

Sample



Alain Briot

Mastering Landscape Photography

The Luminous-Landscape Essays

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The Luminous-Landscape Essays

Alain Briot

rockynook

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Table of Contents

1



2



3



12 Preface

14 Introduction

16 How to See Photographically

- 17 Seeing Photographically
- 17 Making Abstract All Sensory Input Except for Visual Input
- 18 Focusing on the Visual Aspects of the Scene
- 18 Learning to See in Two Dimensions
- 18 Recreating Depth, the 3rd Dimension, in a 2-Dimensional Medium

22 How to Compose a Photograph

- 23 Introduction to Composition
- 24 The Strongest Way of Seeing
- 24 There is More Than One Way to Compose a Scene
- 25 One Composition Among Many
- 25 Walking the Scene
- 26 Using a “Cutout” Finder
- 27 Rules of Composition
- 31 Conclusion

32 How to Choose the Best Lens for a Specific Composition

- 33 The Importance of the Lens
- 33 Human Eyes and Camera Eyes
- 34 One Landscape: Three Main Lens Choices
- 42 Which Lens Should I Take?
- 42 Photographic Skills Enhancement Exercises
- 43 Conclusion

46 How to Find the Best Light for a Specific Photograph

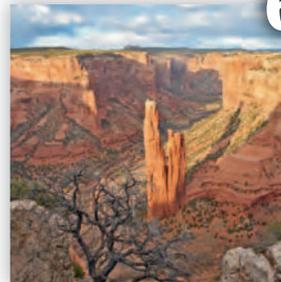
- 47 And God said, Let there be light: and there was light (Genesis 1:3)
- 47 Drawing with Light
- 48 Three Governing Rules Regarding Light
- 48 How to Find the Best Light
- 50 Sunrise and Sunset – The Best Light
- 52 Other Light Choices
- 52 The Various Types of Natural Light
- 58 Photographic Skills Enhancement Exercises
- 60 Conclusion

**62 How to Select the Best “Film” for a Specific Photograph**

- 63 Introduction to Film Choice
- 63 A Look at Photography in History
- 64 Film and Seeing
- 65 The Importance of Raw Conversion
- 66 Color or COLOR
- 66 Let’s Use Film (or digital capture); Let’s Not Let Film Use Us!
- 67 Color or Black and White?
- 69 Duotones, Tritones and Quadritones
- 70 Film Speed
- 73 Photographic Skills Enhancement Exercises
- 75 Conclusion

**76 How to Determine the Best Exposure for a Specific Photograph**

- 77 Introduction to Exposure
- 77 The Importance of Proper Exposure
- 78 Gray Cards, Overexposure, and Underexposure
- 80 How to Determine the Contrast Range that the Film or Digital Camera Can Capture
- 82 The Power of the Histogram
- 83 Exposure for Digital Captures



84 The Importance of Shooting RAW
84 Exposing to the Right
85 Some Examples of Common Histograms
88 Bracket, Bracket, Bracket
90 Study the Scene Being Photographed
92 High Contrast Remedies
97 Familiarize Yourself with Hand Held Light Meters
98 Spot Meter Meets PDA
99 Photographic Skills Enhancement Exercises
102 Conclusion

7



104 Keepers or Non-Keepers?
105 Keepers or Non-Keepers?
105 Which Ones Are Good; Which Ones Are Bad?
108 My Personal Selection Criteria
110 Technical Excellence vs. Aesthetics
110 The Selection Criteria
111 Photographic Skills Enhancement Exercises
112 Conclusion

8



116 How to Create a Portfolio of Your Work
117 Introduction to Creating a Portfolio
117 What is a Portfolio?
117 Portfolios and *Portfolios*
120 Goal and Purpose
120 Audience
122 Portfolios Are Not Necessarily Aimed at Showcasing a
Photographer's Best Work
123 The Contents of a Portfolio
123 Some Important Questions About Portfolios
125 Photographic Skills Enhancement Exercises
129 Conclusion

130 How to Establish a Personal Photographic Style

- 131 Introduction to Personal Style
- 131 Who Are We?
- 133 Who Am I?
- 133 A Personal Style is a Unique and Personal way of Seeing
- 135 Choosing a Subject is Not Developing a Personal Style
- 136 Choosing a Subject is Not the Same as Choosing a Genre
- 138 Personal Discovery is Not Personal Style
- 138 A Personal Style Is a Combination of Choices
- 142 A Personal Style Is Fine Tuning Choices to Fit Your Own Personality
- 146 My Personal Style
- 147 Fortuitous Attempts and Defining Images
- 148 Photographic Skills Enhancement Exercises
- 151 Conclusion



