Expressions

Conversations in landscape photography

BLACK AND WHITE ISSUE

JOURNAL 9

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Conversations in landscape photography

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Throughout all of the previous issues of Expressions we have always featured black and white images and they have always richly deserved their place. For this issue we have decided to allow colour photography to take a back seat and celebrate a world in monochrome!

We all agree that sharing, talking and debating all genres of photography is fascinating and the subject is never, and wil never be exhausted. Today more than ever we are surrounded by images wherever we go. Social media is awash with a constant carousel of photographs of people living their lives. Of all of the places we see - imagery, advertising billboards, television, Facebook or magazines, there is one constant within them all: the presence of black and white photographs.

You would think that since the first black and white photograph was made by Joseph Nicephore Niepce in 1827 things would have moved on much like the vinyl record gave way to the compact disk that was made redundant by the download. But no. And why we ask ourselves? Because it is different and very powerful. Call it arty, fashionable or timeless, it is still something that most of us photographers turn to as a means of expression: a way of saying something.

You visit any photographic club or society and there will be an annual monochrome competition let alone the many thousands of social media accounts that are dedicated to and actively promote their love of the colourless image. Even as we visit well-stocked newsagents on the high street and pore over the photograph magazine shelves, we can always pick out a black and white issue, not to mention the loaded bookshelves of any bookshop or library boasting a wealth of volumes from which to choose.

When 'Expressions' was first discussed and ideas tabled, one of the initial, and inevitable issues that we could be a certain of was a 'Black and White' issue. A place where a group of photographers can all extol the wonders of a world in monochrome and share tales of how it has always been a part of their photography. In this issue Paul Gallagher asks himself the question, "Why black and white?", and sets out his proposition; why not! Having been almost totally dedicated to black and white photography for almost thirty years, he has a lot of opinions on the subject.

Emma Davies shares with us her introduction to the world of monochrome and why it is still forms part of her portfolio to this day and how it remains an integral part of her teaching. Within the travelogue section, Michael Pilkington tells us about his exploration on the Japanese island of Hokkaido and how the minimalist elements are further distilled in monochrome and lastly it would be remiss of us to not include black and white infrared, which as many of you know, has been a very important genre to us for many years now.

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/journal**.

Why black and white?

by Paul Gallagher

Why black and white?

by Paul Gallagher

I'm probably the wrong candidate to be answering this question. My first response would be a defensive, "Why not?" or, if not that, an affirming, "You should be doing it." I was never converted to working in black and white; it converted me. Since that day as a college student in Merseyside, I have known little else. I was enrolled as a student of graphic design and was informed that any future role in such an industry would entail using images, so an understanding of the photographic process would be essential and enlightening.

I wasn't simply given free rein to snap away at anything I chose, but was tasked with a project to explore images that conveyed vertical emphasis. Off I went alone with this perceived constraint in mind and, within a few hours, I was developing my first roll of film and soon after placing the negative in an enlarger. This was long before the notion of digital imaging had been considered, and students were only offered black and white negative film as a raw material. By this time in the early eighties, colour was of course everywhere. For those of us who can remember, Bonus Print rewarded you with a free roll of colour negative film if you chose to use their developing and print service, which was delivered to you along with your prints.

Something changed in me on that day, and it was the juncture in my life when photography became

part of me at the tender age of sixteen. Several of my peers soon shunned the 'old-style' black and white negative and invested in the full-colour Bonus Print option, but I was taken by it. At the time, as a youngster, I did not really know why. I was fortunate to be a student in a college that boasted a wonderful library, well-stocked in photography books. On one wet winter morning, I was browsing the shelves, and my eyes set upon a deep green book spine displaying the title Examples: The Making of Forty Photographs by Ansel Adams. I slid the book from the shelf and the cover image was "Moonrise, Hernandez." I stood and stared, then retreated to a chair in a quiet corner. The sky in the photograph was solid black, surrounding the moon, and the small houses in the foreground glinted in the last light of the setting sun. It was this photograph that initiated a lifelong journey of exploring every tone between pure white and pure black.

I was lucky, I suppose. I never made the transition from colour to black and white. My first thirsty explorations in photography were firmly embedded in monochrome, with no sense of loss in the absence of colour. Even at that age, every landscape I set my eyes on was being translated into a rich and diverse variety of sumptuous tones. I am fully aware that I was gifted this passion early on, which enables me to grasp why photographers evolving in the opposite direction - from colour to black and white - can find the evolution more challenging. To ask my younger self what it was about black and white that transfixed me would have possibly been an unanswerable question. But as maturation has taken place, I can now assimilate what I was experiencing - and still do.

© Paul Gallagher

For any of you who know me, I can often be heard simplifying photography as an endeavour where we simply collect reflected light. Black and white photography has nothing else to be concerned with other than the limitless quality and essence of light. When I was poring over the pages of Ansel Adams's books, what struck me was the way light in the photographs was presented. At no time did any of the photographs feel deficient or bereft of colour. On the contrary, they sparkled with a realism of a world in which colour was not needed. In fact, the presence of colour in any of the images that inspired me would have been detrimental, merely serving as a distraction.

