



Trees 13 - 2018 Copyright Andy Ilachinski



Andy
Ilachinski

There are photographers who make images of the natural world, and then there are those who engage with it. Andy Ilachinski belongs firmly to the latter. His work is not about depicting trees, landscapes, or patterns—it is about being present with them. To spend time with his photographs is to feel the boundary between perception and presence soften, revealing a world that is both familiar and entirely new.

A theoretical physicist by training and a lifelong student of Zen, Andy moves through the world attuned to the invisible structures that shape all living things: pattern, emergence, vibration, interconnection. His photographs of trees—quiet, attentive, and alive with an inner presence—become a foundation for this issue not because they “match the theme,” but because they open a gateway into the deeper conversations Issue 5 seeks to have: about ecology, relationship, symbolism, and the inner landscapes that shape how we see.

Across his tree work, and extending into his Cymaticscapes, Synesthscapes, and other abstract portfolios, Andy's images act as meditations. They remind us that seeing is never merely visual. It is relational. It is sensory. It is shaped by attention, by moment, by the state of mind in which we meet the world. His philosophy echoes throughout his work: that photography is a practice of presence, a way of dissolving the boundary between the observer and the observed.

In the pages that follow, we explore several facets of Andy's vision. We begin with trees—both literal and symbolic—and move outward into the energetic, vibrational, and spiritual terrain of his broader portfolios. What emerges is not a linear progression but a constellation: patterns of thought, glimpses of interiority, and images that hold as much silence as they do form.

Andy's contribution to this issue is expansive, and intentionally so. His work offers not just photographs, but pathways—ways of perceiving the world that invite us into deeper reflection, deeper stillness, and deeper connection. It is a reminder that trees, like photographs, are never only what they appear to be. They are thresholds.



From Above - 2025 Copyright Andy Ilachinski

Gathered Light Magazine (GLM): Trees appear across many of your portfolios — sometimes as solitary forms, sometimes woven into complex landscapes. What draws you toward trees as subjects?

Andy Ilachinski: My experience of the “beauty” of trees spans multiple aesthetic, scientific, even spiritual dimensions. As a physicist, I am naturally drawn to their fractal (i.e., self-similar) morphology and appreciate; as a complex systems theorist, I am equally drawn to “trees as interconnected nodes of a larger network” via intertwined Mycelial threads that are mostly hidden from direct view; and as someone who has had a lifelong penchant for taking a holistic view of nature, I tend to view trees through a “Goethean” lens (ref: “The Metamorphosis of Plants”) – that is, I see trees and other elements in nature not as static “things” in the here and now, but as fleeting glimpses of a continually unfolding process of evolution, metamorphosis, and transformation. I also tend to see “trees” even when there are no trees present (echoing Minor White’s famous admonition to “photograph what else things are.”)



New Zealand 1 - 2025 Copyright Andy Ilachinski

GLM: When you approach a forest or a single tree, what tells you there is “something there” — a presence worth engaging with? Is it form, mood, light, intuition, or something more difficult to name?

Andy: Paradoxically, it is rarely the “tree/forest as object” that grabs my attention (this is certainly true for images that have stood the test of time), rather it is my state of mind. I have written about what this means multiple times on my blog with varying degrees of success; it is an intensely difficult thing to put into words. It is not an accident that a part of my “About” page on my main web gallery has the words, “...In simplest terms, I take pictures of what calms my soul. There may be other, more descriptive or poetic words that may be used to define the “pattern” that connects my images, but the simplest meta-pattern is this: I take snapshots of moments in time and space in which a peace washes gently over me, and during which I sense a deep interconnectedness between my soul and the world.”



New Zealand 2 - 2025 Copyright Andy Ilachinski

GLM: You’ve written about “inter-being,” the relational nature of all things. How does photographing trees inform your sense of interconnectedness, both ecologically and personally?

Andy: While my “eye” is inevitably steered by my “day job” as a physicist, specializing in the study of complex adaptive systems (which refers to the study of self-organized emergent behaviors and phenomena in networks of interconnected agents), my “I” is anchored in Zen (which emphasizes interconnectedness, non-duality and direct, unified experience of reality; I expand on this in my answers to final two questions). Photography is one way in which my I/eye has learned to engage these aspects of my soul in a creative dance. Trees have always been natural symbols and reminders of the deep interconnectedness of all aspects in nature.

