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Out of the Shadows

The Mekong River is wide and sluggish as it passes under the main bridge in Cantho. The Delta is already guiding its little streams and tributaries away through the Vietnamese paddy fields and flood plains to the South China Sea. Floating market starts to form along the banks of the river. Some boats vie for the best positions as dawn saturates its colour cast on the water's surface. It's a powerful monochrome as shadows and silhouettes dominate the scene. When the first rays break the horizon, exotic fruit rise on wooden poles into the sunlight and sales banter echoes across the waterway. But I'm determined to focus my attention in dark recesses as I try to anticipate which boats will break ranks and what trajectory they will take. These markets are the life blood of communities large and small and have always provided me with endless fascination and visual opportunities. I will always arrive early just to drink in the frenzied activity and preparations for the day ahead. Much like a landscape photographer trudging a rocky mountain trail in the early hours following a single beam of light from a trusty head torch, darkness can be a time for contemplation, mulling over the possibilities of the image ahead. And if you forgot to pack the thermos you shimmy and shiver around the tripod until that first light adds meaning to geology, line and form and you pat yourself on the back for making the effort.

Often what comes out of the shadows is infinitely more significant and revealing than what is already there for us to see. They create both space to move in and out of. Borders act as frames for the composition. The interplay of light and shadow has long been at the forefront of how we build the elements of pictures but because our eye is invariably drawn to the highlights in an image, we pay less attention to how shadow and darkness can work in our favour. The lack of detail in a shadow can sometimes feel negative, perhaps even ominous. Is it relevant? Can we use it to communicate the intentions we have for the image?



Shadows have been used to great effect to convey all manner of concepts and idea for decades. The power play of Rene Burri's 'Men on a rooftop' in São Paulo from 1960; André Kertész's graphic still life and Parisian park scenes; and the saturated colour palettes of Istanbul and Mexico by Alex Webb. I have invoked the spirit of these masters on many occasions when trying to make some sense and simplicity out of what are invariably chaotic scenes.

The Street photographer is confronted with them on every corner - changing light, people move, your presence is scrutinised by those who pass by. Do you stand in those shadows which seem both mysterious and comforting at the same time ? Or is it better to brazenly expose yourself to these elements, ignore the negative and pursue whatever it is you are trying to communicate ?

You would imagine that raw, wild landscape does not offer up the same obstacles, certainly none which actively engage or react in the same way as pounding pavement in an urban environment. But that doesn't make it any less challenging. Wide open spaces can be awe inspiring, uplifting, humbling and ultimate extremely difficult to encompass into an image without the depth provided by darkness, shade or shadow. This



conundrum presented itself vividly in visits I made to both Arctic Greenland and sand dunes which have filled an ancient crater in Niger. Both landscapes have been sculpted by extremes of weather, time and temperature making them hard to travel across let alone trying to assemble their characteristics into something meaningfully representative. In Niger it was tempting to shoot often in the middle of the day to convey the sense of desolation and white heat - a counterbalance perhaps to the fragility and undoubted beauty of dunes in the throes of dusk.

I followed a similar approach along the rocky shores of West Greenland where, in the autumn, icebergs frequently moved in overnight, hidden in the shadows of twilight providing a welcome and poignant addition to an already surreal landscape.

Easter Island Moai presented an even greater case for a dark perspective. Their remote isolation and mystery were not enough to satisfy my curiosity. These cultural icons are impressive and without precedent but just eyeing their stoney faces and documenting them in their barren landscape seemed unfulfilling. I felt like these monumental statues needed more depth, more concealment to add to their mystery so ruthlessly pursued compositions of high contrast and facelessness. I am not prone to morbidity but they didn't seem to object!

It would, of course, be wrong to suggest that shade and shadows be incorporated at every opportunity. Leading lines, the rule of thirds, and polarisers have, mercifully, never been used in this way with any great success or originality lest we abandoned all attempts to be ever so slightly adventurous or creative in our approach to photography. Lurking in the shadows or peering into their depths may have greater merits than you might have first imagined.

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