FINE-ART
BLACK & WHITE
LANDSCAPES

The landscape is a popular subject among fine-art photographers and has been a constant source of inspiration since the birth of photography. To kick off this new series on fine-art photography, Lee Frost examines the concept of the fine-art image and explores ideas and techniques that will help you create your own monochromic masterpiece

WORDS & PICTURES: **LEE FROST**

FINE-ART LANDSCAPES

'CIRCLES OF CONFUSION', 'Bokeh', 'hyperfocal focusing' and 'chromatic aberration', our photographic vocabulary is littered with confusing words and phrases, but the one that causes the biggest headache has to be 'fine-art photography'. What does it mean exactly? How can one image be a common photograph and another be promoted to the lofty heights of fine-art – especially when it's a landscape? Maybe you have to print it on fancy matt 'art' paper instead of common old glossy? Perhaps you need to frame your work and hang it on a wall?

The truth is, I'm really not sure, and I don't think many people do either because the phrase is used so often and randomly. According to Wikipedia (always a good source of answers when you're desperate): 'Fine-art photography refers to photographs that are created to fulfil the creative vision of the artist'. That sounds plausible. But if it's the correct definition, we're all fine-art photographers to an extent because we all take photos to fulfil our creative vision, rather than merely record a physical likeness. Don't we?

I'd certainly apply that principle to my own work. Most of the time, my goal is to produce images that capture the drama and character of a scene. Occasionally, instead of looking outward I look in, and the images I produce celebrate me – they reflect my mood, my imagination, my dreams, how I want the scene to look rather than how it looks. In other words, they fulfil my creative vision.

Achieving this doesn't mean you have to resort to extreme tactics to be different; if you end up relying on wacky techniques or obscure subject matter then you are far from fulfilling your creative vision, you'll simply end up with loads of images that say little about the subject or yourself. At the same time, if you need to use unusual methods in order to share your (slightly crazy) vision with others, so be it. The world's your oyster when it comes to shooting fine-art mono landscapes. You can stick with convention and rely on your creative eye to make the images work, or you can experiment with different techniques to achieve the effect you have in mind. Remember, this is about fulfilling your creative vision so do whatever it takes. At the same time, never use technique to try and create a silk purse from a sow's ear. Believe me, it doesn't work.

My favourite 'fine-art' landscapes are almost always black & white, simply because abandoning colour is one step towards expression of my own creative vision. The fine-art landscape photographers I admire also tend to work mainly in monochrome – Michael Kenna and Josef Hoflehner, to name two.

Shooting fine-art mono images with a DSLR is very different to working with black & white film, as to ensure the images are of the highest possible quality, you have to shoot in colour then convert to black & white later. This makes it trickier to take a creative step back from reality, which many would suggest is necessary to produce successful black & white landscapes. But having been a film die-hard until two years ago, I can say, hand on heart, that it's not as difficult as you might think. In fact, I produce more fine-art black & white landscapes today, with a digital SLR, than I ever did with a film camera.

Over the next eight pages, I'll explain tips and give you advice to help put you on your own road to fine-art success.

"My favourite 'fine-art' landscapes are almost always black & white, simply because abandoning colour is one step towards expression of my own creative vision"

Kit for fine-art landscapes

There are no special requirements for creating digital fine-art landscapes, so the camera and lenses you normally rely on will do the job perfectly well. After all, it's not about what equipment you have: it's about how you use it. I've got some great fine-art images simply using an iPhone!

A Canon EOS-1Ds MkIII is my camera of choice, though you don't need full-frame or 21-megapixels so stop feeling inferior and think about my backache! Optical needs are mainly catered for by three zooms: a 17-40mm, a 24-70mm and a 70-200mm. I've also added a Zeiss 21mm f/2.8 manual focus prime lens to my kit. It's expensive, but probably the sharpest lens I've ever used and my favourite for landscapes.

I rarely shoot handheld, preferring instead to mount my camera on a Gitzo carbon-fibre tripod fitted with a heavy Manfrotto 410 geared head.

Neutral Density grad filters are a must for any landscape photographer, and I use a trio of Lee Filters ND 'hard' grads in 0.3, 0.6 and 0.9 densities. I also carry a selection of plain Neutral Density filters – 0.9 and 1.2 – that give three and four-stop exposure increases respectively, and the new Lee Filters 'Big Stopper,' which is a ten-stop ND for super-long exposures.

Fine-art landscapes: Five techniques to try...

