



Small Worlds

MY KEY TO
PHOTOGRAPHY
IN ONE PAGE

Photographs by
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Focus Stacking

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My Key to Taking Good Photos

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins came up with a concept that struck me as true. He even made up his own word to describe it, “inscape.” Inscape was to Hopkins an insight or path into the eternal or beautiful, literally the way or sign of the beautiful. Let me explain.

I look forward to my trips out into the fields and woods. They offer me a chance to get my head together, to relax from the day-to-day grind of running a business, and generally to relax a bit. This is not to say that just going outside and walking in nature means that I am instantly relaxed. That usually takes time.

It is the same with taking photos. In the first ten minutes of a shoot I often don't see all that much to photograph. This too takes time, time for me to slow down, open up, and ‘see’, and to let the natural beauty all around me in. It could be that I am still filled with all the workaday-world thoughts, the things I have to do, problems, and what-have-you. It takes time for my mind to relax and let go of its constant chatter. This day-to-day endless worry and thinking affects my photography. And here is where the word ‘inscape’ comes in.

As I get out there and wander through the fields or wherever, I gradually start to slow down and begin to see things that are beautiful, scenes that I might actually want to photograph. Slowly my view of the natural world around me starts to open up again, and I begin to experience things differently. I begin to ‘see’. It takes time and usually does not happen all at once.

This little pattern of leaves over here or the way the light comes through the forest canopy grabs me just a little bit, and the chatter of my mind pauses and begins to slow down. As I walk along, some little thing or scene appears beautiful to me; I am touched by it, however lightly at first. I gradually get distracted from my daily distractions and begin to center.

These little moments are ‘inscapes’, ways out of my mundane world and into the beauty of nature or, more accurately, back into the state of my own mind or being. As I take my time, I am able to see the beauty in things once again, and what I am seeing suddenly seems worth photographing. Like most of us, I photograph what catches my interest, what I find beautiful or worthy in the world around me.

These inscapes are signals that catch my attention, and they flag me down on my busy way forward to nowhere-in-particular. These moments and signs are how I stop going nowhere, and manage to almost miraculously arrive somewhere once again, perhaps only at my own peace of mind. This is one of the functions of the beautiful, to catch us in the turmoil of life, flag us down, and induce us to pull over and take a moment of rest, some time out.

These moments of inscape are different on different days, and different for different people. They represent the clues

or signs that catch our attention and show us the way into the beauty of the natural world, actually the beauty of our own mind. Another way of saying this might be: what is beauty actually? What happens when we see something beautiful?

Beauty is not simply somewhere out there in nature waiting to be found, but always here within us, locked within us, we who are seeing this nature, we who can see the beautiful. Beauty breaks down the rush of the everyday world and opens our heart a wee bit, making us vulnerable again, more open to experience and input.

Through the natural beauty outside, we go inside and experience the inner beauty of things, which is none other than our own inner beauty. That is what beauty is for, to be touched on, seen, so that we find once again the beauty within our own hearts that we may have lost through the distractions of our daily life. We forgot. We look outside in nature to see in here, to see into our own heart once again.

We can be sensitive to beauty in our photography. I would hate to tell you how many photographs I have of this or that butterfly or critter that are perfectly good photographs, but are empty of magic or meaning. They are well lit, well composed, and have everything that makes a good photograph except that ‘magic’ that keys or excites me. Instead, they are ‘pictures’ of a butterfly, but they have not captured any essence of anything. They might as well be in a field guide – snapshots in time with no meaning.

The reason for this, so I tell myself, is because they just happened to be there, photographic opportunities. I saw them and I took a photograph, but at the time they did not instill or strike any particular beauty in me. This, to me, is “gotcha” photography, taking a photo because I can, not because I saw beauty in it or was moved to do so. There was no inscape moment, no moment of vision – snapshots only.

I find that it is really worth paying attention to what strikes me as beautiful or meaningful and photographing that, rather than just photographing the Grand Canyon because it is there or I am there. A lasting photograph, in my opinion, requires more of me than that, by definition. It has to mean something to me and, for that to happen, I need to actually be moved or inspired. Photographs that have special meaning for me usually have some form of inscape into a special moment that inspires me to capture the scene in a photo.

We can wander for miles looking for something to photograph, chasing down this or that butterfly or animal... searching. Or, we can slow down and let nature herself show us the signs, the inscapes through which we can relax and begin to ‘see’ photographically once again. We can listen to our own intuition. This process of inscape, of insight into the sublime in nature (the sublime within ourselves) I find to be the key to good photographs and to creating photographs that are real keepers, at least in my mind. If we don't touch our own inner self in our work, we touch no one at all, but when we are touched by a moment, I find that others also feel this. Touch one, touch all.

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Michael Erlewine
Archivist of Popular Culture

Michael Erlewine is a well-known entrepreneur, the founder and creator of many large web sites including the All-Music Guide (allmusic.com), All-Movie Guide (allmovie.com), All-Game Guide (allgame.com), Matrix Software (AstrologySoftware.com), AstrologyLand.com, MacroStop, ACTastrology.com, StarTypes.com, ClassicPosters.com, MichaelErlewine.com, and others.

Erlewine was very active in the folk scene in the late 1950s and 1960s, especially in the Ann Arbor area, which included traveling with Bob Dylan (hitchhiking) in 1961. Later, as leader of the influential Prime Movers Blues Band (Iggy Pop was their drummer), Erlewine played a wide variety of venues, including the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco (during the "Summer of Love" in 1967), where his band opened for "Cream" during their first U.S. tour.

Erlewine was instrumental in the landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals of 1969 and 1970, as well as the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Fes

tivals in 1972 and 1973, where he did audio and video interviews of almost all performers. This led to his becoming interested in archiving popular culture and founding the All-Music Guide (AMG), which today is the largest music review site on the planet. He did the same for film, video games, and rock posters. Next to Microsoft, Matrix Astrological Software (founded by Erlewine) is the oldest software company on the Internet. Erlewine still owns and runs the company today, which is located in Big Rapids, Michigan. Erlewine is also very active in Tibetan Buddhism and Macro Photography.

Photo Equipment

In my work, I generally use the Nikon D3x and D3s cameras, with the Voigtlander 125mm 2.5 APO-Lanthar, the Coastal Optics 60mm f/4 APO lenses, and a Gitzo T2531 carbon-fiber tripod, with a Markins Q2 ball head. As for camera settings, I tend to shoot around f/11 at whatever shutter speed will bring down the ISO to 200 or so.

-- Michael Erlewine

Questions and comments can be addressed to Michael@Erlewine.net and there are other free books and PDF downloads at:

<http://www.MacroStop.com>.

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