9

154 Being an Artist

- 155 Introduction to Being an Artist
- 157 Freedom of Expression: Let Us Be Artists
- 159 Being an Artist Is a Lifestyle; Not a Temporary Situation
- 161 Being an Artist Does Not Mean Making an Income from Your Art
- 162 Being an Artist Does Not Mean Exhibiting or Publishing Your Work
- 164 Being an Artist Means Having an Audience
- 166 Being an Artist Means Having an Appreciation for the Arts
- 168 Being an Artist is Knowing How to React When You are Told that "Artists are Lucky!"
- 171 Being an Artist Does not Mean Being an Art Critic
- 174 What About Talent?
- 176 Photographic Skills Enhancement Exercises
- 178 Conclusion



10

11



180 How to be an Artist in Business: My Story – Part 1

- 181 Introduction to Being an Artist in Business
- 181 Travels
- 183 Beginnings
- 184 An Attempt to Merge Art and Studies
- 187 The Beginning of a Career
- 190 The Straw that Broke the Camel's Back
- 192 Doing What I Love
- 193 Why Didn't I Think of this Before?
- 194 Opportunities Often Come Under the Guise of Hard Work
- 194 The Best Place to Start a Business Is on the Navajo Reservation

12



198 How to be an Artist in Business: My Story – Part 2

- 199 The Break
- 199 The People
- 203 The Approach
- 204 The Progression of the Grand Canyon Show
- 206 Quantity
- 209 Wearing Out
- 211 Transitions: How the End of One Opportunity Can Be the Beginning of Another
- 213 The Second Best Place to Start a Business is Phoenix, Arizona
- 215 Teaching Again
- 216 Quality, Not Quantity
- 220 New Shows
- 220 Longer and More Thoughtful Chapters
- 221 New Projects
- 221 Becoming a Music Producer
- 222 Setting Up the Ideal Studio
- 223 Two Businesses in One
- 223 Learning Never Ends
- 225 Conclusion

226 How You Can Do it Too

- 227 Introduction to How You Can Do It
- 227 Do What You Love
- 228 Take Control of Your Own Destiny
- 228 Fame or Fortune? Make a Choice!
- 230 Confront your Fears
- 231 Seek Help from People Who Are Where You Want to Be
- 234 Opportunities Often Come Under the Guise of Hard Work
- 234 Press On Regardless
- 235 It's About You
- 235 Quality or Quantity? Make a Choice!
- 236 Do a Little Bit Every Day
- 238 Integrity
- 240 Best Sellers
- 241 Photographic Skills Enhancement Exercises
- 243 Conclusion

246 Conclusion

248 Index



Preface

“The use of the term art medium is, to say the least, misleading, for it is the artist that creates a work of art not the medium. It is the artist in photography that gives form to content by a distillation of ideas, thought, experience, insight and understanding.”

EDWARD STEICHEN



How does one learn how to master landscape photography? And, more importantly, how does one become a master landscape photographer? Those questions were on my mind when I decided to study photography in 1980. At that time, I found that the answers I was looking for were hard to find. In searching for these answers I discovered a world in which the practitioners kept many aspects of their work “secret”, or at least, let’s say, hidden away.

Certainly, technical information was prominently available. And, of course, things have changed in the 26 years since I started my photographic journey. But, the information that was available then mostly covered equipment: cameras, lenses, and darkroom gear. It did not cover the other aspects of the art of photography, such as light, composition, or how to create a portfolio.

It took me a long time to get answers to my questions, in large part because I had to figure out most of these answers for myself. In the process of doing so, I learned how to master the art of landscape photography, and I became a professional landscape photographer. How I got there and what I learned along the way is the subject of this book. In it I share the knowledge I acquired during all these years.

To offer a short summary of this book, “Mastering Landscape Photography” focuses on mastering three things: artistic skills, technical knowledge, and business sense. Photography itself is a combination of art and science; the result of artistic abilities combined with technical knowledge is required. To earn a living from photography a third set of knowledge: the business sense necessary to run a successful business.

