

Photographing 'in nature'

Workshop at Cathance River Education Alliance

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By James McCarthy

"...innocence of eye has a quality of its own. It means to see as a child sees, with freshness and acknowledgment of the wonder; it also means to see as an adult sees who has gone full circle and once again sees as a child — with freshness and an even deeper sense of wonder."

— Minor White

'Landscape photography' seems a rather simple problem: You go out and make photographs of land and sky, water and shore, trees and fields ... the environment in which we live, a complex network of energy flows, water-cycles and interrelationships between species. What could be easier? The ever-changing world outside our door beckons us with its beauty.

But as anyone knows who's had the experience of taking a snapshot of a beautiful sunset only to be disappointed when the print comes back, making a truly memorable landscape photograph is not easy. And lest one thinks that what is required is to go to a magnificent place — for example, the Grand Canyon — the world is full of 'pretty pictures' of magnificent places that easily exhaust themselves after the first glance. Take my word, as one who's been there and was disappointed with all but a few images of that spectacular testament to the forces of erosion.

So, in my view, landscape photography means something different than making a 'pretty picture' of a scene, such as what we get with postcards. It involves going deeper than the surface reality of a given place. It usually requires spending some time in that place, observing closely what's going on, thinking about it, taking it into your heart and when the heart and mind say 'Yes!' using the camera skillfully to make something worthwhile, an image expressive of both the place observed and the observer who chose to make the photograph.

I've put together some approaches to making landscape photographs that you might want to try out, as well as some questions to get you thinking about the problem I've posed above of how to make an image that will not exhaust itself after the first glance.

10 ways of looking at the landscape (apologies to poet Wallace Stevens)

I. *"If you love it enough, anything will talk with you."*

— George Washington Carver

Slow down/Take some time

Wherever you find yourself outdoors, take time to observe what surrounds you. Soak up the impressions: the warmth of sun, the chill of the wind, the sound of ocean waves or birds singing or grasses rustling. Pay attention to inner realities as well as the outer realities. What catches your eye ... and think about 'why?' Now pay attention to the subject that caught your eye. Does it continue to fascinate you after continuing observation? If not, why not? One possibility is that it's truly not worthy of you spending more time there. Some tip-offs that might help you realize if that's the case: Is what caught your eye something straight out of a postcard ... a stereotypical "pretty" scene? Is it something you have already photographed and about which you realize you've got nothing more to say? But it's equally possible you've not shown yourself to be a worthy observer. Become quiet in your mind. Fight the urge to give up in search of a 'more promising' subject. If nothing else, you will have given yourself the gift of five minutes' meditation and practice in the discipline of doing nothing! As the photographer Minor White once wrote: "Be still with yourself until the object of your attention affirms your presence."

II. *"Man is not himself only ... He is all that he sees; all that flows to him from a thousand sources ... He is the land, the lift of its mountain lines, the reach of its valleys."*

— Mary Austin

Landscape as 'metaphor'

The photographer Alfred Stieglitz, in the 1920s, began a remarkable series of cloud photographs that he titled "Equivalents." His images rarely contained any hint of the horizon line, or other visual cues that would have helped viewers orient themselves to the cloud images. In paring down his subject matter to such an extreme, Stieglitz explored how these visual objective records of reality could express subjective feelings; the 'Equivalent' photographs were, then, visual metaphors for inner personal feelings.

In this approach to the landscape, then, you pay attention to your inner thoughts and feelings and use that to guide your eye to an objective reality that somehow mirrors the inner reality. The downside of this approach — if you focus too intently on your inner reality — is that you might miss out on outer realities more exciting, beautiful, interesting (you name it) than whatever is going on inside yourself! My experience is that this approach works best if you allow it to happen subconsciously and manifest itself oftentimes without prior awareness. Often, it's only when you see the photograph later that you realize why a particular scene caught your eye.

III. *"The blue mountains are constantly walking. If you doubt mountains walking you do not know your own walking."*

— Dogen

Landscape as process, nature evolving:

As you walk in the landscape with camera at the ready, use Zen master Dogen's quotation above to guide your vision of what's happening all around you. If you don't know what Dogen

means, here's a little help from the American poet Gary Snyder: "The blue mountains march out of the sea, shoulder the sky for awhile, and slip back into the waters."

