Luminosity & Contrast

THE CHOICE BETWEEN DARKNESS AND LIGHT

Alister Benn

Copyright

Luminosity & Contrast

The choice between darkness and light

by Alister Benn

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Preface

Whether you are new to landscape photography, or someone who has been looking through a viewfinder for most of your life, learning is a continuous and ever present part of our lives. This is my job; to learn about my chosen art form, and share summaries of these revelations with others. Not a day goes by without something changing my perspective and opening my eyes to fresh opportunities, or ways of expressing myself.

Comparing photography (painting with light) with verbal or written communication is well used, and I agree one hundred percent that a picture can indeed paint a thousand words. Knowing every word in the dictionary may make you more articulate, but it is reliant on having something to say. Photography is the same, it depends entirely on the eloquence of the photographer. Equally, we can say things that make perfect sense to us, but nobody else understands what we're talking about! I believe this is fine too - as long as we are exploring our own imaginations and speaking to ourselves.

In this book, I want to explore the vocabulary of photography, the phrases, paragraphs, rhythms and rhymes of expressive imagery - Luminosity and Contrast.

Everything in photography can be summarised using these two words. This was a startling revelation for me; someone with a history of making things harder for myself. Simplicity has proven to be my saviour, taking me to places creatively that I could never have found without a long period of reflection in the desert. Many of the images in this book were made in the Gobi Desert and it was there that I decided to write this book. Surrounded by thousands of square miles of empty sand dunes: Nothing but Luminosity and Contrast.

Without clear subjects to photograph, I was drawn to textures, boundaries, transitions, contrasts and form. Rules evaporated in the dry air, and I experienced a creative epiphany, which has stayed with me ever since. As I returned to other types of landscapes; mountains, sea coasts, forests and rivers, I discovered the same sense of ease in observing them as I had in the stripped down desert. How I experience a place reflects in my work - *there is no honesty in my images without the experience.*

In the following chapters I will introduce Luminosity and Contrast, before moving on to the concept of Transitions. I will illustrate the theory with numerous images from my catalog, many of which I worked specifically for the book. The vast majority of these photographs took less than 5 minutes to develop, proving, I hope, that successful images do not need to take all day to process.

In the development section I will cover my own style of editing, starting simply and quickly in Lightroom, and advancing all the way through to my most advanced techniques in Photoshop using Tony Kuyper's V6 Luminosity Masks and the History Brush. I will use monochromatic images throughout, stripping it down to the essence of luminosity and contrast, without colour becoming a distraction.

About the Author

Alister Benn is a professional Landscape photographer, guide, writer and educator. He lives in Oslo, Norway, with his partner Ann Kristin. Together they run Expressive Photography Ltd.

Expressive Photography Ltd focusses 100% on Photographic Education, running workshops in Spain, Scotland and the Arctic. Weekly free video tutorials on YouTube will be supplemented by eBooks and Video series focussed on the development of unique creativity.

Alister writes regular articles on the philosophy of art, creativity and personal expressive development for OnLandscape, Landscape Photography Magazine and NPN.

He has been awarded numerous accolades in many of the world's most prestigious photography competitions, with Gold Medals from the Memorial Maria Luisa, the Trierenberg Super Circuit, and the Pris de la Photographie Paris.

