

Color or Black and White?

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There are now three realms of photography: black and white; color; and “this isn’t working in color; let’s try converting it to black and white”. I say this rather tongue-in-cheek, but it’s become a more prevalent tactic with today’s photographers (especially if one is attuned to some of the online photographer’s forums).



This isn’t something that occurred very often back in the “days of film”, because film costs money and developing it costs even more money and time. With some exceptions (Polaroids were useful for this purpose), the film photographer decided then and there whether they were using color or black and white. Today’s digital tools and software have made it exceptionally easy now to “experiment” by using the built-in and

remarkably excellent conversion tools. But has this made us better or just lazier photographers?

Let me first get this off my chest: if your photograph is not very strong when viewed in all its colorful RGB glory, then converting it to black and white will do nothing to improve it. A mediocre color photograph converted to black and white only becomes a mediocre black and white photograph. I’ve said this many times to fellow photographers, friends, and students: strong black and white photography arises from forethought, rarely from afterthought. When Ansel talked about visualization, he was talking about a process that took place before the shutter was fired, not after. In other words, a strong black and white photograph is conceived in the mind (or mind’s eye, as some would have it) while in the field, not during post-processing. What I especially object to is the notion that black and white is ideal when the light sucks or when the image isn’t working in color. These are two lousy notions.

As a photographer who practices both color and black and white photography, what approach do I take? When I’m in the field, I look for and see either in color or in black and white, but rarely can I do both successfully at the same time. Depending upon where I am – let’s say in this colorful southwest Utah setting seen in the photograph at left – I’ve determined that the color of this location is what is drawing my attention, so I begin seeing only in color. And therein lies my Photographic Rule #1,456: if the COLOR



of something draws me in, then photographing/printing in color is the obvious choice. If the LIGHT, TONE, or CONTRAST of something draws me in, then black and white is my more obvious choice. The color might do nothing other than add distraction.

Michael E. Gordon is an award-winning fine art landscape photographer and respected digital print maker. Michael leads photographic workshops and tours and provides printing services and custom printer/paper profiles for photographers. He lives in Southern California with his wife Shauna and their menagerie of rescued animals.