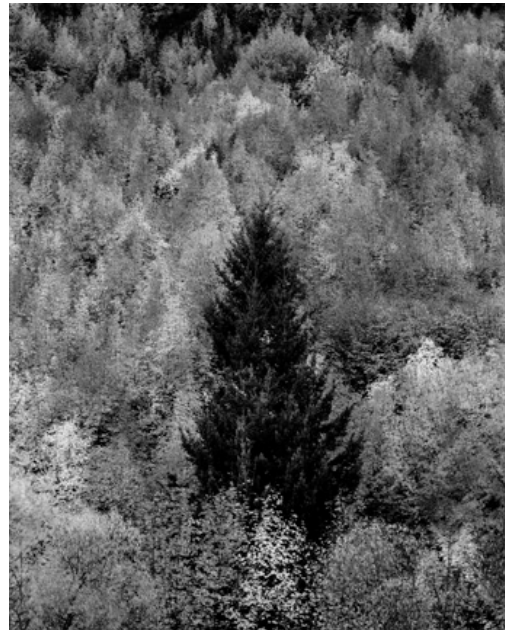


Seeing in Black & White



It's approaching 10 years since I wrote my first article for Better Photography. In that time I find it amazing that I have not raised the subject of Seeing in Black and White. Given that this section in the magazine deals with darkroom work for the black and white worker, it seems this topic is very appropriate.

The question "Do you see in Black and White" is something that I have been asked many times and I suppose something that, we as black and white practitioners, never think about, so I thought I would discuss the subject with you or at least my version of the subject.

Firstly, what does the term "Seeing in Black & White" mean? My understanding of it is that you have the ability to look at a scene before you and know what tones or shades of gray they will reproduce as, in a black and white print.

If you have never photographed in Black and White then it would be hard to visualize how tones would reproduce. And if you think that you can whack it on the computer and just de-saturate it then forget it. It's just not the same. It's like looking at an image in a magazine and then seeing an original print. It's just not the same. For some it'll do. It'll be near enough, but if you want the best from an image and you always want to produce the absolute best that you can then with Black and White you need film and fibre base paper.

I know the advertising tells you different but as I have said before they have only one interest and it isn't yours. If like me you get hounded with "why don't you change" then just ignore it. I don't know why those people whose preference is film aren't left alone. Sometimes I feel like the early Christians who were persecuted for their faith. Strike! All we are doing is making images. Using a capture medium that has been around for a good few years. Will switching to digital make me a better photographer? I doubt it. It will certainly cost me more. I will need to update my camera every 3 years and also my

computer and software. It will keep the money in my pocket from going stale that's for sure.

Going digital might be an advantage if you travel a lot. You won't have to beg the X-Ray people to hand check the film and then explain to them what a roll of 120 film is or even that there is such a thing as 4 x 5" sheet film. They don't seem to be educated in these areas. They will tell you about the radiation at 10000 meters and how that does more damage to your film than a puny X-Ray machine. If that's the case then the next round of litigation against the airlines will be for exposing all of us to excessive doses of radiation. You see how it goes. All I want to do is take pictures. It seems it's getting harder all the time.

Seeing in black and white isn't something that you can do overnight, but if you put your mind to it you could get close in a few rolls of film or several sheets of film. and of course subsequent prints.

The main problem with many Black and White photographs I see is that there is not enough tonal separation in the mid tones. Often this is due to the fact that the scene being photographed has only subtle colour differences. For example the image I have shown here in colour. I did take it if you were wondering. In B&W a very difficult thing to photograph and have it be outstanding. As you can see there is yellow, light red, orange and pale green all contained within the scene.

In the colour photograph these colours have very soft or subtle separations, but in the black and white pictures as you can see, you get tonal mergence in the image where no filter has been applied, but better separation where a filter has been applied.

When you view a scene and contemplate making a picture of it you need to discuss with yourself whether you think it is going to work as a black and white image. Be prepared to walk away from it if you feel it won't, or, if unsure take it, write down the colours within the scene and analyze it when you make a contact print or an enlarged print.

This of course is the quickest way to learn because you will physically see why it is or isn't working. One of the first things I do when I get excited by a scene is to see what the inherent contrast is like and decide whether I will have to emphasize it or not. This could be done by way of filtration or development, but firstly I am looking for natural contrast within the scene. Dark tones against light tones and so on.

