered by the facts. Those are the ones that I am referring to in this chapter.

This part of our audience believes that photographs must represent reality and to achieve this they believe that photographs must remain unaltered and printed exactly the way they come out of the camera. While this may be true for certain types of technical photographs, when it comes to art and to my work I believe the exact opposite to be true, namely that photographs *must* be altered in one way or another in order to have a chance to represent the reality that I perceive.

My premise for this chapter is that a fine art photograph, created by an artist with the goal of expressing himself or herself, is a representation of this artist's view of reality, a representation of this artist's vision, and not a representation of the world as others may see it.

Ultimately, this is a matter of opinion, and personally, my opinion is that a photograph cannot capture reality as we experience it physically and I can back it up with facts (as I have done so in chapters 2 and 3 of this book). However, I found that debating this point with people who do not agree with me isn't necessarily the smartest decision. So, I propose here a different approach, one that works great for me.

A Little Bit of History

For a long time I didn't know what to say when confronted by people asking me if my work was real, if I manipulated the colors, or if I changed something in the scenes I photographed. In fact, as a fledging artist unsure of where I stood, I felt threatened by these questions and was more concerned with defending myself than with anything else.

At that time I believed that explaining my artistic approach would help. So I answered by saying that the color changes, the manipulations, or the modifications I made to the image were representative of my style and that my goal was to show how I saw the world.

I also explained that I preferred to call what I do "enhancements" rather than "manipulations", because the later seemed a derogative statement while the former seemed positive and complimentary.

Unfortunately, my efforts were to no avail. These fine differences in terminology were lost on these people. Furthermore, their minds were made up and they did not want to be bothered by the facts. My facts may have been accurate, thought-out and sophisticated, but

13 Of Audiences and Bestsellers

There are always two people in every picture: the photographer and the viewer.

Ansel Adams

Figure 13-1: *Sandstone Patterns*

Introduction

The concept of audience is one of the most difficult ones to come to terms with for artists and photographers. In fact, finding and defining an audience is one of the most difficult aspects of doing art.

This problem is not unique to photography. It is just as problematic for artists working in other mediums. Many writers, for example, have difficulties coming to terms with the concept of audience. When I taught Freshman English (English 101) in college, while working as a graduate teaching assistant during my Masters and PhD studies, audience was one of the most difficult subjects I had to teach. Not because I didn't know how to teach it, but because students were reluctant to consider their essays to be written for an outside audience. In their minds, I, the teacher, was their audience. They did not need, did not want, and were not interested in considering any other audience for their work.

I was their audience because I was grading their papers. Therefore, my students wrote for me. They were less interested in writing what they believed in, than in writing what they thought I wanted to read. No matter how much I would explain that they were graded on the quality of their arguments (much of teaching English 101 in the United States is based on a rhetorical approach, so much so that Rhetoric Departments are responsible for training English Teaching Assistants) and not on what they thought I wanted to hear, most of them still could not write for any audience other than myself. Regardless of how often I would point out that after graduation they were going to write for a "real" audience and not for a teacher, they still continued to write for me. I was their audience because I was

giving them a grade. The fact that they would write for someone else in the future—their bosses, co-workers, employees, business associates, publishers, or simply (and more to the point) an audience that was interested in new ideas—*their ideas*—did not phase them one bit. They were writing to get a specific result, which was getting a grade, be it an A, B, or C, depending on whether they wanted to excel or simply pass the class.

Who Is Your Audience?

I think ultimately if you have a very high expectation of your audience and you know exactly what it is you're trying to express through the medium of film, there will always be an audience for you.

Atom Egoyan

It would be far fetched to say that photographers face the same problems as my freshman English students did. They don't, at least not directly. For one, many photographers study on their own. Few take formal classes and those who do are graded more on technical and artistic content than on whether their work is meeting the needs of a specific audience. And of course, during workshops grades are not given.

Still, the concept of audience is a thorny one. I teach it in just about all of my workshops, and every time I get raised eyebrows and objections from some of the participants.

