



Achieving Your Personal Style

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Introduction

The great thing about this thing we call art is that it has no rules. - Kim Weston

Personal style is the venue through which you share your vision with your audience. Your personal style develops, expands, and becomes more unique as you continue making your vision a reality. As we saw in the three previous essays, this is a four-parts process: vision and personal style are related to inspiration and creativity. The more fertile your inspiration and creativity are, the faster your vision and your personal style will grow.

Achieving a personal style represents a significant amount of work. As you work towards making your vision a reality, you will need to become bolder. To compensate the detractors that will most likely come your way, you will need to find courage and motivation in your successes at describing your vision and at sharing it successfully with your audience.

As you become bolder you find new ways to express and share this vision. Each new artistic statement or new piece will become another step towards achieving your personal style. Each attempt is but one small step, but the sum of your attempts creates a stairway that eventually will lead you to heights that you could not have climbed in a single step. The only way to get to the top of this stairway is work as hard as you can at developing your style.

About 4 years ago I wrote my first essay on personal style, the essay was published in my book *Mastering Landscape Photography*. If you have not read this previous essay I recommend you do so because it features information that is not repeated in this second essay. The essay you are reading now is the result of my continued thinking on this subject over the past 4 years.

What is a personal style?

I am steadily surprised that there are so many photographers that reject manipulating reality, as if that was wrong. Change reality! If you don't find it, invent it! - Pete Turner

A personal style is the translation of your vision into an actual work of art or photograph in this instance. It is the translation of your ideas into something that others can see, something that you can share with your audience, something that represents the closest rendition of your vision that you are capable of producing at a given time.

The language you are using to create this translation is photography. Photography is a visual language that uses composition, tone, color, contrast, subject, light, angle, approach and more to translate your vision into images that anyone can see.

As with any translation, something is often lost, modified or left out. Therefore, each new translation, each new photograph, is a new attempt towards a more accurate translation or towards a translation that your audience understands better. It is also a new attempt at defining the language that you are using to make this translation. As an artist expressing your vision through a personal style, you are not just sharing a message through the language of your choice. As your vision becomes more refined and more unique so does your language. Eventually, the language you use becomes yours only. You invent it as you move forward towards an ever-finer representation of the ideas in your mind.

At that point you are both the inventor of a new vision and the inventor of a new language to translate and express this vision. You are the inventor of the image as well as the author of the *facture* of the image. Your personal style is a visual language in a way that you use to communicate your message, your *vision*, to your audience.

In other words, you are not just the author of the work of art. You are also the author of the visual language used to create this work of art. You are therefore indebted to your audience because if you create a new language your audience needs to make the effort of learning this new language.

This language may be fairly transparent or it can be quite complex. You are therefore responsible for either teaching your audience how to read this language, or for having others help your audience understand your language. This is because your audience needs help understanding the structure of the language you are using. This is what was missing in much of Modern Art for example. For a long time there was no one available to explain the language of Modern Art to the audience and as a result Modern Art was, and to a large extent still is, incomprehensible to a large part of the public.

The process of developing a personal style is a process of evolution, of continual refinement and of fine-tuning the expression of your vision. A true personal style represents the outcome of this process: a consistent and ongoing expression of your vision. First it is an approach in which the technical and artistic challenges have been resolved in a satisfying manner. Second it is an approach that demonstrates a consistent solution to these problems, a solution that is implemented in a similar manner from image to image, throughout your entire body of work.



Monument Valley Afternoon

This is one of the most famous locations in the world and an icon of the American Southwest. As such I often say that it is easy to create a good photograph of Monument Valley because it is so dramatically photogenic, but difficult to create an outstanding image because so many good ones already exist.

This is one of my most recent attempts at creating another image from this location. While it is not for me to decide what is the level of achievement of this image, I can say that I find it pleasing, in large part because it was taken in mid-afternoon, a time that poses challenges for color photography because the light at that time is relatively flat and unsaturated.

What makes this image successful are the cloudy conditions present on that day. I waited until the sun lit the middle butte and I used the rocks in the foreground as leading lines towards this butte. I also selected a time when the clouds were grouped in the center of the image rather than when they were moving out towards the sides or the top of the frame.

The combination of leading foreground lines, of the lit middle butte and of the cloud position is what, for me, creates the fundamental structure of this image. My only regret is that I could not get just the middle butte in the light. The two others

were also partially in direct light and if I had waited any longer the clouds would have been gone. One's desires sometimes go beyond what nature can do.

Finding Your Own Way Of Seeing

We often hear of "camera angles" (that is, those made by a guy who throws himself flat on his stomach to obtain a certain effect or style), but the only legitimate angles that exist are those of the geometry of the composition. - Henri Cartier-Bresson

Achieving a personal style does not mean creating photographs that are outlandish, that rely on theatrics to be created, or that solely depend on bizarre content to be interesting. Style is relying on solid values and concepts. Style is creating a firm foundation from which you will create your work.

Achieving a personal style is first and foremost achieving a personal way of seeing. This is the avowed goal of numerous photographers. However, few actually reach this goal. Why? First, because there is a lack of methodology in regards to helping photographers develop a vision and achieve a personal style. Second, because many photographers underestimate the difficulty of the task: developing a personal style is a lot more difficult than it seems. And third, because there is really no comprehensive study of what is required to achieve a personal style. The literature on the subject is slim and the small body of work that exists treats the subject as if it was as simple as going out, getting a few tips here and there and then be on your way to finding your own way of seeing and developing your own photographic style.

The fact is that it is not that simple. In fact, it is not simple at all. The process that leads one to find his way of seeing is long and arduous and follows a logical progression. One has to understand what is involved as well as which pitfalls await one on the path to developing a vision and ultimately achieving a personal style. These pitfalls are specific and once known can be easily averted. We will be looking at a number of them in the next sections. And no, it is not as simple as going out there and taking photographs while making good use of a few tips on composition and on seeing like a camera. Those are prerequisites, and if followed will result in better photographs, but they are not enough to result in developing a personal style.

The issue of personal style has always been present in art. It may, however, have been less important in the past when photography was practiced mainly by trained artists with relatively few "aficionados" joining in. This situation changed somewhat during what I like to call the "darkroom craze" that took place from the 60's to the 80's, although even then the commitment in space (one had to build a darkroom) and time (developing film and prints is time consuming) was significant enough that only the super-motivated were joining the ranks of the practitioners.

The digital revolution changed all of that. All of a sudden anyone with a personal computer—which means a lot of people, just about anyone in fact—and a digital camera or a scanner could claim to be a photographer because they could process and print their own photographs themselves for a relatively low initial investment in time, space and funds.

The many possible variations that one can apply, inflict or otherwise subject a digital image to, depending on how you prefer to put it, means that potentially a personal style is only a mouse click away, or a filter away, or a new piece of software away. This pushes the notion of personal style to the forefront. Questions related to personal style quickly surface: do I have a personal style? Am I really *that* creative? Can anyone else do what I do? Is it me, is it the filter, the software, the camera or something else? Can I do it again? Do others like it? What do you, the master, think of my work? Do I have talent? Am I a genius?

