



## Landscape Artistry

### Ten Tips for Becoming a Better Landscape Artist

Text and photography copyright Guy Tal

#### 1. Get Intimate

To many people, the term Landscape Photography conjures images of sweeping views, magnificent vistas, and wide expanses of big sky, imposing mountains, deep canyons, and vast oceans. These compositions, sometimes referred to as "Grand Scenics," derive their impact from sheer enormity, leaving the viewer in awe of nature's might. Still, it often pays to explore the magic of intimate scenes. The camera allows us to constrain certain elements and separate them from a larger context, giving us the power to explore their individual characteristics and produce unique images. Intimacy is achieved by working from within the scene with few elements, carefully arranged, leaving out the sky and horizon and any unrelated items that might distract the viewer's attention. This does not necessarily imply a small scale; an intimate image can contain fairly large elements. But the fewer the elements, and the more defined their unique features are, the more powerful your image will be. The Mountain Lion Tracks image was made on a trip to photograph fall color in Northern Utah. While my goal was to capture aspen groves glowing in their autumn display, I was more than willing to give those up for a long tracking excursion after I found these tracks in the fresh snow. Despite having made several wonderful images of aspen, this image is by far my favorite of the trip.



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#### 2. Be Prepared

Some great landscape images are a result of purely serendipitous coincidence. Nature often presents us with magnificent imagery lasting but a few moments. Still, being prepared may help us capture some of these fleeting miracles. Being prepared requires research and gaining knowledge of the area you plan to explore. Some things to plan for are weather, direction of light, timing of sunrises and sunsets, moonrises and moonsets, and the phase of the moon. Most of this information is usually available from the local weather service. Further information can be obtained by reading about the area's natural history and by examining the lay of the land by using maps. A scouting expedition will allow you to make notes of potential photo spots and help you plan for your next trip. The more you know, the better your chances. For the Ancient Bristlecone image, I chose my location and subject in advance. Using a compass I determined the direction I wanted to shoot, which helped me pick the perfect tree for the image I had in mind. I picked the day based on reports of a brewing storm, and had my camera mounted and ready in anticipation of the sunset. I had no way of knowing the clouds would arrange themselves so perfectly against my tree, but when the decisive moment arrived I was there to capture it.



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#### 3. Compose

Nature offers us an endless array of choices and infinite beauty when it comes to making landscape images. Unique images, however, require more than just pointing your camera at an interesting subject. What sets great images apart from very good ones is composition. A scene portrayed in a photograph, separate from its greater context, draws power from the arrangement of elements in the frame as much as it does from the individual elements themselves. Do not assume that an interesting subject alone can carry an image. Two important goals to keep in mind are:

- Eliminate distractions – these can be in the form of extraneous elements, lack of attention (we all know that out-of-focus branch peeking into the frame), unfavorable light, and the placement of elements in the frame or relative to each other.
- Use elements in such a way that they enhance each other. Take advantage of lines, textures, layers, and color to group elements together or set them off. Pay attention to shapes and curves and how they can potentially complement each other.



Guidelines such as the Rule of Thirds and the use of Leading Lines are helpful to keep in mind, but do not be afraid to break them or adjust the composition to your taste.

The Creosote in the Sand Dunes image was made at a time of day that is usually not favorable – the light was bright and harsh. I knew the image I wanted, but finding the perfect lone bush was difficult because many interesting possibilities presented themselves but were plagued with deep shadows, too many or too few bushes, visible footprints and other unwanted elements in the sand, etc. I was finally able to find these isolated bushes and work with it. I studied them from different angles before deciding on my final composition, applying of the Rule of Thirds, using the dune pattern to lead the viewer into the scene, and taking advantage of the distinct layers available (the sand, mountains and sky) to create interest in all areas of the frame.

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#### 4. Create Juxtapositions

It is often helpful to enhance an element in the frame by posing other elements against it. These elements can share common characteristics or possess ulterior meanings that serve to create a more powerful impact. For example, a crumbling pioneer cabin posed against a mountain can enhance its wild and untamable nature. A small element in the foreground that bears similar characteristics to a remote feature of the land can enhance the image's sense of depth. In the Silver Island Mountains image, the rock edge closely mimics the mountain's contour. The strong texture and vertical lines in the foreground rock, posed against the soft light and horizontal lines of the mountain, help set them apart, creating a three-dimensional feel and prompting the viewer to compare and study the two.