The most frequent objection comes from participants who mention that they do not need an audience. They photograph for themselves, and are not trying to show their work to anyone else. They just want to become better so that they can enjoy creating better images and better prints.

14

The Numbering Affair

All art is a vision penetrating the illusions of reality, and photography is one form of this vision and revelation.

<div align="right">

Ansel Adams.

</div>

Introduction

This chapter stems from my ongoing reflection on the subject of limited edition prints. To limit or not to limit, that is the question! This chapter also comes out of what I see as the increasing importance of the "limited edition debate", for lack of a better term (there's really no specific name for this debate which is mostly informal, though important at this time).

The clincher for me was the realization that at a time of constant technical improvements, limiting and consequently discontinuing new printings of an older image (and by implication eventually discontinuing landmark images) was preventing the creation of better and better prints of a given image.

Much thought is being given today to the issue of numbering prints. Photographers that decide to sell their work ponder endlessly whether or not to release their prints in limited editions. Such is the issue that worries many photographers today. It's worth mentioning that photographers that don't try to sell their work suffer no such quandary, because they simply print their work, wasting no time on how many prints of a single image they make. Instead, they concern themselves with print quality rather than with print quantity.

Truth be told (extend your hands in front of you, palms facing each other as you say this): numbering photographs is a marketing game. It serves no purpose in regard to the quality of a print. Instead, it is used to artificially increase the perceived value of a particular image while the photographer is alive.

The marketing principle goes like this: reducing the quantity by a measurable amount will allow the photographer to increase the perceived value, and thus the selling price, by a commensurate amount. In other words: the smaller the edition, the higher the price of each print in the edition. An edition of ten would allow each print to be priced higher than an edition of 100, which in turn would be priced higher than an edition of 1,000 and so on. The respective price of each print is set by the photographer, the gallery, or both. Pricing is no small task, and is often just as challenging as setting the number of an edition. However, pricing is a different issue that I will not debate here.

The question then becomes how large (or small) should a given edition be? The answer, for the most part, is in the photographer's expectations for upcoming sales. In other words, how many prints of a given image can a photographer expect to sell? 10? 100? 1,000? More? Smart marketing dictates that you need to find that number and set the edition just at this number or slightly above (in case you were pessimistic). You noticed I said "smart" marketing. I did so because it may, after consideration, not be so smart, which is an issue I will return to later in this chapter.

Manipulation and Art

This numbering scheme sounds manipulative, doesn't it? If it does, that's because it is. To prove it, let's back up a little. Why do we collect or purchase fine art photographs? Is it because they have a number on them (Ansel Adams prints don't have numbers), is it because we expect them to increase in value (many prints do not increase in value), or is it because we love the image? Truth be told (extend your hands forward again with palms facing), most people collect or purchase

Figure 14-1: *Bristlecone Pine and Snow*

Section E:

The Relationship Between the Technical and Artistic Aspects of Photography

15

Technical and Creative Field Checklist for Fine Art Photography

Figure 15-1: *Mesa Sunset*

Introduction

Good plans shape good decisions. That's why good planning helps to make elusive dreams come true.
Lester Robert Bittel

In art, having an organized plan is a challenging endeavor because the end product—the artwork—is unknown to the artist until it is complete. Much of the artistic process depends on inspiration, and inspiration is not prone to following a plan. The best laid plans in art often fail to work because inspiration does not show up, or because something more exciting happened that took our attention away, or because somehow things did not play out the way we expected.

The variables I just mentioned can turn ideas into confusion. At that time we need something to hold on to, something to guide us while we work. I find that one of the most useful things to keep in mind and to refer to while working in the field is a list of what we need to consider and to achieve. This list is the subject of this chapter.

A Few Notes about this Checklist

Before diving into the list itself I want to point out a few things that I find to be of particular importance regarding this list. First, the list is divided in two parts: technical and artistic. This is because fine art photography is both a technical and an artistic endeavor. For this reason we must divide our attention equally between these two aspects.

Second, the art list is longer than the technical list. I did not realize this until I was done writing the list. At first it surprised me, but upon reflection I realized that this is the way

it should be. While I often say that ideally we should have a 50/50 spread between art and technique, in the end the art is where we should place most of our efforts.

