

Sudden Stillness



SuddenStillness

Visual Echoes of Timeless Rhythms

Andy Ilachinski

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Ilachinski
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Fine-Art Photography

SuddenStillness

Photography | Musings | Speculations

*"Seeing is perception
with the original,
unconditioned eye.
It is a state of consciousness
in which separation of
photographer/subject,
audience/image dissolves;
in which a reality beyond words
and concepts opens up,
whose "point" or "meaning" is
the direct experience itself."*

— JOHN DAIDO LOORI
Zen Buddhist *rōshi*
(1931 - 2009)

Artist's Statement

I am, by training and profession, a physicist, specializing in nonlinear dynamics and complex adaptive systems (with a PhD in theoretical physics). However, by temperament and inner muse, I am a photographer, and have been one for far longer than my PhD gives me any right to claim an ownership by physics. Photography became a life-long pursuit for me the instant my parents gave me a Polaroid instamatic camera for my 10th birthday. I have been studying the mysterious relationship between inner experiences and outer realities ever since.

My creative process is very simple. I strive to record the subtle, interconnected web of energy that makes up what we call the world. For me, beauty, which permeates everything around us, appears in its most sublime state when form, color, pattern and texture are all in harmony. In the same way as all "objects" in this world are fundamentally impermanent, and essentially arbitrary, partitions of an otherwise continuous, unfragmented whole, I view photography as an almost mystical process whereby this illusion of fragmentation is momentarily lifted and the underlying essence of the universe revealed. To "see" the whole, one must first learn to see "parts" as mere illusions.

In simplest terms, I take pictures of what calms my soul. There may be other, more descriptive or poetic words that may be used to define the "pattern" that connects my images, but the simplest meta-pattern is this: I take snapshots of moments in time and space in which a peace washes gently over me, and during which I sense a deep interconnectedness between my soul and the world.

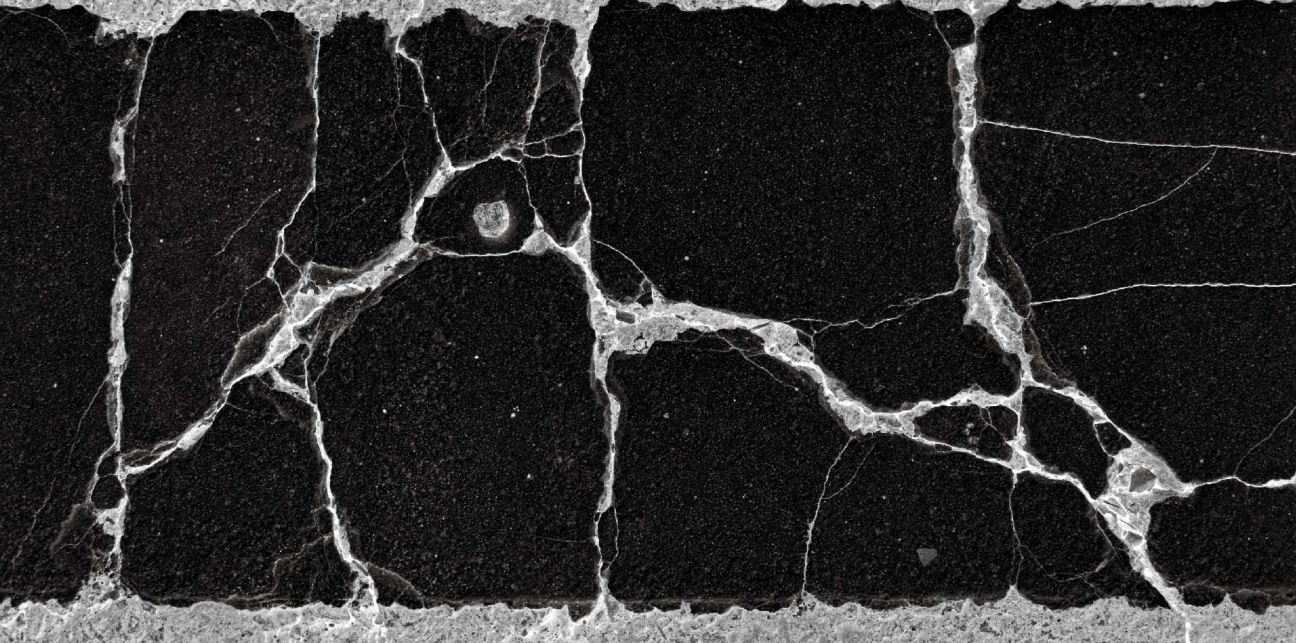
Not Henri Cartier-Bresson's "Decisive Moment,"
but rather a ...

... **Sudden**Stillness



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Abstracts

Solo commissioned show
Hyatt Regency Hotel, Reston, VA
(Feb - April, 2010)

"The great epoch of the Spiritual which is already beginning, or, in embryonic form ... provides and will provide the soil in which a kind of monumental work of art must come to fashion," so prophesied the great Russian painter, Wassily Kandinsky, in his masterful *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1914. Since then, of course, and to varying degrees, art has been replete with many aspects of the spiritual; indeed, the traditionally religious-centric interpretation of the term has on occasion been considerably expanded by art to include mysticism, ritual and myth, symbolism, the occult, and pure abstraction.

A wonderful book, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*, chronicles much of the history of spiritual art, and contains many wonderful reproductions of important works, was published in 1985 to highlight an exhibit held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. A recent Dover reprint of another classic survey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, is also available; though it has only a relatively few black and white examples, the scholarship is first-rate.

The impact of the "spiritual" on photography is less clear, and has - sadly - less of a clear history. To be sure, the spiritual has never been far from photography's best practitioners; though not necessarily in overt form. Alfred Steiglitz's "Equivalents" are nothing if not quiet, soulful expressions of an inner reality, and are obviously infused with spirit in the deepest sense.

Ansel Adams' portfolio of ostensibly "grand sweeping vistas" filled with Wagnerian-scale drama, are both creative affirmations of everything that is beautiful "out there," beyond the artist behind the lens, and of the poetic soul yearning desperately for a way to better communicate the transcendent beauty it sees on the inside.

Adams' quest was a quintessentially spiritual one, much more so than merely aesthetic; a quest that is, regrettably (and profoundly erroneously, in my view), all-too-quickly dismissed by some latter day photographers as a product of "vision-less" Zone-system technobabble and attention to irrelevant minutiae of craft.

Many of Minor White's best works can be compared to those of Kandinsky, in the sense that both artists (used their respective media to) point a way toward a radically new grammar for spiritual expression. And Carl Chiarenza's visionary explorations of the "inner landscape" have been available for all to "see" for decades.

Still more recently, I've encountered the works of spiritually inclined artists such as Doug Beasley, Nicholas Hlobeczy, John Daido Loori, Deborah Dewit Marchant, and Jerry Wolfe, who each in their own way, pay homage to the spirit of Steiglitz's equivalents, and use their photography to reveal otherwise invisible realms of the soul. (Not surprisingly, Hlobeczy, Loori, and Wolfe all worked with Minor White.)

Although there are plenty contemporary photographers and artists whose work is very spiritual in nature, there is little evidence to suggest that "spiritual photography" (at least in the sense I mean here) is emerging, or has ever emerged, for that matter, as a bona-fide movement in photography.

Indeed, if books such as reGeneration: 50 Photographers of Tomorrow (published, ironically, by Aperture, a magazine founded by Minor White and Ansel Adams!) are true indicators of the direction in which photography is currently "moving," that direction is visibly leading away from, rather than anywhere near, spirit. Deliberately staged images that shock and pound the senses into a surrealistic (and often numbingly ugly) unreality seem to be the norm; pictures that invite a quiet meditation or that simply, but sincerely, ask, "Is this not beautiful?" are rarely seen today - and when they do appear, are routinely scorned by critics as unimportant "pretty pictures" that convey no lasting meaning. (Christopher Alexander has been lamenting a similar spiritual decline in architecture and urban planning for a quarter century.)

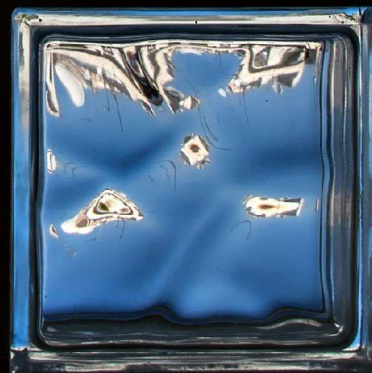
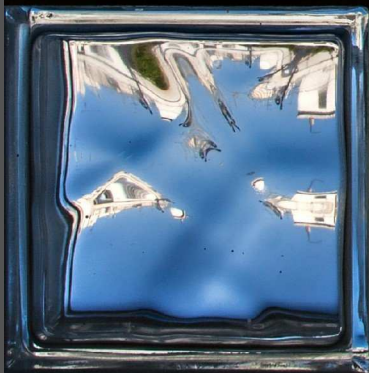
I hope I am wrong, for to move away from spiritual expression is, in my opinion, to move away from the most meaningful connection we have to the spiritual world, which is our essential wellspring of existence, as physical beings. Severing this connection, even if only implicitly by focusing our collective artistic and

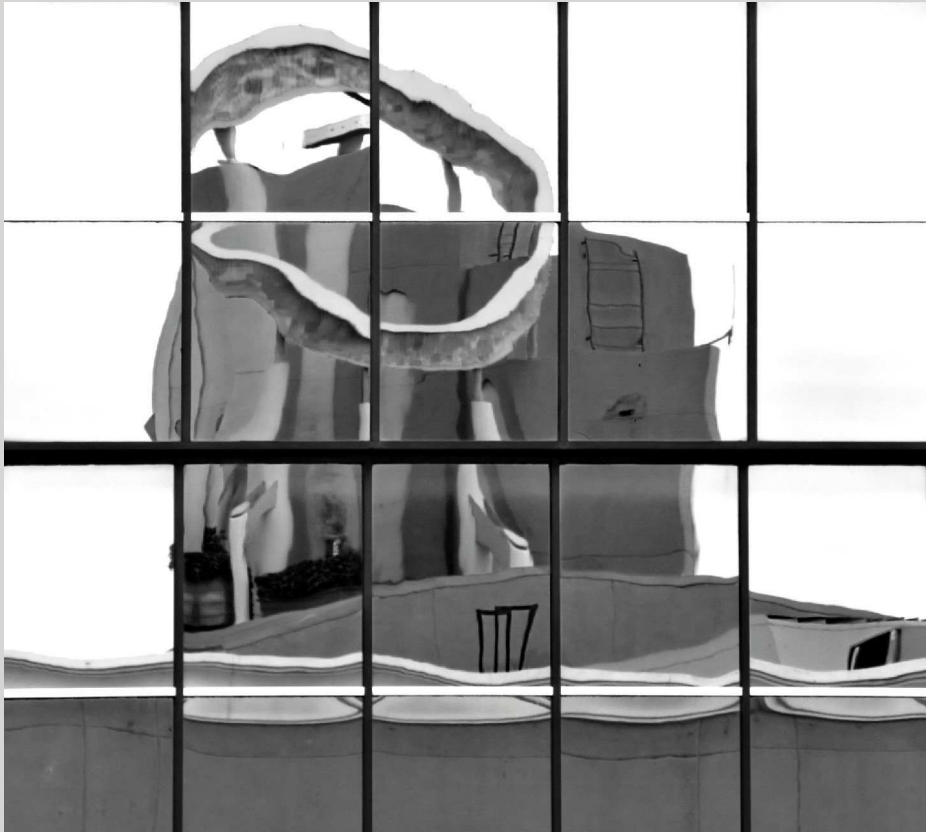
photographic energies onto more "sterile" - and spiritually inert - aspects of the world, means we must face the specter of losing ourselves in (or devolving backwards to) the merely physical.

For me, photography, or any other creative art form for that matter, is first and foremost a language of the transcendent; it represents a way for gifted "seers" - otherwise known as "artists" - to remind the rest of us that none of us are merely creatures of the flesh.

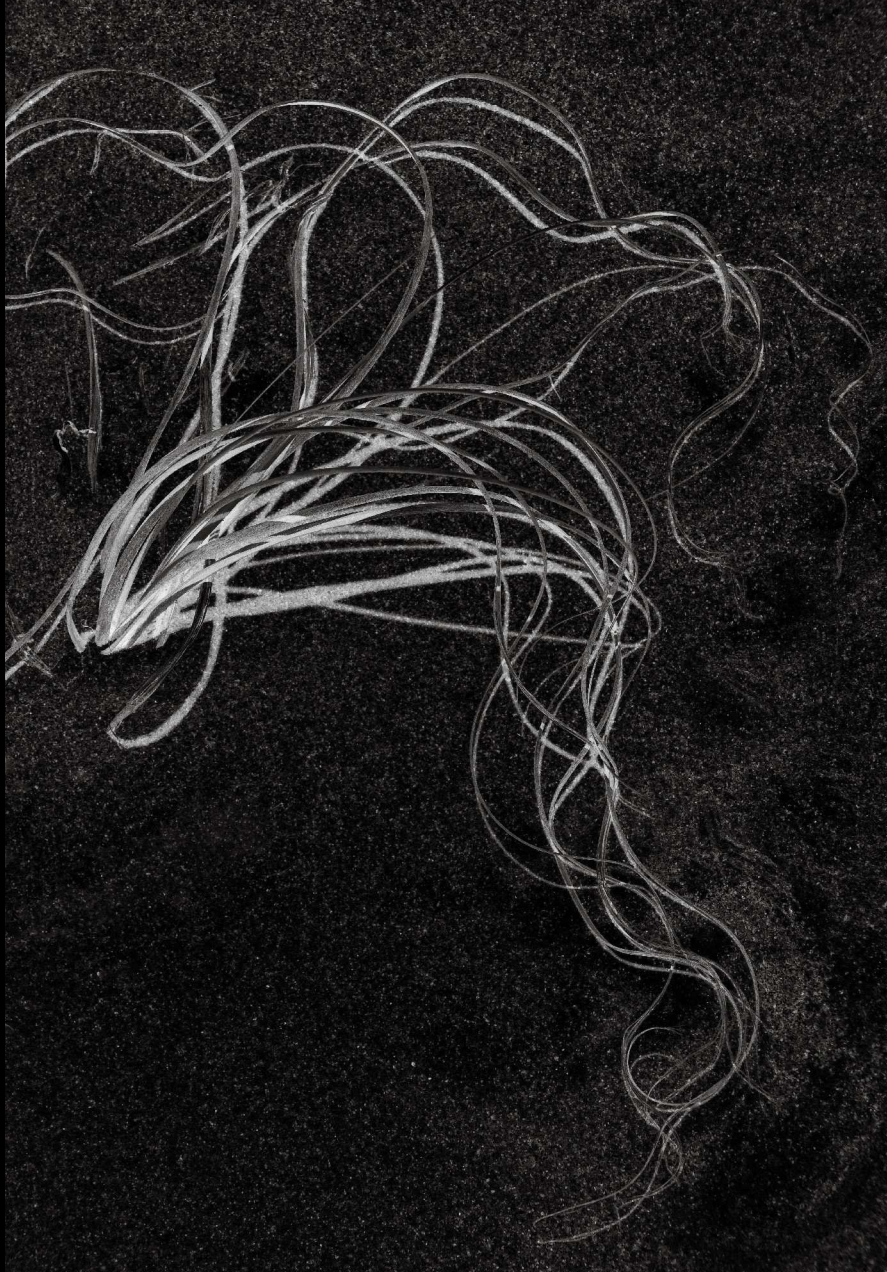
*"The physical object, to me,
is merely a stepping stone
to an inner world where the object,
with the help of the subconscious drives
and focuses perceptions,
becomes transmuted into
a symbol whose life is beyond the
life of the objects we know."*

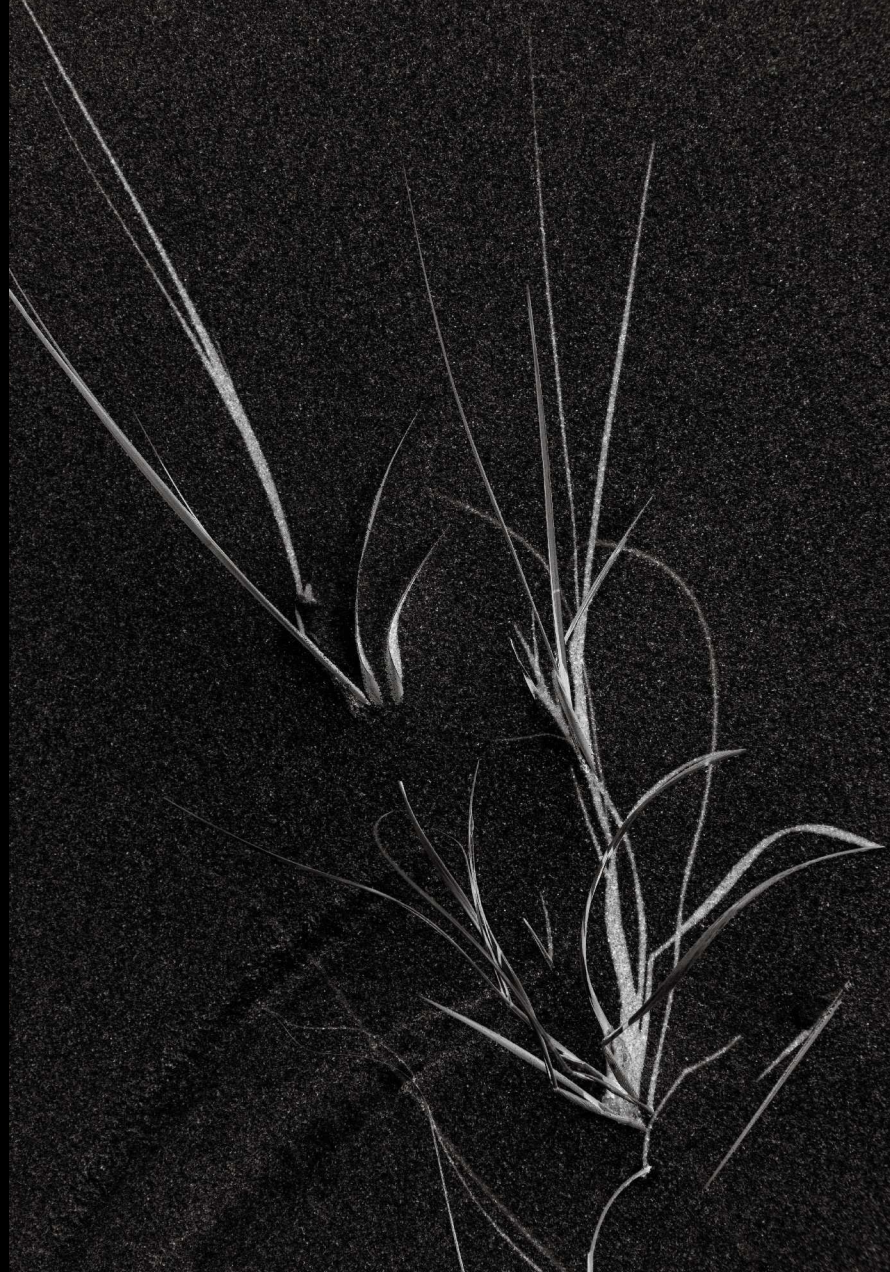
- CLARENCE J. LAUGHLIN
(1905-1985)







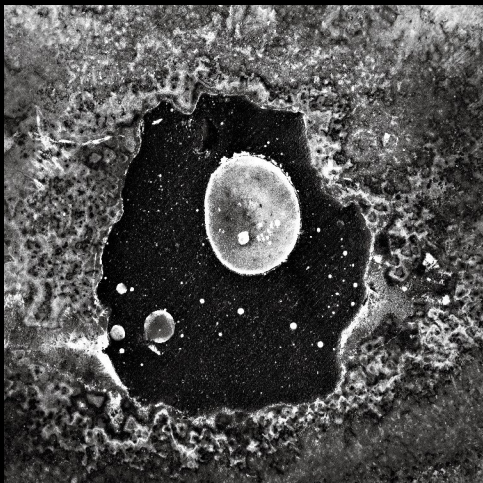














This color triptych of reflections of autumn colors in a small pond near where I work is an intensely personal one for me, as it involves my memory of my dad in a deep way. It marks an interesting boundary (or phase-transition as us physicists like to say) in my own development as a photographer, and in my evolution as a spiritual being.

These images were all taken a few minutes apart on a cool autumn day in 2002, the same year my dad passed away in March. While I had taken numerous autumn shots before, and there was certainly nothing out of the ordinary in my choosing this spot to take these (not too far from where I work in northern virginia), what was unusual was my state of mind and the way I framed them.

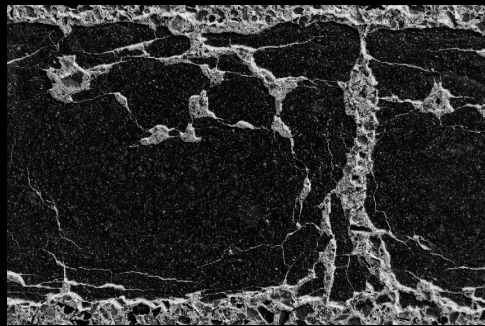
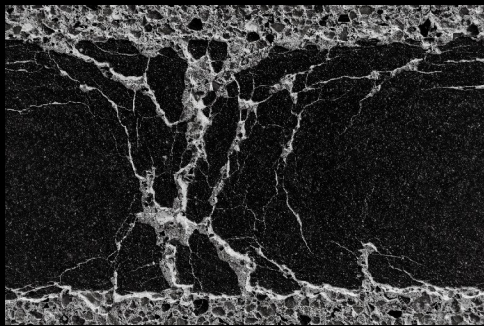
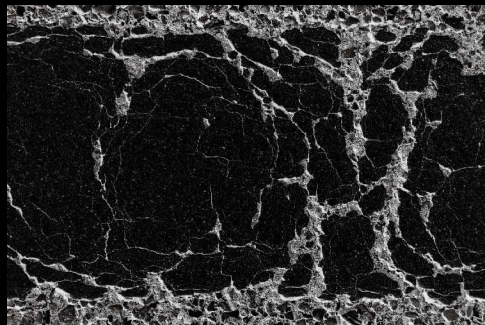
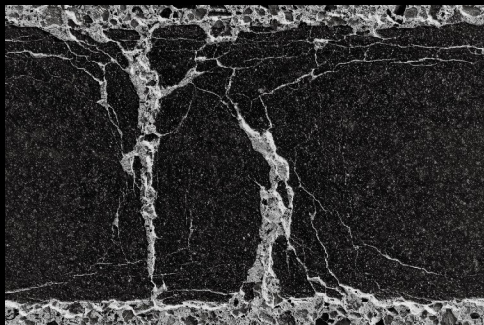
There is no clearer (nor more accurate) way to express what I felt while I was composing these shots other than to simply assert that I palpably felt my dad - his very soul - by my side; guiding me, basking in the mutual joy of father and son communicating, timelessly, spiritually, through our shared feelings about art, beauty, and nature.

This triptych marks a significant shift toward more - and ever deeper levels of - abstraction in my photography. It was as though some internal "switch" were thrown and I started to "see" the world differently; and started finding new ways of expressing it.

Two people - my mom and a dear friend of mine (who is also an artist and part-time photographer), both of whom are predisposed, as I, toward all matters spiritual, later suggested to me that my dad had somehow bequeathed me his "gift of abstraction"; a part of his artistic "Katra" (with a nod to Spock's Katra in a Star Trek film). They said this because they noticed an obvious shift in the meta-pattern that describes the images that I started producing (and continue to produce) after the day in October 2002 that this triptych was taken.

Even now, almost a decade and a half removed from taking these shots, I cannot look at this triptych without not just thinking of my dad, but being one with him.

This triptych thus denotes an important spiritual and aesthetic boundary for me, between an "old" Andy that was too saddened by my dad's death to create any new meaningful art, and a "new" Andy that - though ever mindful of my dad's absence - is eager to find ways of using photography to give new life and meaning to my dad's always kind, gentle wisdom and love.

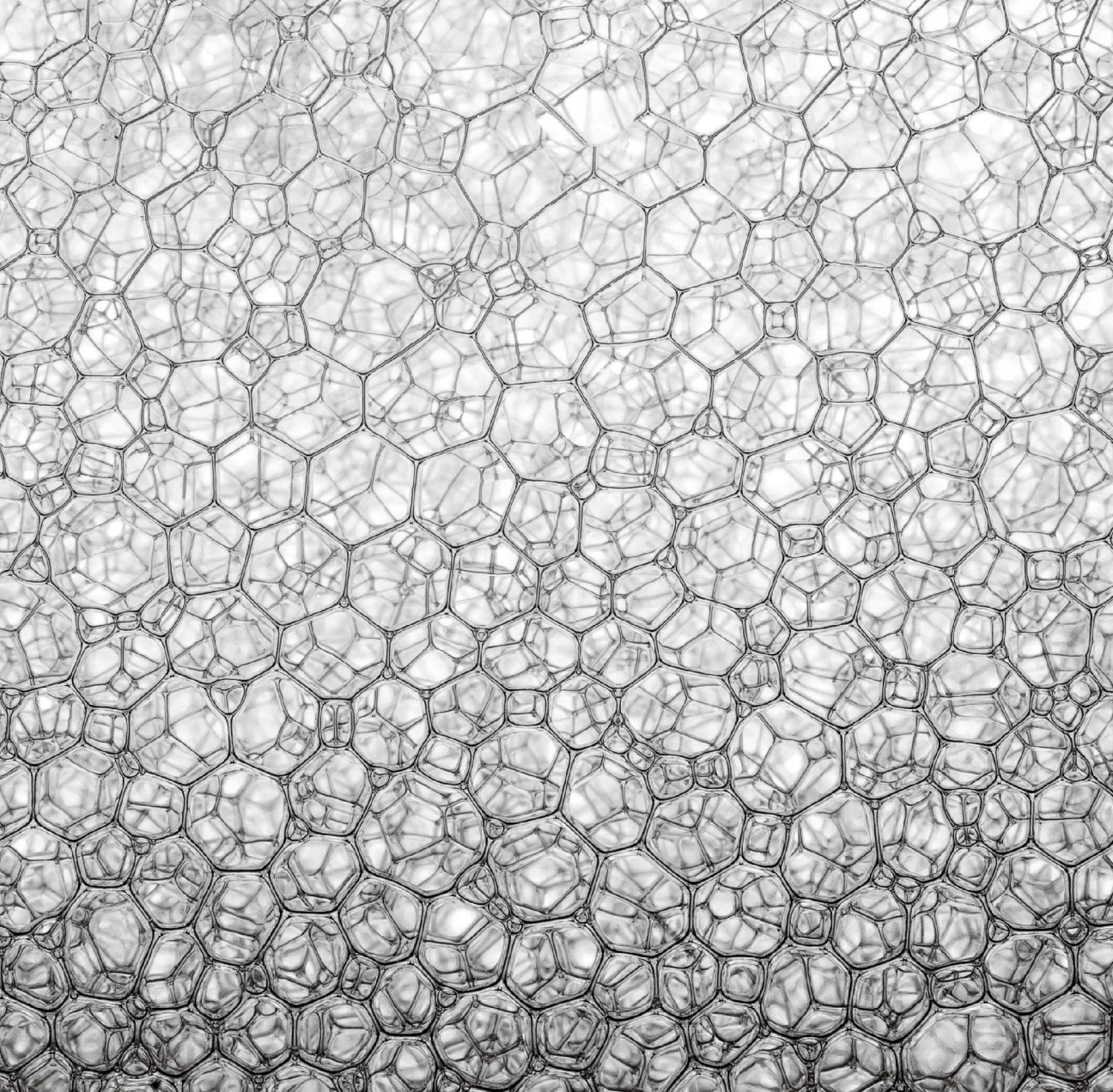
















As Above, so Below

Lenswork Magazine
Print and DVD Extended Edition
(Issue #95, July/August 2011)

Joyful Meditations in a Subterranean Cosmos - Part I:

People often ask me (when I am out photographing), "*You must spend a lot of time doing that, eh?*" To which the answer is (and this is not a cop out), yes and no. Yes - obviously - because it is a life's passion of mine, and I "think about photography" most of my waking hours, even when pouring over equations and computer code in my day job (as a quick parenthetical aside, even as seemingly a mundane and unartistic an endeavor as putting together powerpoint slides for a technical presentation involves all kinds of compositional and graphical design elements, essentially indistinguishable from the unconscious processing going on behind the scenes of a photographer's craft). No - equally as obviously, but only after a moment's worth of thought - because, in truth, I do precious little active photographing while ostensibly engaged in photography!

Allow me to explain, and set the stage for the picture you see above and what all of this has to do with meditation. As a practical matter, the time I have to devote to real photography (i.e., not quick "point and shoot" grabs, but when I am out and about on a photo safari, mindfully settling into an area, senses tuned to visual possibilities ...) is short and comes in bursts. A few hours here and there on every other weekend perhaps; certainly more when my wife and I are on vacation, or when the family is visiting relatives in different states (hence my archive of

portfolios generated in Florida's beauty, which is where my in-laws live). But even then, such as when we visited Greece and Scotland, my "real photo time" was diffused among an endless (but oh so welcome!) parade of 10-15 minute long patches of time during which we parked our car somewhere beside the highway or landmark and "explored for a bit." Then it is back in the car, and the reality of an equally endless parade of pictures that might have been captured - a common lament of all photographers - until the next roadside vista. While there are exceptions to any rule, it is generally rare to have more than a handful of minutes to do photography.

Thus the context for this post, which is intended as a short meditation on the joyful day-long photo safari I was privileged to have on an otherwise nondescript mid-week day last week. Going back a few months, I finally gathered the nerve (after pondering the issue for over a year before; I am a slow ponderer ;-)) to leave a comment on the website for Luray Caverns, a popular tourist attraction in northern Virginia. I would have preferred a personal email, but I couldn't find an address on their website, so settled for sending a brief note in a "comment" post. In it, I introduced myself as a "professional fine-art photographer" (after wrestling a bit over whether I can really call myself one, since photography is far - far - from paying any meaningful fraction of my bills; I rationalized that at least the "fine-art" part was correct, since what I do as a photographer is emphatically

not defined by anyone's demands but my own), and inquired about the possibility of having a "few hours to myself" inside the caverns with my camera and tripod. I heard back within a week from Luray's publicist, who could not have been nicer or more generous. Provided I choose a day other than a weekend, and one that falls before the April crowd rushes in, Luray would be happy to provide a full-days worth of unencumbered photography! A piece of heaven, I thought; and I was right.

I was greeted early in the morning by a staff member (who herself could not have been nicer or more accommodating; offering just the right mix of "Can I get you anything?" with a sincere "I'll leave you to your work" - it was not work, of course, but I guess carrying around two tripods, a bag with two DSLRs, four lenses, a speedlight, a portable drive for backup, a notebook, and an iPad, looked like it was work;-), led into the caverns, asked to wait a bit until all the lights were turned on (which took but a few moments), and then - music to a photographer's ears - told that "the caverns are all yours!" I essentially had the run of the place all to myself from 9:00am to about 5:40pm or so, armed only with a small bottle of water and a package of trail mix from Starbucks). There was a steady but quickly disappearing stream of visitors every hour or so; but they mostly hung around for a few minutes before moving on and out of eye and earshot. All told, I had over 8-1/2 hours of essentially uninterrupted "quality photography time" in

the caverns; easily the longest such stretch I've had in over a decade. In a word, and I'm choosing the word carefully, Wow!

At the end of the day I was utterly exhausted (more so physically than psychically, as the strain of crouching and bending my 50 year old body in odd positions for "just the right" angle eventually took it's toll on every joint and muscle whose toll could be taken), but felt exhilarated; my inner state can best be described as a profoundly deep joyous inner calm. The kind of feeling one gets when one has accomplished exactly what one has set out to do; not to produce something, per se , but to simply engage in the creative process. And engaged I was. I will not soon forget these joyful day-long meditations on the visual delights I found in the subterranean cosmos known as Luray Caverns!

*"Meditation reveals that
the obvious place to begin
is not in some other place,
it's right here."*

- ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS
*Being Black: Zen and the Art of
Living with Fearlessness and Grace*





















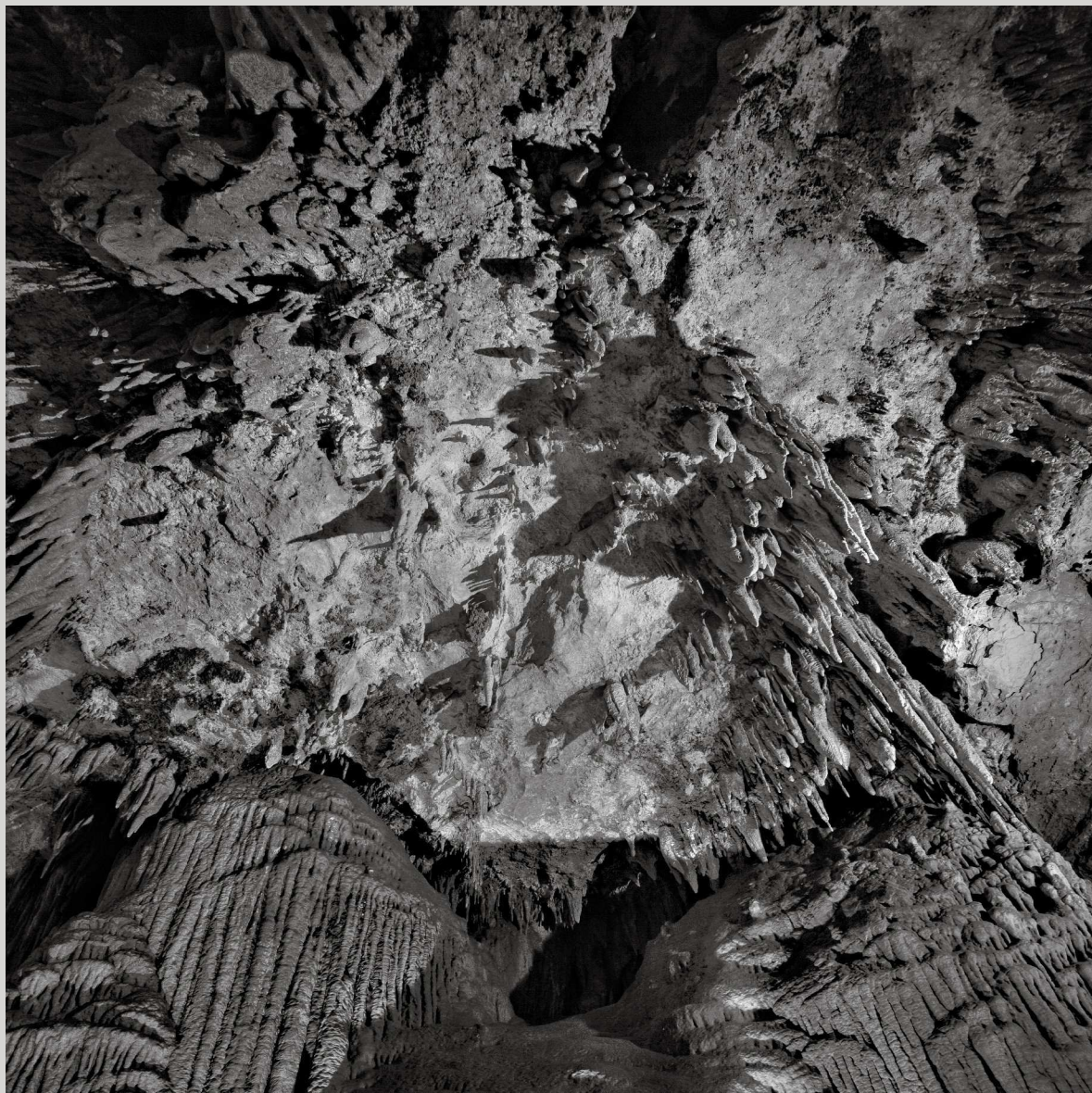




















Joyful Meditations in a Subterranean Cosmos - Part II: A few remarks about the *aesthetics* of capturing the caverns in a photograph, and, ultimately, a fine-art print are in order. The short version is that *it is not easy!*

There are several reasons for this: (1) *light* (as in "lack of control over"), (2) *contrast* (as in "there is too much of it"), and (3) *innate dissonance* (between everything and everything else that consists of light and form;-). As these are all interrelated, I'll discuss them as a group. Light, arguably the single most important component of any photographer's repertoire of "tools," is in this case unnatural (as it is due solely to the intensely locally bright orange tungsten lights), imposed (since it is installed and fixed in place by the park engineers), and fixed (because it is either on or off, never in any "in between" state or alternate projection angle). Thus, the photographer must deal with the lighting conditions as they are defined in situ; in particular, this means that there is no opportunity to "wait for the right light." One might argue, of course, that this is a general quandary all photographers find themselves in; we always "look for" shots, no matter the environment. But what renders this a particularly difficult compositional problem in a cavern is the second reason I've cited for why this task is difficult, namely contrast.

Luray Caverns' lights are bright; very bright; sometimes *blindingly* bright! And are

often focused on relatively small patches of stalactites (dripstone formations that hang from the ceiling) and/or stalagmites (that build from the floor upwards). Again, while contrast is generally a good thing (certainly for black and white photography) and thus not necessarily a problem ("Well Andy, just find the blindingly brightly lit patches you happen to like!"), it can be a problem - certainly an aesthetic one - if what one is ultimately after is not finding the "best" composition that minimizes the impact of brightly lit patches, but one that best respects the totality of forms - including but not restricted to those both defined and hidden by lights and shadows. While visiting Santorini, Greece in 2008 with my wife, I also had to deal with strong contrasts, but at least there the contrasts were predictably variable. Since their strength and location changed throughout the day, I effectively had a degree of control over them; for example, I could decide when and where to set up my tripod (or just wait for the best conditions to arise). In Luray - and, I suspect, all other "public" caverns - there is simply *too much fixed contrast* to make this possible.