Here's another insight from Snyder: "Yet even a 'place' has a kind of fluidity ... A place will have been grasslands, then conifers, then beech and elm. It will have been half riverbed, it will have been scratched and plowed by ice. And then it will be cultivated, paved, sprayed, dammed, graded, built up. But each is only for awhile, and that will be just another set of lines on the palimpsest. The whole earth is a great tablet holding the multiple overlaid new and ancient traces of the swirl of forces. ... A place on earth is a mosaic within larger mosaics — the land is all small places, all precise tiny realms replicating larger and smaller patterns."

IV. *"The world is watching: one cannot walk through a meadow or forest without a ripple of report spreading out from one's passage. The thrush darts back, the jay squalls, a beetle scuttles under the grasses, and the signal is passed along. Every creature knows when a hawk is cruising or a human strolling. The information passed through the system is intelligence."*
— Gary Snyder, "The Etiquette of Freedom"

'Still hunting': Sit quietly, waiting for the world of nature to come back to life around you ... and then make your photograph!

As you move through a landscape, keep in mind the wild critters, the birds, mammals, bugs, the wild plants, that truly live there. Try photographing from their point of view. Watch the incoming surf from the perspective of a sandpiper. Seek out the high vantage point for a bird's-eye view. Apply the insights of ecology to your photography — explore the 'edges'; identify and photograph the indicator plants of a particular habitat ... and, if possible, the birds, insects, mammals that eat those plants or make their homes there. Learn to see the landscape as a complex network of interactions.

V. *"Good photography depends on the skillful pursuit of light. The best light is elusive and often fickle; you must stalk it with patience and craft. You learn its habits and idiosyncrasies. You rise early and put yourself in places where it might appear and work its magic: transforming an ordinary patch of frost-covered weeds into silver-edged calligraphy, or igniting the branches of an October maple with a saffron glow."*

— Richard Brown, "Pictures from the Country"

Photograph at times of day when most often we are not present to see what there is to see. Photograph in seasons, or types of weather, when most often we are not inclined to be outdoors to see what there is to see.

Seek out different qualities of light than the bland overhead noontime light we often photograph under — foggy, early morning, dusk, overcast skies, etc.

Notice how changing light conditions influence the mood or feeling of an object or scene. Try photographing the same subject, from the same vantage point, at different times of day (or different times of year, seasons, weather conditions, etc.)

VI.

*“To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.”*

— William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence”

‘Less’ is often ‘more’: Forget the panorama. Pay close attention, as a child does, to what’s close at hand.

Whatever catches your eye should be self-evident in the photograph. The advantage, then, of a close-up image is that it’s intrinsically ‘self-evident’ because it’s isolated from its surroundings and thereby not lost in the wealth of details that usually are present in the panoramic view of a given landscape.

Seek out details that might be suggestive of the ‘whole’ ... for example, the line of white foam from a spent wave, or the circles drawn in the sand by wind-blown beach grasses, or the patterns of footprints left in the sand by gulls (sometimes with evidence of the eating that occurred there ... ie. the broken fragments of a mollusk shell or the dismembered shell of a crab).

VII. “By the mediation of a thousand little mosses and fungi, the most unsightly objects become radiant of beauty. There seem to be two sides to this world, presented us at different times, as we see things in growth or dissolution, in life or death. For seen with the eye of a poet, as God sees them, all things are alive and beautiful; but seen with the historical eye, or eye of the memory, they are dead and offensive. If we see Nature as pausing, immediately all mortifies and decays; but seen as progressing, she is beautiful.”

— Henry David Thoreau

Wabi-sabi: An intuitive appreciation of a transient beauty in the physical world that reflects the irreversible flow of life and death. Understated beauty, unnoticed, imperfect, even decayed, feelings of melancholy yet finding beauty in the impermanence of all things.

I have long admired, studied and appreciated the paintings of Andrew Wyeth, many of which, I think, capture the Japanese sensibility conveyed by the words “wabi” and “sabi” that are often joined together as one concept wabi-sabi. Think of his painting “Wind from the Sea,” showing torn lace curtains in an upstairs room at the Olson House in Cushing suddenly lifting in a sea breeze that entered the stillness of a hot room when Wyeth opened the window.