When a photographer elects to delve into black and white, the point at which they first face critical decisions is the moment the image transitions from colour to monochrome. As the vibrancy of colour information is removed, they enter a world where the choices before them are vast, and the familiar colour references no longer exist. It is here where you, as the photographer, can decide the destination and narrative of the image - and most often, where the photographer loses their way. It is for this reason that there have been, and continue to be, many image-editing plug-ins providing an array of monochrome 'looks' to choose from which, to be frank, I think are largely dreadful. I cannot think of any other art form where the artist gathers the ingredients for their work and then hands it over to someone else to create - worse still, being able to identify the plug-in that was employed!

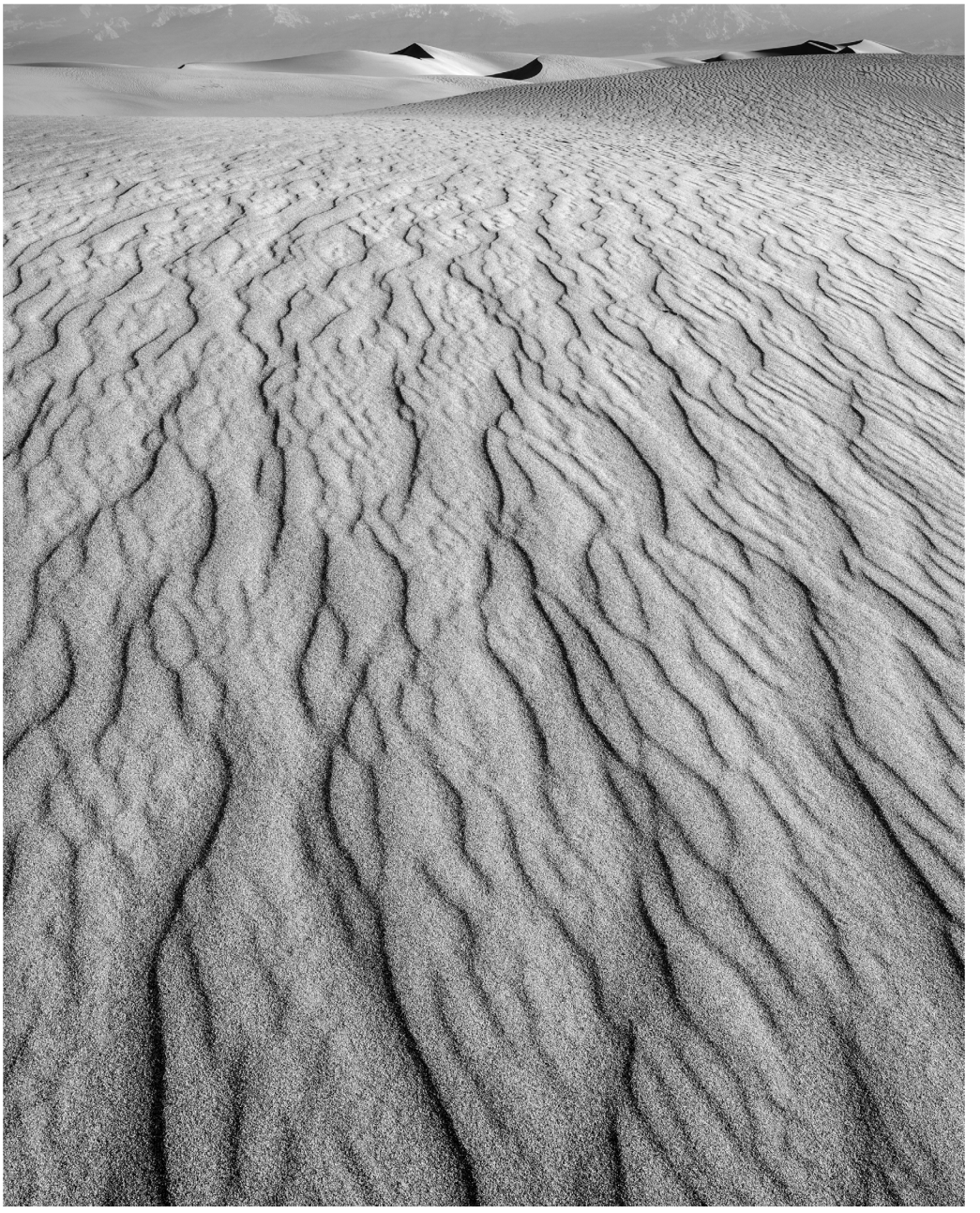
Therein lies the challenge. It is often assumed that, without the need to concern ourselves with colour, black and white should be a relatively simple pursuit. It is not. Sometimes it is even considered a fallback position if the original colour file is not delivering the goods. Black and white photography is a craft that demands skills which must be honed over time, and not just when we arrive at our computer, but even before we lift the camera out from its bag. We must begin by understanding light

and how that alone is being reflected back at us. It is those infinitely varying levels of light that become our infinite blend of tones of grey. Understanding light is the cornerstone and foundation of any photographer, but in particular, the monochrome photographer.

