

ANDY ILACHINSKI

photographer

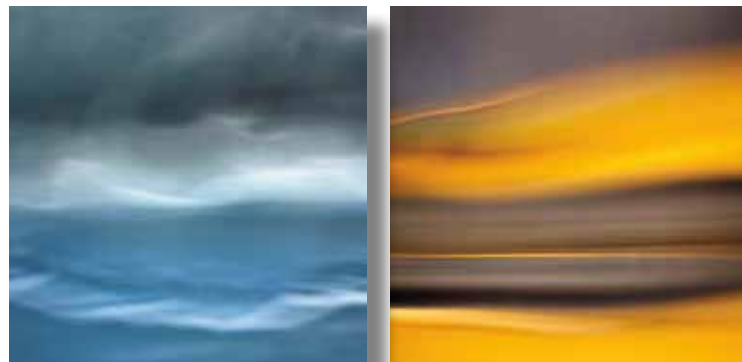


ANDY ILACHINSKI, by training and profession, is a physicist, specializing in the modeling of complex adaptive systems. He earned his Ph.D. in theoretical physics in 1988. However, by temperament and inner muse, Ilachinski is a photographer, and has been one for far longer than his Ph.D. gives him any right to claim an ownership by physics.

Ilachinski has delighted in taking pictures ever since his parents surprised him on his tenth birthday with a Polaroid camera.

Apart from his dad, who is a lifelong artist, Ilachinski is most deeply inspired by the works of Ansel Adams, Minor White, Brett Weston, Carl Chiarenza, and Wynn Bullock.

Ilachinski, along with his wife, two children, and a pug, as well as more books on art, photography, and physics than any of them know what to do with, lives in northern Virginia.



SYNESTHETIC LANDSCAPES

Color is the key.

The eye is the hammer.

The soul is the piano with its many chords.

The artist is the hand that,

by touching this or that key,

sets the soul vibrating automatically.

– Wassily Kandinsky (1866 – 1944)

Synesthesia derives from the Greek *syn*, meaning “union” plus *aisthaesis*, meaning “sensation,” and thus means “joined sensation,” such as when something that is ordinarily “seen” is tasted as well. But this dry definition hardly does justice to the psychological, creative—even mystical—experience of synesthesia. There are well-documented examples of almost all possible joinings of the senses—smelling sounds, hearing colors, feeling shapes, etc. Well known synesthetes include Wassily Kandinsky, Vladimir Nobokov, David Hockney, Richard Feynman, and Alexander Scriabin. Contemporary “synesthetic” artists include Carol Steen and Marcia Smilack.

In my case, up until about the age of ten, I vividly remember perceiving numbers (and, less frequently, letters) as colors; even numbers taking on a variety of “warm” hues, and odd numbers characteristically assuming “cool” hues. Sadly, I now only rarely experience this phenomenon, but recall it well to this day, some forty years after last experiencing it for real.

It is only relatively recently that PET and MRI scans have unequivocally revealed that synesthesia is a demonstrably and rigorously

real—not imagined—experience, indicating that the senses in synesthetes are actually neurologically connected. Before this time, research consisted largely of self-reports by synesthetes, made all the more difficult by the fact that the experience itself was by no means universally accepted as real and the people who stepped forward to share their experiences were often either ignored or ridiculed, or both. In fact, modern research suggests that as many as one in one hundred people may have some degree of synesthesia.

An important part of art—all art, including, for example, painting, photography, dance, poetry— involves the artist finding ways to communicate his or her point of view to another. By its very nature, art seems to require a “mixing of the senses,” in that an artist invites the viewer to use multiple senses—sight, sound, touch, smell, and even taste—to fully experience art. A painting may be seen and touched; a beautiful garden may be seen, touched, and smelled; a fine gourmet dish may be seen, smelled, and tasted. In a sense, then, all artists implicitly strive to induce synesthetic experiences.

As sounds in a musical composition can be used not to express physical objects but ideas, emotions, harmonies, rhythmic orders and most any expression of the human mind and spirit, so light can be used visually to express the mind and spirit.

– Wynn Bullock (1902 - 1975)

There is a print by the Japanese painter/poet Hanabusa Itchō (1652–1724) entitled “Blind monks examining an elephant” that emphasizes an underlying philosophical layer of synesthesia with which I resonate strongly as a spiritually-minded photographer, and that drives my ongoing experiments with “synesthetic landscapes.”