It was extremely difficult to find pleasing compositions of any forms larger than human-sized chunks simply because of the dizzying array of competing light sources. In those instances where I was able to find a pleasing composition of larger and more widely spaced elements (such as in the example that appears at the top of this blog entry, which is a panorama than spans

about 100 ft from left to right), my post-processing in photoshop involved many more layers of local dodging and burning than is my norm. Mind you, this is not a complaint; it is merely an observation of one aspect of what makes photographing caverns difficult; difficult compositionally, and - even more so - tonally.

The last "problem" (both defined and exacerbated by the first two) is the caverns' *innate dissonance*. Nothing in the cavern is smooth, or smoothly varying. Not the light, not the forms, and not the textures. Indeed, the "forms" - such as they are - are best described as large to massive needles made of rock, arranged in staccato fashion throughout "rooms" that themselves range in size from smaller-than-cramped office cubicles to mini cathedrals. Far from a harmonious whole, the caverns are - at least at first sight - a visually loud cacophony of not-always-obviously correlated patterns. Everything is in contrast to - and in dissonance with - everything else in these caverns! There are certainly none of the smooth gradations of light and contour that one finds in the slot canyons of the southwest ;-) Yet, somehow, the photographer must craft a holistic harmony out of these ostensibly discordant compositional components.

So what to do? I chose (by deliberately going to the caverns) and now continue to choose (by spending even more time post-processing what I "saw" there) this experience as an opportunity to find ways of

aesthetically balancing discordant parts. As Alan Watts reminds us, "...what is discord at one level of your being is harmony at another level." Yes, the forms are dissonant; yes, the lights are blindingly bright and often ill-positioned; yes, the tonal gradations all tend to yell and scream rather than sing in melodic verses; but my physics background (if not an even deeper intuition) insists that what appears, on the surface, as a confused tangle of a mess, is - at its heart - a wondrous harmony.

*"Three Rules of Work:
Out of clutter find simplicity;
From discord find harmony;
In the middle of difficulty
lies opportunity."*

- ALBERT EINSTEIN



Entropic Melodies

Multi-page spotlight feature
B&W Magazine, February 2006

Entropy is a measure of the degree of disorder, or randomness, in a system. The 2nd law of thermodynamics asserts that the entropy (of an isolated system not in equilibrium) tends to increase over time (approaching a maximum value at equilibrium). In other words, all natural systems have an inherent tendency towards dissipating useful energy.

Differences in temperature, pressure, and density all tend to even out over time. Or, more simply, as long as there are no outside forces to help, all things inevitably lose their structure, become disorganized, decay, and eventually vanish. Entropy measures how far along this inexorable process has progressed.

From the point of view of physics, entropy also lies at the heart of the fundamental irreversibility of natural processes. While the micro-level laws of physics are all time reversal invariant (meaning that a movie of any natural process that is run backwards in time obeys all the known laws of physics), it is statistically a virtual impossibility of ever observing something like, say, all the gas molecules of a perfume bottle that have been released into a room spontaneously reassemble themselves back inside the perfume bottle. Once the bottle is opened, and the tightly packed gas molecules are exposed to a greater volume of space they can explore, their entropy naturally increases; and, hence, their initially "organized" state just as naturally decays.

But what of life and other complex systems? Is not their self-organized structure inconsistent with the 2nd law? The surprising answer is no.

The 2nd law requires a system to be isolated; that is, it is assumed not to exchange any energy or matter with its environment. However, all living systems are open, and persist in time, in part, because they are able to reduce their local entropy by transferring it to their environment (whose own entropy does indeed grow). Indeed, it is this tradeoff between local order and global decay that makes both life possible and furnishes hope that new life may arise again, out of the ashes - so to speak - of what was once living.

All of the images appearing in this last chapter show things in various stages of entropic decay. Old glasses succumbing to time and neglect; windows reflecting abandoned lives and their own withered forms; doors that no longer lead into any rooms; walls that are no longer distinguishable from the paint that once adorned their surface; and books that have lost their meaning, but only because those that would have understood them are themselves no longer there.

Yet all of these decaying things display vestiges of the life-sustaining processes that nourished them in life, and hint of the ineffable forces that will one day spawn new living rhythms.

*"As entropy increases, the universe,
and all closed systems in the universe,
tend naturally to deteriorate and
lose their distinctiveness,
to move from the least to
the most probable state,
from a state of organization and
differentiation in which distinctions
and forms exist, to a state of
chaos and sameness."*

- NORBERT WIENER
(1894-1964)

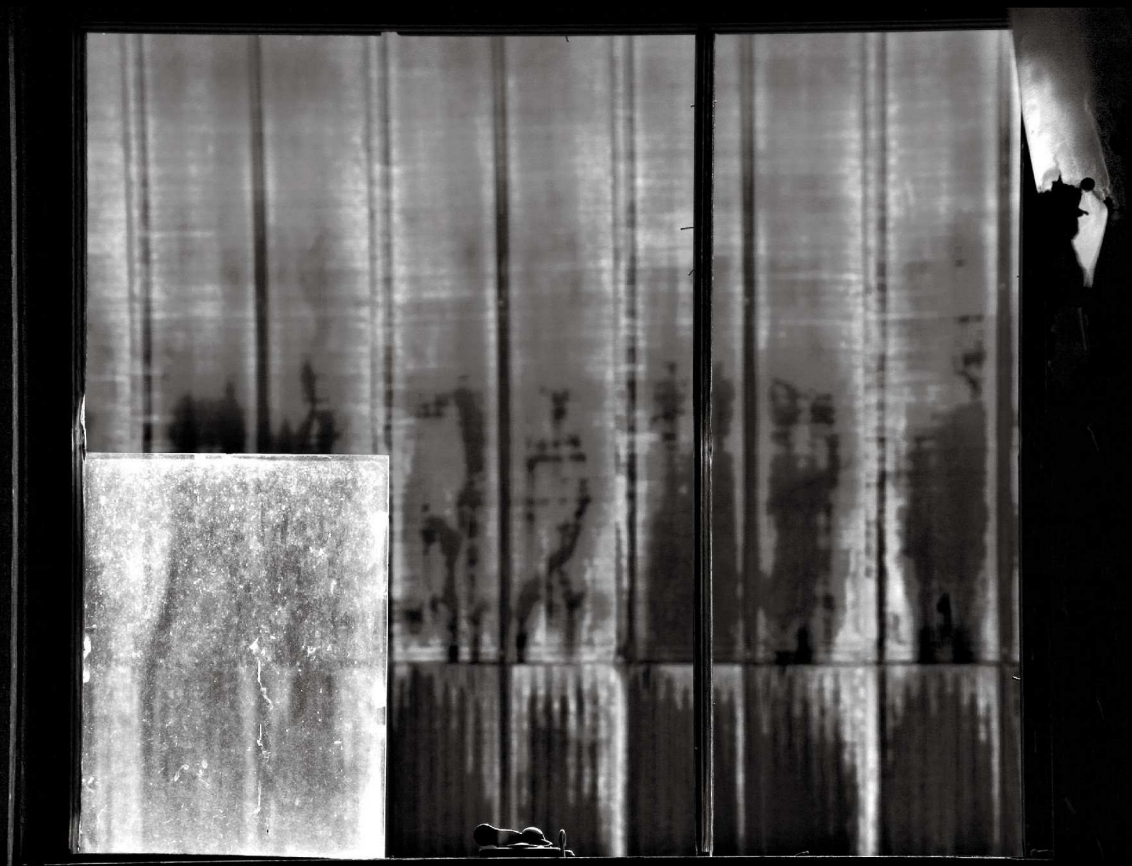




42















... need. No one else was in the

theory of emotional crying was
in 1965. He wrote that "weeping
energy is dissipated in secret
the release of tears as a neutral
aggression occurs
may be unable to discharge
any other way."
Theories similar to L. B. S. Sorenson's psychoan
cal explanation of emotional tears and crying are not u
men in the literature. Other psychological theories at
weeping was a change in one's emotional state such
one's feelings after anguish, pain, fear, or other

In addition to the theories presented by psychol
ogists, two prominent anthropologists have
theories about crying and emotional tears. Char
sumpston said that when humans cry, the blood vessel
become engorged and the surrounding muscles
protect it, which he incorrectly speculated
lacrimal glands to secrete tears. In 1872 in
Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals
distinguished between the relief of sufferings
the total act of weeping, and emotional
Darwin viewed the tears as "an incidental

as the result of tears from a
This concept
as an insignificant
accepted by some
theory has some
explain the unique evolu
ing. Darwin spent his
does not favor Dur

... and

...ologist Ashley Montagu presented a more physi
... of psychogenic lacrimation in 1960. His pro
... wearing originated as a protective mechanism for
... al functioning of the nasopharynx—especially in
... an article in the *Journal of the American Medical*
... Montagu points out that the intake and expu
... sious membranes crying would quickly dry out the
... them moist. When we cry, some of our tears
... the nasolacrimal ducts, which lead from the
... nose and throat. He reasoned that tears—which
... mucous membranes crying would quickly dry out the
... some anti-bacterial ducts, which lead from the
... respiratory membranes and reduce the risk of
... respiratory infections. The process of warding off
... tears were more valuable, because those
... survived. Tearless babies, Montagu specu
... less chance of surviving than those who

... be excluded from the theory that emo
... to protect delicate tissues since newborns
... emotional tears until they are several days,
... months old. Although humans can usu
... survive further development, the ability to shed emotional
... why hasn't the membrane dried out?
... critical days and weeks of life when
... in a dry, intense, frequent, and weeps of life when
... the upper respiratory system
... the opportunity may be one being
... unlikely that emotion
... considerably
... who











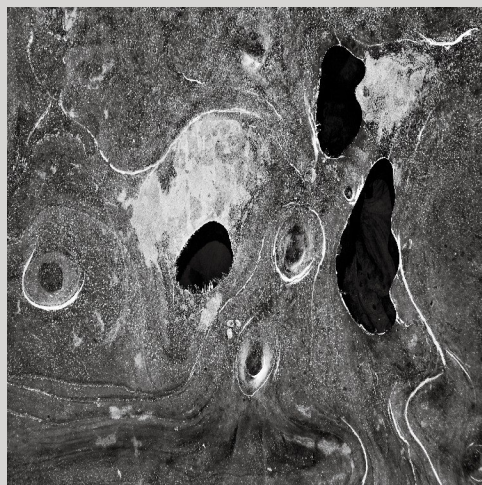


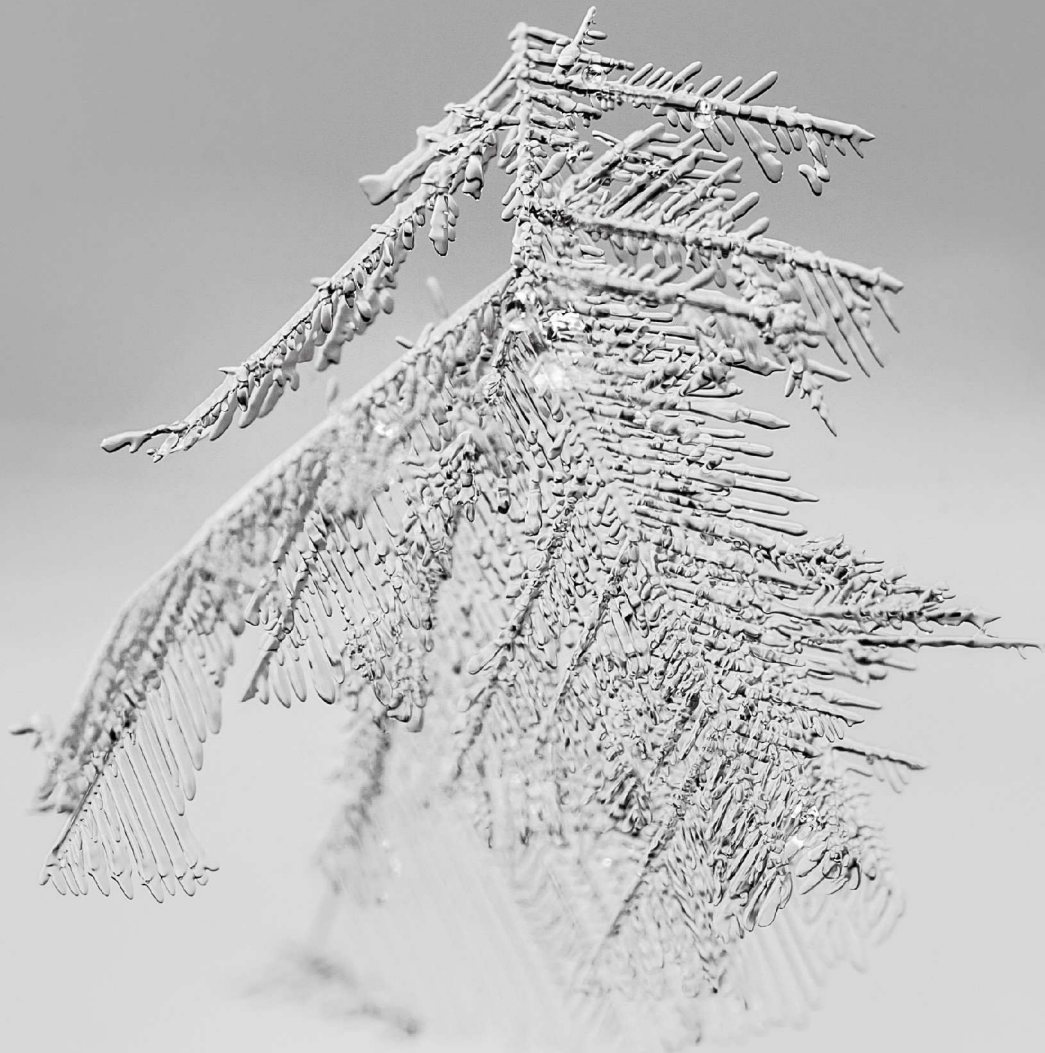


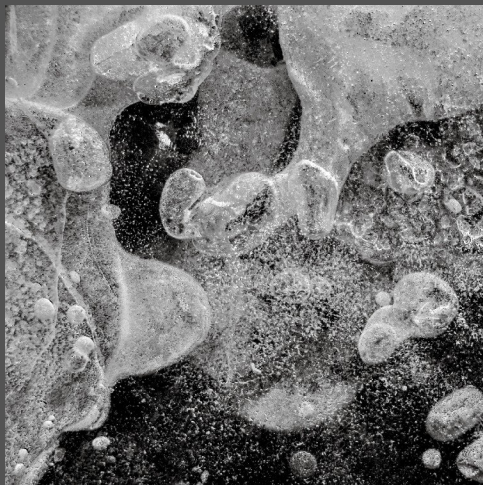


Frozen Ciphers

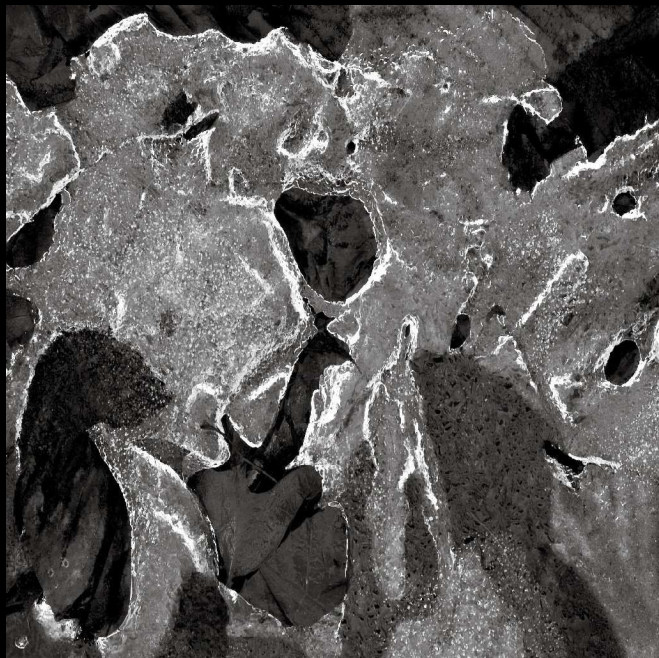
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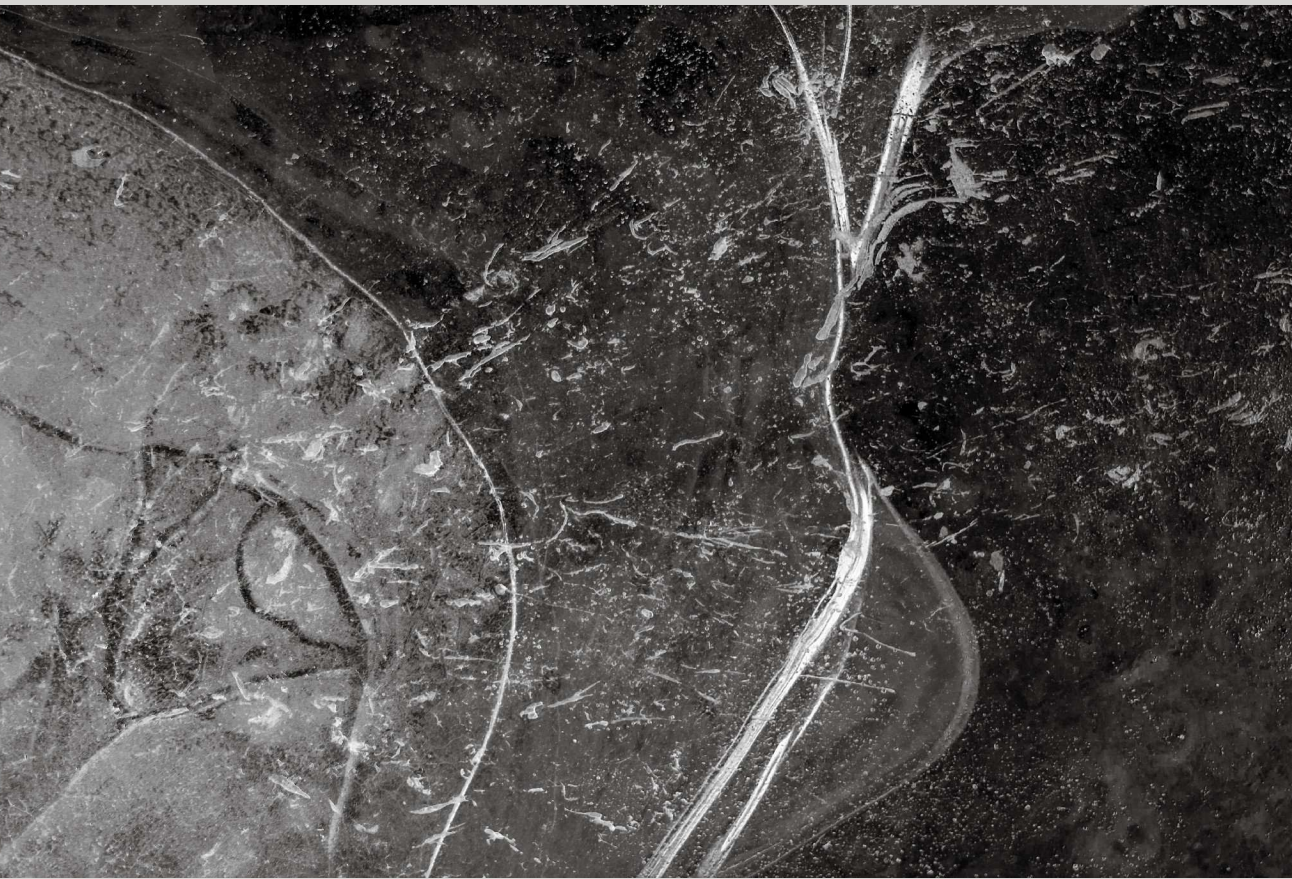


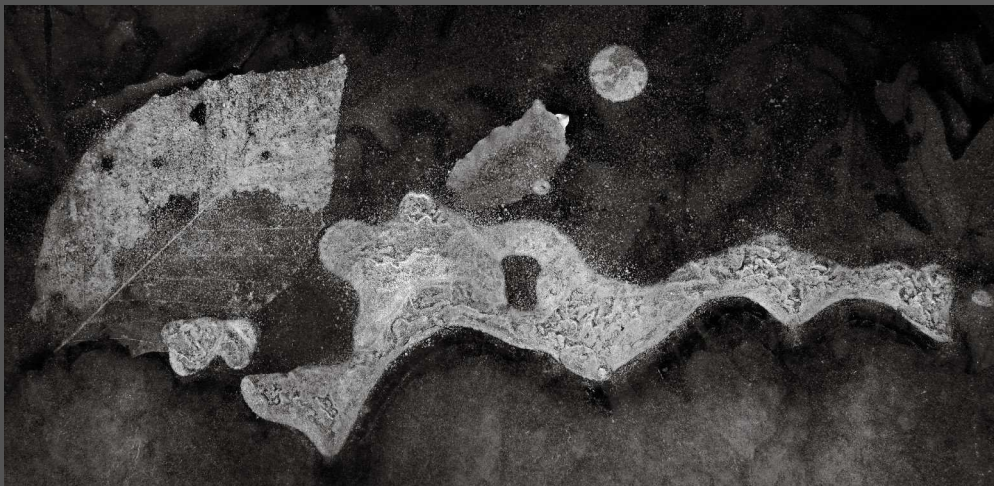




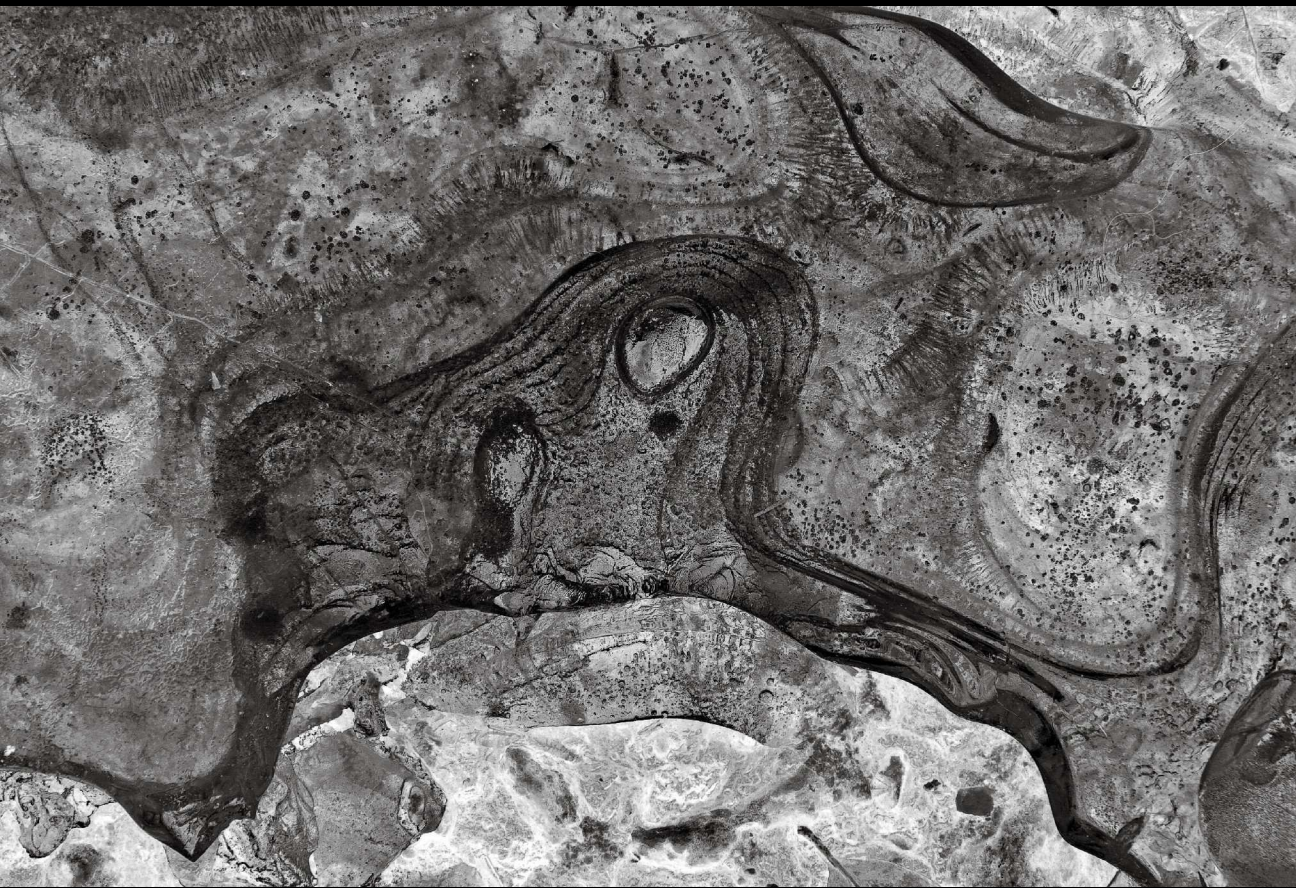




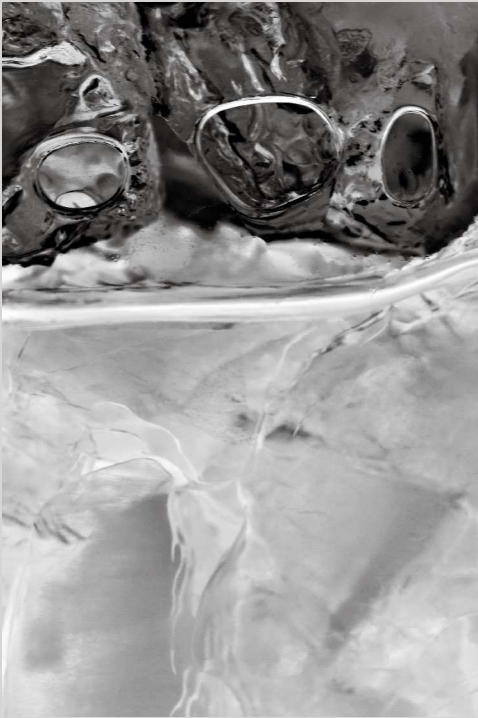






















Glyphs

Multi-page spotlight feature
B&W Magazine, December 2011



What does Athens, Greece have to do with the Carpathian Mountains? That's a trick question, of course, as the "connection" between the two depends on first unraveling the meaning of the enigmatic title of this short blog entry... which has to do with a lucky find of (ostensibly "hidden") glyphs, and musing on them as mysterious purveyors of some unfathomably deep cosmic truth. (Of course, one is free to just revel in their just-as-ineffable quiet beauty without succumbing to my usual Borgesian overtones of over-intepretation ;-)

I have previously written about a trip my wife and I took to Greece earlier this summer. Though my discussion focused almost exclusively on Santorini (the second leg of our journey), we also stayed in Athens and Crete. While I have yet to "develop" the raw files from the other two legs of our journey (and the obligatory shots of the Acropolis, the Palace at Knossos, and Samaria Gorge), I wish to share a few images from a growing portfolio I've tentatively entitled Abstract Glyphs: Mysterious Purveyors of Hidden Harmonies, and which came about by chance in Athens.

After spending the first three nights of our trip in Athens, my wife and I took a cab to the port of Piraeus to catch a ferry to Santorini. Since the ferry was delayed a few hours, I had some time to prowl around with my camera. Indeed, I had the run of virtually the whole open dock area; but could not stray too far - say, back into the city - for fear of missing our ferry.

So, what might catch a photographer's eye on a small city dock? And what does this all have to do with glyphs and the Carpathian mountains? My eye quickly homed in onto the two dozen or so oversized rubber dinghies hanging over the side of the dock to prevent the moored ferries from slamming their hulls against the concrete overhangs (which you can just about make out from the link to a Google satellite view given above). Or, more precisely, my eye quickly homed in on the splotches of colorful paint that adorned nearly all of the rubber dinghies on the dock. What immediately came to mind, as I approached the first dinghy for a closer inspection, is a marvelous - and surrealistically strange and funny - novel I had read last year by Polish novelist Witold Gombrowicz called *Cosmos*.

The novel begins as two young men meet - by chance - on the way to a Polish resort town in the Carpathian mountains. They are soon drawn to a particular rooming house as a direct (if unpredictable) consequence of seeing a sparrow hanged on a piece of wire hooked over a branch; an event that not only convinces the two that it has some deep hidden meaning, but is but a precursor of ever more bizarre and intricate "decodings of meaning" the two must make to understand their (increasingly confusing) lives. As the novel unfolds, our protagonists proceed to "discover" (though "conjure" may be more accurate) ever more recessed layers of "hidden meaning" from what (to all outside observers) are nothing but meaningless everyday things and events.

They see arrows in ceiling stains that point in directions they must follow; and search through other people's rooms hoping to find important "clues," such a nail pounded partway into a wall just above the floor. Though disturbing on many levels (I'm leaving a lot out of this short description), the novel reminds us - and me, during the moment I took to walk over to inspect my first "paint splotted dingy" in Athens - that meaning exists in the world (or in a place, or encoded in a given object or symbol) only when there is someone to decode it.

There is no "meaning" in a signal without a receiver; and a receiver will interpret a signal as meaningless if it does not have the proper context in which to decode the signal's message. But what if there were no intended receiver, but there was a context in which a signal might nonetheless reveal a meaning? And what if there was no message sender (more precisely, no intentionally sent message), but a receiver was nonetheless present; and, purely by chance, was in the proper context to receive a "message"? Is the whole world, perhaps, best described as a vast surreptitious web of timeless "meanings" in search of local senders and receivers?

Such were my thoughts, and such was the state of my mind, which also provided an inner meta-context, in which I took nearly a hundred photographs of "Hidden Glyphs of Unknown Meaning" at the port of Piraeus in Athens. Were these messages, I wondered; encoded by some mysterious (perhaps long

deceased) author? Were they clues to the evolution of the universe? Hints for my own life's journey?

Or just random irrelevant scrawls of disinterested natural forces (that confuse and confound unsuspecting errant passerbys with their siren-song of illusory order when meaning seems to magically arise in an otherwise random context)? What cosmic messages are locked in these hidden glyphs of unknown meaning?

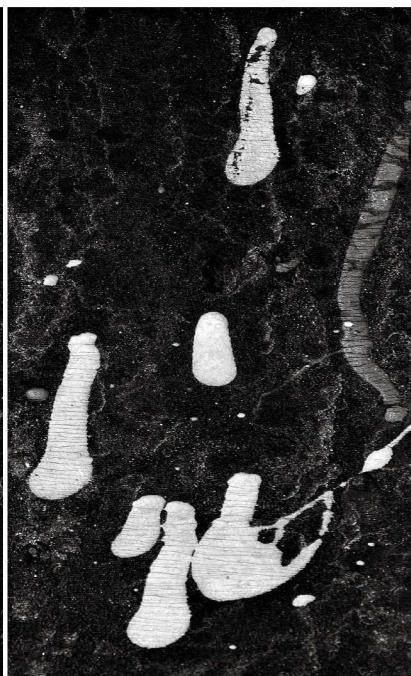
Is there perhaps an even deeper level of understanding - and by whom? - of the hyper-glyph that I unwittingly unleashed into the world by using my camera to muse on the indecipherable glyphs I found in Athens?

*"Everything in the world
has a hidden meaning.
Men, animals, trees, stars,
they are all hieroglyphics.
When you see them you do
not understand them.
You think they are really men,
animals, trees, stars.
It is only years later
that you understand."*

- NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS
(1883 - 1957)



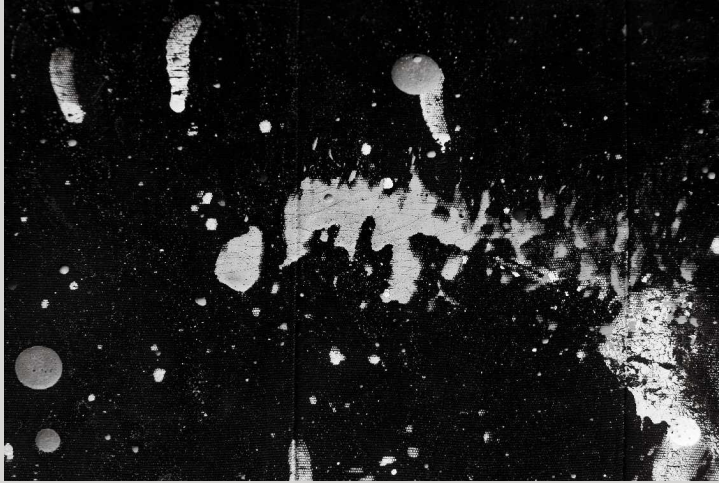


















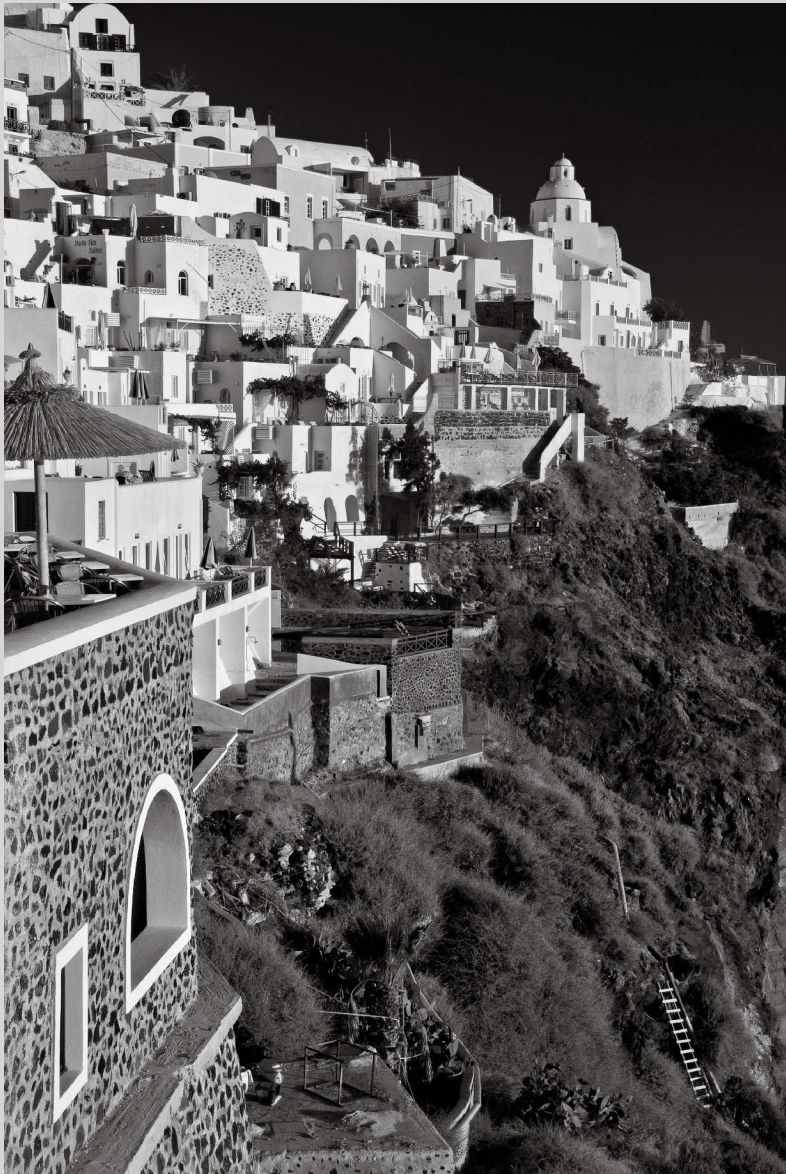


Greece

Crete | Santorini









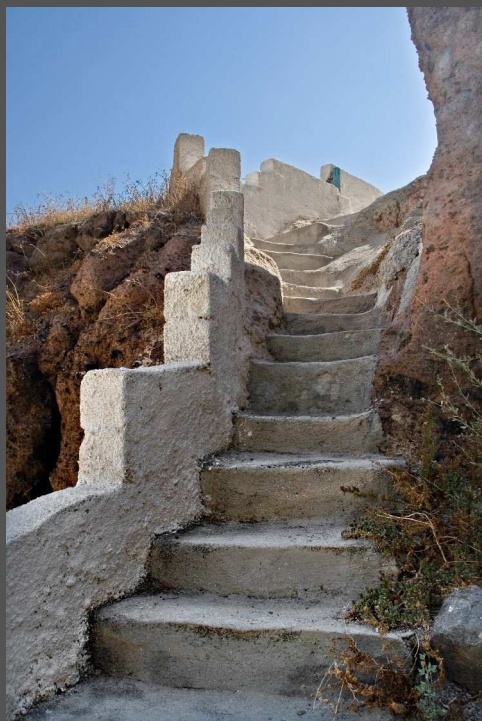


















Wilfried Koch
Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ ΦΡΑΓΚΙΣΚΟΣ ΤΗΣ ΑΣΣΙΣ

Προσφορά του Νίκου Καρατζάκη
Αγορά του άγίου Wilfried von Hilse Koch
Οκτώβριος 2004

Wilfried Koch
SANKT FRANCISKUS VON ASSISI

In Verehrung für den großen Nikos Karatzakis
gestiftet von Dr. Wilfried und Hilse Koch
Oktober 2004

Wilfried Koch
SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

In honour of Nikos Karatzakis
Donated by Dr. Wilfried and Hilse Koch
October 2004

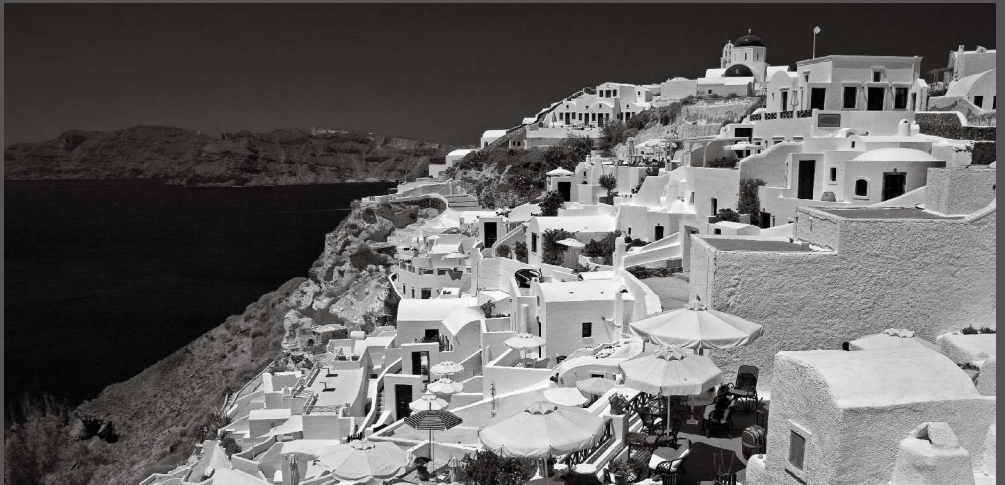




















Hawaii | Color



Hawaii, generally - and Kauai, specifically - holds a special place in my heart. It is the "far away land" I have most frequently visited in my life (8 times, the last being in 2014), and is the place my wife and I dream of retiring to one day.