The word previsualisation is often cast around in photographic circles and is a skill that black and white masters have relied upon for decades. If we begin to see our subject as rhythms, forms, textures, shadows, and light, then we begin to discount the colours we are presented with. The very notion of this results in us continuing the practice back at the computer, harnessing everything in our composition where light has been carefully considered. The converse of this is pursuing the act of colour photography in the hope that it may result in a fine black and white photograph. It is a beginning-to-end journey, and nothing is left to chance.

Compared to working in colour, the interpretive power of monochrome photography is unparalleled. Because colour is ubiquitous in our world, and we are surrounded by colour images every day, there lies a limitation as to how far you can deviate from that reality. Of course, colours can be intensified or desaturated, but the subject often gives the game away, resulting in an image that may gain a raised eyebrow from the viewer. The same is not the case for black and white images. With the glorious absence of colour, the malleability of tones and expression is almost limitless.

Furthermore, black and white photography emphasizes form, composition, and texture with heightened clarity. In the absence of colour, the viewer's attention is directed toward the play of light and shadow, the structure of shapes, and the subtle gradations of tone. This approach refines the photographer's skill in controlling dynamic range and mastering lighting conditions. Artistic control over these elements allows for expressive storytelling, creating mood and atmosphere that can be haunting, joyful, contemplative, or dramatic.



One of the main reasons for the continued high regard of black and white is its historical and artistic significance. For many decades, film-based black and white photography was the primary medium available, and it became associated with the fine arts. The craft of developing film and printing in darkrooms harnessed a deep connection between the artist and the work, highlighting technical prowess and patience. This historical context gives black and white photographs a sense of authenticity and craftsmanship that many appreciate as an essential aspect of artistic expression. Even today, digital tools allow for the conversion of colour images into monochrome, but the traditional processes still appeal to galleries and collectors.

If you have never allowed yourself the opportunity to explore black and white photography, it is not too late - and you certainly should. I will not state here that it will be a seamless journey with easily achievable results, but the rewards gained as you move forward will furnish you with a higher degree of proficiency and dexterity that can be drawn upon in any genre of photography. Be prepared to get lost in the avenues of grey and the accompanying frustrations, but always bear in mind that what you are nurturing is the single most important ingredient in photography: light.

© Paul Gallagher

© Paul Gallagher

A winter journey through Hokkaido

by Michael Pilkington

Travelogue - A truthful account of an individual's experiences to or within a particular place

I have visited Hokkaido several times and taken numerous images there. Of course, I had seen plenty of images from the region before – typically minimalist compositions, snowy fields, lone trees, with lots of negative space made famous by Michael Kenna. For winter photography, it is probably one of the best, if not the best, places I have visited. I confess, I have a love for snow and trees. Not many boxes to tick, but in Hokkaido, both were very much to be ticked.

There is much more to Hokkaido than lone trees. As landscape photographers, it's almost innate in us to distil the elements of a landscape to make the image consumable to the viewer. Hokkaido does this for us. But once you've photographed the first few lone trees, you realise it's going to happen again - and again. Then the challenge shifts to finding elements to add back into the composition. In a landscape we've already deemed minimalist, simplicity can suddenly feel demanding.

Normally, we start in the Biei and Shirogane areas. This is probably one of the most popular regions, and it's easy to see why. It's full of the kind of elements photographers love: rolling fields and those classic, lone trees. There's always plenty of snow on the ground - metres deep in places - and you're generally confined to shooting from the roadside. Venture off the road, and you can quickly find yourself chest-deep in snow. This happened to me once, and I can tell you, it's not easy to extricate yourself, especially with a full camera bag on your back and a tripod in hand. I ended up removing my bag and using the tripod as a crutch to crawl out. Not my finest hour, but a memory made all the more vivid by the laughter of the tour group watching me flounder.

Snow is never far away in Hokkaido, and that's part of the appeal. The arrival of fresh snow is a frequent and welcome event. Sunshine appears, but the wind carries change. One moment you can be stood squinting your eyes from the sun being reflected from the white snow, the next the skies become darker than the land that surrounds you, and gradually snow begins to fall from the grey. Once, I just stood and stared. This is something we seldom experience in the UK and you can see every variation in the winds as the snowflakes whip by.

The Blue Pond at Shirogane is always frozen over at this time of year. Hidden beneath a layer of snow, the vibrant mineral-blue water of summer is absent. The minerals, while visually stunning, are lethal to the trees rooted within the pond. The result is a forest of stunted, lifeless trunks, frozen in place. As you descend the small path to the lake, you're met by a scene both stark and still, dead and frozen in time.

From there, we travel west to Shosanbetsu. The main draw here is the Torii Gate, standing out alone on the shoreline. It's striking - quintessentially Japanese, elegant and defiant. If you're lucky, the sea is partially frozen. You can try a few different angles to frame it against the horizon. It's one of those spots where the image tells its own story. It can be very cold there, and I recall squinting through the viewfinder while a sharp wind sliced through my gloves.