The fact is that if you need to ask any of these questions you most likely do not have a personal style. What you have is access to software that can do things to photographs that were never possible prior to digital photography. Doing something that is unusual, something that is noticeable, does not mean you have a personal style. This is an issue that has been present way before digital photography came about. It means you did something unusual and noticeable to your photographs. That's all. It makes you wonder if you have a personal style, which is probably the most important consequence. However, developing a personal style is still a long ways away. It is also a lot different than using strange compositions, applying cool filter effects to your images, or being "creative" during image conversion and processing.

Style Develops Through Work

You work on an idea, your first interpretation is very raw and you work it and you work it and it gets polished and polished.

It gets to a certain level and then it comes down off that peak. - Kim Weston

A personal style is primarily achieved through work. This work consists of developing the vision you obtained by following your inspiration and expressing your creativity.

You cannot force personal style into being because in many ways style finds us more than we find it. What you can do is work as hard as you can at expressing your vision. You may not even know for sure when you have arrived, when you have developed a personal style. This is in part because this process is a journey and not a destination. It is also because, as artists, we do not always recognize when we have developed a style; in many instances someone else has to point this out to us.

As you work keep in mind that there are no shortcuts to style. Some people erroneously believe that they can follow a number of strategies to achieve a style such as copying someone else's style, following a rulebook to style, following technical instructions to get a specific look, emulating a style and so on. Unfortunately all these shortcuts are ineffective because they are based in duplicating a preexisting style developed by someone else. None of these approaches will result in creating your own style.

A personal style is the expression of your vision. It is also the expression of your personal taste, of your personal choices. In this respect it is as unique as your handwriting. While using someone else's style as a point of departure is possible, such an approach needs to be considered as a starting point and not as a final destination. It should also be remembered that achieving a style is a journey more than a destination and that the most important asset during this journey is your willingness to work as hard as you can at developing your own style.

Your Personal Style Filter

Your style provides you with a set of guidelines or photographic approaches that you have developed through countless hours of trial and error. These provide you with what I call your *personal style filter*. This is a filter that exists in your mind rather than in front of your lens. However, you look through this filter and see the world through it just as well as if it was installed in front of your lens.

This filter consists of your way of seeing the world, from idea to print. It starts with your vision for your work and ends when the final print is matted and framed. It includes each and every part of the photographic process, both technical and artistic. It includes fieldwork and studio work because an artistic photograph is not completed when you click the shutter. A fine art photograph is completed after you are done making all the improvements to tone, contrast and color and after you have created a print that expresses what you saw and felt in the field.

As you work with this personal style filter, you need to photograph what you like rather than what you think you should like. Over time you will begin to develop a consistent way of seeing. You will discover that certain elements or characteristics are being repeated in your work without your conscious awareness. When this happens you will have made one more step towards achieving your style.

Your personal style can also be revealed to you through others. Listen carefully to what others say about your photographs because they can help you identify specific characteristic of your work that you may not have noticed.

Your Personal Style Needs To Be Present Throughout Your Body Of Work

Your personal style should be present throughout your body of work, not just in individual photographs. This aspect of personal style is very important. Several paintings by Van Gogh are recognizable as having been created by the same artist. The brushstrokes, the colors, the subject and overall the *facture* of the paintings are, to the connoisseur, immediately attributable to Van Gogh.

This attribute of personal style extends beyond subject matter. The style of an artist will carry over into the depiction of different subjects by the same artist. For example, a Van Gogh self-portrait and a Van Gogh landscape are immediately recognizable as two pictures done in the same style and by the same artist.

Style is something you carry with you and that you use in any image you create. It is therefore in your entire body of work, and not just in individual images, that your personal style should come through. This is because a style is specific to a

particular photographer first and to a particular photograph second. For example, we say: “this is a photograph by Cartier Bresson” instead of “this is a photograph of Paris.” The location and the subject are subsumed under the style of the photographer.

Only in some rare occasions, when we are dealing with photographs that have become world famous, does the subject take precedence over the photographer. Such is the case with *The Baiser de l'Hotel de Ville* which has become so famous as to immediately imply the photograph taken by Doisneau in front of the Hotel de Ville in Paris.

However such images are rare and it may be a long time before you can think of your work as being included in their company. As a result, it is best to focus only on your body of work as being representative of your style and leave individual photographs aside for now.

The Coherence Of A Style

Over time, you will begin to develop a consistent way of seeing. This way of seeing will include specific choices made in order to best express your vision. These choices address technique, subject matter and personal approach. In the first essay I wrote on Personal Style, I suggested making a list of these different choices. In this second essay, written four years later, I continue to believe that such a list can be helpful.

The difference with my prior essay on style however is that in my first essay I recommended making this list in order to define your style. I have since then realized that doing so will certainly result in creating a style but that this style will be superficial because it will be based on a set of rules rather than based on your vision for your work.

My new recommendation is to base your style on your vision. In other words I recommend that you develop a style that expresses your vision. Only when you see this style emerge, either because people are telling you that you have a recognizable style or because you are starting to see this style yourself, do I recommend that you make a list of this style's attributes. At that time this list will help you see more accurately what this style consists of. It will also let you see what else can be done to refine your style, to make it stronger, or to make it more accessible to your audience.

As you make this list, ask yourself why you are including certain elements, or techniques, or approaches, in your style. If you can't answer that question, neither can your viewer. The fact that we usually equate personal style with mastery suggests that achieving a style requires inborn talent, personal reflection and long-term practice, all three being attributes of mastery.



Monument Valley Panorama

This is an 8-frame stitch done in Photoshop CS3 from Canon 1DsMk2 captures. The photographs were taken hand-held. I did not have to worry about parallax errors since all the elements are located at infinity focus.

I intended this image to be merely a test of the stitching capabilities of the new image merge function in CS3. However, the resulting image exceeded my expectations and although it really needs to be seen large to be fully appreciated, I decided to use it as an illustration in this essay.

What I like about this image is the flow of movement in the clouds, the light and the sandstone formations. The clouds are nicely centered over the image, without being unexpectedly cut by one of the borders, something challenging to achieve in a wide panorama. The light is greater in the center of the image than on the edges, thanks to the tallest buttes being in direct light at the time of exposure.

The relative size of the sandstone formations gradually recedes as one moves from the center of the image towards the right and left sides, thereby reducing the importance of the buttes on the sides while placing the ones in the middle on “center stage” so to speak. Finally, the tones and the contrast level throughout the image are quite even, without one area being significantly darker, lighter or more colorful than a similar area elsewhere in the image, adding the final touch that brings the image together.