Or his 1948 painting “Seed Corn” also painted at the Olson House: “Bone-dry quality. It was one of those gray days when those strange dried-out corn cobs seemed to come to life hanging there,” is how Wyeth described the painting in an interview with Metropolitan Museum of Art director Thomas Hoving.

Or his 1954 painting “Teel’s Island,” which he described in this way: “Henry Teel had a punt, and one day he hauled it up on the bank and went to the mainland and died. I was struck by the ephemeral nature of life when I saw the boat just quietly going to pieces”

Wabi: stemming from the root “wa,” which refers to harmony and tranquility. Its meaning is said to be untranslatable, but has “evolved from describing something sad and desolate to describing something that is purposely humble and in tune with nature.” Sabi: Refers to the natural progression of time, and carries with it an understanding that all things will grow old and become less conventionally beautiful.

Together: “Wabi-sabi understands the tender, raw beauty of a gray December landscape and the aching elegance of an abandoned building or shed. It celebrates cracks and crevices and rot and all the other marks that time and weather and use leave behind. To discover wabi-sabi is to see the singular beauty in something that may first look decrepit and ugly.

“Wabi-sabi reminds us that we are all transient beings on this planet—that our bodies, as well as the material world around us, are in the process of returning to dust. Nature’s cycles of growth, decay, and erosion are embodied in frayed edges, rust, liver spots. Through wabi-sabi, we learn to embrace both the glory and the melancholy found in these marks of passing time.”

— Robyn Griggs Lawrence, article in Utne Reader

<http://www.utne.com/mind-and-body/wabi-sabi>

VIII. *“To anticipate, not the sunrise and the dawn merely, but, if possible, Nature herself!”*

— Henry David Thoreau

Get to know a place well enough and you can begin to “anticipate” nature, as Thoreau did, with reasonable accuracy in relation to the season and calendar date of any given year. Photography can be the tool encouraging just that sort of close observation.

Thoreau’s last great project, which he started in 1851 and continued for the next 10 years until his death, was a meticulous daily record of observations about the changing phenomenon of the season. He’d press flowers in a music book, saved specimens in his hat and used his walking stick as a measuring tape. He took the temperature of ponds and stream. And recorded all these observations, day by day, in his Journal. His daily almanac eventually listed the exact flowering dates for roughly 500 species of plants. He began referring to his study as the “Kalendar” project and between 1860 and 1862 began to consolidate the detailed observations of seasonal change recorded in his Journal in a variety of lists and charts.

Here's how he described that project: "I wanted to know my neighbors, if possible, — to get a little nearer to them. I soon found myself observing when plants first blossomed and leafed, and I followed it up early and late, far and near, several years in succession, running to different sides of the town and into the neighboring towns, often between twenty and thirty miles a day. I often visited a particular plant four or five miles distant, half a dozen times within a fortnight, that I might know exactly when it opened, beside attending to a great many others in different directions and some of them equally distant, at the same time."

IX. From Gary Snyder's poem "For the Children":

stay together

learn the flowers

go light

Ecological processes can be complex, but they often have striking visual elements. Using ecological concepts to guide your seeing can be fun and will deepen your understanding and appreciation of nature. Ecology: Snyder gives its root meaning as "earth house hold."

Food webs. Water cycle. Camouflage. Producers, consumers, decomposers. Edge. Succession. Habitat. Niche. Watershed: Concepts with rich possibilities for exploration with the camera.

Here's Snyder, from a 2015 interview with a writer for Newsweek: "I'm a bioregionalist. I've written about watershed consciousness, the intelligence of basing your thinking on the landscape, starting out by making sure you know what watershed you're in and how watersheds relate to each other. Which most people don't do because they're thinking about place is dominated by the highways. That's all that know, really is the roads. It changes things a lot when you clear the roads out of your mind and look at the watersheds. And watershed does not mean just one big river; it's the main stem and all the tributaries all at once. ...