Hokkaido, outside of the winter months, is dedicated to farming fruit and vegetables and cut flowers. It is quite common to see the characteristic greenhouses during your travels. Typically, you only see the frame. These are covered by plastic during the growing season but are removed for the winter as the weight of the snow would probably collapse the whole structure. There is something oriental about the shape of these, curved and coming to a subtle peak at the top, and you see this repeated on the barns and other farm buildings dotted around.

The first time I saw them they appeared to be very short structures reaching only four or five feet above the ground making me picture a farmer stooped over whilst working. It wasn't until a few years later until I saw a farm that had completed some snow clearing that I realised they were in fact over six feet tall and a rather pleasant place to work!

© Michael Pilkington

Teshio and Ōmu are more remote and definitely less polished. A lot of farmland, old fishing gear, and half-buried huts. The landscape is very monochrome - lots of grey, brown, and white - which suits black and white photography well. You find yourself focusing on shapes and textures more than anything. A few huts with snow piled high against them can stand out, especially if you have dark and bleak skies.

© Michael Pilkington

A visit to a fishing port is not high on the agenda for a landscape photographer, but I have to say that walking amongst the fishing trawlers, all towering above you perched on blocks, makes for interesting abstract and graphical images. The whole fishing fleet is hauled out of the water to protect it from the freezing seas and winter weather. It must be a considerable operation. Despite the sub-zero temperatures, this is a time for maintenance, and it is not unusual to see workmen scraping and painting hulls. Often, the water in the docks is frozen, and you can wile away a good hour just exploring the geometrical shapes formed by the rise and fall of the tides repeatedly breaking up the ice.

Cape Notoro is a headland jutting out into the sea featuring a lighthouse at its furthest point. It can be bitterly cold with the wind blowing across the frozen sea, and certainly tests your cold-weather gear. Lighthouses are inherently photogenic, but for me it was the huge expanse of frozen sea that attracted me. The white ice finally gives way to the deep blue of the deeper ocean. Sea water freezes at -1.8 degrees Celsius, similar to the temperature that can freeze fresh water, yet you would assume temperatures would need to be much lower to arrest the power of waves.

Places, such as Abashari, are very much on the photography circuit, thanks in part to Michael Kenna. Frozen lakes, fences, and lines of trees make for good subjects, though you have to work to find something that doesn't feel overly familiar. I think that is the challenge of Hokkaido. It is very easy to just take the obvious, and why not? Minimalistic images are the very hallmark of this tour. What I search for is something a little different, a new take on something that has been done a thousand times before. It is not an easy endeavour. Being original and creative doesn't just happen and, indeed, may evade you. But that's also part of the appeal. You never quite know what you'll come away with.

After working along the eastern coast, we make our way inland again, this time climbing up towards Mokotoyama Observatory. The road - Route 102 - winds up to just over 1,000 metres in elevation. From the top, the views are impressive, but what catches your attention is the descent. The road drops steeply, with wide bends that offer expansive views across the landscape. It can be bitterly cold when you are there, with a biting wind that cuts right through every layer.

Along the ridgelines, there are countless silver birch trees, most of them twisted and bent over by years of exposure to the elements. These trees cling to the hilltops in defiance of the weather. Their forms - knarled and stark - make for striking studies against the pale sky and white ground. Interspersed with these, are more dense collections of trees, forming small woodlands. Everywhere you can see a form of miniture bamboo which always manages to poke its head above the snow. It can provide an interesting contrast to the surrounding trees. Even in winter, whilst looking a little battered, it retains its colours of green and yellow. Walking this road is one of the highlights of the trip. The opportunities here are boundless. So absorbed in this, I didn't even feel the cold.

Further inland, Lake Kussharo and Kawayu Forest offer a shift in mood. There, it's all about atmosphere: steaming waters, whooper swans, and swirling snow. This is a favourite spot of mine. Some of the trees along the frozen lake side look like dancers in mid-pose - elegant and full of life.

There are many more stops on this trip, too many for this article, but each offers something different. Overall, Hokkaido lives up to expectations, but not in the way you think it would. The snow simplifies everything - it strips out distraction and leaves only the essentials. This forces you to work differently, to slow down and think about composition more carefully. A lot of the landscape shows signs of human activity - fences, huts, managed fields - but it doesn't feel intrusive. In some ways, it adds to the sense of place - a place that encourages patience and rewards careful observation. I always return with fewer images than expected, but the ones I keep mean something. That, I think, is the real measure.

Featured photographer: Emma Davies

Emma Davies

You may have heard of Emma Davies, the author of the Amazon bestseller “A Year with my Camera” and the instructor of the course associated with the book. Having begun with a career as a lawyer, then retrained as a portrait photographer, Emma then carved a path to becoming a commercial flower photographer, along with taking a Master’s Degree in Psychology, specialising in teaching creativity. Throughout all of these transitions in her life, black and white photography has remained an integral component of her journey.

Your original career path was very different from what you are doing now. Can you share with us how the change in direction came about and how you chose photography?

You never know where things will take you; whilst teaching florists how to take photos for social media, I realised that you can't teach photography in a weekend. I wrote a follow-up email course for my floristry students and that became my global online photography course, 'A Year With My Camera' (AWYMC). Since then, I have turned my hand to book publishing, app developing community management and video creation.

