

THE ART OF LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

What is it that elevates the humble landscape image from a photograph to a piece of art? **Lee Frost** isn't sure – but he's keen to find out.

All pictures © Lee Frost

Do you think of yourself as a photographer or an artist? I can't decide. I've been making my living from photography for almost 25 years now, writing books and magazine articles, supplying picture libraries, leading photo workshops and tours, selling limited edition prints... But despite my success, inside I don't feel like an artist. I'm just a regular bloke who ventures into the landscape with a camera and takes photographs. Sometimes those photographs are good, sometimes not so good. I get rained on. I come home tired and muddy. Sometimes I wonder why the hell I bother and at others I'm humbled and awed by the beauty of nature.

I'm not into navel gazing and pontificating. What inspires me to compose a scene in a certain way has nothing to do with one side of my brain or the other. If it looks good in

the viewfinder I shoot it. I don't feel other-worldly or touched by God when I happen upon a beautiful scene. I just set my alarm clock early and went for a walk!

Saying that, some of the photographs I take happen to be quite artistic and a radical departure from my normal way of seeing and working. The feeling I get when I capture them is different to how I normally feel when I photograph a scene, like I've crossed some kind of creative line that I didn't even see, or discovered something in me that I didn't even know existed. It's like I've adopted a new set of eyes, just for the moment.

I was reminded of this while leading a photographic tour in Iceland back in the spring. My group and I had ventured down a dead-end dirt track on a very grey, misty day and stopped to photograph some Icelandic ponies grazing by a lake. The lake was still and the ponies were reflecting perfectly, so even in the drab weather it made a good black & white shot. But as I scanned across the lake I noticed a tangle of wire in the water and some partially-submerged stones. Because the weather was so still and overcast the water was white and these elements seemed to be floating in empty space like a natural art installation. A shiver of excitement ran down my spine. I was mesmerised by the shapes and tones and gripped by the simple beauty of it. I pointed this out to the group and it was fascinating to see how some individuals embraced the idea and turned their attention away from the ponies, while others thought we were completely mad and just saw the scene in a literal sense – some fence wire and stones in a lake! >

DURDLE DOOR, DORSET

I seem to have a habit of composing scenes so that much of the image area is occupied by empty space with just a single, dominant element breaking into the frame. It's not a conscious decision, but as I examine a scene through my camera's viewfinder I instinctively find myself composing in this way. I like empty space – it gives an image room to breath. Cluttered compositions are in your face and tell you the entire story, but an empty one allows you to let your imagination flow freely and lose yourself in the emptiness.

Canon EOS 1DS MKIII with 17-40mm lens at 17mm, ISO 100, 4 minutes 38 seconds at f/8



SEA TURF, NORTHTON, ISLE OF HARRIS
Simplify, simplify, simplify – that's the key to success when creating fine art landscape images. I started out shooting this scene with a 17-40mm zoom but my most pleasing photographs were taken with a 70-200mm at maximum focal length – and I still needed to crop them to get the composition I wanted. A Canon 100-400mm lens is on my Christmas list. I have a feeling it's going to come in very handy.

Canon EOS 5D MKII with 70-200mm lens at 200mm, ISO 400, 1/250sec at f/11

Back in September, on the Isle of Harris, I had a similar moment of artistic enlightenment while photographing some sea turf near the village of Northton. The turf formed amazing patterns on the edge of the loch but try as I might I couldn't make a composition that worked – there was just too much going on. It was only when I switched to a telezoom and started to isolate shapes, and the contrast between the dark turf and bright water, that things began to click into place. That same sense of excitement came rushing back and I had the image.

The interesting thing is that I rarely set out to shoot images that I would consider to be 'artistic' in this sense – I wouldn't really know how to. Instead they tend to be the result of a happy accident, an act of desperation when things just aren't happening, or a eureka moment. Whatever the reason though, the sense of satisfaction I get from creating them is immense because they're always a pleasant surprise.

Looking through my archive for more images that fall into the same category, I was interested to see that compositionally they're all very simple; stripped back to the bare minimum. Black & white does that to an extent anyway, but it's amazing how, as you start to peel away more layers and simplify even further, the visual effect of the image changes completely. It ceases to be a photograph of something specific but

HOFN, ICELAND

Often I find that images evolve and ideas develop while I'm shooting and the end result is nothing like what I set out to achieve. In this case, I started out with the boats full length in the frame but gradually swung the camera further to the left to exclude distracting details and eventually found myself with a very simple, graphic composition that not only captures the gentle mood of the scene but by breaking all the rules also has great visual appeal.

