

Alain Briot

Beaux Arts Photography

Artistic positioning 2011

1- Technique and approach

Alain's work continues and expands the tenets of modern landscape photography. Like the classical masters that preceded him, who include Ansel Adams, Phillip Hyde, David Muench and many others, Alain seeks unique natural lighting conditions. Because good photographs are often created in bad weather, and seeks active weather conditions to photograph in. The light is his first and foremost concern because it is light that is the most important element of photography.

Similarly, and again like the classical masters that preceded him, Alain is constantly searching for those natural locations that will afford him the means of creating exciting compositions. To this end, the vantage point, the location itself is very important. However, the small details found at a specific location are just as important: patterns in rock formations, the visual rhythm formed by plants and rocks effectively visually organized and the repetition of similarly-shaped elements for example.

Combining the large landscape in front of him with the intimate landscape at his feet, enables Alain to create dynamic compositions. Often called near far composition, this approach allows his to show a scope of view larger than our eye can see in a single glance. While his images may appear "natural", many of them cannot be seen as such because the field of view they encompass far exceeds what our eyes can see at once.

Again, like the classical masters before him, in what was for them the darkroom which for Alain is the digital studio, Alain uses the tools available to him to refine the color, contrast and density of his photographs. His aim, as theirs was, is to create a final print that expresses, in the words of Ansel Adams, what Alain saw and felt or, in the words of Edward Weston, to turn things seen into things known. Alain's goal is to create images that are emotional renderings of the scenes Alain experienced.

However, while the classical masters sought to do little to their work in regards to composition after the photograph had been taken, Alain expands his work in this domain as well. Still using the digital tools available to him, Alain combines, reformats and warps images as he sees necessary to express his vision. Combination of images, from 2 to 8 or more, is necessary when the camera cannot capture the field of view Alain wants to show in a single frame. Adjusting the format of an image is necessary when an image does not offer the format, or the dynamic that Alain is looking for. And warping of the image is often required after images have been combined in order to turn the technical output of the computer into an image whose composition is artistically structured.

Digital processing gives the artist many tools that were not available in a darkroom environment. However, many photographers working with digital processing today apply the traditional darkroom approach to their digital processing work in a literal fashion. In doing so they forfeit many of the possibilities provided to them by digital processing. Many of the tools and possibilities offered by digital processing are not used when the traditional approach is applied as-is to digital processing.

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Alain feels that the traditional approach to landscape photography is unnecessarily limiting when applied to digital image processing. Giving himself the freedom to expand beyond the boundaries of the traditional approach allows Alain to create images that go beyond what can be achieved through a literal reproduction of the traditional approach in a digital context. It is this freedom that allows him to explore the numerous creative possibilities provided by digital processing. In turn, this freedom of exploration is what allows him to create new and never-before-seen images. Both his approach and his creative work demonstrate a daringness to explore territory uncharted by landscape photographers so far.

This methodology allows Alain to continue working within the traditional approach to landscape photography while expanding his style beyond this traditional approach. In doing so Alain gives a large freedom to his artistic approach, a freedom that allows him to create images that go beyond what can be done within the limitations of traditional landscape photography.

2-Personal expertise, artistic training, career path and personal life

My artistic inclinations go back to my childhood during which I engaged in many artistic endeavors using a wide variety of mediums. Encouraged by my parents, I pursued my artistic interests intensely, a pursuit that culminated by enrolling in a private art school in Paris to prepare for the entrance examination to the Academie des Beaux Arts. After successfully passing this entrance examination, I enrolled full time at the Beaux Arts from which I graduated with a degree in painting and drawing.

During these studies, and shortly afterwards, I also engaged in studying photography. For some time these two courses of studies ran concurrently, and I was effectively doing painting and drawing on some days and photography on other days.

My interest in photography stemmed from a certain boredom that I experienced doing solely painting and drawing, all day long, day after day after day. While at first such a regimen was a dream come true, it eventually revealed itself sorely lacking variety. Photography offered a remedy to this situation by allowing me to take my mind to places that my painting studies did not take me. Furthermore, it also brought me in contact with a contemporary medium, a medium in which both technique and technology were in continuous change and development, while painting was for the most part static, having changed little in terms of technique and technology for decades, if not centuries.

My photography studies were conducted at the American Center in Paris, under the guidance of Scott McLeay and occasionally of other instructors whose name I cannot recall at the moment. The American Center was one of only a few places where photography was taught as a fine art in Paris at the time. The other was Parson's School of Design, where darkroom sessions for American Center Photography classes were conducted.

Following these studies I continued to practice and explore photography on my own. I continued to practice painting and drawing, but I decided not to exhibit my paintings or drawings, only my photographs.

While my photography started by focusing on street scenes in Paris, France and Europe, I rapidly moved to

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photographing landscapes, for which I had been influenced early on by the work of Ansel Adams. My first interest in photography coincided with the publication of Adams' seminal work, *Yosemite and the Range of Light*, a book that I first saw in a photography bookstore in Paris, and which impressed me so much that after browsing through it quickly, I put it back on the shelf, walked out of the bookstore, and spent the next several hours recovering from the realization that photography could be much more than what I had seen so far or was able to accomplish by myself up to that point.