I have "seen" this magic place with eyes attached to a brain that had barely yet learned even the basics of photography, but were eager to "record" each and every "beautiful" sight the Hawaiian islands had to offer (back in 1982); with eyes attached to a brain that was just beginning to "see" that images are best thought of as the words and grammar of a powerful new visual language, but whose "rules" remained mostly mysterious (in trips between 1985-1988); with eyes attached to a brain that finally understood that it is not *things* the lens is meant to capture, but the effect that things have on the soul behind the brain (in trips during 1996 and 2006); and, this past July, with (somewhat older, and perhaps just a smidgen even more introspective) eyes attached to a soul that now relishes - above all else - finding music in Kauai's transcendent forms and tonal rhythms.

It is a cliché, of course, that we never "see" an old place as before, and that we, ourselves, like a Heraclitian river, are never the same twice. But the deeper meaning of this abused aphorism is that the essence of who we are is not confined to a single time and place, but

is spread throughout a lifetime of journeys and learning. I am much less the being that is typing these words, than an infinitely thin snapshot (right now) of a consciousness that was born some 54 years ago and has continued journeying in some fantastically high dimensional "experiential space." Our store of photographs - and/or, just as validly, any other impermanent artifacts that our essential being has "created" along its journey (including, in my case, equations, computer code, technical reports and papers, and even books) - accrued over a lifetime of "seeing," are intertwined, nonlinearly nested visual palimpsests of an ever-evolving / never-complete document of our being; of who we really are. As such, they serve as potent probes, in hindsight, and only after careful reflection, of who we were, at some past time; and offer valuable clues and insights into how (sometimes even *why*) our essential being has evolved into its current state. More rarely, and with deeper contemplation, such palimpsests can help us better understand and appreciate the forms and rhythms of the journey itself.

So what does my palimpsest say about my ongoing journey, from the perspective of hindsight provided by 32 years of traveling to - and "seeing" - Kauai? Simply that, as a photographer, right now, my deepest yearning has nothing at all to do with finding the next "pretty shot," and is all consumed with "tuning my eyes" to hear some new "tonal rhythm" or form (to hear a bit of Ansel's "music"); and the discovery of a *universal* rhythm - that, though it may



appear, for example, in some image taken in Kauai (or elsewhere), is not *about* Kauai, per se (or any other place), but reveals still deeper layers of a *feeling of place* - makes me the happiest. Perhaps because I have taken hundreds, if not thousands, of images of Kauai during all my past visits, and countless numbers of "I have been here" point-and-shoot documentaries of *being in place*, that this time my eye and soul were both finally free to focus on Kauai's subtler gifts. While I am not immune to Kauai's majestic Wagnerian vistas, it is Kauai's preternaturally sublime quiet music - the kind of visual song that stills one's soul - that now draws most of my attention. *What will my soul's eye "see" in another 10 years time I wonder...?*



















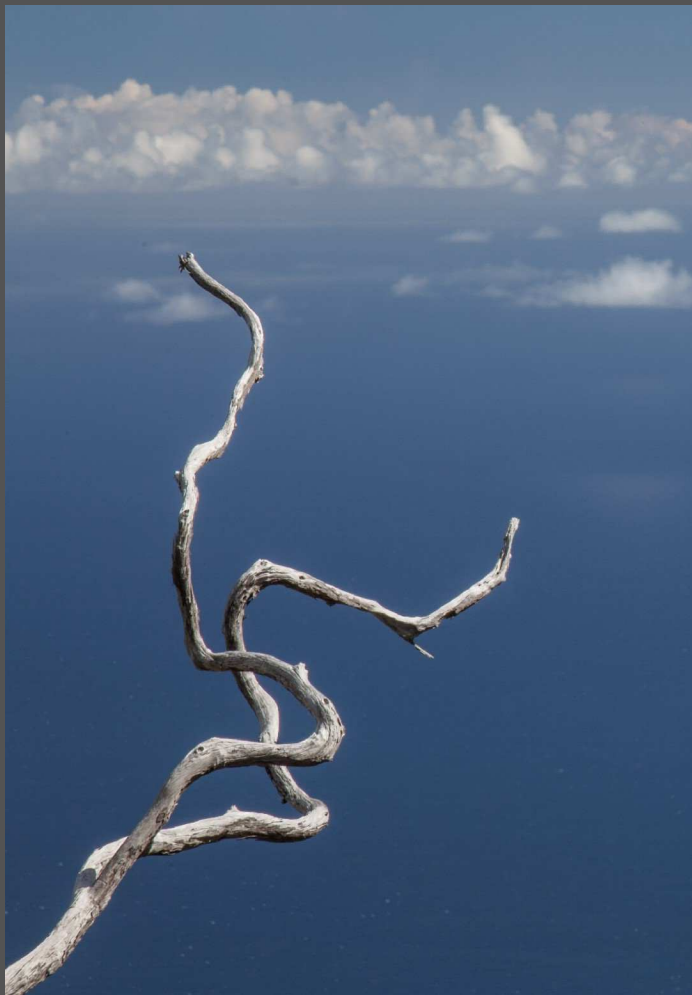




















Hawaii | Black & White



From a blog entry posted soon after my wife and I celebrated our 10th anniversary in Hawaii in 2006: Hawaii is an indelible part of me. More so even than my blood, my skin, or any of my physical possessions, for these are all far more transient and ultimately communicate far less about who I really am. But the depth and timelessness of my affection - my reverence - for these sublime, preternaturally beautiful islands, speaks volumes about the nature of my soul.

I visited the islands for the first time in the early 1980s as a beginning graduate student in physics. As soon as I stepped off the plane, and saw the gentle giant green mountains, the billowous clouds serenely floating over them, the deep inviting aquamarine blue water lapping the ragged shore - its dull roar echoing somewhere off in the distance - and tasted that intoxicatingly sweet scented tropical island air, I knew my soul had found its home. It is sublime, it is mysterious. There is an abundance of raw wild energy; and an immersive transcendent tranquility that subsumes all.

God, Yahweh, Buddha, Brahman, Tao, Ein-Sof, or whatever other linguistic "label" one is comfortable in using to refer to the infinite, attains a physically manifest luminous form in this paradisaical oasis. *Hawaii is magic.*

While putting together a book of images from this 2006 trip (available from Blurb,

and titled *Hawaii: Visions of Primal Serenity*), I took the opportunity to compare my "eye" and aesthetics as they were in 2006 to what they were about 25 years ago; and to reflect on my own evolution as an artist (as well as to learn something about the creative process in general).

Something immediately struck me as I was viewing my large collection of "old" and "new" shots. The much older shots, which were all taken at a time when I was (possibly) a technically proficient photographer but had not yet matured as a "fine-art" photographer, were technically well executed "depictions of what I happened to be looking at" at the moment, in this case being Hawaii. While most are better than standard postcard fare (at least I hope so ;-), the truth is that, if I give an honest self appraisal of my earlier work, I see "scenes of Hawaii" and little more. Yes, they're pretty; yes, a few might (and do!) look nice on a wall. But they are pictures of Hawaii and little else. It is not false modesty for me to assert that any technically competent photographer, with a requisite skill level, could easily have reproduced (indeed, surpassed) many of my earlier photographs. *So how are the new ones different; and in what way do I think they are "better"?*

Well - jumping 25 years or so forward in time (and, in my case, about 75 thousand or so more images, give or take a few thousand, film and digital), what I see

myself doing more and more of (at least trying to) is incorporating the scenery *out there* into my bag of photo tools that I use to express what I feel "on the inside" when otherwise looking at the scenery. This represents both a subtle and profound shift.

The scenery, in an important sense, has become an integral part of my photographic toolkit, as important as - and distinct from - my usual assortment of purely technical tools (such as camera, lenses, filters, and so on). The scenery itself is no longer the core "object of focus" for my other tools. It has become an essential part of my toolkit.

It no longer really matters to me, in the deepest artistic sense, whether I am in Hawaii, or here in Northern VA, or Florida or anywhere else, in particular. My "goal" as a photographer is no longer to "show someone what I'm looking at." Rather, my goal is to communicate - express - a bit of "what I felt" when taking a picture to someone viewing the resulting photograph or print. I am much less concerned with whether the viewer "likes" what he or she "sees" - or identifies, objectively - in a photograph; and much more interested in conveying a feeling, a mood, a state-of-mind and/or heart, that persists even as viewer steps away from the image.

What is of lasting value (to both the viewer as an "involved interpreter and recipient" of an art work, and the photographer as its author) is not the fact that a particular photograph contains, say, a recognizable

image of a "door," but rather the subjective emotional impression that the image of the door imparts to the viewer both while the viewer is actively viewing the photograph and afterwards, when the physical photograph is transformed (during the act of viewing) into a hybrid objective-subjective memory in the viewer's mind. It is my *feeling* that I am trying to convey; not the "object" that I took a photograph of to express that feeling.

What the viewer objectively "sees," of course, is the "object" (or objects) in the photograph; just as what I objectively "see" before I press the shutter is the (almost, but not quite identical) "object." Art, when it happens, depends on the simultaneous appearance of two transformative acts: (1) the photographer uses "objective reality" as an implicit tool to craft and communicate certain elements of his own, inner, subjective, reality; and (2) the viewer sees past the "objects" in a photograph and feels something - a residual imprint, perhaps - of what is, objectively speaking, not physically present, but hints at what the photographer felt while taking the photograph.

Of course, the degree to which the viewer "feels" what the photographer does (or what the photographer wishes to express) is impossible to measure. That is as it should be, for were this to be possible, art would be reduced to an "objective" science, which would be a pity. While I would certainly be delighted to know that someone resonates with one of my photos for exactly the same

reason as I (or at least, in the same way I remember resonating with a "scene" while capturing it with my lens), it is not imperative that this is the case.

In truth, at this current juncture of my ongoing evolution, what I strive for in all my work is to convey the simplest *feelings of calm*. I understand that each viewer will take away from my images what he or she is predisposed to feel. Perhaps some find disharmony in what my eyes sees as serene patterns. But even in these cases, if viewers react more on an emotional level to my photos (even if the emotion they feel is different from the one I wish to convey) rather than in some detached, emotionally sterile or empty, fashion, I am still partly satisfied as an artist. For my goal is never the object, but a *feeling*.

Molokai = Tranquility. Each Hawaiian island indelibly leaves a unique imprint on a photographer's mind/I/soul. For example - for me - Oahu, while indisputably lovely and a photographer's paradise, is somewhat of a tropical version of a fast-paced (at least by "island" standards, as all the Hawaiian islands are decidedly "slow" by mainland standards!) mainland resort, and leaves me both relaxed and a bit anxious to go somewhere "quieter" after a brief stay. To be sure, much of Oahu's "fast pace" is arguably confined to Waikiki, Honolulu and their neighboring areas, and much of the rest of Oahu (particularly its eastern and northern shore regions) induces a feeling much closer to what I associate with Kauai

(see below) than to how I have characterized it here. Nonetheless, since my experience of this island has always been anchored to Waikiki (and Honolulu), Oahu unfortunately remains in the category of "extraordinary place to visit for a few days, but..."

The Big Island is full of nervous energy and mystery, as though it is still unsure what to make of itself or where it wants to go. It feels unsettled. While this unfocused energy undoubtedly provides a creative spark, it makes it hard to completely still my inner world; which is something I must therefore always consciously devote some of my own energies to do whenever I am on the Big Island. I therefore typically leave the Big Island feeling both exhilarated (for having seen so many wonderful sights) and exhausted (for having to counter the Big Island's yin with a bit of yang).

Maui contains many scenic wonders (*Haleakala, Hana, and the Sacred Pools*, to mention but a few), but is for my tastes too commercialized. The seemingly endless parade of pristine new golf courses, while clearly a welcome sight for some, takes much away from a "pure" experience of the natural Hawaiian splendor. Maui thus always leaves me longing for a simpler, less glitzy, Hawaii; somewhere where the gentle whisper of the land and trade winds can still be heard above the modern din. I am sad for Maui, as its heritage and true self seems to be slowly, but inexorably, eroding.

Kauai holds the dearest spot in my heart, as it is a perfect blend of old and new, and displays some of the most awe-inspiring natural beauty on earth. If there were one place on earth I could choose to live, it would be Kauai.

I equate Kauai with rejuvenation; *physical*, *spiritual*, and *artistic*.

Thus, finally, we get to Molokai: a simple, quiet, tranquil oasis of the deepest, most ineffable calm that I have ever experienced!

I am convinced that time comes slowly to a stop (and if not a full stop, certainly to no more than a crawl;-) halfway between wherever it is you start your journey to Molokai and your first step onto this special place.

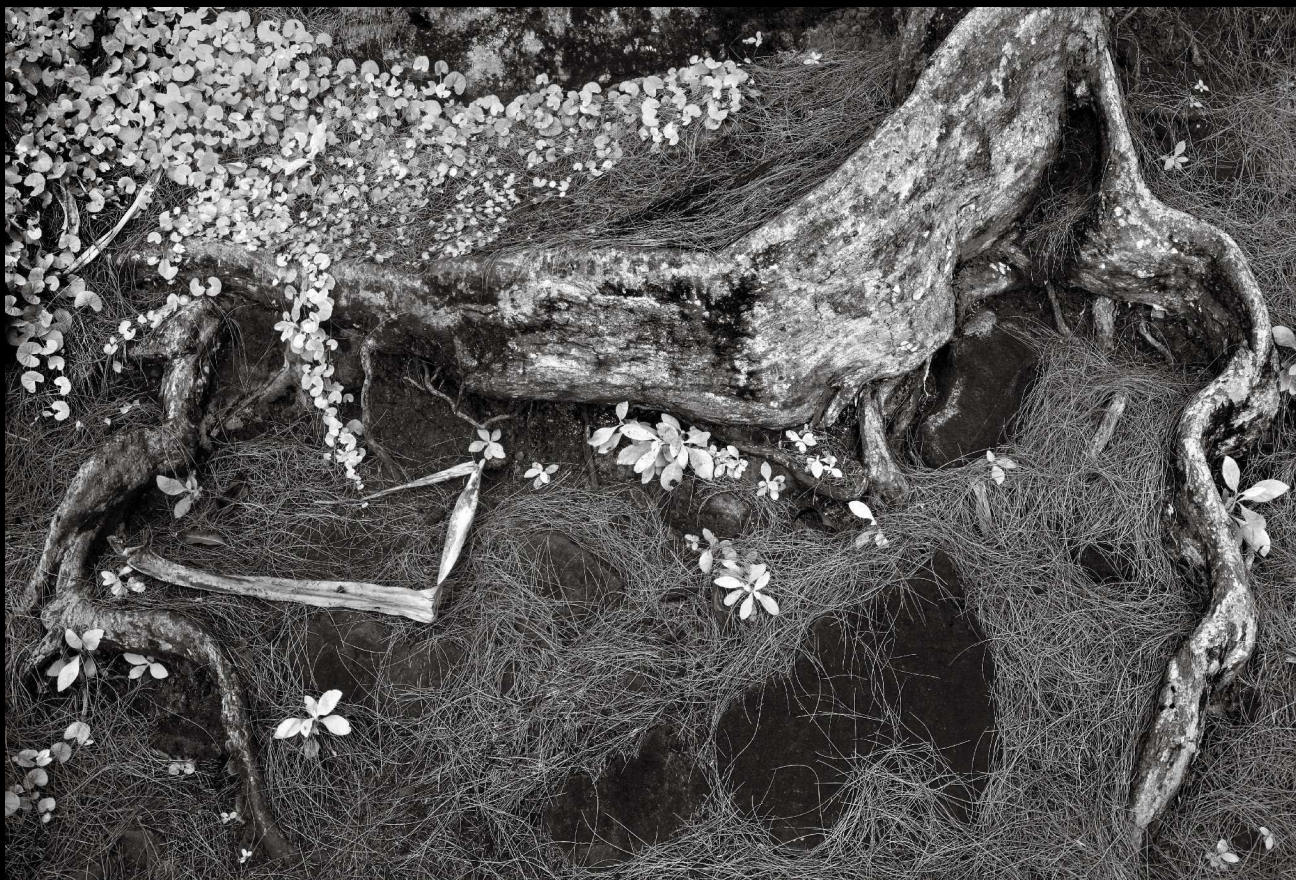
One becomes oblivious to everything, even time, except for the *eternal now*.

For me, *Molokai is tranquility*, for that is the state of mind I am always in whenever I am lucky enough to visit. Just "being in Molokai" is akin to performing effortless meditation.

The hard part, speaking as a photographer, is to find ways of expressing how I feel about Molokai in my images. Unfortunately, I've yet to hit my mark! I guess I'll just have to go back for another tranquil, timeless, effortless meditation.





















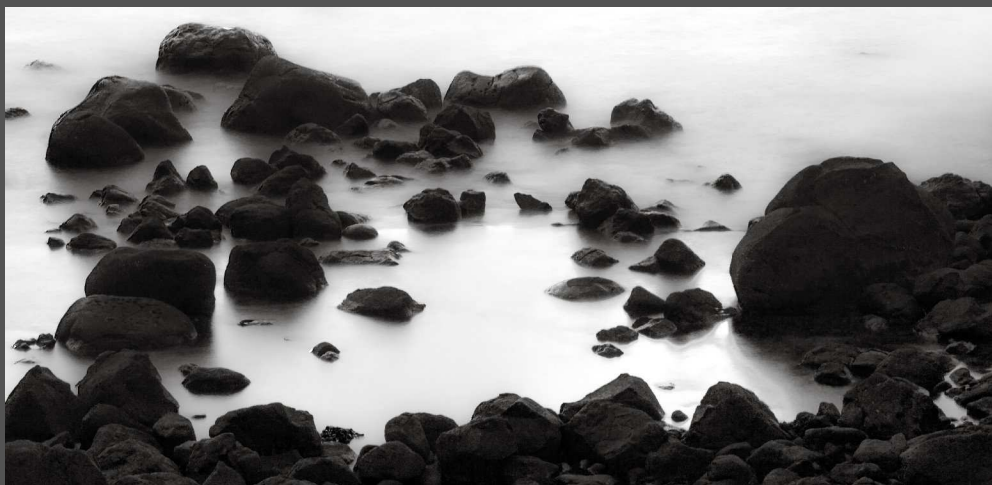








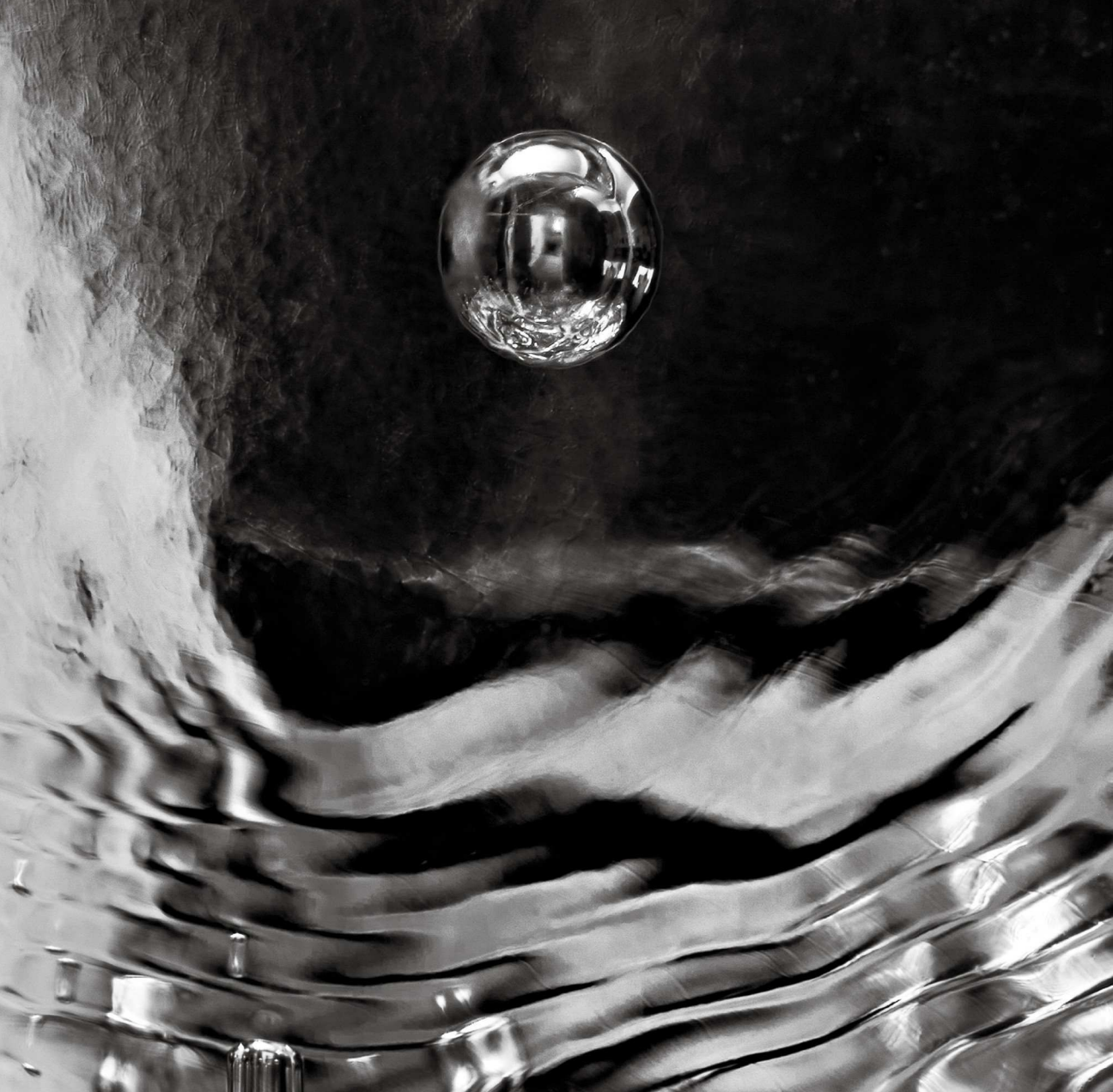












Microworlds

Lenswork

Print & Extended Edition

Issue #76, May-June, 2008

1st Prize

"Body of Work" group exhibit

ROHO Gallery, Cincinnati, OH, 2009

(Juried by Bill Seitz, Gallery Director at the
Carnegie Visual and Performing Arts Center)

Group juried exhibit

"Up Close and Personal" exhibition

1650 Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, 2013

If being able to recognize, and express visually, “beauty in banality” (in decidedly nonverbal terms) is one of the core aspirations of fine-art photography, I can think of no finer lesson than the one I was humbly taught by two small acrylic candle holders.

To explain, I need to backtrack a bit. Because of my training as a physicist, my approach to photography has always been somewhat cerebral. Of course, my mind is certainly clear of equations while I shoot, and my “trigger finger” is driven more by intuition than math; but I just as often find myself analyzing the Whys and Meanings of a shot, with something approaching a clinical precision, even as the shutter is clicking. I suppose it is the price I pay for having a decidedly left-brain “day job.” So naturally, my cerebral side is almost always the one that guides me from shot to shot, and decides what new projects to start. Almost, but – happily – not always.

Case in point...my family and I were sitting down to dinner one fateful evening last summer. Nothing out of the ordinary; indeed, one might even say, intimately banal. The furthest thought from my mind at that moment — which arrived at the tail-end of a long photo-safari day for me, during which I took many soon-to-be-forgotten photos of the usual rocks-and-water variety at a local park — was “analyzing” the mathematical pros and cons of possible new projects to start. All I wanted to do was eat. But, as my fork was

about to pierce the skin of a potato, my wife came in from an adjoining room to nonchalantly place two old small acrylic candle holders (that were given to us years ago as a wedding gift, but which I had never really “seen”) on the table, and reached for a match to light the candles. A cliched phrase aptly describes my reaction: I see!

To say that the creative fire that instantly stirred within my photographic eye upon intuiting the limitless compositional possibilities of the “worlds within worlds” of trapped air bubbles alone sufficed to ignite the candles that evening may be a slight exaggeration. But it is a fact that these two humble holders (1) left me dinnerless that night (as, without a word, I rushed headlong for my tripod, hardly even giving a thought to the morsels of meat and potato still dangling from my beard), and (2) completely consumed my photographic attention for the next two months, as I zealously explored the magical universe that unfolded before my macro lens.

This experience taught me a valuable lesson in photography and the creative process, that I rebuke myself for not having recognized earlier in life: all the careful, analytical rumination and planning in the world can only take you so far, but no farther. Maybe it can get you into the right place at the right time to get that “perfectly planned picture” (of something banal). But only rarely does all that planning yield something artistically more meaningful than





a "perfectly banal picture." To get a fine-art photograph — something that truly captures "beauty in banality" — you must learn to put aside all logic and reason, and simply be attentive to the aesthetic possibilities that always surround us, and are always open to artistic interpretation and expression (no matter how seemingly, objectively even, banal).

The physicist in me readily identified the objective properties and measurables that define a "candle holder," but gave no compelling reason to pick up a camera. Thankfully, the other side of my brain kicked in to guide me to deeper truths and beauty. Such is the lesson I humbly learned from two otherwise ordinary candle holders, and the micro worlds they reveal within to those who can forget their "logic" long enough to see past an objective banality.

*"To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour."*

- WILLIAM BLAKE
(1757-1827)

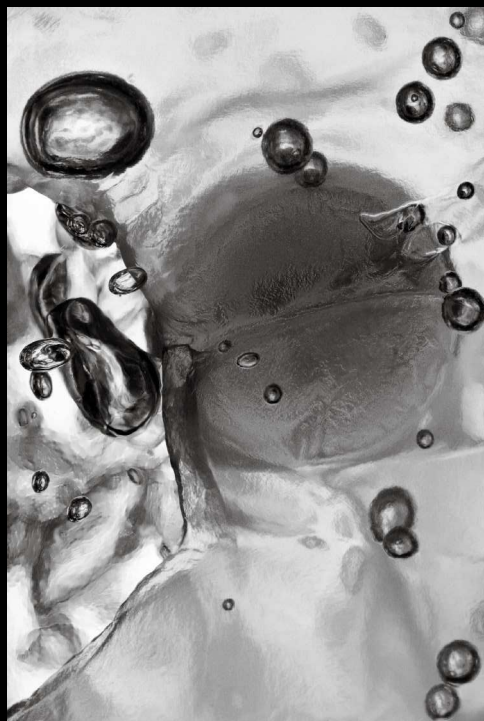






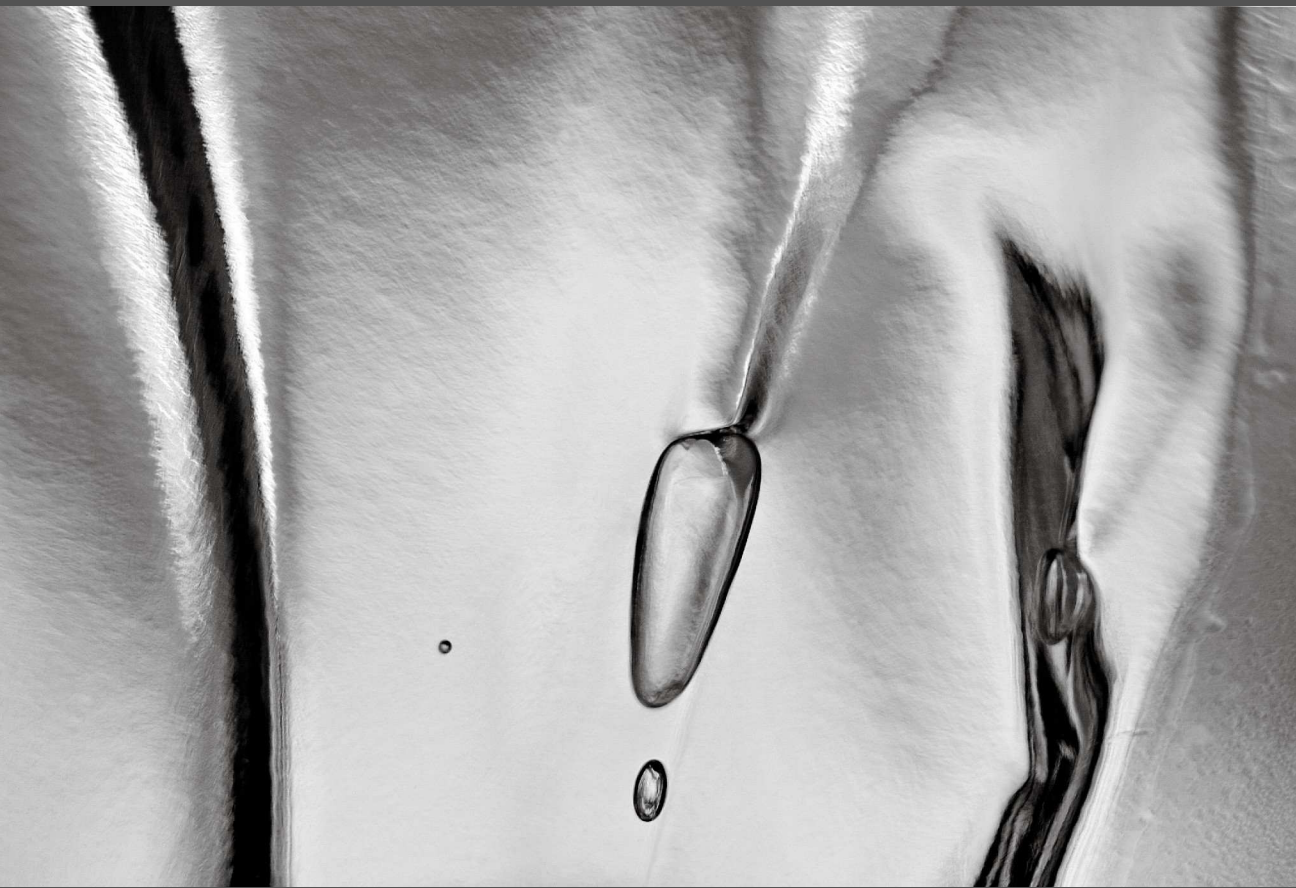














Mystic Flame

"Worlds Within Worlds" exhibit
American Center for Physics
College Park, MD, 2009 / 2010
(Curator: Sarah Tanguy)

After taking almost four months to complete my Micro Worlds portfolio (published in Lenswork magazine Issue #76), which was a project that required me to be painfully hunched over my tripod like a old pretzel, I naturally wanted to choose a follow-on project that would give some much needed rest to my back.

But I didn't necessarily want to back away from the kind of abstract images that make up Micro Worlds. Indeed, while I've always been attracted to abstract forms (perhaps driven there by my admiration - even awe! - of my dad's paintings), my photography is growing ever more abstract as I grow (or merely age?) as an artist.

In a move that seemed a natural one to take (so at least I could temporarily free myself of a tripod and not be scrunched up for hours on end in some inhumanly back-breaking stance), I turned my attention to the beguilingly exotic, abstract and ephemeral patterns of fire.

All one needs to start a fire is some flammable or combustible material and an adequate supply of oxygen (or some other oxidizer). Subject the two to enough heat to initiate a chain reaction and...voila. On a more technical level, fire, or, more precisely, combustion, involves a complex series of molecular interactions. The burning of even comparatively "simple" few-atom molecules may involve more than 100 unique chemical reactions.

The flame itself is an exothermic, self sustaining, chemical reaction that produces energy and glowing hot matter, a tiny fraction of which is plasma. It emits both visible and infrared light; though the actual frequency range is a function of the chemical composition of the burning elements and intermediate reaction products.

Aesthetically, flames can be quite mesmerizing; displaying rapidly shifting patterns and complex nested tonal gradations and textures, all adorned by graceful (and strangely organic appearing) whirls, whorls, and tendrils of pure, raw energy.

Of course, capturing such patterns presents a real challenge; not unlike that of taking pictures of flowing water. It is impossible to predict when specific patterns will arise. The best one can do is to get whatever equipment will be used in place (camera, lens, and filters), set the focus and desired exposure time, and take as many shots as necessary to give oneself an opportunity to "discover" some interesting patterns after the pictures are taken (and are viewed quietly, in a receptive, meditative state of mind, long after the real fire has been extinguished).

This book contains mostly digital negatives; that is, reverse-toned images in which the darkest portions (of the "real" image) appear the lightest, and the lightest portions appear darkest (although a few

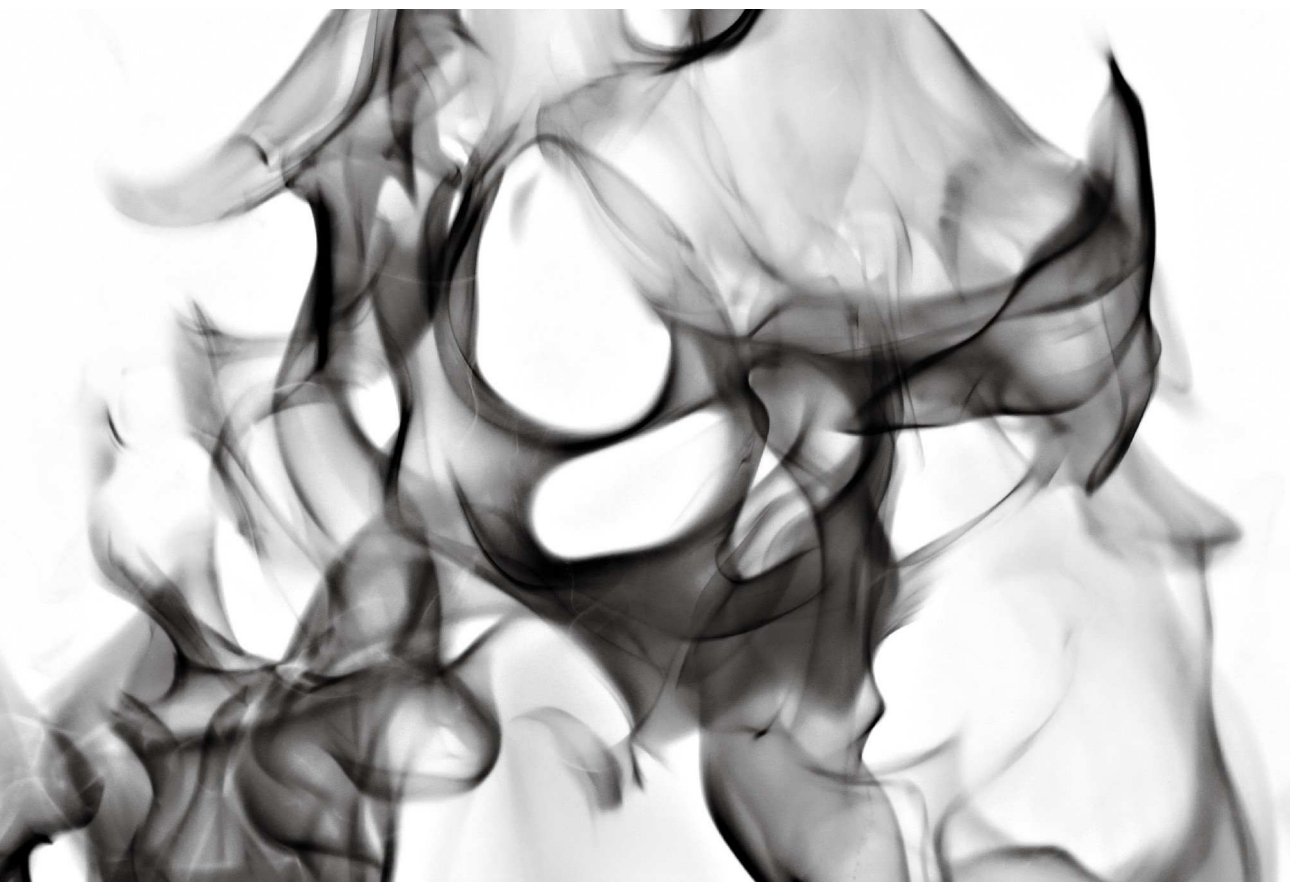
sections of the book contain a selection of full color reproductions).