Itchō’s print depicts a story that has many variants and reaches back into Jain, Buddhist, Sufi, and Hindu traditions. The poet John Godfrey Saxe immortalized the core idea for the western world in his poem “The Blind Men and the Elephant” It begins:



*It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind*

...and eventually has the men “see” the elephant as a wall, snake, spear, tree, fan, or rope, depending on what part of the elephant’s body they touch and probe:

*And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,*

*Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!*

A wikipedia article highlights some of the many uses this story (in all its myriad forms) has had as a metaphor in physics, biology, and religion. I view it as a provocative stepping stone for asking both as photographer and physicist (which is what I am during all my hours away from photography): “What is a ‘thing’ really?,” or—better—“How fundamental an understanding of ‘reality’ does our privileged ‘view’ of it provide us with?”

Suppose you are asked to take a picture of, say, a water glass from your kitchen. What would you do? The simplest, most obvious, approach is to point your camera in its general direction and press the shutter. The result is a photograph of a glass, but, like the blind men groping at the elephant, the glass will have been captured from a single vantage point, using a fixed aperture and exposure time, with perhaps a filter sandwiched between the glass and our lens and maybe a polarizer to “cut out” some of the glare. Assuming the photograph is technically well executed, it can certainly be used to represent the glass, and others may use your image as a “symbol” to denote the “real” glass that continues to “exist” elsewhere, i.e., in your kitchen. But what and how much of the “glass”—and everything it “means” as an object in this universe—has your photograph actually captured? Your image is less an “image of the glass” than it is an “image of the glass taken by [substitute your name] taken on date D under conditions C using camera X with setting S.” Your image—any image—is but one essentially random fixed exemplar of an

uncountably large number of possible images that might have been taken of the glass.

Which image ‘best’ represents the glass? None, all, and one, depending on one’s point of view and ontological predilections. To begin, the answer is none, because “privileged observers” are an anathema; there can be no “best” observer, or “best” image. Images may contain more or less useful information—in the context of a given goal—but, absent such an externally imposed constraint, no one image is “better” or “worse” than any other. Looked at another way, the answer is all, because if an objective measure of “better” or “worse” cannot be defined, each image must be treated equally, and the collective set of all possible images defines the kitchen glass, at least its visual aspects. And, further, the answer is one, because there is always at least one undeniable aesthetic at play, namely that of the photographer. The photographer is a *de facto* privileged observer, and the “best” image is the one that best reflects the photographer’s artistic sensibilities at the instant of capture.

The caveat is that the resulting picture is not really a picture of a “glass.” Rather, it is a “picture of a glass taken by photographer P, at time t, for purpose R.” This ontological distinction is often overlooked. Because an image is itself a physical thing and conveys information about another physical thing, we tend to interpret what we see in pictures literally: “this image shows a glass, and now, having seen it, I ‘know’ what a glass looks like and therefore what it is.” And yet, this is so obviously not so. Taking a cue from the blind men and their elephant, we ask: “What other ‘views’ of this glass could we have, under what conditions (of the glass and our own inner thoughts and

feelings), such that we gain a fuller, more complete, understanding of what a glass really is?”

What does all of this have to do with Synesthetic Landscapes? All of the images in this series are—in the sense I just defined—“privileged views” of colored water glasses borrowed from my family’s kitchen. They were captured using a digital SLR with a variety of macro lenses and using only naturally reflected, transmitted, and refracted light—no *Photoshopping*. Yet none of them depict a “glass” as such; indeed, I hope that for most viewers this will come as an unexpected revelation of what the images “really” are! They are all attempts to pay homage to the great Zen master of photography, Minor White (1908 - 1976), who is famously quoted as having once said: “One does not photograph something simply for what it is, but for what else it is.”

I call this series Synesthetic Landscapes because of the suggestive manner in which “mere” reflections and/or refractions of otherwise “unnoticed” streams of light evoke the synesthetic experience of vast landscapes, seascapes, and other majestic vistas. I also imagine that somewhere in these synesthetic sunsets and meadows there is an image of the very same kitchen glass that got me started on my aesthetic journey. And deeper still lies an image of my own eyes staring back at me. What is “more” or “less” real: the glass, the sunset, or the photographer? Are the distinctions among these “things” as obvious as they first appear? Is the universe perhaps a vast, ineffable, self-created broth of nested self-perceptions? A recursive loop of void and substance? A cosmic elephant observing itself observing and groping for its own meaning?