SUBSCRIBE to Alister's YOUTUBE CHANNEL

▶ YouTube
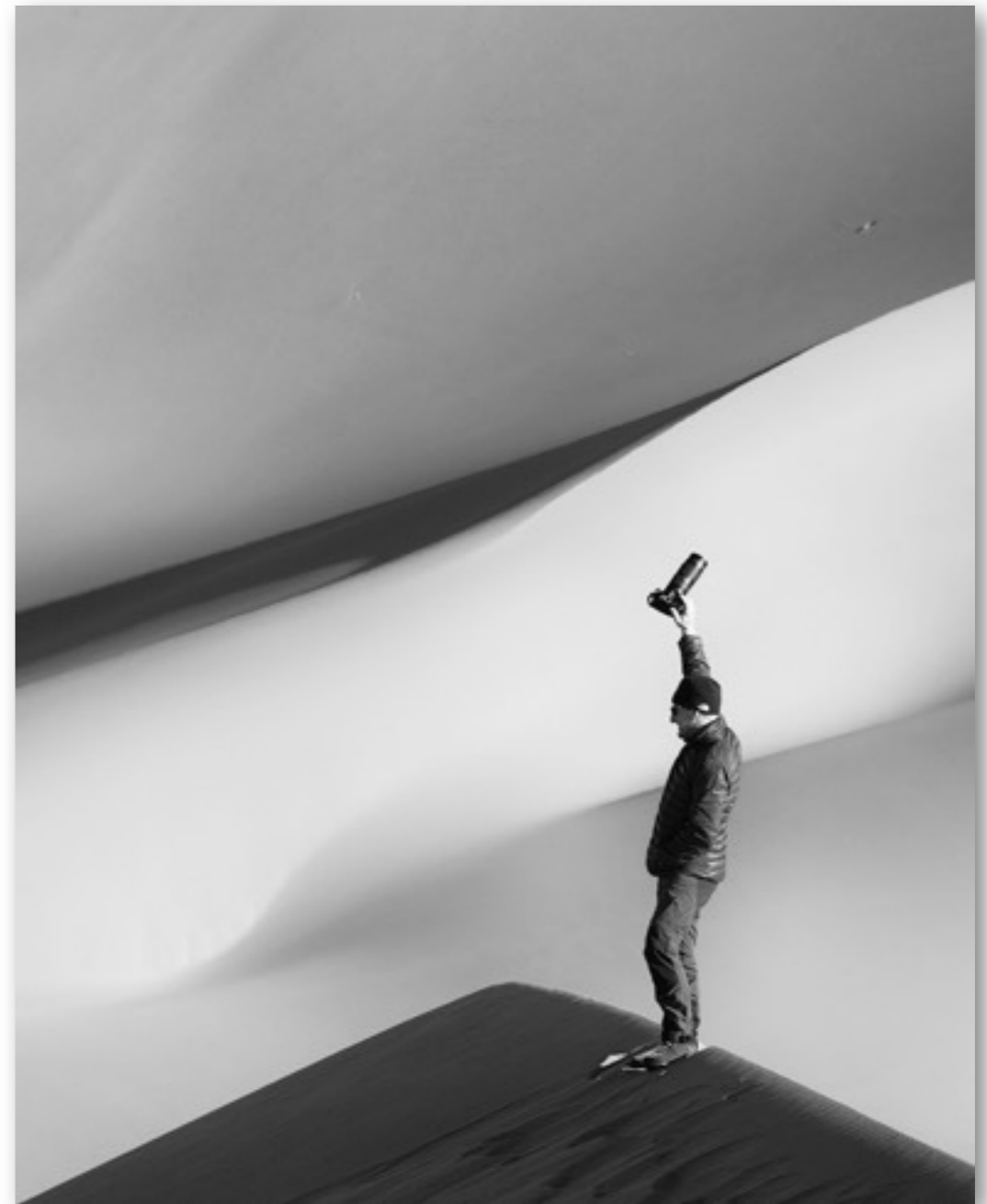
Overview

"I believe that how I'm feeling
changes how the world appears."
- Neil Peart

Introduction

The second we open our eyes, we experience luminosity and contrast; Darkness turns to light, blurriness and diffusion reveal details, textures, depth, three dimensionality and discernible shapes. Our world, and our place in it are completely governed by our perception, and as visual artists, our vision system is ground zero.

SEEING WITHOUT LOOKING

With our eyes open, we see, but we are not necessarily looking. The latter state requires far more engagement and awareness than simply having our eyes open. **You can witness by seeing, but you experience by looking**. It's an involved state, one that makes us part of the experience, it is the art of noticing.

As I step out my door and walk the hills and glens around our home, I look at the world around me, I experience it with all my being, because in doing so I realise my place in it. I take time to notice things beyond my immediate scope as a landscape photographer. I see birds, insects, animals, plants and flowers. I experience the transition of the weather and seasons, and truly understand the fragility of all we love. I like to delve into how the textures I am drawn to on the ground at my feet recede to dusty blue shadows on the distant horizon. Each zone of depth is illustrated beautifully by its own contrast and luminosity signatures; I make mind maps of reality based on these perceptions and the noticing is output in my images.

If I can teach one thing in this book, it is the art of looking, truly realising what our world looks like. With the development of this mind state, we engage with our world and we understand relationships as they exist. Image-making follows naturally, as part of who we are, rather than some external exercise in conscious creativity. I think therefore I am, I am therefore I create.

Once you have looked at the world, and I mean truly looked, you will see for yourself how luminosity and contrast manifest themselves in every single second of our lives. This knowledge unlocks the secret of image-making; looking, engaging, arranging, discovering relationships, both real and imagined, adding your craft to record that moment and then developing a final photograph that turns out just the way you want it, in that moment. The last statement is key; every image we make is simply a manifestation of a moment - our creative choices there and then.