1) MOTION STUDIES
My favourite technique when shooting black & white landscapes involves using exposures of several minutes to capture motion in a scene. Drifting clouds record as soft streaks, water turns to mist, blowing grass and swaying trees take on an eerie look. Among all this motion, anything stationary comes out pin-sharp. This approach doesn't freeze time – the usual role of photography – but records time passing and how it affects the scene in a way that's impossible to see with the naked eye. I particularly enjoy using the technique on coastal landscapes.

2) SEEING RED
I've been a big fan of infrared photography for over 20 years, initially shooting Kodak and Konica infrared film, and more recently with an infrared-modified Canon EOS 20D. The sensor is now sensitive mainly to infrared light and allows me to create fantastic images that are full of mystery and atmosphere. Foliage shows the effect best, coming out white, while blue sky and water go very dark. If your budget can't stretch to a full conversion, many digital SLRs can produce infrared images if you put an infrared-transmitting filter such as a Hoya R72 on the lens.

3) DIGITAL PINHOLE
Prior to 'going digital' I made a lot of pinhole images using purpose-made pinhole film cameras. You can achieve similar results now by putting a pinhole bodycap on your digital SLR in place of a lens. I made my own, but if you send a spare bodycap to Pinhole Solutions (www.pinholesolutions.co.uk) they will convert it for you and return it for £30. If your camera has LiveView you'll probably be able to see an image on the preview screen to aid composition. If not, then just take a shot, check the image then adjust the camera and exposure as required.

4) IT'S IN THE DETAIL
You don't always have to shoot big, wide-angle views to create successful fine-art images. Sometimes smaller is better, so don't be afraid to concentrate on details in the landscape. I find this technique particularly effective in dull weather, when the light's flat and contrast low. Traditional landscape scenes tend to lack drama and impact, but such conditions are ideal for shooting details. Coastal locations are perfect for this as you'll find interesting rocks and boulders, old fishing boats and huts, patterns in the sand and so on, which can be the source of great images.

5) KEEP IT SIMPLE
If you study the work of fine-art landscape photographers such as Michael Kenna, Josef Hoflehner and even Ansel Adams (perhaps the best-known fine-art black & white master of them all), what you'll notice immediately is the simplicity of their work. The compositions are considered, but unfussy. They possess a graphic perfection, almost as though the elements were arranged by hand. It's tempting to cram too much into the frame, but doing so tends to be counter-productive because it confuses the issue. So think less is more and your work will be better for it.

STEP-BY-STEP
CAPTURING THE SCENE

I'VE DRIVEN past this location dozens of times over the last decade. It's the tidal crossing to Holy Island from the Northumberland mainland. I always knew there was great potential there for creative images due to the combination of features it offered, but the light, weather and tide never seemed quite right.

On this particular morning, however, things were different. The tide was out, the sun was masked by a swathe of gunmetal grey clouds and the sky overhead was being reflected in pools on the tidal flats. I grabbed my camera and went off in search of inspiration.

Step 3 Technically, this is a straightforward scene to shoot. I'm using my Canon EOS-1Ds MkIII in aperture-priority mode plus a 24-70mm zoom stopped down to f/11 to give me sufficient depth-of-field and fitted with a 0.6ND 'hard' grad. The patch of sky where the sun's hidden is blowing out but I'm not worried.

Step 6 Having shot a number of frames with the camera on its side, I decide to try the landscape format. This is much more passive than the portrait format and the composition is immediately settled. I'm really liking the look of the image now. All the main features are working in harmony. This could well be the shot.

Step 7 As the scene's still good, I decide to try some more variations. Who knows, I might come up with something better, and I hate walking away from great light. I particularly like the shape of the stream, so I switch to a 70-200mm telezoom and zoom in at around 100mm.

Step 1 This establishing shot gives an idea of the type of scenery I had. The ingredients for some great fine-art images are all there: dramatic clouds, sculptured mudflats and sandbanks, sinuous streams and old wooden marker posts. The creative juices are definitely flowing!
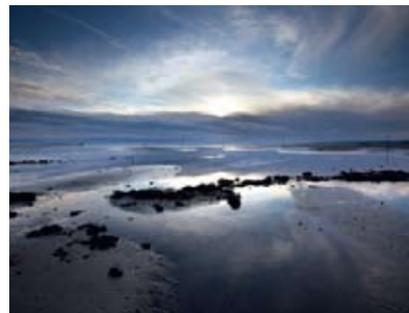
Step 4 As I walk further onto the flats I notice a stream. As I approach I get a rush of excitement. It looks amazing; the gentle curve of the stream, the reflection of the sky and a single marker post in the perfect spot to be my focal point. My instinct is to turn the camera on its side and shoot vertically. This is the first attempt.