The problem with such a wide panorama (this one covers about 160 degrees) is that it is very easy to create an image that is a collage of disparate elements rather than an image of a single scene. It is therefore very important to make sure that all the elements in the image work together.

Goals, Projects And Deadlines

I often painted fragments of things because it seemed to make my statement as well as or better than the whole could... I had to create an equivalent for what I felt about what I was looking at... not copy it. - Georgia O'Keeffe

Because style develops through work, creating new photographs regularly and having a regular schedule is important. The best way to guarantee a regular work schedule is to design a project that has specific goals and deadlines.

Setting up such a project is important because while developing your vision is an exploratory process, it cannot remain an exploratory process forever. Eventually, tangible results have to be obtained and the goal –which is to formulate your vision and to create works of art that depict this vision - has to be reached.

Vision, by nature, is not bound to hard facts or to physical realities. It is for this reason that setting a goal is important. If you do not do so, you may end up thinking about “what your vision is” forever.

The expression of a personal vision is, in a way, the work of a lifetime. However, just like building a monument, or a house, this work is done one stone at a time. In the case of photography, this work is built one image at a time, and, more importantly, one project at a time.

What I am saying here is this: do not think of your vision as being expressed all at once. Think of it as being expressed through a number of individual projects. The exact number of these projects is relatively unimportant. Lets say that there will be tens of them during your career and possibly hundreds, depending on how prolific you are.

Each of these projects must be completed by a set deadline. Why? Because without deadlines little or nothing will get done. Deadlines force us to get started, adopt a certain rhythm, and set the necessary pace to reach our goals and finish our work in time. In a twisted sort of way, deadlines create motivation.

It is therefore important to set a deadline for each of your projects. It is also important to define precisely what each project consists of, something we will look at in detail in the next section. Make this deadline reasonable, that is give yourself enough time to complete the project, but do not make it unreasonably long. A deadline that is too far into the future stops being a deadline and becomes a distant event that we do not need to concern ourselves with right away.

A reasonable deadline for most projects is anywhere from a couple of weeks or months to less than a year. If you find that your project is going to take several years it is time to break it into smaller parts so that each of the parts can be completed in a few weeks or a few months at the most. This is important in order for you to see progress. If your project is too long, the lack of progress will frustrate you. By breaking your project into smaller parts you are making each deadline closer to you and hence easier to reach. Reaching deadlines is important because each completed deadline acts as a motivational reward. It feels good to complete something, even if this something is part of a larger project.

It feels even better to complete an entire project, hence the value of setting relatively short-term projects with deadlines

that are only a few months away. Short-term projects also allow you to witness the quality of your work sooner, and hence give you a positive indication about what you have achieved. They let you see the quality of your work and the type of results you are able to generate at this time. Once completed these short-term projects allow you to make the necessary corrections to fix things that went wrong, improve results that did not match your expectations, and further develop ideas whose implementation was less than perfect. In turn, you can implement these corrections in your next project by designing a new project that will push your limits even further and allow you to get closer to achieving your personal style.

Expect Ebb And Flow

Vision is the true creative rhythm. - Robert Delaunay

In the process of completing the projects you have designed you have to expect ebb and flow. There will be times when your creativity and your ability to express your vision have no bounds. There will also be times when your ideas will run dry and when you will not be able to think of anything no matter how hard you try.

This is normal. What you need to do is expect it and work with it. Ride the tide when creativity runs wild. Write down all the ideas that come to you, develop them, work with them and create new photographs. Don't try to control it, limit it or somehow stop it -- definitely don't stop it! Work longer and harder on those days to make sure you record and start working with all the ideas that come to you. This is time to rejoice in the apparently limitless wealth of new ideas and inspiration. Enjoy it. Don't be critical. Don't judge if it is good or bad. Take it all in. There will be time to sort it out later.

During dry spells, do not try to force creativity to come if it doesn't want to. Instead, work on the ideas you had during the "high-tide" time. You most likely have a backlog, so work these previous ideas out. Complete the projects you started, or go back to your notes and start another project that you didn't have time to do back then.

A dry spell is a good time for putting your head to the grinder and for doing the "dirty" work, the construction work, so to speak. This is a good time to work on your previous creative ideas. If you do not feel creative, then work at completing previous projects that were half completed in a previous creative urge because this is a good time to sort things out and to complete unfinished projects.





Along The Saun Juan

I regularly photograph remote locations because they offer opportunities to see a place without being influenced by images created by other photographers before me.

The location above, one of the tributaries of the San Juan River, is a case in point. I have not yet seen an image of this location from another photographer. I am not saying no other photographer went there because most likely some did visit this location. I just have not had a chance to see their images.

This is important because in such a situation your imagination, and your ability to create an image, must operate without outside help or influences. You have to visualize images totally by yourself.

When these images are successful, they are of course that much more rewarding, both as memories of places that are difficult to reach and that cannot be visited as often as one would like to, and as evidence that your visualizing skills were effective.

Unlearning

I decided to start anew, to strip away what I had been taught. - Georgia O'Keefe

To get better at photography you have to learn both the technique and the art. You have to master technique until it becomes second nature so that you can focus on artistic expression without being bothered by technical considerations.

However, most of the time you basically learn to do what others have done before you. You are learning their rules and their approaches. If you chose a good teacher, these rules are most likely valid and efficient, but they are not yours.

To achieve a personal style you are going to have to unlearn a lot of these rules. You are going to have to put them behind you so to speak so that you can develop your own rules.

Why is that? It is so because achieving a personal style is being able to make your own rules and develop your own approach to photography. Only by unlearning and then creating your own rules will you be able to create something new, something original, and something that has not already been done by somebody else.

One could ask: "then why learn since we are later going to have to unlearn?" This is a good question and if the premise behind it was correct, we would save huge amounts of time. Unfortunately, one cannot unlearn without first learning. Learning is necessary. One has to know the rules in order to break them. One must learn before one can unlearn.

Unlearning is not the same as not learning. Unlearning is the process of going beyond what we learned, of going further than what was taught to us. We have to learn, then, to achieve a style, we have to unlearn. In this context unlearning means making our own rules. First we learn other people's rules, then, through unlearning, we formulate our own rules.

Unlearning is not a destructive process. Instead, it is the process of building new knowledge upon the knowledge imparted to us by our teachers. What we learned becomes the foundation on which we build our own knowledge. By doing this we add the knowledge that we created ourselves to the knowledge that was created by others.

The fact is that we cannot totally forget what we have learned. We cannot wipe this knowledge off our minds, the way we would wipe a blackboard, or a slate, clean. What we can do is put aside, or use as foundation, what we have learned and replace it with our own style, our own set of rules, our own way of making art, so that what we originally learned is no longer at the forefront.

