

SOULSCAPES

by Ray Guillette, HonNEC

There is a breathtaking moment. Something beautiful and inspiring unfolds before your eyes, and it seems that nature has allowed you to be a part of what's happening. You are thankful to be here, and you want to capture the moment in an image. You want to remember everything, every part of what makes you feel this way. You want to save and to share the moment. Your soul has been shaken, and will be every time you see this image. Somewhere out there beyond your lens but within your vision is what you've been looking for....yourself.

When we make images of the landscape that clearly express our feelings, we are making soulscapes. They tell the story of a place from our point of view, why we came here, and what we feel is important. A soulscape tells the viewer something unique because it also tells something about the one who produced the image.

The creative process that leads to a clear personal communication has several key elements. Some of these are:

- 1) **INTENT:** the realization of what we want to say, and the feelings we want to share.
- 2) **LIGHT:** using the light we are given that day to enhance the message.
- 3) **VIEWPOINT:** the camera position that gives our image the best story-telling perspective.
- 4) **FAMILIARITY:** knowing the location well allows us to be in the right place at the right time.
- 5) **CREATIVITY:** using our own personal way of visual expression to make the message unique.
- 6) **STORY:** planning ahead for an audiovisual sequence while we are shooting.

INTENT

What brought you here?

When we arrive at a location, we usually have goals in mind. There is something there that attracts us. Maybe it's a mountain, a lake, a waterfall, or a meadow. Keep these goals in mind as you scan the scene, looking for the right image. Try to identify the elements of the scene that will communicate the feelings it creates in you. To make an easily understood message, we need to arrange the important story telling elements into a simple composition. Always looking, we decide what will help our message, and what might confuse and distract the viewers, making the message harder to understand. Viewers only see what you put into the image. Simplicity makes the message easier to understand. Clutter makes it more confusing. We want the viewer to know immediately what we were thinking when we made the image.

While keeping your story in mind, be open to change it if weather, light, or time of day are not helping. You can't say something visually if the visual language isn't there. You can still say something, but it may not be what you first had in mind. The story is still yours, just different.

LIGHT

"The light is everything"
Mary Oliver

The quality and direction of light can produce dramatic changes in the landscape. Light can be modified with filters and flash, but we can't change the light we are given. We can make good, meaningful images in almost any light, but lighting conditions do limit the content of the message. There are two main types of landscape light, direct (sunny) and diffuse (cloudy).

Unobstructed sunlight falls on our subject from a definite direction, producing shadows and highlights and creating contrast (conflict between visual elements). This bright light produces a warm, vibrant, and energetic feeling in the image. The direction of light causes some striking and reliable visual effects that are stronger early and

late in the day, and are sometimes awe-inspiring minutes after sunrise or before sunset. On a sunny day the first thing to do is place your camera where the scene will be either sidelit or backlit.

Sidelighting is classic landscape light. It emphasizes the three dimensional form of objects by producing shadows. These shadows create contrast, increase our sense of color saturation, and emphasize texture. Contrast and color saturation will add life to any image. The perception of texture is a sure way to connect with a viewer. Sidelighting helps create a sense of place, (the feeling of being there), by giving the viewer a universally recognized reference, touch. Sidelit scenes also allow maximum polarization, which further increases color saturation. Uneven polarization can be distracting, especially if the sky fills a large part of the frame. This can be fixed digitally, or in camera by using a graduated neutral density filter, or a vertical format.

Backlighting produces basic changes in how we see. It often gives a magical feeling to the landscape, a feeling that may be stronger in the image than in reality. Impact is strengthened by seeing in this different light, and by making shapes more prominent. Backlight passes around and through objects on it's way to your lens. Edges are highlighted and translucent objects are filled with a glowing light. Weather conditions take on the color of light, warmer early or late in the day. Because we recognize shapes instinctively and immediately, the message is quickly received. Less time is spent figuring out what we are seeing, leaving more time for an emotional reaction. The common and the mundane are sometimes elevated to a higher level of elegance and simplicity. The extremes of light at sunrise and sunset give opportunities to make dramatic backlit images, as do foggy or misty mornings.