GLM: Your tree photographs often feel simultaneously literal and symbolic — grounded in the real, yet pointing beyond it. When you’re working with these subjects, do you think of the images as reflections, dialogues, or manifestations of something deeper?

Andy: “Transcendence” has been a persistent theme throughout my life, anchoring both my inner philosophical musings and, as you point out, my photography. “Everything in the world has a hidden meaning,” Nikos Kazantzakis (one my favorite authors) once wrote. “Men, animals, trees, stars, they are all hieroglyphics. When you see them you do not understand them. You think they are really men, animals, trees, stars. It is only years later that you understand.” While I rarely consciously think of “possible meanings” or reflect in some way on “manifestations of something deeper” before I take an image of something, I am also rarely attracted by a subject unless I sense that what it does not show – what is, in effect, “invisible” to my eyes and camera – runs far deeper than what is visible on its surface. I trace this lifelong “meta pattern” to my dad, who was an artist (but not a photographer). His philosophy was that artists exist to remind us that we are not merely creatures of the flesh, and that art is at its finest when the artist somehow manages to induce in the viewer dimensions of inner experience that transcend those that define the artwork itself. To varying degrees, I have followed my dad’s credo.

Section II – Perception, Seeing, and Attention

GLM: Much of your work deals with the act of perception itself — not just what is seen, but how seeing occurs. How do trees and natural environments shape your understanding of attention, awareness, or presence?

Andy: My answer draws on two of my most frequently visited blog entries. The first is a short essay entitled, “The click of the shutter button...and a deep mystery,” which I posted in 2008. It deals with the enigmatic instant of time after something grabs a photographer’s attention and before the photographer clicks the shutter, a question that has fascinated me since I picked up my first camera.

This question cannot be properly addressed without immediately falling down a deep rabbit hole of what it means to be “In the Zone” (see Section III – Process & Practice), conscious vs. unconscious states, and the creative process. Since my left-brain (science/physics) and right-brain (photography/Zen) “I”s are always mutually dancing, my creative process is therefore somewhat of a paradox: the deeper I am “In the Zone,” the more likely it is that

whatever image I am trying to capture will turn out “well” (i.e., meaningful), but for reasons beyond my understanding; on the other hand, the greater the effort I expend to understand my own creative process while doing photography, the less likely it is that whatever image I am trying to capture will be a keeper.

The second blog post (entitled, “Learning to See from the Blind,” and published in 2009), is a review of a book that has strongly influenced on how I perceive my environment as a photographer. The book - *Seeing Beyond Sight*, by Tony Deifell - collects the works of visually impaired children during a five-year program of teaching photography to students at Governor Morehead School for the Blind in Raleigh, North Carolina, from 1992 to 1997. “How can the blind take pictures?”, one immediately asks. In a conventional sense, of course, they cannot; but only if by “taking pictures” we mean using the camera to record what they see visually. But, photography, in its purest form, is so much more than that.

Alfred Steiglitz, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Minor White (and many others) teach us that the finest photography

occurs when we are able to catch that special sliver of time during which the boundary between inner and outer experiences vanishes. Steiglitz called such photographs equivalents; Cartier-Bresson referred to the sliver of time as the decisive moment; and Minor White talked often of the profound role that spirit plays in photography (“Be still with yourself until the object of your attention affirms your presence”).

Sighted photographers respond no more to purely visual stimuli than blind photographers do. All photographers, whether they do so consciously or not use all of their senses to reach that ineffable instant when the shutter goes “click.” One can argue that blind photographers, precisely because they do not respond directly to visual stimuli, are actually closer to the core truths and realities that lie beyond the light than photographers who must work their way through to truth (by brute force, so to speak). As one student quoted in Deifell’s book puts it, “I was thinking that it would be sort of hard for a blind person to take pictures, but it’s not very hard. You’ve just got to listen.”



