Focus on David Fokos and learn how to make a perfect photograph

Posted on October 31st, 2011

Jetty by David Fokos

Jesse: David Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences with us as you are in my opinion a photographer who will inspire many future photographers for a long time to come.

David: My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

***Jesse**: What did you do for a living before photography and do you think it has had an impact on your style?*

David: I've made my living from my art for about 10 years now. Before then I also worked as an audio design engineer, designing high-end loudspeakers for home stereo systems and home theaters. My college degree is in engineering, but I also took many classes in Japanese art history. I think both of those fields have had a profound influence on my work. First, if you look at my images you can see how "precise" they

are – I spend hundreds of hours getting my lines, compositions, and tonal range exactly right. A lot of that comes from my engineering side. When I make an image I know exactly on what I want the viewer to focus and what I want them to see and feel. By reducing my images to austere minimalist compositions I force the viewer to more closely examine what I have left in the frame thus intensifying the viewer's observation and appreciation of the few things that remain. In this regard I have also been greatly influenced by Japanese aesthetic traditions. As I mentioned, in college, I studied Japanese art history, Japanese film, and haiku. I have been greatly inspired by the haiku poet's ability to convey deeply felt sentiment through a minimal number of words.

However, I would not say that I consciously set out to make "photographic haiku," or deliberately try to illustrate traditional Japanese aesthetic concepts such as seijaku (tranquility), sabi (patina and an appreciation of the ephemeral nature of things), yūgen (an unobvious, subtle, profound grace), shizen (without pretense), and wabi (rustic simplicity, freshness, quietness, an appreciation of imperfection). Yet, I feel that the spirit expressed in these concepts resonates within my images. It was through my work, as I struggled to make the first image that I felt successfully conveyed the emotion I wished to share, that these ideals came to reveal themselves to me.

Jesse*: David, you have created a unique style of black and white landscape photography. How does it make you feel when you think about the impact your style has had the photographic community?*

David: The single most important thing I ask of photographers, or any artist, is to show me something I haven't seen before. Make me look at my surroundings in a new way. Expand my vision of the world. This is not a trivial task, especially now that digital cameras allow everyone to conveniently take and share as many photos as they like for essentially no cost. It was very different when you had to buy film, and pay for the film to be developed and the pay for prints to be made. The point is that there are now literally billions of photographs out there. How do you make something that is original, something that reveals something new about the world? It's not easy, but that is the challenge for the modern artist. I could go to Yosemite and exactly duplicate an Ansel Adams image, but what would be the point? It wouldn't show anyone something they haven't seen before. I often hear from people who say something like, "You know, I walk past this place everyday, but I've never seen it as you have shown it to me here" or, "Just the other day I was traveling up the coast when I saw this cove and thought 'this would be a perfect David Fokos image'." It's moments like those, when I realize that, through my work, I have forever changed the way that someone looks at their world, that are the most satisfying. I mean, how amazing is that!

Jesse: *With such a large following what causes you to keep your editions so small in number?*

David: I am obsessive about my images, my prints, my framing – everything. When a collector purchases one of my prints, I want it to be absolutely the best it can be. To maintain such a high level of quality, I often have to print, and reprint, an image sometimes many times until I am satisfied that the print is as good as it can be. There is a significant expense involved in producing my prints, both in terms of time and materials. If I offered lower cost open editions, or large "limited" editions (limiting an edition to 2500 prints is pointless), I would not be able to afford the expense that goes into making sure my prints are perfect – I would have to spend less time working on each print and accept some prints that are slightly less than perfect. That is something I am just not willing to do.

Jesse: *What is your favorite photograph from your collection and why?*

David: That's like asking which of your children is your favorite. I don't have a specific favorite in my portfolio. However, I often find myself most enthused about my newest images because they are fresh, but I love all my images.

Jesse*: Early in your career, which photographer had the biggest impact on your growth?*

David: Oddly, I wasn't really influenced by any photographers, except peripherally by Ansel Adams. I began taking pictures when I was 11 years. Even the pictures from my very first roll of film showed an affinity for the landscape and a certain type of composition. When I was in high school in the 70's I took a photo class where I learned the basics – how to develop film, make prints, etc. The textbook for that class was simply titled "Photography" by Upton and Upton. On the cover was a cross-section of a view camera showing the image of an apple being projected upside down inside. Inside the book were many Ansel Adams images and a discussion about Adams' Zone System. Adams' was near the height of his superstardom at that time. Just after I graduated from high school Adams was even on the cover of Time Magazine. Everyone knew who he was, and he was the only photographer I really knew anything about. I admired his methodical nature and the quality of his prints — the infinite depth of field (i.e. everything in focus), the high resolution, and the full tonal range. I was inspired to try to achieve similar results with my own photos. I learned that Adams achieved the high resolution of his images by using a view camera, and that a lens stopped down to f64 resulted in full depth of field. And, using the zone system that he developed,

he was able to achieve the full tonal range seen in his prints. I set out to emulate him, and soon after heading off to college I purchased my first view camera – a 5×7 Korona View from the 1920's. I had never even held a view camera before, but I bought this one out of the want ads, and then taught myself how to use it. I spent the next 15 years working, primarily in isolation, oblivious of other photographers, on Martha's Vineyard developing my style and perfecting my technique.