©Emma Davies

I now teach full-time and am lucky to be able to spend my photography time working on personal projects, which you can see here: **emmadavies.com**

AYWMC turns ten next year and is a testament to the fact that joining a genuinely supportive community is the way to learn. If you can have fun at the same time as working on new skills, you don't need to worry about what other people think.

I run an online camera club separate to AYWMC and members there have convinced me to try bird photography. With age comes patience? I've discovered I enjoy getting to know birds and their behaviours, and in the back of my mind, I'm always looking for situations that might work well in black and white.

© Emma Davies

© Emma Davies

I love the concept of Women and The Photobook as a means of sharing the work of women photographers to a wider audience. How did you hatch the idea and are there any particular volumes you are proud to have in your collection?

How long have you got? I could talk about this project all day.

During lockdown I did an online Photography MA with Falmouth University. As part of this we had the opportunity to work with industry professionals and I opted to take up the challenge from 10x10 Photobooks to create a reading room of photobooks by women to accompany the publication of their anthology, What They Saw, Historical Photobooks by Women 1843-1999.

Along with Philippa James, we opted to continue the project after its initial outing at Photo Oxford. Since then, we've been to Martin Parr's Books on Photography and to Format Festival. The aim is straightforward: to bring photobooks by women to a wider audience. We have both historical and contemporary books, and we love to share.

Some of my favourites:

We have a first edition Lee Miller that I bought second-hand at a bargain price before her film came out last year. It has that old-book smell still; you feel like you are holding a piece of history.

There are only a handful of copies of the first photobook, Anna Atkins' cyanotypes, but Taschen did a beautiful reproduction, which has pride of place in our collection.

© Emma Davies

We are incredibly grateful to photographers who donate their books to us (we have no funding - we do this for love); most recently, Lisa Brunzell's 'Let The World Adore You', now shortlisted for Arles. Lisa is Swedish, and her book explores the British fascination with ABBA via tribute bands.

We have a soft spot for handmade books. Historically women did not have access to mainstream publishing houses–because they weren't legally able to enter into a contract, because they were expected to stay at home, because they didn't make photographs of "publishable" work–and so their handmade books did not make it into the received canon of photobook history.

© Emma Davies

Tamsin Green's 'This Is How The Earth Must See Itself' is one of our handmade books; she made it in the dimensions of an OS map to reflect her walking practice.

womenandthephotobook.com
10x10photobooks.org/what-they-saw-historical-photobooks-by-women-publication
lisabrunzell.se/lettheworldadoreyou
manualeditions.com/books

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I have seen from your personal work in the past that you have a passion for black and white. Has that always been the case and were there any particular photographers that influenced you in your photographic journey?

Having learnt photography in a bathroom-darkroom with my dad, yes - black and white photography will always be my first love. Even with digital photography, there is something timeless and deceptively simple about a monochrome image. I enjoy the challenge of creating a composition that works in B&W, and the mental gymnastics sometimes needed to pitch your exposure just right. And when it all works (not as often as you might think) and comes together in a beautiful print; there's nothing like it. Michael Kenna has been a big influence; looking at his prints, you know he has been involved from start to finish, which to me is very meaningful.

It's been interesting thinking back on other photographers who have influenced me. A few favourites who work in black and white:

Vanessa Winship for her ability to mix the personal and the universal.
Fay Godwin for combining a love of the landscape with an examination of the political.
Chieko Shiraishi just because she embraces the darks.
Inge Morath for reminding me photography can be fun.

I've never been a photography purist; I love the speed and flexibility of digital and the post-processing options you get with Lightroom and Photoshop. But with the advent of AI and the growing "one-click fixes" editing options, I'm actually coming full circle and picking up my analogue cameras again. Maybe digital photography is becoming too easy and doesn't give me enough of a challenge? I don't have a problem with AI at all, and I use it to brainstorm new approaches to creative problems. But it has made me appreciate what photography is (for me): a tangible link to a moment, a connection that neither

digital nor AI can reproduce. With an analogue photograph that hasn't been through a computer, I can hold a physical trace of where I was and what I saw.

© Emma Davies

Right now, I'm working on an entirely analogue project. No scanning, no digital editing, no digital printing; from negative to print with no pixels in between. I am having a lot of fun resurrecting my darkroom skills but it does seem to be like riding a bike; you don't really forget. And the most unexpected thing about this project is how much I am enjoying the imperfections. When I first learnt darkroom printing, it was using Ansel Adams' zone system, which is incredibly prescriptive, and you never really felt like you were doing it right. Now I'm just embracing the process, seeing what I like and delighting in the odd dust spot, light leak or blown highlight. It feels like these "mistakes" are actually a trace of the human, a sign that this was made by me instead of being manufactured by AI or fixed by Lightroom.

For the kit nerds amongst us I am enjoying using all my old gear:

1953 Voigtlander folding camera (120)
Vintage Kodak pocket junior No.1 (120)
My very first camera; Canon AE-1 (35mm) circa 1980, still going strong
Hasselblad 501CM (120)
And my pride and joy, an Ebony wooden field camera which takes 5x4 sheet film.