Third, the technical list needs to be learned only once while the artistic list is the one you have to go back to each time you create a new image. In a way this stems directly from the second point above. The technical aspects of photography will not change. Once we learn how to choose f-stop, shutter speed, ISO settings, and so on, this knowledge will remain the same. Of course, certain technical aspects have been and will be improved upon, but for the most part the technical aspects are there to stay. The only time you would have to relearn these is when you use a new camera, and then it would be essentially at the level of finding out where these controls are on your new camera and what has been improved.

On the other hand, one needs to look at the artistic list over and over again because it features questions that can be asked forever. These questions can, and most likely will, have different answers each time you ask them. Also, these answers will change because we change as we go through life, as we experience different things, and as we get older. In turn, the way we view the world and the way we represent the world in our photographs and in our art changes.

Fourth, your personal style is largely defined by your answers to the questions on this list. It is also defined by what you like and dislike. In other words, how you use this list will have a direct effect upon your personal style. Defining a personal style is making choices, and this list is about making specific choices in specific situations.

Fifth, this checklist is your "blueprint" to the studio work you will do after your

16 Image Maladies

Introduction

In this book I approach composition as consisting of all the elements that have a visual effect on the image. This means we are not looking just at the arrangement of objects in the scene, or just at the traditional rules of composition. Instead we are also looking at color, contrast, cropping, edge treatment, and many other aspects of image making often disregarded by more traditional approaches to composition.

How these elements are handled by the photographer makes an enormous difference in the look of the final image. It also involves both technical and artistic knowledge, not just one or the other. If these elements are not handled properly, issues do arise. In effect, when an image is afflicted by one of the maladies mentioned in this chapter, the composition of this image suffers as well. The maladies outlined here are not simply technical issues. They are also artistic issues which affects how the image is perceived by your audience. I like to call these issues *maladies* rather than *problems*. Malady is a non-loaded term, meaning it has an open meaning instead of a directly negative connotation.

Maladies can also be diagnosed while problems often are here to stay. Finally, each malady I discuss has a remedy, something that points to a positive solution. I will be going over what I consider the most important image maladies. For each malady, I will offer a remedy. If applied as indicated, this remedy will cure the specific malady for which it was designed.

I compiled this list of image maladies while doing student print reviews. As I completed hundreds of print reviews, I noticed the same maladies came up regularly and students were unaware of them for the most part. This told me these maladies are not something the untrained eye can diagnose on the spot. Instead, one needs to know what to look for, and one needs to know what remedy to apply.

Heavily Cropping Images

This first malady affects images in which the main interest is lost within the framing of the image. In other words, the image shows far too much of the location. The photographer saw something, but the photographer did not get close enough to the subject, did not use the proper lens, or somehow failed to focus the image on the part instead of the whole.

In this first example, I was attracted by the backlit trees that were in front of the canyon wall. The wall was in the shade while the trees were receiving the last rays of the setting sun. It created depth and contrast as well as a significant difference of color saturation between the trees and the sandstone wall.

My first attempt was to photograph the entire rock formation with the trees in front of it (figure 16-2). However, I quickly realized that this diluted the interest of the image significantly. It was not clear which element was the most important.

Next I used a longer lens to simplify the image and reduce the elements in the image to the two trees in front of the sandstone wall (figure 16-3). This was better but still too complex. Again, it was not clear which element was the most important.

Finally, I used my longest lens, a 250 mm on my Hasselblad medium format camera (I was shooting with the P45 Phase One back attached to the Hasselblad) and simplified the image even further (figure 16-4). This time