Jesse: *If you don't mind could you take us on a journey of how you capture an image and the process it must undergo before it reaches your limited edition collection?*

David: Before I get into the technical details of my process I would like to talk a bit about how I came to make the images that I do. For me, the intention of my work is to evoke within the viewer, the same emotion I felt when I made the image. In this respect I am not trying to show the viewer what these places look like, but rather, what they *feel* like. Kind of the way that Willy Wonka's gum, recreates the sensation of an entire three-course dinner! Emotion is the essence of experience. But the problem with photography is that the camera doesn't record emotion.

To sum up what I have learned from over 30 years of photographing the landscape is that our emotional experience of a place is not instantaneous. Therefore, to make an image of a place as I experience it over time, I need the camera to experience the place over time as well.

I believe that our sense of experience is built up over time – a composite of many short-term events. I offer this analogy: Suppose you meet someone for the first time. Your impression of that person is not a snapshot in your mind of the first time you saw that person, but rather a portrait you have assembled from many separate moments. Each time that person exhibits a new facial expression or hand gesture, you add that into your impression of who that person is. Your image of that person — how you *feel* about that person — is formed over time, rather than upon a single expression or gesture.

Likewise, I believe that our impression of the world is based upon our total experience. For example, the ocean has always made me feel calm, relaxed, and contented. If I were to take an instantaneous snapshot of the ocean, the photo would include waves with jagged edges, salt spray, and foam. This type of image does not make me feel calm — it does not represent how the ocean makes me feel as I stare out over the water. What I am responding to is the underlying, fundamental form of the ocean, its vast expansiveness and the strong line of the horizon, both of which are very stable, calming forms that I find relaxing. So, I had to find a way to brush away the messy, "visual noise" of the waves to get to the essence of my experience. I have done this by using my camera's unique ability to average time, through the use of long exposures. In this way I am able to quell the visual noise (e.g. the short-term temporal events like breaking waves or zooming cars) to reveal a sort of hidden world. It is a very real world to be sure – the camera was able to record the scene – it is just not one that we normally experience visually. We feel it. We sense it. But in general, we don't see it.

Our bodies respond to many types of stimuli. What we see – the visual information – is just one type of stimulus, though it is often the most overpowering of the senses. However, due to the short wavelengths of visible light, this information is presented to us in an infinite series of frozen snapshots. Our bodies also react to other types of stimuli on longer time scales – our sense of touch, smell, hearing, etc. The wavelengths of sound are much longer than those of light so it takes our body longer to capture a "sound snapshot". Our skin reacts to sunlight, another stimulus, but how long does it take for us to get a tan or sunburn? The point is that the world exists as a continuum, not just the artificial, frozen, slice of time the camera presents to us in a snapshot. Our bodies respond to the world in a cumulative way, averaging our experience as we pass through time. Using my camera to capture the passage of time through long exposures, I can reveal what our world "looks" like based on a longer time scale. My photographic process acts as a translator – translating from the "invisible" world of non-instantaneous events, into the visible world of a photographic print.

It took me a long time to understand this – 15 years during which my images failed to evoke the emotions I wished to communicate. Then, slowly, I began to sense some change in a few of my shots. And while not entirely successful, there were areas within these shots that hinted at what I was trying to express. I spent a lot of time contemplating why it was that these images were more successful for me than others.

The key to my work is to minimize my images in a way that emphasizes certain elements while de-emphasizing others. In addition to careful composition, in scenes with movement I use long exposures. When a scene does not contain movement, a simple instantaneous exposure is sufficient, as the experience over time is invariable — a longer exposure would make no difference. As far as the brain is concerned, there is less visual noise in a scene that contains no movement, so it is already minimized to some degree.

The key to these images, much like my time-averaged images, is to frame the shot in such a way as to emphasize the emotional triggers and de-emphasize any distractions that remain. I have found that minimalist compositions have been the most effective means of evoking a pure emotion within the viewer as the message is less cluttered. Put slightly differently, there is less in the image to "confuse" the viewer's

brain.