"This is part of being an environmentalist and having a sense of the land. Watersheds generally tend to contain ecosystems and there's no difficulty about understanding the landscape. Watersheds are not arbitrary; they have been shaped by the land itself, the play of the ridges and streams, whereas boundaries that are on the map, especially in North America are arbitrary lines drawn with a ruler, often by people who had no idea where they were. Which means they're temporary; 500 years from now we won't be using those boundaries at all. So that's just part of my toolkit."

Here's a photo-assignment you can try, called "Expanding Circles," which I've adapted from a chapter in "Listening to Nature," by Joseph Cornell.

Find a place that offers an expansive view. Sit where you can take it all in, but also in a which that has an interesting foreground. Take notice of what is close at hand: nearby plants, rocks, insects, flowing water. Be still. Just look and listen.

Now, broaden your outlook to a circle of 10 to 20 feet from your vantage point. Be still. Just look and listen.

Now extend your awareness to 50 yards, 100 yards, to the sky or horizon. Be still. Just look and listen.

Now make a photograph expressing every sound and sight of that scene, the sound of wind through the towering trees, the birds singing in the forest, the gurgling of flowing water.

As the photographer Minor White once put it: "When you approach something to photograph it, first be still with yourself until the object of your attention affirms your presence. Then don't leave until you have captured its essence."

X. "We walk through our lives as if we're in a Japanese scroll. It's just rolling by. Every dimension is coming at us — 360 degrees around us — and life is just flowing by. At any given moment, there is the possibility to say, "Ah!" You catch your breath. You are inspired. You are at that moment suddenly feeling alive and aware and awake. Something, some connection with the whole, has pressed itself to your senses. In that moment, there's the tiniest little change — so tiny, it's been smothered by all the energy around you — at that moment you stop, and say, 'What's here? Why here?' It doesn't require your eye, it requires your sense. ... By looking through the camera you begin to take the measure of the place. If you move the camera a little to the left, if you move it to the right, it all changes. All you have to have is the courage to say, 'This is the place.'"

— Joel Meyerowitz, "Creating a Sense of Place:
Photography by Joel Meyerowitz"

OK, when is he going to tell us about 'composition'?

I've deliberately held back discussing how to organize the space within the viewfinder — by cropping, moving in close, or moving back ... in general, changing your perspective and relationship to the subject until it 'look's right.' And that's because I truly believe all of the preceding suggestions will teach you more about what's right for you, what's unique in your way of looking at the world, than any set of formulas about composition that I might share with you.

But every photographer, probably, has to reach that conclusion on their own by trying every trick of composition that's been written down and put into books for aspiring artists to emulate. So here are a few suggestions to consider in composing your picture:

— Nothing within the frame without a purpose, a reason for being there.

— Consider the ‘rule of thirds’, both vertical and horizontal. I.e. Positioning the horizon one third from the bottom or one third from the top is more ‘dynamic’ visually than positioning it at the midway point.

— Check out the concept of ‘dynamic symmetry,’ a classical design principle that’s embodied in Nature’s growth spiral found in the chambered nautilus shell, sunflowers, pine cones. There are diagrams showing how this principle relates to the rectangle and, therefore, the typical frame of a 35mm negative.

— Leading lines, S-curves, convergence ... all ways of guiding the eye into the picture.

— Look at paintings, photographs by acknowledged masters and learn from them how to organize the space within the frame of your viewfinder.

— Every ‘rule’ of composition may — and often ‘should’ — be broken. When? As your heart, mind, feeling, intuition dictates.

— Remember, as photographer Edward Weston once said: “Composition is the strongest way of seeing.” Different scenes, different photographic situations call for a different compositional approach. Keep it fresh, intuitive, don’t photograph by formula!

“The critical moment for the photographer is the moment of seeing, a creative act which involves the perceiving of the subject to be photographed in the first place and the photographing of it in the last place. Between these two actions there is flexibility as to how long the moment may last or what it includes from the point of view of the artist.

“The decision as to when to photograph, the actual click of the shutter, is partly controlled from the outside, by the flow of life, but it also comes from the mind and the heart of the artist. The photograph is his vision of the world and expresses, however subtly, his values and convictions.”

— Paul Strand