The discovery of Adams' work led to an attempt to duplicate his approach during a six-month trip throughout the Western United States in 1983 during which I worked solely with black and white Polaroid film (with a few packs of Color Polaroid thrown in) and an Arca Swiss 4x5 camera with a 90mm and a 210mm Rodenstock lenses.

This trip revealed to me the beauty of the American West, the extensive photographic opportunities it offered, and the impossibility of capturing all of this in six months with the equipment and budget I had to work with. Motivated by what I had seen and experienced, I returned to the US Southwest in 1986 as a foreign student enrolled in a Bachelor Degree program at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona. The choice of NAU as a university was based on Flagstaff being located on the Colorado Plateau, within a day or less drive to countless fantastic photography locations.

I received my Bachelor Degree from NAU in 1990 and two years later I received my Master's Degree, also from NAU. In 1992 I moved to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to work on my PhD. The Upper Peninsula offered photographic opportunities almost equal to those offered by Arizona, except that the cold and the snow lasted half a year instead of a couple of weeks. Eventually, the combination of cold weather and grad-student-status, with which came extreme workload, low pay and the challenge of doing photography semi-professionally while completing a PhD degree, proved too much for me. As a result, in 1995 I returned to Arizona where I started Beaux Arts Photography. I never turned back, and I have enjoyed a very high level of success ever since, proving to myself and to others who are curious about making such a change in their lives, that following your heart instead of plowing along in an unfulfilling activity can be the best decision you'll ever make.

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3-Sources of inspiration and artistic process

For me a work of art is primarily the product of a person, not of a machine. For this reason, a photograph printed straight from the original capture, either film or digital is unsatisfying. Such an image represents the output of my camera rather than the expression of my emotions.

While, as a photographer, I can to some extent choose the type of light, composition, lens, equipment and other technical aspects of the image, I have very little control over the artistic aspects of my work during image capture.

To satisfy my creativity I need to work on my photographs after I complete the image capture. For me, the creative aspect of photography starts after the image has been recorded by the camera. It is then that I am able to infuse the image with the emotional content that I experienced while being at the location where I took the photograph.

To this end I do to the image everything that I deem necessary. On the level of image adjustments, I first adjust the global color balance and the global contrast of the image to my taste. I then focus on individual colors and work towards making them the exact tonalities that I desire. Similarly, I adjust contrast so that it reflects the feeling of open, glowing light or of deep, mysterious shadows, according to my memories of the original scene.

On the level of image composition, I routinely collage multiple captures into a single image. The goal of these collages is to expand the field of view represented in the image far beyond what a single capture can show, even when the photograph is created with the widest lens available. These collages have the added benefit of representing time as well as space. Because the different images that compose the final work are taken over a span of time, which can vary from a few seconds to 25 minutes or more, the resulting collage shows the variation of light, the movement of clouds, and the changes in other moving elements that took place during the time required to complete the image captures.

I also clone elements that I deem unnecessary or unaesthetic. These elements are rarely "trash" (empty cans and other litter) because I can easily remove these prior to taking the photographs. Rather, these elements are either natural features that I could modify in the original scene, or elements that I did not "see" as troublesome when I took the original captures. These include, for example, branches or twigs intruding into the borders of the image, textures whose patterns are incomplete or visually unsatisfying and any other unwanted element.

The collage process often results in areas of the image being left blank. This is because as the collage process unfolds, the image is warped, stretched and "kneaded", so to speak, into a specific visual projection. Sometimes the goal is to project the image without any distortion. Sometimes the goal is to induce distortion purposefully to reinforce a specific pattern in the image, such as a sweeping curve, or a specific visual rhythm.

This process results in an image that rarely, if ever, fits into a rectangular format. Rather, the image ends up having rounded corners, and areas are routinely left empty, being simply "blank canvas" space. While I could choose to leave the image as it comes out of the collage process, I currently fill these blank image

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areas with details and patterns cloned from other areas of the image. This process is very similar to painting, in the sense that I add, ad lib, color and patterns that are the product of me imagining what could have existed in locations where there is currently nothing. In other words, I invent photographic information. I create part of the image from my own inspiration with the goal of expressing the emotions and the vision that I had while I took the original captures.

Because of this cloning and "image painting" process, cropping of the image is frequently necessary in order to eliminate unwanted areas and give straight borders to the image. This cropping, and of course the collage process, mean that the final image format is quite different from the original capture format. This final image format is arrived upon because of the image's needs not because of the desire to use a specific, or a "standard," format.

On occasion, the image format that I arrive at through the process I just described is unsatisfactory. In those situations I stretch the image digitally, either in the width or in the height, to give it proportions that represent my vision rather than the technical output provided by the computer and camera combination. This stretching may be rather moderate or quite extensive, depending on the needs of each individual image. When performing this important step, my concern is to not distort natural element beyond believability.

Here, as well as in the other aspects of my work, my concern is believability rather than reality. In other words my goal is not to create an image that represents something that exists, as is, in reality, in the "real" landscape. Rather, my goal is to create an image that is believable, an image of something that one can consider to be possible, even though one could not quite find this exact same image in nature.

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