This book covers all three areas: art, technique, and business. It starts with the technical aspects of photography that consist of learning how to see, compose, find the best light, and select the best lens for a specific photograph.

It continues by focusing on the artistic aspects of the medium with chapters on how to select the best photographs among the ones that were created, how to create a portfolio of one’s best work, and how to become an artist.

Finally, it concludes with two chapters on being an artist in business, then looking at how „You Can Do it Too“ in the final chapter.

This book encompasses the sum of all that I learned during the course of my journey in photography. My goal in sharing my knowledge is to save the reader time and to prevent the reader from having to experience the hardships I encountered. It is my hope that it will help make your own journey a resounding success.

Alain Briot

Introduction

Why is it so difficult to explain the things we do everyday; the things we do intuitively, almost unconsciously? I believe the reason is simple. It is difficult to explain because these things come naturally, almost easily, without having to purposefully think about them.

In my case, it is also difficult to put into words my personal photography *system* which has largely been developed through years of trial and error; years of learning what worked and what didn't work, until one day, I found myself looking at one of my images thinking, "I really like this one. How did I get there?" I got to where I am, I am tempted to say, due to *perseverance*; I never gave up, and I love photography so much that I somehow found both the motivation and the finances to continue in the face of less than satisfying results.

I am a visually oriented person. I have a long history, not only in photography, but as a visual artist working in several different media. When I began photography in 1980, I had already been trained as a fine artist in painting and drawing, and I practiced art under the guidance of my parents since my early childhood.

Furthermore, I am focused upon representing what I perceive as beautiful in the most aesthetic way I can conceive of. I practice aesthetics on a daily basis, yet I do not call it aesthetics. I don't actually have a name for it, but I create beautiful images of natural places. Quite simply, that is all.

I am looking for an effective way to teach what I do without making the subject unnecessarily complicated. After all, it would be easy to approach it from a theoretical perspective

using lengthy and obscure terminology and creating a text which, although it may be of interest to academics, would provide no help whatsoever to photographers wanting to improve their photographs.

So how does one explain, in a manner as clearly and concisely as possible, something that is done unconsciously? One way is to explain how one proceeds step-by-step, by breaking the topic down into major areas. This is the approach I will follow, which has the advantage of being simple, of getting straight to the point, and of moving from one concept to another in a logical and organized fashion.

I have identified nine major areas related to aesthetics, which encompass what I focus on when I photograph. I have also identified three areas related to art and business:

Aesthetics

- 1 How to See Photographically
- 2 How to Compose a Photograph
- 3 How to Choose the Best Lens for a Specific Composition
- 4 How to Find the Best Light for a Specific Photograph
- 5 How to Choose the Best "Film" for a Specific Image
- 6 How to Determine the Best Exposure for a Specific Scene
- 7 How to Decide Which Photographs are "Keepers" and Which are Not
- 8 How to Create a Portfolio of Your Work
- 9 How to Establish a Personal Photographic Style

Art and Business

- 10 How to Be an Artist
- 11 How to Be an Artist in Business, Part 1
- 12 How to Be an Artist in Business, Part 2
- 13 How You Can Do it Too

