

THE IMPLICIT LIE



When nature images are manipulated

A PHOTOGRAPHER, in a recent conversation we had about shooting landscapes and wilderness images, suggested that photographers have no responsibility to disclose whether their art reflects the reality of the scene as they saw it. Not even when it has been altered to appear realistic, and an unsuspecting viewer could think the scene accurate. His idea is that creativity is what photography is all about.

He is not alone. Many landscape images that I see today are highly manipulated but stay just within the borders of believability. Others go so over the top, I wonder how anyone could believe them. Skies photographed from a different season or time of night and composited in. Trees added where they didn't grow. Colors of foliage altered dramatically. Such images do not represent the scene that was before the "artist" at the time the shutter was snapped.

But landscape and nature photography is inherently representative. The creative part comes from framing, not inventing, an exquisite composition. If photographers alter an image, do they have a responsibility to inform viewers explicitly? I believe they do.

For me, a photographer's silence is an implicit, nonverbal communication to viewers that what they are looking at is real, especially when it looks plausible. I have always adhered to this definition: *A lie is any communication given with the intent to deceive.* This communication could be verbal or nonverbal, implicit or explicit. Creating an image that skirts reality without disclosing that it is not is tantamount to deception. Certainly we all believe that if the photographer were to tell the viewer outright that the image depicts reality when it does not, the photographer would be lying. And no one likes being lied to, do they?

Many artist/photographers use an Ansel Adams quote to qualify their actions: "The negative is the

CAPTURING THE NATURAL WORLD Kurt Lawson photographed Rodney Lough Jr. and his Arca Swiss R13d 4x5 camera modified to accept a Phase One IQ180 digital back, at sunrise along the shores of Mono Lake, California during the filming of a training video series to be released soon.

About the Author

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equivalent of the composer's score, and the print the performance." Remember, Adams was a landscape photographer; we can infer that he referred to this specific genre. He was of course referring to black-and-white, a highly interpretive form of photography. Yet when we look at any of his works, we find images that look natural within their context—either in black-and-white or in the limited amount of color photography that he created before his passing.

These artists either ignore or don't know Adams's other famous remark: "Not everyone trusts paintings, but people believe photographs." Viewers perceive the visual, nonverbal communication of landscape images as truthful representations of nature. So when a photograph is visually represented as reality but its deviation from it is not disclosed, viewers are, in a way, under assault. What's worse, they don't even know it.

So who is to be held accountable? The unsuspecting viewer or the photographer who knows but remains silent? I do not see how tricking viewers could ever be a good policy to employ, nor do I believe that it is good for the art form. Perhaps it's time we become explicit about the content—and manipulation—of images, explicit in our implicitness.

My goal has always been to get back to what I saw, not what I *wanted* to see. How I get there I don't care, but I want to be able to stand in front of anyone and be able to say, "That is what I saw," and not be lying about it.

I realize there is nothing that I can do to control what is happening. I'm not sure I would even if I could, since I strongly believe in a person's freedom to choose between right and wrong. But I needed to state my position and hope that you can respect my choice as I do yours. —Rodney Lough Jr.