

Aesthetics & Photography  
Part 11

Being an artist in Business - 1  
*My Story Part One*



*Wolf, Moose & Island*  
Collage created during my Artist in Residence stay at Isle Royale National Park

by  
Alain Briot

BEING AN ARTIST IN BUSINESS IS DIVIDED INTO THREE PARTS, AS FOLLOWS:

-1-

My Story-part 1

-2-

My Story-part 2

-3-

How you can do it too

# Being an Artist in Business

by  
Alain Briot

- 1 -

## *My Story Part One*

*Your pictures would have been finished a long time ago  
if I were not forced every day to do something to earn money.*  
Edgar Degas in a Letter to Jean-Baptiste Faure,  
contemporary art collector, 1877.

### **1-Introduction**

This essay is the long-awaited continuation of my previous essay *Being an Artist*. In this previous essay I made a sharp distinction between being an artist and being an artist in business. The reasons for this distinction will be clear by the time you reach the end of this essay.

As I was writing this rather difficult text, I realized that it was getting longer and longer. This is due in large part to my decision of structuring this essay around an account of my story as an artist in business. I pondered a long time about which format to use for this essay, and finally concluded that telling my story was the best approach and for several reasons.

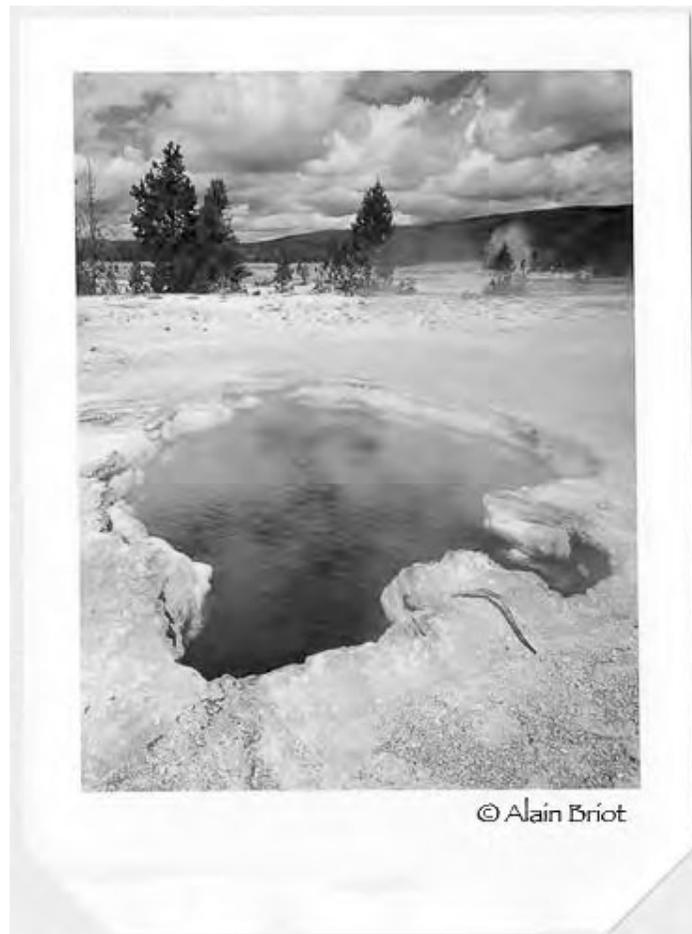
First, this is the last essay in a long series, and several times during this series I felt that telling my story was important. This is my last chance to do so and I don't want to miss it.

Second, what better way is there to show what it is to be an artist in business than by telling the story of how I came to be an artist in business? Business is really a hands-on activity. It's not so much about theory and ideas than it is about doing it.

Third, everyone likes a success story, and this is such a story. So make yourself comfortable, pick up your favorite chair, and get ready for an interesting read.

Before I start I want to mention that the goal of this essay is not to act as a photography-marketing course. For this I offer a number of resources on my website, such as a marketing CD, marketing workshops and a one on one consulting program. Rather, the goal of this essay is first to help you understand first how *selling art* differs from *making art*, second to show you how I found myself following *the path less traveled*, to use Robert Frost's metaphor, and third to describe what happened along this path. As Edward Abbey says in the introduction to *Desert Solitaire*, and I paraphrase, *How I got here no longer matters. What happened here is what this book is all about*. Let's see what this is all about.

This essay is structured as an account of my personal journey from Student to professional photographer, a Journey that covers nearly 20 years. I started this journey when I started Beaux Arts Photography in 1995. We are now in 2005, the tenth year anniversary of me being *An Artist I Business*. I did not plan it that way. Clearly, when I started I had no idea that one day I would be writing an essay about being in business for a worldwide audience. Yet, this is exactly what I am doing now. As we will see in the course of what follows, you never know exactly where an important decision can take you.



*Surprise Pool, Yellowstone National Park, 1983*  
Arca Swiss 4x5, Rodenstock 90mm, Polaroid Type 52

## 2 – Travels

*My favorite thing is to go where I've never been.*  
Diane Arbus

I am tempted to say that all good photographs start with a great journey. At least mine did. Journeys open the heart, the soul and the eyes and with open eyes one sees clearly, sees a new world, a world that, for those who have lived in it forever, is no longer visible.

In June of 1983 I flew from Paris to LA, bought a Ford Pinto for \$600 from a private owner, and drove it for 6 months through Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, California, Colorado, part of Idaho and most of Arizona, not necessarily in this order and not in equal amounts in each of the aforementioned states.

In late August 1983 I drove from somewhere in the Western Colorado Rockies to Arches National Park. The trip was long and night fell before I could reach Arches. Yet, motivated to see with my own eyes what I had seen so far only in magazines, I decided to press on regardless. It was a moonless night, and I knew I had arrived in Arches only because of the sign that read “Arches National Park.” I parked across the road from the sign and proceeded to set up the tent at the base of a sand dune. If you drive to Arches you can easily find my camping spot, in front of the Park’s entrance: the sand dune has become a favorite place for visitors to slide down on. In retrospect I can hardly believe I camped there and I wonder how a police officer or Park Ranger didn’t ask me to leave. Maybe the night was too dark to be seen, maybe there was no county ordinance about doing so (after all I was not in the park, just very close to it), maybe I was just lucky (yes).



