The Least Impossible Way

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LensWork Publishing
2016
Often, when in some remote and wild place, I catch myself reflecting on the journey that brought me to this desert. I was born—and lived half my life—in Israel, where I went to school, served a mandatory military service, studied and taught at the Tel Aviv University. I usually refrain from mentioning these facts, as they often arouse misconceptions about my allegiance to certain nationalities and political ideologies. Israel is the place in which I happened to have been born, but that never felt like home to me. My fondest childhood memories are of roaming the then-seemingly-endless fields and orchards around my home, by myself, fascinated by the life and beauty I found. For as long as I can remember, I have been a loner and an outsider and generally found little interest in the affairs of humanity.

Wild places always felt more welcoming and comforting to me than cities; and I always found the cycles of nature more fascinating, mysterious and engaging than the so-called “human condition.” In natural places, I find kinship with the world and feel myself a part of its unfolding story, whereas among people, I usually feel like a baffled observer.

The wild I knew as a child disappeared before my eyes as I grew up, as did many illusions about

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Camera as a way of life ... is still the least impossible way for me to develop and to maintain a state that I can call mine.

~Minor White
the world, life and humanity. After my military service and stint in the academy, I embarked on a career path in information technology. Realizing I could not find happiness in the country of my birth, I immigrated to the U.S. by myself and soon fell in love with the Western landscape. Every chance I had I sought to immerse myself in some wild place and explore it ever further. The camera came with me, at first as a means of recording and sharing what I found, and later as a means of expressing those inner states inspired in me when communing with the natural world, and for which I have no words.

I vividly remember the first time I visited the high desert of the Colorado Plateau about two decades ago. It seemed like I knew the scents of sagebrush, pine and juniper before I took my first breath here. I knew the grit of the sandstone before I ever touched it. I felt I knew my way to places I have never been to. No other place ever felt like this to me. Something in me reacted to this landscape with a deep sense of belonging, of being where I have already been and where I should be. Rather than visiting a place for the first time, it felt like returning to a place I loved after a long absence. It felt like home in a sense that I had not known before.

I was fairly successful in my corporate career despite my constant yearning for the wild. I made a good salary and lived in a nice place while also earning some income and recognition in photography. I lived in physical and social comfort but still could not help feeling anxious and deprived of so many sensations, emotions, and inspirations that I always found in remote and wild places—and that were part of me since my earliest memory. In the back of my mind, I always wished for “someday” when I would restore balance to my life, but it always seemed beyond reach.

And one day, in a moment of reckoning, I had to admit to myself that a perfection of circumstances likely would never happen and that I was not getting any younger. I decided that “someday” was that day.

I moved to a tiny town at the foot of one of Utah’s high plateaus on the edge of the sandstone canyon country that I loved and began what was to be a journey of exploration, inspiration, and discovery that exceeded anything I could have imagined. In time, these desert places were no longer just attractive models for me to photograph; they became sanctuaries and temples, as familiar and comfortable to me as my own house. Rocks, trees, and animals became my travel companions and characters in my life story. Canyons, mountains, forests and rivers ceased to be just places and things I visited or casually encountered, but partners in an ever-evolving relationship, as complex as any
I have had with another human being. It is this relationship, complexity, and emotional bond with the land and the life it supports that I wish to express in my work.

It is hard to imagine the sheer enormity and endless intricacy of this place. Novelist Wallace Stegner described it as, “a country of spiritual healing, incomparable for contemplation, meditation, solitude, quiet, awe, peace of mind and body.” Although regarded as a desert, verdant corridors carve the Colorado Plateau along great rivers and streams. Its high elevation and geographic relief give rise to a great diversity of life, seasons, and light. And where the roads and trails end, places remain where humans have not set foot in hundreds or thousands of years—or ever.

In photographs, I can convey some of the land’s profound moods, but certainly not all. No image can be the equivalent of the scent of desert brush after a monsoon rain; the solemn silence of softly falling snow among ponderosa pines and bare aspen trees on the high plateaus; the song of canyon wrens in the high cliffs; the sound of water gurgling along passages of fluted stone; the hushed whisper of wind in the canopies of gnarled old cottonwood trees; the rush and rage and smell of a flash flood; and a thousand other sensations. And certainly no image or number of images can substitute for the feeling of solitude and remoteness or the deep contemplations that ensue after some days spent hiking within these vast expanses, witnessing their immense beauty and power, sitting by a small campfire at night, or sleeping under a sky filled with stars and without a trace of artificial light. It is a place that is meaningful to me, and that makes my life meaningful.

