

Pictured Rocks

by Curtis Miller



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Commentary

In some regards, film photography was an amazingly constricting process. For example, the choice between black-and-white and color was determined by what film you had loaded in the camera. That is to say, it was a *preliminary* choice that was most often determined for large sequence of images — either that, or we wasted a lot of unexposed film. Sheet film users had the advantage here, but almost all of the photographers I've known personally made a decision about black-and-white or color not based on the *film*, but based on *their career*. There are always exceptions, but color photographers were most *always* color photographers; black-and-white photographers most *always* black and white.

And then there was a smaller, third group: I'll refer to them with the shorthand phrase, “the psychedelic color” photographers. This group completely abandoned any sense of accurate color representation and explored a variety of unusual techniques as varied as cross-processing or gum bichromate. Their results were often fascinating color work, but not a color we could see with our own eyes.

So, the three choices were: monochrome, visual color, or psychedelic color. Each of these materials were somewhat plastic and could be pushed around a bit, but I would venture a guess that 99% of film photography fell in one of these three categories. In retrospect, don't these three choices seem somewhat simplistic — at least as compared to the rendition possibilities we have today?

Consider this image by Curtis Miller. It is a color photograph, but this is not our grandparents' Kodachrome. In fact, it's almost what I would be tempted to characterize as a *color split-tone*. The lower half — the sandy beach and rocks — appears to have a decided bias to the warm side of the color spectrum. The top half — the water and clouds — appears to have a decided bias to the cool-blue end of the color spectrum. Local software adjustments? Color bias graduated filters? I'm not sure how he created this gorgeous aesthetic, but the fact that it even occurred to him to do so is, I suspect, a function of the significantly expanded options available to us through digital technologies. I simply cannot imagine a photographer *thinking* in this combined color palette in the film days. If there existed such an individual, I've never run across them nor seen them highlighted in books on the history of photography.

Today there are other creative possibilities, too. One of the more popular ones I see is a mixed pallet aesthetic — parts of the image monochromatic, other parts in full or even exaggerated color. There is so-called “color stripping” where certain colors of the rainbow are simply eliminated from the image through total desaturation of selective parts of the spectrum. Conversely, there is “spectral enhancing”



were certain segments of the rainbow are intensified so that specific colors stand out in exaggerated vibrance. I suspect I'm just scratching the surface.

The applicable question that always occurs to me on I see such color manipulations is whether or not it is a gimmick in search of an aesthetic, or an aesthetic that perfectly magnifies the emotional content of the image. Is it right, or is it ridiculous?

This example from Curtis Miller, I believe, is a significantly better photograph in its current form than it would be as any form of monochromatic or natural color rendition. It's just right. He hasn't

pushed the colors too far, but he's push them far enough to provide us a new and different visual sensation. It takes a sensitive artist to not push too far. As Arthur William Radford so famously said, “Half of art is knowing when to stop.”

I think one of the best attributes of the digital age of photography is that so many of us have simply eliminated self-imposed restrictions about the *kind* of photographer we are. Are you a black-and-white photographer, or a color photographer? Increasingly the answer seems to be, “Yes. And then some.” And our photography is better for it.