Changing The Rules

One of the biggest mistakes a photographer can make is to look at the real world and cling to the vain hope that next time his film will somehow bear a closer resemblance to it...If we limit our vision to the real world, we will forever be fighting on

the minus side of things, working only too make our photographs equal to what we see out there, but no better. - Galen Rowell

We previously discussed the concept of breaking the rules. Changing the rules is different from breaking the rules. Breaking the rules means doing the opposite, or doing something totally different, than the established rules call for. Changing the rules on the other hand means creating a new reality by looking at a specific situation differently. It means implementing your own ideas instead of following someone else's ideas.

Many artists, inventors or other creative individuals got started making their own rules because they did not like the rules that others had established. They did not want to follow these rules because they did not think that these other people were doing things the way they should be done. There are many examples of this in the world of fine automobiles to take but one example. Enzo Ferrari and Ferruccio Lamborghini, in Italy, are good examples. Both men offered a new approach to cars. Ettore Bugatti, in France, is another good example. All three constructors were dissatisfied with the approach taken by others in regards to the design and the construction of automobiles. They had their own ideas about how the design and the construction of a car should be approached. While they started as apprentices or employees of already-established automobile companies, they eventually quit these other companies to found their own in order to implement their ideas.

In fact, designers or engineers that decide to start their own companies usually do so because they are unsatisfied with what exists around them. In many instances, they work for someone else in the same field until they decide to go their own way. This decision is usually motivated by the desire to do things better or differently or to start something new altogether. These decisions are made as a reaction against what exists. Without a reaction towards what is already in place at a given time, there would be no progress and no new styles would emerge.

I know that, personally, my current style is as much a reflection of what I like as it is a reflection of what I do not like. In many ways I want to provide to my audience an alternative to what was there before I got started as much as provide myself with the satisfaction of creating my own world, my own reality. The choices I make are informed both by what I like and by what I dislike. Finding out what I dislike allows me to make a selection just as well as finding out what I like. In fact, what I dislike is often a more powerful motivation to do my own thing than finding out what I like.

Dissatisfaction with what exists, and examples of what others do that you like, gives birth to ideas. But ideas are just a starting point, a place of departure, a beginning. The development of these ideas is what truly matters. This development, and the hard work that accompanies it, represents the journey towards a true style, a style that no one else has, a style that is unique to you: a personal style.

The fear that many upcoming photographers have to create images that "are not real" is often due to the fact that they haven't created their own reality yet. At this stage of their career, they rely on the reality of other photographers, or of other artists, to find both vision and inspiration. In other words, the vision and the inspiration for their work does not come from their work. Instead, it comes from the work of others.

When this is the case, the artist is more concerned with being faithful to the vision of others than with being faithful to their own vision. Often, these artists have spent little or no time developing their personal vision.

In turn, this concern for being faithful to someone else's vision manifests itself in a certain level of insecurity regarding their efforts to emulate the work of others. Because the reality they are depicting is not theirs, there is a constant concern about whether their work comes across as real or not.

This concern is often passed as being a concern for the artist's faithfulness towards his subject. However, this is an inaccurate description of the problem. In the situation I just described, the artist is concerned with being faithful to someone else's style, someone whose work they admire and want to copy or emulate. The artist is not primarily concerned with being faithful to their subject. The artist is concerned with being faithful to the style that another artist has used to represent the same subject.



Hoodoos and Clouds

This photograph was created on the same day and in the same location as the next image in this essay. I also used the same wide-angle lens and the same camera. The difference is in the timing (this image was created first, the next one approximately 15 minutes later) and in the composition of the element in the image.

In this image I kept the relative size of the two hoodoos similar. The larger element is the rock at foreground right. The two rocks in the middle of the image are given a lot of importance, because they look like they are sliding off the sandstone bench on which the hoodoos are located, thereby indicating the direction of things to come, which is that hoodoos eventually collapse, leaving their capstones to tell their tale, so to speak.

The cloud formation brings the image together because it fills the sky and because it is centered in the image. The interesting shape of the cloud formation, which metaphorically resembles a feather or an arrowhead, adds further interest. Without this cloud most of the drama would be lost. Finally, the colors and tones are consistent throughout the image, bringing unity to the composition.

Be Bold And Audacious

Be bold, and mighty forces will come to your aid. - Goethe

Personal style is rooted in originality and innovation. Therefore, personal style is demonstrating your personality while creating original artwork.

In order to develop a style you must do something different from what others have done before you. In many ways, this means that you must take a chance or take a risk. Nothing-risked means nothing gained. You must attempt to go beyond what others have done so far, attempt to push the boundaries, or attempt to do something new. You must also be bold and, to some extent, audacious in the choices you make for your art.

Being bold is not a concept that is often mentioned in art. Most of the time, art is presented as being about *aesthetics*. For example my own website presents my work under the heading of *beautiful landscape* and my avowed goal is to share the beauty that I see in the landscapes I photograph.

Yet aesthetics are only one aspect of art and while I put this aspect forth I also take a bold approach to landscape photography. Aesthetics are what an audience looks at first and in that sense aesthetics are as much about the audience as they are about the artist. Boldness in art on the other hand is primarily about the artist. It is about how the artist approaches his art and about how the work is created. Being bold has to do with the artist's intent for the work while aesthetics has to do with the audience's reaction to the work.

Being audacious is doing something that others did not think you would do. It is trying something because there is a chance it succeeds, while knowing that complete success may not be possible. In other words, one has to try and see. One must not be afraid to take a chance.

To some extent, audaciousness in art also means that the artist must be willing to deal with a certain level of controversy. The potential for controversy can be seen as detrimental to the artist. This can be the case depending on how the artist handles and copes with controversy and with adverse reactions to his work. However, it can also be beneficial to the artist in terms of causing the audience to rethink their position regarding the subject and the artistic approach used by the artist.

Controversy can also be beneficial in terms of generating exposure, an approach that has been used by artists in the past for this reason. However, to generate exposure only for exposure's sake, without having a solid work of art as the source of this exposure, usually means short-lived exposure instead of long-term artistic recognition. Long-term artistic recognition requires something else besides drama and controversy. It requires work that is recognized as being art and not just recognized as being controversial. As time goes by tempers cool down and the work is studied for its content more than for its intent. When this occurs, work created solely to generate controversy usually gets forgotten because it does not pass the test of time.

Don't Sell Your Soul

Don't make music for some vast, unseen audience or market or ratings share or even for something as tangible as money. Though it's crucial to make a living, that shouldn't be your inspiration. Do it for yourself. - Billy Joel

The anecdote of the artist asked by a patron to "match the painting to the couch" is a classic. I have been faced with this situation a couple of times and my answer has always been to turn down the potential customer's request. Why? Because my work, as I explain in this series of essays, comes from my inspiration and my inspiration does not come from the color of a potential customer's couch.

The fact is that inspiration and making sales are two entirely different things. The former is about art while the later is about business. I discuss the differences between the two at length in my essay *Being an Artist in Business* so I won't go back over it here. This essay is available on the web and in my book *Mastering Landscape Photography*.