Pacific Northwest 16 - 2019 Copyright Andy Ilachinski



Pacific Northwest 3 - 2019 Copyright Andy Ilachinski

GLM: In your writing, you sometimes refer to the “threshold” between the seen and the felt. Do certain landscapes — forests, rivers, deserts — pull you toward this threshold more strongly than others? If so, why?

Andy: The boundary I write about most often - and which anchors my photography - is the one between inner experience and outer reality. And no one has had a greater influence on my thinking about the nature and importance of this boundary than the architect and design theorist, Christopher Alexander (1936 - 2022). The final volume of Alexander's 4-volume opus, *Nature of Order*, develops a visionary holistic view of art and nature in which everything is alive. Alexander believed that an abstract, invisible structure - which he called, “wholeness” - pervades all parts of the world at all scales: “No pattern is an isolated entity. Each pattern can exist in the world only to the extent that is supported by other patterns: the larger patterns in which it is embedded, the patterns of the same size that surround it, and the smaller patterns which are embedded in it ... Space does not merely contain living structure; life ... is an attribute of space itself.” He continues: “[it is the] interior element in a work of art, or in a work of nature, which makes one feel related to it. It may occur in a leaf, or in a picture, in a house, in a wave, even in a grain of sand, or in an ornament. It is not ego. It is not me. It is not individual at all, having to do with me, or you. It is humble, and enormous: that thing in common with each one of us has in us. It is the spirit which animates each living center.” And so, my answer to your question (“Do certain landscapes ... pull you toward this threshold more strongly than others?”), is that I am drawn most strongly to environments, large or small, that make me feel most alive, in Alexander's sense.

GLM: How do ideas take shape for you? Do your images begin as intuitions, questions, or conceptual investigations — or do they tend to emerge spontaneously while you're walking, looking, or being in nature?

Andy: Virtually all of my best images are either captured spontaneously (for example, my favorite images from a trip my wife and I took to Greece in 2008 was of abstract paint splotches on tire dinghies in the port of Piraeus in Athens while we were waiting for a ferry to Santorini), or spontaneously planned, by which I mean that the creative spark that ignites the “concept” for an image or portfolio (that may require considerable planning) is spontaneous. For example, the idea behind my “Micro Worlds” portfolio (that was published in *Lenswork* in 2008) arose spontaneously after I returned from a day long, unsuccessful photo-safari at a local park. As I sat down to dinner with my family and my fork was about to pierce the skin of a potato, my wife nonchalantly placed two small acrylic candle holders with trapped air bubbles inside on the table. My “eye” was consumed with taking pictures of bubbles in various media for the next 4 months! A more recent example is my ongoing experiments with finding standing-wave patterns in jiggling water the “spontaneous gestation” for which took nearly 25 years! (“Cymaticscapes,” described later).

Section III – Process & Practice

GLM: Many of your images carry an unmistakable contemplative quality. Do you have a field practice or mindset you enter when photographing, or is the process more guided by the environment and the moment?

Andy: Rather than a process I follow, the process I strive to achieve (albeit, not as regularly as I'd like) is the one I alluded to earlier; namely, to be "In the Zone." By this I mean the experiential flow that Mihály Csíkszentmihályi outlines in his book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. "Flow" refers to the supra-conscious state that people "awaken" to an experience when completely absorbed and immersed in an activity. For me, of course, that activity is photography. When I am in this flow state, I do not know my name, I do not know where I am except for the "feel" of my immediate surroundings, I do not reflect on my problems or station in life, I do not worry about what "I need to do" after I've finished my photography. I am one with my camera, I am one with what my camera is pointed at, I have no conscious sense of self or awareness of being, apart from a pure primal joy in experiencing total immersion in what I am doing. I am focused, strongly and deeply, but not at all actively engaged in thinking about anything. There is no sense of time, not even as I press the shutter repeatedly or take long exposures and somehow, though only mechanically and utterly devoid of conscious reflection, tick off the required seconds. I know the flow has vanished when

I hear myself ask, "What now?" The degree to which any of my images is imbued with (and/or conveys) a contemplative quality is directly commensurate with how deeply immersed I was in "flow" while seeing it.

GLM: Your work ranges from wide landscapes to intimate macros and abstract studies. How do you decide what "scale" to work in? Does the subject suggest the scale, or do you enter the landscape already sensing where you'll focus?

