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# The Photographs

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I went into the woods with traditional tools, a large-format view camera, made in Switzerland, and lenses made in Germany. The mysticism of large format appeals to us landscape photographers with words like quality, traditional, contemplative, Switzerland, and Germany. I am all for these words, and all for large-format photography (I used it for two of the photographs in this collection). However, after two trips to the Cairngorms, and not too many more trips of the shutter, I realized that light is fast, and large-format is slow.

I have a need for speed. Speed is the time to see several viewpoints, not slave over one. Some would say this shows the absence of mastery, that surely a master would instantly know what to photograph and when and how to photograph it. I would say that a master would know where to start, acknowledging, as well as he is trained in the doctrine of previsualization, that as he strains to previsualize, the future still does not come into focus. The weather and the light, his partners in art, do not take well to holding still while he enacts his master plan. Sometimes, they do participate. Sometimes, they do nothing. Sometimes, if he is willing to participate with them, then they reveal themselves.

The tools I now take with me into the woods are those that allow me to participate like this with the landscape, not to dictate to it. Which cameras? Which lenses? Which filters? Not the best or newest, and, unless their makers sponsor me, why advertise for them? I will tell you that now I shoot digitally, and the photographs look good at the sizes I print them, and that is all we should ask of our tools. To ask for more is more about technology and less about beauty.

There it is — beauty — the perfect idea that parasitizes the arts whenever we as arts practitioners presume to diagnose it in our work, when really we would all be better off doing our thing (procuring art, not artist's statements), at ease with the feeling that, between the arts and critics, beauty comes and goes as beauty pleases, in fevers and chills. Oh, well, I'll have a go.

E. O. Wilson, the evolutionary biologist, wrote in *The Future of Life* that aesthetics stem from evolution. We have evolved to see beauty in places and practices that made our progenitors fit to survive. He wrote that lightly wooded landscapes, such as those in which the early *Homo sapiens* would first have stood and prospered, are internationally seen as beautiful. Beauty, by this definition, is a tool for passing on survival skills, attracting us to who or what or where was useful for survival. So, beauty is utility — and yet the tool is used by our genes and not us. To us as humans, in the act of being attracted to beauty, beauty seems to be a goal, a good feeling to have, or a person to have and to hold. So, beauty is a tool to genes and goal to humans.

Beauty, as our genes would have it, appeals to tradition. Beauty shows what did succeed, and still could, only not necessarily. Nonetheless, if the human condition has changed only little, these beautiful appeals could still be fitting. For this reason, beauty will have to be tried on for size by every generation. Should my generation, a generation that inherited deforestation, still find fitness in a genetic, aesthetic attraction to woodland? Yes, I do believe those genes still fit us well. Imprisoned in our cities, something in our cells is telling us we need woodland — like sex, we have a wood drive. Why not? What sort of world would we live in, if not for wood? We still depend on trees for timber and paper and oxygen, if not for swinging through.

The photographs in this collection — I call it *Woodland Light* — will help us urban apes experience our in-built sense of woodland beauty. We need to see more woodland on our walls, or in our public spaces. That experience of beauty, as beauty has evolved to do, will see to it that we preserve what we need to survive.

Beauty, in selecting these photographs, is therefore the first criterion. The second, only where it coexists with beauty, is interest in the objects of beauty themselves — in their ecology and history. The woodland historian, Oliver Rackham, wrote in *Woodlands* of his disappointment in woodland photographers who photograph only the unremarkable trees. To Rackham, unremarkable are those "telling nothing," because of their historical or scientific insignificance. Firstly, I would argue that visual artists are not in the business of telling,

but showing. Secondly, historic or scientific is not necessarily photogenic. If I were a documentarian, not an artist, I would be content with such objective depictions. The job of the artist is being subjective.

Simply using tools was revolutionary in the caveman days of wheels and levers, before the tools began to use themselves. Today, with automatic tools at democratic prices, the skill is not in simply using tools, but being justified in using them. Would we defend a writer for falling asleep on a keyboard? The quality of senseless "querty" that the keyboard would produce would be perfect, if we were only interested in the font. Perfect pixels also make imperfect pictures.

Imagine a technology through which everything everyone looks at is photographed technically perfectly. Neither far fetched, nor far in the future, will it kill photographers? Only if we believe that photographers are only technicians. The skill that will be the salvation of photographers is in knowing what not to show. By showing everything, we show no insight. The insight we show is in the distillation of reality, and that is what we will still do. Photographers will still distill.

Before I photograph, the woodland is a complex texture of life forms, of outlines infringed upon and intertwined in the fight for light. When I photograph, my compositions are a weeding-out of outlines, so that only simple forms win out in the untangled light that heads into the lens. In simple forms, we recognize beauty.