What I want to emphasize here is that it is easy to lose your inspiration for monetary gain. While matching the color of an image to that of a couch seems relatively benign, the implications are that you are renouncing the inspiration for a specific image by agreeing to modify it for the sole purpose of making a sale. My recommendation is to explain exactly that to your potential customer. If they walk away without buying anything, they are basically saying that your source of inspiration is of no concern to them and that what they expect of you is to jump when they say, "jump!" and not waste their time by asking "why" or "how high?"

Just say no to such requests and wait for the proper customers to come along, the ones who respect you and your work and who understand that artistic inspiration is something not to be fiddled with. Believe me, they will come. And if this results in a reduced number of sales, simply increase your prices. True inspiration, un-wavered by couch colors, comes at a price.

Don't Worry About Creating Masterpieces

The Most important ally in the study of Painting is the art of thinking. Excepting natural talent of genius, individuality in

thought is, without any doubt, the Greatest single factor in creative work. - Edgar A. Payne

As an artist I find it more important to ask myself "what is the source of my inspiration" than to ask, "what are my masterpieces." Answering the former of these two questions may lead to possible answers for the later while answering the later may only result in self-delusion.

This is because one cannot say that the body of work of a specific photographer is devoid of masterpieces unless one first defines what is a masterpiece. Doing so would be like deciding that someone is a referee without first making sure that person learned the rules of the game at hand.

The problem is that defining what a masterpiece consists of is very difficult. Most "definitions" are little more than best-seller lists. As I pointed out in my essay *Being an Artist in Business* what sells well is not necessarily the finest work of a specific artist. Examples abound of artists whose work was not recognized during their lifetime and yet has become highly sought after their death. On the other hand, examples abound of "so-so" artists whose work sells extremely well.

Therefore, saying that a work of art is a "masterpiece" is putting a label on the work more than anything else. It is a fairly arbitrary and subjective decision made by a specific person, or a group of people, for specific reasons. Such decisions are often temporary.

As artists, wondering if our work is of masterpiece caliber (whatever that may be) is unnecessary. What we know for sure is that out of the thousands or millions of photographs we will take only a small percentage will end up being recognized as having made a contribution. What those photographs are is best left for others to decide. In my view the most effective way to improve our photography, and to achieve a personal style, is to continue creating new work while pushing aside such concerns.

Moving Out Of Your Comfort Zone

One photo out of focus is a mistake; ten photos out of focus are experimentation, one hundred photos out of focus are a style. - Anonymous

I discussed the concept of comfort zone in *Exercising your Creativity* so I will only go back over it shortly in this essay. The fact is that to develop a personal style you have to move out of your comfort zone. Why is that? Because you need to create something new, something you have never done before, something the outcome of which is unknown to you. You have to create something that is outside of your comfort zone.

Think of your personal style as your personal potential. One of the most powerful things that can stop you from realizing this potential is your comfort zone. If you stay within your comfort zone you will simply not be able to develop a personal style. There is no way around that. Most people who fail to develop a personal style fail because they did not, for a number of reasons, move out of their comfort zone.

As someone told me one day, attempting to defend his comfort zone: "I am in a comfortable rut." My answer was "comfortable, maybe, but a rut nevertheless." Unless this person gets out of this rut, he or she will not be able to develop a personal style.

I do recommend that you re-read the section on comfort zone in the second essay in this series, *Exercising your creativity*, and that you conduct the skill enhancement exercises whose goal is to help you move out of your comfort zone. Both are invaluable in helping you first assess your current comfort zone and second start the process of moving out of it. Here too, work is the key to getting results. Thinking about this matter is not enough.



Hoodoos

Someone once told me that photographers like hoodoos but that print collectors are only moderately interested in them. While this may be true, it is also true that print collectors are interested in the expression and the style of the artist, regardless of subject matter.

Hoodoos make a very interesting photographic subject, due in large part to the variety of dramatic shapes offered by the different types of hoodoos. Hoodoos can also be composed in a variety of ways, either outlined against the sky or against a sandstone cliff, or presented as a grouping by playing the shape of one hoodoo against that of another, or by creating a visual comparison of shapes and textures.

In this image I used the shape of the foreground hoodoo to lead the viewer's eye towards the faraway hoodoo by creating an imaginary diagonal line from the bottom left to the mid-right side of the image. The striation in the thin clouds at the top right adds movement to the image, because the clouds are moving in a direction that is parallel to the hill at mid-right and to the capstone of the faraway hoodoo.

Careful image construction is something that is very important to me, and the way I constructed this image is no exception. I also waited until the last possible moment to make the exposure. A few seconds later and the sun had set on the sandstone bluff behind me, engulfing the hoodoo formation in a shadowy shroud. While this situation could be the subject for another image, it was not part of my vision at the time.

Don't Try To Please Everyone

Do not quench your inspiration and your imagination; do not become the slave of your model. - Vincent Van Gogh

Inspiration thrives when you are excited about what you do and when you are excited about the prospect of showing your new work to people who you know will appreciate it.

On the other hand inspiration can be easily dwarfed if you expect part of your audience to be displeased by your new work or when you know for a fact that criticism is to be expected.

At such times it is important to remember that you will never be able to please everyone. No matter what you do, some people will love your work while others will dislike it. This may sound depressing if you are new to this aspect of art, but

unfortunately it is a fact of life as an artist. The solution to this problem is to develop a thick skin and to learn how to put this out of your mind.

This statement about the fact that negative comments will come your way no matter what type of artwork you do often comes as a surprise to upcoming photographers. To illustrate it I regularly use my own experience as an example. I do landscape photography, and my images aim at representing beauty. My website, beautiful-landscape.com, is named after my main purpose for my work.

You would think that such an endeavor would bring little or no criticism or negative feedback. Well, the fact is that it does bring some. Whenever I announce a new series of images, or publish a new photograph, I have people email me, or contact me in one way or another, to let me know how much better my work would be if I did "X" to it. Some simply tell me that my work is no good, using far less considerate terms than I am writing here.

As the proverb goes "Let the dogs bark: the caravan will go by regardless." In other words, you can afford to ignore a certain amount of background noise, or in our case of negative feedback, no matter how adamant some of this feedback may be, and still continue moving forward. Another way to put it is to say "Press on regardless" a concept I discuss in detail in my *Being an Artist in Business* essay.

After all, everyone is entitled to an opinion and it would be nonsense to believe that everyone has the same opinion or that everyone loves what you do. What matters is that you love what you do and that your audience loves what you do as well. It is up to you to consider those who regularly criticize your work part of your audience or not. Personally, I do not consider them part of my audience and I recommend that you follow my approach. However, the final call is up to you.

Just remember that trying to please an audience that, so far, has proven to be impossible to please is not conducive to renewed inspiration. Inspiration, when it comes from your audience, comes from an audience praising you for the work you just did and asking you to go further with your vision. It does not come from an audience that cannot be pleased no matter how hard you try.

