The Case for Black & White in Landscape Photography

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Introduction

• We live in a world of color; color dominates much of the landscape photography we see today on the internet, social media sites, etc.

• When it comes to popularity, color images are those that likely go viral and sells well on the art show circuit in which I’ve participated. After all, color catches the eye, evokes emotion.

• However, landscapes also show well black & white (b&w). But it really begs the question; is black and white landscape photography still relevant?

• I think it is and I hope to share my views why in this presentation, entice photographers to explore and capture landscapes in black and white.
My View on Black & White vs Color Photography

• Our natural tendency is to shoot in color as we see the world in color. A good color landscape evokes emotion as in a beautiful sunrise or sunset.

• However, an image or scene is made up of multiple visual and compositional elements- color is but one of those visual elements. Others include:
  ❖ Texture
  ❖ Shape and Form
  ❖ Tonal Contrast (difference between light and dark areas)
  ❖ Leading Lines & patterns
  ❖ Quality and direction of light (luminosity)

• The removal of color forces the viewer to pay closer attention to the other visual elements
  ❖ B&W lets the subject stand on its own, without the ‘distraction’ of color
  ❖ A strong black and white image can also evoke an emotion without color!
Why Black & White in Landscape Photography

• Black and white makes you look at the scene in terms of tones, rather than color.

• Black and white, when done well, creates a certain mood in your imagery.

• The removal of color forces the viewer to pay closer attention to the other visual elements in the image.
  ❖ Black and white lets the scene stand on its own without the ‘distraction’ of color.
  ❖ The danger of working in color – and this applies to all genres of photography, not just the landscape – is that you may end up relying on the strength of color to carry the image

• Black & white helps you get better at composition and could make you a better landscape photographer.
A Simple Color vs B&W Example, a Red Rose
A Simple Color vs B&W Example, a Red Rose

- Color provides immediate feedback, evokes emotion.
- Color tends to dominate the photo so much that it’s difficult to see the other compositional elements that add impact to an image.
A Simple Color vs B&W Example, a Red Rose
A Simple Color vs B&W Example, a Red Rose

- When color is removed from the image, any importance it had leaves with it.

- Without color. The emphasis then falls on other compositional elements (light/shadow), texture, contrast, shape & form).

- B&W lets the subject stand on its own, without the ‘distraction’ of color.
Techniques used for creating B&W Landscapes

Below are some of the tips & techniques I use that work well (for me) when creating B&W landscapes.

- Scout out your scene, different times of day, weather conditions, etc.
- Learn how to view the scene in black and white (Pre-visualization)
- Study the compositional elements, use those elements to enhance your image
  - Texture, shape and form, lines and patterns, light and shadow.
- Consider foreground/background to add interest to your image
- Try filters (neutral density) to create long exposure landscapes.
- Post-processing for the finishing touches
- Be deliberate in your photography- minimize snapshots, record photos.
Learning to See in Black and White (Pre-Visualization)

To really create strong black and white landscape images, the photographer needs to learn to see in shades of gray—or imagine how the photo will look in black & white.

One must learn to ‘pre-visualize’ how a scene will look in black & white.

- It is a learned ability to form an image in your mind’s eye of what the scene will look like before clicking the shutter, allowing the photographer to hone in on subjects and compositional elements that translate well in black and white.
- Look at the brighter parts of the scene to see how they interact with the darker parts of the scene.
This scene has good potential for b&w.

Good tonal quality (differences between light and dark areas).

Dramatic skies have an almost textured appeal.

Texture in the grassy areas.

Low horizon emphasizes importance in the skies.
Learning to See in Black and White (Pre-Visualization)

Springbrook Forest Preserve, Naperville, IL
Learning to See in Black and White: Color Contrast

Contrasting colors don’t always translate well to high contrast in black and white.

- Below are six basic colors converted into gray so you can see how they translate in B&W.

- Note how red and green, distinct in color, translate to similar shades of grey.