To compose in a minimal way, I first decide what it is that I wish to convey – what is it in the scene that I want the viewer to focus their attention upon, and what emotion I want to evoke. Then, I try to minimize anything else that competes with that. The composition becomes critical – specifically how the main elements interact with any lesser elements, the horizon, the positive and negative spaces created by their placement, the edges of the frame and the tension or harmony created by the positions of everything.

When composing, I pay particular attention to the background and the edges of the frame to make sure there is nothing there that will be a distraction. Often this means that I am not able to get a shot at all. Or, sometimes I take the shot but have to work on it in Photoshop later to get the shot I really wanted. An example of this is my shot from Northumberland, England titled "Wooley Reservoir". When I made this shot the dirt in the foreground was strewn with a dozen small white rocks. I could have gone about picking them all up and tossing them out of the frame, but then I would have trampled the grass. Instead, I chose to remove them digitally. The eye is always attracted to the lightest areas of an image and those white rocks were a distraction – they had to go!

I shoot 8×10 Kodak Tri-X Professional film with my 82-year old Korona View camera. I use just one lens – a 210mm Rodenstock Sironar-S. This lens is a wide-angle lens on my camera (the equivalent of a 29mm lens on a 35mm camera). Ironically, having only one lens to choose from allows me greater freedom. If I had a number of lenses I would continually be trying to decide which lens to use. When you only have one lens, you never have to think about it. Instead of being paralyzed by indecision, I am free to concentrate on my compositions.

My equipment weighs 60lbs. I have to ship my camera equipment, in advance, to wherever I want to go. When shooting, I go out with 12 sheets of film (at $5+ per sheet). I shoot at least two of everything just in case something happens to one of the negatives. Sometimes, I'll try different exposure times, different compositions, or different filter combinations. This means that when I go out I am usually only able to take one or two shots before I have to reload my film holders in a darkroom or changing tent. My camera is very susceptible to wind – so windy days and windy places are out. After shooting and then shipping my film and camera equipment home again, I develop my film – 5 sheets at a time in a Jobo. Only then do I have the first chance to see if any of my shots are worthwhile. If I have a negative I like I then wet-mount the 8-inch by 10-inch film to my scanner and scan it at a very high resolution (16-bits @ 2400 ppi). This results in an 800MB grayscale image file (which is equivalent to the resolution of a 2.4GB color file).

Once I have a high-resolution image file in my computer, the real work begins. I often spend 100 hours or more, fine-tuning the image – dodging and burning (making certain areas lighter or darker), adjusting local contrast and, when necessary, removing little white rocks. This is the part of the process that adds the emotion back into the image my camera recorded.

Our eyes are naturally drawn toward light. I work to craft my images in a way that takes the viewer on a little trip — the trip I want them to take: enter the image here, look at this, then this, and finally exit there. So, for example, if I want the viewer to focus on a certain part of an image, I make sure that the little white boat over toward the right side glows, while the left, top and bottom of the image are made darker. I make hundreds of local contrast adjustments, and I make sure that there is nothing that will distract the viewer. Everything must be in perfect harmony.

Sometimes I'll work for many, many hours on an image and then, in the end, have to discard it having decided that I couldn't make it work to my satisfaction. However, when I *am* ultimately satisfied with an image, I still need to do print tests and make adjustments so that the final print accurately reflects the image I saw on my computer monitor.

Finally, after the hundreds of hours it took to produce the perfect print, I still have one thing left to do and that is have the print framed for presentation. The frame plays a significant role in the finished work and its importance should not be taken lightly. The style and weight of the frame become a part of the composition. Over the years I tried a number of different styles of framing until I found one that I thought was ideal.

I send my prints to Los Angeles to be framed by one of only two framers in the country that I feel is capable of this quality of framing. My prints are "face-mounted". This is a special process that was developed in Germany whereby the print is bonded to a special, premium-quality brand of UV protected, anti-reflective plexiglas, (note: before mounting, the edges of the plexiglas are polished for a finer finish) The print is then bonded using an optically-clear sheet of adhesive. The process requires passing the print and plexi through a special machine with heated rollers, multiple times. The result is an amazing immediacy as, unlike with traditional framing, the print sits just 1/8″ from the front surface.

Next, a piece of 6mm thick black sintra (a type of rigid plastic) is bonded to the back of the print. At this point, the print is hermetically sealed between these two sheets of plastic. A wood frame is then bonded to the sintra.

Next, a decorative outer wooden frame is custom-milled by my framer from rock maple, to which he applies 3 coats of a proprietary color of lacquer. Though my frames may look black, they are not. I worked with my framer to develop a special "off-black" hue that would not contrast too starkly with the image. This is yet another way I work to minimize even the smallest of distractions.