Also if you have reasonable separations within your picture there is always the option to increase the paper grade when you are printing so as to make the darker tones a little darker. Of course this will push the higher values a little higher and so you expand the contrast range of the photograph once printed. The one thing you need to be careful about is not to print your photograph with too much contrast in order to "bring it up" and also not to print it too dark.

This is one of the most common problems I see when I am asked to judge at Camera Clubs. I think some bad advice is circulating amongst our amateur clubs! Sometimes if the image is lacking then the tendency is to crank up the contrast and print dark. Put a bit of punch into the shot as they say.

In April this year I was a guest speaker at the PSNZ (The Photographic Society of New Zealand) annual convention in Auckland along with some notable folk from the mother

country. Heather Angel, a leading nature photographer, Colin Prior, a fabulous Scottish photographer who mainly specializes in panoramic images of Wild Places, Andy Rouse, a zany and wonderful wild life photographer and Joe Cornish, probably Britain's most famous Landscape photographer. Mostly they photographed in colour. Mostly I photograph in Black and White. The subject, WHY? was discussed on many occasions. Each of us had there valid reasons. During the convention there was a print display from clubs all over NZ. Mixed in amongst the plethora of photographs were some rather lovely B & W images but too many were either dark or over contrasty. It is definitely an area in both countries that needs to be addressed.

After the convention was over Colin, Joe and myself headed off to the South Island with some of the folk from the convention committee to do some photography around Queenstown. The most notable feature of the trip was the autumn colours around Arrowtown. The colour image offered here gives you a taste of what we were looking at.

On this particular day we had decided to go back to Arrowtown and see what we could do with all that colour. There was a suggestion that I take along a banana lounge, watch and learn how it is done in colour. Ha Ha. I reminded them that uncle Ansel once quipped "with black and white you get landscape and with colour you get scenery". The banter never stopped the whole time. It was good photographic fun.

On this trip to NZ I only had my 4 x 5" camera with me and only b&w film. Whenever I photograph in colour I use my Bronica 6 x 7 cm. Joe offered me some of his beloved Velvia and at first I declined as I was having too much fun, but when I noticed all this colour and that tree I just had to borrow a sheet. I thought it might produce something that would get me excited.

I made just one exposure and a couple of exposures in black and white as you see here really just to show the differences. I had the idea for this article when I was there, mainly because I was seeing so much wonderful and vivid colour and I had to look around a little harder for images that I thought would work for me and the film I was using.

Fortunately no one was suggesting to me what I should be photographing as often happens when you go out with others. I am sure we all have had it happen to us when friends or family come along. Why don't you take this? What about that?

When I visit friends who are painters I never tell them what to paint. It is one of the problems with photography. It is too common. It's everywhere and everyone who has a camera can take a picture. Everyone with a camera becomes an expert. Quality is not an issue. I remember once touring around parts of Victoria with a friend and he kept suggesting which way I could point my camera. I kept suggesting something else to him.

How many photographers (mainly amateurs) buy photographs? Very few I would suggest. They figure one day they will get that image for themselves. Come to think of it I wonder how many painters buy paintings. When you have the ability to do something yourself you seem to switch off from that desire to own something you see and respond to.

With the two black and white images you should be able to see the differences. One has been photographed "straight" and one using a deep yellow filter and the negative was also given increased development to raise the high values so as to expand the contrast.

The yellow filter I thought would be best for this situation. All filters for black and white photography (yellow, orange, green, red and blue) will allow the light waves of their own colour to pass through whilst blocking their opposite colour on the colour spectrum. Now depending on the strength of the filter and where other colours are on the colour sphere, this will determine how much light is blocked and in doing so how dark a particular colour will go.

The yellow filter will allow its own colour to pass through whilst darkening to varying degrees anything that is opposite or near to the yellow filter. So much depends on where on the colour spectrum other colours lie.

Here the yellow filter allows yellow to pass through but slightly blocks the red. The orange alters very little, but the green becomes somewhat darker. Because this scene is in shade and being lit from an overcast sky then blue light will be present in the shadows. A yellow filter will darken or block that colour from passing through those areas as well. So between the trees goes darker also.

If I had used a green filter it would have allowed its own colour to pass through, but would have blocked the red, yellow and orange and only slightly darkened the shadow area. The separation in the light colours would have stayed the same as in the print where no filter has been used. I chose the yellow to try and help expand the contrast.