*Courthouse Towers, Arches National Park, 1983*  
Arca Swiss 4x5, Rodenstock 210mm, Polaroid Type 52

Who knows and who cares. What's done is done. What matters is what happened the next morning when I woke up to the otherworldly sight of towering sandstone walls, rock spires stretching towards the sky on top of the mesa in front of me, and color, color and more color: reds in hues I had never seen or imagined before, reds streaked with black stains of desert varnish running down the sandstone walls for hundreds of feet, sparse vegetation that clung to the sandstone walls for dear life, and the sky, blue as can be, filling the space above the mesas, with just enough soft white clouds to make the scene irresistible. The road, the ranger station, the US flag, the signs (*Do not park along the road - No Firearms - No Camping*) were, in the photographic passion that this view generated in me, invisible to me and thus did not detract from the beauty that was all around me.

I packed my tent and proceeded into the park, unhindered by rangers who weren't on duty yet (*Entrance Station Opens at 8 am - Please Proceed*), and found myself, having driven up the sandstone cliff, into the delight of sandstone. This was a foreign world, a world that no photographer can ever forget, a world that needed time to be understood and photographed well. I knew then that I would have to come back, that this trip, no matter how long or how intense, would not be enough.

### **3 – Beginnings**

*If the path be beautiful, let us not ask where it leads.*  
Anatole France

Come back I did in 1986, three years later. In 1986 I moved from France to Flagstaff, Arizona to study photography at NAU, Northern Arizona University. When I showed my portfolio to the head of the photography department, and asked which classes he suggested I sign up for, his answer was "any class you like, including graduate classes." To me his answer meant that none of the photography classes offered by NAU was worth my time and that I wouldn't learn much from any of them. Why? Because how could I qualify for a graduate class when I just entered the American University system? I took the decision right there and then to switch my major from Photography to Journalism and study landscape photography on my own. After all, I was in the right place to do so, having chosen Flagstaff based on its proximity to the Grand Canyon and countless other stunningly photogenic natural locations.

Journalism turned out to be an interesting major and in many ways it helped me tremendously with grammar and the mechanics of writing. But the theory part, which is what interested me most, proved to hold my attention for no more than a year. At that time I decided to switch my major to English, in large part because I found it one of the most challenging majors available to me at the time.

English proved to be it in terms of my academic studies. I also discovered that while literature was interesting rhetoric was fascinating. After receiving my Bachelor's Degree in 1990 I decided to work on a Masters in Rhetoric. I received my MA from NAU in 1992 at which time I moved to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to work on a PhD in Rhetoric and Visual Communications at MTU: Michigan Technological University. At the time MTU offered the only program I could find on Visual Rhetoric. What is Visual Rhetoric? This is the exact question that was asked of my PhD dissertation committee director the first time we met. I told him that if I sat in front of a poster of Lenin, and was photographed, then sat in front of a poster of Reagan, and was photographed, that the two photographs would tell something entirely different about myself (provided we had only the photographs to look at and no other information).

He agreed that visual rhetoric was a reality and we moved on to design a course of study and assemble a committee. However, his question –which to me was a non issue- raised my suspicions about the level of intelligence of his department. After all, they had accepted me on the basis of a carefully written letter describing my goals, letter in which I explicitly stated I wanted to focus on visual rhetoric. So why ask what visual rhetoric was now and not before I moved half way across the country? Today, as I look back at all this, I cannot help but think of a flyer I saw posted in a real estate agency near Holbrook, Arizona. On this poster a photo of Tom Cruise and a photo of an aging, tooth-less and dishevelled man are placed side by side. Under the dishevelled, tooth less, vagrant looking aging man it says “I run East. Under Tom Cruise it says “I only run West.” I wish I had seen this poster before moving to MTU. I wouldn't have run East so quickly.

By now you have a good idea of what is to come next. But the specifics aren't clear yet. You are correct. Stay tuned, it's coming.

#### **4 - An attempt to merge art and studies**

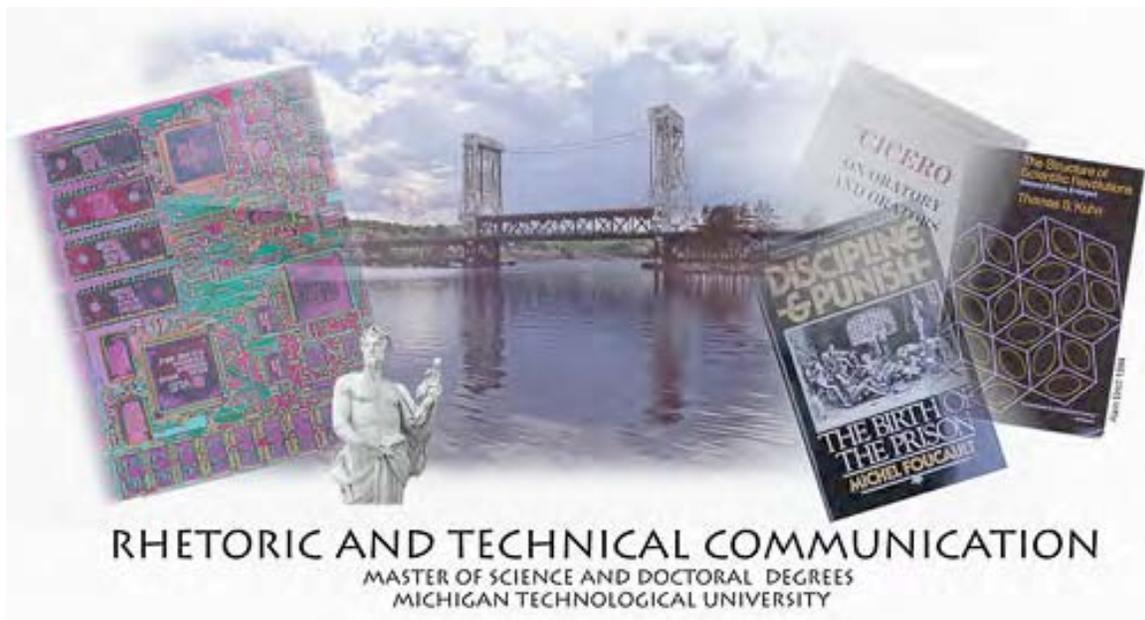
*Artists live in an imperfect world where affairs of the heart  
must sometimes be compromised with business.*

