

## The Essential Landscape - The Visual Handicap

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**An issue some visual artists struggle with** is the ability (or inability) to tell a story in an image. We all know the old adages that *every image tells a story* and that *an image is worth a thousand words*, etc., but is that really the case? Can you really tell a story in a single image?

Perhaps this is simply the wrong way to think about images. If a story can be better told in words, music, or song, then why even try to tell it visually? An image can surely complement and complete a text or musical score, but it can also go beyond them – it can distill and isolate specific highlights and anecdotes, perhaps better than words ever could. This concept can have far-reaching implications in terms of the creative process, in terms of what can be achieved, and even in terms of evaluating and appreciating all visual art.

What brought on this notion most was actually an old song. Recently I found myself en route to northern Arizona, some six hundred miles away. I left home before dawn, and after a couple of hours on the dark open road I found a classic rock radio station that played some of my old favorites. Shortly before dawn, as the dark sky slowly faded into pale pastels a familiar sound filled the cab of my truck. There came a song I haven't heard in perhaps two decades. Within an instant my mind raced with memories and emotions. I was so moved and surprised that I almost broke into tears. Some hours later, thinking about that moment, I wondered if an image could ever produce such intense emotion in a viewer as a song can. But much as I tried, I could not think of one that ever did so for me.

Of our five senses, smell and taste are the ones most likely to trigger intense memories. In order for sound and sight to evoke this degree of emotion a *story* is needed, as in a book, a song or a movie. What hope then does a photographer stand when presenting a single static image and hoping to communicate a message to his or her audience? Are we indeed as handicapped and limited in our craft as to be utterly incapable of conveying anything more complex than “this is pretty” “this is sad,” or “here’s where I’ve been”?

This revelation continued to weigh on my mind until I took the time to review some favorite images and arrived at an altogether new realization: these are not whole stories and were never meant to be. Some are teasers, some are flashbacks, some are statements, and some are conclusions. To attempt to describe any one of them in words alone would surely fail to achieve the same effect.

Images do not tell stories. Further, they cannot really be measured in words: not the proverbial thousand or even the life's work of a prolific author could express a defining moment with such power and clarity as an image. Images achieve what words cannot. Images take the instant of a moving experience and preserve it. This is what they do best: capture and express the timeless qualities of a fleeting moment. Words cannot do that - even pronouncing a single word, indeed even a single syllable, is already too time-consuming for such an endeavor.

Still curious, I sought to learn what past masters of the visual arts had to say on the matter. Perhaps the most poignant observation I found was one from painter Edward Hopper who simply stated, “If I could say it in words there would be no reason to paint.” Yet my favorite perspective is one expressed by Rene Magritte who said of his paintings that “they evoke mystery and indeed when one sees one of my pictures, one asks oneself this simple question 'What does that mean'? It does not mean anything, because mystery means nothing either, it is unknowable.”

So many times I have heard from critics that an image presented to them does not represent the reality of a scene. In my heart I know this is not true, yet I still struggle with having to explain what is essentially inexplicable: what constitutes reality. My image is not trying to tell you what you may find or see yourself at any other



time or under any other circumstances. It is not meant to tell you how the image came to be or the history of the place or what may or may not transpire there in any other time. It is a singular impression I brought with me from my own personal experience and is truly impossible to explain beyond the visual elements in the frame.

Perhaps the most important conclusions for me were to acknowledge the limitations of my medium and how that medium can be used. It is one thing to aspire to greatness, but an altogether different thing to expect to do it all with images. Much as I would love my work to prompt political action, to promote conservation or peace or any number of lofty ideals, I have come to acknowledge that there are more suitable means to accomplish these than images alone. In my images I seek to capture beauty and to inspire others to appreciate the places and things that I love, but that is not enough. Even the great Ansel Adams did not stop at images. His political activism involved prolific writing, lectures, guiding workshops and communicating his world views to all who would listen, including political leaders.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow is famous for saying that when all one has is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. Don't treat your camera as the hammer. Use it along with your own skill and vision for the things it can do well, and don't hesitate to reach for other tools where its expressive powers fall short.

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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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