

Wild Rivers interview



Taylor McKinnon

and

Alain Briot

Wild Rivers interview

The following interview was conducted by Taylor McKinnon in February 2007. Taylor owns and operates Wild Rivers Expeditions, a river running company located in Bluff, Utah with which we organized two River Running Workshops in 2005 and 2006. The context of the interview is informal, with a direct, "no BS" approach that characterizes both Taylor and I.

Taylor McKinnon (KM afterwards): How did you find your way from France to the American Southwest? Were you just following your lens?

Alain Briot (AB afterwards): In a way, yes. I first visited the Southwest in 1983, and although I spent 6 months exploring and photographing the Southwest I realized I needed much longer to photograph it well. I returned in 1986 as a student, attended Northern Arizona University where I received my Bachelor and my Master's degree, then worked my way up to a PhD until I realized that doing photography full time was much more exciting than being an academic. I now operate Beaux Arts Photography (www.beautiful-landscape.com) and will have been in business for myself for 10 years in 2007. I also tell everyone that doing what you love is possible and that you can do very well with it if you truly believe in yourself and if you are willing to work very hard at it.

TM: Tell me why you chose the San Juan River as a portfolio subject.

AB: I look for places that are both little known and extremely photogenic. The San Juan is exactly that. For Example, Slickhorn Canyon and Oljeto Wash are visual treats that only those who have explored the Canyons of the San Juan know about. The fact that it takes several days to reach them by river is the main reason why the San Juan area isn't more visited. But for a photographer, Oljeto, Slickhorn, and the whole San Juan River corridor and side canyons, is simply a visual treat. It is also a place where creating images that no one has seen before is still possible. It is challenging to do that with Monument Valley for example!

TM: There are those who say digital photography shortcuts film's artistic process or falls short of film's aesthetic. Your view?

AB: Hogwash, to be polite. The fact is that art is difficult and critique is easy. You don't hear photographers say that digital is easier than film. You just hear critics say it, and mainly those critics that are misinformed about what creating fine art photographs involves, be it with digital or chemical photography. Just look at people who first pick up a digital camera and try their hand at it. Then take the results of their efforts and put them next to a fine print by a master landscape photographer, whether this master works with film or digital. This test will make things crystal clear right away. There is nothing easy about photography, whether it is chemical or digital. What there is, is a different set of difficulties when you compare traditional photography to digital photography. The same is true if you compare photography to sculpture, or to music, or to painting. The fact is that all the arts are difficult. If they were easy, everyone would do it and do it well. Everyone would be a master. The fact is that few do it well, that few become masters of

their art, and that those who succeed do so because they dedicate their life to their work. It's a huge commitment, and I believe that those who say that it is easy, in one form or another, are really trying to minimize the extent of this commitment because it scares them to think that they may never succeed at creating a fine art photograph or any other fine art project, or it scares them to think of how much time is really necessary to succeed.



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TM: Which artists have most influenced your style?

AB: I met a huge number of artists in Paris and I saw a lot of different work, starting with painting then continuing on with photography and just about all the other medium used by artists. In a sense, I had a different experience growing up than most photographers do. Salvador Dali may have been my earliest influence, in part because he lived in the same district my parents did when I was growing up. Other surrealist painters were also influential, such as Magritte, as well as surrealist writers such as Andre Breton. What I enjoy about surrealism is the combination of humor, wit and freedom of thought. In photography, Scott McLeay, who for the sake of me I

can't find any traces of today, was very influential. I still can't believe there are hardly any references to his work today. Of course, the American Landscape tradition, with Elliot Porter, Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, did play a role. But I have always felt something missing in the artistic content of their work. Lots of technical mastery, but at times a little bit too much rigidity and not enough artistic freedom. I think a mix of surrealism and American landscape tradition seems to be a good trade off, with a bit of artistic black and white flair thrown in for good measure and some free thinking to spice things off is definitely a good place to start!



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TM: Your subjects often deal in nuance, capturing beautiful scenes that others' eyes might simply pass by. Has this always been an element of your style?

AB: I think a style evolves and mine has evolved in the direction you describe. I can't say for sure if it has always been that way. I do know that more and more I see things in a very personal manner and that my style has evolved into something that I consider to be solely my own. I create my own reality, something that is very difficult and took me over 20 years to achieve. What I do know for sure is that when I create an image that matches my vision it makes me happy.

