

IN PURSUIT OF FOCUS

BY VALDA BAILEY

It has been suggested to me that a few words describing my workflow and thought processes as I go about my photography might be of interest to some. Trying to nail down exactly what it is I do will not necessarily be easy but I will try.

We all come to photography with different objectives. For many, it has much to do with the thrill of the chase - climbing the highest peak or waiting for hours in challenging conditions until the clouds part and light changes. For some, part of the appeal is gathering together a carefully chosen (and meticulously maintained) assemblage of filters, tripods, light meters, maps, apps and other sundries before setting out. Others enjoy the camaraderie, competition and conviviality of the weekly camera club meet.

My life is certainly not geared up for pre-dawn expeditions across hill and vale, and my impatience renders me somewhat unsuited to the careful calculations and intricate planning, that most landscape photographers have to incorporate into their workflow. It's an approach I greatly admire but cannot hope to emulate. In much the same way that I am physically incapable of singing in tune or dancing in a co-ordinated and dignified manner, it is a discipline that I am simply unable to master.

Had I not come across Chris Friel's work with its deceptive simplicity and casual violation of what I had hitherto assumed to be sacrosanct rules, I have no doubt that landscape photography would have remained uncharted territory and I would still be out on the streets hiding behind lamp posts trying to take candid

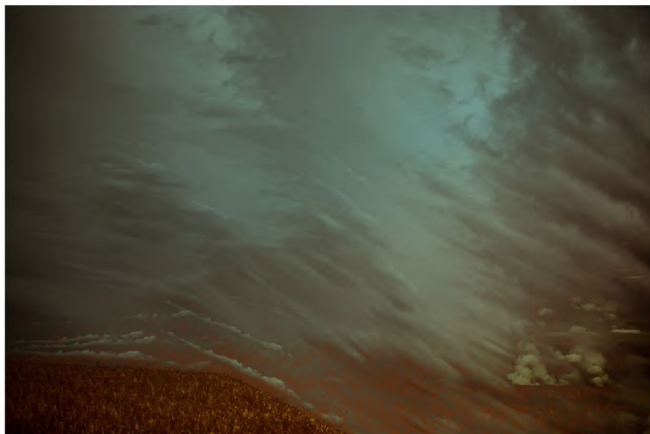
shots of complete strangers. It was obviously of huge importance that the end result of Chris' work was immensely pleasing to me, but the casting aside of rules and formalities and being able to pursue a much more unstructured approach was of almost equal importance.

My own objective when taking photographs is rooted in my training as a (hopelessly inept) painter. The causal deployment of the brush that says so much with such apparent ease is something I have always found extremely compelling. It could be argued that I'm setting myself up for failure before I even begin by trying to make a photograph that is more like a painting as the hand of the artist is always going to be missing but I press on regardless.

The time I have available to me to get out with my camera varies but it almost never coincides with a high tide or perfect light. I tend to set off with as little gear as possible and even less of an idea about what I am going to capture. When I find a likely looking place to stop I tend to shoot off a dozen or so frames pretty quickly to give me a vague idea of how the light falls and how the colours are being rendered. Sitting there for twenty minutes or so messing around with multiple exposure options, camera movement, white balance variations and the like allows me to collect my thoughts and, hopefully, for a relationship with my surroundings to start to develop. If the day is going well, I get a vague idea of what it is about the place that I would like to convey and I then set off to find an arrangement of shapes, colours or tones that will allow me to develop this inner monologue. If no obliging tree or clump of grass presents itself I will try to find something in the sky. 'Storm' is a case in point.

Storm

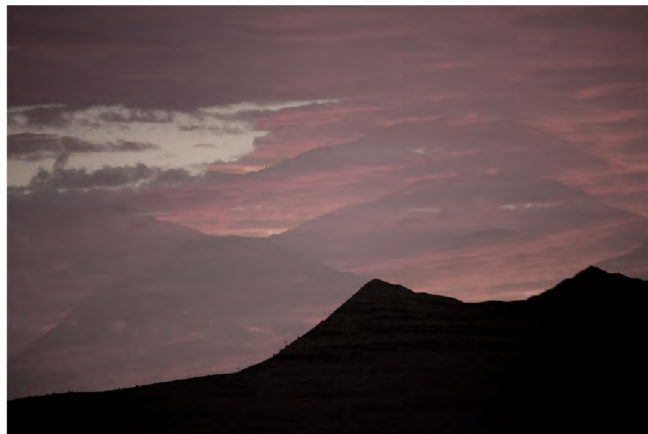
I had been out photographing poppies - it was early August, Flickr was awash with images of scarlet fields and I had discovered a couple of beautiful poppy fields just outside Brighton. I think it was my third or fourth visit there and



although they were starting to look a little forlorn, I was hoping that something interesting might happen. After an hour or so it became abundantly clear that it really wasn't going to materialise, but the light was so interesting that I turned my attention on the sky. Whether it was the multiple exposure working its magic or the patterns in the sky I don't recall, but I suddenly started to get a feel for my surroundings. Although I always say I don't go out with pre-conceived notions of what I am going to shoot, on this occasion I was definitely intent on shooting a field of poppies. Although this image could just as easily be titled 'Poppy Field',

for me it is all about the incoming storm and the dramatic sky and a lesson learned to look beyond the obvious.

