

Expressions

Conversations in landscape photography



JOURNAL 13

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Conversations in landscape photography



This journal is published by **aspect2i.co.uk**

Contact: **journal@aspect2i.co.uk**



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Well, it has arrived, and with the passing of time, our beloved journal 'Expressions' has become a teenager, although not with the grumpiness and being argumentative. When you say the word thirteen, it is often met with comments such as, "That's bad luck", and it's amazing to think that even today, many airlines omit row thirteen from their planes. We will have none of this triskaidekaphobia here (Yes, this is a real name for it!), just a good gathering of amazing images and thinking photography.

When the favourite seasons of winter and spring have come and gone, we have valuable time to dedicate to working through the image files we have accrued during the season's outings. It is this very subject that Paul Gallagher discusses, the often-reluctant time in front of the computer and why it has garnered such a poor reputation with many photographers.

Continuing on the subject of studying images and image editing, Michael Pilkington shares his thoughts about a common trap that initially feels rewarding but can soon lead to stagnancy, where the photographer arrives at a plateau. Michael argues that a personal style is not something that should be pursued, but something that can evolve through vision.

Getting away from computers and studying we take you to one of the most remarkable and wild landscapes in the world: Chile and Bolivia. Mark Lawrence first travelled there several years ago and was understandably staggered by what he witnessed. In this issue of Expressions, Mark shares his account of travelling in this part of South America and the experiences he encountered and shares some of his incredible images from his travels.

From time to time, you meet photographers who seem to have a boundless reservoir of creativity and freedom. We are pleased to have Martin Addison FRPS as our featured photographer. Martin sees the world in a different way than many of us and is a master of seeing what many would easily miss. Often presenting his work in groups and panels, Martin tells us about what intrigues him and creating books has become an integral part of how he presents his work.

As always, Expressions is free to everyone, so if you know a budding photographer or a visual artist you would think would enjoy what we are offering here, then please share this link with them aspect2i.co.uk/downloads/expressions



I hate sitting in front of my computer

by Paul Gallagher

I hate sitting in front of my computer

by Paul Gallagher

This is a statement I hear a lot. There was a time when the camera and the darkroom were inseparable, not because photographers were particularly disciplined, but because the darkroom was simply part of the craft, and you didn't complain about it either. It was the place where photographs were crafted and finished, ready to be shared with viewers, and you accepted that without questioning whether you "felt inspired" to be there or not.



© Paul Gallagher

Today, the computer has replaced the darkroom almost completely, yet many photographers now speak about editing as though it were an affliction rather than a creative act. Images sit untouched on hard drives for months, sometimes years, while photographers insist that they love photography but somehow dislike the part where photographs are actually completed.

It is convenient to blame a computer, as many people get frustrated with them whether they are using them for editing or not. Computers are blamed for many things these days, so photography has simply followed suit. I have heard photographers say the computer is supposedly too slow, overly complicated, hugely technical, and far removed from the experience of being in the field. The implication is that photography is somehow more authentic when the photographer is outdoors and less authentic the moment they sit down to edit.



© Paul Gallagher

The computer is not the problem any more than the enlarger was the problem in the darkroom. What has changed is not the tool, but the photographer's relationship with it. Somewhere within the evolution of digital photography, photographers stopped understanding editing as an extension of seeing and started treating it as an arduous process that must be endured before an image can be shared.

One of the reasons photographers still feel an affinity to their cameras is that, despite extraordinary technological advances, the fundamentals have remained familiar. Aperture still determines depth of field, shutter speed still controls motion, and lenses still offer perspectives in ways that photographers instinctively understand. You can hand a digital camera to someone who began their career with film, and within minutes, they will be making competent photographs.

The digital darkroom offers no such continuity. The negative has been replaced by a digital file, and that file resides inside software that is somehow abstract and is continually being updated. Where the camera can be understood instinctively with experience, using a computer demands an understanding of new terminology and constant updating of knowledge. This creates a split identity for the photographer. In the field, they trust their judgement and the camera settings they are familiar

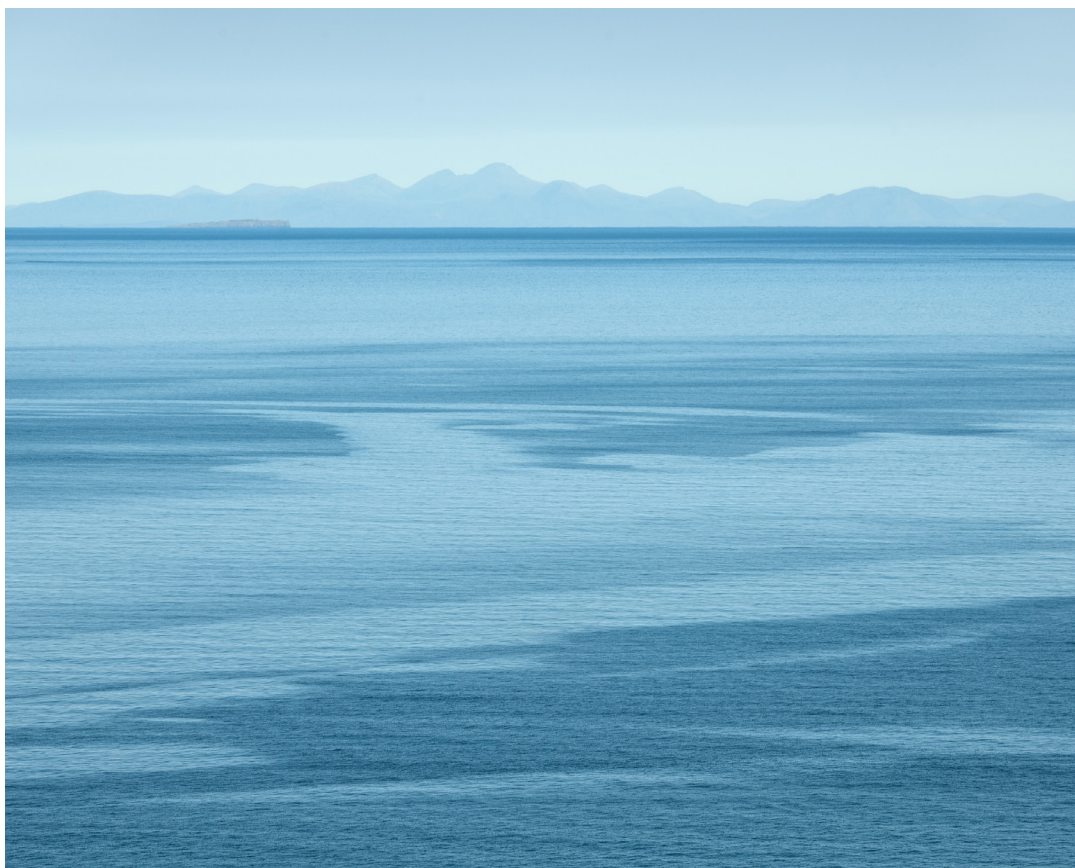
with, whilst at the computer, they are in new photographic territory.

Digital photography has become obsessed with choice, and we are awash with more sliders, control panels, masking options and an array of plugins promising to unlock hidden potential. This is presented as progress, yet it has produced a generation of photographers who are paralysed by their own options. Every adjustment invites another, and decisions feel endless, because there is always another tool to experiment with whilst editing the image. Editing becomes a tedious navigation rather than a decisive act, and the photograph and any intention of what it should look like slowly disappears beneath a plethora of options. Some photographers describe their complex editing as though it is sophisticated, but in reality, they are aboard a rudderless ship.