Sara Genn

My goal when I applied to MTU was two fold: first, to study an academic area of high interest to me then and now, namely how photographs are used to shape our understanding of the natural world, to express how specific cultures perceive nature and the role it plays in society. Second, to try and bring together my two interests: academic studies and landscape photography. I had assiduously practiced and studied photography while at NAU, building a body of work counting in the tens of thousands of photographs, most of them in medium format, a size I found to be compatible with hiking while delivering the quality I wanted. I had shows of my work, and I had written extensively about photography, during that time, more in an attempt to reflect upon the subject than with the goal of publishing my writings.

I had also excelled academically, maintaining a 3.87 GPA as an undergraduate and a 4.0 GPA as a graduate student. I had submitted papers to numerous conferences and had been accepted to all of them (a 100% track record in terms of conference submissions is uncommon). The PhD, as I saw it, was my last chance to bring my studies and my photography together. Being “a terminal degree” it represented both the end of the road in terms of academic studies and a final commitment to be an academic and not something else. Thus, I thought that I better get it in line with my photography, otherwise my energy, no matter how high, would not be enough to sustain professional work in both fields, i.e. academia and photography.

MTU attracted me because my idea of merging the two disciplines which I was working in was well received by the faculty, at least in so far as the feedback I received from them by mail. I had been accepted on the basis of my stated goals to design a course of study on visual rhetoric while focusing on photographs as “texts.” It all sounds very academic now but at the time it was real and at the forefront of what I could conceive of. I had also been offered a position as a teaching assistant, teaching photography classes at MTU and running the darkroom.



*An illustration I created for the Rhetoric and Technical Communication Program at MTU.*

The idea was to depict the program as a bridge (literally) between practice and theory. I was originally offered to have the image credited to my name as payment, but I insisted on getting “hard cold cash.” A phone call to the department chair inquiring about the budget for this project turned out that \$2000 had been placed aside for this illustration.

I was paid this amount for creating this image.

Things always look good from a distance, and the distance is great between Flagstaff, Arizona and Houghton, Michigan. When I arrived in Houghton I found out that not only would I have to teach photography classes and run the darkroom, as it turned out I would actually be the *entire* photography department myself. The previous teacher had retired, the one hired after him had gone back to New York, and there was nobody but me to take care of this aspect of the Humanities course load.

Not that it bothered me. In fact I enjoyed the responsibility which I perceived to be proof that I was trusted to do the job. Sometimes, and in this instance definitely, being overloaded with work can be perceived as a sign that one is deemed capable above the norm. I thus proceeded to clean the darkroom from 30 years of accumulated “photographic debris” to put it pleasantly, the duration of my predecessors tenure. I also proceeded to hire darkroom assistants and tend to the darkroom budget that I was responsible to balance. I became, in this respect, introduced to the concept of the “ballpark figure” in terms of getting the budget to a point that made sense to all. Yet, getting financial figures in the ballpark, an area quite large when you think of it figuratively (and the reason why sending the ball out of the park is such a feat), can be somewhat challenging. I could never quite get used to it, and as a result always strived to get the figures right on. I couldn’t quite operate not knowing precisely how much money was available to me. I did not know it at the time, but this approach was going to prove very useful later on when I became an artist in business.

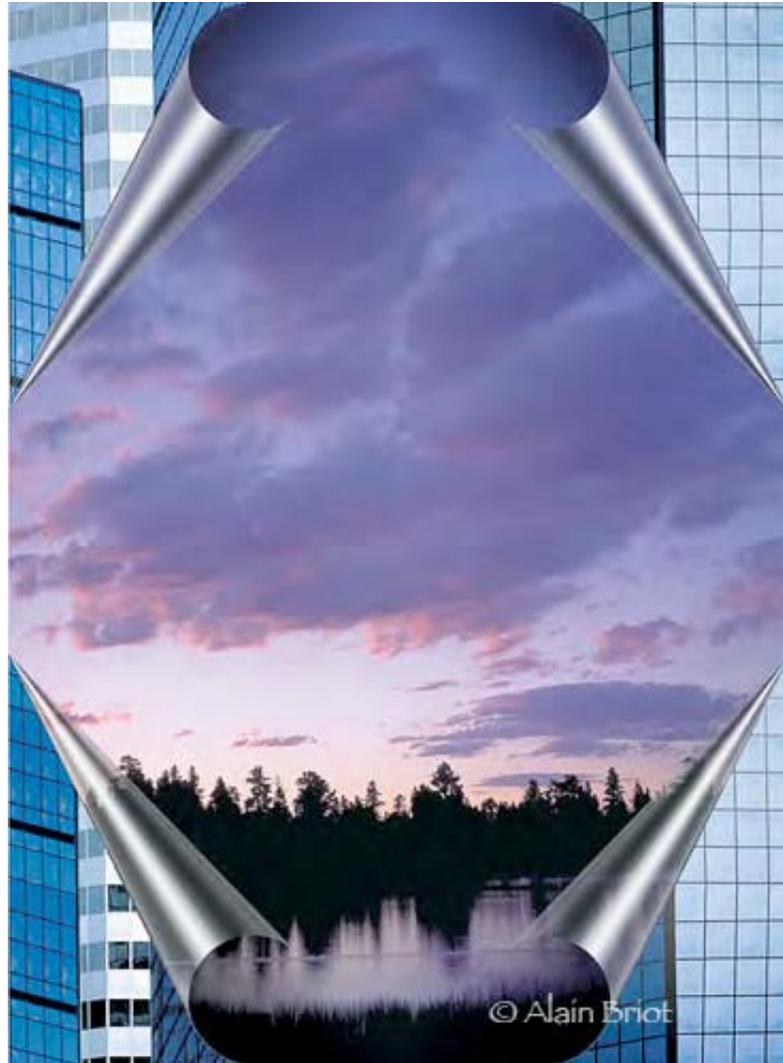
Since only one Photography course was offered per semester, I had to teach two other classes –English 101 as it turned out- to meet my Teaching Assistant responsibilities which were to teach 3 classes per semester. The fact that I had to be in the darkroom a certain number of hours a week to supervise my darkroom assistants (they couldn’t answer all the students questions), had to balance the budget, order darkroom supplies, place ads looking for darkroom assistants then interview them and sometimes find replacements when the ones I originally hired decided not to continue for the remainder of the term, did not count towards the 3 classes obligation. I mentioned it to the department chair –Cindy Selfe- to no avail. The rules were the rules and the fact I taught a class that had more work than others was not a reason to change the rules. Case closed, deal done: get back to work.