The most striking feature of these photographs, at least from a philosophical point of view, is that they provide a glimpse of the unseeable. Because the exposure times for most of these images lie between 1/500th and 1/4000th of a second - or, in a slice of time that is far shorter than what our eyes need to "see" (and/or discern) patterns - they depict a reality that is fundamentally inaccessible to us. Yet here it is, simultaneously a beautiful enigma revealed, and an invisible reality not quite completely exposed; for as soon as a pattern is "captured" by the camera, its ephemeral form instantly and mysteriously vanishes forever.

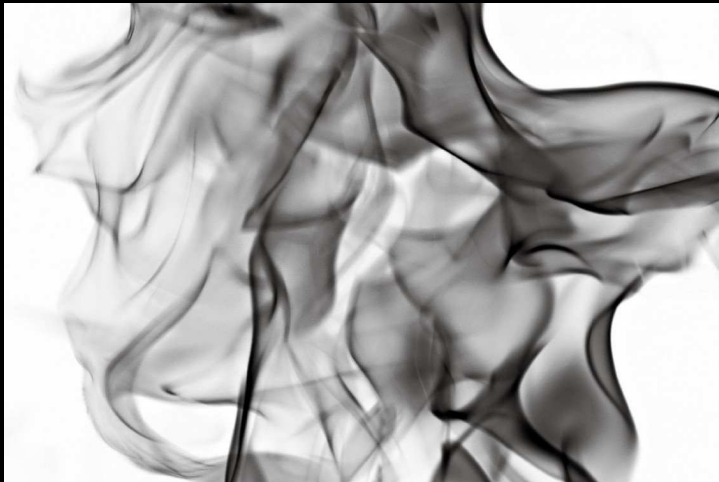
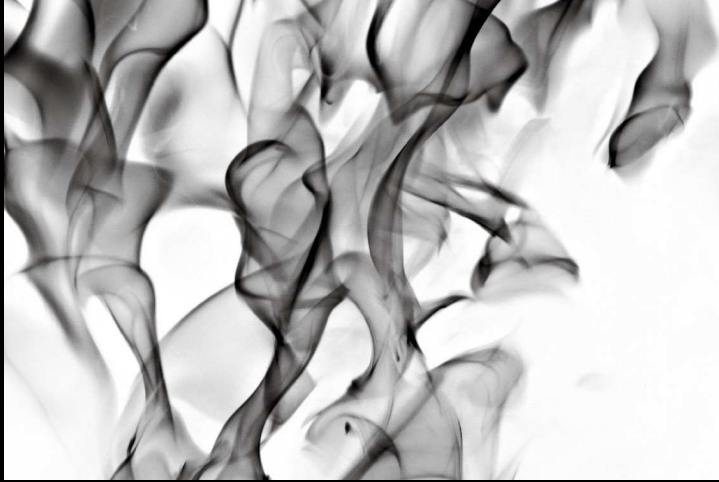


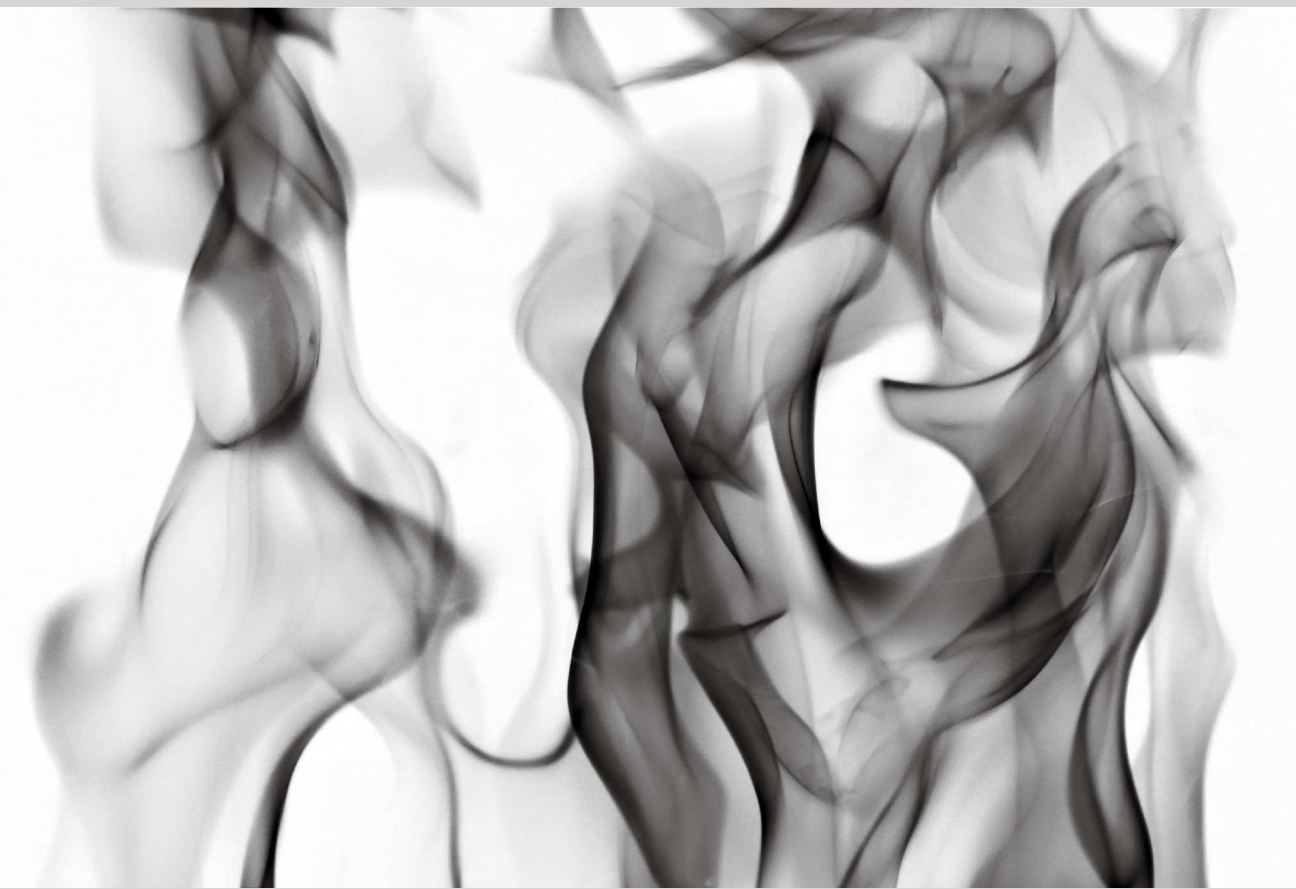
*"All things,
Oh Priests,
are on fire...
The eye is on fire;
Forms are on fire;
Eye-consciousness
is on fire;
Impressions received
by the eye are on fire."*

- BUDDHA
(Hindu Prince Gautama Siddharta
founder of Buddhism
563-483 B.C.)

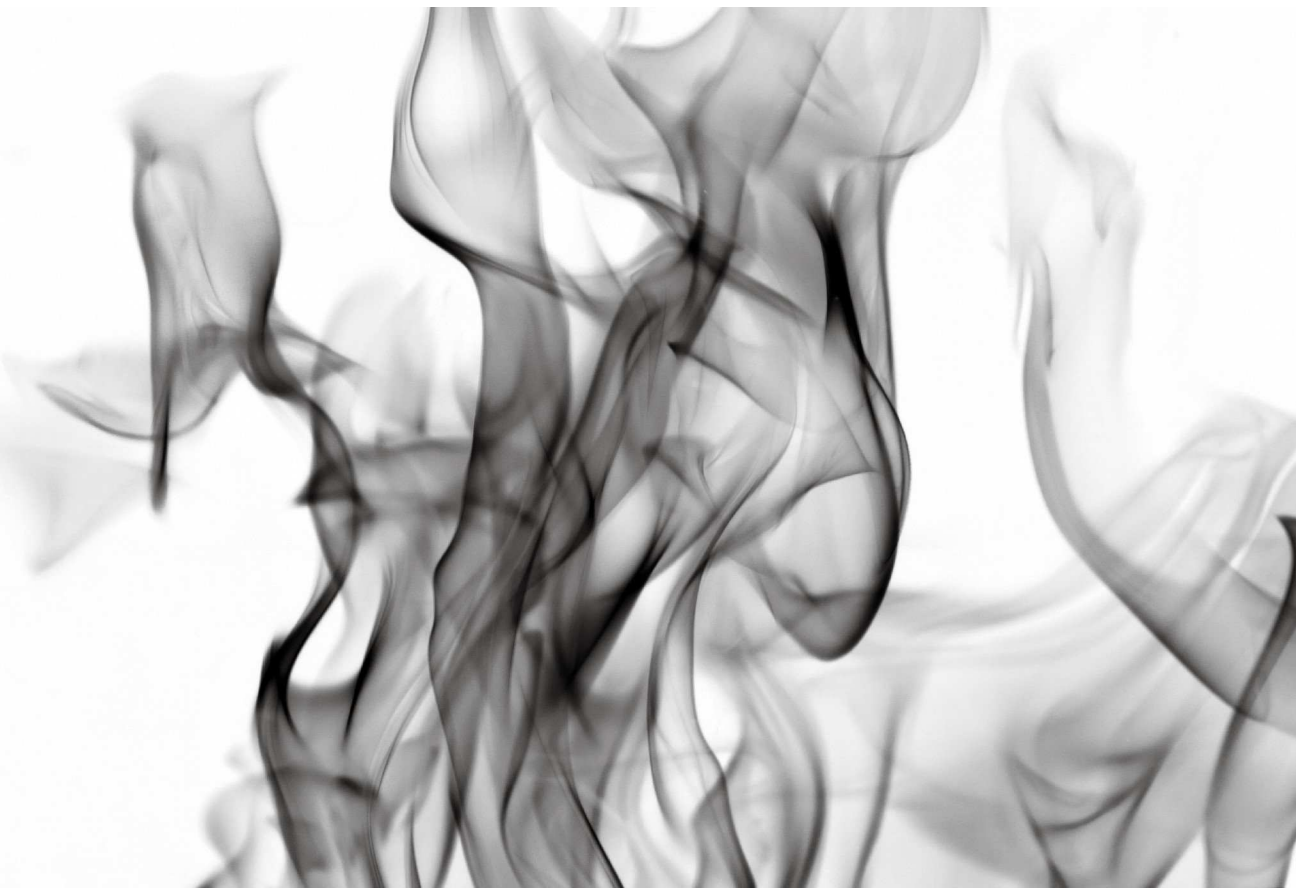


















Portals

Group juried exhibit,
Traces Left Behind: Evidence of Humanity
Vermont Photography Workplace
Dec 2014/Jan 20



*"I find that if
I sit down a minute
and relax, a solution
always presents itself...."*

- Professor Henry Jones
(from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*)

So there I was, sitting in my car, in the rain, after traveling an hour or so from my home in northern Virginia to a park (I've never been to before) not far from Leesburg, in *Red Rock Wilderness Park*. My wife found the park for me on the web, and read that it has some nice views of the Potomac. I had a few hours to myself - my wife knows well my "Oooh, nice diffused light out there today!" look - and so decided to do a photo-reconnaissance run. And it started out great: no rain, nice cloud cover, nippy but not cold.

But soon I found my Sunday fortunes waning. I got lost - twice - started hearing funny sounds from the engine and had the "check engine" light come on (which turned out to be a minor but expensive service for which I also had to lose a few hours from my "day job" in the coming days), and it started raining, hard. There was really nothing to do once I got there but wait; though, because of the time I lost getting lost, I did not have all that much time to waste. Oh, and my iPhone started running out of juice so YouTube entertainment was going fast as well.

Dire situation all right! Of course, I expected my Russian blood to kick into high gear and make for an afternoon's worth of angst and brooding ;-). What a mess! But wait...I did manage to snap one simple photo with my iPhone to send my wife to show her my predicament. You see a piece of it at the top of this entry: just a simple snapshot out of my windshield. Looking

toward Edwards Ferry road, it shows the parking lot and a part of the grainery and stable ruins that are still standing in the park. Predictably, just as I sent the email with the photo, my iPhone died. So I kept staring out my window, feeling sorry for myself, cursing the weather, cursing the battery in my iPhone, daydreaming a bit, but also becoming increasingly mesmerized by a particular section of wall, outlined in yellow in the image on the right.

I saw it as not, as it is in reality, an exposed section of an old wall of a Civil-war-era stable, but rather a fortified section of a phantasmagoric prison cell (a metaphoric echo of my inner Russian angst?). I imagined all kinds of Borgesian tales behind the incarceration of "prisoners" held here throughout the decades (... centuries, millenia, ... just when was it built?). Alchemists imprisoned by Illuminati minions devoted to keeping a lid on secrets best not revealed? Uber-geniuises - long since forgotten in the mists of time - who stumbled upon eternal and shocking truths, and were unceremoniously dumped into locked cells to live out the rest of their lives in abandoned sarcophagi? Perhaps these ruins were even once called home by the "Old One", who quietly inserted himself into our realm to taste life of the flesh; yearning, like many of Kazantzakis' heroes, to just revel in the struggle between earth and spirit. What became of the "Old One" I wonder; and is he - still? - struggling, even after the walls of his prison have crashed down around him so long ago? Or was



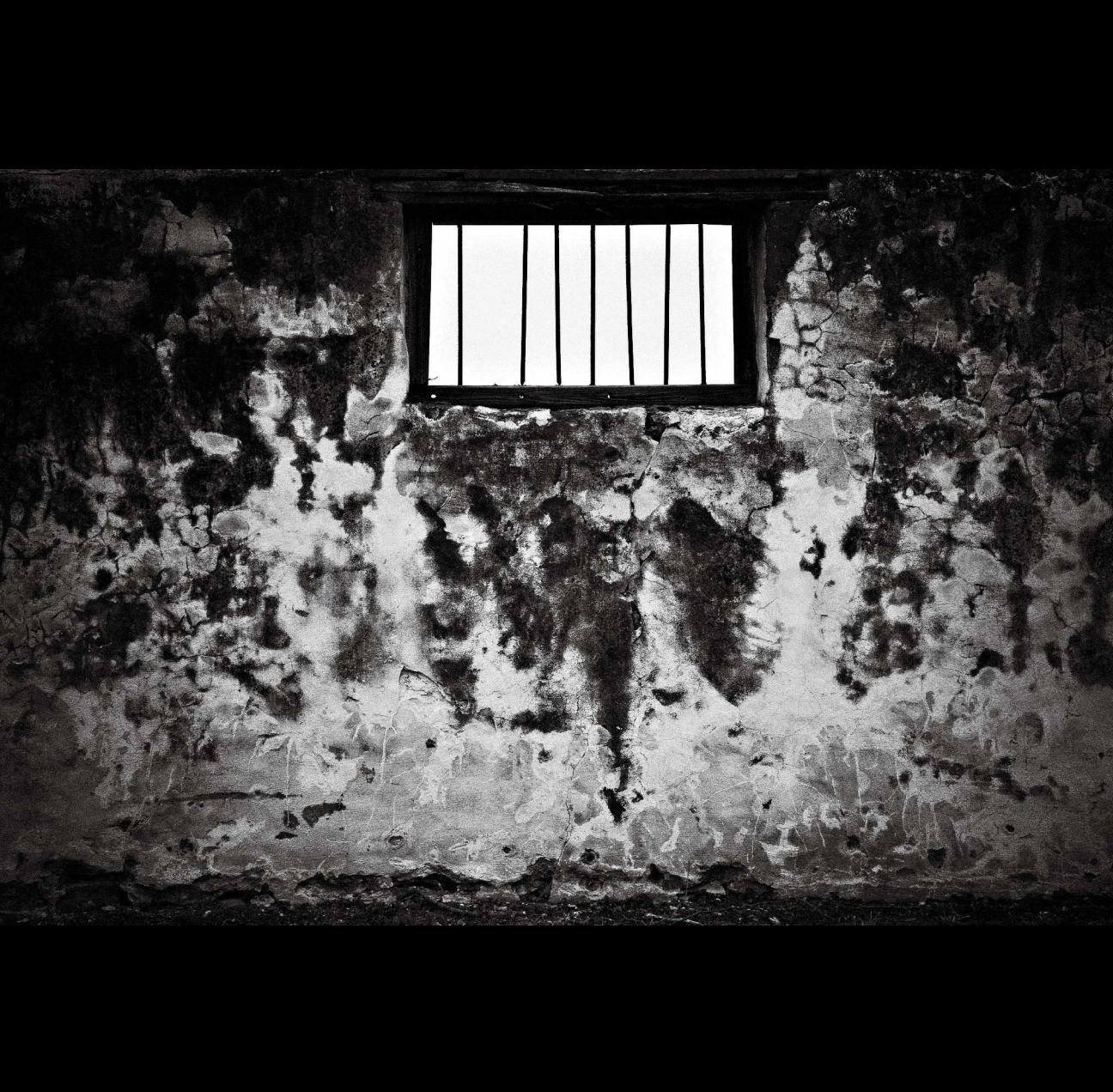
something even more mysterious once living within these walls, something for which to this day there are still no words, no languages, that adequately describe "it" except in the vaguest, most imprecise terms, something that the prison was never meant to contain at all, but was rather built to *prevent everything on the outside of its walls from ever getting in?*

What happened when the walls came down? Have the strange symbols been deliberately etched onto the textured walls by the creature (or creatures) that escaped? Are they ciphers of clues to what awaits us all? Clues to how we might find a way out of an invisible prison that still surrounds us? That contains our cosmos? That *is* our cosmos?

Such were my (admittedly, slightly bizarre) musings as I watched the stable wall ruin out my window, wondering if the rain was ever going to stop and whether my car was well enough to get me back home when it did. Finally, there was a small break in the clouds, and the rain slowed to a drizzle. I got out my camera, steadied it on the trunk of my car, and took a single shot. I knew how the final image would look even before I pressed the shutter; it would hint - but only hint - of the surreal Borgesian world (just on the cusp between the real and unreal) my mind's eye was lucky enough to briefly glimpse on this otherwise drab "uninteresting" day in the park.

It is a photo of what was in the Red Rock Wilderness Park that day; it is also a photo of what else was in the park that day.

On an even more basic level, discovering photos such as this is why I love fine-art photography!























Scotland *Orkney | Skye*

Group juried exhibit
The Built Environment
Vermont Photography Workplace
Nov/Dec, 201



As difficult a task as it is to point to a single distinguishing feature of *Scotland* that stands out in my photographic eye, for so much of *Scotland* simply transcends an aesthetic breakdown of any kind. *Scotland's* beauty must be experienced and cannot be verbalized (nor, perhaps, even be photographed in a way that captures its deepest secrets), I will start my musings on the recent trip my wife and I took to *Scotland* by recalling the magnificent skies of *Skye* and *Orkney*.

My previous benchmark for varied dramatic skies was Hawaii, where the weather changes on a dime and the interested observer / photographer can find dozens of different "skies" in any given hour on any part of the islands. But *Scotland's* skies leave their Hawaiian cousins far in their wake. I have never before seen such dynamic, textured, layered, epic-scale Wagnerian colossi as the "seas of clouds" on *Skye* and *Orkney*. The drama was often so great, and the magic light so fast moving and changing, that all I could do to keep up was to simply click away, mechanically, unable to take in all of the spectacle unfolding before me, behind me, all around me. Once, on our first day on *Orkey*, even before we arrived at our hotel in *Kirkwell* after arriving by ferry at *Stromness*, a spectacular sunset begged us to pull over to the side of the road, and as I was setting up my tripod to catch a sunset, a fantastic - phantasmagorical! - rainbow appeared to the east; as my attention was

diverted, my wife screamed that another rainbow was forming to the south!

There we both stood, slack-jawed, swaying gently in the *Orkney* wind, in awe of nature's beauty at its finest. I had even momentarily "forgotten" to do anything with my camera; as my conscious and unconscious minds fused into one and my attention was focused solely on the experience. Such deep egoless total immersion in the moment, as we soon learned, is the norm for being in *Scotland*. It is thus easy to understand the origin of some folk tales, such as the one about Herla - the "wise King of the Britons in ancient times" - who once visited an underworld realm, where he was lavishly entertained with song and dance. But upon returning to his own world, King Herla discovered that centuries had passed!

As dramatic as the skies of *Orkey* are, *Skye* brings an added dimension (or two or three) to the landscape, literally. For as relatively flat as *Orkey* is (though it has its fair share of rolling hills and cliffs!) and is devoid of vegetation, the many rolling mountains and jagged peaks of *Skye* make it a veritable mini-Himalaya, along with its enormous array of beautiful lowland flowers.

I soon noticed a distinct change in my compositions. Where, in *Orkney*, my eye tended to mostly ignore foreground detail (for, in truth, there was little to be had except an occasional but uninteresting rock or twig) and focus on clouds and sky with a

bit of a horizon, in *Skye*, my camera was taking in the full view from my feet to as far away as my lens could take me! Moreover, because of the lovely colors, I also found myself - very uncharacteristically - thinking and previsualizing in color! I thought back to our trip to *Santorini, Greece*, where I had a related (but very different) experience with "color versus B&W" visualization. In *Santorini's* case, however, my thoughts on the matter crystalized after I had returned home and was viewing my images in Lightroom. This time, in *Skye*, the utterly un-ignorable effervescent colors forced me to adapt my photography from B&W to color on the spot! While this may not sound like a "big deal" to most readers, I can assure you that for one, such as myself, who is almost exclusively a B&W photographer and therefore tends strongly to view the world in B&W, the shift was very dramatic (and, in hindsight, very enjoyable). Perhaps I can use this experience as a stepping stone learning experience to widen my photographic horizons a bit.

"The great plain of Caithness opens before our eyes. This is the northland, the land of exquisite light. Lochs and earth and sea pass away to a remote horizon where a suave line of pastel foothills cannot be anything but cloud. Here the actual picture is like a picture in a supernatural mind and comes upon the human eye with the surprise that delights and transcends memory. Gradually the stillness of the far prospect grows unearthly. Light is silence. And nothing listens where all is of eternity."

- NEIL GUNN, *Highland River* (1937)



























Orkney (Scotland) and war, of one kind or another, have a long intertwined history. Scapa flow, for example, which is the name of the sea that surrounds the Orkney Islands, is one of the great natural anchorages of the world, serving as a harbor for Viking ships more than 1000 years ago. More recently, it was the site of the United Kingdom's chief naval base during both WWI and WWII (the base closed in 1956).

It was in WWII, in early 1942, that over 500 Italian prisoners of war (captured in North Africa), were brought over to Orkney to help construct the *Churchill Barriers* (a fortification ordered built by Churchill, following a German U-boat sinking of the HMS Royal

Oak in 1939, an attack that took the lives of 833 members of the Royal Oak's crew). Since a treaty prevented prisoners of war from working on military related projects, the *Churchill Barriers* became roads linking the southern islands of Orkney together. But the barriers were not the only project these Italian prisoners of war had worked on. A small hillside on the north side of the island of Lamb Holm overlooks the most northerly of the Churchill Barriers. On it is a small and (from the outside) modest appearing chapel that is now known as the *Italian Chapel*. A glimpse of the soulful beauty of the chapel's inside is given by the image at the top of this blog entry (the other "side" of the chapel, the part that visitors walk through as they enter, is simply an austere vestibule; if anything, its simple unadorned appearance intensifies the grand vision that immediately grabs hold of all visitors' attention).

During the years 1942-1945, the hill was where the Italian prisoners of war lived (at Camp 60). By all accounts, however, Camp 60 was infused with an unexpected aesthetic. The prisoners built footpaths (using concrete that was readily available for the barriers), gardens, and vegetable plots. They also set to work on a place of worship, culminating - under the leadership of prisoners Chiocchetti and Palumbo (who designed the wrought iron rood screen) - in the Italian chapel. The chapel is a mini artistic-masterpiece, and stands as a living testament to the indomitable will of the human heart and soul.







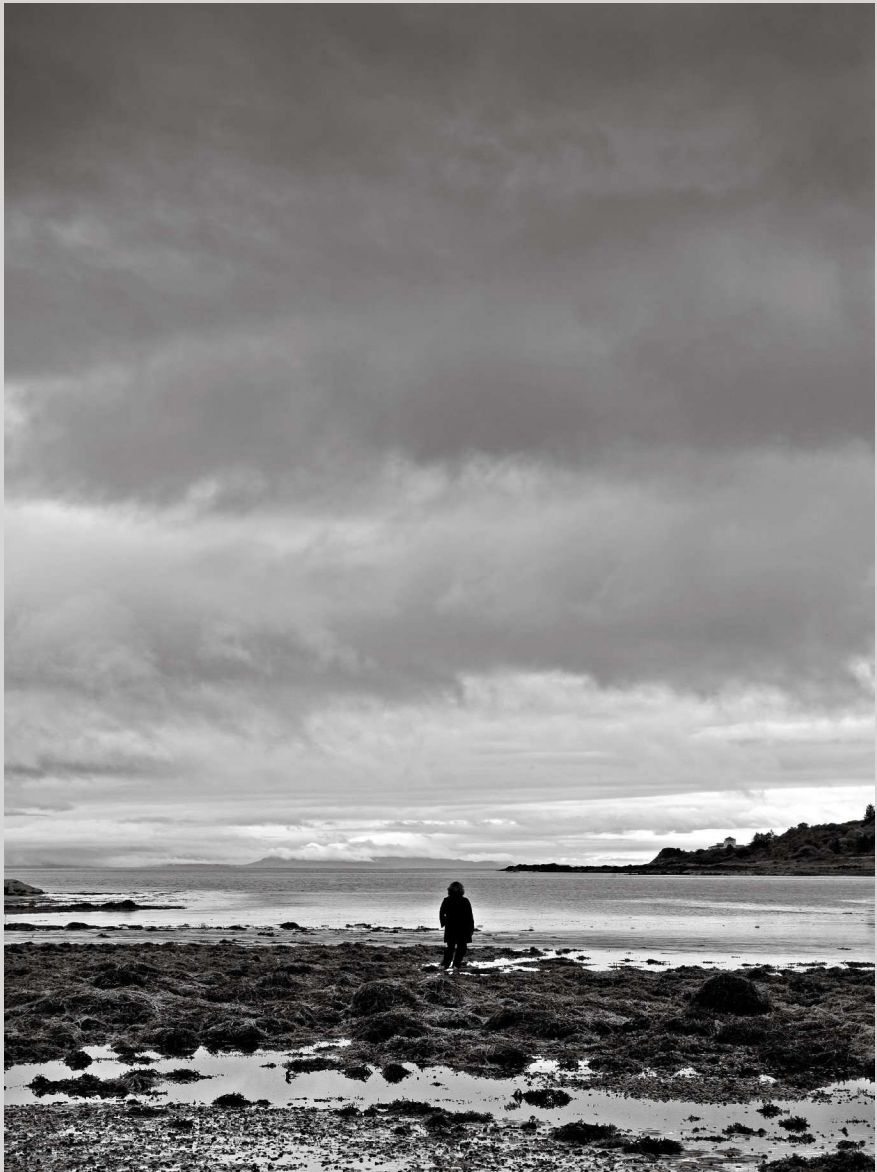




















Spirit & Light

Lenswork
Extended Edition
Issue #71, July-August, 2007

Group juried exhibit
The Built Environment
Vermont Photography Workplace
Nov/Dec, 2014



Although I was raised in the Russian Orthodox tradition (and was an “altar boy” into my early teens), somehow, inexplicably, I have never before seriously trained my camera’s “eye” onto the rich aesthetic forms I had so long admired and that adorn most Orthodox churches. It has been quite a while since I’ve been part of a congregation, and I have tended to frown upon organized religion more than I have been attracted to it as I grew into adulthood. My spiritual core nonetheless owes much to my early upbringing.

A few years ago, I had an opportunity to participate in a juried exhibition at the Washington National Cathedral (and I am proud to have two of my works on

permanent display in its upper gallery). As I made my frequent journeys toward one of the city’s and the nation’s best known landmarks, I kept noticing this beautiful Orthodox Church, St. Nicholas Cathedral, standing off to the side. I remember admiring it from afar and making mental reminders to stop by before going home to see what was inside, but was usually so tired after a day of taking pictures at the Cathedral that I never got around to it...until one day last year, when I finally resolved to make a special visit to St. Nicholas and see what I would find.

What I found was both a revelation and an awakening. A revelation, because I had, in some sense, “discovered” what was there in front me all along: an immensely beautiful church that I had essentially ignored in my erstwhile pursuit of the National Cathedral’s more heralded grandeur. An awakening, because it took but one glance at St. Nicholas’s ornate but soulful interior to remind me of my own spiritual roots, and my need to replenish those roots by revisiting them with my camera. And so began a quiet journey over the next few months that took me to several Orthodox Churches in the DC area, and the one closest to my heart, in my hometown on Long Island.

Somewhere along the way I somehow rediscovered myself.







Свѣтлѣ ПЕТРЪ КРЪТЮЦКІИ Свѣтлѣ КИМЛЪ КАЗАНСКІИ Свѣтлѣ ВАСИЛІИ КИШЕВСКІИ Свѣтлѣ ОНФРІИ СМАЗЪЖЕВСКІИ Свѣтлѣ ГЕОРГІИ

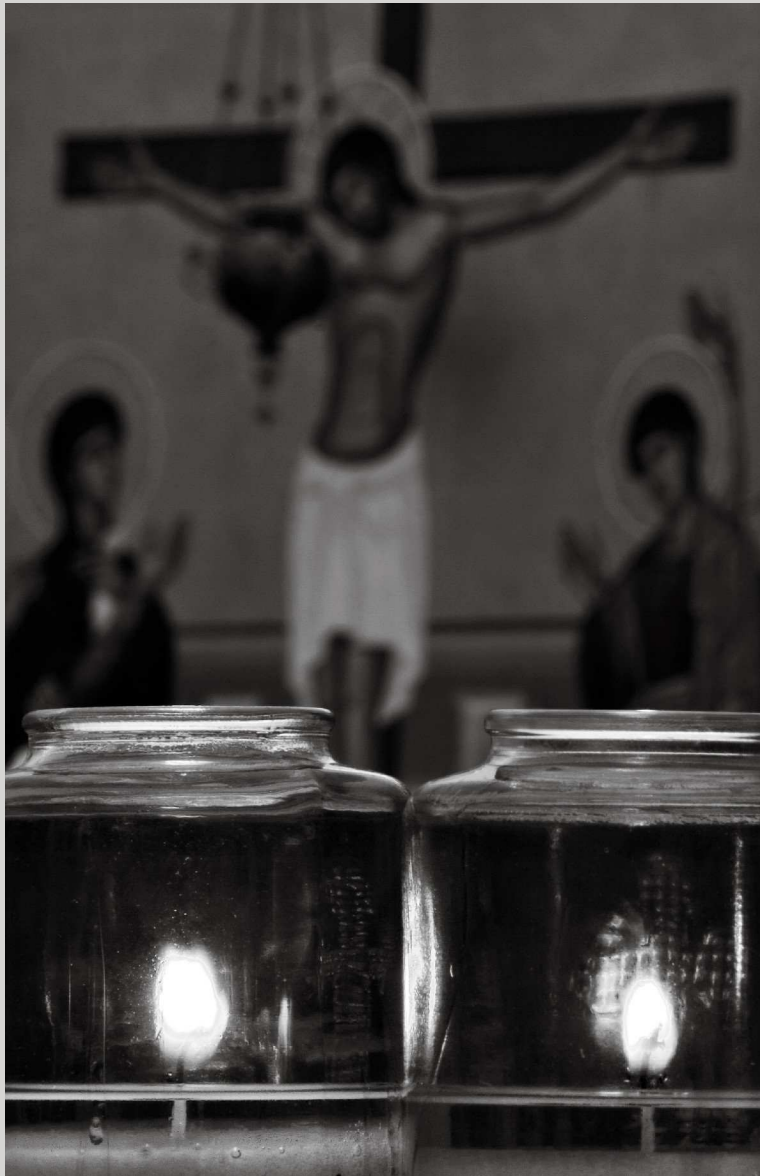






















Synesthsapes I

Lenswork, Extended Edition
Issue #105, March-April, 2013

Stone Voices, Winter 2013 Issue

Group exhibit, Vermont Photography Workplace
2012 (Juror: Carl Chiarenza)

Solo commissioned show
Bodzin Art Gallery, Jewish Community Center Northern Virginia, 2015

A set of Nambe-like metallic salt and pepper shakers (featuring shiny reflecting metallic surfaces), assorted pots and pans and formal serving trays, and the backdrop and decor of my in-laws' dining room (in Coral Gables, Florida), all mysteriously conspired - during the Thanksgiving break - to teach me a lesson on the art of making blurred distinctions.

I mean this both literally - as in exploring (what for me) is an unusual range of bokeh-inducing f-stops (f~2.8; compared to the range I "normally" work in: f11 ~ f16) - and metaphorically - as in the lesson the "abstract experiments" I will describe below has taught me about the blurry distinction between "photography" and (more traditional forms of) "art."

The context, and lucky trigger, for my lesson, was my (day-job-related) physical and mental exhaustion that I've accrued over the days and weeks before the Thanksgiving break - which effectively barred me from going outdoors with my camera, as I normally do when on vacation. I was simply too tired to go on any of my usual photo-safaris. But not too tired to pick up a camera, of course ;-) I took the normal mix of family photos, and photos of my in-laws' garden plants and flowers.

And then we had Thanksgiving dinner! The silverware was out, the serving trays were on display, and those precious Nambe-like salt and pepper shakers were teasing me with their compositional possibilities!

I spent the next few days playing with the macro lens I brought with me, Canon's 100/f2.8. This is the same lens I'd used previously for both my *Micro Worlds* (page []) and *Swirls, Whorls, and Tendrils* (page []) portfolios, and remains one of my favorite lenses to turn to when my muse keeps me indoors. I trained my lens on the reflections of objects in the dining room that appeared on the salt and pepper shakers as I moved them around perched atop one of my mother-in-law's metal serving trays.

What I found was both a *revelation* and a source of *illumination* on the nature of photography and art (with a smattering of insight into the nature of life itself).

First, the revelatory part... since, at f~2.8, the macro lens renders everything with an extremely narrow depth of field, the "distinction" between otherwise separate objects is either difficult to discern or is effectively invisible. Indeed, different "things" are mostly blurred into fuzzy indistinct clumps of overlapping shapes and color. And, speaking of color... precisely because of the paucity of recognizable "things" - that normally provide the backdrop of "compositional primitives" with which a photograph is aesthetically organized - color becomes as integral a component of a composition as shape and tone (this, coming from a black and white photographer - hence a revelation!).

The resulting images of reflected objects are (almost absurdly) minimalist abstractions of

fuzzy fields of overlapping colors. My usual argument for preferring not to use color is that my "eye" tends to focus on shape, tone, and texture alone. Color (at least in the context of this particular aesthetic approach) is thus unnecessarily intrusive, distracting, and - often - overbearing. In my post-Thanksgiving experiments, however, with texture virtually gone, and shapes and tones reduced to their bare essentials, color reasserts itself as an important aesthetic tool. In side-by-side comparisons between the color and black & white versions (not shown here), I strongly favor the color versions.

As for the illumination part...it is often argued that the fundamental difference between traditional art (such as watercolor) and fine-art photography is that where photographers must search for (and find visual approximations of) what they wish to print as a "photograph" (and thereby use to communicate some "idea" or "feeling" as photographer-artists), traditional artists create what they see in their mind's eye (or inspired by what they see).

The artist *intentionally adds things* in his "mind's eye" to an initially blank canvas; the photographer intentionally wanders around the world looking for something "out there" to add to an initially data-lacking CMOS sensor (or undeveloped film) that the lens can record an image on. One adds information from *within*; the other adds information from *without*.

But is that really the case? My post-Thanksgiving macro experiments reminded me that - on the deepest level - there is little if any meaningful distinction between what *artists of any kind do*. All artists create; that is what they do, and that is what describes how they behave. But it is the process that defines them; not the tools they use, not the methods they employ to create their finished artwork, not even the conventional "categories" that others use to label what kind of artists the world perceives them to be.

The usual art / photography distinction is blurred by what I found myself doing with my camera to "create" my images (a few of which appear in this blog). Rather than simply moving my camera left, right, up, and down on my tripod "looking for pleasing compositions" - as I normally do when doing macro photography (and which, in particular, I employed for both the *Micro Worlds and Swirls, Whorls, and Tendrils* portfolios), I found myself also *intentionally* repositioning the metal tray on which the salt and pepper shakers were standing, intentionally moving various colored objects on the table that were reflected in the shakers and tray, *intentionally* moving objects on the adjacent walls, and *intentionally* changing the room lighting.

On the one hand, none of this is out of the ordinary, and - to a degree - is something that I, and all photographers regularly do. On the other hand, there is a crucial difference: in this case, I was making all of

these changes not just so that I could *find* a pleasing composition (that would, as if by magic, appear before me); but because I deliberately wanted to create just the right combination of objects and light for a particular composition of color, shape, and tone - that I had *previsualized in my mind's eye* - to appear in my viewfinder! In short, I was using a camera, but I was creating the image as though I was a traditional artist!

To be sure, I had no brushes and was not using paint; but the effect, and, more importantly, the intent, was exactly the same. To make the distinction, or lack of one, even more self-evident, consider a simple thought experiment. Suppose I create an image, any image in the way as I've described above: I use my macro lens set to f2.8, and deliberately and willfully create a local "environment" (consisting of a particular configuration of things, light, and color) previsualizing the image that forms in my viewfinder to look as it appears in the image above. I press the shutter, and process the file as I normally do (except skip the step of converting to black and white). Call the resulting image, image-A. Now suppose that I instead start with a paint program, and paint the same image. I then grab my camera, take a shot, and again process as I normally do, winding up with image-B.