My art ebbs and flows with my personal development, experiencing profound moments of creativity followed by prolonged periods of reflection. I use my photography as a litmus test for my soul. It is not constant, all is transient. Should I revisit an older image I will develop it in an entirely different way, based on my current perspective, skill levels and intent.

In this book I want to share many of the eureka moments I've had since I wrote my last book back in 2014. It's been a long trip, and I can assure you, many things have changed. I'm pleased to say that much of what I wrote back then still holds true, serving as a foundation layer of belief that formed a solid base on which to build my personal creativity.

A word of warning however, this is not a book about quick fixes, shortcuts or presets, although many of the tools I use and processes I will discuss **are** quick and can be learned rapidly. What I ask from you here and now is a commitment; a sense of purpose and an open mind to evaluate what you will read, and apply it to achieve what you want with your work.

It has never been my job as an educator to turn out cookie-cutter models of my own perspective. The theories and practices I will discuss should arm you with a fresh outlook, but equally you must embrace a willingness to grow. Becoming the photographer that you want to be requires effort, I know because I've spent the last 20 years of my life solidly committed to that task, and I'm still working on it every day, and continue learning, changing and evolving.

All I can do in these books or when running our workshops is discuss photography, it's psychology, sociology and aesthetics from my own perspective. I do not judge anybody else for their motives, styles, methodology or lifestyle; we're all free to embrace this art form for what it can do for us, and indeed, what we can do for it.

The Zone System

Throughout this book we will frequently refer to tonal zones, and to make this digestible, it is best if we use the well known system developed by Ansel Adams and Fred Archer between 1939-40.

THE ZONE SYSTEM

If we create a gradient from pure Black on the left to pure White on the right, this represents the Full Tonal Range that we can use in our images. Using the RBG numerical system, the far left is 0,0,0 and the far right 255,255,255.

Adams and Archer divided this gradient into Eleven equal portions:

By averaging each of those eleven Zones, they become the familiar chart we see right. Each zone representing roughly one stop. Even though the scale was developed with Black and White film in mind, and the values were essentially useful for printed media only, the scale has very much stood the tests of time.

Throughout the book I will refer to Zones 0 through X, *(Using Roman Numerals)* which mirrors the 11 step gradation from the original gradient.

If an image contains a range of all 11 zones, generally speaking that would be a high contrast scene. If only a few adjoining zones are represented in an image, such as zones IV, V and VI, this would be low contrast. Of course, any such definition is wildly simplistic, but it is a good idea to start somewhere and we can build complexity into our definitions later.

Over the years I have learned that having incredibly complex ways of explaining things rarely makes them more accessible.

Zone
0
I
II
III
IV
V
VI
VII
VIII
IX
X
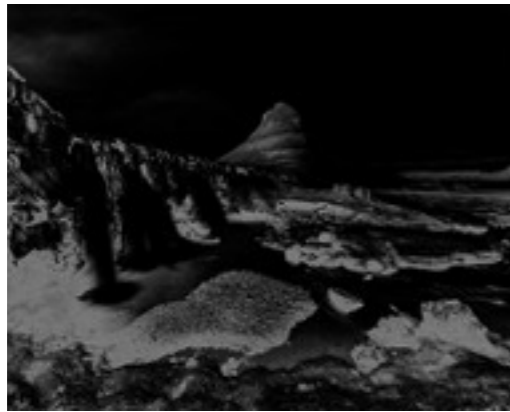
0 I II III