Backlighting is an express ticket to inspiration, but it also brings some challenges to the making of a simple, effective statement. Since shapes are emphasized, be careful not to overwhelm the senses with too many shapes, or with shapes that merge with each other or with a dark background. Exposure is tricky for backlit scenes because of the presence of highlights and shadows. I usually give a little more exposure to backlit scenes, and bracket exposures. If the sun is in the composition, it's best to spot meter the sky without the sun in the frame, then return to your intended composition with the sun in place. Bracket toward overexposure, and use a graduated neutral density filter to darken the sky and lighten the foreground. Hiding part of the sun behind a tree or other object, and using a small aperture will result in a sunstar, which automatically becomes the center of interest.

Frontlighting minimizes shadows, making shape and form less noticable. It is usually the last and least dramatic option in lighting the landscape. The chance of having a light, distracting sky is greater with frontlighting. Polarizers are less effective here than in sidelit scenes, and colors less saturated. If you must shoot a frontlit scene, it's best to shoot early or late in the day, underexpose a bit, and try out a polarizer and perhaps a graduated neutral density filter. There will be less tonal contrast, so look for a composition that emphasizes color, depth, and scale. Sky color can be darkened by choosing a viewpoint that allows you to look up at your subject. Be careful not to over-polarize in this situation.

Cloudy day light falls on the scene from many different directions. This soft, diffused light makes the landscape seem quieter and more peaceful than on bright sunny days. Shadow edges are softer, highlights less noticeable, and differences between light tones are less distinct. A featureless cloudy sky is often a bright distraction. It is usually best to minimize it or eliminate it from the frame. A grad ND filter may help here.

There are some definite visual advantages on cloudy days. More detail can be seen in shadow areas. Motion in water and foliage can be captured with longer shutter speeds. Best of all, this is the time to point your camera downward and concentrate on details. Close views of a forest floor, a grassy meadow, or a beach can fill the frame with overlooked beauty.

After sunset, for about 30 min, the diffuse and soft light is beautifully colored. Long exposures "collect" this lavender light when it is not actually visible to the eye, giving the image an unexpected emotional boost.

Storm light, at the front or back edge of the storm, is the best of both worlds, a mix of bright sunlight and dark clouds. It gives the potential for high contrast and high impact images.

VIEWPOINT

"A good photograph is knowing where to stand."
Ansel Adams

Choosing the right viewpoint is the best way to ensure that your message will be clearly understood. Viewpoint, along with lens choice determines what elements are included in the frame and how they are arranged into an understandable message. This is your story, your opportunity to tell the viewer exactly what you were thinking. This is where time spent perfecting the skills of looking and seeing pays off. Usually the best images of the day are the ones taken after a long look around.

Think of the image as divided into foreground, middle ground, background, horizon, and sky. There will be one best spot where all of these fit into a statement of what you think of this place. It may take some time to find this best place. Your images will reflect the time you take to know what to say, but also from where to say it. Move your camera from side to side, forward and back, and, equally important, up and down. Camera height effects your statement as much or more than tripod placement. High positions stretch out and emphasize the middle ground, and lower positions put the foreground "in your face". Both positions give a strong sense of depth, but in different ways. A low camera position usually leaves no doubt in the viewers' minds about what you wanted to say. A strong foreground also adds impact to your image.

Lens choice effects more than just what will be included in the frame. A wide angle view encourages feelings of space and grandeur. When a wide angle lens is tipped upward, vertical lines will merge together toward the top of the image. This looks unnatural and is usually a distraction, so try to point your wide angle lens as straight as possible. Mid-range focal lengths tell the story truthfully, as the unaided eye sees it. Long lenses compress elements and weather conditions into an image that allows the viewer to make the same associations that you did, often enhancing emotional impact. The "intimate landscapes" of Elliot Porter and William Neill, and the "extracts" of Ansel Adams are some of the most moving landscape images ever made.