Which I did, moving along with my studies (3 PhD level classes per semester), completing the various requirements for my PhD (committee meetings, oral exams, written exams, etc.) homework (tests, papers, finals) , applying to conferences (at least one per semester), and of course teaching two subjects (English and Photography), then three as I added a digital photography class, and finally four when it was deemed necessary I also teach a Technical Writing class in addition to Photography, Digital Photography, English 101 and English 102. The workload kept increasing.

By the beginning of my second semester at MTU I had raised the darkroom fees enough to afford a film scanner and a copy of Photoshop 2.5. With this equipment

available I created the first digital photography class at MTU. It was so revolutionary (at the time) that my syllabus was published by Harper Collins. I had also, by 1992, moved to digital photography myself. I continued to shoot film (digital capture was not a reality yet) but processed and printed my photographs digitally. I gave conference presentations, wrote syllabuses, read hundreds of books, and maintained a 4.0 GPA as a graduate student. In addition, and to conclude this part of my story, I never misbalanced the budget, had students complain about my teaching, or had any complaint whatsoever from my professors. All in all, and despite the overwhelming workload I was under, I managed to keep it all together, trudging along relentlessly and, I must add to my surprise, quite happily.

Except for one thing: financial reward. My salary then, as a teaching assistant, was a meager \$500 per month, if that much (\$485 sounds more like it). With such income I had to pay for all expenses which meant that my car was a beater, my house a disaster and my personal photography expenditures supported by credit card companies. I could have applied for a student loan, a solution most of my fellow students chose to embrace, however I didn't. Natalie already had student loans and the idea of adding debt to debt wasn't something I looked forward to. In addition, Natalie's income was supplemented to mine and between the two of us we could absorb most expenses. We weren't getting anywhere financially, but we were maintaining ourselves. At least that's what we thought. Natalie was a 7<sup>th</sup> grade substitute teacher by day and a bartender by night. I will let you ponder the philosophical implications of this situation. Some Junior High educational problems have origins that are challenging to pinpoint unless you know the full story.



*Landscape Curl*  
*One of the first digital images I created.*

## **5 - The beginning of a career**

*Art and business may be strange bedfellows,  
but an artist must make room in her bed for both.*

Eric Maisel

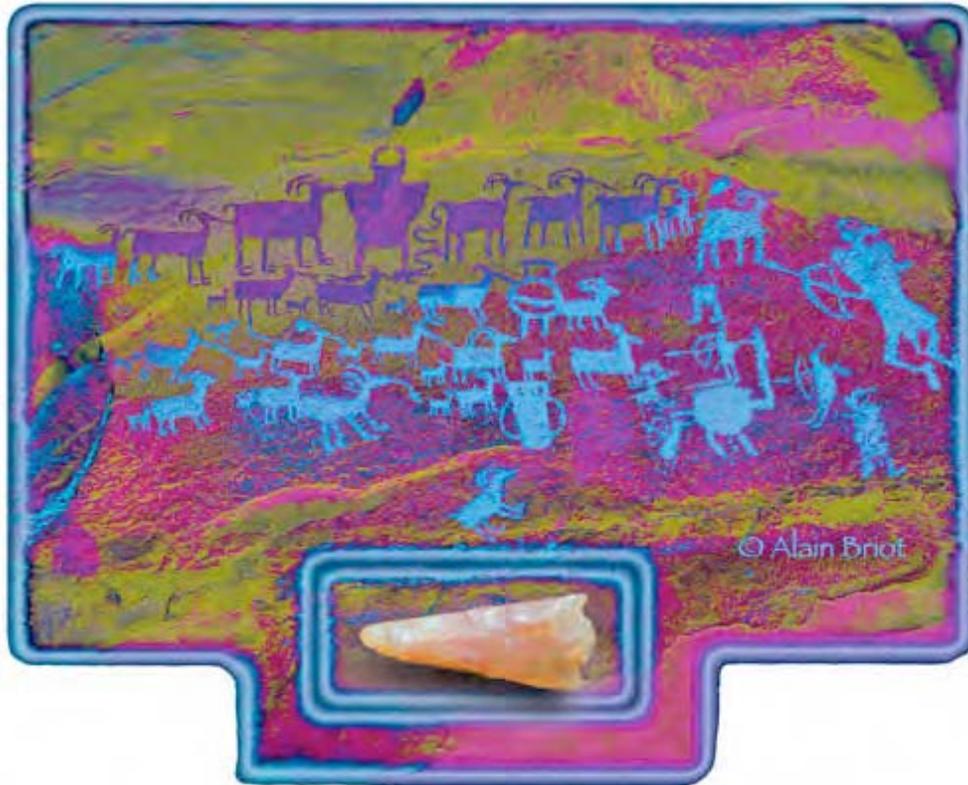
Digital photography is expensive. Unlike chemical photography you must update your equipment regularly, not just your cameras but also your computer, software, printer, etc. Plus, you cannot afford not to upgrade. Doing so means you are left with antiquated equipment, not just in terms of photography but in terms of everything else, since the computer is in a way the nexus of your operation. An antiquated computer doesn't just mean you are not at the forefront of digital imaging. Neither are you at the forefront of web design, page design, color calibration, computing speed, operating system, web access and so on. Older computers aren't just older, they are also unable to run the latest operating systems or the latest software. They are unable to take advantage of the latest and fastest connections such as, at this time, USB 2, firewire, optical connection, Ethernet 1000 and so on.