IV V VI VII

VIII IX X

Zones 0 - X represented as
luminosity masks
in this image

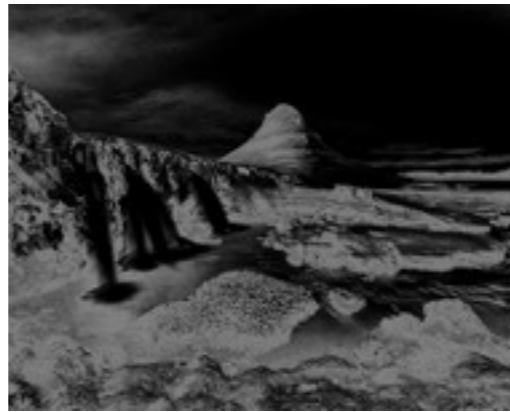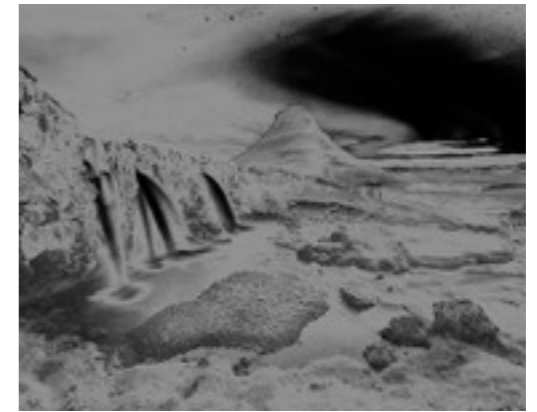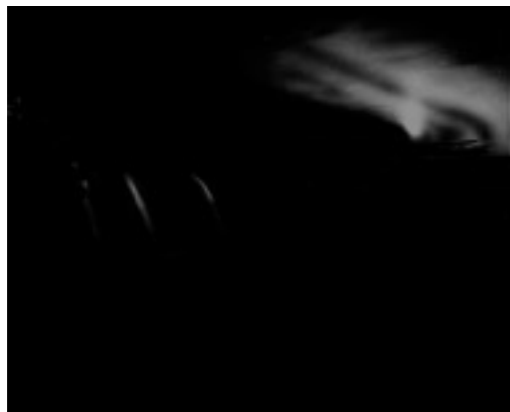When you look at a graphical representation of the zones in an image, it's easy to see how the various luminosities and the amount of each come together to set the emotional tone of the image.

The vast majority of the tones in the *previous image* are from 0 - V, meaning it's generally dark, which makes sense for a night shot. Lots of the image inhabits zones II, III and IV, giving huge amounts of shadow detail. These details allow for a lot of exploration in the shadows, adding to a sense of mystery and suspense.

The only things in the image that exist between zones VI and X are the waterfalls and the aurora, but due to their placement in the frame, there is a visual link between them, and they form the subject of the whole photograph.

This is a common theme in dark, mysterious images. The shadows define the structure, but the highlights tell the story.

The high key image on *this page* is only represented between Zones IV to IX - thus exhibits less contrast and a generally brighter, open and optimistic feel to it.
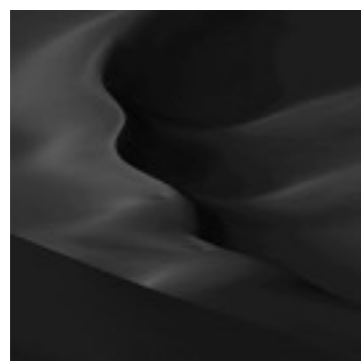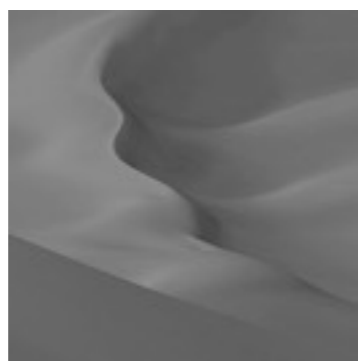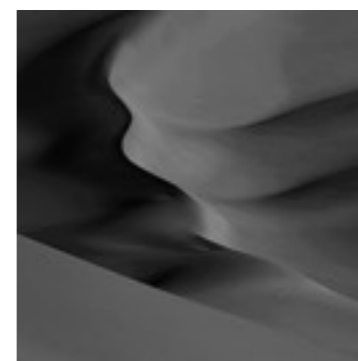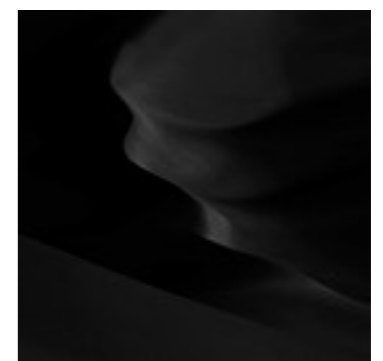
| IV | V | VI | VII | VIII | IX |