FAMILIARITY

You CAN go home again.

Don't know where to start? It's often best to return to familiar places. While there is value and excitement in searching for new landscapes, it is in returning to the familiar ones that allows the best images to emerge. Knowing a location well saves energy otherwise spent searching, and allows you to find images that are suggested by light and atmosphere. Time is conserved, since prior visits have already found productive areas. And when a certain condition of light or weather emerges, the right place to maximize it's potential is already known.

It takes time and energy to explore a new location. But at a familiar place energy can be directed elsewhere. There is more opportunity to express creativity. The act of looking is made easier, and leaves more time for the art of seeing. Different viewpoints and techniques can make unique images in familiar places. The changes observed at the same location through the seasons, at different times of day, and in different weather can create major differences in your images. The knowledge gained in one place can be applied to many.

CREATIVITY

"They could tell me how to paint their landscape, but they couldn't tell me how to paint mine."
Georgia O'Keefe

One of the best ways to show your feelings about the landscape is to present it with a creative expression of what's really there, making your own personal vision of what everyone else sees, too. Digital image manipulation has given us many creative tools, but there are other options we can use to express our own way of seeing. Filters, montages, and soft or selective focus techniques can make the image our own.

Viewpoint and lens selection contribute to creativity, as does being in a familiar location. But the best way to let your creative juices flow is to be free of technical concerns, and then to give your mind all the time it needs to

express itself. If you're in a rush, or have to pause and look for your exposure controls, your creative process will slow down or stop.

To enhance creativity, keep looking, and then abstract the landscape. Try to visualize the image as an arrangement of colors, shapes, lines, and forms. Then arrange these graphic elements into a composition that makes sense to you. Defocusing to a slightly fuzzy image may help you see this. Once you have reduced the image to its basic elements, you can then make a balanced composition that has the important elements exactly where you want them to be.

Telephoto lenses allow us to select a smaller portion of the scene. This is a very personal and creative way of showing the landscape. The viewer sees only what you select. You can make the scene into an abstract pattern by excluding ground and sky, and using long lens optics to minimize depth perception. These choices concentrate graphics, and emotional impact as well.

STORY

Go out and get yourself an audience.

Producing audiovisual sequences is the most gratifying way to communicate your message. Images with simple composition, good technique, and impact are important, but VARIETY is the essential ingredient in any successful AV presentation. Variety will carry a sequence with some flawed images, but a sequence with prize-winning images and no variety will usually seem flat to the viewer. Try different viewpoints and lenses. Shoot high up and low down. Show the grand scene with wide angle shots, isolate areas that are important to your story, and close in on details. Details often tell a more personal story than wide views. They also let viewers "fill in the blanks" with their own emotions. Creative images can also add variety to your story.

If possible, use complimentary colors to add impact to your show. Green and red are compliments, so when a green slide is followed by a red slide, both appear fully saturated.

Try to shoot a group of images with similar horizons so they will dissolve smoothly. The dissolve, or interface between two images, should not be so noticeable that it takes attention away from the images themselves.

And be sure to shoot some images without a horizon, to connect images with conflicting graphics and uneven horizons. Avoid frequent changes between horizontal and vertical formats, which will distract from your message.

The sequence should have a unified theme or story line. It could be the story of a place, a season, a time of day, or simply a group of images that make you feel the same way. You don't have to show everything that's there to develop a story, just the parts you choose. Simplicity of theme is just as important as simplicity of composition.

When adding music, try to let each musical phrase contain a single clear statement. Try to visualize a beginning, an end point, and a high point in your sequence. The music you select will usually determine where the high point falls in the sequence.

So take us along as you explore the wonders of your world.....out there in the landscape, surrounded by potential.