

The Essential Landscape
Does the World Need Another Aspen Image?
On Cynicism and Nature Photography

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“Like the world needs another aspen image” was a somewhat sarcastic response found in a discussion forum when a member expressed excitement at the arrival of autumn and anticipation for the aspen’s colorful foliage displays in Colorado. I have to admit the remark gave me pause. I can’t say for sure how serious the intention was, but I felt it was something to rationalize, if only for myself.

So, does the world need another aspen image? After some thought, two conclusions presented themselves: first, this was the wrong question to ask; second, pity for the person who had become so jaded and cynical that such a question would occur at the mention of a majestic feat of nature.

What is a cynic? A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.
-- Oscar Wilde --

For argument’s sake, here are some of the things I pondered as I sought to articulate my own answer.

Does the world need another aspen image? How about another view of Delicate Arch, another record of Yosemite Valley or Monument Valley, another sunset or waterfall? Have we seen enough? Are we sick and tired of these? Have they been done to death? Is there a reason to even try?

By the same token, does the world need another performance of Mozart’s Requiem or Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons?” Does the world need another sentimental love story, another action movie, another apple pie, another Tour de France, or another Superbowl?

Face it, we all have things we love, things that inspire and energize us that we can never get enough of. A repeat performance can have distinct nuances, unique subtleties, sometimes even a completely new interpretation. And yes, sometimes it’s not unlike any number of previous ones. Yet it still hits that soft spot within us and puts a smile on our faces.

So to ask whether the world needs this or that is an irrelevant question. When it comes to indulging our personal pleasures, to arousing our own creativity, or to just plain enjoy a good show, revel in beauty and savor life, the real question should be: do I need another aspen image, or better yet – do I love being out among the aspen on a beautiful autumn day breathing in the delicate scent of fallen leaves and photographing the magic around me? To hell with the world, just try and stop me.

What about creativity and originality? It has long been my contention that trying to be original for originality’s sake is a sure way to produce obscure and uninspired work. The harder you try to be original, the less meaningful your work will be. Originality is not a goal; it’s a result of listening to your inner voice and expressing your uniqueness as an individual. Follow your inner voice wherever it takes you, and if it takes you into a golden aspen grove and your heart rejoices, forget all else and immerse yourself in the moment.

Being creative is a result of a very unique state of mind. No one artist produces only groundbreaking original creative works with every click of the shutter. Sometimes you need another aspen image, another bar of chocolate, and another triumphant performance of Beethoven’s 5th Symphony before you can see, feel, and execute your next great original masterpiece. Don’t deny yourself the freedom to enjoy in the process.



Another thought to ponder: learn to walk before you can run and cover the basics before seeking advanced insight. Casual visitors to an aspen grove will likely produce very repetitive images resulting from first and/or sparse impressions, but make a hundred images in the same grove and you will see and feel and know more about it, and your work will reflect a deeper connection to the subject. You cannot jump into intimacy without establishing familiarity and friendship first. You will note that to a large extent the best images of any place will come from those who visit it often, who have explored and photographed and studied it for many days, seasons, or years. Don't skip the common initial impression just because someone had seen or photographed it before you (or even if you had done so yourself). When an opportunity to experience and participate in beauty presents itself, one would be a fool to reject it on any premise.

And who's to say that original aspen images are not still out there to be made? Consider the following examples from my talented colleagues Michael Gordon and Adam Schallau. Not only are these fresh, interesting, and creative views of the "done to death" aspens, but they also represent new insight for the photographers themselves (neither of whom is a stranger to aspens, by the way). Michael Gordon's own words on his image were "I made it two years ago, but only 'got it' last night for the first time." Adam Schallau referred to the decaying leaves in his image saying "I have never seen this before and found it very interesting." Neither image would exist if these fine photographers thought to themselves that the world doesn't need another aspen image.



Finally, the world may or may not need any images at all. What it does need is those who appreciate its natural beauty, those who seek to be part of its native ecosystems, to understand its cycles, and to enjoy the simple pleasures of wilderness. So go find yourself a beautiful aspen grove and forget about the world for a while.



The author wishes to thank Michael Gordon and Adam Schallau for their kind permission to use their images." and have the names link to their web sites:

- Michael: www.mgordonphotography.com
- Adam: www.recapturephoto.com

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Guy Tal resides in Utah, where most of the Colorado Plateau's breathtaking grandeur can be found, and where issues of preservation and land-use are among the most prominent on the political agenda. Guy's large format photography can be viewed on his website at <http://scenicwild.com>.

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