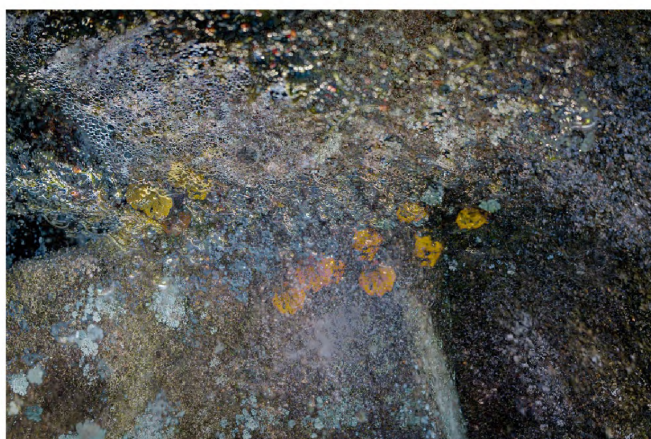
In common with most photographers I am always looking for shapes. Ernst Haas said 'shape is the enemy of colour' and it's only recently I've begun to see how



true this is. The photograph below was taken in Namibia - the colour has not been altered and while I think the sky is a little bit too candy-flossy for extended viewing, the shape of the distant hills, their relationship to the drifting cloud and the vague outlines in the sky generated by the multiple exposures are what interest me about this image. In-camera multiple exposures often throw up some curious and seemingly arbitrary colour casts. It is this, together with the random shapes that can be generated, that make this approach so endlessly fascinating to me.

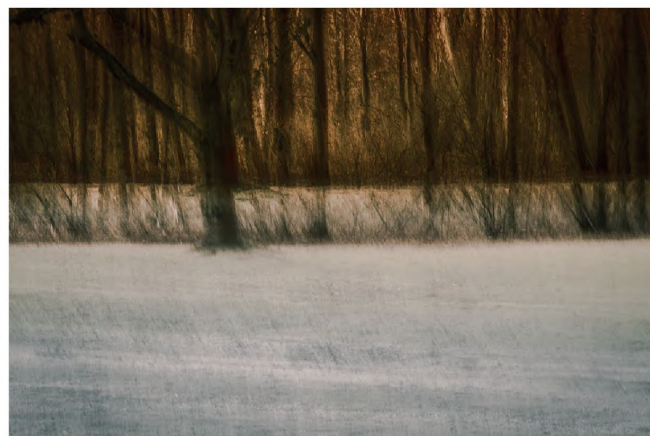
Much is made of developing a 'style' of one's own. I don't know if this is necessarily desirable - certainly a concerted effort to set oneself apart will probably result in a set of contrived images. When I first started trying to master alternative (for want of a better word) techniques, I was very much aware that I was bumping along behind Chris Friel frantically clawing onto his shirt tails. His influence remains strong but hopefully my work is finally starting to have an identity of its own. This is not a conscious development, more a slow evolution and assimilation of ideas and influences.

The image below is from a series of macro multiple exposures of some lichen



on a rock, overlaid with some watery bubbles, resulting in a strangely surreal abstract.

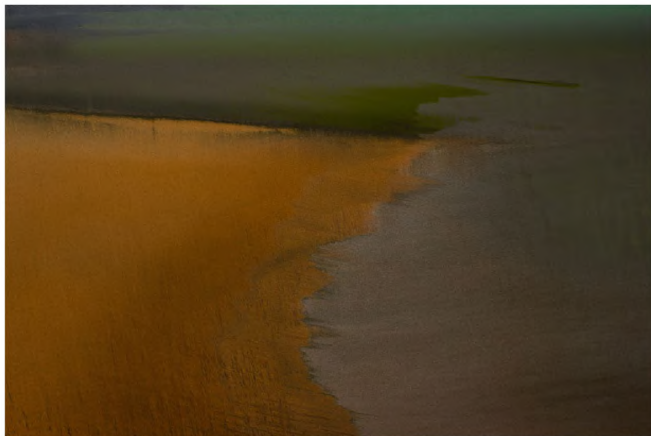
One of the aspects of this approach that greatly appeals to me is the freedom to be creative with colour and tone. I generally don't spend a vast amount of time on post processing, but now and again it can be rewarding to start pushing a few sliders to see what happens. With multiple exposure one is freed from the constraints of remaining true to the scene, as I am generally more concerned with conveying an emotional rendition rather than a literal one. That's not to



say those pursuing more traditional methods aren't conveying emotion - just that I allow myself more freedom to distort reality than perhaps others do. The image below was a perfectly nondescript study of some trees in a park in Berlin. The foreground was particularly dull so I dropped in a grad filter in Lightroom that decreased the contrast, upped the exposure and lo and behold created a blanket of - admittedly rather grubby - snow on the ground. A quick twiddle with

the white balance and job done.

Another aspect of multiple exposure photography which appeals to me is the creative freedom it affords. I don't spend hours in Photoshop but I have developed some pre-sets in Lightroom which help flatten the image and boost some of the more unexpected colours which sometimes result from in camera multiple exposure. It's probably no surprise that I am greatly influenced by painters - the fact that I can look at work by Cezanne, Van Gogh or Diebenkorn



for example, and be able to use their colour palettes as an inspiration in my work is something that excites me greatly.

I am primarily motivated by shape and colour and while I greatly admire black & white photographs - indeed 90% of the images I have on my wall are black &

white - I think it's unlikely that I will ever get to grips with it myself.