



Ten Questions: An Interview With Art Wolfe

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NPN Editor-in-Chief Richard Bernabe recently interviewed internationally-acclaimed photographer, Art Wolfe. Wolfe has taken an estimated one million images in his lifetime and has released over sixty books, including the award-winning Vanishing Act, The High Himalaya, Water: Worlds between Heaven and Earth, Tribes, Rainforests of the World, The Art of Photographing Nature, as well as numerous children's titles. Graphis included his books Light on the Land and the controversial Migrations on its list of the 100 best books published in the 1990s.

Art, Welcome to NPN, Nature Photographers Online Magazine. My first question is the same I ask of everyone. How did you get your start as a photographer?

My parents were commercial photographers so as a kid I started photographing with a Brownie. Growing up in the Pacific Northwest ingrained in me a sense of wonderment and desire for exploration. I camped a lot with my family and as I grew older, I started climbing peaks, and then started leading climbs. All along I photographed and then when I started at the University of Washington, I had great art instructors. It was at that time that I steeled myself and went out to promote my work, approaching businesses like The North Face and REI to display my prints. I also made the acquaintance of the late Dr. Alan Lobb, the director of Swedish Medical in Seattle. He bought prints for the hospital and I was able to buy my first car to go out and shoot more. I worked on my first book with him, which featured his significant collection of Native American basketry (*Indian Baskets of the Pacific Northwest and Alaska*). Alan was a true Renaissance man who taught me the value of tradition which inspires me to this day.

Who inspired you as a young, beginning photographer? Who inspires you now?

I deeply admire the work of Ernst Haas, Elliot Porter, M. C. Escher, Robert Bateman, Mark Tobey, and Jackson Pollock.

Having visited and photographed so many places and things over a significant period of time, how do you keep yourself motivated?

I just love taking pictures, pure and simple. I like to say I shoot with an unprejudiced eye meaning I will photograph just about anything. Over the years I have kept myself excited by photography by evolving my style and vastly varying my subjects.

[Nature Photographers Online](#) - Images by [Art Wolfe](#)

Your television show, *Travels to the Edge with Art Wolfe* must have you traveling quite often. What do you consider to be your favorite and least favorite aspects of traveling?

The television show demands great amounts of energy from a lot of people. Each episode takes about ten days of shooting with my very small crew of three. Before traveling there is a great deal of man hours put into planning and when we return with the raw materials the real production begins. Air travel has changed unbelievably over the last decade. As you can imagine it is my least, least favorite aspect of travel and the issues of flying into remote locations with a lot of equipment (though we pride ourselves on packing light) are legion.

I understand you also draw and do some painting. How have these disciplines affected how you approach photography?

My degree at UW was in Fine Art and Art Education and this has deeply informed my photographic work. So many nature photographers started as scientists and at the time I broke into the field, my art background really allowed me to show the natural world from a different perspective.

As a nature photographer, you have been a pioneer in exploring the accepted boundaries of artistic freedom with digital technology. I have a real distain for the words “manipulation” or “alteration” as I think they’re misleading and inaccurate as they relate to photography as art or personal expression. So lets use your own phase, “digital illustrations.” What are your thoughts on digital illustrations in the context of nature photography and where do you think all of this is going?

To this day I refuse to use the word “manipulation” as I think it paints everything in a derogatory or negative manner. Over 15 years after the publication of *Migrations*, I remain ideologically where I was when I published the book: if it is a book based on art for the sake of art, I find no compelling reason not to use this fantastic advancement of the photographic art to its utmost. If, on the other hand, I am illustrating a textbook or a natural history article, there is no place for digital illustrations.

What I tried to do then was bridge the gap between artistic photography and nature photography. I believe I pushed the boundaries as any artist actually should do and grow through the experience. For me it was the next step, like using a new lens, new film, or a new camera.

How has digital photography, opposed to film, allowed you to become a more creative photographer?

Shooting digital really brings home the immediacy of photography. I love getting the instant feedback on whether a technique works or not, and it just reinforces and spurs creativity. Gone are the days of shooting for a month in Africa and then waiting for hundreds of rolls of film to be processed to find out whether it was a success or not.

I know you're not a techie or gadget person, but if you had to name one piece of equipment or technology that has changed your photography for the better over the past 10 years, what would it be?

I switched to Canon digital cameras in 2003 and I have never looked back.

Any new projects we should expect from you in 2011?

Thanks for asking! I am working on a couple new book projects, one in particular on dogs (!) due out next fall.

Aside from the TV show—we hope to start filming Season 3 early in 2011—my main focus is teaching workshops here and abroad. Coming right up in October I have on the schedule four Art of Composition Seminars in Portland, OR; Charleston, Houston, and West Palm Beach. These are one day intensive courses and my motto is “My challenge is to change the way you see the world.”

And in 2011 I am leading international photo tours to India (January), Japan (February), and China (April). A complete list of workshops can be found on the [workshop page](#) of my website.

If you had not taken the career path of a photographer, what do you think you would you be doing right now?

I can't imagine being anything other than a photographer. However, if not a photographer, I would have been a painter. It's a good thing I chose the camera over the brush!

Comments on NPN nature photographer interviews? Send them to the [editor](#). NPN members may also log in and leave their comments below.



Over the course of his 30-year career, photographer **Art Wolfe** has worked on every continent and in hundreds of locations. His stunning images interpret and record the world's fast-disappearing wildlife, landscapes and native cultures, and are a lasting inspiration to those who seek to preserve them all. Wolfe's photographs are recognized throughout the world for their mastery of color, composition and perspective.

You can learn more about Art at his website, www.artwolfe.com, where information on fine-art prints, books, DVDs, photo workshops, and more can be found.



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