Out of sight

by Paul Gallagher

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There are certain avenues through which you travel during a photographic career that, when left behind, there seems little reason to go back. There is a sense of completion and closure, all of what can be explored, has been. As a photography student black and white was definitely 'my thing' and I was the one who was in college early with the chemicals up to temperature processing films and print making. In my sixteen-year-old mind I wanted to be the next Ansel Adams, so I was in the embryonic stages of learning previsualisation and attempting to achieve the sumptuous tones I had seen in his books.

One afternoon, another student with a shared an affinity for black and white came out of the darkroom with a print that was as punchy and as contrasty as any print I had ever seen. What he held in his hand was an image he had taken in the sand dunes of Formby Point on a bright sunny day, with blue skies of a small picket fence leaning over in the marram grasses as they reached towards the sky. The marram grasses where glistening white and the blue-sky backdrop was ink-black. Although it was a country mile from that smooth tonality that I was trying to create, I was a kid and it looked like great fun!

I soon had in my clutches a roll of Kodak High Speed Infrared black and white film and off I went to the beach. The first thing I learned is that you had to load the film into the camera in a darkroom, otherwise you would run a real risk of fogging it before you have pressed the shutter. If you have never loaded 35mm film into a camera before, it was a fiddley affair sometimes, but in the dark the exercise was positively frustrating!

Good fun it was! Setting an ISO (or ASA in those days) was hit and miss as I was dealing with a film that couldn't see invisible light and the guidelines were sketchy at best. With simple tank development, fix and wash I was ready for the enlarger. The prints had solid blacks and the whites glowed, the pine trees of Formby looked skeletal and contorted against the black skies with wisps of cirrus clouds above. I was quite taken by the look of infrared and spent many a happy hour walking the beaches of the Sefton coast and through the streets of Southport. As with all good things, they need to be taken in moderation, as soon enough the fascination wore thin and I returned to my favourite Ilford Delta 100 black and white negative film.

I now know the reason I walked away from those early experiments with black and white infrared; I was getting the same results every time. This can be a good thing for some photographers as a benchmark is established and you are comforted in the knowledge that little can go wrong, and if it does, you are likely to know where that happened. Over thirty years passed before I was to return to infrared.

As my career in photography pushed through the years, I eventually left film behind, forged a healthy appreciation for digital, and began to explore colour with ardour. It was in these early days of digital that a company who had begun to convert digital cameras to infrared contacted me and suggested that I should try out one of their converted cameras. I was sent the camera and I experienced two sentiments at once. Firstly, when I opened the box and removed the camera it was a little six megapixel Nikon D70.

Given that only a year or so beforehand I was marching through the landscape with a twenty kilogram backpack full of large format equipment, this felt positively 'mickey-mouse'! Secondly, the only mental reference point for infrared for me to draw upon was those harsh black and white prints I'd made as a student and subsequently left behind spending years pursuing beautiful, subtle tones of grey.

In short, it didn't have much going for it and it languished in my bag for a few months before I was somewhat obliged to make some exposures having received a call from the company asking how I was getting on! I chose the right day with the best weather and headed out on a spring morning with the sun bright in the sky and fresh new leaves sprouting on the trees. I returned home and took a look at the files on my computer and what I was presented with showed no change to what I had seen in a college dark room. I was staring at images with stark highlights and overwhelming blacks, a tonal range I had worked hard to get away from for many years.

Then something happened that changed everything. I was away on holiday in a quiet corner of Westmorland and soon discovered that I had left the batteries for my camera at home. In fact, the only camera I had with a battery supply was the little Nikon D70 infrared camera. It was that camera or forgo any opportunity of making images for the duration of the holiday. I resisted, then one evening out of desperation I picked up my nemesis and headed out. Westmoreland is an area to the east of the Lake District that is quiet and littered with miles of country lanes that wind through the farmland. As I was driving the fine weather was clearly not going to last as heavy skies were building from the west arriving from the coast and I realised my opportunities were thinning out for infrared photography.

Although my chance of a good infrared image had passed, I parked at the edge of the field where mature Caledonian Pines were stood and simply gazed as the skies darkened, and in the distance the occasional flash of lightning lit the landscape. Now that I had resigned myself to the assumption that the best light had gone, I began thinking that although I was not stood in sunlight, there was still light

© Paul Gallagher

present that contained infrared. As the dark arms of the storm reached across the field in front of me, I made an exposure and dashed back to the car just before the heavy rains came down.

Back at the cottage I took a look at the image after it had been converted to black and white where the sepia tone, commonplace with converted infrared camera files, had been removed. What I was familiar with in infrared was nowhere to be seen. The high contrast, dark black and bleached whites were replaced with a rather flat image of the scene, that, to all intents and purposes, looked like newsprint! This was the first infrared image I had seen that I could regard as flat and bearing no contrast at all. Feeling rather vexed I almost felt like switching the laptop off and bidding a farewell to infrared, but my thoughts arrested me. If the file had no risk of clipped highlights or blocked shadows, then all the tonal information was in there, latent and waiting to be discovered.

