

Shoot for the Moon

Monthly news and tips from
Landscape Photographer
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December 2021 Vol 15 - Conveying a sense of place in your images

Hello

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

This month's topic is all about conveying essence and a sense of place in your images. This ties in nicely with my new 'Planet Suffolk' Project and the associated visual storytelling workshops that I am planning for 2022.

If you have any comments or thoughts on the subject I am always keen to receive your emails 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

Sense of place



Conveying a sense of place.

Recently I have been travelling a little bit more with my camera - getting away from the flat landscapes of Suffolk which I am so familiar with. This year I have been to Wales and Scotland and have loved every minute of the journey but I am frequently frustrated by the images I make in these new landscapes.

In Scotland I particularly struggled with the grand vistas and iconic landscapes and I think that was partially down to not knowing what I wanted my images to say - after all how do you treat a location that has been photographed thousands of times? How do you find something different to say? How do you convey that sense of place that is so important?

For me I think this all comes down to connecting with the landscape and finding my own personal take on an iconic location. What I am looking for is the essence of the landscape I am shooting.

What is meant by the essence of a landscape?

The dictionary definition of essence can be described as the basic nature of something. So when we are thinking about this in terms of a landscape we are really thinking about all the qualities that make up a landscape's character.

As we walk around a landscape we absorb the sights, sounds and smells of an area. We can use these experiences to try and convey the atmosphere or the sense of the place we are

photographing.

We will also be aware of the lighting and the weather and the mood that these elements create within the landscape.

You want the audience to have an emotional response to your images and to do this you need to get across some of what you were feeling when you press the shutter.

To convey the essence of a landscape you need to form a connection with it. So when you are next out in the field ask yourself how does this landscape make me feel? What do you want to convey in your image and what elements can you use to help you do that?



Above is an image of the dead trees at Trimley Marshes. They sit in a flooded inlet and are quite characterful. This image sets the scene and locates the trees within their environment but it doesn't really say much more than that. The lighting conveys a mood but the image doesn't really work on a deeper level because there is not enough of a connection between the elements in the scene.

When I first arrived at this location the thing that really struck me about the scene was the shape of the trees and their relationship with each other. This hasn't really been communicated well in the first image. It is just a scene with a few dead trees at the edge of the river.

I was aware of this problem when I was taking my shots and so decided to change my viewpoint and make part of the scene much more prominent.



Changing my shooting position and getting up close to the first tree has altered the whole feel of the image. The emphasis is now on the nearest tree and its quirky shape and gnarly trunk is much more prominent. The other trees recede into the distance but there is a connection and a relationship between all three that is missing from the first composition. The trees now also seem to have personalities. The composition brings out their Tolkin-esque characters - and this is especially true of the foreground tree.

The lighting also adds to the mood and gives the overall image a slightly otherworldly appearance.

For me the essence of this landscape - the qualities that give it its character are the dead trees and their location within the flooded

saltmarsh. The river edge and Felixstowe Docks in the distance are locating factors but they are not the principal elements in a story about the dead trees. They are supporting elements and as such don't really add to the story or the mood of the image. In fact the mood is greatly enhanced by their exclusion.

Finally when thinking about the essence of a landscape remember "the most compelling photographs don't just capture a scene they transport the viewer to the landscape and visually speak of the connection the photographer has with the environment he is photographing".



These three images were all taken at Shingle Street on the same morning. They are placed in the order that they were taken and represent my thought process on the day.

I wanted to capture the essence of the beach in springtime. I felt that the elements

that best represented this were the flowers but I also wanted to show the flowers in relation to their landscape. Shingle Street is best known for its coastguard cottages, its little bungalow on the seashore and its mounds of shingle.

After taking a few images and experimenting with compositions I decided that the third shot was the image that best conveyed the essence of Shingle Street in the spring.

