

Shoot for the Moon

Monthly news and tips from Landscape Photographer
Gill Moon



May 2020 Vol 5 - Mindful Photography

Hello

and welcome to the fifth edition of 'Shoot for the Moon'

As we head into May and are still under lockdown I thought it would be a good time to explore nature connection and a mindful approach to photography.

I have always used photography as a way to destress and to immerse myself in the natural world and would much rather point my lens at a forest or reedbed than I would a manmade habitat. This months musings are all about how we can get that connection with the natural world and what it really does for our photography.

I hope you will find issue 5 interesting and informative. I am always keen to receive feedback so please get in touch if you have anything you would like to share.

Remember to aim high, be inspired and shoot for the moon! Thank you and happy photographing

Gill

If you would like to get in touch please email me at gill@gillmoon.com

Nature Connection and a sensory approach to photography



A few years ago I won a photography competition with the image above. The competition required us to convey a message through words and a single picture. My entry was all about nature connection - it was an attempt to describe how a particular landscape made me feel.

As a landscape photographer I think nature connection is an important part of making a great image.

Ansel Adams once said *"A great photograph is a full expression of what one feels about what is being photographed in the deepest sense and is, thereby, a true expression of what one feels about life in its entirety."*

It is easy to get caught up in the pursuit of the perfect image, to tell yourself that if you

visit a classic location in perfect weather you will come away with an iconic shot. But I am not sure this approach really works. To create something special I believe you need to slow down, get rid of preconceived ideas and connect with your surroundings.

There are many reports about how we are losing our connection with the natural world and how, as a society, we need to take steps to address this. It is vital for the protection of the natural world that we re establish our connection with nature after all it is impossible to care for something we cannot relate to.

Today, in these difficult times, things we have always taken for granted (like spending time in the countryside) are restricted. It has become clearer than ever that, as a species, we need our connection with nature. We need to

breath in the air, marvel at a view and feel in awe of the world around us. We need to do these things to feel alive.

A sensory approach to landscape photography

As photographers we can all appreciate a beautiful image but beauty is not always enough to set our images apart and make them really memorable. We need to evoke a mood, to convey what it was really like to be in that moment when the shutter was pressed.

One of the ways we can do this is to think about our senses and how we can use them to add mood and emotion to our images.

When we connect with a landscape we use sight, sound, touch, taste and smell to build a picture and assimilate our response. For example imagine you are standing on a cliff looking out to sea, the weather is stormy and you can see grey clouds rolling overhead, the wind is bracing and makes you shiver with cold and the crashing waves below throw spray up to your face and leave the taste of salt in your mouth.

These are all things you might notice if you were standing on that cliff - but how can you communicate them through a photograph? You have used all your senses to construct that moment in time, now you need to put these all together and channel the mood and emotion you are feeling into an image.

Understand the message you are trying to communicate is an important part of creating a special image. This is how we connect with the landscape. I recently read an article by Guy Tal (www.naturephotographers.network/the-mindful-photographer) in which he talks about mindful photography as a way of connecting with the landscape. He describes it as a means

“to summon up attention and to focus it consciously on the task of becoming aware of things, feelings, and sensations, and to weave those into visual compositions”

Using our senses

Sight is the most obvious sense that we use when we take a photograph. It is what we see that makes us reach for our cameras. But how do we translate what we see into a compelling image?

Sometimes when we look back at our photographs there is a disconnect between the image we make and the reality of the scene. Often this is to do with how we choose to portray a 3 dimensional scene as a 2 dimensional photograph. But it also has a lot to do with how we have observed the scene and the elements within it.

Good composition is the photographers way of directing the viewers vision within the frame. When a photograph is well composed the viewer sees the elements that the photographer wants them to see in the order that he feels is most important.

It therefore follows that one of the most important skills a photographer can master is observation. You need to be able to pick out the important elements of a scene, notice the direction of the light, the shapes, colours, lines, patterns, shadows and highlights and then work out how they all relate to each other to form the image you want to make.

Observation is something that comes with practice and one of the best ways to practice is to forget about the camera for a while. Think about a location you know well, try to visualise it and write down all the elements you think you can remember. Now visit that location and make a note of five or ten things you haven't noticed before. Next look around and find the following:

- lines
- shapes and forms
- patterns
- texture
- contrast and tone
- light
- colour.

Practice and observe then pick up your camera.

Sound provides inspiration for mood. Crashing waves, trickling water, howling wind, rustling leaves, rain, birds singing. Think about what mood you want to portray based upon the sounds that you hear? Then think about how you can represent that sound in your photograph?