I still have the Apple Quadra 840av I originally purchased in 1992. There is nothing technically wrong with it, and it will continue to work the way it was designed to work for as long as the hardware holds up. But it has a SCSI connection, something that sounds already out of a Computer History 101 course, is unable to accept more than 1gb of ram, something that sounds like what you get with any computer right off the shelf, has a 40mb hard drive, hardly enough to install Photoshop CS. It also has a 250mhz processor, a small databus, Apple OS 7, and so on. In other words, it is perfectly fine if you want to forever live, operate and do business in the digital world of 1992. But if you want to operate and do business in today's world you need to get one of today's computers.

Not so with cameras, at least as far as film is concerned. A film camera can potentially serve a photographer protective of his equipment his whole life. Certainly, over the course of this photographer's career, improvements in bodies and lenses will be made, such as autofocus, image stabilization, auto exposure and so on. But these improvements will not be introduced each month. Rather, they will be introduced once every few years. And, it is possible to buy the latest lenses and use them on the original camera body. Because a film camera can accept any film, it provides the opportunity to save on the camera and instead spend your money on the good quality film.

Upgrading a film camera is also more of a necessity in some types of photography than in others. In sport photography, or any field in which shooting speed is important, upgrading to the latest models is a must to stay at the top of the field. But in landscape photography, where speed is not so important, this is far less the case, especially if you use large format. While large format lenses have seen improvements over the past 10 years, such as Schneider's introduction of remarkable lens designs in recent years, few if any changes were made to the basic design of a 4x5 view camera. So much so that many landscape

photographers today use relatively older 4x5 cameras with newer lenses mounted on them. Same with film. Once Velvia was introduced in the early 80's, many landscape photographers saw little need to look any further in terms of their film of choice. One could stock up on Velvia without fear of being overextended. Once frozen it was good forever and one could consider his stock of Fuji film an investment rather than an exercise in over-confidence.



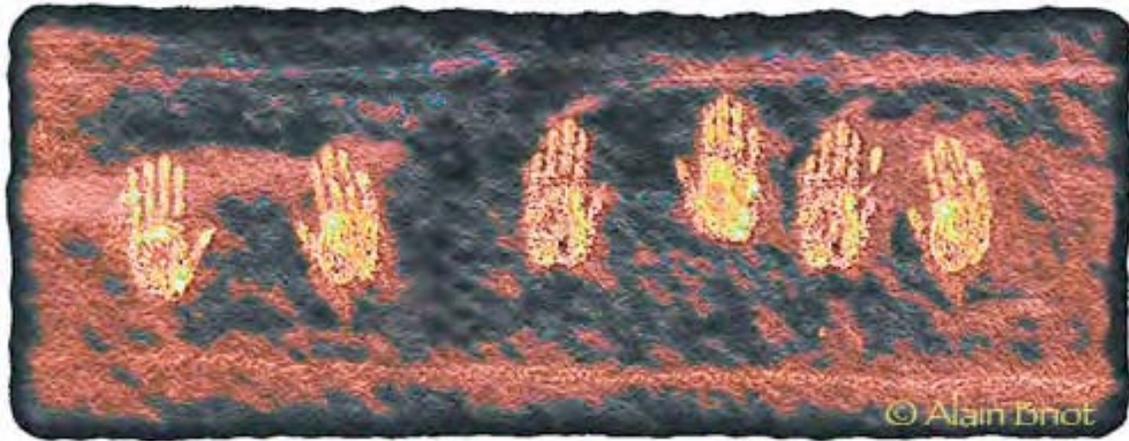
*Hunt and Arrowhead*

This image is part of a series on rock art which I created in 1993. Images in this series were modified through numerous layer mode combinations.

All this to say that digital photography was much more expensive than film photography, because the equipment had to be replaced so often. It quickly became clear to me that if I did not generate an income from digital photography I would not be able to continue. I had to have some cash coming in. It couldn't be all going out. To achieve this there was only one solution: I had to sell some of my work. That was the only solution since my GTA paycheck was not able to cover my digital photography expenses.

I had never sold my work so I made all the usual peregrinations, mistakes, and errors. I started, as can be expected, by seeking gallery representation. Finding galleries was easy. Giving them artwork, keeping track of inventory (who had

what and how many of each) was more challenging. Getting paid –if and when they sold something- was even more difficult. It quickly became clear that galleries were a poor solution to my cash flow problems: I had to pay for inventory up front. I had no guarantee they would sell anything. If they did sell something I had to wait a month or longer to get paid. I needed to reinvest some of that money in new inventory. I only got 50% of the selling price. Except in rare occasions I did not know who the buyers were. Finally I could not, per my contract, sell directly to gallery customers without giving 50% of each sale to the gallery.



*Six Hands*

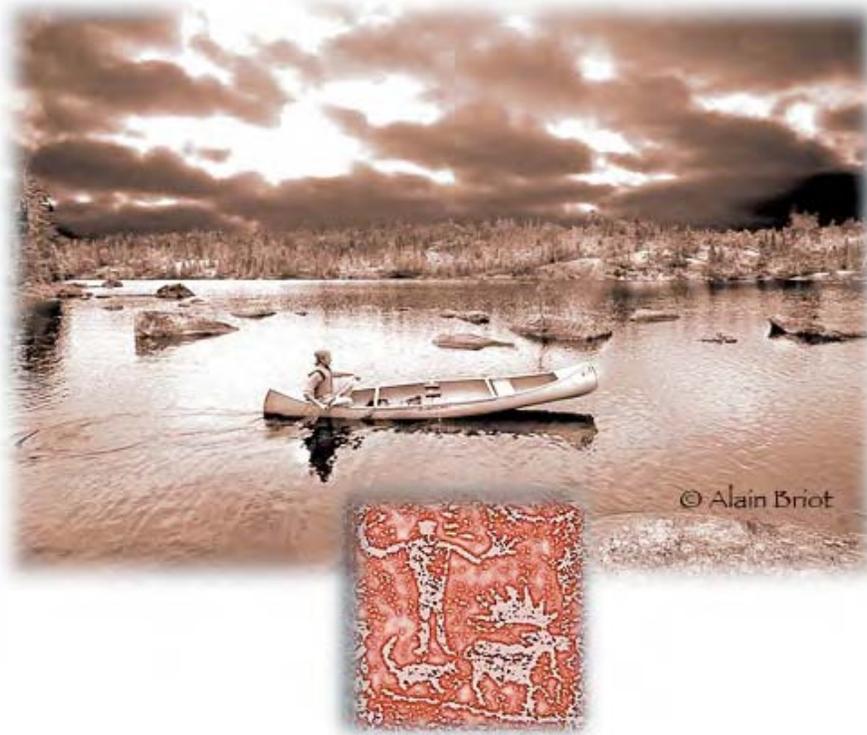
One of the first images I sold. It is part of the same series as *Hunt & Arrowhead*.

