

"Otherness"

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When I think back to some of the images that influenced me at the start of my career - Janos Jurka's red throated divers in mist, Phillippe Henry's Finnish whooper swan in a snow storm and Hannu Hautala's raven in a pine tree - it is clear now that they all had one thing in common. Not just that they portrayed birds but that they possessed a hard-to-define quality of "otherness." This sort of picture not only looks different from more literal representations of the natural world, it engenders a feeling of separation from it. To some people, they look like paintings.

If I was a painter and was told that my canvas looked like a photograph, I'm sure I would be offended! In art (as opposed to draughtsmanship) technique is the junior partner to content and concept and if a viewer was engaged by nothing but the look of the picture, it would have failed. As a photographer, however, I often strive for that look of a painting in my photographs. Apart from anything else, viewers don't need to be told what a familiar (or to use Galen Rowell's term, "mature") subject looks like. A non-literal representation leaves some space for the imagination to work, filling in the content of dark spaces, constructing depth from flattened forms and ascribing colour to silhouetted shapes. It can extrapolate the whole from the abstract and add texture to surfaces denied the flattery of shadow by non-directional light. The viewer becomes involved.

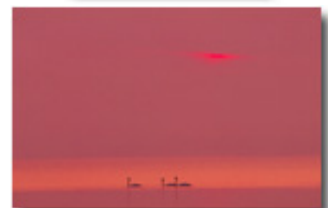
Achieving the Effect

Photos with this look of "otherness", which seems to hold them at a distance from our sensory experience of the world, share some common characteristics. The lighting is normally shadowless; the pictures are shot on an overcast day, in fog or into the light. Familiar subjects given unfamiliar colours - perhaps because they were taken in the shade on a sunny day or have borrowed colours from nearby objects - also challenge our sense of normality in a photograph. Even more at odds with our perception is a simple black and white representation. Typically, "otherly" pictures also lack depth or are at least ambiguous about it. Areas surrounding the subject may be bleached out or obscure. The distortion of perspective that a telephoto lens introduces helps to remove the picture one stage further from our binocular view of the world. This can be accentuated by the absence of foreground, creating a sense of distance from the scene.

Apart from an overcast sky, fog and snow are our best allies in the creation of this look. A snap shot testifies to the chaotic natural state. A photograph in which these distractions from the subject are pared down to the minimum, either by careful composition or thanks to the simplification brought by fog and snow, diminishes the photographic "show all" look of an image.

Composition, too, plays a key role in transforming the familiar into something a little strange. Our visual system is configured to recognise objects, in the first instance, by their outline - in other words, their edges. Excluding edges in a picture not only removes the subject from the context given by its surroundings but denies us the usual clues to identity, requiring the substance, rather than just the form, of the subject to be examined. The sense of abstraction is heightened with shadow-free lighting. In sunlight I use sheets of opaque FlyWeight envelope stiffener as a diffuser to create a bright image where shadow and highlight detail are equally well represented.

Do you really want a photo on your wall?



In our house I have only two of my own photographs on the walls (and they haven't got any further than the office). I normally prefer to see photos in magazines and books and am reluctant to extend the expensive courtesy of mount and frame to dignify my own images. Photos that I have been able to live with over the years share this "otherly" look, never too explicit, always with something new to look at or speculate about. The initial visual hit may not be as intense as from my more vivid animal portraiture but I don't believe that these explicit images retain their interest for as long. To my taste, matte heavyweight stock, rather than semi or premium gloss paper, best reproduces the character of these painterly images with the bonus of much better fade resistance. And while the matte heavyweight paper can't represent the same dynamic range as the glossy stock, it usually accommodates the more limited tonal range of these pictures.

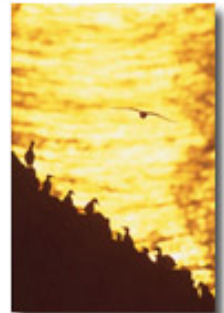


In the case of photos with an "otherly" look, I am interested in using photography to lure viewers into a story about the subject, so that aesthetic appreciation may transform into active concern. Perhaps, in this context, the literal approach, with shadows, foregrounds and edges would be more appropriate, suggesting as it does that the natural world is not something remote and "otherly." But it may also be the case that for some people - and I am one of them - mystery is an even bigger attraction, a more tempting invitation into the natural world.



NB-NPN 0018

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Niall Benvie, who runs [Images from the Edge](#), is the UK's most prolific writer on natural history photography, publishing almost 70 articles and a book (amounting to over 135,000 words) between 2000-2002 alone. But the scope of his writing extends much wider into issues of land management and the polarisation of nature and culture as well as travelogues and commentaries on subjects as diverse as species re-establishment programmes and eco-tourism.

Several thousand pictures from The Images from the Edge collection are accessible in its [searchable online database](#).

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