

Shoot for the Moon

Monthly news and tips from Landscape Photographer
Gill Moon



March 2020 Vol 3 - Composition

Hello

and welcome to the third edition of 'Shoot for the Moon'

This month I will be talking about composition and how that relates to the wider view and to more intimate landscapes.

With the arrival of March it is beginning to feel that spring is on its way. This is one of my favourite times for landscape photography. The days are not too long, the light is still soft and the countryside is beginning to wake from its winter slumbers.

For many landscape photographers shooting is all about location and capturing that iconic or classic view. Whilst this is a great way to explore it is always worth trying to look beyond the obvious viewpoints and try to find something new that hasn't been captured before. That is where intimate landscapes come in.

I hope you will find this interesting and informative. I am always keen to receive feedback so please get in touch if you have anything you would like to share.

Remember to aim high, be inspired and shoot for the moon! Thank you and happy photographing

Gill

If you would like to get in touch please email me at gill@gillmoon.com

Composition

Landscape photography is all about making a successful image from the scene in front of you. Even if your view is dominated by amazing scenery it doesn't follow that you will produce a stunning image without giving some serious thought to your composition. Similarly mundane scenery doesn't mean you will come away with a dull image. It is all about your interpretation of what is in front of you and how you translate that into an image.

The Rules

We are going to start with some compositional rules and then think about reasons to abandon them.

Rules are a good place to start a discussion on composition but I hate the idea that landscape photography has to follow a prescriptive pattern. In my mind this just stifles creativity. Rules are guidelines, they are important to understand and should be considered carefully but should not come to define your image making.

When faced with finding a composition it is a good idea to ask yourself some questions....

What is my subject?

This can be anything that catches your eye, a building, geological feature, a tree or an area of light or a pattern or a block of colour.

What am I going to use as my foreground?

Your foreground is there to compliment your scene and draw the viewers eye into the image. It doesn't need to be a physical structure, it could be areas of pattern or texture or lines created by the movement of water.

What are my supporting elements?

These can be elements within the scene that guide the viewers eye across the entire image.

What am I going to leave out?

Identify unwanted and distracting elements and eliminate them from the frame.

The Rule of Thirds

This is the most well known of the rules and it basically says to divide the frame into a grid of thirds and then position the subject on one of the intersecting points and the horizon on one of the horizontal thirds.



Point of View

Your point of view will completely change the look and feel of your image.

These pictures both feature the same subject but are taken from completely different viewpoints.



Aldeburgh Scallop Shell - photographed from below the shingle bank looking up at the structure using a really shallow depth of field. F 3.2 at 1/320sec, 175mm focal length.

This image was taken lying down with the camera on the beach and the horizon on the bottom third. The low viewpoint emphasises the texture of the shingle beach and compresses the middle ground.



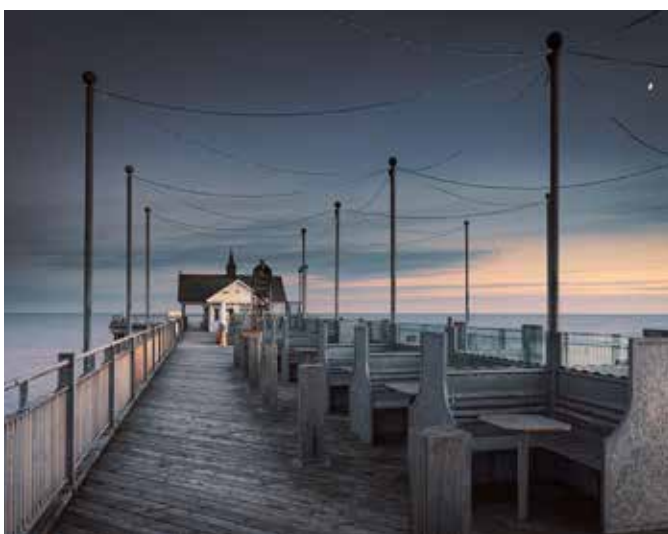
Aldeburgh Scallop Shell photographed from a standing position looking along the beach. F16 at 1/20 second, 55mm focal length. This was taken standing up, the horizon is still in the bottom third but the higher viewpoint emphasises the wider landscape and helps the viewer place the subject within its environment.