I tried shows and direct sales and I found that this approach worked a lot better. At shows I got paid when the sale was made, I got 100% of the selling price, and I knew who bought my work which enabled me to build a customer base and opened the possibility of making repeat sales to the same customers. It did not take me long to find out which system was more advantageous to me.

But making sales was not enough in my estimate. I thought that I also had to make a name for myself. I therefore sought interviews and articles in local and national newspapers and magazines, publications, cover stories, and the like. I was quite successful in this endeavor only to discover that these publications did not result in additional print sales. Certainly, there were people out there learning about myself and about my work, but these people did not pick up the phone to order photographs although my contact information was in each article. I did not know it then, but I was confusing fame and fortune, as we will see later in part 3 of this essay.

I also applied and was accepted in two Artist in Residence programs at Isle Royale National Park and at Apostle Islands National Lakeshore. This proved to be one of the best things I ever did. While it can be said that it promoted my name more than my fortune, this is not a true statement because it opened the doors to sell my work wholesale in several National Parks. Wholesale was a venue that was

unknown to me at the time, so having access to park giftstores and bookstores as a venue for my work was a breakthrough.



*In the Boundary Waters*

*My exploration of Northern Michigan and Wisconsin provided the inspiration for numerous images, such as this collage of three photographs, the sky being imported from an image taken in Arizona prior to my move to Michigan.*

**6 - The straw that broke the camel's back**

At any rate, whether I was doing photography or pursuing my studies, I was working very hard. I did not complain. After all, this was my choice. I could have stopped, done something else, or reduced the amount of activities I was involved in. Hard work did not bother me.

So what gave? What gave was one of my graduate teachers demonstrating a racist attitude towards me. This took the form of him calling me a frog during a graduate teaching class in which I was giving a presentation on that particular day. I was so absorbed in my presentation that I did not notice. It was the other graduate students –my classmates- who came to me after the class and explained what happened. I was so far away from considering it a possibility that a teacher would be racist towards a student that I did not believe them at first. However, when confronted with the facts, and having come down from my sole focus for the class which was doing my best during my presentation, I had to admit they were right. Furthermore, why would fellow students –not one but nearly the entire class- take the time and effort to point this out to me unless they thought something wrong was going on?

I took the matter to my PhD committee, who suggested I address it with the teacher,. Needless to say, I did not see how this was going to help. I then took it to the chair of the department, who suggested the same. I took it to equal opportunity department who also suggested I try to address the issue with him. I wasn't going anywhere.



*Sand Island Light*

A collage of 5 photographs, this image was created during my Artist in Residence stay at the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore. This image was sold as a poster and notecards in the Apostlte Islands giftstore. A limited edition print was donated to the Lakeshore and featured in the Visitor Center.

To this day I dislike talking about this event, and for this reason I am keeping the description of what happened to a minimum. I dislike to discuss it so much that I put this essay on hold, at the start of this section, for over a month and may not have proceeded forward with it if it wasn't for the request of several readers asking when the next installment to this series would be published. This isn't fiction. This is real. This is an event that affected my life and caused me to make significant changes to my life. As we will see, these changes have been for the best. In many ways, these changes freed me. But it didn't look this way at the time.

### **7- Doing what I love**

It was then that I had what some call an epiphany but which I personally prefer to call a mind opening realization, a vision, or a moment of enlightenment: I realized, in the flash of a second, that no matter what activity I would pursue -- be it studies, photography, or any other endeavor—from the most ambitious to the least ambitious, I was going to encounter serious difficulties. There were going to

be people that would try to discourage me and people that would be jealous of my success. Right now it was racism coming from one of my teachers. Tomorrow it would be something else. Finally, there would others who wanted the same thing I wanted and with whom I would have to compete.

What I realized right there and then on that day, in the moment at which the straw was going to break the camel's back, was this:

*Since anything you choose to do to the best of your abilities will present difficulties,  
you might as well do exactly what you like.*

I realized that I might as well choose to do precisely what I wanted to do, without caring much about what others thought or what my chances of success would be, because it was going to be hard to matter what. By choosing to do what I loved I actually placed one more chance on my side, and that chance was my extreme motivation to succeed, since nothing can motivate someone to succeed more than trying to be successful at doing what they love. I may or may not succeed, but at least I would have done something that I loved. If I did anything else, the same chances of success or failure were present, but without the reward of doing something I enjoyed doing.

I might as well fail doing what I loved than doing something I disliked. And again, who said I was going to fail?

### **8- Why didn't I think of this before ?**

This realization made me wonder why I didn't think of it before. Why didn't I decide to do what I love before? I thought about it for a week before the answer came to me. When it did I was shocked:

*I had carried with me the unconscious belief  
that I couldn't make a living doing what I really wanted to do.  
Others could do it, but I couldn't.*

*That belief had prevented me from even trying.*

Why didn't I think of doing what I love before? Simply because I believed, unconsciously, that I could not make a living doing what I loved. I had to do another job, another activity, then do what I really wanted to do on the side. Others could do it, but for some reason I did not include myself in this group.

This belief had been with me for many years. Interestingly, it only took days for it to disappear when I became aware of it. In a way, becoming aware of this unconscious belief was the key to eliminating it. Awareness, some may say, made it vanish. Within days I was talking to others about it, within weeks I had left it behind and moved on.



