

Finding Entropy

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The second law of thermodynamics states: "The entropy of an isolated system not in equilibrium will tend to increase over time, approaching a maximum value at equilibrium." Simply put: entropy (chaos) tends to increase over time. Even more simply put: a crystal vase will eventually break.

So what's my point? Too often photographers prove the negative. Rather than tending toward entropy, we seem to gravitate instead toward the established order. From the beginning, we are indoctrinated with "rules" of photography: always use a tripod, shoot during the golden hours, compose using the rule of thirds, etc. We may find ourselves setting limits on the types of photographs we make: shooting only bird pictures, or only landscapes, and so on. And over time, we learn to control our photographs: we control our exposures to avoid clipping of highlights, we carefully compose our images, we control our depth of field to avoid out-of-focus areas, we control our shutter speeds to stop motion blur. As a result, our personal entropy has a tendency to decrease; we develop distinct shooting styles, and our work becomes more uniform.

To some extent this is a good thing: chaos, for the beginning photographer, usually manifests itself in the form of sloppy technique, poor composition, and unfocused creative vision. By exerting control over our technical skills and developing our vision, we improve our art and craft. Why, then, should I advocate returning to entropy?

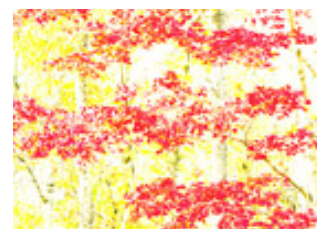
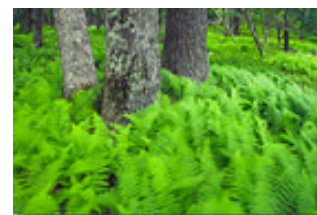
Because chaos is the life-blood of art. Without it, we'd all still be painting stick figures on cave walls. It is too easy to be seduced by order, to follow the ready path laid before your feet. In doing so, however, you end up with a body of work that looks like everyone else's. And getting too mired in the tracks of your own personal style is ultimately a creative dead end. Only by shaking things up a bit — by injecting a healthy dose of entropy into your system — can you create something intensely personal and unique.

For most of us, chaos does not come easy — we have to go searching for it. Finding entropy means shattering perceptions, pushing boundaries, and being willing to unlearn what we have learned (I know, somewhere Yoda is rolling his eyes). It means challenging ourselves to break free from the limits we have self-imposed. And most important, it means making a lot of bad images before we can learn to start making great ones.

Now, I don't mean that we should abandon common sense and reason: good composition and technique still apply, and always should. But we should strive to be more creative. What this really means is that we should strive to be more abstract. The problem with most nature photographers is that we really love what we shoot. We love the waterfall for its own beauty, the eagle for its grace, and so forth. So we get real excited when we get a picture of what we love. But the flaw in this approach is that we just end up with pictures of beautiful things, when instead we should be making beautiful pictures. We need to learn to view the waterfall or the eagle as not an end in itself, but rather as a means to an end: the creation of art. They must be viewed as a compositional abstraction: a waterfall is no longer a waterfall, but rather a shape or line that must interact with other elements of the scene.

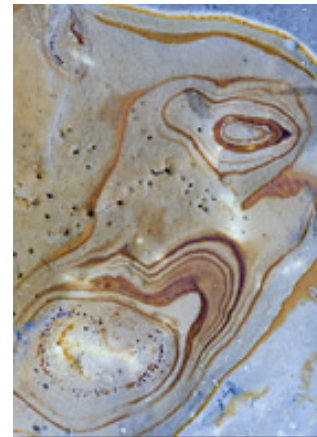
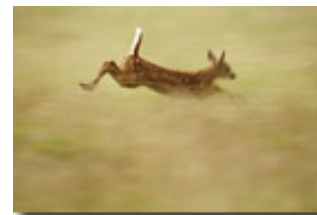
Learning to think abstractly is an important step to finding entropy, and in and of itself it will greatly improve your compositions. But it is only the first step. Once you are able to successfully view elements of your scene as abstractions, you are ready to start creating abstractions, by transforming your subject into something other than what it is. Basically, it's time to push the crystal vase off the countertop.

OK, so what does all of this mumbo jumbo mean in a practical sense? It means giving up control



and seeing what happens. It means breaking the rules and inventing a few of your own. Here are a few ways to add a healthy dose of chaos to your photography:

1. Photograph something never shot before — a new location, a radically different perspective. Following the beaten path only leads you to someone else's vision.
2. Photograph in the dark — not being able to see what you are shooting opens your mind to new creative possibilities!
3. Go with the flow — let entropy have its way. Is the wind blowing hard when you are trying to photograph flowers or ferns in the forest? Instead of increasing your ISO, choose a longer exposure and make your image a study of movement.
4. Intentionally overexpose images — the high-key results may be to your liking.
5. Take your camera off your tripod every now and then. Shooting handheld will force you to make compromises — which may channel your creativity into unanticipated directions.
6. Photograph chaos in action — anything that shows the randomness and energy of nature. Waves crashing on the shore, storms raging, animals fighting to survive in a harsh world: chaos is all around us.
7. Forget about planning and just wander about with an eye (or two!) open for creative possibilities — who knows what you might find?
8. Find your own path to entropy! Invent a creative technique that is entirely your own.



Eventually, the experiments will become less trial-and-error and more planning and pre-visualization. Not everyone will like the results — heck, you may not even like the results — but you will become a better photographer simply by trying. Only by opening ourselves to more creative possibilities, by letting a little chaos (or a lot) enter into our orderly lives, can we grow as artists. Either that, or back to the cave walls.

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Ian Plant lives in the Washington, D.C. area and has been photographing the natural world for fifteen years. His work has appeared in a number of books and calendars, as well as national and regional magazines, including *Outdoor Photographer*, *National Parks*, *Blue Ridge Country*, *Adirondack Life*, *Wonderful West Virginia*, and *Chesapeake Life*, among others. His sixth and most recent book is the critically acclaimed *Chesapeake: Bay of Light*. Ian's work has also appeared in five other books of the *Wonder and Light* series. Ian is co-owner of Mountain Trail Press, a publisher of fine art nature photography books and calendars.

To see more of Ian's work, visit [Mountain Trail Photo](#). The Mountain Trail Photo Team consists of some of the top nature photographers in the country, whose mission is to educate and inspire others in the art of nature photography. There you will find team member images; articles on photo techniques and destinations; and information on workshops in some of America's most beautiful places. Also visit the Team's [blog](#) for a more eclectic mix of images and musings.

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