While some criticism and gripes may be legitimate, and while listening to such criticism and gripes can help you improve your work, I have found that many gripes are simply not worth paying more than a cursory attention to, if any. If you do want to pay attention to gripes, group them into categories and address or answer each category once. As you will soon discover, the same categories come back regularly and once you have answered them you can simply give the same answer over and over again, or forget about them altogether.

In regards to negative criticism I want to point this out: you wouldn't listen to music that depresses you and makes you feel worthless on purpose, would you? Well this is exactly what you do when you listen to negative criticism. You are listening to words that are depressing and that make you feel worthless. These are not words praising your efforts. These are words putting your work, and yourself, down. These are words that do not respect how hard you worked and that have no intent on helping you go further, push you forward or fuel your passion. Let it go. Don't listen to it. Even better, tell those that speak these words to get lost.

Expect detractors

You have to dream, you have to have a vision, and you have to set a goal for yourself that might even scare you a little because sometimes that seems far beyond your reach. Then I think you have to develop a kind of resistance to rejection, and to the disappointments that are sure to come your way. - Gregory Peck

As an artist achieving a personal style you have to expect detractors. You have to expect some people to question your vision, to argue that it is not worthwhile, to tell you they will have none of it, to state you will lose them as customers and to otherwise try to throw you off. Take it for what it is: an attempt at making you feel that your vision isn't worth much, if it is worth anything at all.

I am qualified to talk about this subject having received my share of such comments, either in person, over email or over the phone. If anything, they have further convinced me that my vision was real, that I was on to something unique, that I wasn't following the norm, that I was challenging the status quo.

For example, my open attitude regarding my process, and my statement that I enhance and manipulate my work in order

to express the emotions I felt when I recorded the original camera image, has been the source of endless comments from the part of numerous other photographers and photography enthusiasts.

The publication of my essay on the subject, titled *Just say Yes*, in which I detail precisely how I respond to questions regarding whether I manipulate my work or not, was a watershed event in this regard. I had one person email me for example, to say that he hoped "I would not regret publishing this essay." I had another one tell me that writing this piece, and explaining my position, was going to be "my downfall."

Well, I got news for them, to use a popular expression. For one, I am still here and doing better than ever. For two, they were sadly mistaken because they confused art and facts. Let me explain. What I do is art. First, I make no secret about it. It says so in the heading of my website, and my educational record is a who's who of the art schools and the artists I studied with.

Second, etymologically speaking, art is artifice. It is an impression, a gloss and an illusion. Art is not real. Art is the imitation of reality. In my view it is an imitation that better shows us what reality is, but it is an imitation nevertheless.

In artistic photography, which is what I am doing, claiming to show a factual reality would be foolish. I have never made, or will ever make, this claim. Instead, the claim I make is to express through my art the emotions that I experience when I visit the places I represent in my work. The claim I make is to create images that represent my memories of the places I saw. The claim I make is to create images that depict not only what I saw with my eyes but also what I felt, heard, tasted and experienced through all my senses, not only through my sense of sight. The claim I make is to create images that depict my emotional response to the scenes I photograph.

In that sense I make no claim of being objective or factual. I make no claim that my photographs can be used to factually and objectively depict the locations that I represent. My goal is not to create images that are to be used in textbooks, or in scientific reports, or in geological, anthropological, archeological or other scientific studies. My goal is to create photographs that, to me, are much closer in their aim to paintings than they are to the mainstream perception of what a photograph should be. In fact, my photographs are not motivated to be what photographs should be, or what people think photographs should be. My photographs are simply motivated to be my vision expressed through my personal style, as a representation of my inspiration channeled through my creative capabilities.

Similarly, I certainly do not aim at creating images to be used in news publications. And this is where my detractors fail miserably. Their point would be correct and appropriately taken if such was my goal. Then, and only then, would I regret making the statements I made. A news photographer is expected to be accurate and objective. A news reporter is expected to try his best at being impartial, at not letting his emotions control his work. A news photographer is expected to not manipulate his work and to not enhance his images.

The reason for these expectations is that news photographs are expected to represent actual facts, that they are expected to represent events as they happened. They are not expected to represent events as the photographer remembers them. They are not supposed to be embellished, modified, or changed in any way. They are not supposed to be an emotional response to the scene photographed. Instead, they are supposed to be a detached record of actual events, events in which the photographer was just an observer, or at most a participant-observer.

Being an artist I have no such constraints or responsibilities in regards to my own work. Being an artist I can pretty much do whatever I please. Being an artist I am free to enjoy total creative freedom regarding the subject I photograph, regarding the way I represent this subject, and regarding any other creative aspect of my work. My only requirement, if there is one, is to be totally, fully, and absolutely open about the fact that my work is not an objective representation of my subject. My only responsibility in this regard is to make sure that my audience knows, without the shadow of a doubt, that my work is art and not a factual representation of the locations I represent. My only responsibility is to explain that my goal is to depict, in my photographs, how I felt when I was there, and that my images are a representation of my full sensory experience, that it represents a total commitment to an emotional representation of the landscape.

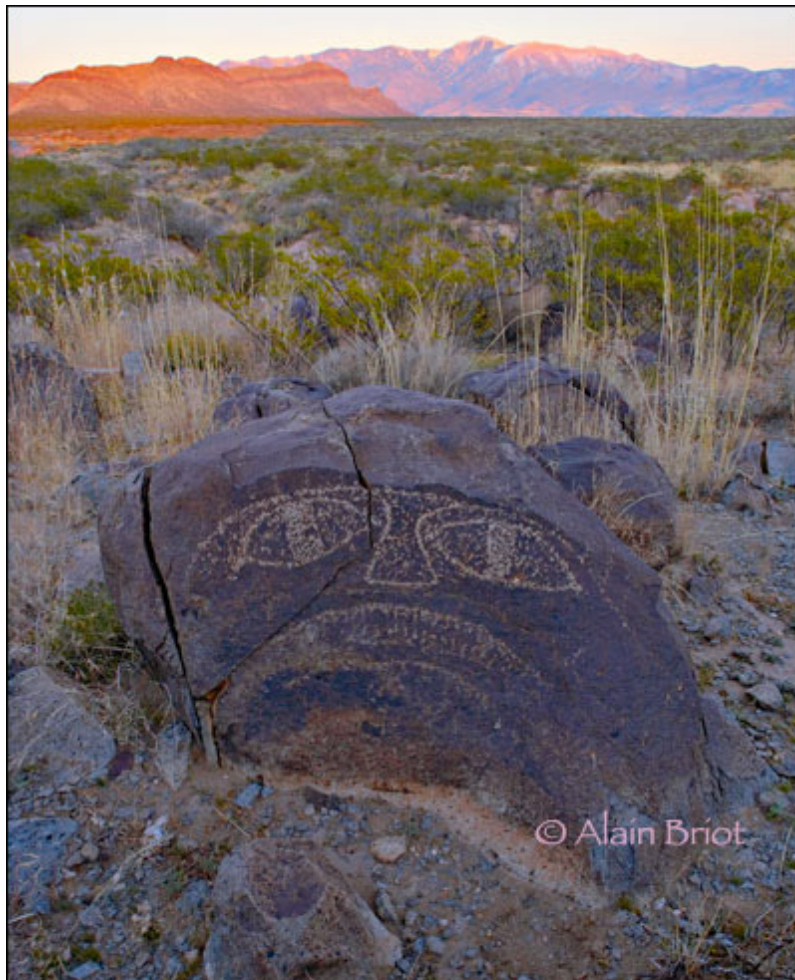
As you become further involved in presenting your vision to your audience, opportunities for affirming your vision will become more numerous. In a sense, every detractor becomes an opportunity for you to further detail aspects of your vision that you may have missed, or that you may not have thought of discussing previously, or again that you may have not considered to be unclear. Each detractor in a sense becomes an unwilling ally by presenting you with yet one more opportunity to explain what it is that you are doing. Every misrepresentation of your images, every misleading statement