### *Island Fishing*

A second collage created from photographs taken during my residency at the Apostle Islands. Natalie and I were given use of a cabin on Sand Island where we stayed for 3 weeks. We were ferried between all 12 islands on National Park Service boats, and stayed in lighthouses and other park housing when unable to return to our cabin the same day.

## **8-Opportunities often come under the guise of hard work**

*The most common money-related mistake artists make  
is a reluctance to invest in their own careers.*

Michelangelo

I talked about all this with Natalie and we decided to move back to Arizona (remember, I was studying in Michigan) at the end of the semester, which was only a few weeks away.

We moved back to Flagstaff, where Natalie's sister lived, and stayed with her for a month or so. More precisely, we rented a U-Haul truck, loaded all our belongings in it, and drove as leisurely as possible from Michigan to Arizona, using all the travel days the U-Haul company allotted us plus some. In Flagstaff we rented a storage unit, unloaded the contents of the U-Haul into it, returned the truck to the rental company, and started our new life. We spent some time at the House of Natalie's sister, which became our mailing address, but mostly we spent our time camping, relaxing, exploring and photographing Northern Arizona. We had both come out of a pretty difficult time in our life and we needed this time off. Natalie

had applied to several teaching positions on the Navajoland and Hopi reservations and there was nothing much to do for us besides wait for the call, or the letter, and go to the interview.

Our travels throughout Northern Arizona brought us eventually to Grand Canyon. How can one not make it there? It is, after all, a world-famous location. During our visit to Grand Canyon we walked in front of the North Porch of the El Tovar Hotel. On this porch, located less than 50 feet from the rim of Grand Canyon, were two artists selling their work. I looked at their displays, looked at Natalie, then said: this would be the perfect place to sell my work. Little did I know that not only was I 100% correct, I had also found the one location that was about to change my life forever.

Natalie eventually found a teaching position in Chinle, in the heart of the Navajo Nation. I found a teaching position at NAU in Flagstaff but turned it down because the higher cost of living in Flagstaff meant that even if Natalie found a teaching position herself in Flagstaff we would have made less money than with Natalie alone teaching in Chinle. So we decided to move to Chinle and once there have me focus on my photography. It was a gamble but it paid off.



*Canoe on Isle Royale*

Part of my Artist in Residency Portfolio for Isle Royale National Park. At Isle Royale we were responsible for our own transportation and were provided with the canoe shown on the photograph above for this purpose. We used it daily.

### **9-The first best place to start a business is on the Navajo Reservation**

*Artists are often excellent businessmen.  
They have to be. Otherwise they do not remain artists.*

A.Y. Jackson

Chinle had good sides and bad sides. You probably already know the bad sides so I won't mention them. Let's look at the good sides instead. I've always said that Chinle is the best place to start a business. Why? Because all the major reasons that cause a new business to go under are not available in Chinle. First, there are no distractions of any sort –no movie theater, no disco, no nothing. So, you must focus on what you are doing. The only distraction, other than doing nothing, is to work. So I worked. I worked on my photography, on a million and one things aimed at getting it ready to sell. Second there is no stigma attached to men staying home while their wife goes out to work, or vice versa. In fact, this is a very common situation on the reservation since there are few jobs and most households are lucky enough to have one member work at all. So, having me stay home and do my thing did not bring uproars, screams of anger, claims of spouse abuse, or other allusions to laziness on my part. Rather, when people asked *What does Alain do?*, Natalie would tell them that I worked on my photography, and they would nod in approval. I had a goal and I was doing something that mattered to me. All was well in their view.

The second thing that makes Chinle the ideal place for starting a business is that you cannot get a business loan and thereby must have a business which is profitable right away. Why can't you get a business loan? Because as a white person you are not supposed to have a business. Only Native Americans can have a business. So, in this situation, why would you ask for a business loan? It would be similar to asking for a loan to buy drugs. "Sorry, can't do it" would be the answer from the loan officer as she discreetly pushes the secret red button under his desk to alert the police officer standing nearby. Nope. Not an option. So, what do you do? Well you must finance your operation out of your own pocket or from the profit generated by your business.

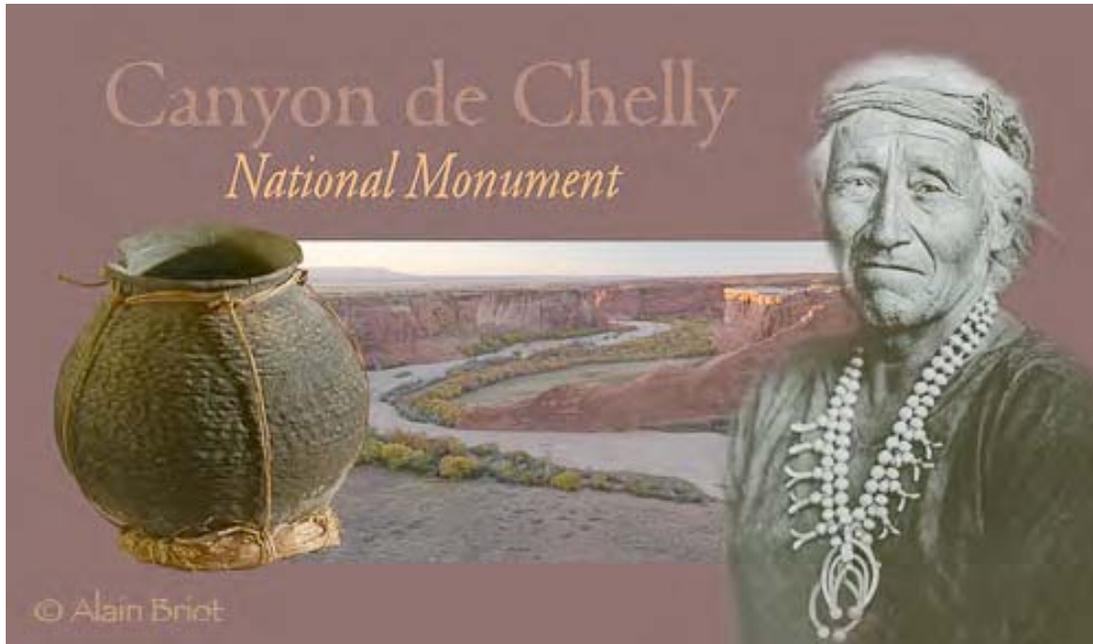
The third reason that makes Chinle the ideal place to start not just a business but a landscape photography business is that you don't have to go anywhere to be at some of the most photogenic places in the world. They are right there at your doorstep, so to speak. In my case it was a 10 minute drive to Tsegi Overlook and a 20 minute drive to Spiderrock, two of the most stunning locations in Canyon de Chelly. If I felt more adventurous, I could drive one and a half hours to Monument Valley or, should I really decide to go all out, drive half a day West to Zion, Bryce Canyon, Escalante-Grand Staircase, Grand canyon. I could also drive half a day East to Mesa Verde, Chaco Canyon, Bisti Badlands, etc. etc. There was no shortage of subjects, and I didn't have to worry about travel costs. I was already there.