Compositionally this is the strongest image, it also has the nicest lighting (side light from the sun over the sea) I also think that it captures everything that I wanted to say about the beach. Although it doesn't show the sea, the boats on the beach speak of the sea and the path through the flowers leads to the coastguard cottages in the distance.

The other two images also have elements that are present in the third shot but they don't have the mood or the atmosphere of the final image and as such don't capture the essence of the beach nearly as well.



Is essence visible or open to interpretation?
Can we see the essence of a landscape - is it obvious or is it down to our own imagination and interpretation?

When we think about the essence of a location what we are really thinking about is how we want to portray that landscape. We can do this by focusing on certain elements or we can use certain camera techniques to emphasise a feature.

For example is the essence of a wild coastline defined by crashing surf? Would a long exposure dilute this message?

I am going to use East Lane at Bawdsey as an example. If you know the location you will know that it has a fascinating history but it is also a fragile environment which is completely at the mercy of the sea. So is this fragility the essence of this landscape? Or can we interpret it in another way?

Does the essence of a landscape depend upon the time of day, or the type of weather we are experiencing when we visit?

These three images were all taken at different times of the year and at different times of the day and in completely different weather conditions. They all convey something different about the environment and all have a different mood. However I feel they all convey the essence of that location at the time they were taken.

For me essence is open to interpretation, it is the mood that you have observed and identified as being most important to the story that you want to tell.



This stormy image conveys the fragility of the coastline as it is pounded by the sea.



This image has a much calmer feel and shows the fragile nature of the coastline in a different way.



This shot focuses on the beach itself and the sunrises that the East Coast is renowned for.

Winter Photography



Snow and frost

This is an image taken at the beginning of 2021. We don't usually get that much snow on the East Coast but when we do it is definitely worth making the most of the conditions.

Tips for shooting in the snow

Cold temperatures affect batteries and they tend to drain quicker so always take a spare or two with you.

In snowy conditions you will need to dial in some positive exposure compensation to ensure your snow looks bright white and not dreary grey. Always check the histogram after you have taken a shot.

You may also need a cooler white balance but I always shoot in RAW and adjust this in post

processing.

Choose your location wisely. I usually head for somewhere quiet where I know the landscape will be undisturbed. Woods look amazing but work best in heavy snowfalls especially if the skies are grey.

Snowy scenes can sometimes be a little monochromatic so pick a location with some colour to add some extra interest to your shot.

In frosty conditions choose a waterside location or somewhere with some interesting foliage. The foreground can really enhance a frosty image so make sure it is captivating.

Stormy conditions.



Stormy conditions can provide some really interesting images. I enjoy working the coast in these conditions but make sure to check the tide tables and be aware of what the water is doing at all times.

If conditions are really windy and you are using a tripod make sure the legs are set as wide apart as they can be and keep a low centre of gravity. This will give your tripod more stability and should stop it blowing over in really gusty conditions.

Long exposures are difficult in windy conditions so experiment with shorter 0.5 - 1 second exposures and create some texture in the moving sea.

Rain

Rainy days might not seem the best days to go out but for woodland photography they are brilliant. The rain acts a bit like mist and has the effect of decluttering a busy scene. The water also saturates the colours and gives a real vibrance to the landscape even in the depths of winter.

When shooting in the rain particularly in wider landscapes where you may want to use a filter I recommend a filter hood such as this one from Lee. The filters sit closest to the lens at the back of the hood so are kept dry (unless you are facing into the wind)



Mist

Mist is beautiful and can really enhance a landscape but it can be difficult to capture. It has the tendency to reduce the colour and contrast of a scene and also has the ability to deceive your cameras metering system. It is advisable to check your histogram regularly and overexpose your images by one or two stops.

When processing your images afterwards you might find you need to adjust your white balance to preserve the cool feeling of a misty morning.

Again choose your location carefully to make the most of the conditions. In thick fog head to the woods but in lighter conditions the rivers can yield some fantastic results.



Part of the Landscape

A Landscape Photography
Workbook
By
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