Here's the obvious question: *are these images different in any **meaningful** way? And, if not, then why?* Assuming I've acquired a modicum of painting skill before

opening the paint program, let's for sake of argument accept that I've managed to create a passable doppelganger for Image-A. We can safely assume that - apart from some minor cosmetic differences - Image-A is essentially equivalent to Image-B; i.e., the two images are effectively the "same." But we must ask, why are they the same? Clearly, the processes that led to the two images are very different. In one case, an image has been photographed; in the other, it was created directly in a paint program. The constant in both cases, of course, is the artist, and the previsualized image the artist had "within" before initiating the creative process that leads to the physical creation of either of the two images.

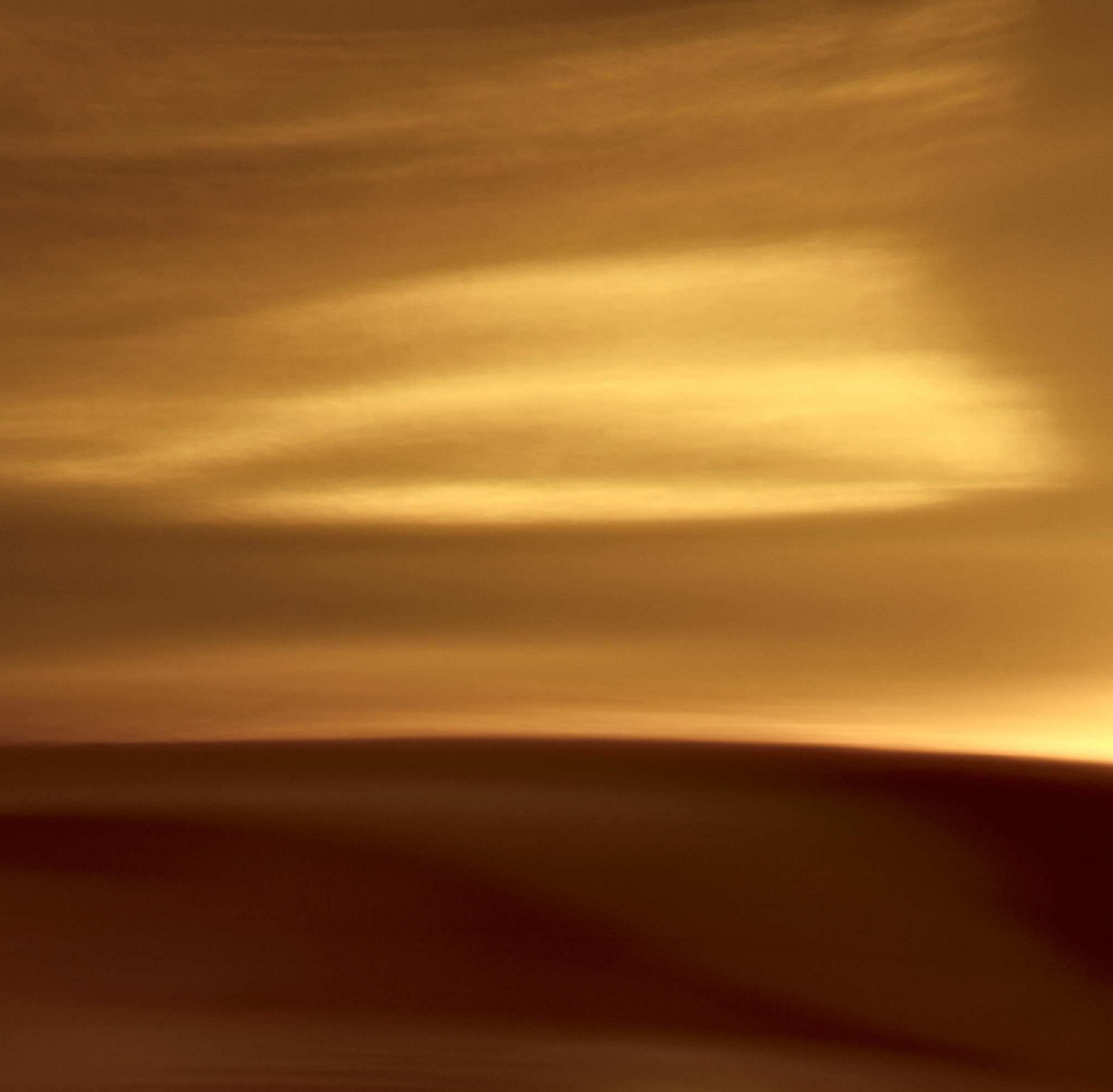
Is the "artist" a photographer or is the artist a traditional artist? And does the distinction really matter in this case? One can also argue that the deliberate "repositioning of objects" to yield specific color-forms in the camera's viewfinder is merely a "complicated label" that designates a different kind of "brush" used to apply a different kind of "paint" to a different kind of "canvas" (albeit a more involved and complex one). Whichever way one argues, though, in the end, I'm left with the conviction that, at least in this case (of post-Thanksgiving macro experimentation), I'm *both* photographer and artist, and I'm *neither* a "photographer" *nor* am I an "artist." *So what am I, really?* Ahh, we've now truly come back to basics. What else, but the blurred distinctions between the sounds of one hand clapping!

*"Whether you are going or staying
or sitting or lying down,
the whole world is your own self.
You must find out whether
the mountains, rivers, grass, and forests
exist in your own mind or exist outside it.
Analyze the ten thousand things,
dissect them minutely,
and when you take this to the limit
you will come to the limitless,
when you search into it you come
to the end of search,
where thinking goes no further
and distinctions vanish.
When you smash the citadel of doubt,
then the Buddha is simply yourself."*

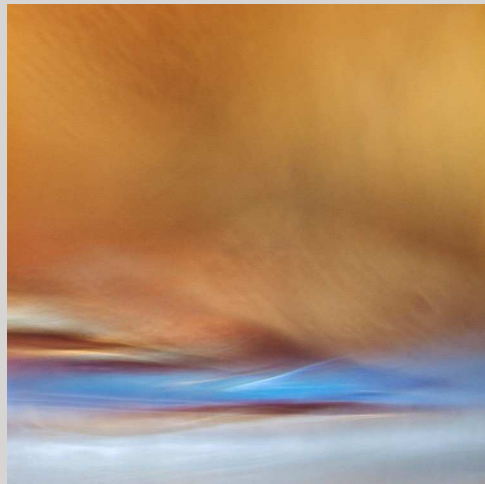
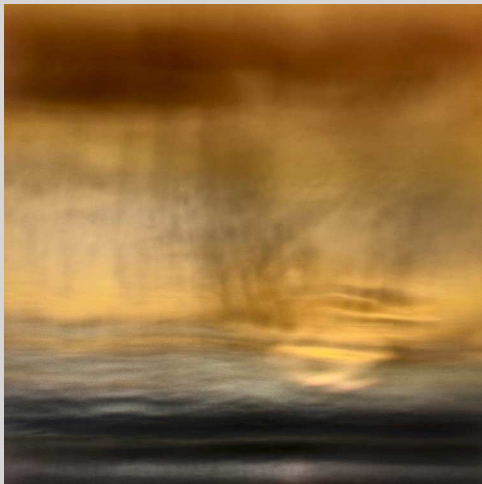
- DAIKAKU, Zen teacher



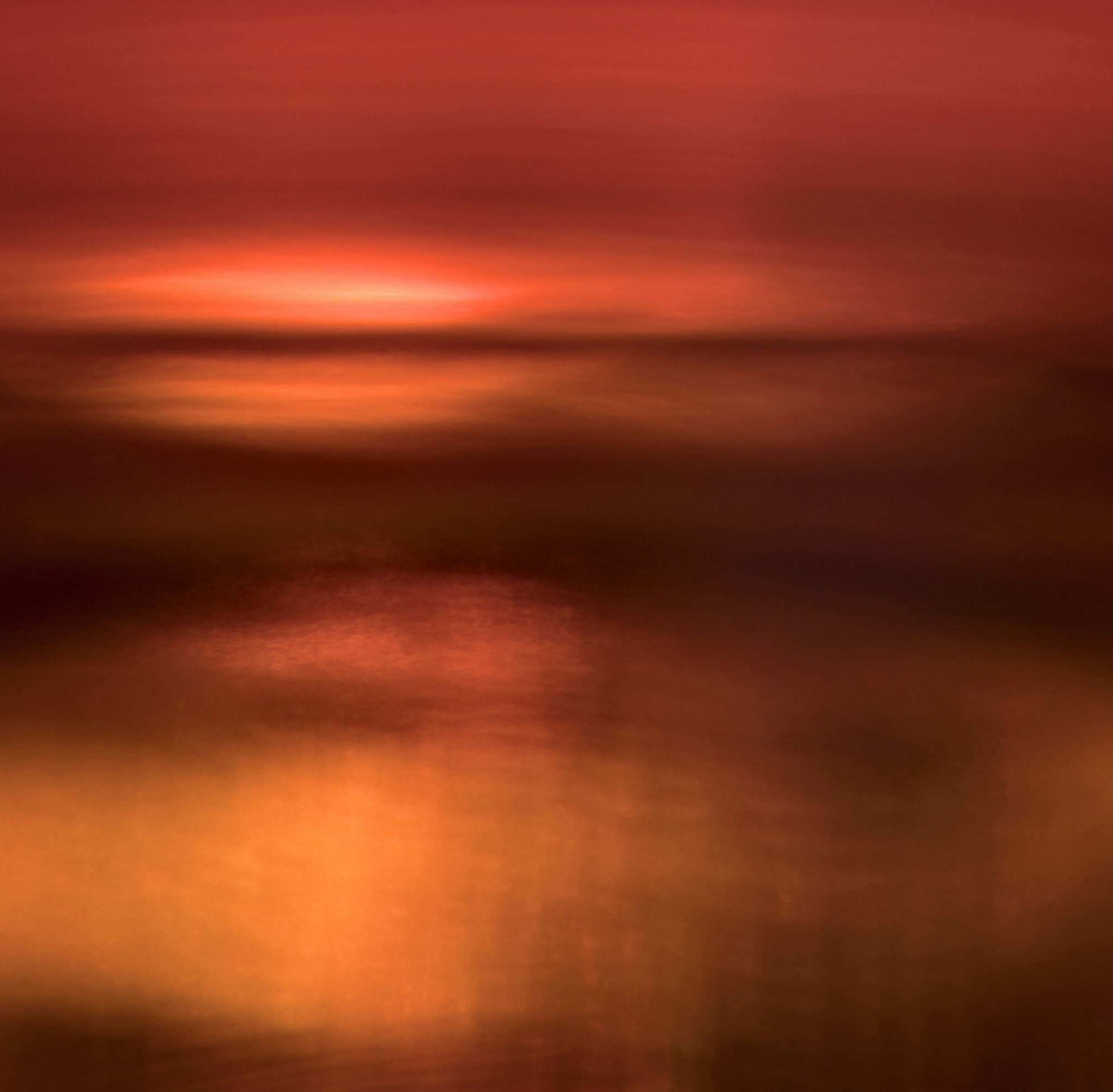


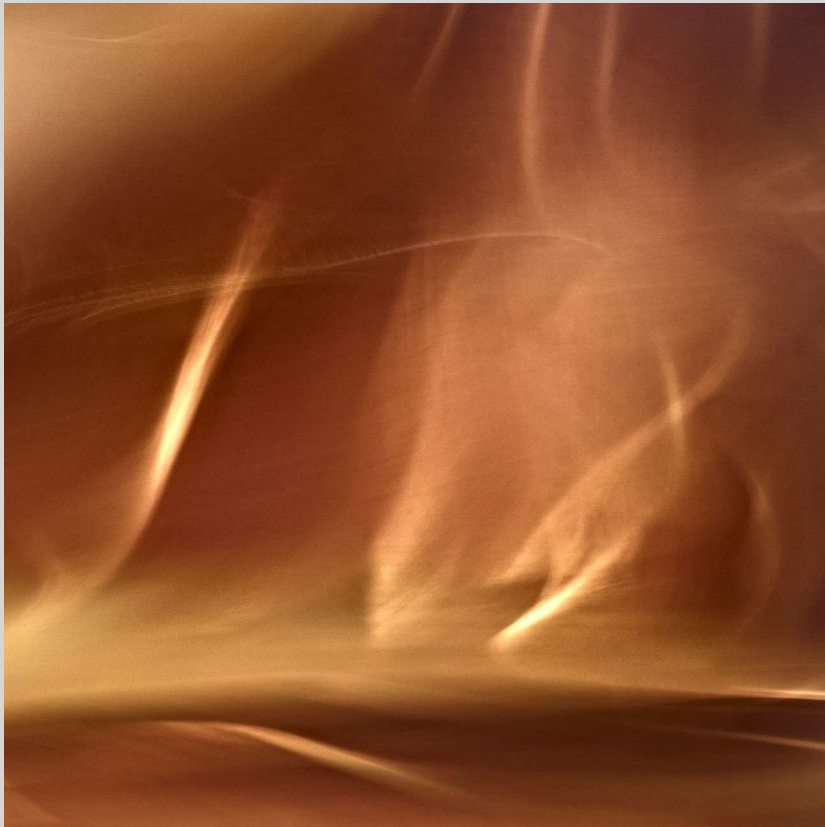


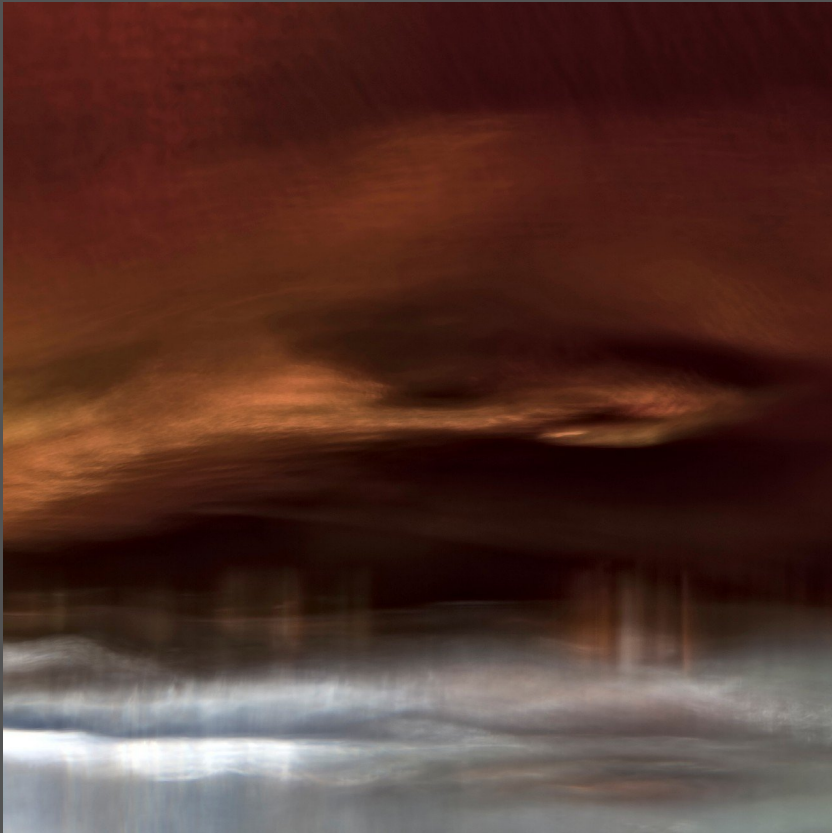
















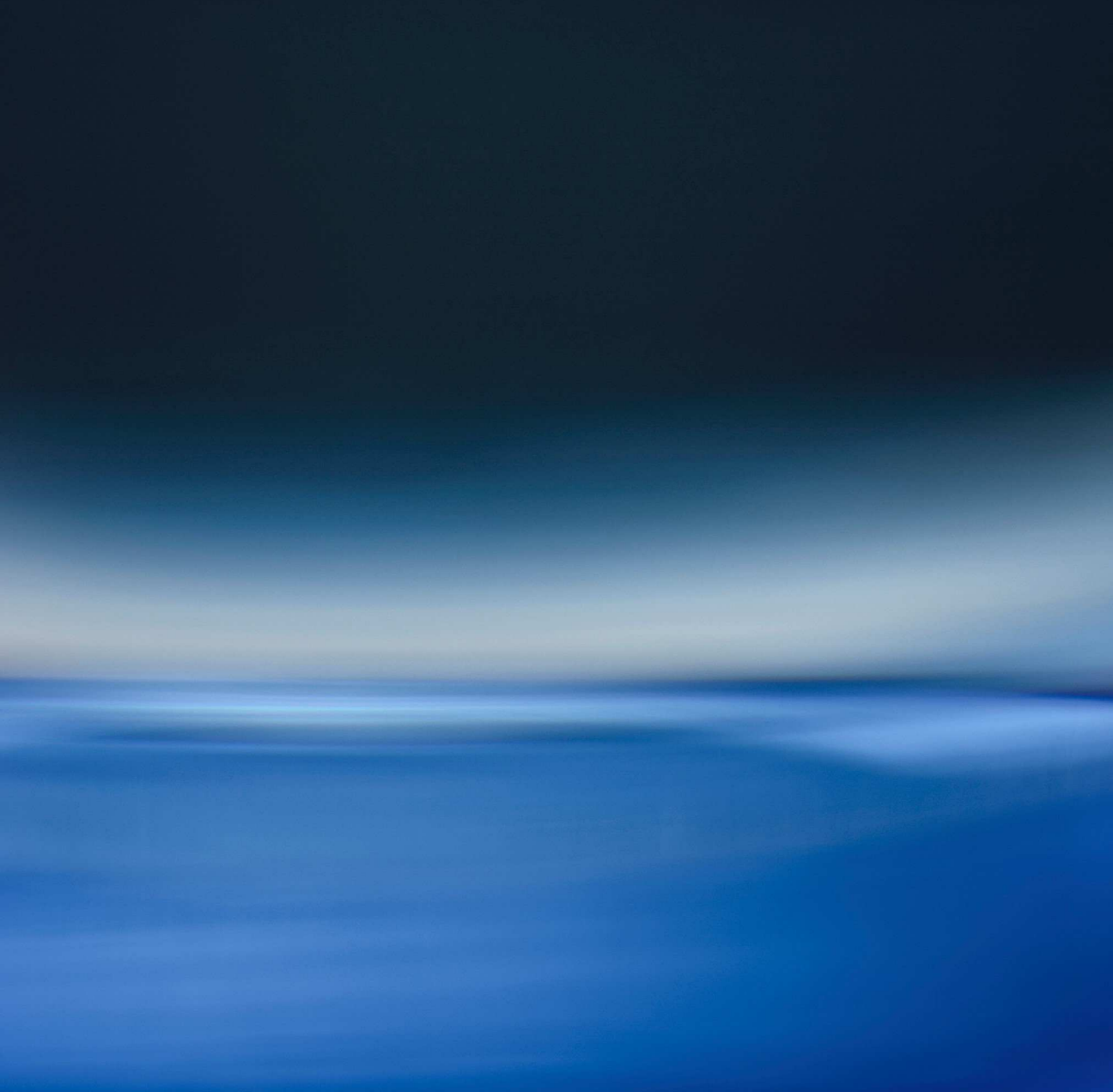


Synesthscares II

Lenswork, Extended Edition
Issue #105, March-April, 2013

Stone Voices, Winter 2013 Issue

Solo commissioned show
Bodzin Art Gallery, Jewish Community Center Northern Virginia, 2015



Synesthesia derives from the Greek *syn*, meaning "union" plus *aisthaesis*, meaning "sensation," and thus means "joined sensation," such as when something that is ordinarily "seen" is tasted as well. But this dry definition hardly does justice to the psychological, creative - even mystical - experience of synesthesia. There are well-documented examples of almost all possible joinings of the senses - smelling sounds, hearing colors, feeling shapes, etc. Well known synesthetes include Wassily Kandinsky, Vladimir Nobokov, David Hockney, Richard Feynman, and Alexander Scriabin. Contemporary "synesthetic" artists include Carol Steen and Marcia Smilack.

In my case, up until about the age of 10, I vividly remember perceiving numbers (and, less frequently, letters) as colors; even numbers taking on a variety of "warm" hues, and odd numbers characteristically assuming "cool" hues. Sadly, I now only rarely experience this phenomenon, but recall it well to this day, some 40 years after last experiencing it for real.

It is only relatively recently that PET and MRI scans have unequivocally revealed that synesthesia is a demonstrably and rigorously real—not imagined—experience, indicating that the senses in synesthetes are actually neurologically connected. Before this time, research consisted largely of self-reports by synesthetes, made all the more difficult by the fact that the experience itself was by no means universally accepted as real and the people

who stepped forward to share their experiences were often either ignored or ridiculed, or both. In fact, modern research suggests that as many as one in one hundred people may have some degree of synesthesia.

An important part of art—all art, including, for example, painting, photography, dance, poetry—involves the artist finding ways to communicate his or her point of view to another. By its very nature, art seems to require a "mixing of the senses," in that an artist invites the viewer to use multiple senses—sight, sound, touch, smell, and even taste—to fully experience art. A painting may be seen and touched; a beautiful garden may be seen, touched, and smelled; a fine gourmet dish may be seen, smelled, and tasted. In a sense, then, all artists implicitly strive to induce synesthetic experience.

"As sounds in a musical composition can be used not to express physical objects but ideas, emotions, harmonies, rhythmic orders and most any expression of the human mind and spirit, so light can be used visually to express the mind and spirit." – Wynn Bullock (1902 - 1975)

There is a print by the Japanese painter/poet Hanabusa Itchō (1652–1724) entitled, "Blind monks examining an elephant," that emphasizes an underlying philosophical layer of synesthesia with which I resonate strongly as a metaphysics-minded photographer, and that drives my ongoing experiments with "synesthetic landscapes." Itchō's print depicts a story

that has many variants and reaches back into Jain, Buddhist, Sufi and Hindu traditions. The poet John Godfrey Saxe immortalized the core idea for the western world in his poem "The Blind Men and the Elephant." It begins:

*It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind*

...and eventually has the men "see" the elephant as a wall, snake, spear, tree, fan or rope, depending on what part of the elephant's body they touch and probe:

*And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!*

A Wikipedia article highlights some of the many uses this story (in all its myriad forms) has had as a metaphor in physics, biology, and religion. I view it as a provocative stepping stone for asking both as photographer and physicist (which is what I am during all my hours away from photography): "What is a 'thing' really?", or, better, "How fundamental an understanding of 'reality' does our privileged 'view' of it provide us with?"

Suppose you are asked to take a picture of, say, an ordinary water glass from your kitchen. What would you do? The simplest, most obvious, approach is to point your camera in its general direction and press the shutter. The result is a photograph of a glass, but - like the blind men groping at the elephant - the glass will have been captured from a single vantage point, using a fixed aperture and exposure time, with perhaps a filter sandwiched between the glass and our lens (maybe a polarizer to "cut out" some of the glare). Assuming the photograph is technically well executed, it can certainly be used to represent the glass, and others may use your image as a "symbol" to denote the "real" glass that continues to "exist" elsewhere (i.e., in your kitchen).

But what - and how much - of the "glass" (and everything it "means" as an object in this universe) have your photograph actually captured? Your image is less an "image of the glass" than it is an "image of the glass taken by [substitute your name] taken on date D under conditions C using camera X with setting S." Your image, any image, is but one essentially random fixed exemplar of an uncountably large number of possible images that might have been taken of the glass.

Which image 'best' represents the glass? None, all, and one, depending on one's point of view and ontological predilections. To begin, the answer is none, because "privileged observers" are an anathema;

there can be no "best" observer, or "best" image. Images may contain more or less useful information—in the context of a given goal—but, absent such an externally imposed constraint, no one image is "better" or "worse" than any other. Looked at another way, the answer is all, because if an objective measure of "better" or "worse" cannot be defined, each image must be treated equally, and the collective set of all possible images defines the kitchen glass, at least its visual aspects. And, further, the answer is one, because there is always at least one undeniable aesthetic at play, namely that of the photographer. The photographer is a de facto privileged observer, and the "best" image is the one that best reflects the photographer's artistic sensibilities at the instant of capture.

The caveat is that the resulting picture is not necessarily a picture of a "glass" (since the photographer may wish her image to convey something entirely different). Rather, it is a "picture of a glass taken by photographer P, at time t, for purpose R." This ontological distinction is often overlooked. Because an image is itself a physical thing and conveys information about another physical thing, we tend to interpret what we see in pictures literally: "this image shows a glass, and now, having seen it, I 'know' what this glass looks like and therefore what it is." And yet, this is so obviously not so. Taking a cue from the blind men and their elephant, we ask: What other "views" of this glass could we have, under what conditions (of the glass and our

own inner thoughts and feelings), such that we gain a fuller, more complete, understanding of what the glass really is?

What does all of this have to do with synesthetic landscapes? All of the images in this series are—in the sense I just defined—"privileged views" of otherwise ordinary colored water glasses borrowed from my family's kitchen. They were captured using a digital SLR with a variety of macro lenses and using only naturally reflected, transmitted, and refracted light—and virtually no Photoshopping (except for mild tonal adjustments). Yet none of them depict a "glass" as such; indeed, I hope that for most viewers this will come as an unexpected revelation of what the images "really" are. Collectively, they are all also a pious homage to the great Zen-master of photography, Minor White (1908 - 1976), who is famously quoted as having once said, "One does not photograph something simply for what it is, but for what else it is."

I call this series Synesthetic Landscapes because of the suggestive manner in which "mere" reflections and/or refractions of otherwise "unnoticed" streams of light evoke the synesthetic experience of vast landscapes, seascapes, and other majestic vistas. I also imagine that somewhere in these synesthetic sunsets and meadows there is an image of the very same kitchen glass that got me started on my aesthetic journey. And deeper still lies an image of my own eyes staring back at me. What is "more" or "less" real: the glass, the sunset,

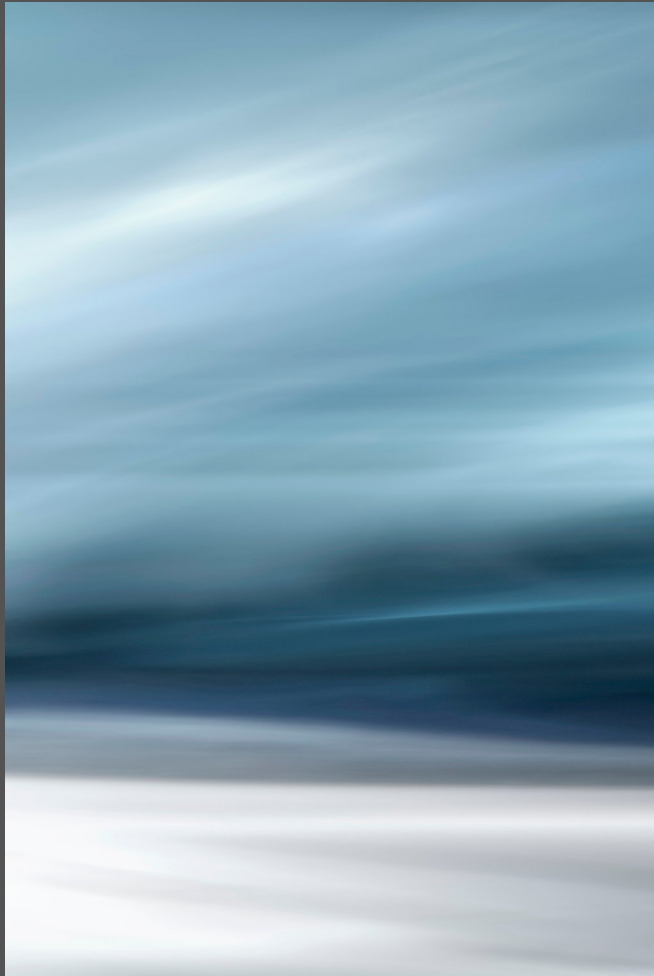


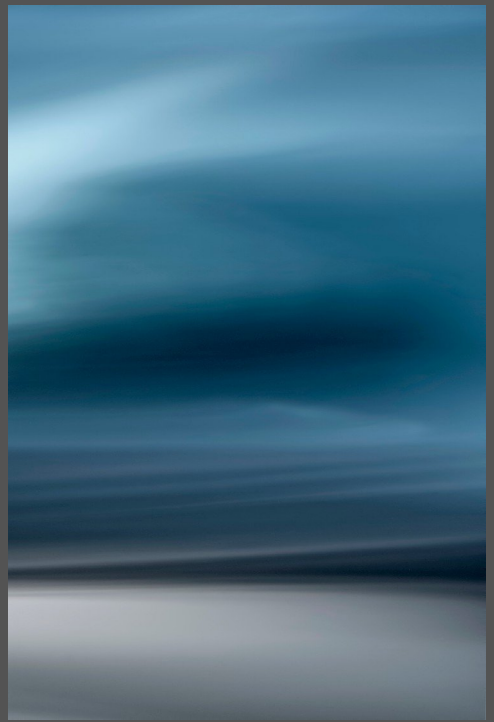
or the photographer? Are the distinctions among these “things” as obvious as they first appear? Is the universe perhaps a vast, ineffable, self-created, ouroborian broth of nested self-perceptions? A recursive loop of void and substance? A cosmic elephant observing itself observing and groping for its own meaning?

*"Color is the key.
The eye is the hammer.
The soul is the piano with

its many chords.
The artist is the hand that,
by touching this or that key,
sets the soul
vibrating automatically."*

- WASSILY KANDINSKY
(1866 – 1944)



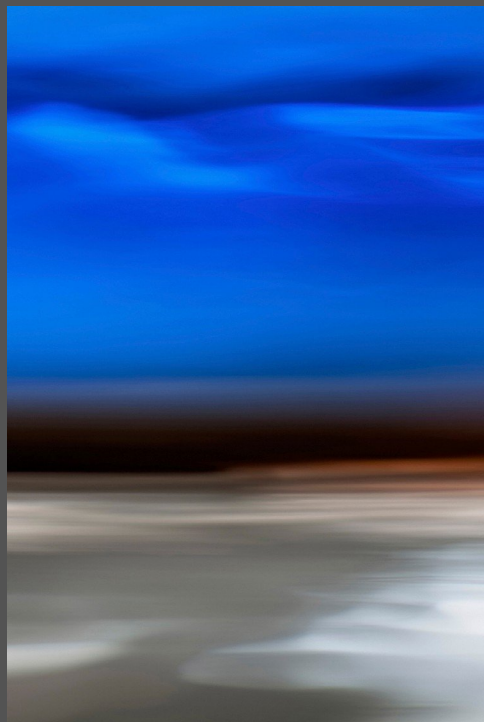




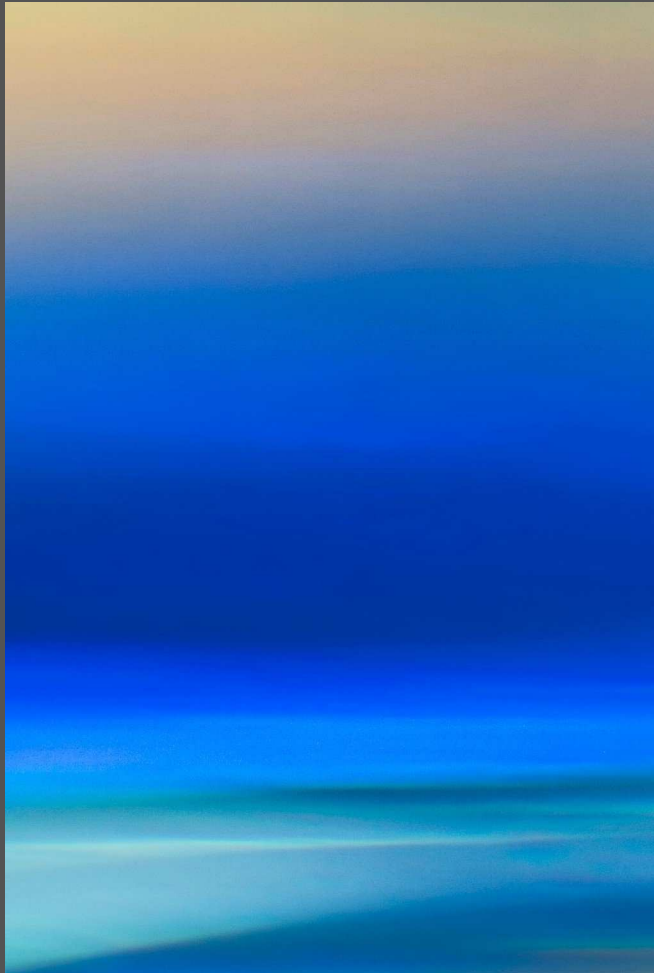


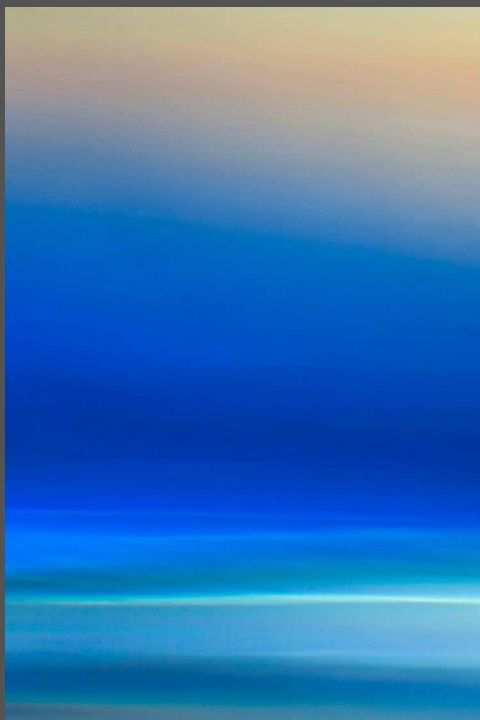


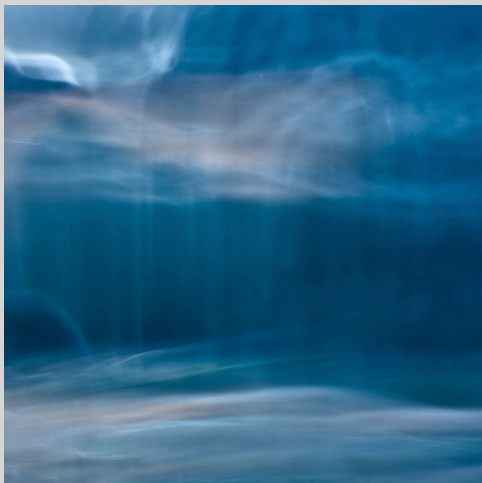








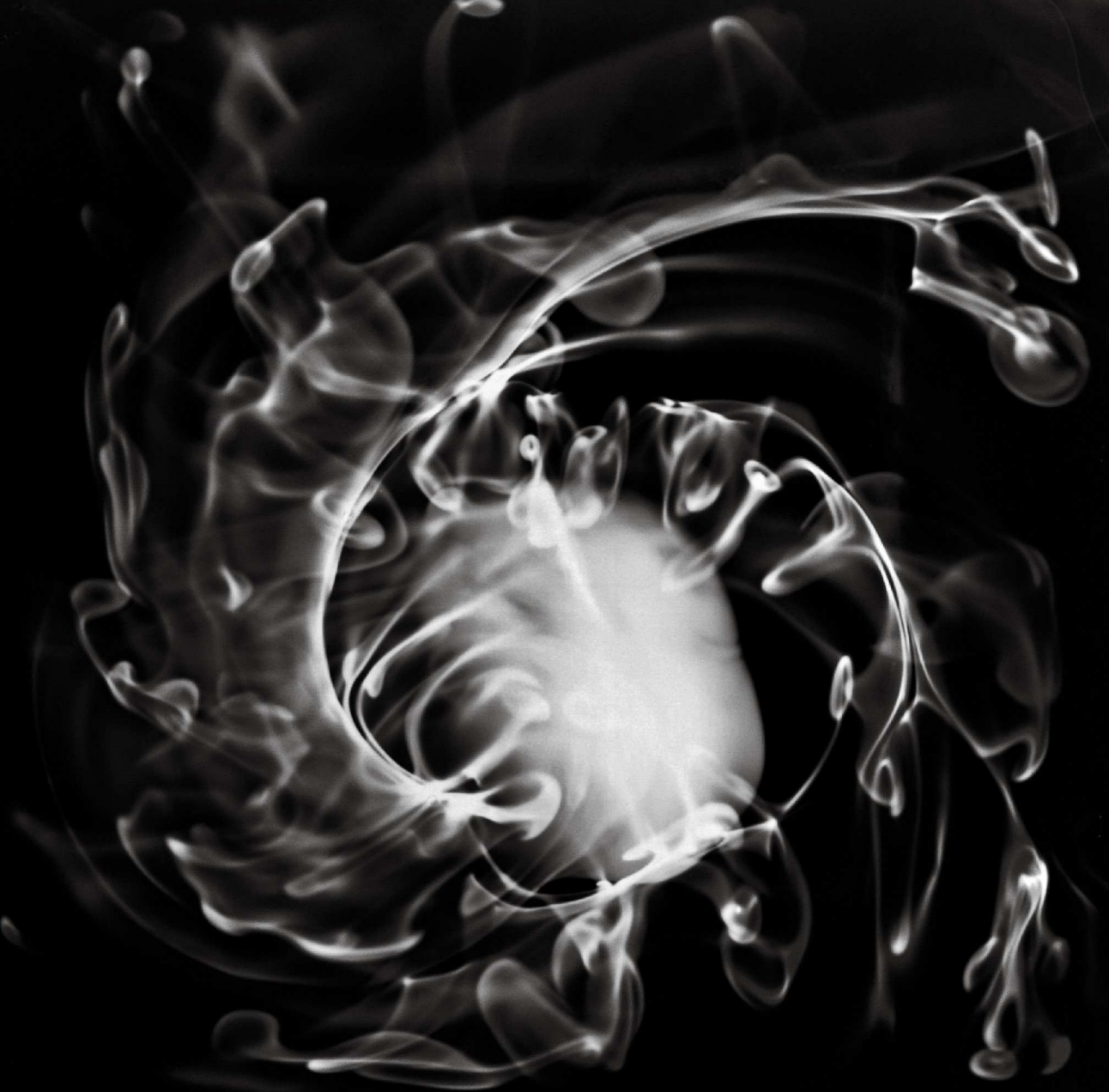












*Swirls, Whorls,
and Tendrils*

Cover Images, *South Poetry Review*
Volume 50, No. 1 & 2 (2013)

Although I am a physicist by day—or, perhaps, because I am a physicist (and thus want the left part of my brain to rest when I'm with my camera)—I have rarely come upon a subject that combines my love of physics and photography. Until now that is. Maybe it is my penchant for abstraction that led to this subject, and the connection to physics is more of an afterthought. Or maybe my physics “eye” unconsciously led me to take on this aesthetically surreal but very “real” physical subject, in hopes of stirring my conscious attention (and relentless equation scribbling). Whatever the case, my recent focus on “ink drop in water abstracts” has consumed both sides of my brain, and is—even as I write this introduction—unlikely to release either side any time soon.