Step 8 Finally, I try a more abstract approach, using the shapes and tones to create unusual images. In this case, the curve of the stream creates a wonderful shape in the mud while contrasting with the vertical silhouetted reflection of the wooden post. This too makes a good shot.

Step 2 Heading away from the road, I walk out onto the flats towards some water to check the reflections. A photographer has beaten me to it and couldn't be in a worse position. Does his silhouetted body help or hinder the composition? I can't decide so I take a shot anyway.

Step 5 The weather is changing so I decide to hang around and see what develops. Cloud is building and the scene starts to become more dramatic and better suited to the black & white treatment I have in mind. Only 20 minutes have passed since I took the previous shot but the mood of the scene is transformed.

Location, location, location

Although there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to establishing what kind of landscape scene works, some locations just scream out 'shoot me, shoot me'!

Anywhere you find water you'll find great fine-art subjects. I live by the sea and love shooting coastal landscapes, but lochs, lakes and tarns can be wonderful too. Rivers and streams are full of life and vitality but fine-art photographers also love woodland for its variety. You can shoot patterns by filling the frame with rows of trunks, move in close to capture textures and detail, shoot mist rising through the branches. Ancient, knarled trees have a beauty about them that has taken centuries to create. Check out Paul Hart's images at www.paulhartphotography.com if you need any more convincing.

Final in-camera shot

After the shot

WITH BLACK & WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY, recording the image is only the first stage and I see the Raw files on my memory cards purely as digital negatives that need to be processed – just like a roll of black & white film.

The difference is that Raw files are processed and perfected in-computer long before you go near a printer, so everything is more precise and controllable. Of course, digital images start their life in colour, so the first step is to convert them to black & white.

There are more ways to do this than there ways are to skin a cat, from simple desaturation to complicated and time-consuming layer techniques, to third-party plug-ins and applications that do the job for you with varying degrees of success.

I'm no expert on this, I find a method that works and stick to it as I'd rather be out shooting than fiddling with my computer. But I can say that the simple ways to convert tend to be the least effective, so I suggest you avoid *Image>Adjustments>Desaturate* in Photoshop or *Image>Mode>Greyscale*, because that's like sending your black & white films off to Boots

and getting a pack of machine-prints back. Hardly the way to 'fulfil your creative vision'!

The Channel Mixer technique in Photoshop is quick, easy and can be highly effective. Go to *Image>Adjustments>Channel Mixer*, click the Monochrome box then adjust the sliders for the Red, Green and Blue channels to change the tones in the image, ideally making sure the total percentage always adds up to 100. For landscapes, setting to red channel to 100% and the other two to 0% gives the same effect as using a deep red filter with black & white film; skies are made more dramatic and contrast increases to add impact to your image.

The more recent versions of Photoshop (I use CS3) also have a useful Black & White option – *Image>Adjustments>Black & White* – which converts the colour image to mono, then gives you a list of presets to try and different coloured filters: infrared, maximum black, maximum white and so on.

Again, I find the High Contrast Red Filter to be effective on landscapes with a good sky, though you can create a custom setting by adjusting the individual colour sliders. Every image will be different, so the trick is to experiment until you find an effect that works for your image.

Nik Software Silver Efex Pro

These days, my preferred method of converting colour digital landscape images to black & white is using an application by Nik Software called Silver Efex Pro (www.niksoftware.com), which I access through the Filters menu in Photoshop. It's not cheap at €199.95 (around £170), but it is good. As well as giving you a range of presets to choose from, you can mimic the effects of specific black & white films, make selective adjustments to exposure and contrast, tone the image and so on. It's a digital darkroom that contains everything you need to produce stunning black & white images.

I rarely scratch the surface of its potential because I find that one particular preset - High Structure - usually gives me the dramatic, punchy look I want, and if it doesn't I can apply the same preset a second or third time, which usually does the trick. I can't recommend this software highly enough so take a look.

Post-production ideas

1) ADDING GRAIN: Grain was always a characteristic of black & white film and many fine-art photographers intentionally used faster films to make a feature of the grain – adding a gritty, textural look. These days, grain is a thing of the past and it's digital equivalent – noise – is something camera manufacturers are obsessive about getting rid of. So, if you want to give your digital images a grainy look, you'll need to add the effect during post production. See this month's Q&A section for advice on how.

2) TONING: Adding a delicate tone to your images can enhance its mood and give them a timeless feel. Sepia (brown) is the traditional colour, but blue works well too, though digitally you can create endless colours and also experiment with split-toning, where the shadows are one colour and the highlights are another. Duotone, tritone and quadtone techniques give you even more options. Try toning in Photoshop by going to *Image>Adjustments>Hue/Saturation*, clicking the Colorize box, then play with the Hue and Saturation sliders. Channel Mixer is another option: go to *Image>Adjustments>Channel Mixer*, click on the Monochrome box then adjust the sliders to create an endless range of tones.