Figure 16-1: *Yucca, Valley of Fires*

17 Memories of What I Have Seen

Figure 17-1: *Bryce Canyon Arch*
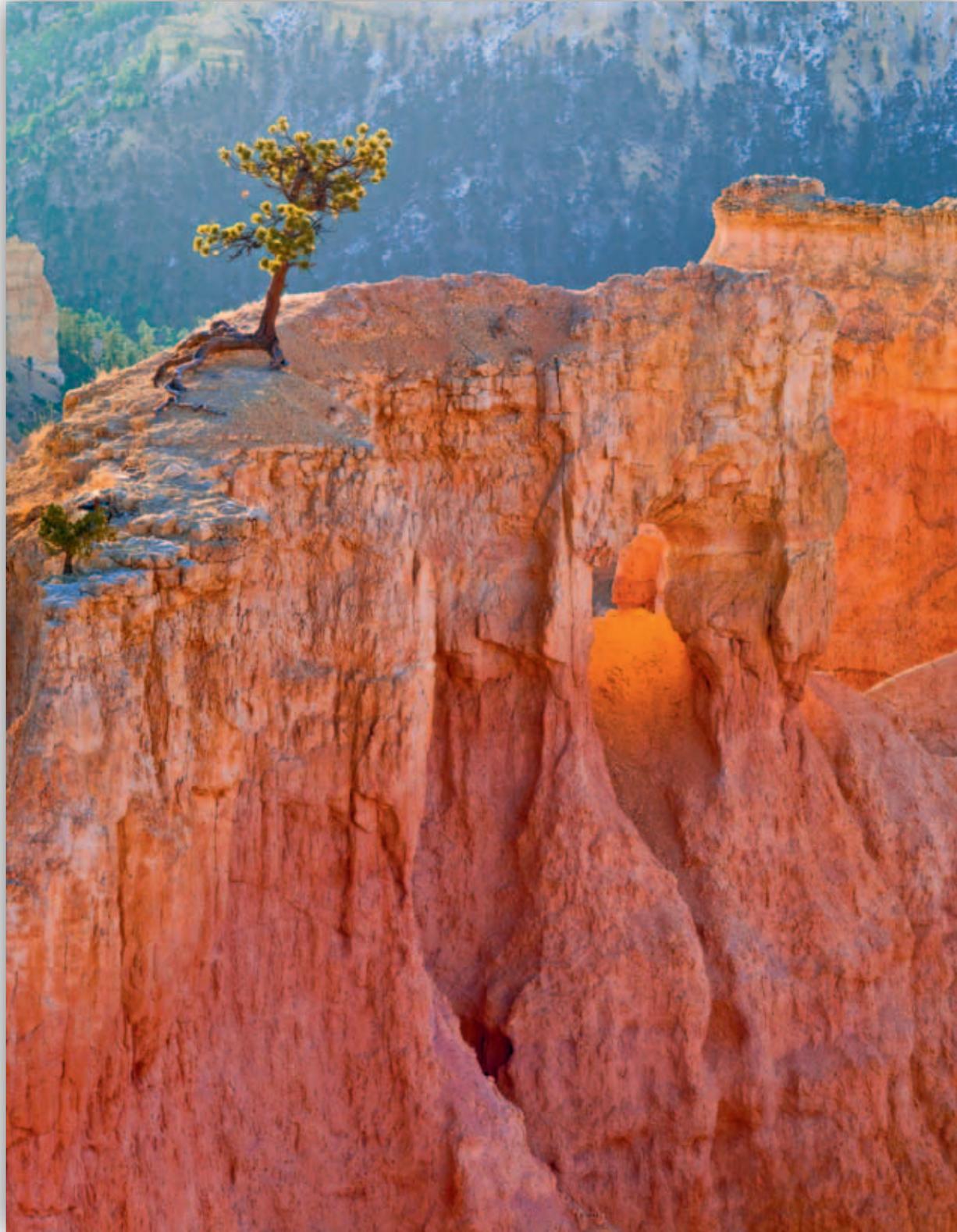
Introduction

Some photographers see the natural world as a gentle place best represented by soft pastel tones in slightly overexposed images with very low contrast and soft light. Other photographers see the natural world as place where drama unfolds, a place best represented by bold colors in deeply saturated images with high contrast and strong light. Personally, I see the world as being a multitude of visages and appearances. At times it is a gentle and kind place, best represented by soft, pastel, unsaturated tones, or even shades of gray. At other times it is a poignant place, best represented with high saturation, contrast, and colorful tones, or deep blacks and pure whites.