*Luminosity represents how dark
or light something is.*

*Contrast is defined by how far apart
those luminosities are and the amount
of each within the frame.*
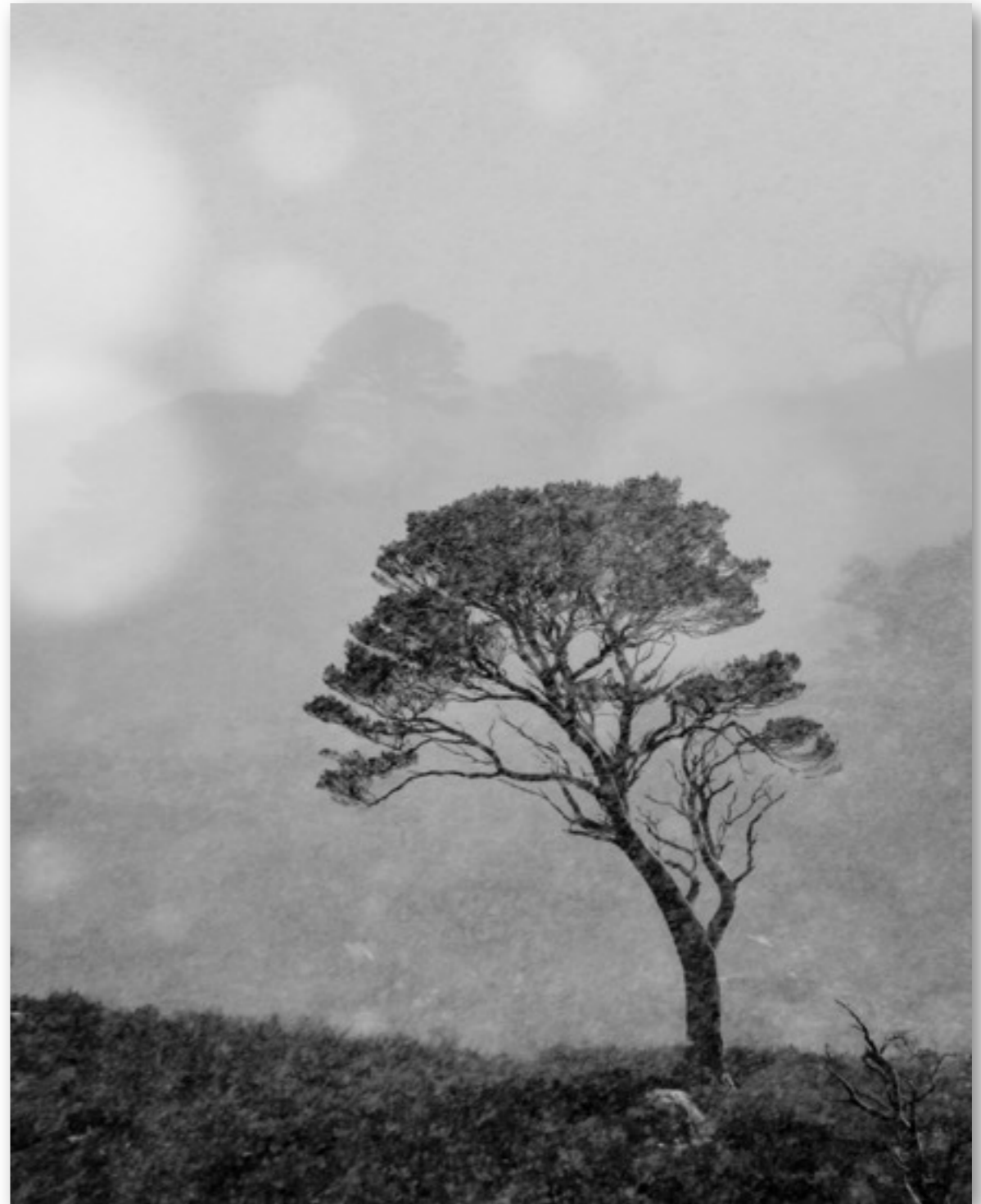
In the absence of software that will isolate each zone independently, the histogram in Lightroom is an excellent substitute. Learning to read one of these is critical to making well-crafted images, and each of the worked examples in the book is accompanied by the histogram.
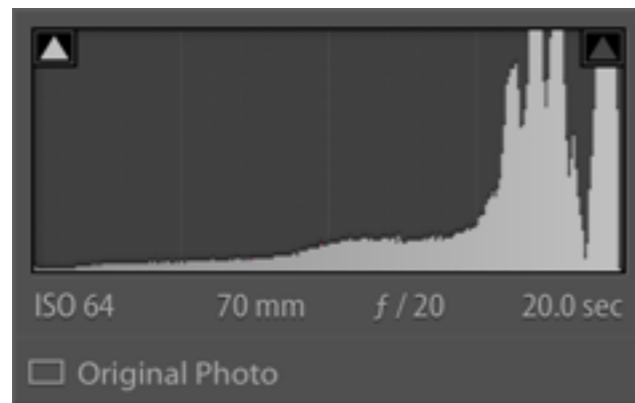
This histogram represents the image on the right. There are no gaps in the graph, demonstrating that all eleven zones are represented in the photograph. There may only be a handful of pixels in the image that are Zone 0, but they add to the overall contrast of the scene.