made about your work by someone else, becomes a new opportunity to set the record straight, to explain things in greater detail, to make more people aware of what you do. Every new detractor brings with him, or her, a new audience to whom you can explain what you do. Keep in mind that in this new audience there will most likely be people who like your work and who will be pleased that you are defending your approach.

Don't assume that there is nothing you can do in front of detraction, misrepresentation or misleading statements made about your work. Fact is, there is a lot you can do. Why? Because while people will listen to detractors or read what they write, they will listen even more closely to what you have to say, or read even more carefully what you write, because they are just as interested in your defense as they are in the accusations made against you. Why? Because your response, your attitude in the face of detraction, speaks volumes regarding how you feel about your work. Your words and your actions are the finest way to show to your audience that you are passionate about your art and that you are committed to your vision.

If you lie down and die, to use a popular expression, what you are saying to your audience is that it doesn't matter what others say about your work. By doing so you are showing that you don't care, that you don't see a reason to defend your work. But if you are putting forth a strong defense, if you are bringing to the table irrefutable arguments in support of your art and of your artistic stance, you are showing to your audience how much you care about your work, how important it is for you to defend it, how much it matters to you how others feel about it, and how important it is that others understand what you are doing. You are showing that you stand behind your work, that you are proud of what you do, and that you are not about to let someone tear it apart without a fight.

Your attitude becomes one more reason for others to become passionate about your work. Your attitude becomes part of your work to some extent. Your attitude shows to your audience the attitude you expect of them. It shows them the way. It makes them want to be part of what you do because you are proud of what you do and because you are ready to defend it, no matter what it takes. People like people who stand for what they believe. People are also willing to hear both sides of the story. People reserve the right to make up their own mind. It is not who speaks first that matters, it is who speaks best. Above all it is who speaks the truth, who speaks from the heart and who speaks about something they truly care for. And in this instance, this someone is you, the artist. If you truly believe in your work and if you truly believe that your work matters to you and to others, you must say so when confronted by detractors.





Face and Mountains

Rock art, Native American petroglyphs (images carved on rocks) and pictographs (images painted on rocks), has been a staple of my personal style for years.

While subject alone is not enough to define style, working with a specific subject for years does create a solid link between an artist and his subject.

I approach rock art the way I approach the landscape. My goal is to express my emotional response to the rock art panels I photograph rather than create a scientific record of these panels.

Skill Enhancement Exercises

Musicians always come up with stuff I couldn't imagine, using my instruments. I can get a sense of whether something would be a good musical resource, but I don't do music. I'm a toolmaker. It's always amazing what someone like Herbie Hancock, Wendy Carlos or Stevie Wonder, can come up with. What they'll do when you put something new in front of them is they'll turn a couple knobs and listen, and immediately get a sense of where to go. The muse talks to them. - Bob Moog, inventor of the Moog Analog Synthesizer

A - Design a short term and a long-term project.

Be specific about the nature and the scope of your project.

Write a description of your project.

Set a deadline for completing it.

Do this for a short-term project: a month or two maximum.

Do this for a long-term project: a year or so maximum.

B - Describe your comfort zone.

List everything that you are comfortable doing.

List everything that you are not comfortable doing.

These things should be related to photography and to your work.

C - Go to a location you like over and over again to photograph it.

Each time you return to this location create an image you have never created before.

Create a new image, different from all the other images of this location you previously created. Make this an absolute rule and do not break it.

This approach will force you to look at places that you know well in a new way each time you visit them. It will force you to search for something new, something you have not seen before. You will search for new compositions that you did not see or did not think of previously. You will search for new light and for a multitude of other things.

Because you cannot take the same photo twice and because you cannot take the photos you have seen from other photographers, you are forced to invent your own images of this place. As time goes by and you continue following this approach you will slowly but surely develop your own personal way of representing this place.

In doing so you are developing your own personal vision of this place. You are not only creating images that people have not seen before, you are also creating your own images of this place. You are not only being creative you are also being original. Originality is one of the trademarks of a personal vision, one of the tests you can use to decide if you have a personal style or not.

D - Follow your creative impulses.

Thinking can help creativity, but that is only one aspect of it. Another aspect is to not think, and instead to act from the heart, to act impulsively. This reaction is based on your emotional reactions rather on the desire to create something that others will like.

E - Master technique in order to focus on art.

Work towards freeing your mind of technical considerations by mastering technique so that you can focus your energy on the artistic aspects of the image. This is a skill that you gain through repetitive practice, until technique becomes second nature and your mind is free to focus entirely upon artistic considerations.

F - Take notes in the field.

Carry pen and paper all the time so you can jot down ideas as they come to you in the field. Carry a voice recorder so you can record ideas as they come to you in the field. Develop these ideas into longer pieces of writing when you return to your studio, hotel, etc. Write your goal down so that others can understand it and visualize it themselves.

G - Listen to music while you work.

Many photographers regularly listen to music while they work. The combination of musical compositions and visual art works well together. One informs the other and music has a relaxing and energizing effect that provide increased creativity and inspiration while creating images. Today, with digital music players, one can listen to music through his computer while working in the studio then take the same mp3 files in the field on an iPod. Listening to music anywhere while creating photographs has never been easier.