3) SOFT FOCUS: A touch of diffusion can add bags of atmosphere to an image, especially if it's backlit. I used to achieve this by printing through a Cokin Diffuser filter in my darkroom, but these days I add the effect digitally. There are various options, but I tend to create a duplicate layer of the image, add Gaussian Blur (*Filter>Blur>Gaussian Blur*) with a Radius around 10 pixels, then adjust the opacity of the layer until I'm happy with the effect.

4) HDR: HDR (High Dynamic Range) is an interesting technique to try on black & white landscape images. Mt favourite software for HDR is Photomatix Pro (www.hdrsoft.com) but the HDR option in Photoshop CS5 is said to be excellent now as well. The idea is that you merge several shots of the same scene, all shot at different exposures. The results can look naff if you overdo it, but ease back on the controls and dramatic images are possible. Here I merged a series of five frames shot at -2, -1, correct, +1 and +2 stops.

STEP-BY-STEP
CONVERT TO MONO

THE TRULY MAGICAL part of the whole picture-taking process is taking the original colour shot and turning it into a successful fine-art black & white image. There are so many creative options available thanks to the wonders of digital imaging, though it is important not to get carried away and do things for the sake of it. Remember, the final 'fine-art' image should be an expression of your creative vision, not a demonstration of your Photoshop skills! If you add too much post-processing, your photograph will lose all realism and be worse off for it, too.

RIGHT: This is how the image looks after the final tweaks. I can already see it framed and hanging on my wall for friends and visitors to see and admire. That said, it is not yet quite finished as I've still got to get the image transformed from some pixels on a screen to a print on some glossy paper.

Step 1 Here's the chosen image from the selection I shot earlier. Composition-wise, I think it's the strongest as the worsening weather makes it more expressive. I did little to the Raw file as the image is going to be converted to black & white.

Step 2 Although I tend to use Nik Software Silver Efex Pro, I'm going to use a Photoshop method here. Going to *Image>Adjustments>Black & White* gives me a basic conversion and also a dialogue box, which pops up on your screen.
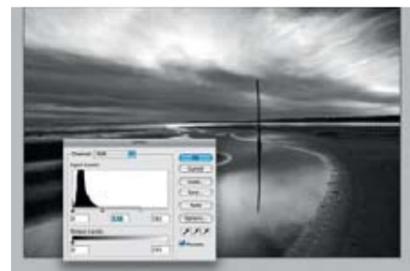
Step 3 The High Contrast Blue Filter preset hasn't worked well at all, making the image look rather flat, which is no surprise as a blue filter wasn't a popular choice among black & white film photographers. Time to try another preset.

Step 4 Using the Yellow Filter preset is more effective than the previous blur filter. Yellow, orange and red filters boost contrast and make the sky more dramatic, as well as darkening cool colours such as blue and green.

Step 5 I try the High Contrast Red Filter preset as it makes the image look dark and brooding. That big sky and the stream stretching into the far, empty distance add to the mood while the solitary post stands like a lonely figure.

Step 6 Almost there, but first I want to make some adjustments. I do this using the Polygonal Lasso tool, set to a feather of 100 pixels, and select specific areas to lighten or darken using Levels. I prefer this to the Dodge & Burn tools.

STEP BY STEP
FINISHING TOUCHES

MY IMAGE taken on the Holy Island crossing is looking good and could be considered a finished work. However, there are a few final touches I'm keen to add to see if I can improve on what I've got. First I'm going to crop it to a square, as I think the concentration of elements in the centre of the frame suits that treatment, then I'm going to add an artistic border. Finally I'm going to make a fine-art print using my Epson Stylus Pro 7880, which is a wide-format printer. I'll also use matte fine-art paper, which comes in rolls for my printer, but can also be bought as single sheets.

LEFT: Here's the finished print made on Hahnemühle Photorag 308, a beautiful, high-quality matte fine-art inkjet paper that I use for all my limited edition prints. I've titled, numbered and signed the print in pencil, window mounted it in archival board and it's now ready for framing.
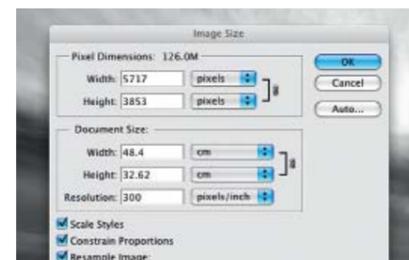
Step 1 The image is opened in Photoshop, then I go to *Image>Image Size* to check the height of the image – 32.62cm. Next I click on the Crop Tool, then in the windows just above the image I enter the crop dimensions: 32.62x32.62cm at 300dpi.