In the next section we will look at the Emotional Impact of Luminosity and Contrast in our images. In terms of image-making, the understanding of this impact is utterly essential if you are to consistently make images that speak to you, and ultimately others.

Emotional Impact

In Landscape Photography where there are no explicit metaphors or human values, much of our expressive articulation has to be implied. It's not like making images of cute kittens that will melt the heart of even the most cynical soul. In landscapes, a tree is always a tree and a rock is always a rock - whatever else we superimpose on it based on our own interpretation is just that, our own thoughts and imagination.

You can make an image in which you feel there are strong metaphors and meaning, but to a third party, it's just trees and rocks; all be it, very aesthetic trees and rocks.

Colour has long been used as a powerful emotional trigger, but here, in the mono, black and white world, that tool has been lost.

So, what's left?

Well, Luminosity and Contrast are all we've got, and it's those we'll use to weave whatever emotional expression we can into our images.

I'm a big believer in the power of the aesthetic to move people in both conscious and unconscious ways.

"You can make an image in which you feel there are strong metaphors and meaning, but to a third party, it's just trees and rocks; all be it, very aesthetic trees and rocks."

- Alister Benn

Seeing a grand landscape will no doubt trigger ideas of majesty, expansiveness, grandness, power, inspiration and so forth, but equally, there is an underlying geometry about these scenes that drives the subconscious to react to them in these predictable ways.

What makes a landscape majestic?

What makes a scene contemplative, or ethereal, or calm?

Understanding these things in our own work is vital for the articulation of expression. We will be coming back to one word again, and again - WHY?

Understanding your motives, your intent and your creative choices is again, a vitally important part of your art.

You can ask yourself any of the following:

"Why do I make photographs?"

"Why am I composing the image in this way?"

"Why do I feel this image works best this way?"

I could go on and on. And the reason for all these Why's, is for us, the artist, the creator of this image, to be clear in our own mind what we're trying to achieve.

Throughout this book I aim to steer clear of overly technical language, in both describing images and in the development section covering various creative processes. Instead, I prefer to use an adjectival system, where I use expressive, describing words to articulate mood, emotion, intent and feel.

I've done this for many years now, and exclusively discuss images with our participants on these terms. If you were to describe anything you love or admire, you would almost certainly use non technical, adjectival language. Nobody would talk about their significant life partner saying "My love is founded on their perfectly symmetrical face and a cheek bone angle of 86°." Equally, who ever says of their favourite photograph "I love this one because I shot it at 400 ISO for 3 seconds with my 24mm lens."

Instead, we say, "I love the energy of this, the feel, or the mystery - It just makes me happy, or a little sad." We use loving, caring, compassionate, expressive language to describe what we love, and if that's what we feel, then it needs to be put in at the front end. We need to be thinking in adjectives when we're making our images, not just letting this be relegated to random chance.

How we feel about what we do, what we see and the images we produce is a fundamental of our existence. If we're going to try and engage our viewers in our work, let's do it with passion.

Our relationship with the aesthetic is based so heavily on our emotional response to the content. None of it is rational, thought out, analysed or reliant on rules.

"A great photograph is a full expression of what one feels about what is being photographed in the deepest sense, and is, thereby, a true expression of what one feels about life in its entirety."
– Ansel Adams

We love it "because." And that word is enough!

I think we forget that the art came first, rules followed; as both artists and viewers desire to understand made them ask such questions as, "Why do I love this sculpture?"

The question is valid, it represents an exploration of our selves, our personal taste, an insight into our soul. For a couple of years I shot everything without thought - I didn't think about composition, I wasn't conscious of technical decisions. In front of the computer screen, I developed my images in a flowing, carefree state, curious as to where my mind, if left to it's own devices, would take a RAW file. I was fascinated with exploring what I called my innate aesthetic - the one that would emerge if I stripped away any repetitive process or societal rule, guideline or convention.

I discovered that I am not constant, I change, dramatically and frequently - from calm and quiet, to energised and expressive. I drift between extrovert and introvert, in each moment there is the infinity of possibility. My choice of images to work on would vary from morning to afternoon, day to day, week to week and season to season. Colour, contrast, luminosity, subject matter, moodiness, energy, flow and harmony are all expressive variables and flowed from me in a holistic and simple manner.