Rogie Falls

Nikon 24 - 70mm lens at 24 mm, F16 at 1/15 second exposure

The image above was taken at Rogie Falls just west of Inverness. It was a damp moody day with little wind so the only sounds were the roaring of the water as it tumbled over the falls. Selecting a slowish shutter speed allowed the image to retain its sense of motion, with lots of texture present in the swirling water. Hopefully the moody colours, dark rocks and turbulent water create a sense of drama and allow the viewer to imagine the turbulence and noise of standing by the falls.

I could have used a much slower shutter speed than I would have produced an image like this on taken at the Fairy Glen.



Fairy Glen, Black Isle

Nikon 24 - 70mm lens at 24 mm, F16 at 1 second exposure

The idea behind this image was to portray an enchanted or magical setting. So whilst the weather was pretty similar to the last image and the sound of the waterfall was still the most prominent sensation the feel of the image is much softer. This is due to the use of a slightly longer shutter speed which has blurred the water and also to the enclosed feel of the image which has been achieved by eliminating the sky with a tight crop.

Motion is a great tool for portraying the sound of the wind especially when photographing trees. The slightly blurred branches illustrate the force of the wind. Freezing the motion would have eliminated this element from the picture all together and created a very different feel.



Malham trees, Yorkshire

Nikon 24 - 70mm lens at 70 mm, F8 at 5 second exposure

Touch can be represented in two ways: Physical objects which are easy to portray in photography. So focusing on textures will enable you to portray physical things, eg. whether something is hard, soft, rough, smooth, prickly, sharp, hairy etc. It is also possible to convey things that we feel that are not physical attributes, eg. the chill of a damp day, the heat of the sun or the force of the wind. The image below shows a section of rock on a Scottish beach and is all about texture - it gives you a real sense of what the rock felt like.



Malham trees, Yorkshire
Nikon 24 - 70mm lens at 70 mm, F8 at 5 second exposure

This works well as a close up but would also work just as well with the texture being incorporated as part of the foreground. The image below uses the barnacle covered rocks as the foreground to the wider scene.



When thinking about texture your choice of viewpoint will have a big impact on how prominent the texture will be in your image.



Aldeburgh Beach
Nikon 24 - 70mm lens at 40 mm, F16 at 1/100 second exposure

The image above was taken at head height looking down onto the beach. From this vantage point the effect of texture within the image is reduced and plays almost no part in the image. In the image below, however, the texture of the beach is much more prominent. This is because the view point is much lower, deliberately getting closer to the shingle to make it a much stronger element within the frame. For me the second image gives a better representation of what it was like to be standing on that shingle beach in Aldeburgh.



Aldeburgh Beach from a low viewpoint
Nikon 24 - 70mm lens at 70 mm, F8 at 1/320 second exposure

Smell and taste are a little harder to convey through your images but it is possible. Certain smells can be very evocative - imagine the smell of seaweed at the beach, or a pine forest on a damp day. These are smells that are instantly recognisable and easily associated with certain views or landscapes. For example when I took this image in Rendlesham Forest on a damp autumnal day one of the overriding sensations, when observing the scene in front of me, was not visual but the smell of damp earth and the rain in the pine trees. I don't know whether that sense of smell is evident from the image but by being aware of it I was more open to other shots including the second picture which is of raindrops caught in a spiders web on the forest floor.



Rendlesham Forest

Nikon 70-300mm lens at 70 mm, F14 at 0.8 second exposure



Aldeburgh Beach

Nikon 24 - 70mm lens at 70 mm, F16 at 1 second exposure



Saxtead Mill

Nikon 24 - 70mm lens at 52 mm, F5.6 at 1/500 second exposure

Similarly the smell of a flower meadow on a summer's day is intoxicating. Shots taken low down within the flowers really seem to evoke that smell and feel of summer.

Taste is much harder to depict. The most obvious examples are fruit or things that you can actually eat. However a more subtle way of depicting this sense is shown in the image below which makes me think of the taste of seawater as it splashes up over the wooden posts.



Bawdsey

Nikon 24 - 70mm lens at 70 mm, F11 at 1/1600 second exposure

A mindful approach

Connecting with the natural world and having a more mindful approach to landscape photography can really help elevate your images. It forces you to slow down and think about the world around you and helps you to notice all the small things that may have previously gone unseen.

It is often a good idea to make a visual inventory of things you see or feel. This will give you a list of things you can use in your compositions.

Forget preconceived ideas about a location and open your mind to all the possibilities on offer. The image below is a good example of this. It was taken at Rogie Falls in Scotland. I had gone to photograph the waterfalls but on the hill above the river was a forest of beech saplings and young trees covered in lichen which had turned their trunks white.