© Paul Gallagher

In practice, many photographers now spend longer deciding how to edit an image as opposed to actually engaging with what the photograph is trying to say. The result is often not better images, but images that feel overworked, even sometimes ugly, as though the photographer was never quite convinced by the results enough to stop

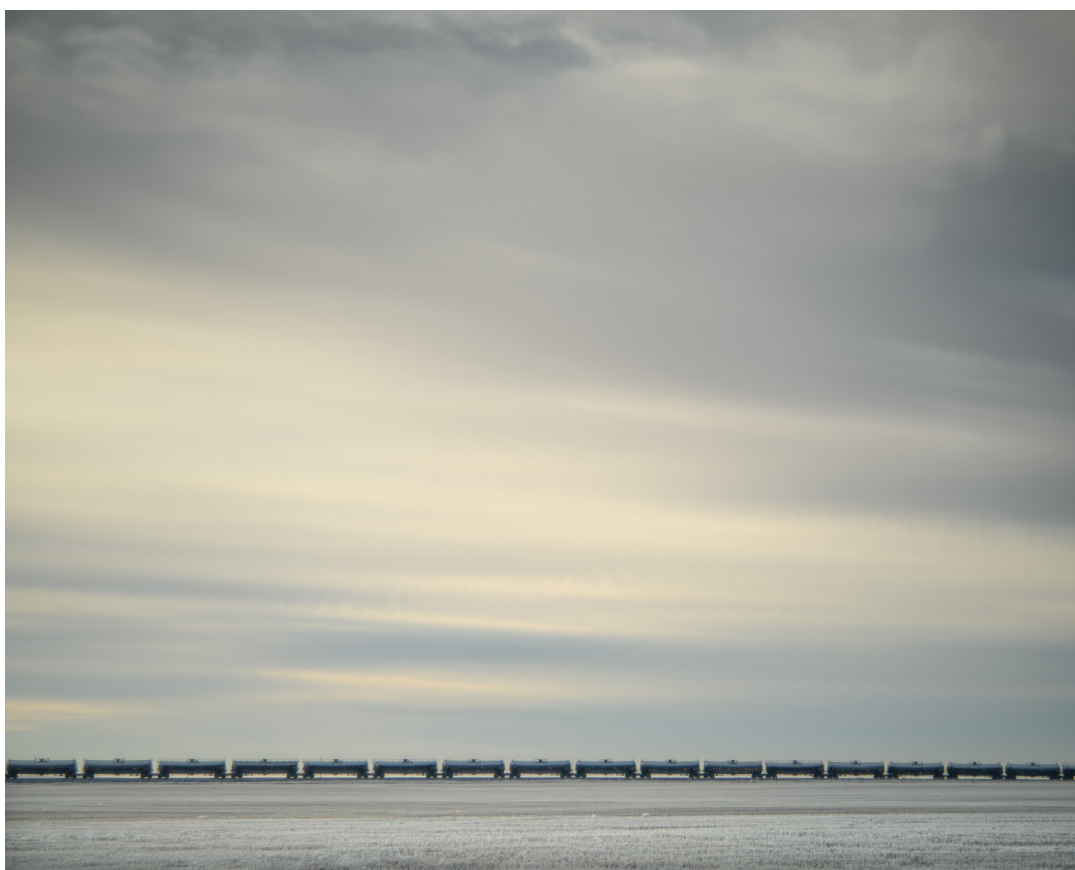


© Paul Gallagher

The traditional darkroom did not produce strong photographs because it was magical, but because it imposed limits that demanded thought and skill. A photographer learned quickly when further time at the enlarger improved a photograph, and also, when it made it look worse. We have all heard the terms dodging and burning, which have been carried across to digital editing software, but in the darkroom, they were acts of judgement. Contrast and tonality were not endlessly adjustable; they were decided upon and applied with limited choices.

In the digital darkroom, those limits no longer exist unless the photographer chooses to impose them, and many do not and lose their way during the process. After many years working with photographers, they seem increasingly uncomfortable with editing, and it is worth asking how they are being taught. Much of modern photographic education, particularly online, is obsessed with technique and tutorials mainly aimed at tools, shortcuts, and advanced workflows, often presented as the missing ingredients standing between the photographer and wonderful images. I think the missing ingredient here is judgement.

Photographers are shown how to use luminosity masks, colour grading techniques, and automated selections, but they are not taught how to recognise when image editing needs restraint rather than progression. They are also not taught the 'why' and 'how much'. Editing can become an accumulation of techniques rather than a response with the intent to complete a considered journey. This approach fosters photographers who are skilled at operating software, yet are strangely unsure what their own photographs are about or trying to communicate. They know what the tools can do, but not when to stop using them, and the reason for this is that they have little understanding of what they want the completed image to look like.



© Paul Gallagher

Much of this complex approach made some sense fifteen years ago when digital files were of poor quality and demanded heavy manipulation to reach even modest standards. Early sensors struggled with dynamic range, colour fidelity, and noise, and editing was often an act of rescue rather than refinement. It would be true to say that era has passed, but the practice remains a legacy.

Modern cameras produce files of extraordinary quality, yet many photographers continue to edit as though they are compensating for deficiencies that no longer exist. Images are pushed, pulled and stretched not because they need it, but because photographers still believe that serious editing must remain complicated to achieve a good outcome.

It would be naive to pretend that software companies bear no responsibility in this. Subscription-based models, particularly from companies like Adobe, rely on constant development to sell their subscriptions, whilst new features may seem appealing even when existing tools were more than sufficient. The result is software that grows and becomes more complicated and automated, whilst quietly encouraging the belief that editing requires even newer tools. Photographers are not learning to edit images; they are learning new and more modern tools.



© Paul Gallagher

This encourages the use of editing software but offers little in understanding why they are doing what they are doing, and it also encourages photographers to keep adjusting rather than stopping. Over time, the outcomes remain the same and a creative plateau is reached, resulting in the photographer becoming unconvinced about their work but doesn't know why.

Photographers will often say to me they avoid editing or spend as little time engaged in editing because

it is boring, technical, or uninspiring. The truth is more uncomfortable as they avoid editing because it exposes uncertainty. Sitting in front of the computer removes the pleasure of the moment when they made the exposure and replaces it with the responsibility of making decisions. For photographers who lack confidence in their own judgement, this can be uncomfortable.



© Paul Gallagher

Simplifying your editing process is not a rejection of technology, nor is it a nostalgic attempt to return to the past; it is a characteristic of confidence and the application of your intentions.

Photographers who edit images using fewer tools and who adopt a simpler approach tend to know what matters in their images, and they know the very point at which to stop. To do this regularly means your judgment is consistent and is borne of confidence. These are not technical decisions; they are philosophical ones. They require photographers to trust themselves more than the software, and that is precisely why so many resist them.

At its best, editing should not be approached technically but as a continuation of why the exposure was made. The same connection that guided the photographer in the field should guide them at the computer, gently allowing the image to emerge from the raw file. Photographers who simplify their approach often experience something unexpected. Not only do their images improve, but the act of editing becomes easier and more satisfying and being at the computer stops feeling like a chore and starts feeling like what it was always meant to be, a place where photographs are nurtured and created.



© Paul Gallagher

If photographers truly hate sitting in front of their computers, the solution is not another plugin or learning new tools. The challenge is not that editing is too difficult; the issue derives from the fact that photographers have evolved into thinking simplicity is not good enough.

An Altiplano adventure

by Mark Lawrence

An Altiplano adventure

by Mark Lawrence

As time passes and we grow a little older, and maybe wiser, adventure can feel like something we used to do when we were younger. A few years ago, perhaps this feeling was in the back of my own mind as I viewed images of the spectacular salt flats, high on the Altiplano in Bolivia. I knew I wanted to go, even though a little voice inside my head kept telling me I must be mad.....after all, it is a long way, I had never travelled at high altitude, and perhaps worst of all, as my wife informed me, they eat guinea pigs!



© Mark Lawrence

Fast forward a few months, and I booked, with a sense of both anticipation and anxiety. There would

be an English-speaking guide, guinea pigs were not on the menu, altitude remained a nagging doubt, but the flights were pleasantly straightforward. This would be an adventure like no other. My first destination was the town of San Pedro de Atacama, a small town in the El Loa province of Chile, overlooking the Licancabur volcano. Close to the border with Bolivia, San Pedro would be an ideal base from which to start my adventure.