Looking more closely at the image file I began a process of stretching out the tonality making the blacks darker and the whites brighter. As the image gradually revealed itself, I was struck by how much detail there was in the sky. If I had made the same exposure with a standard digital camera, the sky would contain very little detail and would be very bright and the foreground would be dark. The foreground in the infrared file was luminant and displayed wonderful pale toned grasslands. The challenges I would have been faced with using a standard camera were bereft in this image file, and what the camera had captured was the textures within the storm clouds I had witnessed, and the chlorophyll in the grasses and pines needles had reflected the infrared light, and they were glowing.

What I hadn't realised was that I was making the assumption of what the ideal weather conditions were for infrared, the very same conditions that I was tired of that produced mediocre high contrast images. What I had learned through the mistake of leaving camera batteries at home and pointing an

infrared converted camera towards a landscape that was in receipt of no sunlight, is that infrared light is still there, but not in the same quantities, not enough to reproduce the high contrast qualities I found objectionable.

This revelation changed everything for me. Although the original image file looked as dull as dishwater and seemed ever more problematic, it had hidden qualities that are unobtainable with a standard digital camera. Shadows areas containing even the slightest dusting of light would glisten, and the bright skies of an overcast day would be replete in texture and tone. From a camera that was viewed as a hindrance only producing images that were as far away from smooth tonality as I could ever have wished for, I now had a dedicated black and white camera, and an understanding of what infrared could be.

Many a day and location followed on from this evening in Westmorland and many more cameras have been converted since. The little Nikon D70 still has a place on the bookshelf in my office, emblematic of a turning point in my black and white landscape photography. I have learned a new version of previsualisation. One that employs an understanding of what invisible light looks like, a light that is everywhere we can see light. I have stood looking over the grandeur of Yosemite Valley, on the Great Plains of America, high in the mountains of China and walked through the woodlands of Lancashire, and infrared has become an integral component of photographing these places. Long gone is the notion that it is the type of photography that is best done on the sunniest of days, but an expressive use of light that has the subtlest qualities of any Ansel Adams photograph if used in the right way.

Two trees in winter

by Michael Pilkington

Over the course of different tours, I returned to the same pair of trees - slender and weathered standing on the edge of a frozen lake. These trees became more than subjects. What began as a simple composition soon became a study in perspective, emotion, and visual language

Through three different images, made on different days and from different positions, I was able to explore how framing, distance, and compositional intent can completely transform the character of a subject. It also talks to the need to explore a subject, trying to go beyond the obvious.

In the next few pages, I set out this journey of visual exploration.

Image 1 - Stillness and simplicity

The first image was made a couple of years ago. As was normal, the sky was a pale grey and the snow seemed to reflect this. The distant shore of the lake was the only thing that separated sky and snow. I was attracted to these two trees as they presented what I considered to be a typical Hokkaido composition: minimalistic.

In terms of composition, I placed the pair of trees in the middle of the scene, giving them enough room on either side for the composition to breathe. This, I felt, gave a sense of scale to the trees in this vast landscape. There were no other visual elements: no foreground branches, no footsteps, no textural distractions. Just the trees, bare-limbed and delicate, standing on the open edge of the lake.

As a minimalistic image, the trees carried the entire weight of the image. I visualised the pure simplicity of the image with the trees, their branches, lightly edged with snow, becoming line drawings against a pale sky. I liked the way one curved slightly toward the other, the way their canopies overlapped but didn't entangle.

There was no need to add anything else to the composition. The mood was contemplative and solitary. The two trees, isolated from the world around them, evoke something deeply emotional: stillness and connection. There's a purity in the lack of context that lets the imagination fill in the gaps.

Yet its strength is also its limitation. The image is quiet and self-contained, but it doesn't offer a narrative beyond the moment. Without any spatial cues or surrounding elements, the viewer is suspended in a kind of visual silence.

Image 2 - Observation and distance

On a subsequent trip, under different conditions, I returned to the same location. This time, the snow had settled differently and was thicker. Visibility was much less and the distant shoreline was a light grey smudge that just about separated sky and snow.

I didn't want to repeat the same image as I had previously taken. Instead of concentrating on the two trees, I cast my eyes around and, between those two trees and me, were other trees, their boughs sweeping up and over the two companion trees. I realised I could use these foreground trees to create a path for the eye - a corridor that led you into the image.

The composition became more layered, more architectural. Four trunks stagger across the frame, each with its own spacing. They are strong and dark, their branches sweeping and angular. And in the background, small but clearly present, are the same two trees.

This image introduces a sense of narrative, the trees in the foreground being guardians, protectors. The viewer is no longer with the trees, as before, but looking toward them. The mood shifts from intimacy to observation.

Image 3 - Embracing complexity

This last image was taken at the same time as the second and in many ways, is the culmination of the entire exercise. The previous image had framed the two trees, giving more depth and complexity to the image. Stepping back, and looking around, I considered how I might frame them from both sides.

I wanted to create a greater sense of depth and layering. The snow at the base of the trees was deep and undulating revealing subtle shadows that provoked as sense of three dimensionality

The emotional tone of this image is different again. Through shadow to light. The composition invites the viewer to stop, to look, and to reflect. Visually, this is the most complex of the three. The framing elements are dense and detailed, but they serve a purpose. The distant trees, now much smaller and seemingly further away, gain a new kind of significance. They are not central, but they are important - a destination.