Ink in water, in turns out, is anything but simple; either photographically or mathematically. On the photographic side, many photographers—amateur, pro, unknown, famous, living and long forgotten—have doubtless focused their lens’ on “ink & water” countless times, perhaps stretching all the way back to Fox Talbot. I have no illusions of having discovered a new “frontier” (as Bruce Barnbaum did with his magnificent shots of Slit Canyon). But even a familiar subject can sometimes offer unexpected surprises. My own humble addition to photography's collective oeuvre of subject matter is more akin to Hilla and Bernd Becher's typology of watertowers and other industrial structures. Only in my case, it is a typology of the

dispersive structures of a single ink drop in water.

The technique is straightforward, but requires a bit of practice and patience. A small 3”-by-3” glass vase is filled with about $\frac{3}{4}$ ” of water (less than that, or more, yields a set of slightly “different” patterns from those appearing here) and placed on a light table (which provides the only source of light). A macro lens (in this case, a 100mm lens capable of 1:1 magnification) is mounted on a camera (Canon's 30D DSLR), and is positioned so that the lens is pointing vertically downward on the surface of the water. A small eyedropper is filled with India ink, is carefully centered between three and six inches above the water (as with water depth, a greater or lesser height yields a slightly different set of patterns), and a single drop—this is the “hard” part that requires a bit of patience—is slowly released.

As the ink strikes the water, about a third of its volume quickly spreads radially on the surface. The remaining blob sinks to the bottom. Some of it bounces back up, and a slow process of diffusion, dispersion, and rotation begins. The resulting 3D patterns are captured (and compressed into two dimensions via the lens) as they unfold, and are processed and displayed as digital negatives. A single drop's effective “unfolding lifetime” varies between 1-1/2 and 2-1/2 minutes. It is not a real lifetime, of course, since the ink continues to diffuse until it is thoroughly mixed with the water, but denotes a period after which most of

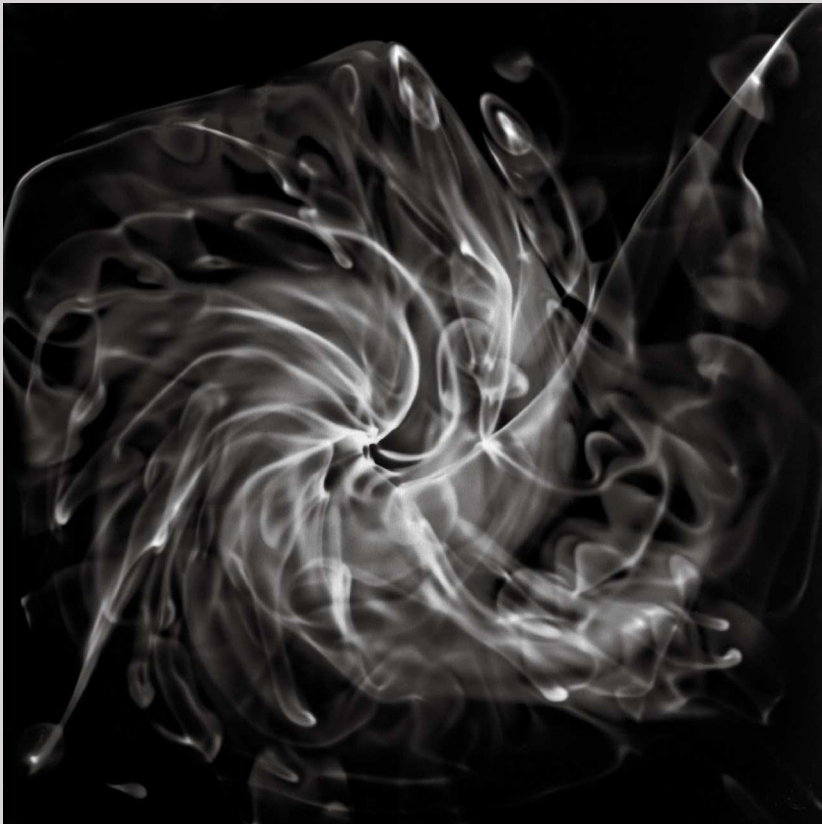
the "interesting" patterns—the swirls, whorls, and tendrils—have all but dissipated, and no new internal structures appear. The images in this portfolio show the structure of the radial spread of a single drop of ink in water as it appears at a single time (to within $\sim 1/60$ th sec) near the tail end of its unfolding lifetime.

Each ephemeral form is unique, surreal, and exquisitely beautiful. Since these are lifesize macros, many of the fine details are literally invisible to the naked eye. The macro lens reveals what looks like "organic" life-forms, that develop as though some hidden "rule" (or genetic code) is guiding their evolution. In truth, the myriad shapes and forms are a complicated confluence of multiple simultaneous forces at work: diffusion, dispersion, interplay of relative viscosities of the water and ink, a transfer of momentum as the ink drop bounces upward after hitting the bottom of the vase, gravity, random drifts and impurities in the water, and thermal convection rolls due to the heat generated by the bulbs in the light table.

Tellingly, even as each delicate form is "perfect" onto itself, what starts the whole process going, and what is most responsible for the diversity of patterns, is imperfection. It is because the ink drops are not perfect spheres, because they assume a variety of randomly distorted oblong shapes as they fall, and because they have unpredictable and shifting densities of ink inside of them, that each sequence is a unique creation that unfolds just once, then vanishes forever.

*"All is process.
That is to say,
there is 'no thing'
in the universe.
Things, objects, entities,
are abstractions
of what is relatively constant
from a process of
movement and transformation.
They are like the shapes that
children like to see in clouds."*

- DAVID BOHM
(1917-1992)







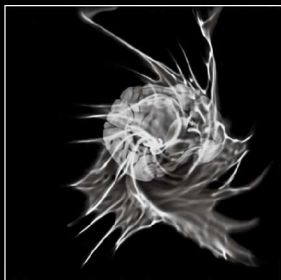
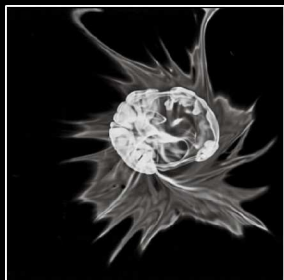




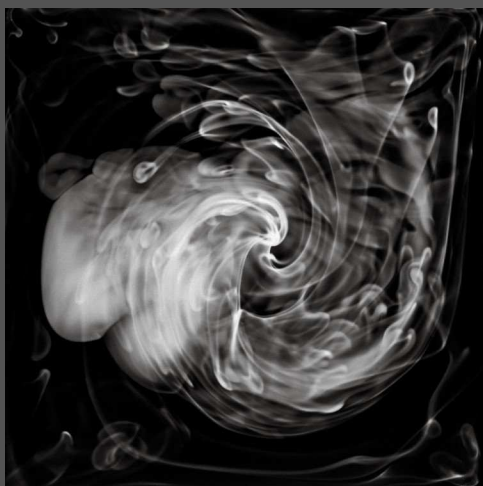


















Tao

I have enjoyed a life-long fascination with Zen Koans, that roshi John Loori (among many others) used so effectively in his teachings on art and creativity. Apart from Loori's own books on Koans (see *Sitting with Koans*, *Riding the Ox Home*, and *Two Arrows Meeting in Mid-Air*), a favorite of mine is the classic *Zen Flesh*, *Zen Bones* by Paul Reps.

And one of my favorite stories from Reps' book is called *Trading Dialog* for Lodging (found on pages 46-47 of *Zen Flesh*, *Zen Bones*). Now, not being a Zen master myself, I humbly offer an "interpretation" of this little gem and remind the kind reader that it is just that, no more, no less; namely Andy Ilachinski's interpretation of a story found in a book of Zen and pre-Zen writings by an author named Paul Reps, as revealed to Andy's consciousness on a beautiful autumn Sunday morning in October 2009. But therein lies both the rub and the truth; or, more precisely, the lesson. For "truth" is, at its very best, just a fleeting ephemeral approximation of ... ?

The story begins by reminding the reader of a Buddhist tradition in which a traveling monk can remain in a Zen temple provided he makes and wins an argument about Buddhism with anyone who lives there. We are then told of a temple in the northern part of Japan where there are two brother monks: one, the elder; the other, stupid and possessing but one eye. A traveling monk finds his way to this temple and, rightfully, challenges the monks to a

debate. The elder brother, too tired from a long day of studying to engage in the challenge, asks his younger brother to "go and request the dialogue in silence" in his stead. The young one-eyed monk and the wandering stranger go to the shrine and sit down.

A short time later, the traveling monk goes to the elder brother to inform him that his brother has defeated him. Before leaving, the elder asks the monk to relate what had happened. The monk recounts the challenge: "At first, I held up one finger, denoting Buddha, the enlightened one. So your brother held up two fingers, signifying Buddha and his teachings. I held up three fingers, representing Buddha, his teachings, and his followers, living a harmonious life. Your brother then shook a clenched fist at me, showing me that all three come from the same, single, realization. To this insight I had no answer. I thus lost the challenge."

As the traveling monk made his way back down the road away from the temple, the elder monk's brother appeared, breathless, before his brother. "Where is that monk?" he started, "I'm going to beat him up!" Asked to explain his anger, the younger brother recounts what happened: "Why, the minute he saw me he insulted me by holding up one finger to laugh at my one eye. Since he was a stranger, and in need of a place to stay, I decided to be kind and held up two fingers, congratulating him on having two eyes. Infuriatingly, he then held up three fingers, stubbornly reminding me

that - between the two of us - we still had only three eyes. I couldn't contain my anger any longer, and showed him my fist!"

One reality, or two? Or three? Or an uncountable number of "potential" realities, and interpretations? What I love about this simple story is how artfully it blends meaning, distortion, subjectivity, context, tradition, interpretation, and - with a subtle nod to an "unspoken" arbiter / truth-seer (not the elder brother, but an implied "outside observer" who is reflecting upon even the reader's interpretation of this story) - the recursive, self-referential nature of "true" objectivity; and, ultimately, the nature of "reality" itself. As space-time (so far as we know) is finite yet unbounded, so - too - this story suggests, reality is finite but unlimited in its interpretations.

This story also suggests that, despite there obviously being a reality - there are two monks engaged in a Buddhist challenge! - no one in the story experiences it fully. Certainly not the two monks, with their dramatically different recollections of what happened; and not even the elder brother, who ostensibly hears "both sides" of the "reality," but is not himself present when the "reality" occurs, and who does not reveal any of his own predilections and subjective interpretations of what he hears from two different people (one of whom is very close to him, the other a complete stranger); just what does he make of these two stories? And what does the elder believe really happened? We might, just as

well, wonder about a "more complete" reality, that encompasses not just the two arguing monks but the two monks + elder. What is to be made of the single "interpretation" we have of this system (which is not, I remind you, that of the elder - who merely listens in the story - but the interpretation of the whole story that you, kind reader, have yourself to offer!)? The telescoping levels are, of course, endless and whose "end" remains perpetually out of reach; the next one starts at "two monks + elder + Andy's interpretation of the story". What of my role in this, as I've recounted a story favorite of mine from memory; and did so fairly and honestly, but certainly not verbatim, word-by-word. What intentional and/or unintentional subjectivities did I introduce into the story that altered its "true" meaning? And so it goes.

What does all of this have to do with photography? Everything, or nothing, depending on what "part" of the story one is paying attention to. The experience of the wandering monk reminds us that just as all of us ("privileged observers") sit at the center of a unique - and therefore uniquely limited - reality, the "true nature" of reality remains hidden, unknown in whole, and eludes even the mindful gaze of the wisest of wise "outside observers" (for, in truth ;-), there is no such being). Our understanding of reality is fluid, imprecise, and - forever - incomplete; and owes more - much, much more - to subjective context-dependent interpretation than most of us (particularly



us physicists!) feel comfortable in accepting. A "photograph" may reveal two monks arguing, and show that one monk holds up one finger or two at the other, and/or that one monk is clenching a fist. But that is all a photograph can ever show. And, once it is created - and the "reality" to which it points has ceased to be - the "truth" of a photograph is forever limited to a sort of vestigial (and ever-changing) collective memory of possible interpretations that live on in the minds of those who "look at the photograph" and the photographer who "experienced" it while it was being taken.

And the lesson for the photographer? It is simply this: forget about trying to capture "truth" with your camera. Focus instead on communicating to the rest of the world what you experienced as truth (while immersed in the "reality" your camera recorded but an infinitesimally small slice of).

*"When the photograph
is a mirror of the man,
and the man is a mirror
of the world, then
Spirit might take over."*

- MINOR WHITE
(1908 - 1976)

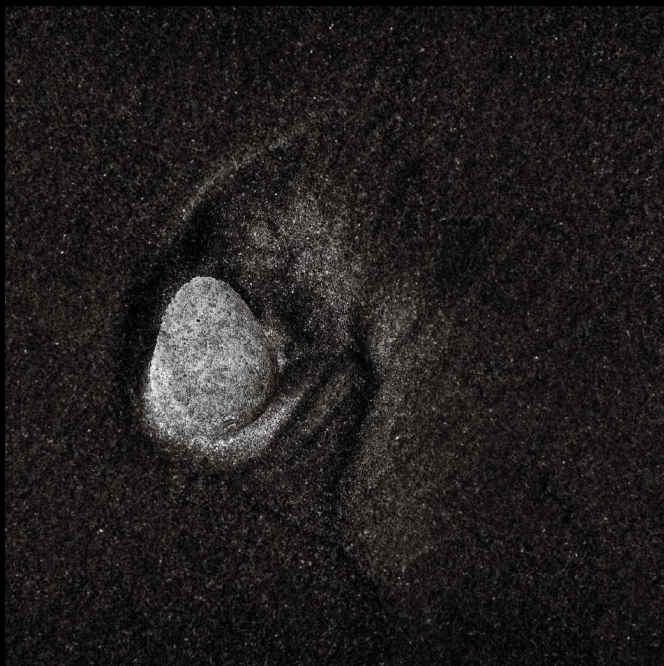










































Trees

*"The tree which moves some to tears of joy
is in the eyes of others only a green thing
that stands in the way. Some see nature all
ridicule and deformity... and some scarce see
nature at all. But to the eyes of the
man of imagination,
nature is imagination itself."*

- WILLIAM BLAKE
(1757 - 1827)



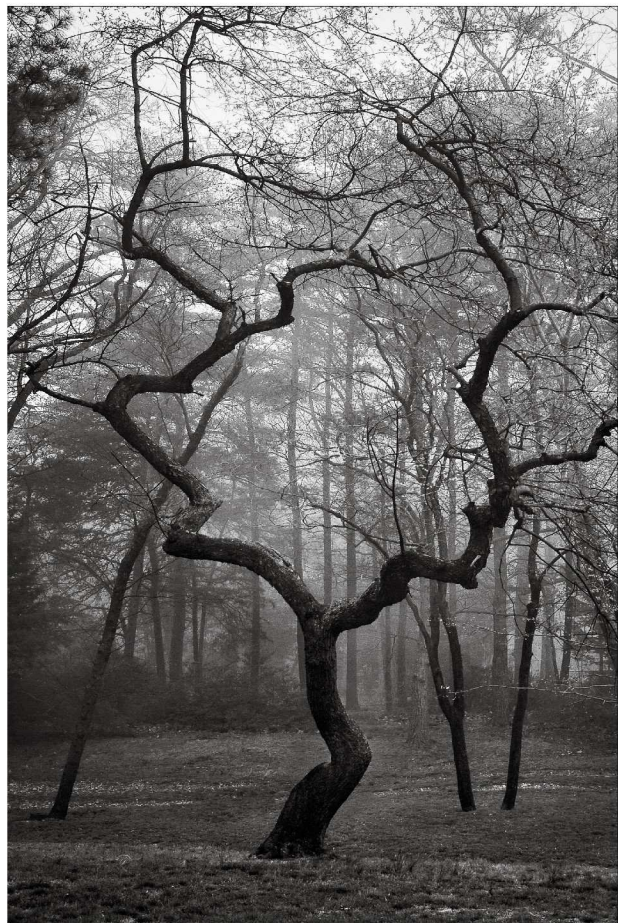
















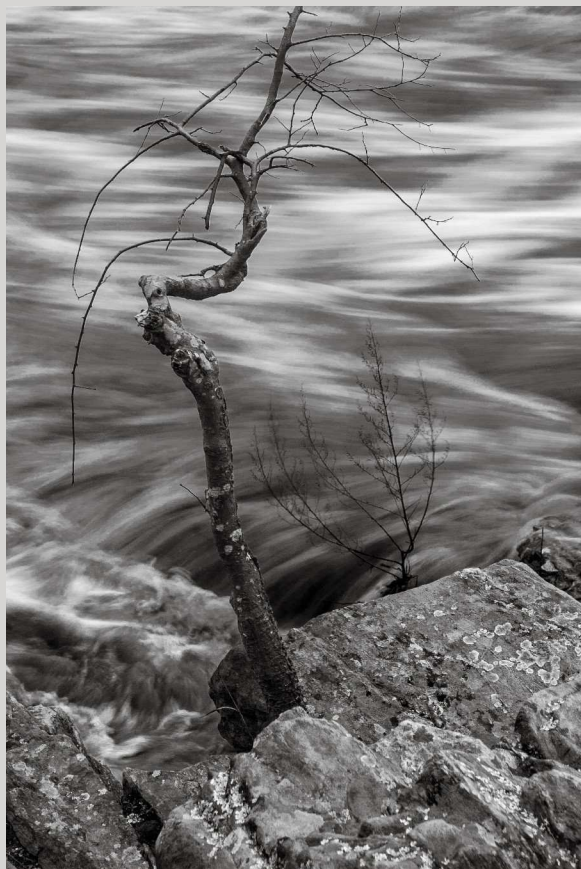






























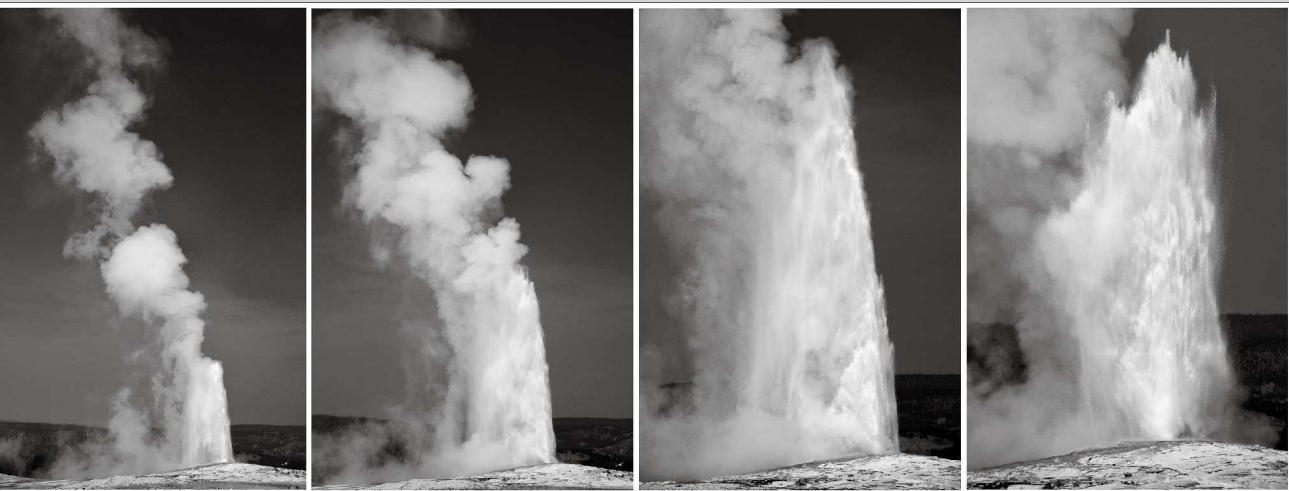




Yellowstone | Grand Teton

*"Wholes and not wholes; brought together, pulled apart; sung in unison, sung in conflict; from all things one and from one all things...As the same things in us are living and dead, waking and sleeping, young and old. For these things having changed around are those, and those in turn having changed around are these...
...into the same rivers we step and do not step, we are and are not."*

- HERACLITUS
(c. 535 – c. 475 BCE)



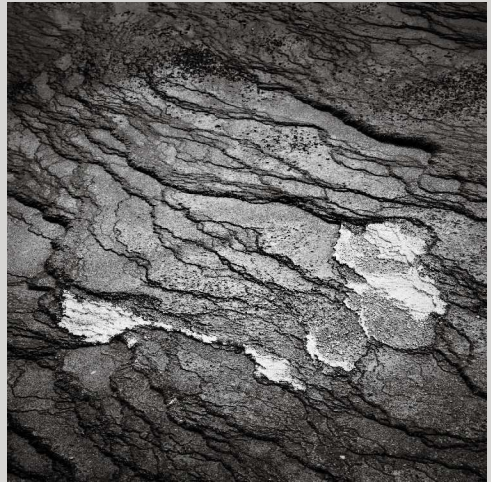
When my parents, my father's grandparents, and I visited Yellowstone's Old Faithful geyser in 1970, I remember it as an unassuming "mound" with steam coming out (before the awe I felt upon witnessing its eruption for the first time as a 10yo!), nestled slightly beyond a small walkway from Yellowstone's famous old faithful inn (built in 1904). There were no main thoroughfares, no parking lots (save that for a relatively small one near the inn), no boardwalks. We parked our car right by the geyser, walked out to Old Faithful, waited about 20 minutes or so for it to erupt (it was a bit more regular than it is now, thanks to myriad small earthquakes over the intervening years that have affected subterranean water levels), and we are on our way. My, how times have changed! Or have they...?

Nowadays, the area around Old Faithful resembles more a small town - with a major parkway leading into it, several huge parking areas, lodging, shopping, a nature center, and more boardwalks than Coney Island and Atlantic City combined (or so it seemed) - than some "not easy to be discovered" marvel of nature. One could be forgiven for missing the geyser entirely, given the voluminous activity swarming all around it, passerbys appearing more interested in licking ice-cream cones and texting their friends back home about how "great Yellowstone is" than waiting for Yellowstone's patient sentinel to burp its superheated water for a few minutes. More than once did I hear a child ask her parents,

"Where is the geyser, mommy?" while standing almost directly in front of it!

While it is easy to lament the "loss of innocence" associated with the development of any natural park designed for public consumption (the deepest personal lament of this kind may arguably be ascribed to Ansel Adams, who - in revealing the stupendous beauty of Yosemite Valley to the public - also rendered it forever impossible to experience as an isolated wilderness, I will not dwell on this aspect of our experience of Yellowstone; instead, I will muse on what I found at Old Faithful in more general terms of what it says about the impermanence - and *permanence* - of reality.

On the crudest level, Old Faithful remains "Old Faithful"; i.e., it is a geyser, located about 17 miles west of West Thumb Basin, with a more-or-less regular eruption schedule (about 65 minutes in 1940 to 90 +/- 10 minutes today). The dynamics of its eruptions has remained the same, even as the individual molecules of water continually change from eruption to eruption. But as I've just described, the visitor's experience of Old Faithful is dramatically different from what it once was (and was for me in 1970). Where, in decades past, one could view the geyser in relative isolation (if one so chose) - a communion, of sorts, between civilization and pristine nature - such a communion is now all-but-impossible, as Old Faithful must compete with impatient swarms of jostling and always-chattering



bodies, not-so-distant belches of diesel-powered RVs and trucks, and an occasional screech of tires as cars and buses attempt to avoid wandering hordes of tourists lost - or soon to be - in vast parking lots. Meditation helps, of course, to refocus the mind on the Old Faithful; and, truth be told, the sheer wonder and delight of seeing a massive 150+ foot column of super-heated steam and water suddenly erupt from a hole in the ground never gets old. My experience of the erupting geyser - sans surrounding noise and clicking cameras - was essentially what I remember it being 42 years ago.

But, in the end, what do we really mean by "Old Faithful"? Is it the geyser? the geyser erupting? the water underneath the geyser?

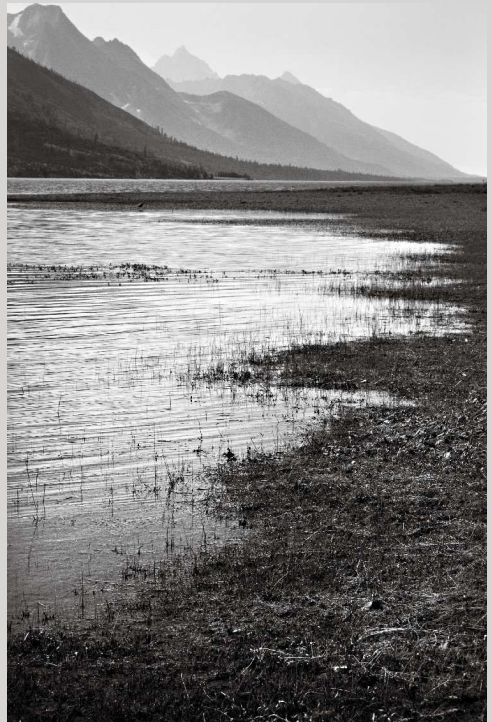
the surrounding area? the "experience" of watching "it" erupt? the tourist-driven infrastructure that envelopes "it" (and all surrounding geysers)? What has remained the same, and what has really changed? Labels, labels, and more arbitrary labels, all pointing to "something," and yet none describing anything of lasting meaning or value.

And so, how fitting it is that an old "faithful" wonder - the same and yet not the same as it once was - sagely reminds this self-professed observer of wonders of the folly of wondering about the labels of things. "Old Faithful" is as an imprecise, imperfect label of a "geyser" in Yellowstone as "Andy" is an essentially vacuous label of a "photographer on an RV trip to Yellowstone with his family." Impermanence bleeds from words and arbitrary attachments; and permanence is but an impermanent illusion. All things are the same and not the same. And Old Faithful is no "thing."

*"We are like the spider.
We weave our life
and then move along in it.
We are like the dreamer who dreams
and then lives in the dream.
This is true for
the entire universe."
- UPANISHADS*





















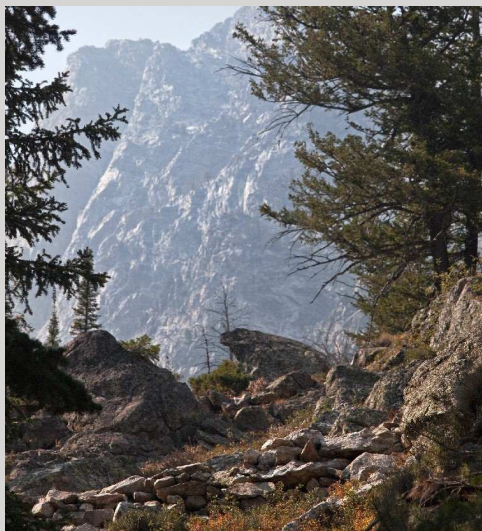
























42A bit over years ago (and, in view of the commentary to follow, a faint echo of Douglas dams' answer to *life, the universe, and everything*), my family and I took a trip out west that I have never forgotten. My 'family' back then was made up of my parents and both grandparents on my dad's side. I have never forgotten that trip for two reasons: (1) it was the last trip that all of us were together on (my grandparents were, in 1970, well into their 80s and it was upon our return to 'home' that year on Long Island, NY, that health issues that would eventually take both their lives first appeared); and (2) it was the first time my 10 year old self was exposed, and spiritually awakened to, the extraordinary aesthetic riches that mother Earth offers.

Now fast-forward to 2012, during which time my family and I (including my wife, our two sons and my mom, who just happens to be the same age as my grandfather was in 1970) flew out to Denver, CO to rent a 32-ft RV and used it to explore the *Rocky Mountain, Grand Teton, and Yellowstone* national parks. (This trip was 2/3 as long as my 1970 trip, but covered many, if not all, of the memorable sights and sounds I remember from long ago.) Long in planing (dating back about three years, at least), I wanted to make this trip for two reasons: (1) to provide my kids an opportunity to experience a similar reverie of nature's beauty and/or a "spiritually awakening" as I had at their age (mission accomplished on both counts!), and (2) to give myself an opportunity to re-experience memories of a bygone time that I now, and will always, cherish. It is in the unabashed failure to achieve this second goal that I wish to focus on in the words that follow.

Despite my longing for - and all my earnest efforts to recreate - the exuberance of my youthful adventure, and though there were certainly moments during which time's ineffable veil parted just a bit to reveal to my mind's eye a dim indistinct sepia-like 'print' of what I saw 42 years ago, the sad truth is that I was thoroughly and at all times aware of being inextricably mired in a 51 yo body, with all its attendant life's bumps and bruises, experiences, and never-ending responsibilities; a fact that my 10 yo self could neither fully anticipate nor

fathom! Try as I might, and cliché-ridden though it may be, I found it impossible to recapture the essence of my remembered youth. Except, that is, through watching my children dance to the tune of their own blissful reverie, and by engaging in photography.

What I yearned for most of all (from my experience as a 10 yo) was what I remember as a pure innocence of being; a joyful and unconscious participation in nature's rhythms. I had absolutely no concerns, no worries, no pressures of life (or panic over whether - after enjoying the "view" at 12K ft on Colorado's trail ridge road - I would be able to safely drive a 12 foot wide RV down twisting hairpin turns in lanes barely a foot wider and roads that fall off 8% grades and plunge thousands of feet down on either side!). I remember just "being in the moment," playing, laughing, hiking, splashing in lake water, and pausing on mountaintops - with nary a conscious thought - to gaze out into the infinite expanse of our western landscapes. But there were far too many distracting and nagging thoughts intruding into the 51 yo version of my younger self to allow such innocence (though memories of how easy - how effortless - it once was - and is, for my children! - reminded me that it is not the state that is inaccessible, but my all-but-convincing left-brain attitude that makes it only appear to be inaccessible). In truth, it was not my 51 yo body that was the problem, but that I had forgotten that the "I" that had experienced all those wonderful things in 1970 has not aged at all.

Rather than quietly and gracefully surrendering to the flow of time and nature, I was, so to speak, swimming against the tide, desperately trying to turn back time to reinsert myself into a long-deceased body and mind so that I could re-experience the past exactly as it, and I, were back then, 42 years ago. But my soul was already where I needed to be; where I was, in 1970, in 2012, and whenever, and wherever, else I need to be. It is a timeless, yearning-less state forged by a numinous connection between self and nature. And, as so often happens (with me, at least), photography reminded me of my foolishness.

The child does not yearn to return to anything, or to any time or state; it simply delights in being, in experiencing. As I tuned out my incessant left-brain confusion, and refocused my attention on the beauty around me, my hand instinctively reached for my camera, and all yearnings ceased. *Numinous self-actualization...*

*"It's also helpful to realize that this very body that we have,
that's sitting right here right now, with its aches and its pleasures,
is exactly what we need to be fully human,
fully awake, fully alive." - PEMA CHODRON (1936 -)*



Musings on the Creative Process

The following essays originally appeared on my blog
<http://tao-of-digital-photography.blogspot.com>
between Jan 2005 and Dec 2015

Sting, Goethe, and the Creative Process

My wife and I recently went to Sting's *Symphonicities* concert, when his tour stopped by in northern Virginia. Apart from enjoying his music (backed by the Royal Philharmonic Concert Orchestra), and observing the inevitable aging of his/our generation first hand - there were many, many more 40/50/60-somethings at the concert than anyone who can still remember pimples on their young faces (my wife recalled the puzzled look on the face of our 17 year old baby sitter when she told her where she and I were going for the evening; "Sting who?" she asked), the evening gave us a chance to muse on one of the reasons for Sting's longevity, and what it may say about the creative process in general.

There are some who have criticized Sting's recent forays into decidedly non-traditionally-Rock-like music oeuvres (such as with his *If On a Winter's Night and Songs From a Labyrinth* albums). And his most recent *Symphonicities* album has been described as same-ole / same-ole embellished with a full orchestra (an overly harsh assessment, IMHO, as much thought and craft obviously went into integrating new voices and new accompaniment). Of course, it is precisely by continually venturing into new musical territories and challenging himself to rework older material that Sting stays a potent musical and creative force. Sting also challenges us to consider just who "Sting" (or any artist) really is, and whether being content with "sameness" is a form of artistic decay, at best, or artistic irrelevance, at worst.

Ansel Adams, with his piano skills, was fond of comparing the relationship between prints and original exposures to performances of scripted musical scores; and was equally fond of "reworking" old plates with new techniques or aesthetic sensibilities. The "Ansel Adams" of 1980 was similar to but not entirely equivalent to the "Ansel Adams" of 1960 or the "Ansel Adams" of 1940. Yet we use the same "name" to refer to all three periods, and have a mental picture of the "same" Ansel Adams when referring to any of his impermanent historical versions. Szarkowski's *Ansel Adams at 100* shows a few examples of Ansel's evolution as a printer (the difference between Ansel's original and 20+ year-later version of his well-known "Mckinley" print are particularly striking).

There is a deeper - philosophical / epistemological - problem lurking here, hidden in a seemingly innocuous question: "What is the difference between the 'name' of something that is alive - a flower, a pug, an artist, or an artwork - and the 'living being' itself?" Richard Feynman, the great physicist, told of an important lesson he was taught as a child. His father - a methodical observer of nature - delighted in sharing with his son his voluminous mental notes on the rich lives of all the birds that lived in their neighborhood;

when they came out in the morning, what songs they sang, what food they ate, and so on. All of this his father learned on his own, not by reading books, but by carefully watching and listening to the birds for years and years. Young Richard's lifelong lesson came one day when his peers laughed at him for not knowing any of the birds' names, something he never learned from his father (who himself did not know). His father gently explained to Richard that he actually knew far more about the birds than any of his friends: "All your friends know is a jumble of sounds that help them point to a particular bird. Only you know who those birds really are!"

This holistic approach to "knowing" can be traced back to Goethe's way of doing science, an approach which Henri Bortoft (in his masterful work, *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way Toward a Science of Conscious Participation in Nature*) describes as "dwelling in the phenomenon" instead of "replacing it with a mathematical representation." It derives from the "simple" observation that living beings are growing, evolving processes that are as much "things in themselves" as interconnected components of lesser and greater processes. To identify any one state of such a being with the being itself - i.e., by using a "name" to designate "what the system is" at some arbitrary time during the course of its evolution (such as by taking a picture of a tree in your yard one day and calling it "the tree in my yard"; or by taking a picture of the Atlantic ocean from some beach on Long Island - see picture above - and calling it the "Atlantic Ocean") - is to miss completely what the being really is; namely, an organic instantiation of a continually unfolding dynamic process of evolution, metamorphosis, and transformation.

In describing the movement of metamorphosis in the foliage of a flowering plant, Friedemann Schwarzkopf (in his *The Metamorphosis of the Given: Toward an Ecology of Consciousness*), suggests that "...if one could imagine a person walking through the snow, and leaving the imprints of its feet, but with every step changing the shape of its feet, and if one would behold not the trace in the snow, perceptible to the sense-organs of the physiological eyes, but the living being that is undergoing change while it is walking, one would see with the inner eye the organ of the plant that is producing leaves."

And what of the lesson for the photographer? If only we could see the world as Schwarzkopf - and Goethe - suggest we see a plant! The inner creative process that drives what we do (why and what we choose to look at, what moves us, what grabs our attention and demands to be expressed) is just as much a living force as what we train our lenses on in the world at large. I would argue that in order to become better - more impassioned, more sincere, more artfully truthful - photographers, requires a more Goethian approach; it requires us to learn how to dwell in our subjects. Don't focus on objects or things. Pay attention instead to process; and revel in your own transformation as you do so.



Postscript. Goethe's *The Metamorphosis of Plants* has recently been reissued in a beautiful new edition. Highly recommended for anyone interested in learning about the "...how of an organism." For those of you wishing to pursue Goethe's approach to nature, I urge you to also look at two recent books: (1) *Meditation As Contemplative Inquiry*, by physicist Arthur Zajonc, and (2) *New Eyes for Plants: A Workbook for Plant Observation & Drawing*, by Margaret Colquhoun and Axel Ewald.