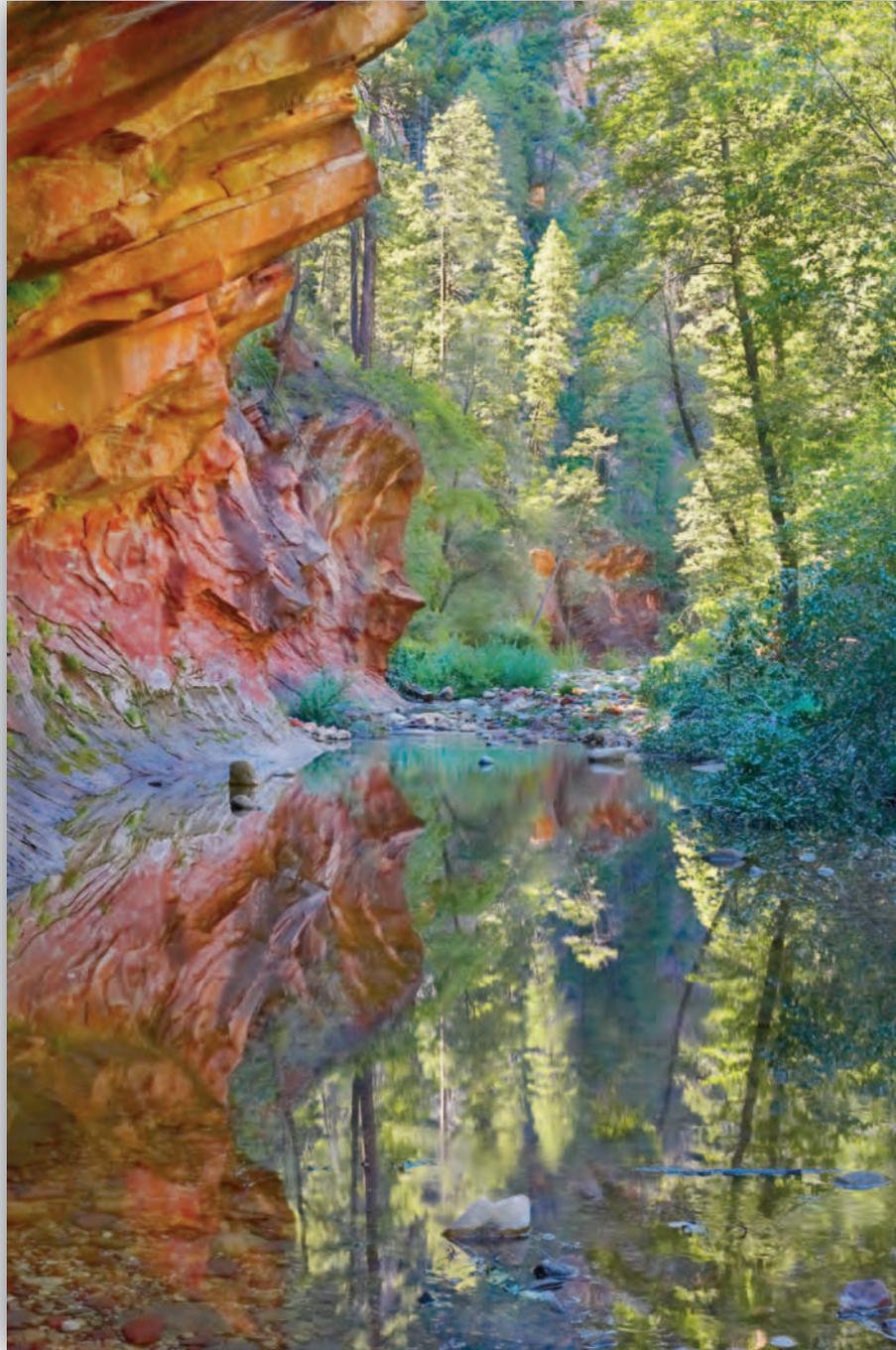
In the first nine chapters I will cover the topics related to aesthetics by explaining my personal approach, and by describing the tools I use (those tools are not only cameras, as you will see). My photographs will be used throughout the book as examples. I chose images which relate to the topic being covered, and I describe how and why specific images were created.

Finally, the organization of these chapters follow the steps I take when creating photographs, as well as the steps I recommend the reader to take for the time being: find what to photograph, compose a photograph, choose the desired focal length, determine if the light is right, decide which film to use, calculate the proper exposure, decide which photographs are best and, ultimately, assemble a body of work and develop a photographic style.

How to See Photographically

Vision is the art of seeing things invisible.

JONATHAN SWIFT



Seeing Photographically

When I refer to *seeing*, I am talking about *seeing photographically*, or *seeing like a camera*. Learning to see like a camera is the purpose of this chapter.

I firmly believe that I cannot take a photograph of something I have not seen photographically. In other words, I must first see something, then see a photographic opportunity, and finally, *see a photograph*, before I can set up my camera and compose an image. This may sound obvious, but it is not. I have met many photographers who “shoot away”, so to speak, hoping that when they return home they will find a “good shot” somewhere in the mass of originals they brought back. Unfortunately, this approach often results in disappointment.

This is not to say that taking a lot of photographs is bad practice. Many professional photographers shoot large quantities of photographs and get excellent results. However, they know how to see photographically and are not just shooting in the hopes that something will turn out. My viewpoint is not based on the number of photographs one takes: rather, it is based on why and how one photographs, and on the premise that what one sees directly influences what one photographs.

