

Twelve Significant Photographs a Year

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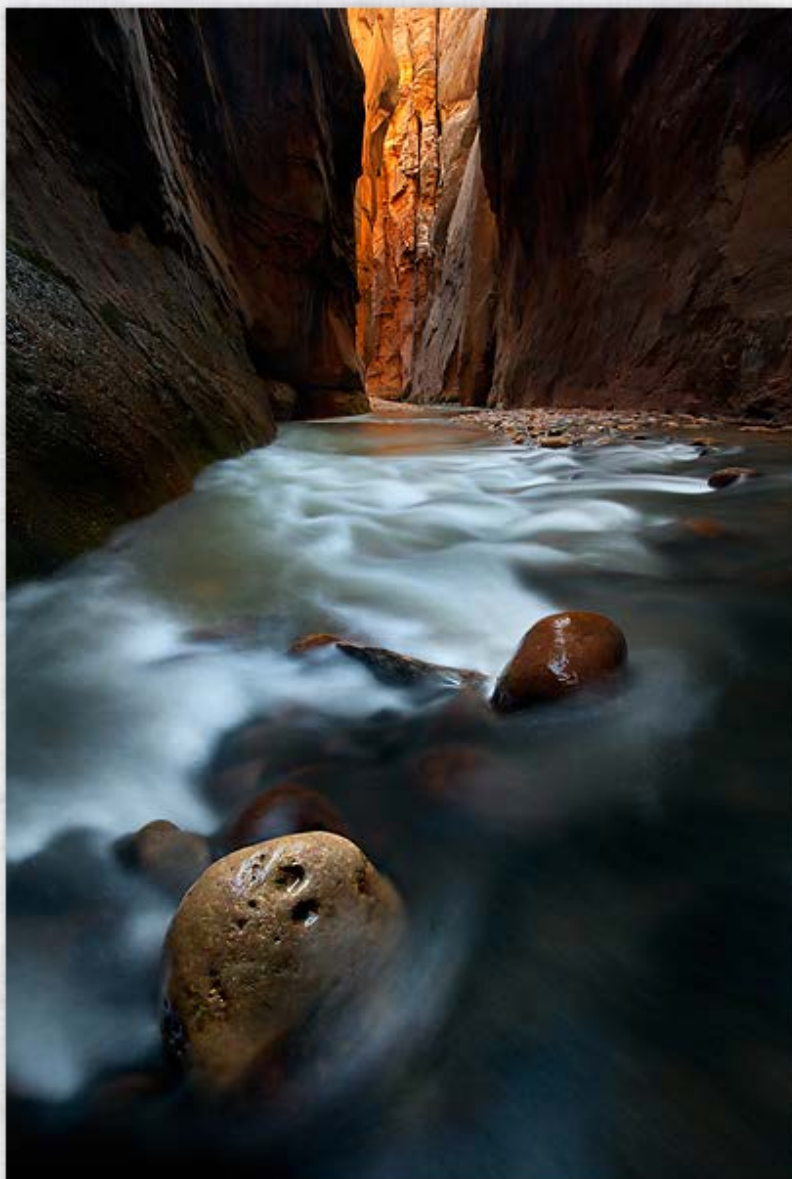
Ansel Adams once famously said, "Twelve significant photographs in any one year is a good crop." I don't know how many days Ansel spent in the field in a given year, but I do know this: the pace of nature photography has become much more hectic than in his days of 8x10 view cameras and glass plates. Forget every year - it seems these days we're expected to make twelve significant photographs every *trip*.



LOS CUERNOS

This acceleration is fueled primarily by the ascendancy of two things: the digital camera and the Internet. Digital

photography has given us the ability to readily fix mistakes (and, if we are so inclined, to easily take average scenes and light and transform them into something much more impressive than they really were to the eye). Combine this with hundreds of online photo sharing forums, and Internet audiences always hungry for the next great image, and you have a recipe for a world caught in an endless scrum of majestic light and epic beauty.



LIGHT'S PASSAGE

Every now and then, however, it is a good idea to slow down, and to take stock of where things are and where they are heading. There's no better time than the beginning of a new year to take a deep breath, and to critically assess the direction your creative eye is taking you. So before charging headlong into 2012, pause for a moment to review the photographs you made in 2011.



AUTUMN EPHEMERAL

Letting Ansel be our guide, challenge yourself to pick your twelve favorites from last year. Notice that I said *favorites*, rather than best. What you consider to be your best images may be biased by whether you think they appeal to others or not. Just because an image gets wide acclaim - or wholesale rejection - from notoriously fickle Internet audiences does not necessarily make it good or bad. Pick your personal favorites and you will have picked your true best. Maybe you see something that others do not. Don't be afraid to believe in your creative vision.