Andy: At this (65+ year-old) stage of my photography, scale falls far behind pattern/pattern-of-patterns (the simpler the better), light/shade (the gentler the transitions, the better), and Gestalt "feel" of a scene (the quieter, the better) in terms of what naturally draws my eye. I have long lost the desire to take photographs of "things," and focus instead on trying to capture and communicate a Goethean-holistic view of a "quiet slice of time" of some environment, regardless of the scale at which I'm looking at an environment.

I'll expand on this on a more practical level by making two further comments. First, because I am very nearsighted, seeing the world without my glasses yields an almost abstract (certainly a much simpler, distilled) representation of it. Since my eyes sans glasses provide only rudimentary information about shapes and tones, I find it a useful exercise to first "see" compositional landscapes in these aesthetically simple terms, before fully investing and immersing



Trees 5 - 2006 Copyright Andy Ilachinski



Ice Flow Abstract, Iceland - 2023 Copyright Andy Ilachinski

myself in finding real photographs in it with my glasses. This has been a vital part of my creative process for well over 35 years. I have written about using this technique on my blog while having a day to myself inside northern Virginia's Luray Caverns (see, "A Blurred Path Toward Clarity," published in 2011) .

The second comment is that my penchant for "seeing" patterns-of-patterns over other attributes of an environment often results in abstract images, wherein counterintuitive misalignments of objects and scales compel the viewer to literally not see what is front of their eyes. Examples include images of Iceland's glacier ice flows captured from a Cessna, pictures of autumn-colored tree-tops taken during a balloon ride my wife gifted me for my birthday last year, and my 20+ year-old (and still ongoing) "Synesthscares" project that consists of finding seemingly Wagnerian-scale landscapes and seascapes in millimeter-sized patches of light reflected-by and/or refracted-through colored glass. (Note: the title is a play on the word "Synesthesia," which derives from the Greek syn = union + aisthaesis = sensation, and means "joined sensation")

GLM: Technically speaking, for your black-and-white work across landscapes, trees, Cymaticscapes, and certain abstracts, are you shooting digital and converting in post, working with a converted sensor, or is film part of your process?

Andy: This question takes me down the nostalgia road. My first film camera was the Canon AE-1 (in the 1970s), which I used for years until I purchased the Canon A2E in the 1990s. My first digital camera was Casio's QV-10 with it's whopping 0.25-megapixel CCD sensor, followed by Nikon's swivel-design Coolpix 950 (which I purchased to see what digital could do, but continued using my A2E for serious photography). The camera that finally weaned me off of analog photography was Canon's D60 (which was introduced in 2002), which I purchased with a nod to how I got started in photography. I have gone through multiple cameras (and camera systems) since, but have settled on Nikon's z5 and z7. Also, a few years ago, I converted my old Canon 7D to infrared to expand the "aesthetic possibilities" (particularly during summer months).