Canon EOS 5D MKIII with 70-200mm lens at 200mm, ISO 640, 1/800sec at f/9



WIRE AND STONES, ICELAND

I love this image. It represents landscape photography at its most abstract, where a scene has been distilled to its purest form. David Bailey once said, 'It takes a lot of imagination to be a photographer. You need less imagination to be a painter because you can invent things. But in photography everything is so ordinary; it takes a lot of looking before you see the extraordinary.'

I couldn't agree more.

Canon EOS 5D MKIII with 70-200mm lens at 200mm, ISO 100, 1/100sec at f/8,



more an arrangement of shapes and tones in the same way that a piece of music is an arrangement of notes – and we know how emotionally powerful music can be. Maybe that's the key to creating artistic images – how they make the viewer feel is more important than what they represent.

The use of space is interesting. Conventional rules of photography tell us to make full use of the image area, to keep the composition tight, because empty space makes a photograph look 'windy' and boring. But the problem with tight compositions is that they give you the whole story in one hit and leave no room for interpretation – there's nowhere for the imagination to wander because every time you try, your brain is bombarded with visual information. It's like the jigsaw is already complete. By allowing an image to breathe, however, you free up the viewer's imagination and allow them to see what they want to see, or feel what they want to feel.

Most of my conventional landscape images are taken with a wideangle zoom, either a Canon 17-40mm or a Canon 24-70mm. But looking through my growing collection of art images, I realised that the majority have been shot using a 70-200mm telezoom, or the top end of my 24-70mm. That's not surprising really, because the longer the lens and the narrower the angle-of-view, the more you can abstract elements

AMBLE PIER, NORTHUMBERLAND

Compositionally this image is unexciting and the subject matter nothing to write home about, but as a piece of art it works on both a visual and emotional level, being simple and striking to look at but also encouraging you to explore your imagination. Look closer.

How does it make you feel?

Canon EOS 1DS MKIII with 70-200mm lens at 93mm, ISO 50, 5 minutes at f/16





BRIDGE, ICELAND

What do you see here? A rather dull photograph of a metal bridge disappearing into the gloom of a grey day? If you look at it in a literal way then yes, that's exactly what it is. But when I photographed it I was struck by the sense that it seems to go on and on forever, never coming to an end, and I was reminded that that's how life can feel sometimes – like we're stuck on a long, straight road that has no end and carries us through a landscape that never changes.

Canon EOS 5D MKIII, 24-70mm lens at 25mm, ISO 400, 1/160sec at f/11

◀ from a scene to create simple compositions.

Water also features heavily in these images. Living by the sea obviously has a lot to do with that, but I chose to live where I live because I love the sea, so it's no accident – and even when I'm away from home I'm drawn to water because photographically it potentially offers both creative and emotional imagery.

Technique doesn't play a major role – it's more to do with state of mind – but I do find a 10-stop ND filter invaluable as the long exposures allow me to record motion in a scene and add a wonderful sense of grace and flow to my images. I also like the idea of recording the passing of time and the effect that has on a scene, rather than freezing split seconds, and exposures of several minutes do just that.

I've never really looked at my photographs as pieces of art before, partly because I've never considered myself to be an artist. I still don't, but to be honest, I don't think it matters. I'd much rather think of myself as a photographer, who sometimes makes artistic images, than an artist – because as soon as you call yourself an artist you put yourself on a pedestal, and you can fall off a pedestal!



ALNMOUTH BEACH UNDER SNOW

The winter landscape is a favourite among black & white photographers because of the way it reduces the landscape to abstract simplicity. I shot this image on New Year's Day morning 2010 after a night of heavy snowfall. The tide had receded in the early hours, allowing snow to settle on the beach, and I found myself completely alone in a perfect winter wonderland while everyone else nursed hangovers from the night before! There was little in the way of foreground interest, but when I spotted this dark rock pool I knew I'd found just what I needed to make a striking image. Imagine it printed nice and big and hanging on your wall.

Canon EOS 1DS MKIII with 17-40mm lens at 40mm, ISO 100, 1/20sec at f/22

B+W