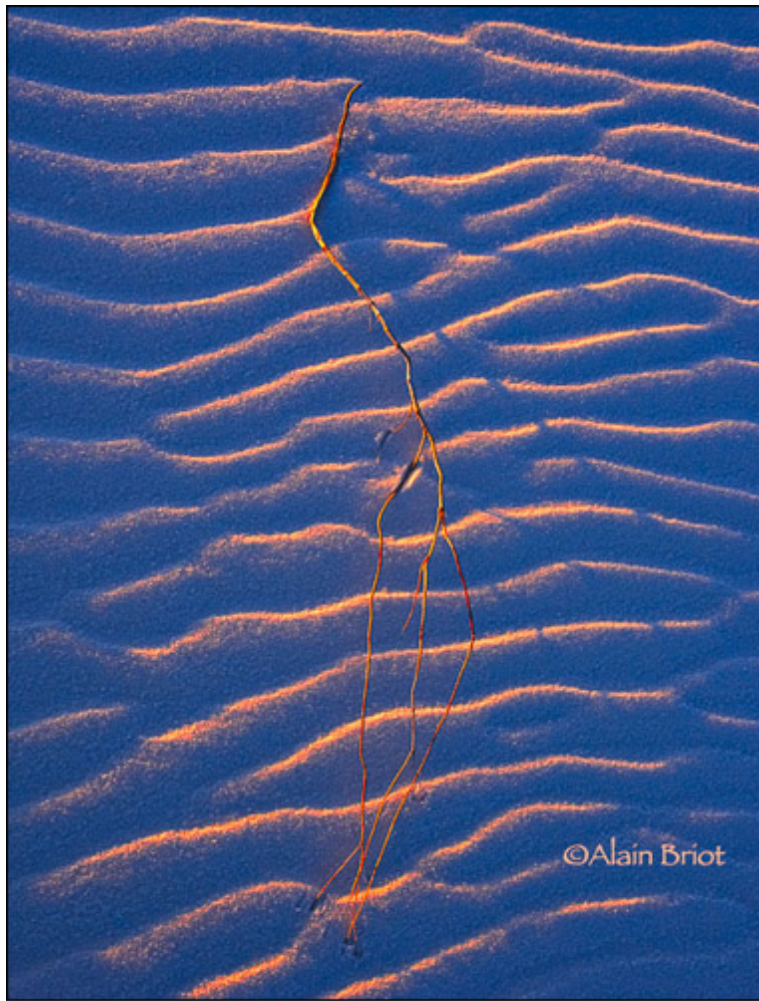
H - Invent a new way to work.

Invent a new way to work, to take photographs and to process your images, a way that is yours and no one else. This may mean changing the equipment you use or changing the way you use this equipment. It may mean designing a studio that fits your personality, buying property where you are comfortable working, in a location that inspires you.

I - Don't rush it.

Take your time. Just like you can't schedule creativity, you can't rush personal style into being. Artwork that is in the making asks for its own time. You have to operate by listening to the piece you are creating, and not just by listening to your own schedule, your desires or your deadlines. Deadlines do help make things happen and many artists would never get started, or never finish their projects, if it wasn't for deadlines. But deadlines can also kill art, by making you want to complete a project too fast, without listening to the work.

Rhythm, in a way, also has to do with deadlines. There is nothing like a deadline to hasten us towards completion of a project, and indirectly generate the necessary inspiration to find the way to complete this project. Deadlines generate rhythm and impose a specific pace, rushed if one procrastinated or if the deadline is too short, or, more rarely, slower if the deadline provides more ample time or if one started the project early.



White Sands Branches

I rarely photograph details, preferring to focus on the grand landscape. This is a personal choice and there are exceptions to this rule, as demonstrated by the image above.

I use the same approach to photograph both details and grand landscapes. I could, for example, have used this detail as a foreground element in a wide-angle, near-far composition.

I decided to focus solely on the foreground here because my vision for this image was not of a near-far composition. Instead, my vision was of a close up showing the relationship between the shape of the branches and the sand ripples, both lit by glowing sunset light. My vision was also about emphasizing the difference in color between the warm sunset light on the branches and part of the sand ripples, and the cool blue of the shaded areas.

Conclusion

It seems that perfection is reached not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing more to take away. - Antoine de Saint Exupery

The achievement of a personal style means following your inspiration and vision, being creative, trusting your own instincts, leaving your comfort zone and not being afraid to take chances and make your own rules.

Your personal style is an extension of your personality. As such your personal style is as unique as your handwriting for example. The mistake that many people make when it comes to personal style is thinking that they have to have a model and that this model will help them find the right way and the wrong of making art. Such a model does not exist because art has no rules. Art is whatever you want it to be.

As long as you do not approach art that way, the achievement of a personal style will continue to elude you. If you forever

try to continue following the rules, or try to copy someone else's work, your work will remain commonplace and expectable. To be unique, to surprise yourself and your audience, in short to achieve your personal style, the artwork you create has to be yours.

Think of art as being this one place where anything goes, where you can be yourself and do what you want, whatever that may be. Think of personal style as being able to create something unique and extraordinary, something that does not exist in any way, shape or form, something that others will want to own and admire.

Personal style is therefore about being cutting edge. As such it carries with it the risk of exposing yourself to potential disapproval, because anything that is cutting edge is bound to elicit extreme responses, either total acceptance or total rejection. "Mild" responses are rare once an artist develops a true personal style and this is one of the reasons why so many hesitate at doing what it takes to achieve a personal style. In other words, they are concerned, and rightly so, that the responses to their work will be polarized rather than neutral.

Having a defined and recognizable style means making decisions regarding what you photograph and knowing what is your subject. If you are unsure of your subject your audience will be unsure of it as well. As a result, it is unlikely that this audience will support your work. Why? Simply because if you are not sure where you are going they will not be sure whether they want to follow you or not. You are supposed to be the master, to decide where you are going and to show the way. The audience expects you to make these decisions and to lead them on the path to an understanding and an appreciation of your work. For this reason they cannot lead you. This is neither their role nor their inclination. This is not their purpose for looking at your work. Instead, it is your responsibility to lead them.

You must therefore make decisions about what is your subject, your approach, and eventually your personal style. Doing so is crucial because lack of decision in this instance means lack of following on the part of your audience. If you don't know where you are going, or if you believe that not making a choice will preserve all options for future decisions, your audience will drop you like a stone –if they ever give you any attention at all- to go see the work of those who have a firm idea of what they are doing. Audiences like strong positions. They like artists who know where they stand, even though the stance of this artist may be unlike the taste of a specific audience, or may be shocking, or again may be unconventional. They like a firm position because this is what is expected of an artist. In a sense, polarization of the audience is a logical outcome of art.

This series of four essays is now complete. In this conclusion I want to point out that although my focus has been photography, most of what I presented here is applicable to other artistic mediums, and that, eventually, the process I described is applicable to art in general.

This series is therefore not only about photography. It is also about the purpose of art and about the reasons why we create art. We create art to share a message with our audience. In the context of the visual arts, which include photography, we create art to share a different way of seeing, a different way of representing things visually. Eventually, when all is said and done, creating art is about expressing our personality and our vision of the world.

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Alain Briot creates fine art photographs, teaches workshops and offers DVD tutorials on composition, printing and on marketing photographs. Alain is also the author of *Mastering Landscape Photography*. This book is available from Amazon and other bookstores as well as directly from Alain. You can find more information about Alain's work, writings and tutorials on his website at <http://www.beautiful-landscape.com>.



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