Also by giving the negative an extra stop of development, which equates to about a 30% increase in development time, it also raises the high values. When I took a reading using a spot meter (knowing I was going to use a yellow filter) I placed the red tones on Zone 4 1/2 which meant that the yellow was about 1 stop lighter. The yellow filter would expand that difference to about 1 1/2 to 1 3/4 stops (Zone 6 to 6 1/4) and extended development would again increase the yellow trees to about Zone 7. Now this on paper gives us 2 1/2 stops difference, but the extended development would also raise the red tones slightly (about 1/2 stop) so the real difference is only about 2 stops.

The red tones would be raised through development because they have been placed quite high on the scale and close to Zone V. If I had placed the red tones on Zone IV for example the extra stop of development would have raised those tones only about 1/4 of a stop. Extra development always affects the higher values the most.

The extra image(s) I have included just show how there is natural contrast contained within the scene. The decision to make is, is it an exciting picture or do I just take it because I need the practice. The other images are from Waireri Beach near Auckland.

Using filters can often alter the relationships that are occurring within a scene. Filters are things that should be used wisely and creatively. If you are reasonably new to Black and White photography be prepared to unscrew that polarizer off the front of your lens. This for some reason is a very common practice. Filters should be added where necessary. They should not be considered as part of a lens.

There are varying qualities of filters also. For screw on filters B + W are probably considered one of the best. Hoya are also good value. For filters that slot into a holder that sits in front of the lens then it is hard to go by Lee filters. They have always been the preferred choice of the movie industry and are also available for stills photography.

Because I was in need of an update of my filter system I recently swapped my entire system over to Lee. Like all things in photography they ain't cheap, but I don't want a great image passing through a cruddy piece of glass. In fact when I came to ordering them I rang a company in Melbourne who I knew carried Lee filters. They had some stock, but not all. They had some interest, but not much. I pushed the point. They tried to steer me to another brand. They're not as good I said. Yeah but they're cheaper and we have stock!

I don't want to be unfair, but I have noticed that if it is not of new technology the sales folk loose interest. Anyway I hit the net. Joe had told me of a company in the UK I had heard of so I went to there web site and ended up purchasing from them. They were helpful and gave some of that service we had been used to in the good old days. I also saved myself in the vicinity of \$400 to \$450. I had tried locally, but quite frankly was put off by attitude.

Here's another example that happened recently. I needed to buy some extra RAM for my computers. I rang a company in Melbourne (diplomacy says I shouldn't name them) to see if they had stock and to get a price. Now if I was street wise I should have known better. I should have gone to the website and wasted 20 minutes navigating my way around and trying to work out which RAM was for my unit. The guy on the phone told me it's all on the web site. Yes but I'm talking to you on the phone, can't you tell me. Well yes, but it's all on the site. Yes but you can tell me so much quicker and I want to buy. Yes well you can buy off the site as well, it's all there. I kid you not, this is how our conversation went.

Finally I got the information I needed and bought it. I'll never go back there again. There are plenty of others, but if I had been street wise I should have known better.

There is of course some cross over of filters for both B&W and colour. The most common are the skylight, U V, polarizer, neutral density and split grade neutral density. After that you start getting a little more specific.

With using filters it is like so many things, experience is the thing that counts. The more you do it the more you will understand what needs to be done the next time. You would never go into the field with a couple of filters that you nothing about. You would rather use those ones that you know that you have had the experience with.

It is important to be comfortable with your equipment. Filters included. You wouldn't want to learn to drive a car from a learner driver or have an apprentice mechanic do a major overhaul on your car. Photography is all about experience and practice. Without it you will probably learn nothing.

Seeing in black and white is a lot different than seeing in colour, but it takes time and effort to do it. Colour seeing is also a craft and a skill. Knowing how to control the colours you see. Knowing what filters to use so as to not to include a colour cast in the image. Photoshop may take out some of the aberrations, but it will also take out the creativity. It is also a tool that should be used wisely. Once again experience will take the lead.

Although I tend to take more photographs in B&W than colour it will be a long time coming that I wont be able to remember those magnificent colours and scenery I witnessed that day in Arrowtown. In fact there was a moment when Colin, Joe and myself just stood and looked without saying a word. I think we were spell bound.

The world is a beautiful place so however you record it, do it justice.