© Mark Lawrence

A direct flight from London to Santiago was the first part of the journey, and I allowed four hours in Santiago for my connecting flight to Calama. This turned out to be far longer than I needed, but it allowed a leg stretch before a short flight to Calama. On arrival at Calama, I booked a transfer to my hotel in San Pedro and was joined by a few much younger French and American travellers who were staying in different hotels. Travelling on high-quality roads, we approached San Pedro and promptly turned onto a dirt track for the final mile or two to the town. It was then that my anxiety took hold! It wasn't the dirt track road; it was the exterior of the hotels – rotten wooden doors in what looked like walls made of mud! Imagine my horror when the second stop was almost identical – it was my turn next – what had I done?!

A few minutes later, we arrived.... The hotel was a very nice 4-star establishment with a small swimming pool and a receptionist who spoke English – phew! I spent the afternoon exploring my new surroundings. San Pedro de Atacama contains everything your preconceptions of a South American town might include: dusty streets, a market, small shops, cafes, bars and roaming dogs.

It was friendly and relaxing, and I even made friends with a couple of Alpacas. Tours are available to some local attractions, but as I already had an itinerary, I resisted the temptation as I would soon be meeting with some fellow photographers and our guide.



© Mark Lawrence

The following day, as we met as a group for the first time, the weather was fine and sunny, less than ideal for photography, but very pleasant, nonetheless. The landscape was spectacular, vast dunes with distant rocky mountains and the ever-present Lincanbur volcano. As the sun dropped towards the horizon, the soft light created wonderful conditions to capture the amazing landscape. This small taste of what was to come had already vindicated my decision to travel here.

With sunrise at around 0630, most days involved an early start to make the most of the light. Visiting the Rainbow Valley, we were treated to some amazing rock formations containing an array of different colours, resulting from the rich mineral deposits in the strata of the landscape. The hues of reds, pinks and oranges were a sight to behold. With the morning shoot complete, we had time to rest and relax before heading out again in the afternoon. This provided the opportunity to obtain some Bolivian

currency for the next stage of the adventure, as you can't obtain the currency in the UK. Several exchanges were found in town, and the friendly staff helped change dollars into Bolivianos.

The afternoon and evening shoot was at Laguna Tebinquinche, a salt lake, some 30 kilometres from San Pedro. Here we found crystal clear reflections of the Andean mountains, curious white salt crusts and some amazing cloud formations. Staying until sunset, I wandered around the edge of the lake, finding a variety of compositions and watching the ever-changing pastel hues of the sky.



© Mark Lawrence

Over dinner, we discussed the following day's plans and the trip to help acclimatise to the higher altitudes that we would experience in Bolivia. San Pedro de Atacama sits at about 8,000 ft above sea level; however, in Bolivia, we would reach a maximum altitude of over 16,000 ft so some preparation and a gentle increase during our stay was the plan. The following afternoon, we visited the Pecan Monks, a rock formation in the Atacama Desert located at over 14,000 ft above sea level. Not only was this an interesting landscape to see and photograph, but it also provided the opportunity to experience a higher altitude for a short period, a recognised and recommended approach to reducing risks of altitude sickness. When we arrived at the Monks, you could feel the air was thinner, so the advice was to slow down and enjoy the experience, which we did. These were landscapes on a grand scale, with an otherworldly feel as former volcanoes rose from the high desert plains towards an unusual sky with clouds shaped by the mountains and the altitude. With no ill effects of the high altitude, it was time to return to base and prepare for the next leg of the tour – the journey into Bolivia.



© Mark Lawrence

A long journey into Bolivia was planned, allowing time for the border formalities and some photography. It was cloudy as we arrived at the Bolivian border, where our English-speaking guide met us, along with three 4x4 vehicles, necessary for the Bolivian terrain. Border checks complete, we headed to Laguna Blanca for some photography. Another salt lake, Laguna Blamca was surrounded by salt crusts that made for a fascinating pale foreground against which to view the surrounding mountains. I could already tell that we were moving into a quite different landscape. A lunch stop at a thermal lagoon punctuated our progress, and as we headed through the Siloli Desert it began to snow – this was a

surreal experience as I had never associated snow with a desert! Onwards we went, stopping for a leg stretch where a railway line crossed a salt flat. This also allowed a quick refuelling of the 4x4's, this involving a gravity feed from the fuel containers strapped to the roof of the vehicle! After a long but exciting day of travel, we arrived at our hotel - I had been warned that the hotels in Bolivia were basic, and whilst they were not western 5-star standard, I found them very comfortable and welcoming with tasty food, one was even made from blocks of salt, extracted from the nearby flats. Indeed, it was the renowned Salar de Uyuni that was on the agenda for the next couple of days. After a relaxing morning exploring the small town in which we were staying, we headed off to the Salar after lunch.



© Mark Lawrence

I am rarely lost for words, but this landscape was truly staggering in its scale, beauty and otherworldliness. Hexagonal patterns of salt crystals zig-zagged in every direction across the vast flats with former volcanoes breaking the distant horizon. As we moved across the Salar the light changed as clouds diffused the light and started to create wonderful conditions for our photography. Ending the day at Pescado Island, the views as the sun set were amazing, and from our raised viewpoint we had true 360° views of the Salar. Our guide pointed towards a volcano on the horizon and explained that was where our hotel was – I said to her “so a 15 minute drive”, she turned, smiled and then laughed – “no 35-40 minutes” she said – the distances are vast and, clearly, deceptive!

The following two days were spent exploring the vast expanse of the Salar at dawn and dusk, with time in between to explore the local villages and take some time to rest. The villages were poor, but the



© Mark Lawrence

locals were friendly and welcoming, and with daytime temperatures around 20 degrees, it was very comfortable. Of course, dawn could be cold at such high altitudes, so warm layers were essential, our coldest morning reaching -10 degrees. With clear skies at night and very little light pollution, astrophotography was an option, although I was the only one of our group to venture out and capture the full arc of the Milky Way, another truly memorable sight.



© Mark Lawrence

I left the Salar with a heavy heart, having been mesmerised by its truly unique landscape, the like of which I had never seen before. Our next stop was in Uyuni to visit a locomotive graveyard where locomotives left behind after the rundown of the rail network have been left to rust in the dry, salty desert air. This was another slightly surreal sight with the remains of locomotives and wagons set against a desert backdrop. Moving on towards our next hotel the knowledge of our expert drivers was put to the test when a track that we were planning to take was blocked, but without flinching, they headed off across the desert to rejoin our planned route a couple of hours later.



© Mark Lawrence

Staying at a desert hotel that relied totally on solar power was another new experience and great fun. This was our highest altitude stay at just over 13,000 ft above sea level and put us in an ideal location to photograph a Borax lake and the Laguna Colarada, the latter renowned for its flamingos and vivid crimson red colouration. The colour of the lake is a result of red sediments and pigmented algae, and provided yet another surreal sight to take in and photograph. As the sun set, the intensity of the red-coloured water took on a whole new dimension, and the sound of the flamingos and little else was another perfect end to another perfect day.



© Mark Lawrence

Alas, all good things must come to an end, and so, after a final sunrise shoot at Laguna Colarada, it was time to head back to the border with Chile. Our travels had taken us in a large circle. Hence, the journey to the border was relatively short, allowing time to stop in the Siloli Desert and enjoy one last glimpse of the mountains coloured by the minerals embedded in their rock formations. Bolivian border control was an interesting experience, quite different to our entry, with two young men in hoodies examining documents in a rather run-down building and applying the obligatory stamp to our passports. We said farewell to our Bolivian guide and expert drivers who had looked after us so well and returned to our Chilean driver and his minibus. We enjoyed a last meal together in San Pedro de Atacama and got an early night in readiness for the early airport transfers the following day.



© Mark Lawrence

I'm so glad I didn't listen to that little voice in my head; the landscape was beyond spectacular and so different to anything I have seen either before or since, the anxieties were needless, and the cultural experience was fantastic. Adventure is good for the soul at any age!