"The world is blue."

- YVES KLEIN (1928 - 1962)

Yves Klein, Arbitrary Labels, and the "Meta" Art of Displaying Art

Last week, my wife and I had the pleasure of seeing the Yves Klein exhibit at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC (for those of you with iPhones, iTunes has a wonderful app to allow you to experience the exhibit "virtually" on your iPhone). Yves Klein was a French "artist" born in Nice in 1928 and died, tragically young, of a heart attack in 1962. I put the word "artist" in quotes because Klein's "art" was - and is - notoriously difficult to pin down; he used so many different techniques and produced such a diverse oeuvre, that the word "artist" hardly does justice to what Klein really was (and for which I have no ready "label"). Even in describing his more "conventional" works - in which pigment is applied to a canvas - one wonders whether an asterisk (even a question mark!) should not accompany any description (see below). His works are all equal parts object and concept (or philosophy). Klein's works are best appreciated as transient artifacts - as snapshots in time - of a ceaseless process of creative exploration, unconfined to a single genre or single means of expression. Klein was in many ways the physical embodiment of an incorporeal creative force. His life was art, much more so - on a fundamental level - than any of the art works he had time to create.

Which brings us to the second theme of this blog entry, the arbitrariness of labels... One of the techniques Klein employed (often as

a public performance to the delight of invited guests) was to have two or three nude women cover themselves with paint - typically a special "spiritually charged" hue of blue ...

"Blue has no dimensions, it is beyond dimensions, whereas the other colours are not.. ..All colors arouse specific associative ideas, psychologically material or tangible, while blue suggests at most the sea and sky, and they, after all, are in actual, visible nature what is most abstract." - Yves Klein (lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959)

...and proceed to "paint" canvases with their bodies. Sometimes the "painting" would be directed by Klein; sometimes it would be left up to the "body brushes" themselves. But in either case, Klein himself was but the creative fire behind a process that, once set in motion and because of the womens' active participation, was not entirely under his control. Which brings up a not so easy to answer question: in what sense can one say that the "finished artwork" (many fine examples of which are shown at the Hirshhorn exhibit, including a few wall-size videos of the process itself) is Klein's alone?

Klein also experimented with the use of fire as paint, was a photographer, and sometimes used the windshield of his car as an "abstract canvas" to capture the dynamic imprints of twigs and insects as the car careened on winding stormy roads.

"I dash out to the banks of the river ... and find myself amongst the rushes and the reeds. I grind some pigment over all this and the wind makes their slender stalks bend and appliqués them with precision and delicacy on to my canvas, which I thus offer to quivering nature: I obtain a vegetal mark. Then it starts to rain; a fine spring rain: I expose my canvas to the rain... ..and I have the mark of the rain! - a mark of an atmospheric event."

My wife (an art major in college) astutely asked whether the same question might be posed of Jackson Pollack, whose art also arguably depended at least in part on the vagaries of paint-globule-trajectories not under his control; or, indeed, of any artist whose works depend on processes not under their direct control (see *Chance Aesthetics* by Meredith Malone).

Language can be both surgically precise and woefully ambiguous (and sometimes, simultaneously both!) The labels we apply to things and processes are - as often as not - arbitrary, and are rarely more than simple caricatures of the real things and processes they are used to represent. This is never more true than when we apply labels to artists and the works they create. Certainly (?) Klein and Pollack (and Kandinsky, and Picasso, and my dad, Sam Ilachinski) are all "artists." But what does the label convey, apart from the fact

that whatever it is their souls and activities share probably has little to do with building particle colliders (though this too is arguably an "artform" so that the overlap may not be as "small" as one first suspects... but we'll leave that discussion to a later time ;-)) ? Is a "body art" painting by Klein a "painting by Klein"? Is it a "collaborative work of art" created partly by Klein and partly by his cadre of "body brushes"? Is Klein merely one "creative force" behind a painting that owes its existence (and meaning?) to multiple creative forces (in the case of his body art in particular, Klein is arguably the more passive of the many creative forces at work; or is he)? To what extent does the word "artist" signify what Klein really was (which, even from the brief sketch I've given above, it should be obvious that Klein was not your "typical" artist)? And for that matter, how many - ever more precise (?) - "labels" do we need to begin to capture "Klein as Klein" (and can that even really be done)?

In truth, the best we can do to represent - or to label - Klein, or any other artist (if we're honest), is to append to any symbolic signifier of Klein (a picture of him shortly before his death, say, or merely the word "Klein") Klein's complete creative oeuvre, from first doodles as a baby-Klein to the last half-completed sketch before his fatal heart attack at 34. Of course, even this is at best an incomplete record, since there are likely to be many more works that Klein had kept to himself, or destroyed, than exposed to public view (I know this to be a fact regarding my dad's lifework); but, certainly, the label "Klein" followed by a catalog of reproductions of his life's work better represent the "artist" Klein than the word "artist" alone.

Alas, even here there is a snag. For even if we managed to reproduce a complete record, we would still have to contend with the nontrivial problem of how to interpret - how to derive meaning - from the record in the manner in which it was constructed and displayed (which adds yet another layer of ambiguity and arbitrariness). Is a linear time-line "better" or "worse" than organizing according to theme and process? While creative works surely accrue in a "linear" fashion (for our hands can create only one work at a time), artists - especially "artists" like Klein - rarely work on a single project at a time, mentally and creatively juggling multiple simultaneous works. How can that complex dynamic inner process be captured in any static "record"? And yet, if it is not - and cannot - be captured, to what degree can any record of any artist's oeuvre truly capture the "artist"? Surely the way in which an artist's oeuvre is interpreted - and therefore how the "artist" is understood through his oeuvre - owes as much to how the oeuvre is organized - usually by someone other than the artist (though the same would be true even in the case where the artist organizes his or her own life's work) - as what is "in" it. Interpretation cannot proceed without both content and context (to which we must also add the context - and current state-of-mind - of the viewer!)

Which brings us to the third theme of this blog entry, the meta-art of displaying art... though we are dangerously close to encroaching on the formal study of semiotics - i.e., the study of signs and symbols (see Handbook of Semiotics by Winfried Noth), I will confine my musings to an observation my wife and I made at the Yves Klein exhibit. In one hall of the exhibit, the curators had beautifully arranged about 25 or 30 of Klein's smaller blue sculptures. It is a large semicircular room (following the circular contour of the Hirshhorn building), brightly lit, and painted a solid white from floor to ceiling. Each work rests on its own modest pedestal, ranging from about two to four feet in height, and relatively positioned in a more or less grid-like configuration, with bases extending from the floor at varying depths (as the main "base" of the exhibit is itself positioned at a slight incline). The effect is mesmerizing, as the roomful of small blue objects reveals itself as you step into this part of the exhibit. The arrangement is both inviting - as a whole - and seductive in compelling one to linger and admire the individual works. The question that immediately presents itself - on the meta-level - is the degree to which the artful arrangement of Klein's works colors and/or defines how one interprets them. Certainly, the effect - and subsequent interpretation - would have been dramatically different had my wife and I stepped into a room in which all of Klein's works were "arranged" in a disorganized pile in one corner. But what if the arrangement had been just as "artful" (why do we so seldom pay homage to the curator's meta-art of arranging other artists' "art"?), but had different lighting? Or a different relative positioning? Or a slightly different choice had been made as to what individual works to include from the exhibit? All of these particular choices would give the exhibit a different feel, and - more importantly - compel viewers to interpret "Klein the artist" in different ways.

However, lest one conclude from all of this that the best, and only, way to "know" an artist is to become the artist (much as Borges describes how a fictional Pierre Menard becomes Cervantes in order to be able to write Cervantes' Don Quixote), remember that the artist's own struggles to create - and which leave a trace of artifacts that others use to "understand" the artist - are also the artist's attempt to understand herself! So who knows the "real" artist?

*"The essential of painting is that something,
that 'ethereal glue,' that intermediary product
which the artist secrets with all his creative being
and which he has the power to place, to encrust, to
impregnate into the pictorial stuff of the painting."*

- YVES KLEIN (1928 - 1962)

Lionel Dobie's Artistic Admonition

"Why do photography?" Or, more generally, *"Why do art?"* This seemingly "obvious" question is anything but obvious; it is also infinitely far from "simple." Indeed, I would hope that most artists never consciously ask it (of themselves); and never use words alone if forced to answer it by others. For (quickly jumping to the conclusion of this short entry) their life's work is by itself a never-ending, silent but engaged, "answer" to (what ought to be an) unspoken question best left to others - those other than the artist - to ask. What can any artist (apart, from - maybe - one whose art is oratory) possibly say in answer to such a question?

I was reminded of its unintentional absurdity while watching an old (~ 20 yo) film called *New York Stories*. Or more precisely, while watching the first of three "shorts" that comprise this film called *Life Lessons*, and starring Nick Nolte (as abstract artist Lionel Dobie) and Rosanna Arquette (as aspiring artist Paulette). Paulette is Lionel's former lover, but moves in with Lionel in the hopes of learning art from him. The movie mostly explores how Lionel's creativity is coupled with the fits of jealousy he suffers through while Paulette dates other men. Paulette eventually leaves, but not before Lionel has gone through enough jealousy to fuel the completion of the art he needs to open a new exhibit. As the movie ends, another aspiring female artist moves in and we are left with the strong impression that this "new relationship - broken relationship - jealousy - creativity" cycle is the meta-pattern that defines Lionel's world and life.

All of which is, for my purposes here, utterly irrelevant and inconsequential (though is a fair summary of the short film for those who have not seen it; it is certainly entertaining enough to watch and enjoy). To me, the one shining moment in the film happens near the end, right before Paulette leaves for good. We are in Lionel's loft studio (where most all of the film takes place), with Lionel listening to some loud music and painting like a madman - very much in the "Zone." The canvas is huge (it looks like to be at least twenty feet on the side), paint is being splattered everywhere, and Lionel is - as any artist can confirm while painting / creating - oblivious to everything around him except his inner state. In walks Paulette, who has been patiently waiting - yearning, begging - for some advice from Lionel, but has yet to receive anything of value. Heck, she is not even sure if she any good as an artist, much less what to do about it. So she confronts him. Then and there.

"Am I any good?" she asks. Lionel's reaction is the best self-contained "answer" to that question I have seen; certainly on film, possibly ever, in any context, and serves as a thought-provoking - even soul-searching - admonition to all artists, aspiring and

accomplished alike. (I may have forgotten the exact details of what happens next, but...) Lionel throws down his brushes with an Eastwood-like "Dirty Harry" fury - veins at his temples flaring and throbbing - phlegm unashamedly spewing - frothing - out his mouth as he screams, *"Good?!? What the f*** difference does it make whether you're good or not?!? You paint because you need to!"*

What a beautifully transcendent moment. They are "merely" actors, and Nolte is not "really" an artist (or is an artist of a different kind, stage-playing an artist). That does not matter. Though I prefer answering questions - even this one - in a slightly more civilized manner than Nolte's character, I confess that I cannot imagine a better, more perfect, response. It summarizes exactly my own sentiments.

Why do I do photography? Is it because I like taking pictures with a camera; reveling in the tactile feel of cold magnesium and pushing buttons? Because I'm shy in public and prefer to hide myself behind a box with lenses? Because I'm really a conventional artist at heart but know I have no talent for drawing or painting and so must make do with an "easier" art? Because I'm a narcissist who thrives on hanging my work in public? Because I yearn for attention and recognition from my artistic peers? Because I am in a perpetual search for the "perfect picture"? Because I'm trying to find a way to express my "artistic vision"? None of these are true, in the purest sense (though some may contain hints of banal, and fundamentally meaningless, truths).

I do photography because it is who I am. As surely as my laughing at Monty-Python; my relishing my wife's cooking; my joy at playing with my sons; my absorption with physics equations and computer code; my night-time ritual of re-reading, for the umpteenth time, some story by Borges; or my fascination with abstract art - none of which I can explain the "reason" for that adds anything to the simple fact that they are all things I happen to love to do, so too I can say the same about my photography. All of these things are their own reason and explanation. Life and work and play and joy and love and ... everything else that makes up my life and gives it meaning, is a self-contained, self-referential soup of nested cause and effect, and experience. And they are all, ultimately and collectively, the only meaningful expressions of who I really am. I do photography because it is who I am. And when I stop, I cease to be. Until I start again...

*"All true artists, whether they know it or not,
create from a place of no-mind,
from inner stillness."*

- ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER

"Boinga, Boinga, Boinga" Shots

My family and I recently returned from a "mini vacation" in the Adirondacks, near Lake Placid, NY. The trip evoked many wonderful memories of taking similar trips with my mom and dad over 30 years ago. Though I haven't been in those parts for many years, the Adirondacks' unique charm and quiet ambiance almost instantaneously enveloped my soul. I felt as though I had come home.

Since the trip was geared more for "family" and camping, I spent relatively little time prowling with my camera. Of course, I did manage to catch a few images of the "rocks and water" variety...particularly on the ausable river.

Indeed, there is a short story attached to the images I took there, which I'd like to share in this blog entry. The title - "*Boinga, Boinga, Boinga*" Shots - refers to the "bounce" (translated as a "Boinga" sound) that all intrepid photographers perched on exposed trail bridges over the river go through while patiently waiting for the reverberations caused by (largely disinterested) passerbys to die down so that they can finally click the camera's shutter. Since I wanted to produce silky-smooth water flow, I needed my exposure times to be fairly long (> 5 to 10 sec). But, being the tourist attraction that it is, the ausable river trails are naturally overrun by adventurers; not all of whom appreciate the "fine art" of taking long exposures. Capturing a shot such as the one that appears at the top of this entry thus requires an enormous amount of patience; both on the part of the photographer and, unfortunately, on the part of the passerbys.

This particular shot was the result of - what must have seemed to an outside objective observer - a comedy of errors. First I had to wait for the clouds to block out the sun. A process which played itself out multiple times over the course of a hour or more, as small bands drifted in and out of view. Next, I had to "coordinate" cloud-blocked composition opportunities with stretches of time during which the bridge was entirely free of passerby footsteps. This was far from easy. I had to make quick sideways glances to the left and right, while holding my camera in position for a preplanned shot. Of course, there were several "opportunities" which misfired. Typically, if I clicked the shutter and the bridge was free of hikers, a cloud would dissipate faster than I had anticipated and the shot was ruined. Just as typically, the clouds would stay in place and the light would be just right, but a hiker (or two, or three, or an entire family!) would appear - mysteriously - from out of the woods (and off the trail) and noisily make their way - *boinga, boinga, boinga* - across the bridge.

Once, just for good measure, a family of three started on their way from one end of the bridge toward me and my tripod near the middle, and stopped in mid-stride when they saw me lift my eye and head (and may have heard me mutter something like "Arghh" after missing a chance to get a shot). Seeing that the cloud cover was still good and that the party was (at least for the moment) motionless - and upon hearing one of them say to the others, "Hey, look, a photographer is taking pictures, let's be quiet!" (which brought a smile to my face) I bent back over my viewfinder and was preparing to press the shutter, when - *boinga, boinga, boinga* - forward (and onward and closer) went the boots.

The unfolding events were far from over. I lifted my head, uttered another soft "Arghh" under my breath, and felt the group halt again (and heard the same member softly admonish the others, "Hey, he's not done, hold on a minute.") Back to my viewfinder I go, only to see the clouds break and the bright sun beat down on the water. I lift my head back up, this time because of the blinding light; but this time hear, "OK, he's done, let's go." Before his sentence is finished, the cloud cover comes back and my eye goes back to the viewfinder, only to see the effects of the - *boinga, boinga, boinga* - footsteps coming closer to me. I keep my eye glued to the finder, hoping for a miracle. As the group passes me, one of the hikers accidentally trips over one of my tripod's legs (though there was ample room to maneuver around). I straighten up and accept the sincere and immediate apology; but as I do the cloud cover vanishes.

The group of hikers is now standing a few feet from me, and is both quiet and intrigued by what I am taking pictures of. I answer a few questions (while waiting for the clouds to come back to block the sun), and - seeing the cloud cover return - quickly turn back to my camera, and hear a "Hey, good luck with your shots fella" followed by the now omnipresent *boinga, boinga, boinga* sound (and reverberation) as the group moves away. I lift my head (in half disgust, but with still a bit of humor at the Monty-Pythonesque predicament my desire to capture this little scene has placed me in) and see the group, once again - and for the last time, since they are now getting close to the other side of the bridge - stop, and no doubt seeing my increasing angst - sincerely wish to allow me to take a "quiet" shot. Gratefully, I bend down, see that the cloud cover is still good, and take my shot. As soon as I hear the click of the shutter after the exposure is complete (though there is no way the group of hikers could have heard from where they were standing), I feel the *boinga, boinga, boinga* of their steps as they step off the bridge and move off into the woods and out of site. That whole process, to capture that one shot, took about 40 min.

When I got back to my car, and after I had a chance to reflect on my experience, I admonished myself for my infantile-like reaction to the not-always-accomodating natural



elements (cloud cover vs no cloud cover) and the presence of hikers with heavy boots. Apart from the obvious fact that I had no more right to be on the bridge than the hikers (so that, in truth, they "owed" me nothing by way of accommodating my purpose for being there) , we were all a vital part of a little self-contained "world" out there on that bridge. And the hikers, whose *boinga, boinga, boinga* certainly affected my ability to capture an image at the instant that their boots were going "*boinga, boinga, boinga,*" actually helped me produce what I feel is a better image than what I was likely to have captured were it not for their presence.

The simple reason is that the interplay between the bright sun, cloud cover and the *boinga, boinga, boinga* all conspired to *slow me down*. These elements collectively helped ease my mind and soul to a slower pace; one much more attuned to the Adirondacks' own natural rhythms. I may have wanted to take a quick picture and go, but I didn't take the time to ask the ausable river whether it wanted its picture taken in such a quick and impersonal manner. As a photographer, I ought to have known better. And I humbly and sincerely thank the merry band of hikers - who kept going *boinga, boinga, boinga* - for reminding me of the need to just slow down, immerse myself in the environment and quietly listen to my subject.





Escher, Paul Klee, and a Turtle, Oh My...

...to which the tagline can read: a snapshot of the corner shelf in the study of a photographer prone to a gentle madness (where the "madness" refers to the deep passion for books, and is part of the title of a book - not shown - that describes that passion).

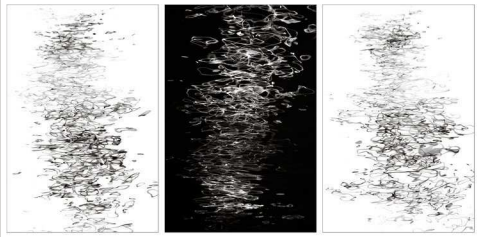
My home, much to wife's dismay, is filled with books; all kinds of books; a veritable (countable) infinity of books, though a demonstrably smaller infinity than, say, the infinity represented by the categories one can imagine by which these books can all be distinguished, and that they collectively represent an intertwined wisdom about. Short books, and long; dime-store paperbacks and coffee-table-sized hardcovers; textured papers and glossy; those with pictures and others with only text; books about history and culture; philosophy, art, religion and Zen; the collected works of Chekov, Ellery Queen, Stanislaw Lem, and Philip K. Dick (with scattered books and tapes by Alan Watts); travelogues about conquests of Everest, Antarctica, and Ayahuasca; biographies of Maxwell, Dirac, and Feynman, as well as Ansel, Cartier-Bresson, and two Westons (Edward and Brett); books on self-organized vortices of consciousness and anything else mused on by Hofstadter; Christopher Alexander's magnum opus; and more books on physics and photography than most dreams can conjure over a dozen or more nights!

Borges famously introduced a ridiculously wondrous taxonomy of all knowledge in his 1942 essay "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" (which he claims to have taken from an ancient Chinese encyclopedia, Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge). The categories of animals alone includes:

*"Those that belong to the emperor;
Embalmed ones;
Those that are trained;
Suckling pigs;
Mermaids (or Sirens);
Fabulous ones;
Stray dogs;
Those that are included in this classification;
Those that tremble as if they were mad;
Innumerable ones;
Those drawn with a very fine camel hair brush;
Et cetera;
Those that have just broken the flower vase;
Those that, at a distance, resemble flies."*

And to this whimsical classification I introduce another that leads directly to the title of this blog: an image of the books (and of whatever else might fall onto your camera's sensor) that sits directly in front of you as you work on your images on a computer. Arbitrary? To be sure. Meaningful? Only to the extent that it is a well-formed query that has a definite answer; it may even provide a glimpse of what "interests one" most, right now, as in "I need this and that reference to be by my side." If we are what we read (and eat, and see, and do, ...) then surely our most immediate literary/visual companions are what we are at this moment (so long as they assembled on the shelf by themselves).

So my soul, right now, evidently needs these 15 books to be within easy reach as I muse and ponder and tinker with tones and forms on my computer: 9 are related to photography, 3 to art, and 1 each to mathematics, physics, and an "uncategorizable" category onto itself (best defined by its title: The Art of Looking Sideways); well, these books and an image of an old, wise sea turtle who - like a Zen sage - quietly reminds me of the transience of all categories and classifications, and that, eventually, even my desire to look sideways will drift into a timeless void.



The Experience of a Photograph

The finest photography makes you forget you are looking at a photograph and makes you experience it as if it were real; as if you were a part of it.

Photography need not be restricted in any way in what it represents, or how it represents it. Even the word "photography" is needlessly restrictive. It is useful only insofar as it "points to" something someone has created (which the world calls a "photograph"). But once the physical object is created, the word "photograph" has served its purpose and can be safely discarded. It is the object we care about; or, more precisely, the affect the object has on us, as viewers. Of course, the degree to which one viewer "feels as one" with a photograph always depends on the viewer's particular predilections and aesthetics. Ardent admirers of Andy Warhol generally react markedly differently to a given image (whatever the image!) than admirers of the art of Wassily Kandinsky. But that is the whole point; a point that - upon deeper reflection - may hint at the embryonic stirrings of an experiential equation of aesthetics:

$$\text{Experience} = f(\text{Photograph}; \text{Context, Interpretation})$$

Before I explain some of the (obvious?) parts of this equation, let me quickly get the "f" (= "function") out of the way. Feel free to disregard it. It is inserted merely as a

philosophical placeholder, and for completeness. It reminds us that there is "something" that binds and equates the two sides, but its precise makeup is (for our purposes here) unimportant. It is exceedingly unlikely to have a nice, mathematically well-defined definition. In fact, the best description of what it is a placeholder for is a "human observer" (of "photograph"); and no one, so far as I know (with the possible exception of Stephen Wolfram, developer of Mathematica and the soon-to-be-released Wolfram Alpha), has yet been bold enough to posit a "function" for a human being.

"A human being is part of a whole, called by us the 'Universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest--a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness." - Albert Einstein

So what do I mean by this equation? I mean that - ultimately - that the only experience that is of any lasting consequence to an observer viewing a photograph (or any work of art; or anything!) is the experience itself. That is to say, after all is said and done, after an observer "views" an artwork, the only thing that matters to that observer, the only thing that is of any lasting value, is how - from the observer's own inner point of view - the observer has changed as a consequence of experiencing the artwork. No one can say what that experience will be like, beforehand. The observer is able to reflect back on what the experience was like - on what the artwork means - only after experiencing it (which involves recursive feedback loops on nested experiences, meta-experiences, and the like; none of which we'll get into here). But the observer will be changed in some way. She may be happy, sad, puzzled, angry, detached, thoughtful, tearful, sardonic, ..., or (though unlikely) she may remain completely unchanged, save for the memory of having physically interacted with the artwork. And it is the way in which our ineffable inner state - our prison-like solitary experience of "I-ness" - changes as a function of our viewing of an artwork that defines what that artwork means to us, as viewers.

The left-hand-side of the equation thus represents the inner experience that a viewer has of an observed artwork. The "Photograph" is the physical photograph, and is perhaps the only part of the equation that may be described with something approaching a mathematical rigor. It represents the tangibly objective properties of an image. The paper it appears on, the color dyes and pigments it is imprinted with, its tonal range and contrast levels, and - to some degree - the "things" it depicts (either representationally or non-representationally, as "abstract" shapes and forms; defined mechanically, as by a digital scanner). The "Context" refers to (1) the context in which the photograph itself appears (perhaps as one of a series of related images, or some other over-arching portfolio of images; is it hanging in a gallery? is it a stray remnant of a discarded box of old polaroids?

a web-only image on some unknown photographer's photo-blog?); and (2) the context in which the observer finds herself in while viewing the image, which itself includes both inner and outer dimensions. Is the observer in a gallery setting? is it a private viewing with family and co-workers (the latter set including people to whom she is not as "close")? has she just had lunch with a friend and is in a good mood? has she recently had a spat with her mom and is feeling sad? has she had a long interest in photography, or is perhaps herself a photographer, or is her interest more fleeting?

Finally, "Interpretation" refers to how the viewer interprets the artwork; or the (inner) meaning she ascribes to the work. Interpretation refers to how she really "sees" the work; not necessarily how the work "really" is (objectively speaking, as defined by its physical dimension, the "Photograph"). Note that the viewer does not have to (and, in general, may not even be able to) "see" any of the objectively-hidden "subjective" dimensions of an image, if there are any. Think of the well-known "Hidden Dalmation" image which consists of black and white patches, and may be "seen" as such by some viewers; or may be "seen" as a dalmation by others. The "Photograph" dimension of this experience is the objective image; the "Interpretation" dimension is either "seeing black and white patches" or "seeing a dalmation" (and its attendant associations: does the viewer like dalmations? is she afraid of them? does it remind her of a childhood incident that, by itself, has nothing to do with dalmations or dogs of any kind?...))

"All our thoughts and concepts are called up by sense-experiences and have a meaning only in reference to these sense-experiences. On the other hand, however, they are products of the spontaneous activity of our minds; they are thus in no wise logical consequences of the contents of these sense-experiences. If, therefore, we wish to grasp the essence of a complex of abstract notions we must for the one part investigate the mutual relationships between the concepts and the assertions made about them; for the other, we must investigate how they are related to the experiences." - Albert Einstein

What the equation $E=f(P:C,I)$ suggests is that whatever an observer experiences by viewing a photograph (or any artwork) is a (likely very complicated) function of (1) the photograph itself, as a physical object; (2) the inner emotional and outer environmental contexts in which the viewer is situated in while viewing the photograph; and (3) the interpretation that the viewer ascribes to the photograph (which, since it is also a function of multiple factors, may be but only one exemplar - true for a given context - of a possibly vast set of alternative interpretations by the same observer). On a trivial level, we've simply decomposed a single dimension ("Experience") into three. As an academic exercise, it focuses attention on some of the basic factors that influence how we view art in general.

Other writers, considerably more esteemed than I (and with deeper results), have gone through this exercise before. For example, the well-known photographer / photography theorist Stephen Shore, in his book *The Nature of Photographs*, introduces a similar set of factors (that he calls "levels") for interpreting an image: the physical level, the depictive level, the mental level, and mental modeling. Each depicts one of the four core elements of an image: vantage point, frame, focus and time. John Szarkowski, the late great photography historian / curator / critic, in his *The Photographers Eye*, suggests five dimensions: the thing itself, the detail, the frame, time, and vantage point. But however you slice the dimensions - one can always add or subtract to taste - such decompositions, if done thoughtfully, are useful because they partly disentangle the otherwise messy soup of objective and subjective factors that define our overall experience of an artwork.

But what I am after here is subtly different. Assuming that the experience of an artwork is the most meaningful dimension (though, as we've discussed, it too has an ephemeral nature, and may take on added dimensions as the same observer "views" an artwork at different times and in different contexts), what the equation leaves the door open for - at least formally - is the possibility that the same overall experience may result from many different combinations of photograph, context, and interpretation.

Think about that for a moment. Suppose the "experience" is "feeling joyful, imagining you are in a field of Gold, without a care in the world, and being suddenly transfixed by the notion of Buddhist impermanence" (or anything else, for specificity;-). What gave you this experience? Perhaps it was looking at Ansel Adams' "Moonrise, Hernandez" at the Smithsonian (where an original print was recently on display, and which induced roughly the same "inner experience" in me as I was viewing it). Although we are conditioned to think of our experience - after the fact - as being synonymous with what we were viewing (when asked, we reply: "I was looking at the Ansel Adams exhibit"), the more personally meaningful symbolic (and literal) token of our experience is the memory of the experience itself. It is the memory of what we felt as we were viewing whatever we were viewing; the state of mind we were in, cognitively, intuitively, and emotionally. (For mathematically inclined readers, this is essentially the art-equivalent of taking a Fourier transform between, say, momentum and position space in physics. The respective spaces represent two views of the same system; and do so in a way that preserves information. In our case, "information" is equivalent to "experience," and the function "f" hints at a Fourier-transform-like "experience preserving" sloshing back-and-forth among three dimensions.) Now imagine - perhaps in some distant time, when evolution has worked its magic on our cognitive / emotional / aesthetic processing abilities - we are able to recall experiences as readily as we now recall things and events. Were we such creatures, we would not care

whether the "thing" was the "Moonrise, Hernandez" by Ansel Adams (or the "event" a showing at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC in 2008); we would care - and remember - only that there was a moment in our lives when we felt "joyful, imagined we were in a field of Gold, were without a care in the world, and were suddenly transfixed by the notion of Buddhist impermanence." But so many other combinations of photograph, context, and interpretation could have put us into the same state! Depending on the person, perhaps Minor White's "Capitol Reef, Utah (1962)," viewed on a computer monitor late at night could induce essentially the same experience. Generalizing further, perhaps the same experience may also be had by listening to, say, Beethoven's *Appassionata Sonata* with a group of close friends at a local country concert hall.

Getting back to - and expanding upon - the main thesis of the earlier blog entry, I now state the main conjecture of this blog entry: the finest photography consists of those images that - for the broadest possible set of contexts and interpretations - yield the most meaningful experiences in the broadest class of observers. Note that the class of "finest photographs" is emphatically not defined solely by the physical dimension of any one photograph; and - critically - includes the observer. "Moonrise, Hernandez" - arguably a fine example of "fine photograph" in the Western world ;-) may rank somewhat lower among the Aka People of Africa (whose collective "aesthetics" are probably quite different from ours). Photograph and viewer are - must be - inextricably interwoven and coupled. A "photograph" has no more a single interpretation, and entails no more of a single experience, than a human is defined by a single inner state and experiences life as a single event (though some mystics claim that is precisely what life is). What a photograph "is" (to an observer) depends on - and is, in turn, shaped by - how the observer experiences the photograph; which henceforth becomes part of the observer, and helps shape what other photographs "will be" and the manner in which they, too, will shape the observer.

"I don't believe people are looking for the meaning of life as much as they are looking for the experience of being alive." - Joseph Campbell

Taking a cue from Campbell, we can rephrase the main conjecture of this blog entry as follows: the finest photography consists of those images that - for the broadest possible set of contexts and interpretations - induce the richest, deepest feelings of being alive in the broadest class of observers.

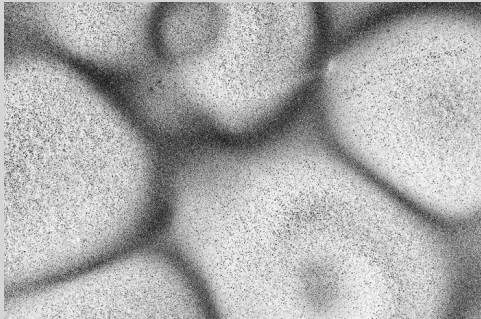
Thought Experiment #1: What would an artwork that depicts all of the possible artworks, in all of the possible contexts and interpretations that a given observer might ascribe to them, look like, starting with - as an example - Adams' "Moonrise, Hernandez"? How would an

observer of Adams' "Moonrise, Hernandez" experience this meta artwork? Is there a Borgesian Aleph of art?

Thought Experiment #2: This blog entry has introduced a formal distinction between a "fine art photograph" and a (run of the mill?) "photograph" as defined for a group of observers. An obvious question is, what does this distinction entail for the individual observer? Following our formulation, we speculate that an observer - say the artist herself? - seeks that combination of artwork, context and interpretation (as any other observer does, of course) that induces the richest, deepest feeling of being alive. Here's a thought experiment: thinking only of yourself as observer (no collective "averaging" is being done here!...this is you we're talking about!), what would you imagine that artwork to look like that - out of all possible artworks that you can possibly create in this lifetime, and that you can observe in all conceivable contexts so as to form all imaginable interpretations - is the one that makes you feel most alive? Now go out and create it...

Postscript: the image posted at the beginning of this essay is a triptych of photographs of moonlight, reflected in *Lake Saranac*, in the Adirondacks NY. The images were taken from a series captured during a single, exceptionally clear night in August, 2008.





The Click of the Shutter Button, and A Deep Mystery

Physics is replete with "revolutions" in world-view that emerged after someone was brilliant enough - and brave enough - to question the foundations of "common wisdom."

Witness Copernicus and his assertion that the Earth was not the center of the universe; Newton and his realization that the same force that binds us, as physical beings, to this planet is the same one that keeps the planets in their orbits; James Clerk Maxwell and his curiosity about the relationship between electricity and magnetism; Einstein and his stubbornly persistent analysis of the deep meaning of simultaneity; and Louis deBroglie (along with a handful of others, including Einstein) puzzling over the difference between particles and waves. The list goes on and on, of course.

In each case, a seemingly mundane - but sincere - questioning of an "obvious" fact (as Tommy Lee Jones says to the Will Smith character in the movie *Men in Black*, as he tries recruiting Smith's character to join MIB: "Everybody *knew* the Earth was flat...") led to a radical conceptual reordering of how we think of the universe, and our role in it.

*"We pass into mystical states
from out of ordinary consciousness
as from a less into a more,
as from a smallness into a vastness,
and at the same time
as from an unrest to a rest.
We feel them as reconciling,
unifying states."*

– William James
Variety of Religious Experience

While I do not propose any such radical reconceptions of our world in this humble little blog entry, I am going to suggest that the "creative act of photography" affords us an opportunity to ask a disarmingly trivial question (that may indeed alter how we perceive and interact with our environment, and ourselves). I will preface the question by first positing that one of the deepest mysteries confronting science today (apart from questions pertaining to the standard model of physics, string theories, or loop quantum gravity) is the *nature and origin of consciousness*. Consciousness is something we all, presumably, possess; yet is something about which - apart from knowing we possess it, and guessing that our experience of it is "pretty much the same" as that of any other humanly conscious creature - we have little or no real understanding.

Three of the more cogent (and often widely disagreeing) discussions of consciousness are (1) *Consciousness Explained* (by Daniel Dennet), (2) *The Conscious Mind* (by David Chalmers), and (3) *I am a Strange Loop* (by Douglas Hofstadter). None of these, of course, "explains" consciousness; but all are great at stimulating further discussion.

My particular interest, at least for purposes of this blog entry, is that aspect of consciousness that has to do with intentionality; i.e., the (apparently) willful decision to "act" (such as when we decide to "press the shutter" of a camera). Before I ask that question, however, consider this "simple" experience: I am holding a ball in my hand, which, at some point in time, for whatever reason, I decide to throw up in the air a few inches, and catch again. A trivial everyday act. Yet an utter mystery, as far as both fundamental physics and our understanding of consciousness is concerned. Just as there is no "physics" (of which I am aware), no equations or simulations, that accounts for why a small sphere located at some space-time position (x,y,z,t) suddenly "decides" to move against the gravitational field; there is no theory of consciousness that "explains" why I chose to throw up a ball. Oh, I certainly register the fact that the ball has been thrown - i. e., I am "conscious" of having done so after I've done it - but I have utterly no idea why I chose to throw it at the time I threw it. Benjamin Libet has studied this fascinating phenomenon in the laboratory (see *Mind Time*), and has found that consciousness is actually far from a vehicle of willful intentionality; indeed, its real purpose may be to negate possible actions, not - as we have been taught by convention - to create them.

Why am I choosing the words I'm typing now, and not others? How are they forming in my mind (and, while we are on the subject, what is mind?) I am aware of having "written", but I am at a complete loss as to explaining *why* I chose the words I did; nor am I able to "explain" why they emerged when they did. They "come out of me," as if by magic; and I have little, or no, "control" over what they are or when they will form. My conscious self

reflects back on their existence, but appears blissfully unaware of the process by which they were created.

So what does all of this have to do with photography? Everything, really; the creative act of photography is a microcosm of our general state of conscious experience. The best photography is usually done when the photographer is in a state of flow; in which many of the attributes of "self awareness" - or consciousness itself - vanish. In truth, though, every single photograph is a result of (at least an instant's worth) of a "lack of consciousness." When I press the shutter, at that instant, *I am completely unaware of why I have done so.* It is important to understand exactly what I mean by this. I do not mean that I have idea of what I am doing. Clearly, I am out taking photographs, and I am fully aware of this, even as I press the shutter. But when my finger physically moves down on the shutter button to initiate capture, I have absolutely no idea why that act did not occur a microsecond before or a microsecond after. Indeed, if Libet's research is to be believed, the best I can say is that I become aware of having pressed the shutter button only *after I have done so*, but in no other way has my consciousness been an active participant in the process that led up to pressing the button.

The act of taking a picture thus presents the photographer with both a puzzle (about who we really are, apart from the role we play in helping the universe take a picture of itself) and an opportunity to learn something about the universal core of the creative process and consciousness itself.