Conclusion: Three ways of seeing

These three images, taken in the same place and featuring the same two trees, represent three distinct ways of seeing. The first is close and pure, a moment of presence captured without interference. The second steps back, introducing space, context, and quiet narrative. The third pulls the viewer into a constructed vision.

What connects them is not just the subject, but the attention paid to it. In each image, the two trees serve as visual anchors. They remain unchanged while everything around them shifts - light, distance, composition, and tonality.

For me, this series has reinforced a central belief: that repetition is not a limitation, but an invitation. By returning to the same subject, I was able to explore composition, uncover nuance, to test my visual instincts, and to deepen my connection to the landscape.

Sometimes, the quietest subjects speak the loudest. You just have to keep looking.

Ancient oak

by Chris Cullen

Ancient oak

by Chris Cullen

I prefer to say "this image was made" rather than "this photo was taken." The distinction feels important to me. It's a bit like the difference between workers earning money and investment bankers making money. One is a reward for effort; the other just wafts into a bank account without any hard graft. I like to think I put a bit of effort into my image-making.

This image shows a remarkable ancient oak tree in a wood I've been visiting for 20 years – my favourite tree in my favourite wood

Woodland photography is notoriously tricky. The goal is to choose a subject and present it well. Woodland chaos intrudes from every direction. Excluding such distractions is far from easy. The light can be harsh, and areas of bright sky are problematic. Finding rhythm and balance, and controlling the size or degree of shadows and highlights, is challenging.

RAW image files are often surprisingly high in contrast when viewed later. The human eye adapts to dark and light areas, making scenes seem less contrasty. When considering a potential scene, I often screw up my eyes. Detail disappears, and only vague areas of dark and light remain. This helps me identify significant shadow areas that ordinary adaptive eyesight fails to spot. It also helps me appreciate the inherent geometry in a scene and avoid compositional flaws. I certainly used this trick when making this image.

The origin of any composition is: What is the subject? What am I trying to say? What (if any) emotion am I conveying? Here, the subject is my favourite tree. What I'm saying and showing is the amazing way it widens at its base (a 48-foot circumference at ground level). This widening forms an inverted Y-shape. I love this tree. I love its age (about 500 years). I love the fact that, as a student of history, I know that Mary Tudor hunted here in 1528.

Having decided what to include, I then decided what to exclude. What you see here is the outcome. The foreground tree is the main subject. The background tree further left is a subsidiary subject. I love this direction of view because there are two or three Y-type shapes. The main subject forms an inverted Y, the tree on the left a normal Y, and the fallen branch is another inverted Y. In this view, I've deliberately not emphasised the branch's Y, because the background Y was more important to me. The two Y's are like Yin and Yang – opposites. This is the core of the composition.

When framing the image, I was mindful of the right side of the subject tree's trunk. There is a sliver of bright sky there and the trunk of a parasitic holly tree. I considered this and allowed it. In post-processing, I chose to reduce the brightness (highlights slider) of this area. I think the visual weight of the main tree and the two Y's renders that bit of sky unimportant and not distracting.

The left and right sides of the image are light and dark. This isn't a problem. They have balance – one counterbalances the other. The sky on the left isn't unbroken. It's bright, but it has no continuous areas.

End note

"What I love about Black & White photographs is that they're more like reading the book than seeing the movie." "
Jennifer Price

We have heard this said so many times and they are words often spoken by the avid reader of literature. When considered, to go and watch a movie is a simple task. All we are required to do is find a comfortable seat to sit back, relax and watch what is presented to us. The proposition of yielding the same information from a book is quite different. Rather than committing to the two hours that is required to watch a movie, it can take many hours to pour over the many pages in a book, so why is the experience often regarded as more rewarding?

When watching a movie, the entire experience is designed to deliver you to a place or moment laced in incredible sound, colour and effect. Your response is fashioned by the director who draws on your senses of light and sound and often leaves little to your imagination. In books we merely have words. Words that are placed together to tell a story, and they will be words that you are familiar with, and have read in many different contexts over the course of your life.

The distinction between the two is the presence of imagination. The movie leaves little to the imagination, and in fact guides you though the story with little or no application of imagination. The experience of reading a book has little in common. You cannot see the settings or the characters. You have to use your imagination to fill the void. There will of course be some gentle persuasion from the author, but ultimately, it is up to you. Who hasn't read a book and not imagined a particular voice in your mind for the characters written on the page?

What Jennifer Price tells us about black and white photographs is this. Like the words in a book, they are a departure from reality, and through the craft of tones and light the photographer suggests to us what that reality may have been like when the exposure was made. Beyond that suggestion, and with the absence of colour, we have to leave our imagination to make of it what it will.

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 have had an experience you would like to share that you know others would be fascinated to hear, or you may want to contribute as a featured photographer or submit an article. Just follow the email link below and feel free to drop us a line with your thoughts or equally leave a comment on our **Facebook** or **Instagram** pages.

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