The contrast between the white trunks and the green woodland floor was something that I enjoyed capturing much more than the actual waterfalls. As a result I learnt much more about the area than I would have done had I concentrated just on the falls.

If you are interested in reading more about this approach to landscape photography there is a good article by Guy Tal which talks about his take on mindful photography

www.naturephotographers.network/the-mindful-photographer

Beech woods at Rogie Falls

Nikon 24 - 70mm lens at 46 mm, F16 at 1/8 second exposure



Inspiration

In researching this article I have come across many photographers who practice a mindful approach to photography or use their work to connect with the landscape around them. These are some of my favourites:

Guy Tal

I came across Guy Tal through On Landscape magazine. He is a landscape photographer based in Colorado. Guy strives to create images that speak to wildness - the quality of being attuned to, and inspired by, the wild. guytal.com

Paul Sanders

Paul's website is called 'still' and the images evoke a powerful connection with the landscape. Paul is a professional landscape photographer based in the south east of England. His career took off in the world of international news where he worked for Reuters before joined the Times as picture editor. Today he runs workshops which are designed to help you reconnect with the world through the art of photography. www.discoverstill.com

Undertow by Francis Scott

Undertow is a project about the coastline of Orkney by photographer Francis Scott. It was her attempt to reconnect with the island of her birth. It started as a series of walks where Francis mapped out sections of the coastline to see how they all linked together. She made notes which annotate hand drawn maps and these are accompanied by black and white images taken on a medium format camera. You can read more about the project here: www.thedrouth.org/undertow-by-frances-scott

Jodie Hulden

Jodie is a California-based photographer whose contemplative photography focuses on intimate natural landscapes and still life vignettes. She has some beautiful images on her website and some interesting projects including 'Seeing Silence' which focuses on triptychs combined with visual poetry. These all speak of a connection with nature. www.jodiehulden.com/seeing-silence-1

May's mindful challenge

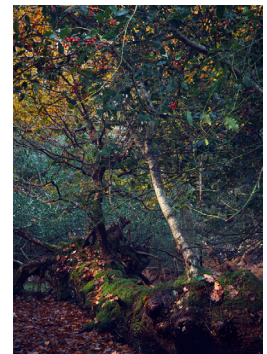
Find an image or series of images that mean something to you on an emotional level. Now see if you can write a short sentence to combine with the image /s to enhance their emotional impact.

Find somewhere local and spend some time exploring the landscape with all your senses. Make a series of images that connect you to the landscape through sight, sound, touch, taste and smell.

I am really happy to offer feedback and would love to see your images so please get in touch gill@gillmoon.com



Connecting with a landscape



These images form part of a project I am working on detailing my connection with the enchanted landscape of Staverton Thicks in Suffolk.

Some wild places have the power to captivate all who visit them, not because they have unrivalled views or superior scenery but because they instil in the visitor a sense of wonder and awe. Staverton Thicks in Suffolk is one such place.

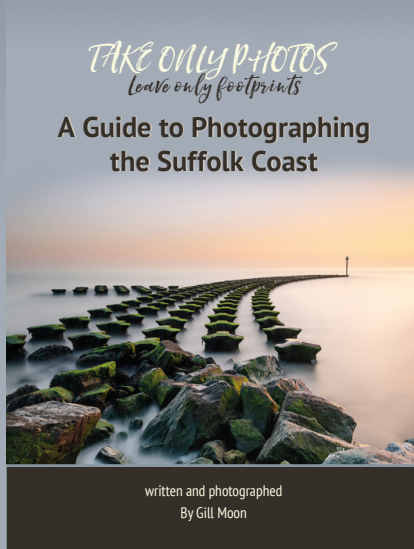
It's ancient woodland is a landscape of fairytale qualities where vast oaks stand side by side with some of the tallest holly trees in Britain. Reminiscent of childhood stories, the 'Thicks' is a chaotic tangle of twisted branches where light is sparse and evergreen curtains of holly hang in the air. Dead and decaying boughs and trunks litter the floor and even on the brightest of days the air is cool and the forest dark. For all who enter here mystery abounds and imagination runs wild.

These images focus on the fairytale qualities of the 'Thicks', its Tolkienesque trees, the fallen beasts imagined in the deadwood and the symbiosis of its compound trees formed as different species grow on top of one another. The framing of each shot has been kept deliberately tight to emphasise the enclosed feeling of the forest and the autumn colours and painterly atmosphere give the images a feeling of antiquity.

I am hoping to complete the project next year with a book and exhibition.

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