I consider my work as expressive art, which means that I primarily intend to convey subjective thoughts and feelings rather than objective appearances. To this end, I spend considerable time reading about art and various philosophies, as well as keeping up with scientific research related to visual perception and psychology in the hope of becoming more versed in the expressive powers of the visual language. In particular, I seek visual means of accomplishing the effect described by Alfred Stieglitz and Minor White as equivalence. In Minor White’s words, an equivalent image is “an image with specific suggestive powers that can direct the viewer into a specific and known feeling, state or place within himself.”

Painter Paul Cézanne mused, “I have asked myself whether the short time given us would be better used in an attempt to understand the whole of the universe or to assimilate what is within our reach.” Indeed, interested as I am in the workings of the universe, I could live
a hundred lifetimes and never experience all that this desert has to offer. In these places, I not only find my inspiration, but also can think with a clarity that I find nowhere else and feel with an intensity and a sense of purpose that I am not able to accomplish in other settings.

I have photographed for about three decades now. Other than my love of the wild, photography may well be the most persistent thread in my life. It continues to offer me a means of exploration and expression, and it motivates me to seek more experiences and feelings that are worth expressing. Working as I do and my desire to create at the peak of inspiration make photography an ideal medium for my expressive goals. A faithful companion on so many journeys—within and without—the camera is not only a part of my world but also a means of being more mindful of it, weaving its visual qualities with my own emotions to produce work that uniquely reflects both self and subject.

Guy Tal
Torrey, Utah, July 2016
Years ago I renounced such categorizations of my work as, "nature photography" or "wilderness photography." The reason was that I was not comfortable with the use of "wilderness" as a marketing term, and the way it is sometimes appropriated by those who do not experience it as I do. Wilderness to me is not a thing or a place; it is a multidimensional experience inspired by the wild, leading to profound emotions and deep contemplations, and a sense of personal freedom unequaled in any human-made or controlled setting. More importantly, nature and wilderness, to me, are not just resources to be exploited for the banal goal of making photographs. Too often I am disappointed by photographers implying that their work is somehow more worthy by virtue of it originating in some dramatized characterization of an outdoor experience — distances traveled, hardships endured, or skills tested in order to gain some view.

I also do not find much value in grouping artists into arbitrary categories by whatever commonalities exist in their subject matter or methods. In fact, I consider as more elevated the kind of art that accomplishes the exact opposite — art emerging out of subjective experience and personal sensibilities, created by artists who have something unique and novel to express. Where groupings are to be made, I much favor those distinctions made in painting to those commonly used in photography. A romanticist, a realist, and an impressionist may work with the same subject matter, even the same materials, but with completely different expressive intents, which to me are more important to understanding an artist and their work.

My wilderness experiences are essential to my being who I am, and as my work strives for the goal of self-expression — an honest product of who I am, the life I live, and the things that make it worth living — wilderness also is a source of profound inspiration. It is a subtle but important distinction: I do not venture into wild places in search of photographs, I do so to seek meaningful experiences; and if such experiences also inspire an image or two, so much the better. But the making of images is in itself entirely unnecessary for my appreciation of my times in the wild.

As expressive art reflects the life, thoughts and feelings of the artist, those things that make the artist's life more meaningful also make the art that expresses it more meaningful. The point of living a creative life — rather than just engaging in creative pursuits on occasion — is not merely to produce aesthetically pleasing artifacts, but to bind one's creative work and living experience as two dimensions of the same life in all its details, always unfolding and evolving in parallel. The pursuit of aesthetics alone indeed may result in pleasing and well-received works (that may be indistinguishable to a consumer from more personal expressions) but its rewards to the person making the work have no hope of comparing with those arising out of a deeper living experience, made up of all the joys and despairs of journeying through life as an artist.