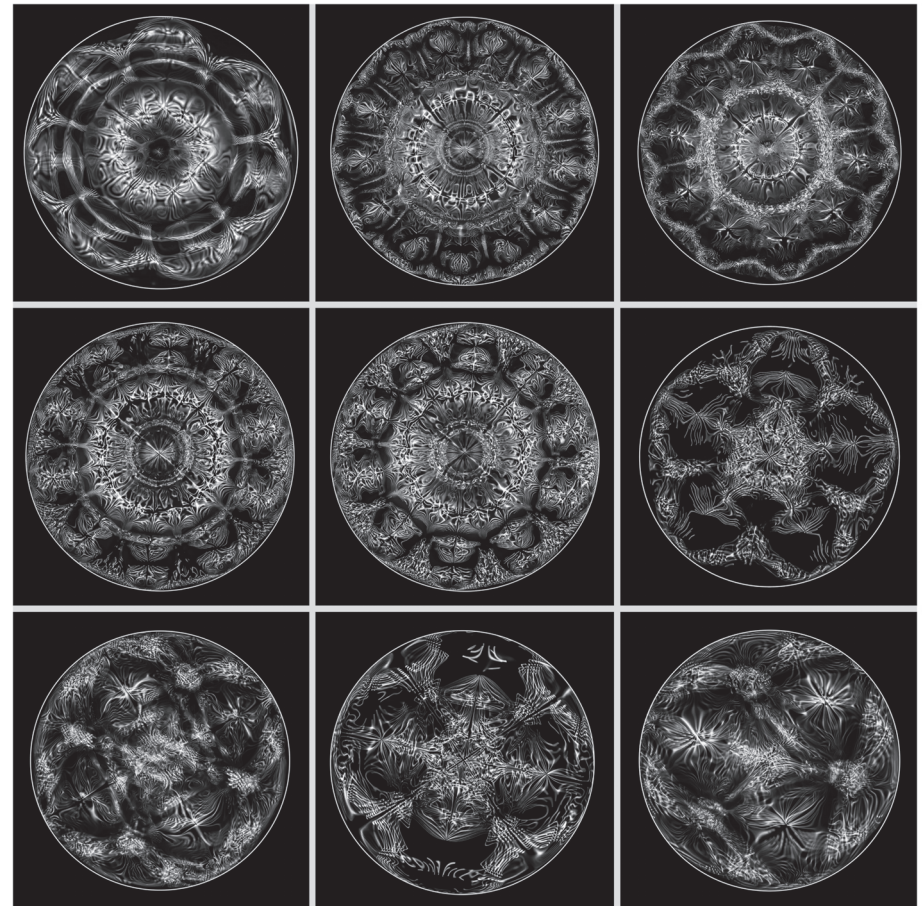
Section IV – Cymaticscapes, Synesthetic Landscapes, and Color Chimeras

GLM: Your Cymaticscapes carry the energy of vibration, resonance, and structure. You've mentioned using frequency generators and vertical vibration generators in creating your Cymaticscapes. What kinds of frequencies or ranges have you explored so far, and what draws you to those choices?

Andy: My "Cymaticscapes" series is doubtless my longest-in-gestation portfolio. The title is a play on the word, "Cymatics," which refers to the study of sound and vibration; specifically, to when the two are combined in a way that creates complex patterns in different media such as sand, water, or - what Swiss physician Hans Jenny (who coined the term) liked to use - corn starch in water. My left-brain/day-job as a physicist introduced me to cymatics in the late 1990s when I stumbled across this paper describing what (at the time, were never before seriously studied) complex emergent patterns in vibrating layers of small granular media (e.g., cylinders filled with BBs from a toy shotgun). The paper itself was about a related phenomenon called "oscillons," but it soon led me discover Jenny's work on cymatics. The right-side of my brain is genuinely perplexed by why it has taken me so long to explore cymatic patterns with my camera; in fact, I briefly wrote about cymatics (without any accompanying images) on one of my earliest blog posts in 2006. But, whatever the reason for the long gestation, I cannot be happier that the two sides of my brain have finally agreed to play with cymatics: it is the perfect amalgam of my deepest passions - physics, photography, and mystical speculation.

The first two separately play obviously critical roles. The physicist in me is giddy over the vast phase space waiting to be explored: vibration frequency + medium (type + mix type) + vessel (type + diameter + depth) + ... And the photographer side is not too far behind: light (type + source(s) + directionality) + angle-of-view + f-stop + exposure time + ... But it is the idea of "cymatics as creative bridge" between seen and unseen, between energy and pattern, and between physical and spiritual that I resonate most deeply with, and is most ripe with creative possibilities. In quiet moments, I like musing on the fact that it is the energy that the universe ineffably pumps into an otherwise structureless bag full of 'elemental things' that gives rise to an emergent multidimensional dynamic cymatic-like sentient geometry called "Andy."

