

## Capturing Art in Nature Photography

By Eric S Gudger

I had just spent 14 hours on the road. Instead of driving straight to the hotel I needed a photo fix. From my previous visit to Big Bend National Park, I knew several great locations. With the sun getting low and travel rather slow in the park, I had doubts about getting to the Window on time. As I entered the Basin, the most amazing light show I had ever seen in Big Bend greeted me. WOW! Talk about visual overload! The photographic possibilities were endless. Was I ready?

Of course not! How could I be? Sure I could walk out to any location with a decent view and snap a few shots. However, this is just not my style. Over the years, I have collected my share of these quick photos. I was never happy with them. After a quick one mile hike down the mountain, I did find a great location with amazing foreground features.

It is during these times that I get mesmerized by the scene. I know enough about my style to know that it is okay if I never take a photo in these situations. The experience was all that I need. Finding a great location was just “icing on the cake”.

This is an example of how I approach art in my nature photography. But, where is the art in nature photography? How do I identify it? How can I re-create it?

My artistic approach starts with keeping my photographs simple. They are designed to eliminate chaos and clutter. Even my landscape shots are designed to lead the viewer on a simple journey into the photo.

Did you notice the word “designed”? Yes, I design each shot. Technically, I am skilled enough to capture the scene I want. My art comes as a result of seeing the scene and using the camera to capture my vision. Am I successful with every shot? Hardly!!

I know that my art is not a result of my technical skills. My art lies in capturing the emotional experience of the scene. While it is impossible to capture the total experience on film. I strive to capture my emotion in the photograph. The accuracy of the photograph is not important. Art is not about accuracy. It is about vision. While my medium of choice is visual, my goal is to transcend visual accuracy and capture the emotion of the moment. It is the passion for life's emotional experiences that drives me on. My art is revealed when the viewer has their own emotional experience through my photograph.

Still, the image is mine and mine alone. It is meant to please only me while capturing my emotional experience.

Galen Rowell once told a story about coming across a Yellow Cab from California driving on a desolate road in Nevada. While he found the situation interesting, he knew enough about himself not to take the photo. Galen went on to describe his approach as requiring a personal involvement either intellectually or emotionally, or both. Certainly, this approach was successful for Galen. I only hope that my approach is as successful as his.

Galen is certainly not the first or the last to use a personal involvement approach to photography. One of the early masters of photography Henri Cartier-Bresson called this the “decisive moment.” It is the “recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of the precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression.”

The technical aspects of this are easier to show in the field than it is to explain it in an article. While lens selection and perspective are keys, it is the photographer’s involvement that makes the scene.

Are you getting the picture? If not, do not worry. I bet you know art when you see it! At the club’s Spring Photo Contest, a great example of this was Janice Braud’s Best of the Show photo titled “Reflecting Old Glory.” (Check this out on the club website.)

Like many, my initial journey in photography concentrated on technical aspects of photography. I devoured photo magazines and books, attend photography classes, and ask a lot of questions searching for technical perfection. Additionally, I spent lots of money buying film and wondering why I wasted my money. Along the way, I did learn what I liked and I did learn how to consistently re-create quality images. Soon, I began to realize that while the technical aspects of photography were important, they are only the means to an end. After all, it is the emotion in a photograph that sets it apart.

I would like to share two memorable photographs from last year. The first one shows a reflection of Mount Rainier. My journey for this photo began in March of 2005 as I scouted the area between Seattle and Yakima. It took three week long trips and countless days of searching, studying, and mapping to find the right location. My last scout of this area started 2 days prior to the morning of this photo. On this scout, I never did see Rainer. I knew I had found the right spot; but, when could I find the right time?



For my return visit, I had to drive two hours in the fog and hike 30 minutes through snow and sludge. Well before sunrise, I waited in sub-freezing weather for the light to hit the mountain. And when the light and colors did arrive, I had less than 2 minutes before the fog found my location and blocked my view of the mountain. Do you notice any of this? Of course not! None of it even matters. What mattered to me was the emotional experience. That I was able to capture this emotion is very rewarding.



The second photo brings back a truly memorable experience. My journey for this photograph began in February 2004 with my initial journey to Big Bend. The remoteness, time commitment, and expenses required to photograph this area increases the demands to capture something special. For this October 2005 photo, our group had taken a late lunch at the visitor's center. We were quietly sitting on the veranda watching the thick clouds roll in and block the sun.

Why we go out? The light was gone. Only one student joined me. All we did was drive a mile down the road and park the car at a turnout. We even set up our tripods and cameras on the shoulder of the road. When the scene showed up, we were ready. Never mind that the light show lasted less than 3 minutes. We were ready. Can you see the short window of time in this shot? Of course not! When I see this photo, I see the moment. I feel so blessed to have created this photograph.

Where does the art come from? It comes from deep within. It comes from living the experience and capturing emotion in your photography. Now is the time to find your moment!

Eric S. Gudger