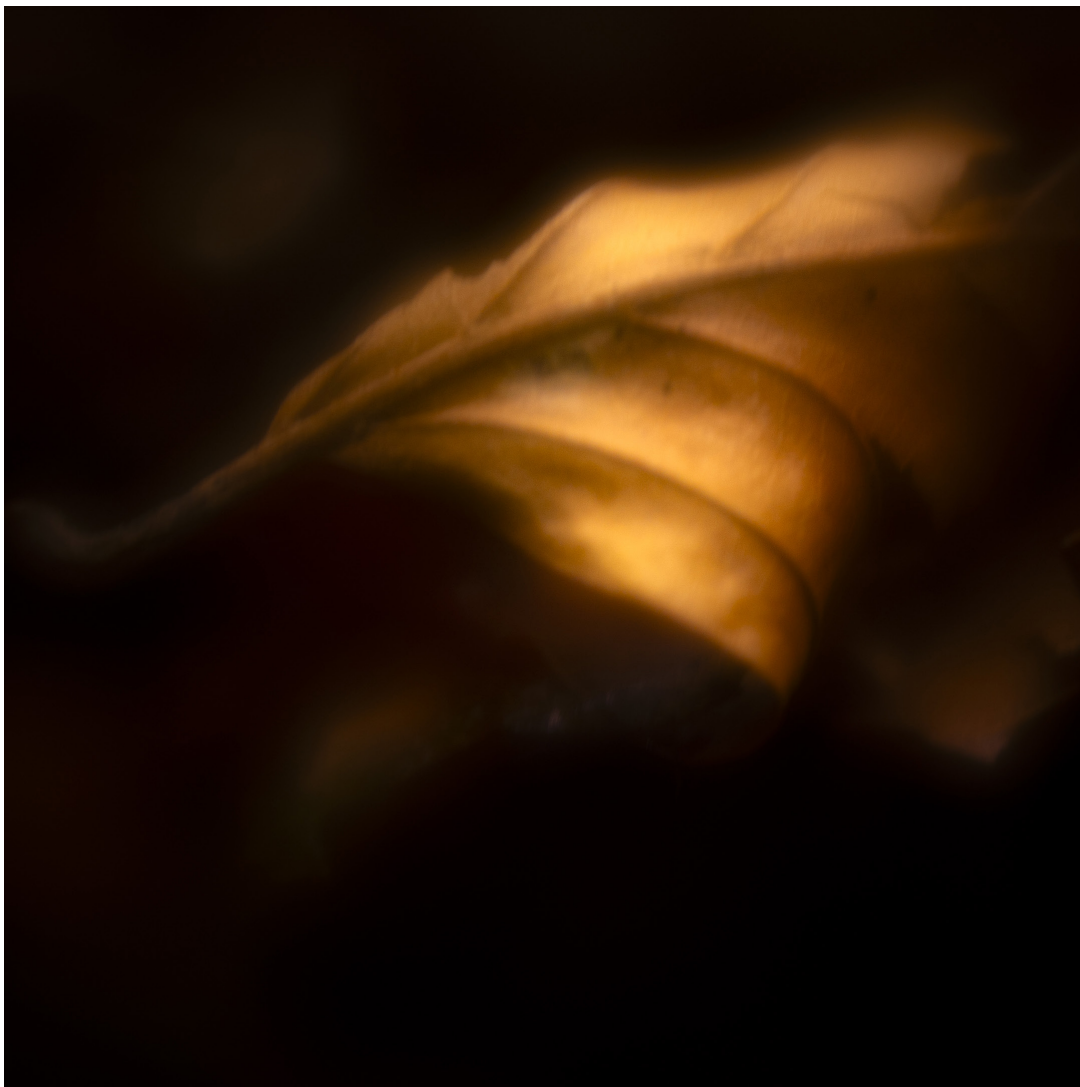


© Mark Lawrence

Featured photographer Martin Addison, FRPS

Martin Addison, FRPS

Occasionally we see a photographer's work and it becomes apparent they have the ability to see the world about us in a very different way. This is a talent many of us wish we could draw upon from time to time, but Martin Addison seems to have the ability to relish in this every time he is out with his camera. From ICM to multiple exposures, intimate studies to groups of photographs that are seemingly made to be presented together as a group. As our featured photographer in this edition, we approached Martin to ask him about his work in the hope that we all may learn a little of this way of seeing and maybe experiment ourselves.



© Martin Addison

I have known and admired your work for some time now and one quality I have always loved is the explorative freedom you enjoy. Have you always possessed this or was it discovered?

When I first joined the Worcestershire Camera Club in 1970, there was one member who influenced me a lot. He always had a different way of seeing images. I liked this approach as it gave me different results from what other photographers were creating. If everyone was photographing the landscape, I preferred to find a rusty tin can and create images from that.

Over the years, I have realised that I like to produce images that are created from subjects which most photographers ignore. This gives me great satisfaction as I have created something which is very personal to me, rather than a more easily recognised subject.



© Martin Addison

A good example is a recent image I made while in France. I spotted a steel joist which had been placed in a car park to be used as a seat. The underside was very dusty and there were marks from where people sitting there had scuffed their shoes. As soon as I saw this, I thought of a medieval battle, the sort that Uchello painted in the 15th Century. I took a series of photographs with my phone. They were very grey, so I increased the contrast in Lightroom and inverted the tones, so the marks were white on black, and the result was very much as I had imagined at the time of taking. The original phone shot and one of the images are shown here. I printed a set of six images on a high-gloss paper which brought out the detail.

You were an RPS Panel member for many years and must have seen a huge number of submissions. What would you say you have learned from this process and experience?

It has been a privilege and joy to be involved in the RPS Distinctions process for many years, and this has reinforced the view that I hold to pursue your own interests and not to follow themes that other applicants have been successful with. It is not easy to create images which are unique, but using a different approach is very refreshing and more likely to be successful and, more importantly, satisfying to you, who is the only person who really matters.



© Martin Addison

Another point is that it is so important to pay attention to the details. So many panels have had technical faults which can be very easily fixed. Seeing submissions fail because of this reason has reinforced my desire to get it right in the camera if at all possible and to ensure that when I come to print an image, I check it very thoroughly before I start the print.

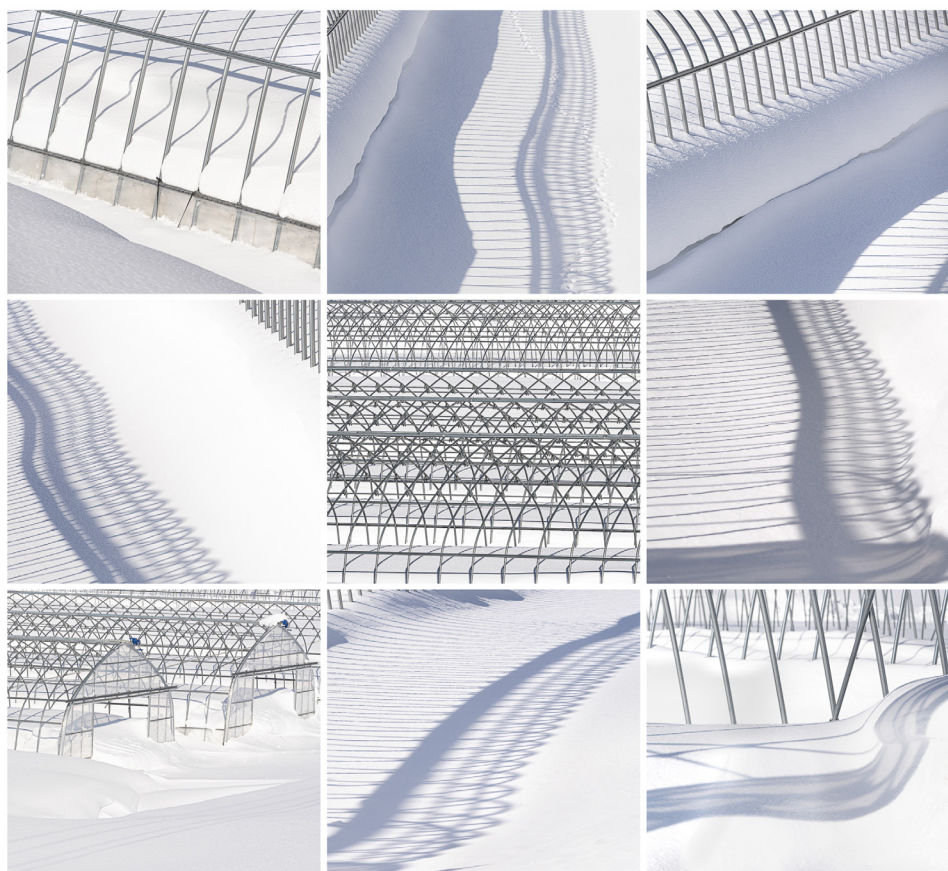


© Martin Addison

Despite using social media fairly extensively, I am of the school which believes that a photograph is not finished until it has been printed, so I print quite a lot of my photographs.