Depth

When constructing your image think about your foreground, the middle distance and the background. Decide which will have the most attention in your frame. This will determine your viewpoint.

By placing elements in the foreground, middle distance and background you create a natural progression through your image and hence a sense of depth.

Lines



Southwold Pier, looking along the pier using perspective to lead the eye into the image. F14 at 3 seconds, 24mm focal length.

Lines form the edges of shapes, but they also form shapes of their own. Lines can lead the eye in a photograph and serve as a powerful compositional tool.

The direction a line travels plays a role in the emotion of the image. Diagonal lines create a feeling of movement within the frame. They lead the eye towards a particular part of the frame. A leading diagonal line that heads into the distance will give a photograph a sense of depth.

A vertical line builds a feeling of strength or stability, while a horizontal line is more generally associated with a calm or peaceful image. Curved lines will create a sense of motion



Walberswick looking along the Dunwich River towards the old pier. This image is all about lines, diagonal and vertical with lots of perspective. As the composition is quite busy the black and white conversion simplifies the scene a little.

1/100 sec at F14, ISO 400, handheld



The Martello Tower at East Lane Bawdsey - I used the rocks to create a line leading into the image from the left corner.

1.6 second exposure at F16, ISO 100, 0.6 ND grad filter

Framing

Framing your subject by using other elements within the landscape is a useful compositional tool. It can add depth and context to your image.



This image uses the shape of the tree to frame the rising sun.
1/1250 sec at F8 ISO 800 handheld.

Foreground frames are the easiest way of using a frame within your image. Find a part of the landscape that you want to focus on (subject) - in the image below it is the martello tower, then find an object to 'frame' your subject and hold it for the viewer. In this case the groynes frame the edge of the image and guide the eye to the martello tower on the far bank of the river.



Looking across the Deben at Bawdsey 1/160 sec at F14, ISO 200

Patterns and texture

Textures are a great way of adding foreground interest to a shot without actually using a specific object.



The foreground of this image is all about patterns and texture with the interest created by the sea holly, the patterns in the sand and the textures of the marram grass. 0.4 sec at F16, ISO 100

Look for shadows and lines within the texture patterns and use these to lead the eye across your image.



This image uses the textures of the grasses combined with the colours of the heather to create a leading line into the image from the right hand corner. 5 seconds at F16, ISO 100

Play with focus points and depth of field - focus on the foreground and blur out the background or vice versa to change the mood and feel of your images.



Foreground texture with blurred background.
1/800 sec at F5.6 ISO 100

Beyond the Classic View

The term intimate landscape was first coined by photographer Eliot Porter in 1979 who used it as a title for an exhibition he held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The images that he selected for his exhibition can be seen on this website and give you an idea what he meant by the term intimate landscape. www.afterimagegallery.com/porterintimatelandscapes.htm

Today intimate landscapes are a popular part of landscape photography - the term describes a small scene which has been extracted from a wider landscape view and put into a frame of its own.

Intimate landscapes are really worth exploring because they are a way of creating an image that is unique to you. It is very unlikely that anyone else will see the same elements or composition as you even if they visited the same location. Intimate landscapes are personal to you, they are your take on the world and are more emotive than the classic view that many photographers jostle to take.

How to find an intimate landscape

It is easy to spot a classic view and the elements that make up the most obvious compositions are easily identifiable. It is less easy to spot an intimate landscape.

It all comes down to observation and a particular way of seeing the landscape around you. Intimate landscapes don't need dramatic light and very often dull or shady conditions work really well.

Try to distill the scene into its component parts and think about the landscape in terms of shapes and tones. Give yourself time to notice what is going on around you and take in all the various elements. Consider textures, patterns, colours, shapes and tones.