DESERT REPOSE

Picking just twelve can be more challenging than you think. Even if you had a really good year, finding twelve of your images that really inspire you may prove difficult. We all have an initial rush of excitement when we first view a stunning new image on our camera's LCD screen, or after it has been brought to life on the computer. But after you have stared at an image for several months, does it still move you the same way it did when you first saw it? Many images have short term wow factor, but few have sufficient depth to stand the test of time. If you find that you are picking mostly from your recent work, take a break and wait a few weeks before starting again. Let some of the "honeymoon" period wear off, and study your recent work critically before including it in your top twelve.



RIO DE LAS VUELTAS

Now that you've picked your twelve favorite images, take a moment to explore what they say about you as an artist. Have you taken images for yourself? Or have you taken photographs that will sell well or give you acclaim on the Internet? Has your vision progressed from the previous year, or have you been in an artistic rut? Are you seeing more of the nuance and subtlety of nature, or have you been chasing epic moments? Are each of your photos different, or is a style emerging? There are no right or wrong answers, but honestly asking these questions is the key to artistic growth.



VERNAL IMPULSE

"Personal vision" is something that gets talked about a lot. Everyone agrees that one should strive to find their personal vision - but what does this really mean, and how does one go about accomplishing this lofty goal? I wish I could provide easy answers, but they don't exist. I can offer this small pearl of wisdom: to find your vision, you must immerse yourself in the photographic process. Artistic vision isn't found sitting in front of your computer processing digital photos. You find your voice only by constantly seeking to make images, by constantly striving to better yourself, and by finding the creative energy to pull your camera out even when personal motivation is lacking.



 VIRGIN CREEK

I'll tell you one way that you certainly *won't* find your personal vision: giving up when things get tough. We all have times in the field when conditions don't seem promising, or we just can't seem to make it happen. All I can say is keep trying. I'm not suggesting that you need to spend weeks on end in the field to make significant photographs - but you should fill the time you do have with as much shooting as possible, and keep on pushing even when you feel like you are beating your head against a wall.



MYSTIC TEMPLE

Another way to get sidetracked on your quest to find your personal vision is to rest on your laurels. No matter how wonderful your last photograph was, you can always do better. Even when you make something exceptional, don't quit. Although moments of greatness don't happen often, they never happen when you're not out there trying your hardest. By constantly striving to outdo what you have done before, your personal vision will continue to crystallize and mature, and great moments will become less and less rare.



LAND OF THE LOST

Now that you've picked your twelve favorites, think critically about what it is that you like about each. Try to transform your subjective feelings into objective lessons that can be applied to future image-making. What works? What doesn't work? How can each photograph be improved? Would some subtle repositioning enhance the composition? Would sunset instead of sunrise light provide a different mood? The more you study your own work and the work of other artists, the more skilled you will become; your understanding will become richer, and your mastery more subtle. Always look to see your subjects in a different light, and constantly train your creative eye to see what others do not.



THE PROPHET'S CALL

To be honest, I find the process of picking my twelve best images to be a difficult one. Great photographs don't just fall from the sky - they require patience, hard work, and dedication. Even with significant time spent in the field, few images rise to the highest level. The process of building a quality portfolio is a long and arduous one, and there are no shortcuts along the way. It may take years for your work to speak with authority, but once it does, no one will ever fail to see your vision. Even then, you can never expect to complete your progression as an artist - it is a lifelong journey, rather than a destination.



8 SHADOW OF LIGHT

So, maybe in the end, twelve significant photographs every year really isn't such a bad number. The most important thing is that they are significant to you, are a product of your own vision, and represent your progression as an artist. As we enter the New Year, reflect on the lessons learned from the past, and strive to do even better than before in the future.



❏ KING CANUTE'S THRONE

As for me, I'm looking forward to the day when I can have a conversation with Ansel about his awkward number choice. Ten (instead of twelve) has the benefit of being a round number, and much easier to obtain!

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Ian Plant is a full time professional nature photographer, writer, and adventurer. His work has appeared in numerous books and calendars, and he is a frequent contributor to leading photo magazines *Outdoor Photographer* and *Popular Photography*, among others.

In addition to his magazine articles, Ian writes for the [Outdoor Photographer blog](#) and his own [Dreamscapes blog](#). He is also the author of a number of [ebooks](#) and [digital processing video tutorials](#). You may see more of his work on his [website](#).



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