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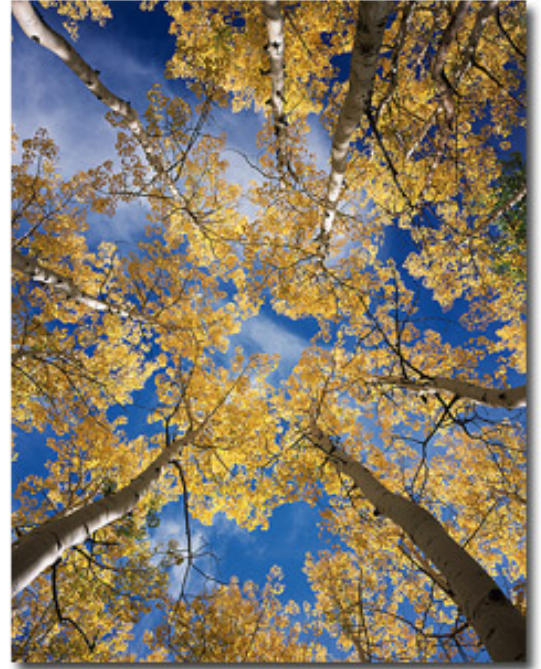
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#### 5. Look In Every Direction

As we explore nature we tend to look ahead, keeping our heads level and a few feet above ground. Still, a wealth of beauty is there to be discovered by the mere act of tilting one's gaze up, down or sideways. An ordinary scene can become unusual and interesting when studied at a new angle or from a different perspective. Recognizable items can become abstract, parallel lines converge, and clutter may become uniform. Simple magic.

The Aspen Tops image is admittedly not an original idea. I have seen similar images by other photographers. What was interesting to me is how I came about it. I was exploring a grove of aspens on a cloudy day. The soft, diffused light was perfect for images in the woods. All of a sudden, the clouds cleared and the light became harsh and contrasty. At the time, I had my camera aimed at a nice cluster of aspen boles, ready to trip the shutter. I raised my head to see if more clouds were about to roll in, and voila!



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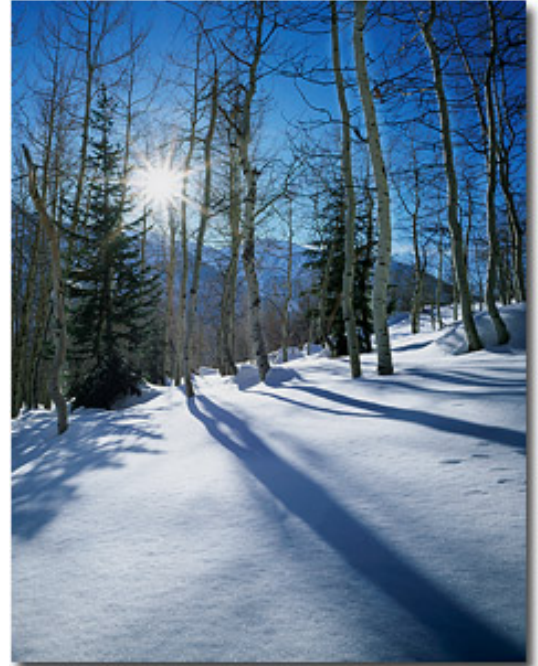
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#### 6. Take Chances

With much trial and error, a photographer can learn the limitations of film, lenses, and other equipment, however there are situations when even the most accomplished shutterbug will not be able to tell for certain whether a successful image can be made. These are situations of extremes – very high or very low contrast, very deep or very shallow depth-of-field, very high magnification, and so on. These conditions challenge your equipment and your film, and results may be difficult to predict. In many of these situations, though, attempting to make an image despite the doubt may yield stunning results.

On a white Christmas Eve, I set out to spend the holiday in a mountain wilderness. The trek over deep snow was difficult, but the cold air, combined with wonderful silence and sparkling flakes afoot made it a visual feast. As the sun hung low over the horizon, aspen and spruce trees shed their long shadows on a ground covered in shimmering crystals, and the clear sky and remote peaks glowed in deep cerulean blue. The shadows made for wonderful leading lines, but leading to what? I was missing a prominent element for a complete composition. I made the unlikely choice of using the sun itself as an element in my image. I did not know if the coating on my lens was good enough to keep flare at bay, or whether I will be able to capture the extreme contrast given the narrow latitude of slide film. I decided it was worth a try. And what a wonderful Christmas present I got when I picked my chromes at the lab.



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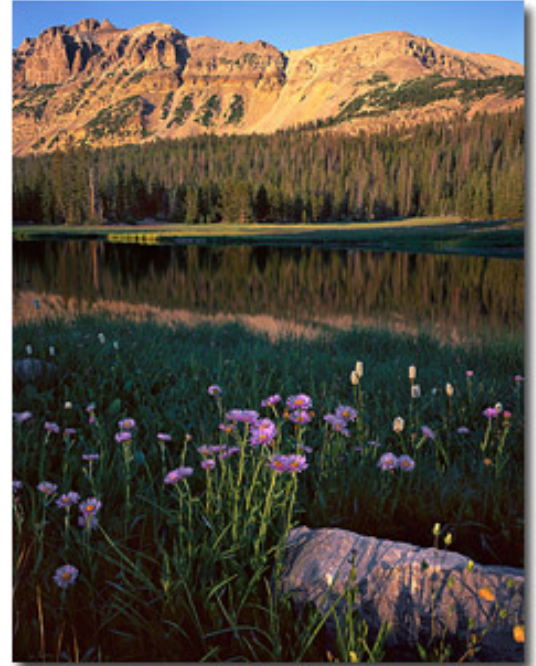
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#### 7. Keep Going Back

As a beginner I used to browse through books and magazines in awe of the images I found. The biggest question on my mind was "how do these photographers find such magnificent scenery?" As I gradually explored and discovered the wonderful scenic areas of the American West, I soon came to realize that finding a beautiful scene is only the beginning. My images were good, because the subject matter was spectacular, but there was nothing particularly unique or inspiring in them otherwise. I proceeded to experiment by revisiting scenic areas at different seasons and different hours of the day, in mild and inclement weather, and a whole new array of choices unfolded. It is remarkable how many different moods can be found at the same place at different times. An important lesson was learned: it is very rare to arrive at a scene, no matter how wonderful, and snap a masterpiece.