Intimate landscapes are best shot with a telephoto lens which will allow you to focus in on smaller areas of the scene.

The following two pictures were taken at Ramsholt on the River Deben. This pond with its reeds and dead trees had always caught my eye but I wasn't sure how best to capture it. The first image is a shot encompassing the wider view. It's a nice scene but for me it lacks impact probably because there is not an obvious focal point. The colours are nice and there is lots to look at but this is not enough to create a really impactful image.



Ponds at the edge of the River Deben at Ramsholt. F16 at 0.4 seconds. 70mm focal length.

The second image was made by focusing in on a couple of elements within this scene. These were the ones that had initially caught my eye - the dead tree trunks in the middle of the water with the reeds as a backdrop.

By using a longer focal length and picking out areas of texture and colour and thinking about these as graphical elements I was able to make an image that I felt was more impactful.



This image focuses in on a specific part of the last scene and was shot at a focal length of 170mm. F16 at 0.5 seconds.

What makes a good intimate landscape

Intimate landscapes are images that make the viewer think. They force us to use our imagination and capture our attention for longer. They often work best when the sky is excluded from the frame.



1/60 second at F8, ISO 800

This autumnal image was taken at Melton on the edge of the River Deben. It was the colours of the trees and the reeds surrounding the very green water that caught my eye. Excluding the sky made the image more impactful and it now becomes a picture all about colour and texture.



Ebbor Gorge 1/125 sec at F9, ISO 400

The image above was taken at Ebbor Gorge on the Mendip Hills in Somerset. The views from this lookout point are amazing but I felt that the trees in the gorge were equally stunning and I loved the way light played on one side of the gorge whilst leaving the other in shadow.



This image is built around texture and small areas of light on the tree trunks and in the pond. 1 second at F14, ISO 100.

The key to intimate landscapes is observation, reacting to light, texture and the colour and learning how to build an image around these components instead of looking for obvious subjects in the landscape.

When constructing your landscape it is always worth thinking about what initially caught your eye. In the case of the following images it was the green tree in a sea of neutral tones. The first image I took was of the whole scene and whilst I like this image it doesn't really convey my initial thoughts. The blue sky overpowers the image and takes the attention away from the tree. Using a closer crop the image become much more about the green tree and the neutrality that surrounds it.



These images were taken at Ramsholt looking across the marsh.
1/125 second at F11, ISO 200 70mm focal length.



Backlit silver birch trees in Rendlesham Forest.

1/200 second at F5.6 ISO 200 focal length 240mm

Light is a key ingredient in any landscape photography but it can be used to great advantage with intimate landscapes. The image above was taken in Rendlesham Forest with a telephoto lens. This group of backlit silver birch trees caught my eye. I loved the contrast between the trees and the darker forest surrounding them and the way the light accentuated the texture of the branches. Shooting with a telephoto lens at a focal length of 240mm allowed me to compress the foreground and reduce the distance between the small silver birch trees in the foreground and the taller ones behind.

Tips for intimate landscapes

- Start wide and refine your image by focusing in on a specific area.
- Use a telephoto lens.
- Eliminate the sky.
- Look for graphical elements within your landscape and use these to guide your composition.

Inspiration

There are numerous photographers out there producing amazing landscape photography that shys away from the traditional classic view. Here are some of my favourites:

Lizzie Shepherd

Lizzie is a Yorkshire based photographer who's work I absolutely love. Her images have a beautiful light feel to them and often focus on the more intimate or quieter landscapes. The 'Shapes' gallery on her website features some stunning intimate landscapes.

www.lizzieshepherd.com

Beata Moore

Beata is a landscape photographer based on the South Coast. Her work is diverse and ranges from wider views to smaller details and abstract images, both in colour and black & white. Beata is particularly drawn to the subtleties of smaller details of landscape and architecture providing her with endless patterns, shapes, textures and colours. Strong composition and colour harmonies enable her to perfectly encapsulate the spirit of the places she visits.

www.beatamoore.co.uk

David Ward

David is a landscape photographer who's work is renowned for its graphic simplicity and technical quality. He is particularly drawn to making abstract, intimate landscape images and says his work is informed and inspired by many of the great American landscape photographers of the last century.

www.into-the-light.com

Paul Wakefield

Paul is a London based photographer who's work has taken him around the globe. His website is full of stunning images and his 'Personal Series' of images include some really beautiful intimate landscapes.

www.paulwakefield.co.uk

March Composition Challenge

Visit a location that is known for its classic landscape view.