I often see your work on social media and you often present images in groups or panels and seldom individual images. What appeals to you about working in panels?

I have always been more interested in exploring a subject with a set of images rather than trying to capture just one outstanding image. When I find something which I find interesting, I will take the 'obvious' photograph first and then explore alternative ways of looking at the subject. This can include looking up, looking down or using different techniques such as ICM and multiple exposure. The result is a series of images which, when I share them on social media, I show as a set to tell the story more effectively.



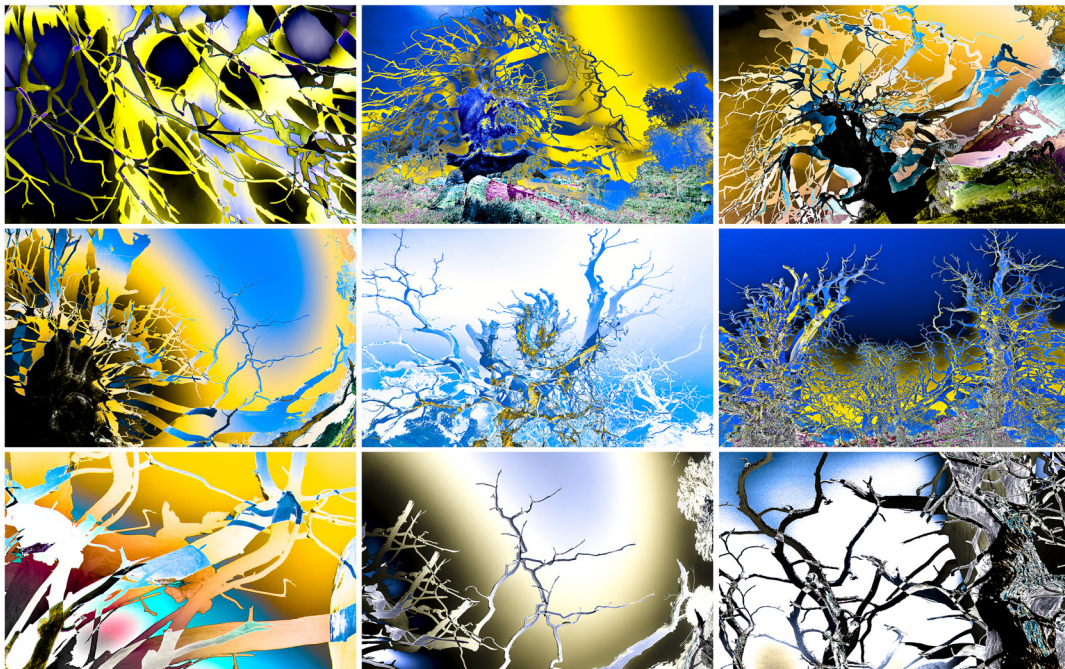
© Martin Addison

Sometimes I will create a panel of images, which I usually make in Lightroom, although I also use my phone. Making panels is easy in Lightroom, and there are a couple of instructional videos which I have made on my YouTube channel.

Since the 1970s, I have loved making AVs (see later in this article), and this has encouraged me to explore a subject in more depth, as an AV will require quite a number of images to tell the story. As a follow-up to that, I also lectured with a friend for many years, showing panels of prints. We used a 16-foot illuminated display stand, so that was another reason to work in series.



© Martin Addison



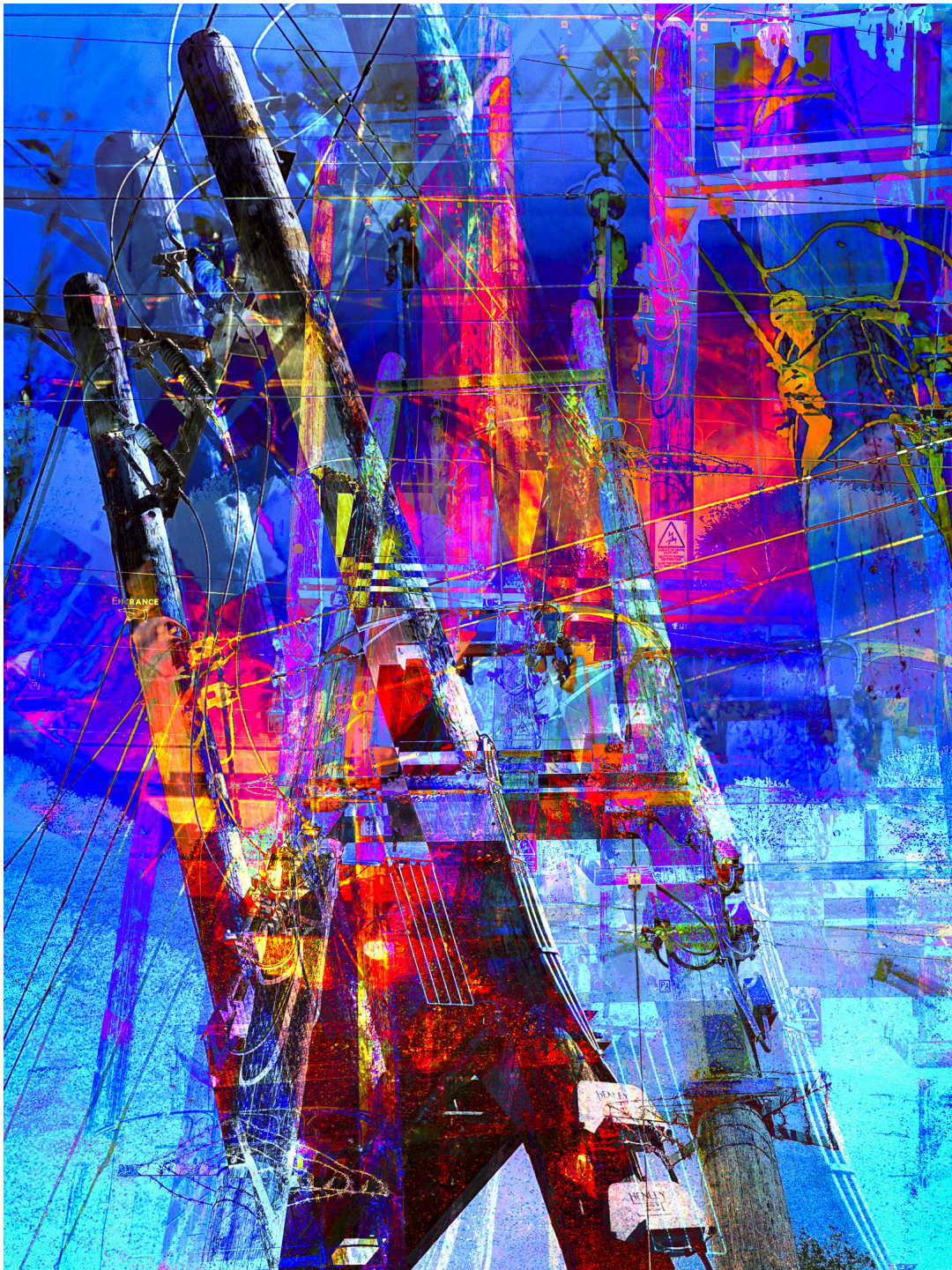
© Martin Addison

I see from your website that you have dedicated time to creating several books over the year. How do you decide on a book project, and is this an extension of working with groups of images?

To a large extent, it does follow on from my love of creating groups of images as this is often the prompt to make a book. Most of the books I make are for myself as I don't offer them for sale, but I find them a really good way to bring together a series of images, although I do find it difficult to decide just when to make the book, as there are always more photographs to create.