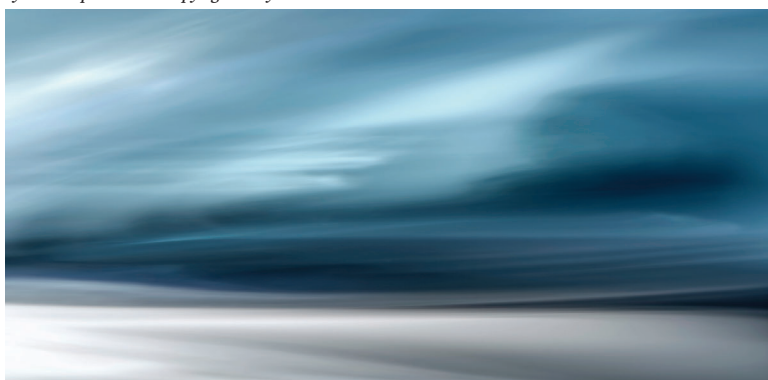
I have only recently started this series (in Oct 2025), and am using the simplest possible setup that consists of a frequency generator (I've confined my early experiments to a rather narrow range between 10 and 60 oscillations a second) and a few small (1.5 – 6 inch) and shallow plates (1 to 3 cm). Given that that I have been actively searching for "Synesthsapes" for over 15 years (see answer to next question), I suspect that my cymatics experiments (using higher and combinations of frequencies, musical harmonics, etc.) will continue for a long while.



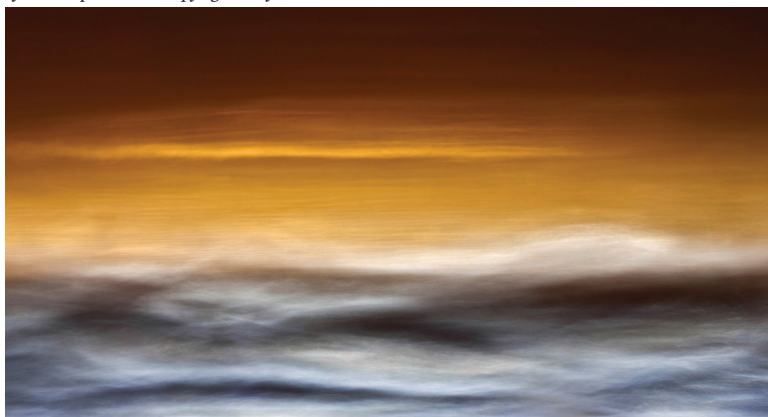
Cymaticscapes - 2025 Copyright Andy Ilachinski



Synesthscape 1 - 2013 Copyright Andy Ilachinski



Synesthscape 2 - 2013 Copyright Andy Ilachinski



Synesthscape 3 - 2012 Copyright Andy Ilachinski

GLM: Your Synesthetic Landscapes shift perception in ways that feel both sensory and emotional. What sparked the idea for these bodies of work, and how do they relate to your broader philosophy of seeing?

Andy: As alluded earlier, Synesthesia derives from the Greek syn = union + aisthaesis = sensation, and means "joined sensation." Such as when something that is ordinarily "seen" is tasted as well. There are well-documented examples of almost all possible couplings of the senses - smelling sounds, hearing colors, feeling shapes, etc. Apart from the author Nobokov, other well-known synesthetes include Wassily Kandinsky, David Hockney, Richard Feynman, and Alexander Scriabin. Contemporary "synesthetic" artists include Carol Steen and Marcia Smilack. In my case, I vividly remember having synesthetic experiences early in my life (up until I was about ten or so), when I routinely perceived numbers (and, less frequently, letters) as colors. Sadly, I now only rarely experience this phenomenon. Although this hardly does justice to the psychological, creative - even mystical - experience of synesthesia.

My "Synesthscape" series was sparked, unexpectedly, during a Thanksgiving dinner in 2009 when my mother-in-law placed a set of shiny metal salt and pepper shakers on the table (reminiscent of how my "Micro Worlds" portfolio started, as I explained earlier). I was mesmerized by how much the reflections of various lights and furniture in my mother-in-law's dining room looked like real landscapes and seascapes. Inspired by this initial glimpse of an entirely new aesthetic landscape (for me, at least), I soon trained my macro lens on various colored glasses, bottles of rum and whiskey, and other semi-transparent objects to search for "synesthscape" in reflections and refractions of light.

Apart from the sheer beauty of the best images, I am intrigued by their transience (if I take my eye off of a framed composition for an instant, I will literally never see it again) and by how even the thinnest slivers of light reveal a universe of real-but-unreal universes. I sometimes regret not titling this series "Seeing infinity in colored glass" instead of Synesthscape (as a play on words from the best known lines of William Blake's poem, "Auguries of Innocence").