The photographs — mine and others’ — that I consider most favorably are not those that merely serve as visual trophies for enduring some difficulty or experiencing a stroke of good luck, nor those relying entirely on interest and aesthetics inherent in the things photographed. Rather, they are those photographs that express a photographer's passion for — and harmony with — the life they live and the things that make such a life better and elevated in their own mind: not photographs of objective things, but photographs about subjective things. This is true whether such images are made in the most remote and solitary places, on a busy street, or in the studio.
Writing and photography play complementary roles in my life, and in many ways are mutually dependent. Photography helps me distill essences from the world outside me as well as articulate my responses to things encountered in the course of life. Writing is my means of sorting out thoughts and feelings, ideas and contemplations; and generally ensues out of inner reflections, rather than sensory perceptions. Just as the outer world offers endless details—often chaotically and randomly arranged—to my senses; so is my inner world often mired in chaos: myriad threads, emotions, ideas and intuitions, thoughts competing with other thoughts for attention. Photography helps me to tackle the former—to order the outside world into meaningful configurations. Writing helps me do the same with the latter—arrange and correlate and reign-in my thoughts into coherent, interrelated, narratives.

My photography is primarily a means of communicating outwardly those synergies of inner and outer experience, prompted by direct encounters with meaningful things; it is my means of coherently packaging and relaying to others those aspects of experience that I wish to share, and that transcend verbal expression. I believe it would be arrogant, however, to suggest that photography as a means of communication—as a form of language—can accomplish all that I wish to say. Although possessing great power to express emotions and feelings by way of visual metaphors (and independent of the limitations of grammar and vocabulary) photography falls short, sometimes, of describing more complex narratives—or when subjective perception may lead to ambiguity of message. In this sense, photography and writing not only serve as independent means of expression (with a degree of overlap); they each also fill gaps that the other cannot accomplish as effectively, or at all. Both are essential to me in order to achieve my expressive goals.

Art rewards differently those viewing it and those making it. As a maker of art, I also have great interest in the creative experience; in contemplating the challenges and rewards of a creative life; and in expanding my expressive vocabulary. This is why I find more interesting those artists who also are—or were—adept at describing their lives, experiences, contemplations, philosophies, and ideas in writing. I consider what an artist wishes to express as more important than the means they choose to express it in, and I therefore believe that the pursuit of accomplishing one’s expressive goals most effectively is a more profitable attitude than dogmatic formalism.

I do not consider myself strictly as a fine-art photographer or as a creative writer, but rather as an expressive artist working in the media of photography and writing.
Also by Guy Tal

More Than A Rock
Essays on Art, Creativity, Photography, Nature, and Life

guytal.com

Ostensibly about landscape photography, *More Than a Rock* is a passionate and personal book about creativity and expression. In this series of essays, photographer and teacher Guy Tal shares his thoughts and experiences as an artist who seeks to express more in his images than the mere appearance of the subject portrayed.

Tal makes an argument to consider creative landscape photography—expressing something of the photographer’s conception through the use of natural aesthetics—as a form of visual art that is distinct from the mere representation of beautiful natural scenes.

Tal covers topics such as the art of photography, approaches to landscape photography, and the experiences of a working photographic artist. His essays also include reflections on nature and man’s place in it, living a meaningful life, and living as an artist in today’s world.

The book is decidedly non-technical and focuses on philosophy, nature, and visual expression. It was written for those photographers with a passion and interest in creative photography. Anyone who is pursuing their work as art, is in need of inspiration, or is interested in the writings of a full-time working photographic artist will benefit from reading this book. The book is visually punctuated with Tal’s inspiring and breathtaking photography.
Guy Tal spent the first 26 years of his life in Israel, where he was born, served a mandatory military service, studied and taught at the Tel Aviv University. Guy spent much of his youth exploring natural areas around his home by the Mediterranean Sea, as well as the Negev Desert and the Golan Heights. As a teenager, Guy first picked up a camera to document the things that fascinated him about the natural landscape and its wild inhabitants, prompting a passion for, and a deep interest in photography that continues to grow and intensify to this day—three decades later.

At odds with the political turmoil and rampant urbanization of his homeland, Guy immigrated by himself to California, where he embarked on a career in Information Technology and began an enduring love affair with the wild places of the American West.

Unfulfilled by the urban, career-driven life, Guy decided to move closer to his beloved deserts and mountains of the Colorado Plateau, ultimately to settle in a tiny and remote town at the feet of Utah’s Aquarius Plateau, on the edge of Utah’s famous canyon country—a place that inspires him deeply and where he practices most of his work.

A life-long learner and explorer, Guy’s interest in art, science, and philosophy converged with his intense love of wild places, finding expression in photography, and writing. He is a frequent contributor to a number of photographic publications, a public speaker, and educator. His first book, *More Than A Rock*, was published in 2015.
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Published by LensWork Publishing, 1004 Commercial Ave PMB 588, Anacortes, WA, 98221 USA
Printed in Canada
Available by subscription from www.lenswork.com