© Martin Addison



© Martin Addison

I make all my books in Lightroom as this allows direct access to Blurb books, which makes it so easy to design and edit the layout. Lightroom also allows the book to be saved as a PDF rather than ordering a printed book, and although this is not as satisfying as a book, sometimes it is all I need and can, of course, be easily shared with friends.



© Martin Addison

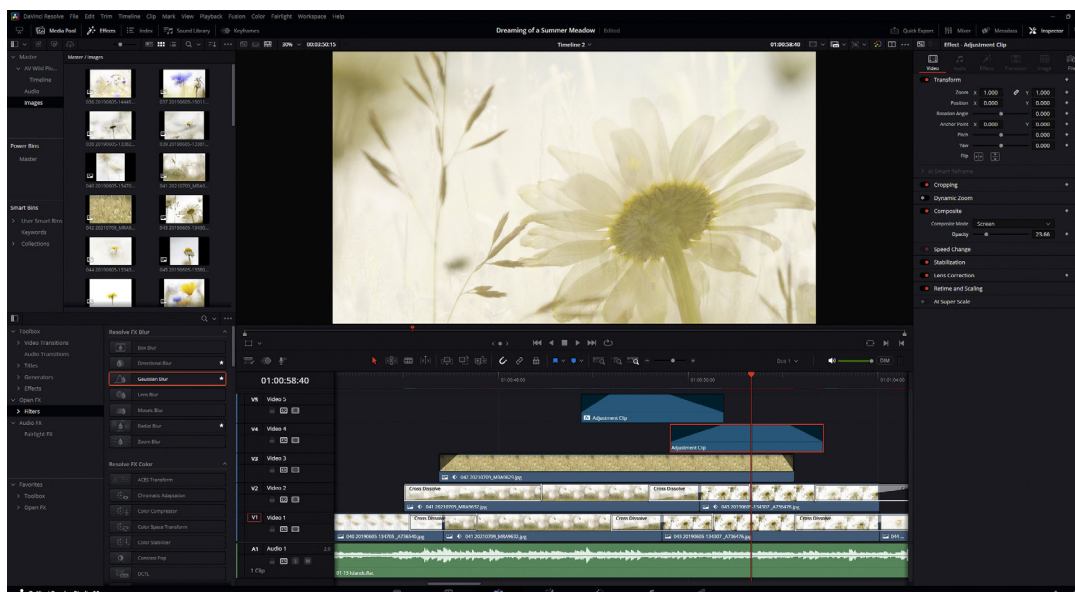
I also make regular books on PDF for my camera club. This allows members to see what other photographers have created on a joint trip or for a specific project.



© Martin Addison

Until recently, I was not aware that you have another skill, namely, creating AV presentations. This is something I have never done, so can you describe the biggest challenges entailed and the rewards?

Although photography has been a constant and vital part of my life since I was a teenager, another major passion has been listening to music. Starting with Pop as a teenager and moving through Folk, Classical, Rock, Jazz, World, Opera (another passion!) and for many years now, music from a very wide range of genres.

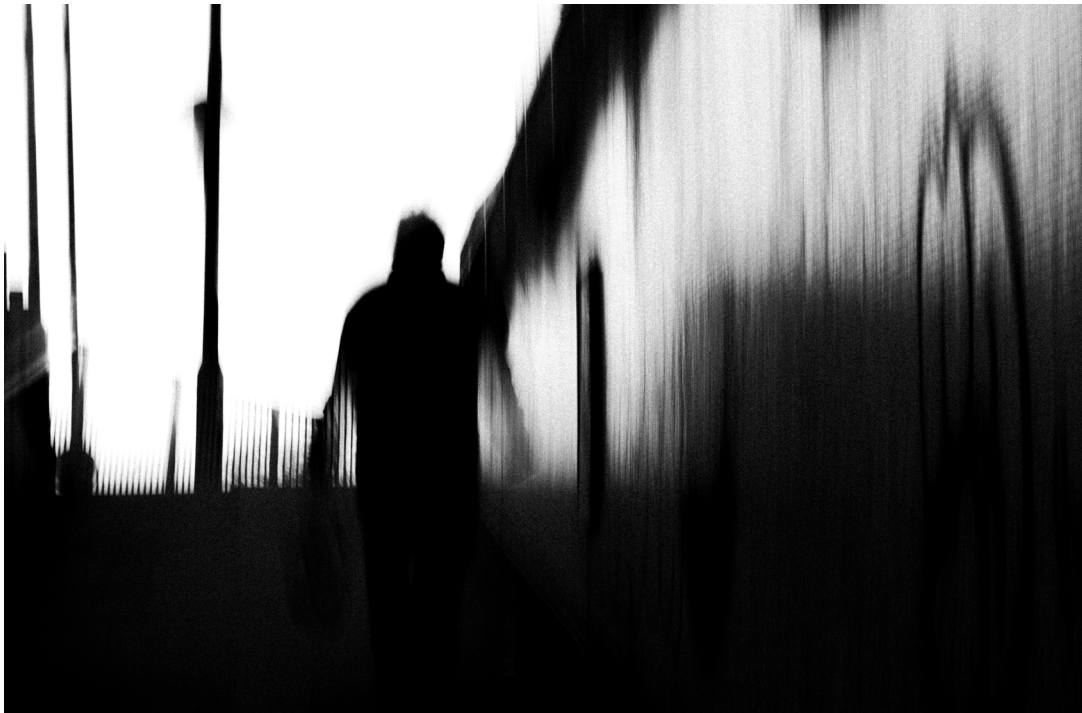


© Martin Addison

Being able to merge two of my passions in AV is something which has given me so much pleasure over many years, and the style of AVs which I create is mainly accompanied by music, rather than having a documentary approach.

In all my photography, it is the creative process which gives me the most satisfaction, whether it is creating something interesting in the camera, creatively processing the image, making a print or creating an AV. These are all opportunities to do more with my images and a great reason for making pictures in the first place, particularly as I don't generally enter competitions.

Creating an AV requires a number of different skills. Creating good quality images is vital, of course, and fitting them into a story or theme which is interesting. Then selecting the music, which must be appropriate for the images, and finally putting it all together with transitions, etc., in an AV program.



© Martin Addison



© Martin Addison



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<https://martinaddison.photography/>



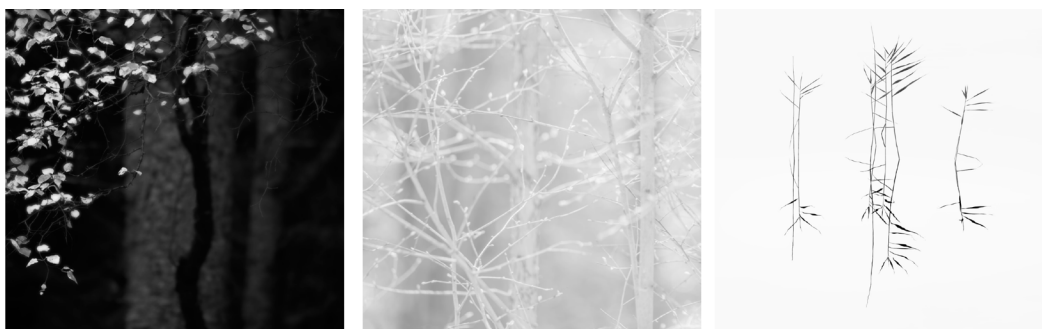
Not seeing the horizon

by Michael Pilkington

Not seeing the horizon

by Michael Pilkington

Many photographers aspire to have a distinctive style. They want their photographs to be recognisably theirs, a visual signature that runs through all of their work. It is an understandable ambition. We admire photographers whose images seem immediately identifiable. We see consistency and coherence in their work and assume that style is something to be discovered, defined and then maintained.



© Michael Pilkington

We often have preconceptions to grapple with when we consider travelling to a landscape that is all but bereft of the features we are familiar with, and indeed, we enjoy being surrounded by. There is a comfort in discovering the forest you are going to on a map or the geology of the coast symbolised by a key, but when this is replaced by an immense geographic area devoid of even the simplest of contour lines, there is little to anchor your hopes on, and enthusiasm begins to dwindle. Thankfully, when first visiting the landscapes of Montana and North Dakota, I was accompanied by a photographer who had already overcome this unease and could share the photographs to evidence it.

