

The New Black and White

By Dan Richards

When we set out to find modern masters of the B&W landscape, we soon abandoned the cliché that the monochrome scenic is “alive and well” – because it’s thriving fabulously, thanks to digital capture and processing. Three artists tell us why.

One started as an audio design engineer, another as a photojournalist, and another continues as a commercial shooter. All of them were drawn to creating landscapes in black and white, and while all three can be said to work in a “classical” style, each has a distinct character to their images.

Staying with Film – The sole film shoot of our trio of monochromists, David Fokos might be considered a traditionalist, particularly given his camera gear: a vintage Korona 8x10 view camera, and one – and only one – lens, a 210mm f/5.6 Rodenstock Sironar-S. (On 8x10, the lens is the equivalent of about 28mm in 35mm full-frame terms.) He uses Kodak Tri-X Pan sheet film.

But after developing film, Fokos goes digital. If a negative looks promising, he scans it at very high resolution (the grayscale image file is – hold your breath – 800 megabytes) and sets to work on it in Adobe Photoshop. He often spends over 100 hours



Sharks Tooth Cliff

on an image – and sometimes ends up discarding it anyway.

Why not capture digitally? A major reason is that Fokos prints big – sometimes up to 7 ½ feet wide. “And 8x10 film gives me the resolution they require,” he says. “It’s only been within the last couple of years that digital capture has been able to rival this.”

Fokos also notes that the reciprocity failure of Tri-X (the tendency of film to be underexposed at long exposure times) helps keep highlights from blowing out during such long exposures – sometimes as long as an hour.

Which brings us to the David Fokos look. “For scenes that contain a lot of motion, my exposures range from 20 seconds to 60 minutes,” he says. “This process eliminates what I have termed as visual noise – all the short term temporal events, things that are moving, that can distract us from focusing on the underlying fundamental forms... In a way, it is like peeling back a page to reveal a world that, while very real, is not experienced visually.”



Eight Rocks and a Stone

This story’s opener, of Shark Tooth Cliff on Martha’s Vineyard, MA, was taken at about 90 seconds. At that duration, Fokos realized that the moon would show motion blur. So he took a fast exposure, too, and composited. He also adjusted local contrast and burned in the top and bottom.

The image here, Eight Rocks and a Stone, was made on Lucy Vincent Beach on Martha's Vineyard. Captured at less than a second at f/45 or f/64, it is one of Fokos' few images that stops motion. He says he wanted "to make an archetypical image that for me represents my summer spent walking on that beach."

[...]

Thinking in B&W - Our monochrome masters agree: to hone your b&w skills, just do it. A lot. "You need to put the hours and miles in," Clor says. "I would suggest planning a photographic excursion to a place that interests you - not a vacation with the kids where you work in some shooting, but a trip devoted to photography."

"To become better at working in black-and-white, I think it is important to immerse yourself in it completely, training yourself to see the world as it looks in compositions of black, white and gray," Fokos says. He suggests capturing images simultaneously in FAW and monochrome JPEG to view the image on the LCD in B&W.

"The biggest mistake made by those new to black and white is to rely too heavily on differences in color rather than differences in luminosity, or brightness," Kimmerle says. "Radically different colors may appear, in a black-and-white image, as the same shade of gray. Seeing in black-and-white is a skill that must be learned by doing."

David Fokos' grandfather gave him his first camera, a Kodak Brownie, at age 11. By his teens Fokos was developing and printing, and in his college days took up the view camera. By the late 1990s he was transitioning from his career as an audio design engineer into full-time fine-art photography. Now based in San Diego, his work is represented by 15 galleries on three continents, and his image are available for commercial use through Corbis.