Creating photographs is all about seeing, and in this sense it is no different from other two-dimensional arts such as painting and drawing. Creating photographs is really about studying and practicing “the art of seeing”.

Making Abstract All Sensory Input Except for Visual Input

Imagine I am walking through the landscape in the spring, surrounded by the chatter of birds and the smell of fresh flowers. A breeze is softly blowing, swaying the leaves and the trees ever so gently. I feel both relaxed and energized by the warm weather, the new growth, and the overall rejuvenation of spring.

If I am to compose a photograph that expresses how I feel, I must remember that none of the pleasant fragrances, none of the gentle breeze, none of the feelings of respite I experience will be represented in the photograph. None of this will be present in the final print *unless*, through my personal knowledge of photography, I can manage to translate these non-visual feelings into visual information. This is because in a photograph *only* visual information is present. What is captured from the original scene is what was visual in this scene. What our other senses told us – scent, touch, sound, emotions – all those things are gone.

Is it possible to translate these other feelings into visual elements? Yes, I believe it is possible, and the purpose of this book is to explain how to do so. However, only with study, practice, and exercises aimed at sharpening visual skills will one be guaranteed success. Translating feelings into images is actually one of the most challenging aspects of photography, and one that separates the master from the apprentice, so to speak. As Ansel Adams put it, “Photograph not only what you see but also what you feel.” This is certainly a tall order, but not an impossible one.

Focusing on the Visual Aspects of the Scene

As was just mentioned, it is easy to be fooled by one's senses into thinking that what feels good, sounds good, and smells good will also *look* good. It is now known that this is not necessarily the case. What captures one's attention when all the senses are at work may or may not be the visual aspect of a scene.

Therefore, in order to create successful photographs, at this point the following questions must be addressed:

1. Is there something visually interesting in the scene I am looking at?
2. If yes, then what is the most important point of visual interest of this scene?
3. Providing that I have decided to photograph this scene, how can my photograph visually convey the feelings I now have?

To answer these questions we must first learn to see the way a camera sees.

Learning to See in Two Dimensions

How does one learn to see *photographically*, the way a camera sees? Let's start with this important concept.

A camera sees differently from the way we see. One of the main differences is that a camera has only one lens and one eye, while we have two. We have binocular vision while cameras (except for stereo cameras) have monocular vision.

What does this mean in terms of seeing? It means that if we do not learn to see with only one eye, either by closing one eye or looking through a viewfinder while composing a photograph, we will end up with mishaps, such as the proverbial tree sticking out of someone's

head. In this instance, when looking at the scene with both eyes, the tree does not appear to come out of that person's head because binocular vision allows us to *measure the distance* between the person and the tree. Monocular vision removes all sense of distance – all sense of *depth* – leaving us with only a sense of height and width, thus placing the person's head and the tree on the same plane of vision.

A photographic print has only two dimensions as well; width and height (8x10, 16x20, etc.). Because depth, the third dimension, does not exist physically, a photographic print has no physical depth. Yet depth is part of our world, thus it is necessary for us to make sense of a photograph depicting this world. In order for a photograph to be realistic and pleasing to our eyes, depth must be simulated. If we were sculptors we wouldn't have to worry about any of this; we would have width, height, and depth as part of our medium. But, as artists working in a flat medium, we must learn how to recreate the appearance of depth.

Recreating Depth, the 3rd Dimension, in a 2-Dimensional Medium

How does one simulate or recreate depth? The appearance of depth can be created with the help of perspective. Well then, how does one use perspective to recreate depth? By implementing the following simple techniques:

1 – Converging Lines

We have all seen photographs of roads going from near to far until the road finally disappears into the distance. Such photographs create a very strong sense of depth because the roads act as lines leading our eyes into the distance. The photographic print, or digital



▲ Horseshoe Bend

Horizontal and vertical compositions.

Glen Canyon NRA, Arizona.

Linhof Master Technika 4x5,

Schneider Super Angulon 75 mm,

Fuji Provia. (both photographs)

▲ These two images were created in March 2003 during my most recent visit to this great location. I first created what I consider to be the “classic” view of the Horseshoe Bend, the horizontal image at left. I then realized that I had never seen a vertical composition of this scene. Knowing there was an opportunity to create a fresh image of an often-photographed location, as well as a foreground-background relationship (a horizontal foreground-background composition of the

Horseshoe Bend is difficult to capture since nearly all the space in the image is taken up by the Bend itself). I “walked the scene” looking for a foreground element .