The problem is that style can become a constraint. Once we begin to identify ourselves with a particular way of producing images, it becomes difficult to explore other ways of interpreting and exploring. We start making photographs that fit our style rather than photographs that respond to what is in front of us.

Consider a few examples:

- If your photography is built around minimalism, how do you respond to the complexity and chaos of woodland?
- If your images are known for muted colours and subtle tones, what happens when you encounter a landscape bursting with vibrant colour?
- If you work exclusively in black and white, are there occasions when colour might communicate your response more effectively?
- If every image is made at sunrise or sunset, what are you missing during the quiet, understated hours of an overcast afternoon?

A fixed style can restrict our vision. Instead of expanding our creative possibilities, it can gradually reduce them.

Most photographers begin by being influenced by others. We discover photographers whose work resonates with us and naturally try to understand what makes it successful. We study compositions, subject choices, editing approaches and presentation.



© Michael Pilkington

This is a perfectly natural part of development. The difficulty arises when this becomes imitation. We are not using this to inspire our work but perhaps to imitate theirs. Many photographers look at established names and see a remarkably coherent body of work. What they do not see is the journey that led them there. When we admire the work of a successful photographer, we are usually looking at a carefully curated body of work rather than the entirety of their photographic life. We see the photographs they chose to show. We do not see the experiments that failed, the abandoned projects, the creative detours or the years of uncertainty. We might not even see the product of their true passions. I have often reflected on an image and thought that this would not be popular for 'mass consumption'. Perhaps, it is too abstract or unconventional.

What we are witnessing is the outcome of other photographers' work, not the process. The danger is

that we compare our own messy development with someone else's carefully edited destination. As a result, many photographers try to adopt a style before they have discovered what genuinely interests them. They borrow the appearance of a photographer's work without understanding the deeper motivations that produced it.

Style risks becoming a formula.



© Michael Pilkington

Perhaps we need to distinguish between style and vision. Many of the photographers we admire have remained remarkably consistent throughout their careers. Their photographs are instantly recognisable. Yet that consistency may not have emerged because they consciously chose a style and then applied it to every subject they encountered. It may be that they repeatedly returned to the same themes, questions and interests. Their visual language emerged naturally from what they cared about. The consistency is not the cause. It is the consequence.

This distinction matters because it suggests that style is not something to chase. Instead, it is something that may emerge as we become clearer about what genuinely interests us. Understanding whether you want to adopt an all-encompassing style needs to be questioned. Perhaps what you are really seeking is not style at all. Perhaps we are seeking consistency. We want our photographs to feel coherent, connected and recognisably ours. The mistake is assuming that consistency must come from adopting a particular visual style. In reality, it may come from something deeper: a consistent way of seeing, responding and interpreting.



© Michael Pilkington

Many photographers talk about finding their style as though it were a particular editing technique or visual look. We take a different view. A meaningful style is rarely something that can be adopted. Instead, it emerges from understanding your influences, recognising what genuinely interests you, and learning how to express those interests consistently through your photography.

There is another force that shapes style. Every photographic community has its rewards. For professionals, those rewards may be sales, commissions or recognition. For many amateur photographers, the rewards come from camera club competitions, judges' scores, social media engagement or peer approval.

None of these is inherently bad. The difficulty arises when those rewards begin to shape what we photograph. On one of our coastal retreats in Scotland, participants were encouraged to move beyond the obvious landscape and explore the coastline in more personal ways. Some produced thoughtful abstract images and expressive, intentional camera movement images. The results were fresh, individual, engaging and distinctive.



© Michael Pilkington

Several participants made the same observation, “They won’t do well in a camera club competition.” It was an interesting response and one we have heard many times running workshops and tours over the years. Sometimes, this extended to a photographer choosing not to take an image because ‘it was not worth it’.



© Michael Pilkington

However, these photographs had succeeded in doing something different. They represented exploration, curiosity and personal interpretation. Yet the immediate measure of success was whether they would score highly under competition judging. The audience had quietly become the creative director.

Over time, this can have a profound effect on development. We naturally repeat what is rewarded. Images that receive praise are repeated.

Successful approaches become habits. Habits become identity.

Eventually, we may find ourselves making photographs that are likely to succeed rather than photographs that genuinely interest us.



© Michael Pilkington

The same pattern can be found beyond photography. Musicians often face pressure to continue producing the music that made them successful, writers can become associated with a particular genre and filmmakers can become known for a particular style.

Audiences frequently reward consistency. The difficulty is that growth often requires experimentation, and experimentation carries risk. The photographer who explores abstraction may receive fewer competition points. The photographer who moves away from familiar subjects may receive less social

media engagement. The photographer who departs from an established style may find that some people prefer the older work. The safest path is often repetition. The most developed path is often exploration.



© Michael Pilkington

None of this means that style is unimportant. Far from it. A coherent visual approach can be a powerful tool. A project exploring urban decay might benefit from monochrome treatment. A body of work celebrating the vibrancy of nature may demand colour. A winter project might naturally lend itself to simplicity and restraint, while an exploration of ancient woodland may require complexity and ambiguity. Different subjects may require different visual languages.

Working within a particular style can be enormously educational. It teaches consistency, curation,

editing discipline and visual awareness. It helps us understand how colour, tone, light, and composition work together. The key is that the style serves the project, rather than the project serving the style.



© Michael Pilkington

It is a function of evolving as a photographer to aspire to a perceived style. I have wrestled with this ambition for a long while. Looking at my own work over the years, I struggle to identify a single style. Some images are monochrome, others colour. Some are minimalist, others embrace complexity. Yet I do see recurring themes. I am drawn to atmosphere over spectacle, ambiguity over certainty, interpretation over description, and emotional suggestion rather than explicit statement.

The presentation of my images, that is to say, the final prints, has evolved over the years. The visual treatment changes, but the way of seeing is surprisingly consistent.



Many photographers believe that finding their style is the horizon they are striving towards. I am not convinced. Perhaps the real horizon lies elsewhere. Perhaps it lies in developing the confidence to explore beyond the expectations of our influences, our peers, competition judges and even ourselves. Perhaps it lies in becoming more interested in discovery than validation.

The strongest photographers are not necessarily those with the most recognisable style. They are often those who remain curious. Those who continue to experiment. Those who are willing to risk making photographs that may not fit neatly within established expectations.

In time, a personal style may emerge. Indeed, it probably will. But perhaps style is best understood as the by-product of repeatedly exploring what genuinely interests us and finding the most appropriate visual language through which to express it. If that language changes over time, that is not an inconsistency. It is growth. The reward is being recognised for how we see, not how the photograph looks.

So rather than searching for a style, consider broadening your horizons. Explore. Experiment. Remain curious. The horizon may not be finding your style. It may be discovering what lies beyond it.



An idea revisited

by Michael Pilkington

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I have spoken of influence in many articles, and it is an important part of developing as a photographer, particularly in the early years. However, a more interesting and productive aspect of this is when influence promotes inspiration. This happened to me recently on a trip to the Outer Hebrides.

Before that, let's track back to an earlier trip to the Isle of Eigg. Paul was experimenting with ICM, trying to get a different take on the breaking waves coming into the shore. One particular image really stood out to me. He had managed to get a beautiful wave smack bang in the middle of the frame. The overall image displayed characteristics of an ICM because the movement of the camera was translated into lines or stripes horizontally across the image. Paul told me that he had used a tripod and the pan function to keep all these parallel components level.



© Paul Gallagher

Standing on Luskentyre beach, watching the waves come in, Paul's image came to mind. I had completely forgotten the details of the image from the Hebrides, except for the central positioning of the wave and the use of ICM.

I have recently been experimenting with vintage lenses, which, when used in a certain way, can give a soft, glowing aspect to the image. Indeed, I have been moving away from ultrasharp images and even softening them in image editing by using negative clarity or negative texture. Regarding ICM, I have been exploring the use of micro movements. Holding the camera still for the majority of the exposure and then moving it perhaps a few millimetres at the end to get some semblance of movement. This was the technique I decided to employ for this image.