1. See how many different images you can make from that one classic view. Experiment with a variety of viewpoints and see if you can come up with something original.
2. Turn away from the classic view and find a more intimate composition. Experiment with framing and eliminating the sky from this view.
3. Use the rules of composition discussed above for both your classic view and your intimate landscape.



How I got the shot



Kyson Point, Woodbridge

13 second exposure at F16, ISO 100, tripod, 0.6ND graduated filter, 6 stop ND filter

This image was taken on the River Deben at Kyson Point. There is a little area of saltmarsh leading up to Martlesham Creek where there is a boathouse sitting on the shore where the creek meets the Deben. This is a lovely peaceful spot about half a mile's walk from Woodbridge along the riverside path.

When I took this shot the sun had just risen over to the left of the image. Despite shining through a layer of light mist I felt the sun was too bright and distracting to include in my image so chose a composition which excluded it. I did however like the warming glow it created coming in from the left of the image. I felt that this balanced nicely with the coolness of the rest of the scene.

I set up my composition to include the areas of eel grass coming in from the right creating a leading line into the middle part of the frame. I placed the horizon just above the centre as I was keen to include the crescent moon that was still visible in the sky. The boathouse is positioned over to the right third of the image.

I decided to use a 6 stop ND filter to slow down the shutter speed to blur the water as much as possible and really enhance the feeling of tranquility.

Workshops

Woodland Workshop

My Winter Woodland Workshop is a full day workshop which explores two of my favourite areas of Suffolk woodland; Upper Hollesley Common and Staverton Thicks. These are two very different areas each with their own unique challenges and compositions.

During this workshop we will explore a variety of habitats including pine plantations, mixed woodland, silver birch glades and hazel coppices. The workshop will cover the camera settings and technical considerations for shooting in woodlands and will also focus on composition and 'seeing' an image. We will look at the wider landscape as well as at more intimate details and will explore different methods of finding and observing images in wild landscapes. We will practice identifying subjects, finding viewpoints, working with supporting elements and incorporating lines, shapes patterns and textures.

After a pub lunch we will move to Staverton Thicks. This is one of my favourite areas of woodland in Suffolk but it is also a very chaotic place that can be difficult to photograph. However when you get your eye in it is fantastically rewarding and an enchanting place to explore.

This 7 hour workshop costs £110 and includes a one course lunch and transport between locations if required. More details at www.landscapephotographytuition.co.uk



Shingle Street Workshop

Join me for a half day photography workshop on the beach at Shingle Street. This is a fantastic location to explore photographically especially in the spring when the floral display on the beach is at its best. Shingle Street is one of the best examples of vegetated shingle found along the Suffolk Coast and in May the beach blooms with the colourful displays of sea kale, sea pea, red valerian, vipers bugloss and sea campion. These plants make wonderful images in their own right as well as colourful additions to a wider landscape shot.

We will explore the wild shingle setting on the edge of the Ore, take in the shell line and the coastguard cottages. We will look at shape and form using the exposed shingle at low tide to compose interesting compositions. We will also focus on the floral display on the beach and have a go at capturing the flowers in detail and as part of the landscape. We will work on identifying subjects, finding viewpoints, working with supporting elements using lines, shapes, patterns and textures.

This is a 3 hour workshop and is suitable for all levels, abilities and camera types.

This 3 hour workshop costs £35.

More details at www.landscapephotographytuition.co.uk