Others were coming here, driving thousand of miles or flying half way around the world to see this landscape. I was already there. Hey, I lived there! Not only did I not have to drive any more than I would drive to go to the grocery store, I could visit these places at any time of the day, night or year. I could –and did- get up the morning after a snowstorm or during a late summer monsoon storm, or any time I pretty darned please, and photograph my heart out. If I hadn't lived there, I

would never have got some of the photographs I captured. The probabilities of finding yourself in Canyon de Chelly the morning after a snowstorm are small. First, it doesn't snow all that often. Second, the perfect conditions for a photogenic snow scene are rarely present all at once. Third, you do have to be there, which can only happen in 3 situations: 1- You live there. 2- You know the storm is coming and you are able to drive there, something more difficult than it seems because the roads are not always plowed. 3- You are just plain lucky. Clearly, living there is the best solution and the one that gives you an edge. It was my situation, and it did give me an edge. Was it fair? You bet. I was paying my dues big time back then so any edge I might get was fair.

The fourth reason why this was the place is called motivation. A lot of people lack the necessary motivation to succeed. When I lived in Chinle, motivation was staring at me right in the face. All I had to do was look out of the window and I would be motivated. The dilapidated houses, the trash in the streets, the dogs running amuck and barking endlessly, the cannibalized cars, the piles of worn out tires, etc. The poverty, unkeptness, desolation were my motivation to get to a better place. It was what kept me going if I needed something to keep me going. Eventually, it proved too much to handle and I had to get out faster than I thought. We'll get to that in part two, I just couldn't help but mention it already. What a place!

The fifth reason is that operating a business in Chinle involved no overhead. We operated out of our house (read mobile home) and the rent plus utilities was \$205 a month. Furthermore, it was automatically taken out of Natalie's paycheck, which means that after a while we got used to Natalie getting paid a certain amount and stopped thinking we were actually paying rent. At any rate, it was a very low amount, and to make things even better it never increased during the 7 years we lived there.



*Canyon de Chelly Collage*

One of the first images I created after returning to Arizona.

And there is a sixth reason. There has to be a sixth reason. You just can't end the list on negativity. That sixth reason was the Navajo people themselves and their unique, ageless I should say, approach to life. In two words, their permissiveness and their lack of judgment. On the reservation, on any reservation I would think but definitely on the Navajo Reservation, being an artist is OK. It is OK to make a living by selling art. It is OK to make art and nothing else. It is OK to stay home all day to do so. They would often ask me, at the Kindergarten Center depot where I went to pick up packages that somehow had ended up there, "so you are an artist?" They would see the huge rolls of bubble wrap, which came 5 rolls at a time for quantity discount, and measured thousands of feet all together, and knew that somehow this wasn't for home consumption. They could put two and two together. I was packing artwork. I was protecting it. What artwork, for whom, to where, all this wasn't known to them and wasn't all that important. What mattered, what raised their curiosity, was that I was an artist and that I was doing well with it. That was OK. That was part of normal life. Being an artist was not off the wall. Their uncles, brothers, sisters, parents were artists: weavers, painters, sculptors, kachina carvers. They were artists from generations past and their children would be artists. Art was a way to make a living on the reservation, not something one finds in a museum or in upper education classes. Art was life and as an artist I was part of life.

The Navajos believe that one shouldn't judge someone else. That one shouldn't say that something, and even more importantly someone, is good or bad. Things can be liked and disliked. That is, opinions are OK. But judgments are not. Judgments are similar to branding someone with an unremovable label, a label that is there to stay, a very sticky label that one can never completely peel off.

Some of the glue sticks so well it never leaves. The paper stays on, some of the inscription stays on, and after years of trying to pull it off the message told by the label can still be read. The mark of time, the tears, rubs, the damage one did to the label while trying to remove it, show better than any speech how long it has been there and how hard the bearer has tried to make it go away.

No, they don't judge. In fact, the mark of a good person is in part determined by a person's ability to not judge. The mark of a good person is to show that one doesn't judge. Show that one has opinions about what one likes or dislikes, about what one believes and does not believe in, but that one stops just before the line where judgments are passed. So it was with me. I was who I was, I did what I did, and there was no judgment passed upon my actions. Not that I was doing anything "wrong". I wasn't. I wasn't breaking any law or doing anything illegal or coveted. But in many cities, in many societies, not breaking any laws, not doing anything illegal or coveted isn't enough to not be judged. In fact, it's not even a prerequisite. People judge because they judge. They judge everything and anything. They judge all day long, as a matter of fact, and those that are judged have to live with the judgment, suffer the consequences, live with the results of their actions, whatever those actions may be, no matter how inconsequential or inoffensive they may be, no matter how important those actions are for the doer. And art is a very important action for the doer.

And then there is one last thing, at least as of now, that really made Chinle the place to be in terms of starting a business as an artist: I was living in a place where art was being created and sold on a daily basis. People here were making a living as artists. I was inspired.

Next: My Story Part 2 - The Grand Canyon Show

Alain Briot  
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