

Following your Intuition

A good artist lets his intuition lead him wherever it wants

Tao Te Ching

1 – Introduction

Landscape photography is a contradiction of sorts. On the one hand we need to spend considerable amounts of time to study the craft and the art carefully, to be at specific locations at the right time, and to wait for the light to be at it best. On the other hand, when it comes to taking photographs we usually have only minutes to do so. Typically, once at a given location, we wait for hours for the light to reach its peak. Once it does, everything happens very quickly and in a few minutes the light is gone. In practice we do have sufficient time, and we can certainly extend this time by photographing before and after peak times, but we certainly need to work quickly.

When you consider that landscapes are a static subject, that plants take years to grow, and that geological forces took millions of years to shape the landscape, having to hurry to capture what will be gone in a few minutes is somewhat of a contradiction. While the landscape is eternal, at least as far as our life span is concerned, natural light is ephemeral.

In this situation, pondering which rule of composition we are going to use seems quite inappropriate. There is simply no time to do so. At least not while trying to capture fleeting light. Certainly, training and study come into play, because what we learned and studied is present in our mind as we compose an image. However, at such times we rely on intuition rather than on conscious thinking to get the job done.

Personally, my approach in regards to deciding which composition to use is to ask myself which scene, which framing, which composition, excites me the most. Which one, in short, makes my heart beat faster. This sums up my approach accurately.



Sunset, Canyonlands, Needles District, Utah

2 – Intuition

Intuition: thoughts and preferences that come to mind quickly and without much reflection.

Kahneman, 2003: A Perspective on Judgment and Choice.

American Psychologist, 58(9), 697-720

Call it intuition if you will. I don't really have a name for it, nor do I need a name. All I know is that it works. When my pulse quickens, the composition gets better. That's good enough for me. If this does not sound very technical, that's because it is not. It is simply not meant to be technical.

There is only one "technique," if we can call it that, that we need to learn when it comes to intuition: trust it. Trusting our intuition is in large part letting go of what we have learned and of the work that has influenced us. Letting go of being like 'the masters,' of trying to do what they did, and of being as good as they were.

It's a big cleansing process, a big spring cleanup if you will. While learning what 'the masters' did and how they did it was important, it is now time to let it all go. Because you cannot unlearn, there is not risk that you will forget what you have learned. The rules, the techniques, all the knowledge you acquired will stay with you. But by letting go you will move beyond what you have learned and into a domain where only your taste, your feelings, and your inspiration matter. A place where intuition is trusted and listened to.

The most interesting aspect is that trusting intuition leads to creating better photographs more effectively than trying to do everything correctly. Of course, this implies that you are able to do everything correctly, that you have learned and practiced all that you need to do. However, once you have done so, letting go of constantly thinking about all this, and instead relying on an intuitive approach, is the key to moving to the next level of photographic skills.

3 – From limited to limitless

Lately, I have become fascinated by what differentiates achieved photographers from beginning photographers. While my goal here is not to publish the outcome of this research, I want to point out a specific aspect that is relevant to this conversation.

A commonly held belief among beginning photographers, one I hear frequently when I teach, is that: "everything has already been done." This belief, which is centered on the concept of limited possibilities, states that there are only so many possibilities out there, and that because we came "too late" (another limiting belief), all the possibilities were already taken by the time we got there.

There is a fundamental flaw in this belief and that flaw is exposed by simply asking: "when should we have arrived so that we were not 'too late'?" Answering this question is simply impossible because unless we were the first people on earth, no matter when we arrive there will be someone there before us. In other words, this belief is based on a false syllogism (a syllogism is a 3 parts proposition). In this instance, this false syllogism goes something like this: there is a right time to take advantage of opportunities, I did not arrive at the right time, therefore I could not take advantage of opportunities.

The problem is that while there is indeed a right time to take advantage of a specific opportunity (singular, no S), there is no right time to take advantage of opportunities (plural, with an S). This is because new

opportunities come up regularly. Therefore, the goal is to keep an eye out for opportunities instead of assuming that each one is already taken. Following this approach leads to this accurate syllogism: There is a right time to take advantage of an opportunity, I do my best to find this right time, therefore I will be able to take advantage of specific opportunities.

While this approach may not work the first time, or the second time, or even the third or subsequent time, it will work *eventually* because opportunities present themselves regularly. In other words, the basis for this approach is the limitless nature of opportunities. Because opportunities are limitless, they will present themselves regularly, and by keeping an eye for them you will eventually be able to take advantage of one. This is an accurate syllogism. It is also a message of hope.



S-Curve Rock, Navajoland, Arizona

4 - How does this apply to photographic composition?