Step 2 The Crop Tool is dragged over the image, then I move it around until the area within the crop lines is the composition I'm happy with. Hitting the Return key activates the crop and I'm left with a perfectly square image.

Step 3 To create an artistic border, I first add a thick black border around the image using *Image>Canvas Size*, changing the Canvas extension color to Black then increasing the dimensions to 35x35cm and clicking *OK*.
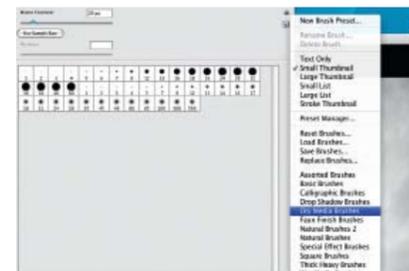
Step 4 Next, I enlarge the image to 50%, click on the Eraser Tool, click on the Brush icon at the top of the screen, then click the arrow at the top right of the window that appears, choosing Dry Media Brushes from the drop-down menu.
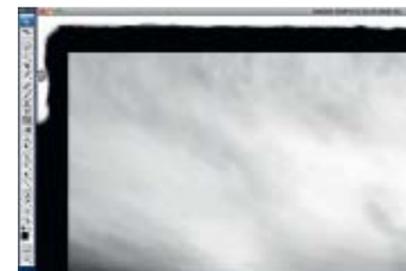
Step 5 The final brush in this menu – Pastel Medium Tip – is selected, and its size set to 40 pixels. I then begin to rub out the outside edge of the black border to create a rough border. This is continued until I've completed the border.
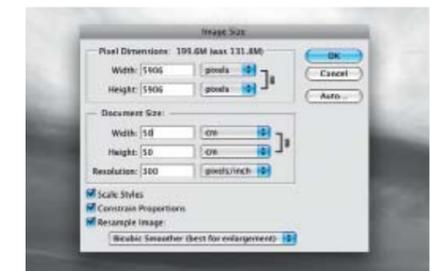
Step 6 As I'm going to make a big print of this image, I need to increase its output size by going to *Image>Image Size*, clicking on Bicubic Smoother (my preferred option in Photoshop), then entering the size I want: 50x50cm.

Fine-art landscapes: We proudly present...

THOUGH YOU MAY THINK that your fine-art monochrome masterpiece is complete, there are still a few finishing touches you might like to consider to show your print off to its full potential. Also think about what you're going to do with your images when they are done and dusted. One sad reality of digital imaging is that the vast majority of photographs these days are only ever viewed on a computer screen, which is hardly the way to appreciate a work of art. Worse still, many images never get viewed at all, which is a real shame given all the effort you've put in to creating them. So remember – print, share and celebrate.

1) IN PRINT: Once you've got a whole series of black & white fine-art landscapes, why not publish them as a book for all the world to enjoy? Self-publishing used to cost a fortune – and still can – but thanks to digital print-on-demand services, it's now possible to design a photographic book and have copies printed just one at a time. One of the best names in the business is Blurb. Visit: www.blurb.com for more information.

2) YOU'VE BEEN FRAMED: The ultimate way to show off your work is by having it mounted, framed and then hanging it on the wall. Better still, see if you can find a local gallery that will display your work and offer it for sale. All my exhibition frames are made in the village where I live and the framer also runs a gallery, so I exhibit my work there too. Bespoke frames are pricey, but there are cheaper options to be found in place like Ikea.

3) ALL SQUARE: Although I shoot in the rectangular 3:2 format, I often crop my black & white images to a square format as I find them easier on the eye, possessing a quiet sense of balance and symmetry. Also, cropping to a square makes the images look less 'digital' because there are no digital cameras with a square sensor. The crop takes just a moment in Photoshop and could transform your image.

4) ADDING BORDERS: When I printed black & white landscapes traditionally, in my darkroom, the negative carrier for my 35mm negatives had been filed out to make it bigger than the image area on the negative. This meant that part of the clear film rebate was visible and when printed created a lovely black border with a ragged outer edge. This can enhance a fine-art image no end and is easy to mimic in Photoshop (see above).

5) INKJET PRECOATS: If you want to make your fine-art landscapes feel more unique, how about handcoating paper with inkjet precoats and printing on that instead of ready-made inkjet paper? The precoats are available from Silverprint (www.silverprint.co.uk) and are known as Golden Digital Ground. They're easy to use, but allow you to coat any material that will pass through the flat feed of your printer.