TM: The notion of freedom is an important icon of the American Southwest: Personal freedom and the rugged individualist, artistic freedom, the freedom from human control that exists in expansive, desolate wild lands. Your art interprets and presents these places. How does that freedom manifest in your art?

AB: I give myself the freedom to create any image I want to create. I also, and mainly I would say, give myself the freedom to enhance or alter reality. The colors I use in my work, the contrast level, the compositions, the relationship of tones and colors, are not necessarily what I see with my eyes. They are not just what my visual sense records. They are also what I feel with my other 4 senses: touch, feeling, hearing and taste as well. What I see in my mind --the sixth sense or whatever you want to call it-- is also involved. In other words for me photography is not just about representing a visual reality. It is also about representing the totality of what I experience. This is a freedom that not all photographers embrace, or allow themselves to have. It took a lot of work to free myself from the desire to simply re-create the images of other photographers, or to follow the accepted norm which is creating images that are, presumably, a straight representation of reality. My work is not a straight representation of reality. It is a representation of my personal experience of reality. It is a representation of my emotional response to the scenes I photograph.

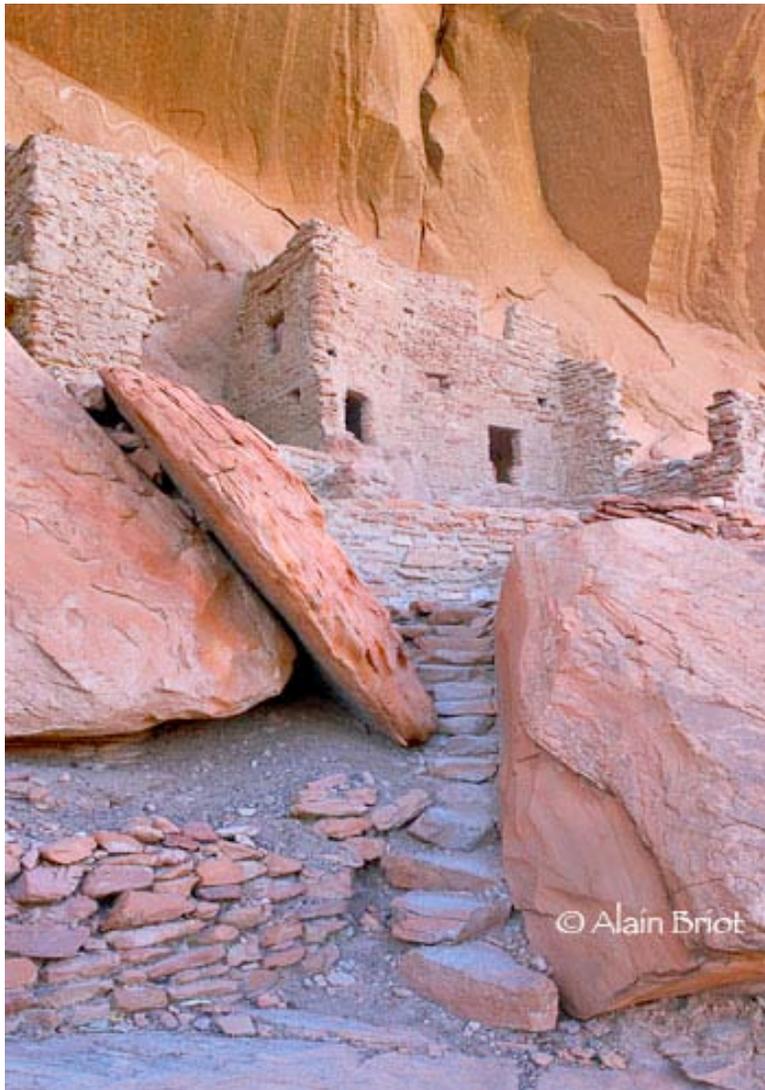


Canyon Curve

TM: What else are you involved in besides your own photography?

AB: I write extensively about photography and I also teach photography. In actuality, my work, my writings and my teaching are all inter-related. They all relate to one another because my work informs my writings and my writings inform my teaching. I do not teach the same subjects year after year, and I do not write about the same topics year after year. Both evolve as my work evolves and moves in new directions.