After searching for a few minutes, I found a rock formation with a shape that echoed the shape of the butte at the center of the Bend. In my opinion, this vertical composition offers a much stronger sense of depth and distance than the horizontal composition. It almost makes me feel dizzy when I look at this image.

image on a monitor, is absolutely flat, but to the eye, it appears as if we are looking into a scene many miles deep.

2 – Foreground Background Relationships (large and small objects).

We know that we perceive nearby objects as appearing larger than faraway objects. For example, a Ponderosa Pine tree appears gigantic when we stand right in front of it, but the tree appears to shrink to the size of a match-stick when viewed from several miles away. Placing such a tree in the foreground of a photograph, or even just showing a part of the tree, and then placing another similar tree in the background, will definitely give the viewer a clear indication of distance. Comparing the relative size of the two trees in the image allows the viewer to actually gauge the distance relatively accurately if he is personally familiar with natural settings and with Ponderosa Pines. Of course, any other plant or object can be used to the same end with the same result. Wide-angle lenses are often used for this purpose. However, any lens can be used, as it is the intent that matters rather than the equipment. I have personally captured near-far relationships with wide-angle lenses, as well as telephoto lenses.

3 – Overlapping

This third technique relies on one simple rule. We know that objects that are in front of other objects are closer to us physically. Using this rule, we can purposefully compose a photograph so that certain objects overlap other objects, thereby giving a strong sense of depth to the image.

4 – Haze

Atmospheric haze offers another way to recreate the appearance of depth in a photograph. We know intuitively and from experience that haze (and fog) gets thicker as the viewing distance increases. Distant objects, in hazy or foggy conditions, are thus harder to see than nearby objects. Atmospheric haze, usually despised because it makes distant objects difficult to see in the summer (the Grand Canyon is a case in point), actually makes it easier to tell that the North Rim (for example) is quite a distance from the South Rim (16 miles precisely at Grand Canyon Village). Therefore, haze can help us recreate the appearance of depth in an otherwise flat medium.

5 – Combining Several of the Above Techniques

These depth-creating techniques are often used in combination with one another. For example, I have created images of overlapping mountains or mesas in hazy conditions (again, the Grand Canyon for example). In this instance, these two techniques reinforce each other, resulting in a photograph that is visually stronger and more powerful than if a single technique had been used.

Similarly, overlapping objects are often used jointly with foreground/background relationships. For example, a plant in the foreground which is emphasized through the use of a wide-angle lens, can be purposefully positioned in the composition so that it partially hides a mountain in the background. Or, this same mountain can be seen through the branches of a tree, as in this photograph of Zion National Park.



▲ In this instance, I did not think that the rock formations (the Watchman) were enough to create a successful image. The sky was nice because it wasn't completely blue or overcast, but again something else was needed. By walking the scene I found this tree through which I could frame the scene since it was winter and the tree had no leaves. The tree also leaned slightly to the right following the line of cliffs which drop towards the right of the frame as well. It is a bold composition which does not emphasize just the tree or just the cliffs but instead balances visual interest.

▲ **The Watchman seen through a Cottonwood tree, Zion NP, Utah.**

*Linhof Master Technika 4x5,
Schneider Super Angulon 75mm,
Fuji Provia*



Mastering Landscape Photography

The Luminous-Landscape Essays

Alain Briot

Mastering Landscape Photography consists of thirteen engaging essays on landscape photography by master photographer Alain Briot.

Topics include practical, technical, and aesthetic aspects of photography aimed at helping photographers build and refine their skills. This book starts with the technical aspects of photography: how to see photographically, how to compose a photograph, how to find the best light, and how to select the best lens for a specific shot.

Briot continues by focusing on some of the rarely discussed, yet essential aspects of finding success in your art, with thought provoking chapters on how to select your best work, how to create a portfolio, what it means to be an artist, and how to be an artist in business.

Using full color examples, this book explains in detail:

- How to see photographically
- How to compose a photograph
- How to choose the best lens for a specific composition
- How to find the best light for a specific photograph
- How to select the best "film" for a specific image
- How to determine the best exposure for a specific scene
- How to select your keepers or non-keepers
- How to create a portfolio of your work
- How to establish a personal photographic style
- What it means to be an artist
- How to be an artist in business
- How you can do it too