These days I would much rather leave a scene empty handed and with the knowledge of when to come back for a good image than to photograph a spectacular scene when the light is not right or the foliage is poor or the sky is bad. The two images of Hayden Peak in Utah's rugged Uinta Mountains were taken just a few weeks apart. One was taken during a break in an early spring storm. The lakeshore was lined with Marsh Marigolds and the scene was made of shades of green. In the second image, the marigolds were gone and replaced by Fleabane Asters. It was a clear spring afternoon and the setting sun shed a warm light on the flowers and peaks above. A very different mood, a different kind of beauty, and a place I will continue to revisit.



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#### 8. Pay Attention to Detail

Someone once said "the devil is in the details." This certainly applies to landscape photography. Who among us doesn't know the feeling of getting a much-anticipated image back from the lab only to realize that the tripod leg is peeking in, or that a slight shift to the side would have kept a rogue branch from overlapping with your subject? These are things that are often easy to miss, especially when using wide lenses and composing on a small viewfinder. In a print or under a loupe, these little things can become big distractions. One of the greatest allies a landscape photographer has is time. In most situations your subjects are going nowhere fast. This allows for a meticulous examination and scrutiny of every part of the image. Close down the aperture to discover out-of-focus elements, shade the lens to verify there is no flare, and take a close look around the edges of your frame to make sure no rogue elements are peeking in. Then, examine the elements in your image looking for converging elements; verify that elements are evenly distributed where they need to be and that there are no "dead areas" in the frame. Pay close attention to any loose elements such as leaves or small branches that might sway in the breeze and create a distracting effect.



Working in a forest is not easy. Perhaps the biggest challenge is finding order in an environment consisting of a large number of elements where a random shot will most likely be cluttered. I had to work my way around these trunks several times before I settled on an angle of view where the trunks are evenly distributed and do not converge, and where branches and other foliage is not prominent enough to distract from the overall mood of a misty redwood forest.

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#### 9. Follow a Workflow

Between the successful operation of your camera, looking for an optimal composition, applying the various rules, eliminating potential problems, calculating exposure, and the myriad other minutia that go into making a landscape image, it is understandably easy to miss something here and there. The unfortunate result can be the loss of a once-in-a-lifetime masterpiece. Like other complex activities we engage in, from driving an automobile to cooking a gourmet dinner, we are less likely to miss things if we instinctively follow a well-defined process or recipe. As you set out to make images, take the time to note the steps you normally take, and the order which makes sense to you. Put it in writing and try to follow the same sequence of activities every time. Before you know it you will instinctively reach for the filters after focusing, automatically think "Rule of Thirds" as you identify interesting elements, and so on. Having spoken with a number of photographers, I found that while some activities naturally follow others, there is still some degree of variance. For example, I prefer to work when all my gear is laid out in front of me and is easy to access. Others I know prefer to peer through the finder and keep their packs on until the very last moment. I evaluate a scene through the ground glass of my camera and will often set it up just to see if I can find a working composition, while others will determine a composition before reaching for their camera. Find what works for you, take notes, and follow your workflow. The more you practice it, the faster and more accurate you will be, and the less likely you are to miss a step.

#### 10. Think Like an Artist

In thinking about Landscape Photography as a form of art, what we really mean is that photography is a means of expression, a way for an artist to convey a mood, a concept, or a message to his or her audience. Like a brush is to the painter, a typewriter to the poet, and a chisel to the sculptor, so is a camera to the Landscape Artist. Elevated to the degree of art, photography becomes more about the artist's inspiration and message, and how it manifests in the final piece, rather than about the mechanics of operating a camera. I find that some photographers tend to look at scenes in terms of the lens or camera body to use before evaluating what the most effective composition might be. Just like a composer does not worry about what pencil to use when writing a score, so I believe a photographer should not place as much weight on the technical specifics of capturing a scene. When considering Landscape Photography as an art, try to think like an artist first. Approach a scene with the intent of capturing it in the most effective way. Be inspired by it first and capture it second. Bring yourself to the same point a painter or a poet would, and let your creativity and vision define what you wish to create. Then proceed to use your photographic skill and technique for a successful execution. Go out, seek beauty, create art.

**Guy Tal - NPN 0440**

*Editor's note* - Be sure to see more of Guy's large format work on his website at <http://scenicwild.com>.

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