Exciting compositions are opportunities for strong photographs. As such, finding photographic compositions follows the same approach as finding any opportunity. In other words, one can consider compositions limited or limitless, as I discussed above. For the beginning photographer an important milestone is moving from approaching composition as offering limited creative possibilities to approaching composition as offering limitless creative possibilities.

So why is it that not more people approach composition, and by extension art as a whole, as limitless? Why is it that they do not embrace the freedom that it offers? I think it is because looking at things as limitless means that you have no place to hide. What you show, what you do, your art in short, is you. It is no longer about someone else. It is now explicitly about you.

It is also because even though you are following your intuition, you are first and foremost following your vision. Vision is what comes first. Intuition is the vehicle through which vision is expressed. Having a vision for your work is not something everyone has. It requires that you sit down, so to speak, and think about what you want to express with your work. It demands that you think about why you are taking photographs. It asks that you make a deliberate decision about the visual message you want to share with your audience.

This is not something that everyone does. In fact, this is not something that everyone wants to do. Nothing wrong here, it is just a matter of personal choice and I respect that. However, without a personal vision you are left to continue doing what has been done before because your guide is someone else's vision. This may not be a conscious thing, in fact it is rarely a conscious thing, but it is a reality. You have to follow some form of guidance. If you do not follow your vision, then by sheer necessity you follow someone else's vision.



Dusk Clouds over Black Mesa, Navajoland, Arizona

5 – Nebulousness

As you see this is a lot more nebulous than the two previous parts of this essay, part that focused on the rules of composition. Sorry about that. I just don't see any way around it. It's either 'follow the rules' or 'let go of the rules and follow your intuition.' There's not really another way. Anything in between is being wishy-washy, straddling the fence or dancing on one foot, to use popular metaphors that describe indecision.

Fact is, this is a progression. You have to learn the rules, just like you have to acquaint yourself and be influenced by the work of the masters, then move past these rules –unlearn if you will- to let go of everything and follow your intuition. It's a simple process: learn, unlearn and let go. The hard part is unlearning. It's a lot harder to unlearn than it is to learn. That's because once you learn something and you consider this thing valid, it takes a lot of guts to look at all the work that went into learning as being no more than a starting point. The acquired belief is that learning leads to knowledge. What we are talking about here is learning that leads to letting go of knowledge.

Letting go of knowledge is challenging. However, in this instance doing so leads to the acquisition of higher-level knowledge. It also leads to the awareness that possibilities are limitless. Letting go of knowledge and operating on the basis of your intuition opens the door to limitless possibilities. In reality we never truly unlearn because we have no way of erasing the memory of what we learned, of what influenced us. All we can do is push this knowledge down to a lower level of awareness so that it is not at the forefront of our thoughts. The knowledge itself is still there, we just don't think of it constantly. It is no longer an obsession, or a guiding principle. Instead, intuition and the desire to be ourselves take over.



Colorado Plateau Cloudscape, Navajoland, Arizona

6 – Learning Stages

Because I feel inadequate ending this essay on a section titled *nebulousness*, I decided to add a few words on what I call *Learning Stages*. Recently, I have been working on outlining the stages we go through as we learn to practice fine art landscape photography to the best of our abilities. This research is motivated by the desire to help students reach higher levels of photography, and help them create photographs in which they express something intentional, personal and eventually, unique.

Many elements are needed in order to create unique photographs. First, we all need a point of departure. Often, this is the discovery of work that impresses us and that we seek to emulate. Second, we need an education in what makes two-dimensional images work. Finally, we need intentional and dedicated study and practice.

But how do all these elements interface? Which one comes first, second and last? What is the progression from one to the next? In the table that follows I tried to outline how I see this progression. At this time I offer it as a conclusion to this essay. In future essays I may detail what each part consists of.

This list is presented as a pyramid even though I did not draw a pyramid shape around it. This implies that the first step is at the bottom and the last step is at the top. I numbered each step from 1 to 9, starting at the bottom. Think of the first steps as the foundation and think of the steps above it as the structure that is being built on this foundation.

Stages

9 - Intuition

Reliance on intuition while using our previously acquired knowledge base to express our personal vision

8 - Vision

Formulation of a personal vision

7 - Letting go

Realization that we need to let go in order to create work that is new and personal

6 - Disappointment

Our work, though rather good at this stage, is not gaining recognition because it is neither new or personal

5 - Copy

Creation of photographs that are essentially copies of the Masters' work that so impressed us

4 - Study

Dedicated study of technique, composition and art

3 - Equipment

Acquisition of camera equipment comparable to that of the Masters who impressed us

2 - Realization

Realization that specific knowledge and equipment are required to create similar work

1 - Discovery

Discovery of Master Photographers work that impresses us deeply

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