

The art of subtlety

Too many 'images with impact' dull the senses, argues Niall Benvie. Here he looks at some alternative approaches he believes can offer a more rewarding experience for both the viewer and the photographer

It's a ready standby, a frozen pizza, for the features editor who's run out of ideas of what to feed his readers: do a piece on how to create images with impact. Perhaps it's the easy alliteration that appeals; perhaps it's the opportunity to use some undeniably striking pictures. 'Images with impact' typically have strong colours, an unambiguous point of focus, dynamic lines and extraordinary lighting. And who, after all, wants to read an article on how to make pictures no one will notice? But in an age when our greatest challenge as photographers is to get anyone to stay with our picture for more than two seconds, creating 'images with impact' isn't the answer.

The trouble is, these images are like someone at a party standing too close to you, speaking too loudly and not letting you get a word in edgeways. What's more, there are lots of similar one-way conversations happening around you at the same time. It's just too much. The effect of all these (brace, brace!) impactful images is akin to tucking into a big bag of Maltesers: the first few taste great but by the time you've guiltily rolled out the last one, your palate has become so dulled that you scarcely taste it. Likewise, once you've seen the first few dazzling pictures with arresting foregrounds and apocalyptic skies, more of the same tends to roll over our senses.

So, if emotionally one-dimensional 'images with impact' won't hold our viewer's attention, what will? Well, what about calm images

expressing subtlety and simplicity? They are the quiet, mysterious character in the corner at the party; you're not sure if they are quiet because they don't feel the need to be the centre of attention, or because they simply have nothing to say. That won't emerge until you make the first move and start speaking to them. But already they've achieved something that the bombastic bore has failed to: they have created curiosity and attracted more than a couple of seconds of your attention.

There's always the possibility that quiet images are actually banal ones in disguise, which, on closer examination, excite neither the emotions nor the intellect. I doubt if I'm alone in entertaining this suspicion when I look at a lot of 'art' photography and wonder at the dreary subject matter, incidental lighting or studied avoidance of joy. But many 'boring' pictures make perfect sense once we know their context, so it's always worth asking a few more questions before coming to a conclusion. You might be denying yourself a treat.

I prefer a more direct way to hold the viewer's attention, and I attempt this by creating complexity. These works comprise several (or many) discrete elements that can't be taken in at a single glance; the gaps between the images provide punctuation that slows the viewer down, letting them draw breath before moving to the next one. No single element draws attention to itself; instead, each contributes to the overall effect.

Quite often, elements that could fairly be deemed banal when seen on their own, work well when assembled into panels; for example, abstract subjects such as moss, stones, ferns and lichens. When seen individually they can be visually unsatisfying, like shelling and eating pistachio nuts one at a time. Collectively, however, with each shell already open, the experience is quite different; the image satisfies.

There is another aspect of complex panels that may pique the interest of anyone keen to produce something specific to them: panels don't readily lend themselves to replication. It's hard graft getting all the elements together and then assembling them in a way that creates harmony without providing a quick route in and out of the piece. And let's face it, not everyone is inclined to commit so much work to a single creation. Some people may not even like them! Your field is pretty clear.

At the risk of stating the obvious, complex pieces affirm complexity. That's to say they show that nature is vastly more complicated than the idealised summary portrayed in an 'image with impact'. These works are more concerned with the threads than the fabric. This approach, with its need to gather many elements, necessarily forces a more intense scrutiny by the photographer and offers deeper appreciation of the subject or location. Who knows, perhaps the viewer can sense that – and will stay a little longer with you.

Lichens, Torrion, Highland.
It took a morning to find the lichens I wanted for this panel. There's a lot to look at in the big print and I'd like to think it would hold the viewer's attention for upwards of 10 seconds.

