



The Psychological Landscape

by Rita Bernstein



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Commentary

Now that we are all so entrenched in the digital age, we are losing touch with one of the most magical parts of photography—the physical characteristics of a print. This is precisely why I think it’s so important that we photographers do our part to preserve the appreciation of physical prints. I see nothing inconsistent in embracing digital imaging and digital image delivery while still holding dear the physical qualities of physical prints. This work by Rita Bernstein is a case in point.

I first saw her project at a photo review event and was powerfully moved by both the imagery and the physicality of her printmaking. The rough edges of the paper, crinkled surface, curled edges, and generalized distress added a powerful emotional content to the delicate tones in the images. When we discussed publishing her work, I expressed my concern in losing those qualities when her images were translated onto the digitally pristine screen in *LensWork Extended*. To simply reproduce her original digital files would’ve missed such an important part of her work. Even scanning the original prints created reproduction images that were too flawless. The solution we found was to photograph her original prints, complete with their distress marks and even the sheen of reflection off the baryta surface. This also had the advantage of preserving not just a tactile feel but also her original split tones.

There is, however, a subtle trap that is an incredible temptation these days. I see lots of work that uses

extraordinary hand processes and various kinds of physical distress in order to make prints that scream, “I am not digital!” The problem with so many of these is that the technique used to make the physical print has nothing to do with the content, either emotionally or intellectually. As has always been the case in photography, technical grandstanding never improves the artwork in spite of the fact that the photographer may beam with pride at their technical accomplishment. No one has ever said it better than the great technical master himself, Ansel Adams, when he quipped, “There’s nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept.”

The pendulum has swung in the opposite direction in this new century where photographers go out of their way to *reduce* the quality of their prints through various physical or digital techniques, but if doing so doesn’t enhance the message in the artwork, it doesn’t improve the artwork. Technique and content must harmonize to create something really special.

Bernstein’s portfolio — aptly titled *The Psychological Landscape* — offers us a look at fragility and the delicate state of mind so easily trampled upon, as are her physical prints. It’s a perfect match between technique and content — and a testament to Bernstein’s artistic sensitivity.