The fact is that, eventually, I do not photograph the world only as I see it. I also photograph the world as I feel it, as I experience it. This is why I perceive the world as having a multitude of appearances, moods, and feelings. The world may at times be soft and delicate, or at other times it may be bold and saturated. But whatever it is, I know what it is not: the world is never static, never the same. Instead, it is ever changing, ever able to surprise. It is the record of these surprises that make a photograph truly captivating.

I also feel indebted to my audience. To say that the natural world has one aspect and one aspect only, as some photographers do, is to limit how others—my audience—can approach this natural world and experience it for themselves. To create this artificial limit is to try to impose a vision exclusive of other visions. This is often done by saying that the photographer's images represent reality and have not been manipulated.

Reality?

I am always surprised when a photographer says they have a personal style and they reproduce the world "as it is". Why don't they see the contradiction in this statement? After all, how can one represent the world as it is and have a personal style at the same time? It is an either/or situation, isn't it?

There is a simple test to prove my point. Let's take ten amateur photographers, all with the same cameras, lenses, and tripods. Let's fly them all to the same location, say Monument Valley, and let's ask them to take one photograph from the same viewpoint at the same time. Finally, let's have the same lab print all ten photographs straight from the film or from the RAW files.

What result would we get? As you can surmise, we would have ten different photographs. The differences would include changes in framing and composition, color variations due to film, sensor type, white balance, etc.

Now let's take ten professional photographers, fly them all to the same location, have them take only one photograph, but this time let them use whatever gear they want, process their images any way they like, then print them any way they desire. The variations we would have when comparing the resulting prints would be far more significant than with the previous test, because more variables are allowed.

In short, in comparing the first and second test, what we see is that there is no way to get the same exact photo by two different photographers, let alone by ten, even when shooting the same thing with the same equipment at the same time and having the processing done by the same outside source.

18 Conclusion

Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.

PABLO PICASSO

Figure 18-1: *Death Valley Panamint Daisies*

Art and Technique

Art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has ever known.

OSCAR WILDE

We are now at the end of this book. It has been a long journey, but I believe a fun and an enlightening one as well. At this time I want to bring up some points that I find to be particularly important when looking at composition, personal style, and inspiration from a certain distance; both from the perspective of a practitioner and of an observer.

Fine art photography is a technique-hungry medium, a medium in which improving your technical skills will bring visible improvement to your work. However, one cannot make progress through technique alone. One must also address the other essential aspect of fine art photography, and that is the artistic aspect. This second aspect addresses you, the photographer, the artist, directly and personally. Why? Simply because while technique comes out of a set of learned skills, art comes out of your personality. Your artistic preferences define who you are, and in turn, they define your personal style. It is because we are all different, because we all have different preferences, that each of us has a personal style.

In the end, fine art photography is a combination of art and technique. I like to say that a masterpiece is an equal combination of both: the masterful use of technique to express a powerful message. The universality of this message—how well people from all walks of life can relate to it—defines how successful the work will be. Of course, commercial success or failure, as well as exposure, play a role

in the success of a work of art. However, this is a matter of marketing, something that I am not looking at in this book, but do teach in other tutorials.

The Creative and Critical Modes

Great things are done by a series of small things brought together.

VINCENT VAN GOGH

For an artist, creativity is often in conflict with critical evaluation. Unfortunately, the two do not work well together. In fact, they dislike one another and are best called upon individually, one at a time.

When working in the field, I recommend that the creation of a photograph be considered creative time, and that the selection of the best photographs from a shoot be considered critical time. I also recommend that the two be done separately. That is, I recommend that you do not select your best photographs while you are photographing. Instead, photograph to your heart's content, making sure you consider both artistic and technical aspects, and later, either in the evening or when you are back in your studio, decide what worked and what did not work, as well as which images you want to convert and optimize and which ones you want to reject.

When working in the studio, converting and optimizing your photographs, I recommend you follow a similar "separation of the tasks", so to speak. Here too, when working on the photographs you previously selected, convert them to your heart's content and experiment with different conversion settings, different color balances, contrast, saturation, or preset