During 2006 my work focused upon color, tonality control and printing. This work culminated in the publication of my new "Printing Mastery Workshop on DVD" which took me a full year to create. The contents of the DVD are similar to those of my Expressive Print seminar, except you do not need to travel and you can watch the presentations as many times as you like in the comfort of your home or studio. In 2007 I am working on several new projects which at this time I am keeping private.

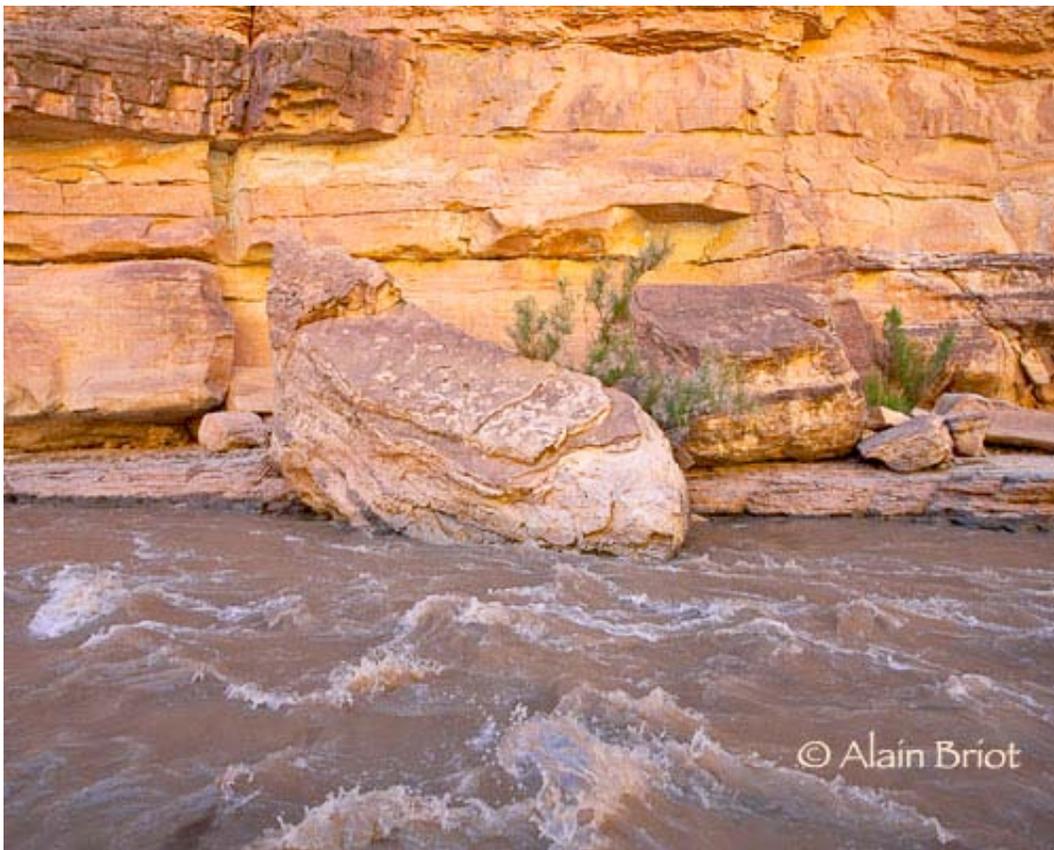


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I also write a monthly column titled "Briot's View" for luminous-landscape.com, a great website operated by Michael Reichman. A collection of my Briot's View essays from the past 3 years was just published in book format in December 2006. This new book is titled "Mastering Landscape Photography" and is available in all good bookstores as they say. In a way, the book is the perfect complement to my Printing Mastery Workshop on DVD because the book focuses on field work --on how to create new images in the field-- while the DVD focuses on Studio work --on how to optimize, print and mat a photograph in your studio.

I also teach photography workshops year round, both field workshops in the most photogenic locations of the Southwest, and Seminars focused upon studying marketing photography, or printing, or composition among other topics. You can find a complete listing of my current workshops, as well as news about my work and writing, on my website at www.beautiful-landscape.com To me teaching and sharing my knowledge with other photographers allows me to return what was given to me, which is being able to do what I love.

Alain Briot
Arizona, February 2007



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