Each image was a construct of a moment - who I was there and then, interacting with data recorded in another moment, either recently, or long ago. I was no longer the person I was when I pressed the shutter, but somehow, the geometry, feel and flow of the composition was resonating with me in this future moment - we could dance again, to a tune of our own composition.

Taking the image on the previous page as an example. It was made on a terrible day on the west of Scotland, running a workshop with a very patient and enthusiastic group. It destroys the myth that you need golden hour light to make meaningful photographs - the rain stopped for a moment around noon and I made this image. I love it - because.

Of course, as the viewer and the creator, I love it because it brings back memories of a great day, and in the whole world I am unique. I am the only person alive who can relate back to that second when I was there, noticing a visual relationship that I find aesthetically harmonious. Everyone else looking at it has no experiential reference, and can only interact with it in the here and now.

That fact makes me smile - my seeing, looking, noticing, engaging, technical aptitude and understanding of processing has allowed me to articulate to myself - something. A something beyond "I'm hungry" or "I'm happy" or "I'm lonely." There is a resonance in the relationship with the content that transcends rationality, analysis or popularity.

I can layer this with metaphors, write poetry to sit beside it, weaving words and images together. I can even compose music to further articulate it's emotional meaning, but at the end of the day, I made it for me, and I like it. And sometimes, that's enough. The difficulties arise when we have to consider the emotional impact on a third party. Someone who wasn't there, someone who may not even speak the same language. What then of control? What then of articulation and expressive momentum?

The Psychology of Visual Design

It is not possible to make images with no emotional impact - it is in us to respond to any stimuli; sight, sound, touch, smell or taste. A simple like, or dislike are two of the most fundamental emotional responses. We can't avoid them, just try it!

Everything we do with an image from the second we arrange it in camera, through pressing the shutter for a specific amount of time, to creative input in development, has an impact on how a viewer **may** interpret it. I highlight that word, because we don't even know for sure. Some people can dislike images because they are too happy or calm; or equally, too gloomy and miserable - every one of us is unique, with our own perspectives, preferences and taste. I cannot please you all - to try is futile.

If pleasing others is an exercise in futility, what in fact are we then trying to do?

I tend to please myself, certainly as far as artistic creativity goes. In this whole world, I am the only person I have even the remotest chance of pleasing - and even then, that's a challenge in itself.

In the next two sections we will look at both High Key and Low Key images: They **feel** different, regardless of the subject matter. Luminosity and Contrast are our two most valuable tools in the psychology of our visual design.

The image on this page is from the same RAW file as on the previous page, yet it feels completely different. All that's been changed is the Luminosity and Contrast. What emotional words could we use to describe this version, as opposed to the other?

Open, inviting, welcoming, energetic, optimistic. Whereas, the first version was gloomy, oppressive, mysterious, even sinister!

Sadly, there is no right or wrong version, each image is entirely valid as an expressive representation of the place and our emotional relationship with it. The key clearly lies in being mindful of where the image is going, is it a holistic message, are you being consistent, and most importantly, are you being successful in articulating your intent - to yourself.

One of our biggest shortcomings as photographers is likely to be a lack of specific intent. I used to go out really early for sunrise with the intention of *"Making some really great photographs today!"*

If ever there was a prophecy doomed from the start it was that one. Today, I give it no thought, I rarely think about photography as all as an activity, or even a creative process - it just is, as fundamental to me as my breath.

However, to get to that point I spent many years being conscious of my intention.

"Why am I making this photograph?" - "What is the stimulus?" - "What shutter speed will best evoke the feeling I am looking for?" - "Is this the most harmonious arrangement?" - "What mood am I hoping to achieve?" - "Is this believable?"

I could go on. I asked myself a lot of questions over the years, and never accepted **because** as an answer!

This repetitive questioning and awareness of intent was valuable practice in muscle memory. Now, I do it without awareness, leaving my reflection on a completed image as a reference to my subconscious intent.