Finally, with screws passing through the back side of the decorative frame and into the wooden frame bonded to the sintra, the print is made to "float" within the decorative frame with a small gap between the edge of the print and the frame. A French Cleat system is used to hang the print on the wall so that the frame sits flush against the wall. The cost of this type of framing is not cheap — about $1300 for each print – but I feel the result is worth it.

Jesse: *What is your favorite past-time when you are not working on producing beautiful images?*

David: I love to cook! Cooking can be very creative and satisfying in many of the same ways as working on my art. And while I have never spent hundreds of hours working on a single meal as I do with my images, I have, on special occasions, taken a couple of days.

Jesse: *Would you say that taking the photograph and then processing it are two separate art forms?*

David: I am sure that for some people they are. However, I tend to view the entire process as a whole – the way that prepping ingredients, and then cooking them are both part of making a dish.

When I take a picture, I already have a pre-visualized, final image in my head – put another way, I know what "dish" I want to make. Making the exposure is just the process of gathering raw material for the final image – like gathering ingredients. Once I have my raw material, I may spend a hundred hours or more working to finish my image. This is the "cooking" part of the process where I "adjust the seasoning" to arrive at a final image whose sum is greater than the individual components.

The difference between documentary work/photojournalism and fine art photography is that in the former one wants to present photographs with the least amount of manipulation possible (other than the framing of the image, choice of lens, etc.), whereas a fine art photographer is an artist seeking to express an idea, evoke an emotion, or convey a message. The famous photographer, Ruth Bernhard, once remarked, "If you do not improve upon the negative, then you are not a photographer". For the photographic artist, the taking of the picture is just the first step.

How many times have you taken a snapshot of some amazing vista like the Grand Canyon, or an incredible sunset only to be disappointed when you got your prints back? You remembered the experience as having been so much more dramatic than the prints convey. One of the reasons for this discrepancy is that a large part of the experience you had while taking the picture was the emotion you felt while standing there. As I mentioned before, your camera does not record emotion. It cannot convey how you felt that morning when you woke up, what kind of mood you were in, the humidity, the smell of the air, the temperature, the feel of breeze, or the sun on your face. All of these things contribute to the emotional response you have to a place. The job of a photographic artist is to work with the camera's image, to create the drama and add back the emotion so that the viewer can also feel what the artist felt. It is this artistic process that takes me so long.

When you get right down to it, a photograph is just a bunch of chemicals stuck to a piece of paper hanging on a wall and the artist may not always be around to explain their intention to the viewer — the image has to communicate everything they want to say.

Jesse: *How long does it take you to work on your images with post processing adjustments before you are content?*

David: I often work a hundred or more hours, post-exposure, crafting an image that exactly expresses the emotion I wish to convey.

Jesse: *Recently you have announced that you are going to take on the task of editing and printing the photography of a handful of photographers. This is pretty exciting news as you have a special gift for post-processing unlike any other. How does an interested photographer contact you for this personalized service?*

David: Well, I didn't exactly announce it so much as let the word leak out. In working obsessively to perfect my own prints, I have learned a great deal about the printing process. A few photographers have contacted me asking if I would be willing to work with them to help them get the most from their portfolios and prints. I have found the process to be very rewarding so I am now offering this service to other artists on a very limited basis.

My intention is not to open a commercial print shop, but rather to work exclusively with a select few artists as time permits. If an artist is interested in having me work with them to improve their portfolio and their prints, they can contact me via email at: david@davidfokos.net.

3 Responses to “Focus on David Fokos and learn how to make a perfect photograph”

1. *Don Peters* says:
   December 17, 2011 at 10:31 am

   Thanks for sharing your story I found it very interesting and inspiring. I am a bit of an amateur nature photographer and have dabbled a bit in black and white but wow your work is amazing. How do you make the work look so perfect and the water is just so smooth. Nicely done!

   PD

   Reply
2. *Steve Coleman* says:
   May 29, 2012 at 8:53 am

   Thank you for this interview. Inspiring and helpful, most enjoyable. Cheers, Steve

   Reply

Trackbacks/Pingbacks

1. *Averaging Time with David Fokos — The Tripod Blog* says:
   December 17, 2011 at 8:07 pm

   [...] Fokos is a perfectionist, and we mean that in the best possible way: he averages 100 hours of work for every image he produces. The result is a streamlined portfolio of black-and-white images that emphasize certain elements while de-emphasizing others. “When composing,” Fokos says, “I pay particular attention to the background and the edges of the frame to make sure there is nothing there that will be a distraction. Often this means that I am not able to get a shot at all.” For more from this interview, visit Nature Landscape Photography Blog. [...]

   Reply

Leave a Reply

Name (required)

Mail (will not be published) (required)

Website

Submit Comment

five – 1 =