- Also note how yellow and orange translate to similar shades of grey.

- Colors can be manipulated in black and white using filters. Popular filters used in b&w photography include:
  - **Red filter**: Converts red colors to white, darkens skies
  - **Yellow filter**: Blue skies are darkened, which helps to increase the separation with the clouds. Other colors like green, red, orange and yellow will appear brighter.
  - **Orange filter**: Blue skies will become even darker for a more dramatic effect.

Images with a wide range of tonal values tend to work well for black and white imagery. Those having a lack of tonal values and range can result in an overall flat image.
Learning to See in Black and White (In-Camera)

Preview the scene, In-Camera, in black and white:

1. Shoot in RAW to capture the most information in the scene on your memory card.
2. Set your camera’s Picture Style (for Canon) to Monochrome.
3. The preview (LCD display) will be stripped of color. However, the color information is retained in the RAW file.
4. Experiment with in-camera color filters (yellow, orange, red, green) for different effects.

Then, identify the other *compositional elements* that don’t depend on color that can add impact to your landscape image.
This scene has several good qualities that would make a good b&w image.

Add interest to your landscape by including a foreground subject.

Adding a prominent element in the foreground can create sort of leading line effect, even if the foreground element is not a line.

Rocks and foliage work well in these kinds of scene.

More experienced landscape photographers use this compositional technique.
Compositional Element: Foreground/background

Graue Mill, Oakbrook IL
Focal Length= 16mm ISO 50
1/8 sec, f\16, Red Filter
Compositional Element: Embrace Texture, Shape, Patterns

- Texture, shape and patterns tend to go unnoticed in color landscape as the viewer is taken captive by color.
- Without color to distract, shapes and patterns become much more obvious and can be a great compositional tool.
- As you shoot for b&w landscapes, look for objects with a lot of texture as you compose your scene. You might find your b&w imagery more appealing.
Compositional Element: Embrace Texture, Shape, Patterns

Sunflower Field, Matthiessen State Park
ISO 200, 1/20sec, f/22
Focal length= 16mm, Filter= Red
Compositional Elements: Light/Shadow/Texture

As I view this scene, I observe:

- A stunningly beautiful landscape.
- Quality of light
- Overall tonality, differences in light and shadow, providing visual depth.
- Texture in the mountains, clouds
- Good separation of color
- All of the above translates well into black and white

The Vinales Valley
Pinar Del Rio Province, Cuba
ISO 400, 1/80 sec at f/22, focal length= 80mm, Filter= Yellow
Compositional Elements: Light/Shadow/Texture

- Good tonality maintained in b&w.
- Some dodging/burning to help create visual depth, 3-dimensional view on a 2-dimensional plane.
- Underexposure creates more drama in black and white landscapes.

The Vinales Valley
Pinar Del Rio Province, Cuba
ISO 400, 1/80 sec at f.22,
focal length= 80mm, Filter= Yellow
Compositional Elements:
Patterns and Minimalism

- Eliminate unnecessary elements in the scene, concentrate on the main subject
- Less is more
- Long exposures work well in these types of scenes to help reduce any ‘clutter’ in the scene.
- Black and white plays well, removes the distraction of color.
- Compositional elements include pattern

Bushwood, MD
ISO 100, f/16, 422.6 sec (~7min)
Focal length= 35mn, Red Filter
Compositional Elements: Patterns and Repetition, Tonal Quality

- Note the vertical pattern and repetition in the trees
- Note the texture in the trees
- Reminder to pay attention to how light falls on your subject.
- Long shadows adds interest

Morten Arboretum
Compositional Technique: Creating Visual Depth and Scale

- This scene has overall good tonal value, highlights, detail in the shadows.
- Good textural component.
- Has a sense of depth; having a three-dimensional representation of the scene on a two-dimensional plane.
- The fog above the mountains add a sense of mystery.
- Structures and livestock shows sense of scale.
- Good candidate for black and white image? Let’s see.
Compositional Technique: Creating Visual Depth and Scale

