

Why Most Landscapes Suck

Every art form has its unique strengths. A gifted oil painter can show us our wordless unconscious. We can climb the crystalline ladder of a Bach cello sonata to a place of eternal peace, light, and harmony. We can live, love, suffer, and die with Raskolnikov and Othello; such is the power of the arts of words. The power of photography is to show us what is underneath the skin of the world: to discover that which is hidden in plain sight. It is the human-scale art form.



Mother and daughter. Beirut , 2002.

Photography is uniquely connected to the world. The distinction between the image and the object is blurred in photography more than in any other art, perhaps with the exception of its close cousin, cinema. It is difficult to disentangle the emotional power of the photograph and its subject. However, the distinction between a great photograph and a mediocre one is that a mediocre one diminishes its subject, while a great one moves us more than a casual encounter with the thing it depicts. Herein lies the power of works like Andres Serrano's [<http://andresserrano.org/>] Nomads or Mark Maher's American Polaroids [http://www.cabinetoflove.net/american_polaroids.html].

Scale and emotion

Different art forms have different emotional scales. I have been to the Himalayas , where the mountains seem to go up forever. Yet I have never seen a photograph of a mountain that conveys that scale and that majesty even remotely like the real thing. In photographs, mountains are merely picturesque. Grand landscapes evoke awe, and awe is a very difficult emotion to convey. The only art form that can really

pull it off is cinema. The beacons lighting over Gondor, the engines grinding to life on the Titanic, or the sweeping phantasmagoria over Metropolis have awed me in the same way as the Himalayas seen up close. This doesn't stop landscape photographers from trying. Yet almost invariably, the awe-inspiring view turns into a cutesy little postcard. Capture or display format doesn't really help -- using a view camera and making huge prints or projecting huge slides simply yields huge cutesy little postcards.



Wide-open space and all that. Meh.

Since most people have pretty bad taste, they easily mistake the cutesy postcards for good photography, especially if they're displayed as large, impeccably sharp prints. Hence the success of photographers like Alain Briot, Michael Reichmann, and Ken Rockwell. Their photography is pure Socialist Realism, only not as honest about its program -- relentlessly upbeat, eager to please, depicting the world not as it is, but as it surely should be... and utterly devoid of power to evoke anything but the most trite and saccharine-sweet of emotions.



"They are Writing about us in Pravda" (Aleksei Alexandrovich Vasilev, 1951)

Photography comes into its own at the human scale. If photography that attempts to convey grandeur sounds tinny, few other art forms can communicate the emotions associated with empathy as well. A photograph can invoke compassion, fear, horror, disgust, joy, anger, or humor -- and, of course, the selfish emotions like pity, lust, ridicule, or condescension. It does it by showing us something over which our eyes would have slid. Great photography grabs us, shakes us, and shouts at us: LOOK!

Text/Context

Visual art is chameleon-like. Since it is never explicit, every experience of an artwork is different, created by the artist and the viewer together. No two people experience an artwork exactly the same way, and the same artwork can produce wholly different experiences in the same person at different times. A modern, urban Westerner cannot hope to experience anything recognizably similar to the experience of the man who painted the walls of the cave in Lascaux . Some art is like a rough gemstone: at first sight no different from any other pebble, but when held against a light, its inner fire is revealed. Or, perhaps there is no inner fire, and the artwork simply holds the power to reveal what is hidden in the light outside it. This is the dance of text and context.



Consider a picture of a youngish Arab man next to a truck. There 's nothing particularly powerful or evocative about it. Then read the caption. Suddenly the image would take on new significance. It could evoke powerful emotions, from rage to pride to sorrow to exultation, depending on the caption and who you are and where you come from.

"Photograph released by the Abu Musab al-Zarqawi group of the suicide bomber identified as Jihad Sayf-ul-Islam, taken as he was setting out to bomb a police station in Sadr City . The bombing claimed 43 lives, including 8 children."

"Syrian driver Mohammed Obeid, working for KBR in Iraq , shot and killed at an American checkpoint near Falluja. According to a statement from the US military, he failed to stop despite repeated signals and warning shots from the Marines manning the checkpoint. Subsequent investigation revealed that the brakes on his truck had failed. He leaves a wife and five children."

"A Syrian truck driver, happy about making it over the pass to Lebanon just before a freak snowstorm hit and blocked the road." (This would, in fact, be the correct caption.)

Without the context, the image doesn 't make much sense. Yet it has the power to take on the coloring of a caption, and lend it credence and strength beyond the words or the simple subject being portrayed. A

boring photograph can become immensely interesting if put into the right context... and, conversely, an interesting photograph ripped out of its context can become completely incomprehensible. Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* only snaps into focus once you hear the title.

Created and contained context

The alternative captions to the picture of the truck driver were an example of created context. It is something outside the picture that gives it meaning. Captions and explanations are by no means the only way of creating context. Another common and often highly effective way is to place the image in a series. For example, Mark Maher's magnificent American Polaroids work this way. Taken individually, the frames still hold a power to fascinate, but they are also very cryptic, much like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle when seen in isolation. However, when viewed together, by thumbing through a book, walking through a gallery, or clicking on the Net, each picture gives strength to its neighbors. A pattern begins to emerge. Maher's message unfolds petal by petal... or, more accurately, a message is created in the mind of the viewer, together with the artist and the act of immersion in the images. The individual image no longer constitutes a work by itself; it is merely a constituent part.



Colossus (Francisco Goya, 1808-1812)

There are images, however, that come close to standing alone. You do not need to know anything about Goya or the context in which he painted *Colossus* to be struck by its power. Enigmatic it is, and you would be foolish to assume that your experience of it is anything like what Goya had in mind when he was painting it -- but it has immense power. The subject -- the giant menacing something equally gigantic but outside the frame -- is put into context by the panicked crowds of refugees; or perhaps the refugees are the real subject, and the colossus is merely the thing that gives them meaning. Either way, the image contains enough things to look at to set the imagination running. *Colossus* contains its own context.

Contained context, I believe, is the key to the power of most "good" photography. The pictures themselves contain enough to put their subject into context. They are not subjects floating in space. Such things fail to seize the imagination, and merely diminish that which they are depicting. Even the least

imaginative of people has a capacity for pattern recognition that will fill in the gaps, if only the photographer gives the slightest of cues for the mind to latch on. Lack of context leads to a lack of meaning, and meaningless things do not have the power to evoke a strong reaction. To create a strong photograph, pull back, look around; don't isolate your subject, connect it with its surroundings.

Which landscapes don't suck?

Most landscapes diminish their subject. They reach for grandeur, and end up with Socialist Realism. They attempt to transmit the experience of the landscape, but the experience somehow flees the frame and leaves behind an empty shell of a pretty image, as easily digested and quickly forgotten as elevator music.

Yet obviously not all landscapes suck. Some landscapes do have the power of evoking emotion: joy, exultation; a reflection of the face of God. Their secret is the same as for any other photography. They have meaning. They dis-cover the hidden, seize us by the lapels, shake us, shout at us "LOOK!" -- or whisper to us, showing us what we should have seen but didn't. They acquire meaning the same way any image acquires meaning: they contain enough recognizable things to pull us in, and show us something new. They do what only photography can.



Landscape. Photographer: Ed Leys. All rights reserved. Used with permission. For more landscapes that don't suck, see California Light and Structure [http://www.blackmallard.com/cal_ls/].

Unless otherwise indicated, all materials on this site are by Petteri Sulonen. They are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License [<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/1.0/fi/>]. I would appreciate it if you dropped me a line if you want to reproduce them. Any trademarks are property of their respective owners; their use is purely editorial and does not constitute an infringement.