Synesthscape also bring to mind a story that has many variants and reaches back into Jain, Buddhist, Sufi and Hindu stories. The poet John Godfrey Saxe immortalized the core idea for the western world in his poem "The Blind Men and the Elephant," that starts out...

*"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!"*

In this context, we might ask, "Which synesthscape is the 'true' representation of a given glass?" Perhaps we are all "blind photographers" poking at infinitesimally small pieces of a vast infinity and calling whatever we happen to train our eyes 'now' as truth?

Section V – Philosophy, Self, and the Inner Landscape

GLM: In many of your writings, you point toward a kind of quiet Zen — a sense of being-with, rather than capturing. Do you feel photography serves as a contemplative or spiritual practice for you?

Andy: Oh yes; a resounding yes, although my aim often exceeds my reach. Apart from Ansel Adams and Wynn Bullock, I have been most heavily influenced by Minor White and John Daido Looi (who, not surprisingly was one of White's students). White was deeply steeped in Zen and leveraged this practice into infusing a sense of spirituality into photography, as well as teaching others to do so; for example, he had his students use Eugen Herrigel's Zen in the Art of Archery in their approach to photography. Looi (a chemist by trade) founded the Zen Mountain Mon-

astery and the Mountains and Rivers Order, where he was the guiding teacher for about 30 years. Among his many books, and the one that continues to inspire me the most, is *The Zen of Creativity: Cultivating Your Artistic Life*.

I devote several sections of an online workshop I led a few years ago (on the topic, "Simplicity in Photography") to using Zen practices to cultivate mindfulness toward achieving a state of non-separateness from – and receptivity to – the world. Zen and photography are mutually reinforcing Yin/Yang poles of my creative process. Mindfulness awakens my inner muse and enhances my photography; and photography (regardless of my state-of-mind when I pick up the camera) instills me with an inner calm. I achieve Csíkszentmihályi's flow when the camera, environment, and I become one.



Pacific Northwest 4 - 2019 Copyright Andy Ilachinski

<https://www.andy-ilachinski.com/>
<https://www.instagram.com/ilachina13/>



Trees 7 - 2002 Copyright Andy Ilachinski

GLM: Finally: If readers of Issue 5 walk away with one idea or feeling from your nature work or abstracts what would you hope it might be?

Andy: That photography may be used as a spiritual path toward of self-discovery. During invited talks, I often use a particular set of slides; e.g., see pages 22-26 in "Science and Art: Self-Entangled Pathways Toward Inner and Outer Truths" at <https://www.andy-ilachinski.com/links> or my blog entry, "The Mystical Way of Photography," published in Dec 2009) to illustrate what I mean by this. The idea is inspired by a quote in the Ching-te Ch'uan Teng lu ("Transmission of the Lamp," assembled by Tao-Yuan of the line Fa-Yen Wen (885-958):

*"Before I had studied Zen for thirty years,
 I saw mountains as mountains,
 and waters as waters...
 When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge,
 I came to the point where I saw
 that mountains are not mountains,
 and waters are not waters.
 But now that I have got its very substance I
 am at rest.
 For it's just that I see mountains once again as
 mountains,
 and waters once again as waters."*

Anchored on this Buddhist quote, the slides lead the reader through the corresponding stages of growth as they apply to photography. In stage 1, the photographer sees "mountains as mountains ..." and delights in capturing the world-as-it-is. In stage 2, the photographer no longer sees "mountains as mountains ..." and instead (perhaps, with a nod to Minor White) explores ways to capture the world-as-more-than-it-appears-to-be. Eventually, in stage 3, assuming the photographer has journeyed on a mindful path), the mountains are once again seen as "mountains," but are now transformed into something new and revelatory. The photographer discovers that her lifelong path has led to herself:

*"A man sets out to draw the world.
 As the years go by, he peoples a space
 with images of provinces,
 kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships,
 islands, fishes, rooms, instruments,
 stars, horses, and individuals.
 A short time before he dies,
 he discovers that the patient labyrinth
 of lines traces the lineaments
 of his own face."
 - Jorge Luis Borges*