- Light/shadow play creates separation between foreground/background mountain range.
- Fog over mountains maintained adding mystery.
- Tonal quality maintained.
- Visual depth created across the scene, giving a 3-dimensional look on a 2-dimensional plane.
Compositional Elements: Leading Lines, Texture, Tonal Contrast

- Note the tonal contrast between light and dark areas of the scene.
- Leading Lines draws the viewer’s attention to the subject.
- Clouds have a texture that compliments the iced-over lake.
Compositional Elements: Leading Lines, Texture, Tonal Contrast

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Compositional Elements: Texture, Weather Conditions

- Clouds can add drama and impact to any landscape.
- Foreboding cloud formations have a more textured look to the scene.
- To add emphasis to clouds, place the horizon on the lower end of the image.
- Conversely, place the horizon on the upper end for less emphasis on clouds, more emphasis on the ground elements.

Bushwood Pier, MD
ISO 50, 30sec at f/10
Focal Length= 21mm, Red Filter
Compositional Elements: Texture, Weather Conditions

- In black & white, intense mood and drama is emphasized.
- Clouds have a somewhat textured look.
- Long exposure technique to give a more surreal landscape.

Bushwood Pier, MD
ISO 50, 30sec at f/10
Focal Length= 21mm, Red Filter
Use filters to add drama, surreal landscapes

- Polarizer filters help eliminate reflections in both color and b&w. They can also enhance an image by proving deeper blue skies which, when the image is converted to b&w, can make the skies a dark grey; adding mood and drama in your landscapes.

- Neutral Density (ND) filters allows for Long Exposure photography; it affords the viewer to see an ordinary scene in a surreal way, making it extraordinary; a way that one would not otherwise see with the naked eye.
Conclusion: Why not give B&W a Try?

• B&W photography is all about concentrating on shape, pattern, form, texture, and line. It's about reducing a subject down to its barest form and tonal range.

• Shooting in black in white will make you a better photographer. A key component of this development includes learning to see in black and white.

• Seeing in black and white is a learned skill...Once you train your eyes to see in black and white, you’ll be able to look at your subject in terms of the qualities we explored earlier: shadows, patterns, textures, and lines. This will make it easier for you to identify situations which are ripe for black and white photography.

• You’ll discover that you start to look at the world differently. You become more aware of light – its quality and its direction.

• All of these things benefit your photography as a whole, not just your black and white photography. So, get out there and give it a go. You may be surprised by how much you love it once you get started.
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Tools: Hardware & Software

Gear:
• Canon 5D MKIII
• Lenses
  • Canon 16-35mm f/2.8
  • Canon 24-105mm f/4
  • Canon 70-200mm f/2.8
  • Canon 100mm f/2.8 macro
• Filters
  • Circular Polarizer
  • 8, 10, 16-stop Formatt-Hitech ND Filters
• Tripod, cable release, etc.

Software Tools
• Canon Digital Photo Professional (DPP) RAW editor
• Photoshop
• Topaz Labs Plugin Suite
• DXO Labs Software
• Nik Software Suite
  • Silver Efx Pro, Vivesa
• Smartphone Apps
  • Snapseed
  • DOF Calculator
  • ND Filter Timer
  • PhotoPills/TPE
Black & White vs Grayscale vs Monochrome

While it might be clear to some, the difference between b&w, grayscale, and monochrome might not be so clear to others.

- A **true black and white image** consists of only black and white colors.

- **Grayscale;** The technical definition of “grayscale” is an image that is composed exclusively of shades of gray, varying from black to white.

- A **Monochrome** image is one with varying tones of one color only (yellow, red, green, blue) as in a sepia toned image.
In photographic terms, black & white and grayscale are used interchangeably. However, grayscale is the more accurate term to use for the type of photography we call black & white.

All grayscale or b&w images are monochrome as they are made of varying shades of only one color—gray. However, not all monochrome images are grayscale as monochrome images can be made using varying shades of any color.