© Michael Pilkington

I am very pleased with the result. My sought-after softness is there, and more importantly, the length of the exposure and keeping it still for the majority of the exposure allowed not only some sharper details to come through and increase colour saturation, but also a beautiful luminosity in the waves hitting the shore. Looking at the two images together, they are very different. That is, perhaps, the point. I did not copy Paul's image, but used it as inspiration. Looking at the two images together, very little survived except the idea of placing a wave at the centre of the frame. That, to me, captures the essence of influence becoming inspiration. The appearance vanished. The idea remained. And that is why the resulting image became my own rather than a variation of Paul's.



Changed perspective

by Paul Gallagher

Changed perspective

by Paul Gallagher

The first time I was afforded the opportunity to drive a section of Route 66 from Albuquerque to Las Vegas, the very notion of such a trip was laden with excitement. Anyone with an inkling of American culture would understand that this was emblematic of the American Dream. To head down 'The Mother Road' stopping en route at one of the many neon-clad motels and eating in a diner was a rite of passage for anyone wanting to experience life beneath the stars and stripes.



© Paul Gallagher

In previous visits, I would walk the pavements of towns such as Tucumcari, Williams and Winslow with a camera in hand, listening to The Eagles song "Take it Easy" on repeat and feeling ever present in that moment, occasionally startled by blisteringly loud Harley Davidson motorcycles as they passed by.

By the time I had travelled Route 66 for the fifth time, the novelty and perception of the places began to dissipate, and during this, another facet of Route 66 began to reveal itself.

Whilst the music was still playing from every souvenir shop and the diners were bustling with passers-by, I only had to walk several hundred meters away to see the diminishing legacy that the glitzy veneer of the high street could not obscure. Closed and abandoned shops, rusting old cars and people living in trailer parks on the edge of poverty. The most poignant symbol was the acres of land occupied by motels that have not received a guest in decades.

As I walked around them in silence, the inactivity and decay portrayed what had been lost, and that the American Dream was just that, a fading dream from the past. Each motel room still displayed its number, and outside, little spindly tables and chairs waited for someone who was to never to return. Because these motels were built for life on the road, each room had its own parking space depicted by white lines painted on a concrete floor that had cracked with time and was filled with black lines of bitumen.

It was as I turned a corner at the side of one motel that I saw wall art of a waiter holding a tray wearing a waistcoat, standing near the parking places, ready to serve his next customer. The wall also displayed a spray-painted USA Highway Route 66 Shield and was made of coarse breeze blocks, typical of these cheap utilitarian buildings, in front of which were the ubiquitous parking spaces. I was the only person there. Of all the doorways, stairs and windows, there was no one walking down them, looking from them, or walking through them. As the waiter patiently looked out towards the car park, he would never again raise a smile as he must have done in years gone by, and no one would celebrate that they had secured the parking space facing the Route 66 sign. I had discovered that when you walked past the diners and bars, the real Route 66 was just a few blocks behind you.

End note

“Better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation”

Herman Melvin

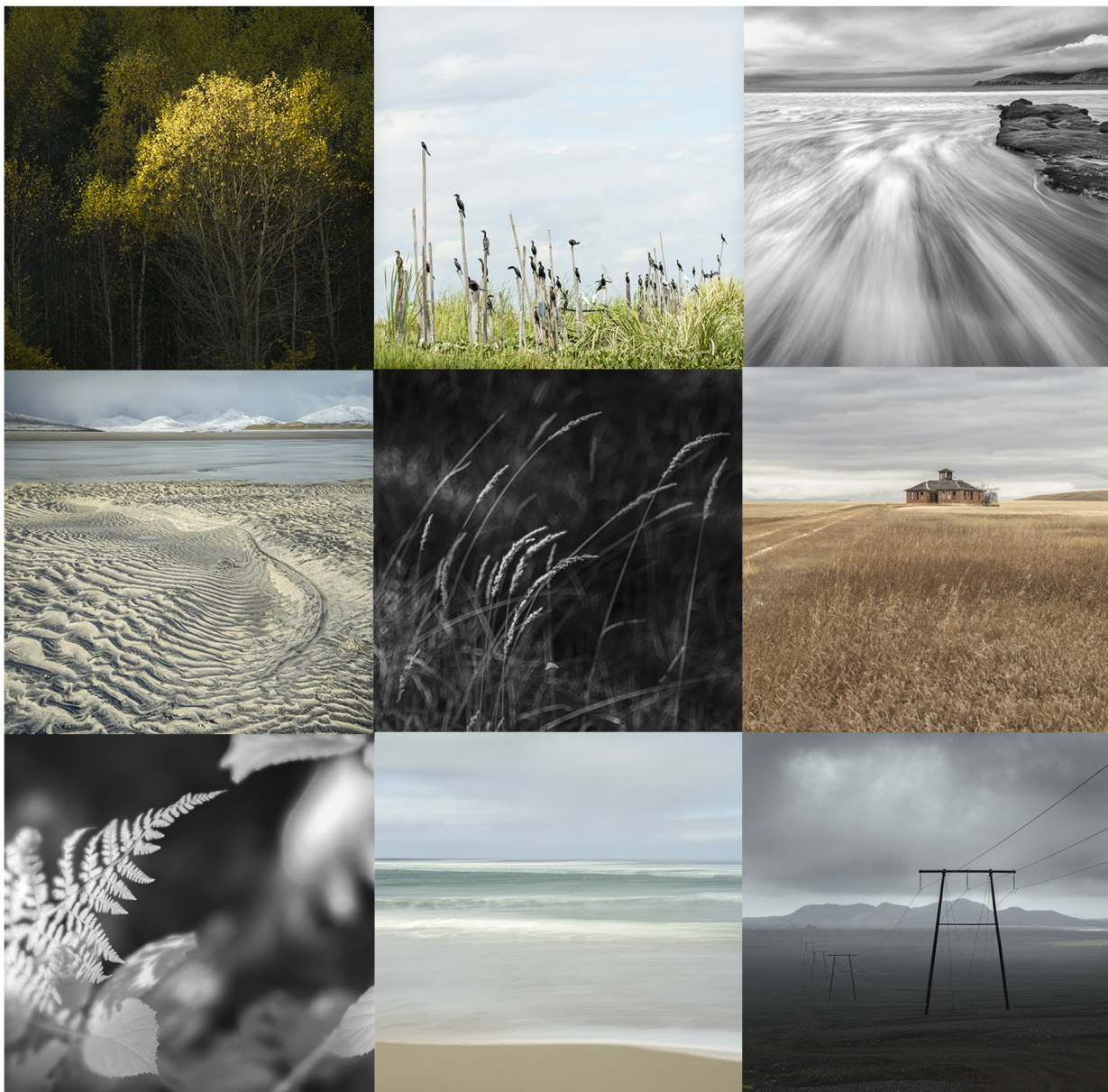
Such wise words from a man who indeed failed during his career and was later labelled as one of America's greatest novelists after his death. He even spent the latter part of his working life working as a humble customs inspector in New York to make ends meet. The man who wrote the globally successful and epic sea-faring masterpiece *Moby Dick* never saw the appreciation for his work.

For Herman Melvin and many other successful creators, success was not achieved by gauging what others thought of their pursuit, but by following their deep intuition and passion. In Michael Pilkington's wisely penned article in this issue, we can see that imitation is a steep-sided pit in which any of us can find difficult to climb out from.

Herman Melvin can only be labelled as a failure in this context if a requirement of success was for him to witness it personally, whereas real success was not the global recognition of his novels, but his drive to complete them. If at any stage you are considering the response of a club judge or are concerned about the lack of thumbs-up on social media, the integrity of your work is diminishing.

Any artist who has forged a new direction or produced work that has arrested the attention of the world didn't do so by solely morphing concepts that had gone before; they allowed themselves the freedom to experiment. It would be a poorer world if Martin Parr decided that photographing people visiting British beach resorts would not be worthy of wider attention, or Edward Weston deemed pepper and shells as a benign subject.

If you would like to comment on what you have read, you have something to add, or you have any questions that may help you on your way in your photography, then please get in touch. You may want to contribute as a featured photographer or submit an article. Just drop us a line with your thoughts.



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