What I sometimes do (when I can retain enough of my self-awareness to remember to do this;-) is to try to minimize the time between which I have pressed the shutter and at which I become conscious of having pressed the shutter. This is not at all as "easy" at it may sound. It requires a razor-sharp Zen-like focus on the process and the moment; and is, at heart, obviously antithetical to the "photographic flow" process, as described in my earlier blog entry.

It harbors a bit of a paradox: the deeper one is immersed in the "flow," the less able one is to "reflect" on the process and "understand" the unconscious instant of capture; on the other hand, the "easier" it is to reflect on the process, the less likely it is that the process being reflected upon is the one of deepest interest (i.e., "flow"). Paradox - unavoidably it seems - always lurks around questions about consciousness; and just as mysteriously, it lies at the very heart of the creative process.





Experiential "Flow" in Photography

I am often asked, "*What do you think about when you do photography?*" To which I typically respond with something like, "the less the better." An answer which, unfortunately - more often than not - only leads to a protracted discussion (that my deliberately "short" reply is usually meant to avoid).

However, the truth is that while my reply is curt, it is far from flippant. Indeed, it conveys the very essence of what I love about photography. Apart from the signature theme of my blog ("Tao" / photography), and my lifelong predilection toward mysticism and spirituality, the one word - the one idea - that best describes what the "I" that the external world calls "Andy Ilachinski the photographer" experiences during (the most memorable moments of doing) photography is *flow*.

Here I am thinking of the word "flow" as defined by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, director of the Quality of Life Research Center at the Drucker School of Claremont Graduate University, and author of (among many other books), *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. In this book (and in his multi-decade long examination of the subject), Csíkszentmihályi describes the supra-conscious state (sometimes called the "groove" by musicians, or the "zone" by basketball players) that people "awaken" to and experience when completely absorbed and immersed in an activity. For me, of

*"It is when we act freely,
for the sake of the action itself
rather than for ulterior motives,
that we learn to become
more than what we were"*

– Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience

course, that "activity" is doing photography; or, more precisely, when I am out "shooting with my camera" (and eye/I).

When I write, as I do in some of my blog entries and Blurb books, that my best moments as an artist - as a human being - are those when I entirely lose a sense of self, I do not mean this to be interpreted as poetry or metaphor; I mean this literally. If I come home from a day's worth of a photo-safari, armed with 10 or more GBs of RAW files, and know that I was *totally aware of what I was doing the entire time* (consciously thinking of f-stops, filters, and compositions), I will also know that there will be little chance of finding any soulful art in that huge digital pile. I was not in the flow.

On the other hand, if I go out for a walk with my dog and camera, and come back with but one shot of *I know not what because my mind was lost while I was taking it*, I stand a good chance of savoring that precious gem of an image that is likely to emerge on my computer screen. Not always, of course, but the chances are usually good, if I lost myself in the process of capture.

This experience, and my interpretation of it, is far from unique. It is experienced by everyone, at some point in time, though not everyone is always attuned to when (or why and how) it happens, nor appreciates what needs to be done to maximize the chances of it happening again. This is where Csíkszentmihályi's books come in handy, as they describe the nature of this experiential flow; how it comes about, what the tell-tale signs are, and how one might better prepare for the "ride."

Note: There is a wonderful 20 min long presentation by Csíkszentmihályi on TEDBlog. A powerpoint presentation (in Adobe PDF) is also available: <http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/csikszentmihalyipowerpoint.pdf>.

Csíkszentmihályi identifies 8 conditions / dimensions of the flow experience: (1) clear goals every step of the way; (2) immediate feedback to one's action; (3) balance between challenges and skills; (4) focused concentration; (5) sense of potential control; (6) loss of self-consciousness; (7) time distortion; and (8) autotelic or self-rewarding experience. Critically, in order to maximize the potential for experiencing flow, one must eliminate (as much as possible) any anxiety or boredom, and strike a delicate (and typically dynamic) balance between the challenge of the activity and the available skills that one brings to bear on the required tasks. The purest - or deepest - states of flow are achieved when one is able to apply a maximal skill set (which can itself, of course, be achieved only through long study and practice; i.e., a total immersion to craft) to the most highly challenging activity. This is rare, but is a spiritual prize well worth pursuing.

Among the several wonderful quotes that Csíkszentmihályi includes in his University of Pennsylvania's *Positive Psychology Center* presentation are these three: one from an anonymous rock climber...

"You're so involved in what you're doing, you aren't thinking about yourself as separate from the immediate activity. You're no longer a participant observer, only a participant. You're moving in harmony with something else you're part of."

...one from a surgeon:

"You are not aware of the body except your hands...not aware of self or personal problems....If involved, you are not aware of aching feet, not aware of self."

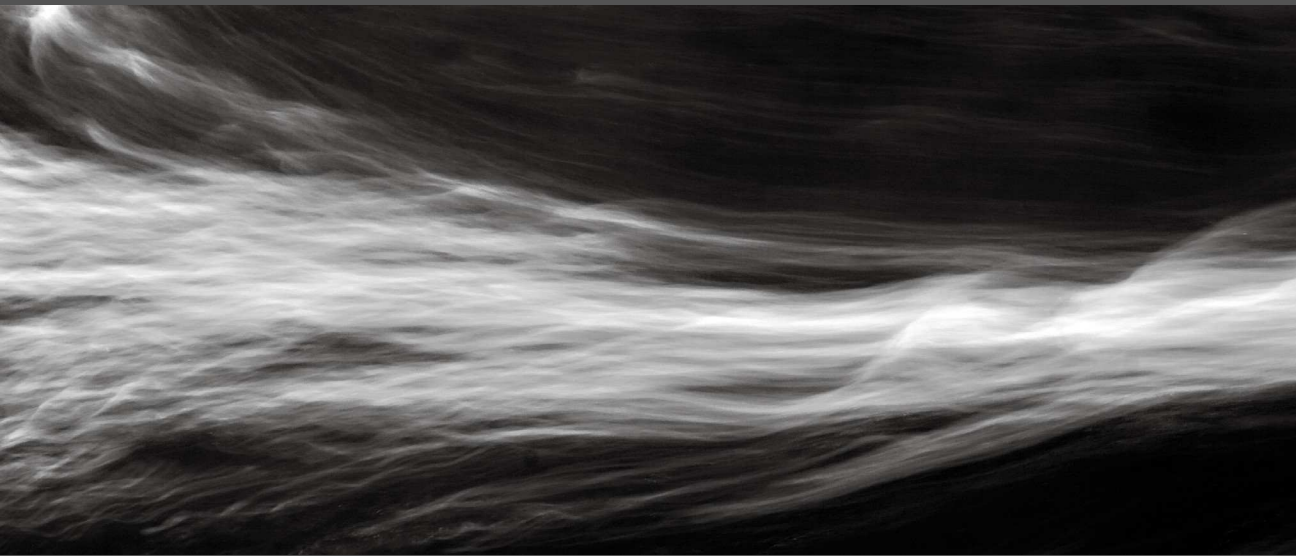
...and one from poet Mark Strand:

"You're right in the work, you lose your sense of time, you're completely enraptured, you're completely caught up in what you're doing.... there's no future or past, it's just an extended present in which you're making meaning..."

These sentiments pretty much express my own experience of flow in photography. When in the flow, I do not know my name, I do not know where I am except for the "feel" of my immediate surroundings, I do not reflect on my problems or station in life, I do not worry about what "I need to do" after I've finished my photography. I am one with my camera, I am one with what my camera is pointed at, I have no conscious sense of self or awareness of being, apart from a pure primal joy in experiencing total immersion in what I am doing. I am focused, strongly and deeply, but not at all actively engaged in thinking about anything. There is no sense of time, not even as I press the shutter repeatedly or take long exposures and somehow, though only mechanically and utterly devoid of conscious reflection, tick off the required seconds. I know the flow has vanished when I hear myself ask, "*What now?*"

Interestingly, Csíkszentmihályi's research suggests that it is highly unlikely that individuals will attain a sense of flow - in any field or endeavor - unless they've immersed themselves in it for at least 10 years. I can attest to this being true in my case, though (being a bit slow perhaps;-) it took me nearly twenty to reach this state. But, oh how I look forward to that precious, wondrous experience when it comes! Alas, when I am in one of those (much, much more frequent) non-flow states, the best I can do is recall *having* the flow experience, not the flow itself. But I know it will come...

So, "What do you think about when you do photography?"



Physics vs Photography: Which is Harder?

George Barr, on his *Behind the Lens* blog, posted one of those wonderfully thought-provoking (and ultimately unanswerable) questions about the relative "difficulty" (as an activity) of one's day-job (in George's case, being a medical doctor, and in mine a physicist) and fine-art photography. While I couldn't resist leaving George a stream-of-consciousness comment on his own blog, his interesting question kept haunting me even as I focused attention to other matters.

My answer to George was (and remains), though not quite as strongly as when I first composed it, that *photography* is harder. The really hard part is explaining, if only to myself, what I mean by "harder."

So, here are a few thoughts. First, the creative aspects of both professions, for me, are, on a meta-level, roughly equivalent. That is, in their respective domains, both physics and photography tap into the same ineffably non-objective part of our brains; it could take minutes to find a "solution" (to a physics problem or compositional one), or it could take days, I just don't know...but the process by which I search for a solution is, at a deep level, equivalent, and equivalently exhilarating. Indeed, it is precisely this "all but impossible to describe" process of finding a mathematical solution to a problem or finding that "just right"

$$\dot{\mathbf{p}} = \frac{\partial H}{\partial \mathbf{q}} \quad \dot{\mathbf{q}} = \frac{\partial H}{\partial \mathbf{p}} \quad \nabla \cdot \mathbf{E} = 4\pi\rho \quad \nabla \times \mathbf{E} = -\frac{1}{c} \frac{\partial \mathbf{B}}{\partial t}$$

$$\nabla \cdot \mathbf{B} = 0 \quad PV = nRT \quad S = k \ln \Omega \quad \frac{dS}{dt} \geq 0$$

$$\Delta x \Delta p_x \geq \frac{1}{2} h \quad \nabla \times \mathbf{B} = \frac{4\pi}{c} \mathbf{j} + \frac{1}{c} \frac{\partial \mathbf{E}}{\partial t} \quad \Delta E \Delta t \geq \frac{1}{2} h$$

$$dE = dQ - dW \quad G_{\mu\nu} = -8\pi G T_{\mu\nu}$$

$$i\hbar \frac{\partial \Psi}{\partial t} = -\frac{\hbar^2}{2m} \frac{\partial^2 \Psi}{\partial x^2} + V(x) \Psi(x, t) \equiv \hat{H} \Psi(x, t)$$

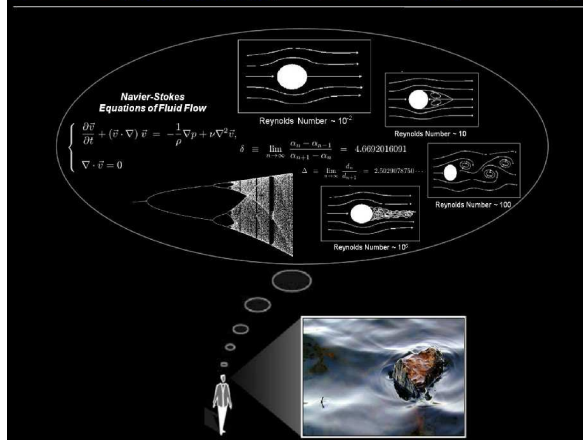
Particles (P, n, e, π, ν, ...)		
Mass (m)	Energy (E)	
Inertia (I)	Fine-Structure Constant (α)	
Momentum (p)		
Planck's Constant (h)	Spin (s)	Speed of Light (c)
Gravitational constant (G)		

sequence of photographic steps (subject matter, composition, exposure, raw processing and photoshop manipulation, and print expression) to get a "print" that draws me both to physics and photography. So far, so good; and so far, about even.

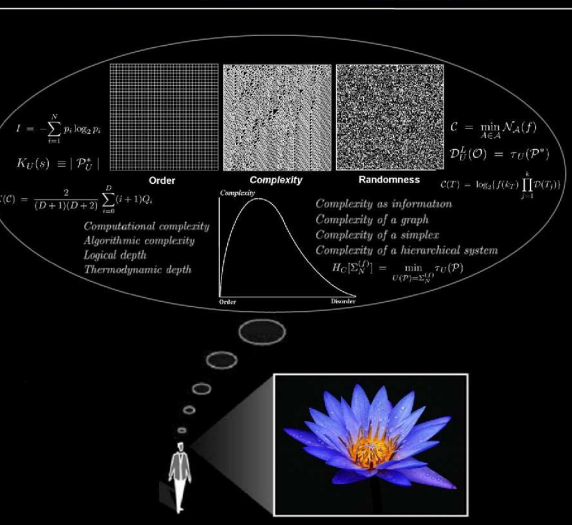
On a more pragmatic level...it is a fact that physics pays the bills (at least for me; though I understand there are fine-art photographers who make a comfortable living doing precisely, and only, that, as their day job). In my case, I know that while I'm wearing my physics hat during the day, I will have loads and loads of time (for which I am well compensated) to just think and ponder problems (mostly of my choosing). I have that luxury. But in photography, the time I have is the time I both make (by myself) and borrow (and/or negotiate with my family). I therefore know - and am almost always consciously aware of the fact (even as I wander around with my camera) - that I do not have precious loads of time at my disposal; that each moment is that much more precious, and can ill-afford to squander any time.

I would be less than honest if I didn't admit to sometimes feeling that doing photography on "borrowed time" represents something of a small advantage, creatively, since I am compelled to learn to make the "best possible use" of whatever time I get. There is also the implicit understanding that when I am doing my photography, I have no pressure to perform (unlike my day-job); I do it on my time, of my choosing, and lose

Sometimes I *ponder about physics* when something catches my eye



Sometimes I *ponder about complexity ...*



nothing, really, if a particular day (or week) leads to abject creative failure.

On the other hand (just how many sides to this are there? ;-), I am my own harshest critic when it comes to photography, and I always have to come up with lame excuses to myself about why a photo-safari day came to naught. Over the long haul that too takes its toll (as my standards inevitably creep upwards, even as my perceived "quality" either stays the same or diminishes (as I get lazier, or tired, or just older).

So, which is "easier" when all is said and done; physics or photography? I think I'm still siding with George on this one. Its not that when I'm doing physics I'm "going through the motions" (I certainly hope not!), but my "day job" has the virtue of having much of its substance (and most of its activity) predefined for me. I waste little energy - creative or otherwise - worrying about what problem to think about, or even whether today is a good day to start a new research topic or write a paper. I'm not even speaking of the mathematical techniques and computer modeling tools I'll likely be using. I know what they are, and I know (in most cases) how to apply them to the problems at hand (and if not, I know where to turn to learn about them, almost as though on auto-pilot).

But photography...well, in an important (and to non-photographers, paradoxical) sense, most photographers are happiest

when they are enshrouded in the totally unknown (which can make life hard)...we peek around that perpetually elusive corner in hopes of finding something we hope we never really find: something absolutely new that we've never ever seen before, and have little or no idea about what to do with if we find it. We keep looking for the "next best shot" and the "next best processing" steps and/or tools to apply to what we've caught on film (or CCD/CMOS). We both seek the unknown (with a passion!) and are afraid of it (because the unknown always throws you off balance). And there is always the spectre of losing one's muse and no longer being able to produce good work; and simply not being up to the technical task of expressing what one's Ansel-Adams' like "visualization" of the final print ought to look like.

We want to be tested, creatively, again and again; but the better we are at achieving our elusive goal, the more uncertain we are of our ability to keep going, and the more difficult it becomes to maintain one's focus and connection to the magic muse. Minor White may have said that *"Spirit always stands still long enough for the photographer It has chosen,"* but that, unfortunately, says nothing about the poor photographer who keeps working, hunting, worrying, praying that Spirit never leaves! For that's precisely when Spirit suddenly decides it has better places to visit. It's something all photographers worry about, at some time; and the likelihood of doing so, constantly, only increases as one grows

Sometimes I use my complexity to *steer my eye / camera*

The image is a complex collage. At the top, a black banner contains the text "Sometimes I use my complexity to *steer my eye / camera*". Below this, a large oval frame contains several photographs: a stone archway, a blue lotus flower, a white bird sculpture, a tree, a cathedral interior, and a person in a thought bubble. Below the oval, a person is shown in a thought bubble, looking at a computer screen. The screen displays a graph and mathematical formulas:

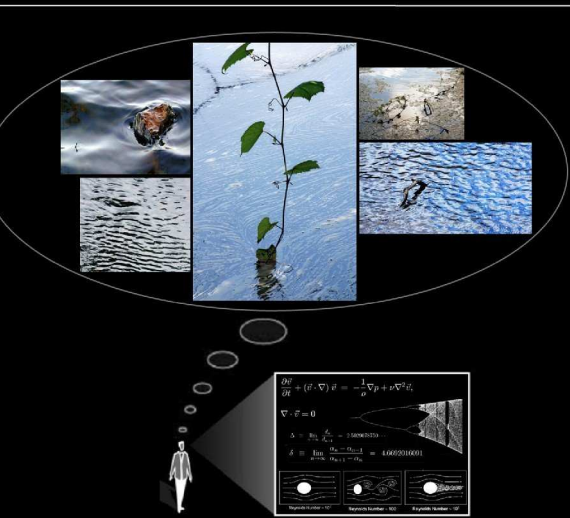
$$f = \sum_{i=1}^n |x_i| \log p_i$$

$$D(\mathcal{O}) = \tau_i(\mathcal{P}^*)$$

$$C = \min_{\mathcal{A}} \mathcal{N}_{\mathcal{A}}(f)$$

The screen also shows a table with columns labeled "Order", "Complexity", and "Businessness".

Sometimes I use my physics to *steer my eye / camera*

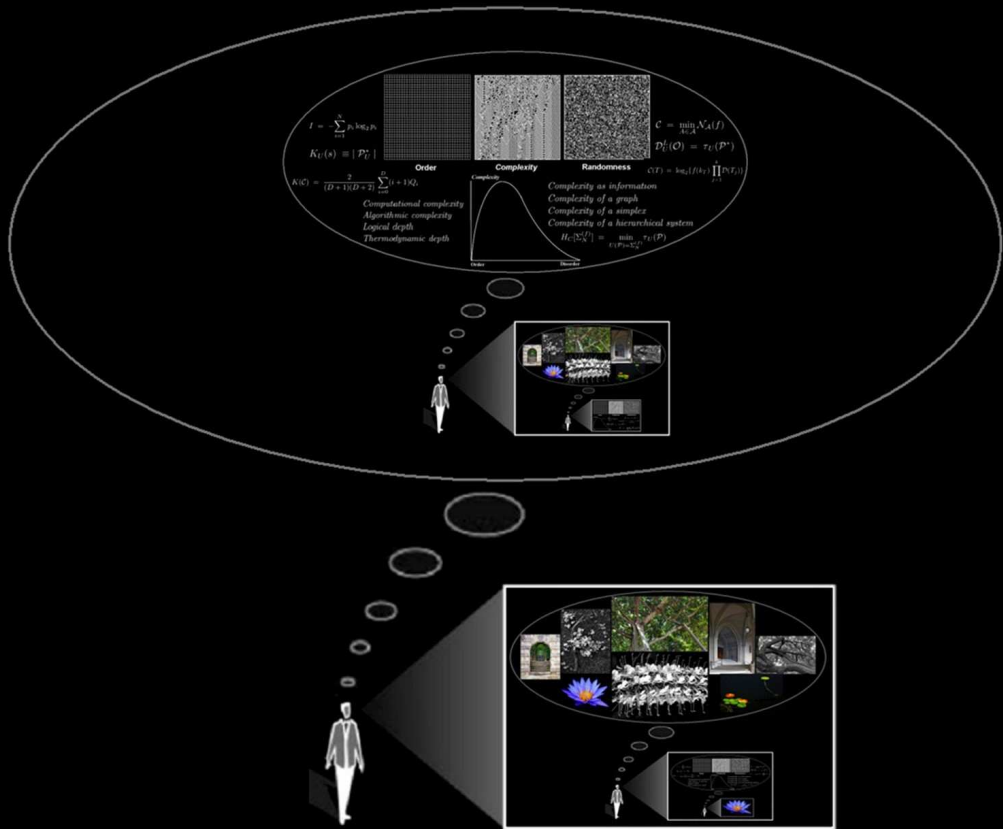


older and yearns to do great things. Needless to say, such worrisome states are not terribly conducive to genuine creativity or works of lasting value. I do not generally find myself thinking or worrying about such almost mystical matters in my day job.

Certainly, in physics, as in all sciences, there is a superficially similar (perpetual even) yearning to "learn more"...but learning is a process that most physicists have mastered long before they stumble upon the "metaphysical" dimensions of yearning (and finally succumb to it). In photography, on the other hand, there is a perpetual and *utterly insatiable* hunger to "find something new", which is a very, very hard thing to do, much less master.

So, as I sit here, at the "wise old age" of 47, and look back on 20 years as a physics PhD and about 35 years as a photographer (well, 36, if I include that sensational abstract I got of my bedpost with my very first polaroid;-), I'd say that photography is marginally more difficult than physics. The really fascinating thing is, though, that it only seems hard when I ponder the question of how hard it is. When I'm doing it, it's *effortless*; and the same goes for physics, of course.

In truth, the core “Andy” is a “complex” *nested creative process...*





Eightfold Path Toward Self-Discovery

*"And you?
When will you begin
that long journey
into yourself?" – RUMI*

In an age of ready access to all kinds of photo gear, from low end to high, and near instant self-gratification with "Wow, another stunning shot!" tweets from friends and family admiring our constant stream of smartphone image uploads, it is easy to forget that true photography - as a creative medium meant to express (and only rarely just to impress) - requires a lifetime's worth of dedication, practice, and patience. The result is not an immediate, but ultimately short-lived, reward; rather, it is a slow, meditative, Zen-like journey toward self-discovery.

I was reminded of this several years ago, upon publication of my first *Lenswork* portfolio, called *Micro Worlds*, when, in adherence to *Lenswork's* policy, I submitted a series of images woven around a single theme (a practice that, not quite by coincidence, I had been slowly evolving to on my own). After showing the published portfolio to my mom, she asked a disarmingly simple question:

"Andy, these photos are lovely, but why do you take so many pictures of the same thing?"

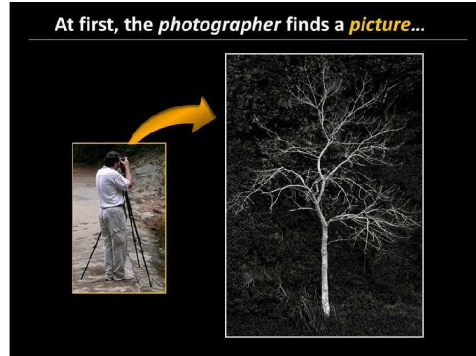
My immediate reply was honest but shallow. I told her that individual images were inadequate to fully express what I wanted to communicate about what I was seeing and feeling. My mom - who is not used to shallow answers about art, having lived with an artist (my dad) for as long as I can remember - called me on my flippant reply, and probed for something deeper. I tried again: *"I don't think in terms of individual images anymore; and when I see a subject that interests me, I want to explore it more, with multiple exposures and viewpoints."* In some ways, of course, that was worse than my first answer. And my mom immediately countered with: *"Andy, now that you've restated my question, how about explaining why you don't think in terms of individual images anymore?"* Though I had no meaningful reply, I realized that my mom had unwittingly revealed a meta-pattern shift in the gestalt of my photography at that time; one that I had not yet worked through on a cognitive level. The fact is that I did not then (those few years ago, when my mom asked her question), and do not today, find the same pleasure in capturing that "indelibly special image" as I did when I was first starting out in photography about 40 years ago; I need something more. This essay is a stab at communicating (mostly in words) the stages of development that, I suspect, almost all photographers go through if they stick with photography long enough, and which culminates not in the preternaturally magnificent final image (as all of us once aspired to when starting out), but a quiet, solemn revelation of our deepest selves. While my notes contain the germs of ideas for "stages of artistic evolution" whose numbers range from a only a few to more than a dozen, I eventually settled on eight steps, with perhaps a semi-conscious nod to the *Eightfold Way* of the Buddha.

Step 1: Joyful snapshots of anything and everything. What is the first thing anyone who gets a new "toy" (or serious tool) wants to do? Play with it, of course. See what it can do, learn how to use it, and just have some fun with it. The beginning photographer doesn't really care about anything other than taking pictures of whatever strikes her fancy: pictures of their dog or cat, snapshots of their friends,, their own reflection, a tree, a street, a baseball game, whatever. Everyone begins somewhere; and that "somewhere" for photographers is a joyful – and unabashedly indiscriminant - expression of a new found tool that takes pictures. In a basic sense, anyone who is alive and is the least bit curious about the world - and is given a camera, or any other artistic tool - instantly becomes a step-1 photographer.

Step 2: A passive stirring of aesthetic value. As the photographer evolves from step one to step two, she still takes images of anything and everything that strikes her fancy but now finds that certain objects draw a deeper attention than others. Her gaze still falls on most everything that surrounds her, but her embryonic photographer's "eye" begins to discern that aesthetic value is not uniformly distributed throughout the environment.

Certain scenes, and "special" things, draw her eye more than others. But the second stage photographer is still mostly passive, tentatively reacting to aesthetic stimuli as they appear and are recognized, but still largely undiscerning as to their relative merit and eager to "take in as much as possible." The step-2 photographer creates pictures in which others recognize that certain things are given more or less visual weight than others; but - because the step-2 photographer is still only a "beginner" - the pictures themselves are not necessarily as aesthetically pleasing as they could be.

Step 3: Willful engagement of the environment. The transition from step two to step three is both difficult to see "from the outside" (for observers of the photographer's inner journey) and dramatic (as experienced directly by the photographer). The transition occurs when the photographer finds herself discontent with the merely passive capture of objects, and instead, now actively seeks objects she deems "interesting." She has started to categorize the world according to her own unique measure(s) of lesser and greater aesthetic value. Objects (or places, or people, or activity) that the stage-three photographer holds in high regard become beacons in the environment that immediately attract the photographer's attention. If the photographer finds trees of particular interest, for example, she is no longer content with leaving a park with a "few stray shots of trees," but now deliberately searches for as many different



kinds of trees as she can find. The stage-three photographer begins to learn what she values most, and then goes out looking for it. She is also better able to use her skills to express why what she "saw" was so special to her.

Step 4: Recognition of the power of expression. The transition between step three and step four is marked by a gradual recognition of the power of using photography - traditionally, a print, but nowadays encompassing myriad forms - to express not the object itself, but what draws the photographer's attention to the object. In practical terms, this means that the stage four photographer is concerned less with depicting trees merely as objects



of interest (in keeping with our "tree" example) - being quite happy to display a set of "shots of pretty trees" that are otherwise unremarkable in any way - and more with finding the one shot (and the one resulting print) that best expresses to others why the photographer loves to photograph trees. This subtle (and not so easy) transition represents a very significant worldview shift, as well as a shift in artistic sensibility. Indeed, many photographers, myself included, find themselves stuck at the cusp between steps 3 and 4 for years, as they patiently explore ways to express *feeling*. Making matters even more difficult is that the stage 3/4 transition involves a gradual recognition of - and increased attention to - two different

worlds of reality and expression: (1) attention to using a print to isolate the tree as it appears to us, as an otherwise embedded feature of the external environment, and (2) attention to using post-capture tools (either in a traditional or digital darkroom) to properly express the most important features of the tree as captured in a photograph. This distinction is both subtle and deep. It is meaningful only insofar as the stage-4 photographer realizes there is an important aesthetic difference between using tools to render differences between trees and their environment (in order to "make them stand out" better from the surrounding clutter), and using tools to selectively render the inner parts of a given photograph. Stage 4 is when the photographers gets the first inkling to dodge, to burn, and make other tonal changes to an image. The slow and careful learning, nurturing, and refining of these skills can (and often does) take years, if not decades, to develop fully.

Step 5: One picture is not enough.

Sooner or later, every photographer yearns to go beyond the "image"; to go beyond just showing a single picture, or at most a few prints, of some subject the photographer holds dear. More effort and greater care is put into every single capture, and its attendant post-capture processing; and more and more finished prints are deemed "worthy to show others" by the photographer. But the stage-5 photographer also grows increasingly dissatisfied over what she is beginning to

perceive as "too shallow" an expression of an inner vision that is slowly trying to make its own voice heard. "I like this tree," she finds herself thinking more and more often, "but, by itself, it says little about why I love taking pictures of trees." She continues, "Each of my trees is lovely, and I'm proud to show them to others, but I'm somehow missing the bigger picture. It is as though each picture is but a chapter in some book not yet assembled." The photographer may not yet quite know what this nascent book is, or have any idea what form it will eventually take, but her aesthetic eye is being stirred to higher levels. The stage-5 photographer no longer thinks (or "sees") in terms of individual pictures; but is uncertain about how to use them to construct an artful narrative.

Step 6: Need to tell a story. Inevitably, the photographer becomes interested in not just putting together a set of assorted - but only marginally related - prints (as in collections of "best of" shots), but in carefully crafting and sequencing the images in a portfolio of prints to tell a specific story. If the original interest was, say, trees, the photographer now wishes to move beyond her ever growing collection of "individual trees," to a new form of expression designed to reveal both how "sets of trees" are related, and a bit of the process by which the photographer's perception and expression of her general "love of trees" has itself evolved over time. The stage-6 photographer thus naturally steps away from prints as prints (even if they are otherwise a part of a larger collection), and focuses increasingly on portfolios of interrelated images. It is no longer enough to just find that one "good" or "best" image - even though all photographers are always happy to find it; the photographer now first thinks in terms of sets of mutually interrelated collections of images. Ideally, each image stands on its own and compliments and/or enhances all of the others. In more practical terms, the photographer now wishes to express a deeper aesthetic experience of trees in general; as exemplified, perhaps, by a selection of personally meaningful images captured in a favorite park, or accrued over several weeks or months (or years) even as the photographer explores other subjects and themes. The stage-6 photographer's attention has moved from "pictures" to projects; motivated by a growing desire to tell *stories*.

Step 7: Stories of Stories. The penultimate step typically appears only when a photographer has attained a certain level of aesthetic maturity; by which time a meaningful body of work - consisting mostly of portfolios (though "individually meaningful" images still pop up from time to time) - has naturally emerged. Each portfolio has both a story to tell, and is an element of an as-yet unrevealed and unrealized deeper narrative about which the stage-7 photographer hears the first faint murmurs of. The emerging "story of stories" concerns the truths of the world "out there," as revealed to the photographer through her lifetime's worth of aesthetic judgments as to what to shoot, what to keep, how to express,



what to show, and what to sequence into portfolios. The photographer begins to appreciate certain universal truths by examining the aesthetic order that she has "imposed" on the world by her growing body of work. By studying her own portfolio of portfolios - as though her life's work was itself a "world" open to capture with an aesthetic eye and camera - the photographer discovers universal truths about the world itself.

In my own case, I have glimpsed some of the feelings associated with a stage-7 worldview by looking inward to my motivation for creating a "portfolio of portfolios" called *Sudden Stillness*. *Sudden Stillness* consists of four interwoven

portfolios called *Chaos*, *Order*, *Complexity*, and *Entropy* (originally the winning entry in the U.K. *B&W Magazine* sponsored book contest in 2007, and a later extended version self-published through Blurb). The subtitle of the book conveys the deeper meaning behind - and reason for the particular sequencing of - the images: *Visual Echoes of Timeless Rhythms*. Collectively, the four portfolios weave a story about the fundamental rhythmic patterns that regulate our world (from this one photographer's point of view, of course). In short, the stage-7 photographer uses her own work - consisting now mostly of nested stories of stories - to transcend art and begin addressing deeper and universal themes and issues regarding the order of the world around her. Art is no longer concerned solely with the here and now - for its own sake, and regarding limited sets of objects, themes, and contexts - but assumes an added dimension of seeking a transcendent truth about the nature of the world itself. And part of that truth is revealed - to the photographer - by the photographers own body of work.

Step 8: Self-discovery. Step-8 is not all that different from step-7, at least outwardly, and if measured objectively in terms of the photographer's physical output (in terms of the number and type of images and prints produced). The stage-8 photographer still typically produces portfolios of portfolios, still diligently practices her art, relentlessly striving toward perfection, and delights with each

every "beautiful print" as though it was her first, just as she has always done. But the photographer shows no outward sign of doing anything different from the stage-7 photographer. Indeed, paradoxically, the stage-8 photographer may even appear to others as being stuck on a plateau (albeit an artistically very high one), and no longer willing, or able, to grow as an artist. But something fundamental has changed in the way the photographer understands and interprets her own work; and that is invisible to anyone but the photographer at first. In the same way as the stage-7 photographer uses her art to uncover truths about the world, the stage-8 photographer discovers truths about her own soul. The world, and the photographer's own work, have both come full circle: the world revealed through a photographer's vision; and the photographer's artful expression of her feelings about the world uncovering the depths of the photographer herself. Seer and seen become one; and the seen brings the seer back to self.

*"A man sets out to
draw the world.
As the years go by,
he peoples a space with
images of provinces, kingdoms,
mountains, bays, ships, islands,
fishes, rooms, instruments,
stars, horses, and individuals
A short time before he dies,
he discovers that the patient
labyrinth of lines
traces the lineaments
of his own face."*

– JORGE LUIS BORGES
(1899 - 1986)



Photo Vitae

Contact Information

email: ilachinski.studios@gmail.com

Website: <http://www.sudden-stillness.com>

Blog: <http://tao-of-digital-photography.blogspot.com>

Please contact the author for licensing and/or availability and pricing of signed prints

"Synesthetic Landscapes," essay and portfolio,
Luminous Landscape, May 2015

Solo invited show, *Bodzin Art Gallery*, Jewish
Community Center Northern Virginia, 2015

"An Eightfold Path Toward Self-Discovery," essay
and featured images, *Shadow and Light Magazine*,
Nov/Dec 2014

Group juried exhibit, *In the Abstract!*, The Kiernan
Gallery, April 30 - May 31, Juror: Susan Spiritus

"Synesthscaapes" Portfolio, *Lenswork Magazine*,
DVD Edition, Issue #105 (March/April 2013)

Cover Image, *South Poetry Review*, Vol 50,
Issue 1, Winter 2012 / Spring 2013

Group exhibit, *Vermont Photography
Workplace*, March-June, 2012

"Luray Caverns" Portfolio, *Lenswork Magazine*,
Print/DVD Edition, Issue #95 (July/Aug 2011)

"Abstract Glyphs," Portfolio Spotlight,
B&W Magazine, December 2011

Merit Awards (Animals & Pattern/Texture),
Black & White Magazine's Single Image Contest
2011 (Issue #80, Pages 30, 220, Feb 2011)

Belnavis Art Gallery, Small Works Exhibit,
West Springfield, Virginia (Oct-Dec 2010)

Finalist, 2010 *B&W Spider Awards* (Nature)

Juried exhibit, Abstraction in Photography,
*Vermont Photography Workplace / Photoplace
Gallery*, Middlebury, VT (Oct 2010)

Cover photo of music album, 16:9, Stuart
Sweeney (*Oomff*, new independent label based
in Corby, Northants, UK)

Solo show, *Hyatt Regency Hotel*, Market Street
Bar & Grill, Town Center, Reston, VA (Feb/April,
2010); Greater Reston Arts Center

"World Within Worlds," Group Exhibit, *American
Center for Physics*, College Park, MD, 2009/2010

First Prize, "Body of Work" group exhibit,
ROHO Gallery, Cincinnati, OH, 2009

Finalist, 2009 *B&W Spider Awards* (Architecture)

Finalist (Abstract Category) World Wide
Photography Gala Awards, 2009

Featured photographer, 2010 wall calendar and
datebook, *Change Your Mind, Change Your Life*,
by Dwyane Dyer (Amber Lotus Publishing)

Founding (juried) member of *Lorton Arts
Photography Workhouse Association*, Northern
Virginia, 2008-2009

Featured photographer (at behest of editor,
Lenswork Magazine) at LOOK3 photo festival
(Charlottesville, VA), 2009

Featured artist, *Northern VA Mag*, August 2009

"Micro Worlds" Portfolio, *Lenswork magazine*,
Print & Extended Edition, Issue #76
(May-June, 2008)

Merit award, *Black & White Magazine* (2008)

Semi-finalist, *Photographer's Forum Magazine*,
Annual Contest 2008

Solo Exhibit (27 Photographs)
Books & Books, Coral Gables, FL (Dec, 2007)

Honorable Mention, *Photo Technique*,
Portfolio Contest 2007


Lenswork, DVD, Issue #71 (July-August, 2007)

Winner of book contest, sponsored by UK *Black
& White Magazine* and *Envisage Books* (2007)

Featured photographer for *Transdisciplinarity and
the Unity of Knowledge Conference*, Metanexus,
Institute, University of Pennsylvania (June, 2007)

Ilachinski
Studios, Inc.

Fine-Art Photography



A physicist specializing in complex adaptive systems, Andy Ilachinski spends most of his free time wandering around with a camera

A Founding member of Lorton Arts Foundation Workhouse Photographic Society in 2009 (near Occoquan, VA), his photographs have won numerous awards, have been exhibited in many juried solo and group shows, and hang in galleries, businesses, and homes

Featured in *Lenswork* four times, in *Black & White* twice, Andy has won awards in the prestigious *B&W Spider awards*, and won the international book contest sponsored by the UK *Black + White Photography* magazine in 2007

Contact Information

email: ilachinski.studios@gmail.com

Website: <http://www.sudden-stillness.com>

Blog: <http://tao-of-digital-photography.blogspot.com>

Please contact the author for licensing and/or availability and pricing of signed prints