I'll close this section with something for you to ponder: The aspect ratio of the frame, its four bordering walls and everything contained therein contributes to the emotional impact of your images. Every spec of light, every rock, cloud, patch of moss or significant line, curve, or changes in contrast and luminosity. Everything counts. If it's in there, it's changing the impact. Be mindful of this - from the compositional stage through to the final print, every step is relevant. Leave nothing to chance.
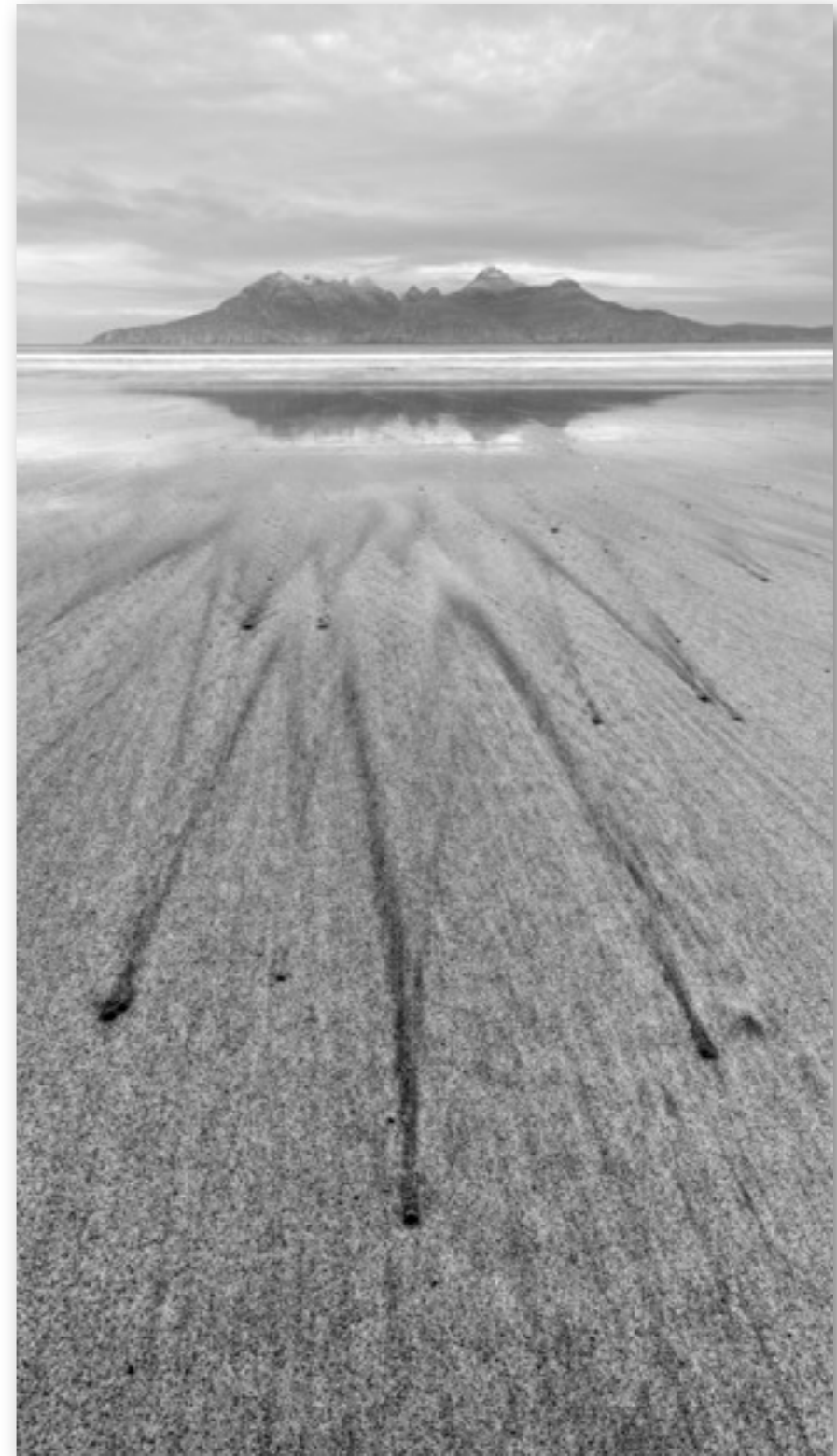
Chapter Summary - 1

✦ You can See without Looking

✦ Looking is Noticing

✦ Noticing leads to Engagement

✦ Engagement leads to Understanding

✦ Understanding how Luminosity and Contrast appear in the World tells you how your images should look.

✦ Image Development is about the application of Luminosity and Contrast.

✦ The Zone System is a convenient way to assess the range of Luminosity present in a scene or photograph.

✦ The landscape has no inherent metaphors

✦ Emotional language is best suited to creative and expressive output

✦ Making images that reflect our inner selves and moods leads to greater engagement with both landscape and self.

✦ Understanding self provides a better platform for creativity.

✦ Please yourself - you have very little chance of pleasing everyone else.

✦ Ignore nothing - attention to detail. Everything in the frame is visible and there to be seen. Leave nothing to chance.