

I Opened a Photo Gallery During a Pandemic

By David Mark



Angus Haywood, Sunlight and Curves

Along Lake Como's waterfront of gardens and villas are handmade gates and railings with delicately scrolled metalwork. Their 18th- and 19th-Century owners and designers chose more curves than straight lines, and they seem just suited to the natural curves around the lake and within the gardens, and the distant peaks and mountains in the haze.

The "Silver Light" exhibition at the Taunus Foto Galerie in Bad Homburg, Germany, shows the work of photographers who have in common their dedication to monochrome photography and serene, captivating images. They continue a long tradition and are, in my opinion, among the best in black and white fine art photography to be found today.

But before we get to some of the individual images and the stories behind them, I should point out that my gallery is little more than a year old. So why did I open a new gallery in the middle of a pandemic?

After some 35 years in financial services, I gave up working in a structured environment, with a steady income and relative security, to set up a photo gallery. Although external factors (the aftereffects of a serious concussion and retirement age) played an important role in my decision, the gallery was established as a business, not a pensioner's hobby — which may leave you wondering how much the concussion affected my sense of judgement. But planning and location scouting had been going on for some time before anyone had heard of Covid, and my crystal ball worked as well as most others. Two years later, we're still gripped by the pandemic!

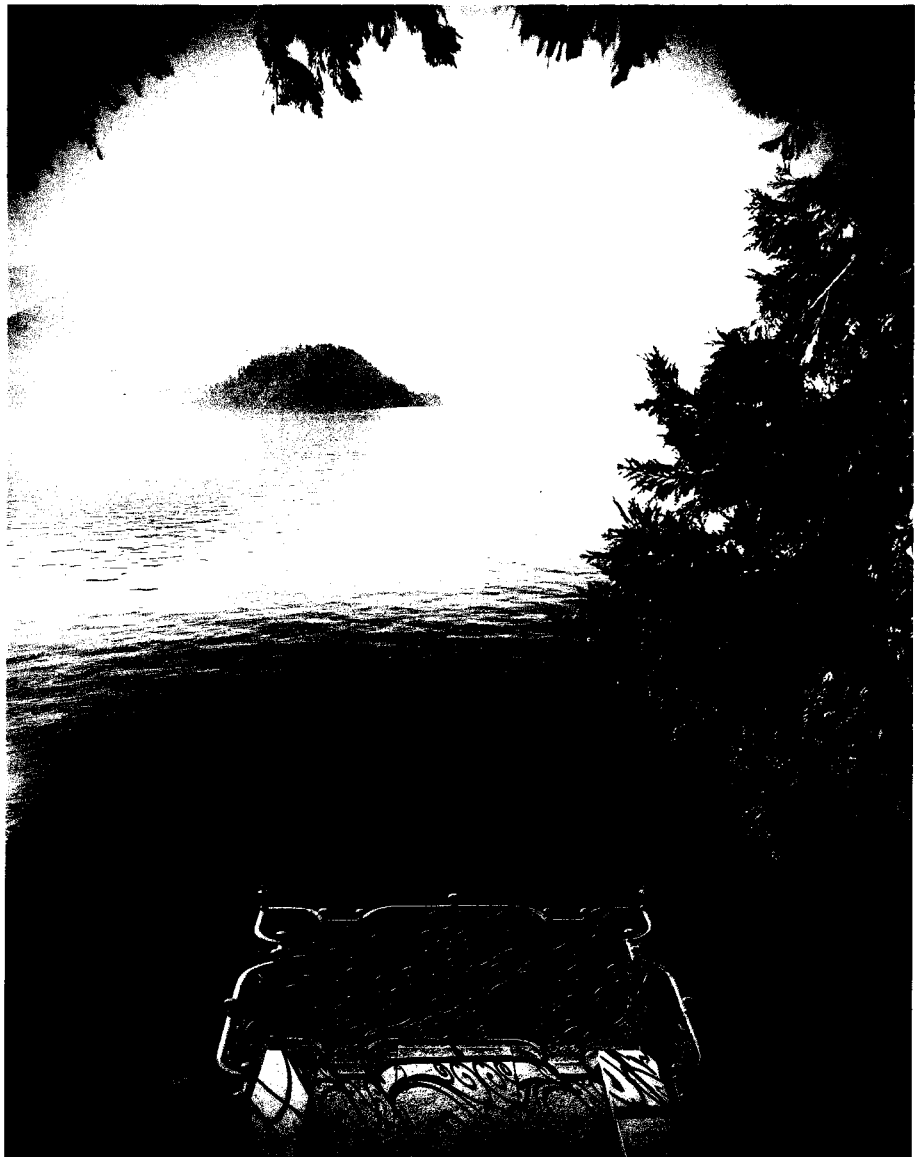
Still, I don't regret my decision. I believe that physical galleries have an important role to play in the world of fine art photography, just like brick-and-mortar camera stores or printed journals about photography. There is, of course, the importance of seeing a print "up close and personal", seeing the details and textures, and the way reflected light shows an image in a way a screen never can. But that's not the only reason galleries are important.

We all grow up hearing stories, first from our parents and later when we read them and see them as movies. Humans have a deep-rooted attachment to stories. So, while photographers need to know and use their equipment, they must also have stories behind their images, and it's fundamental to the role of a gallery owner/manager to retell them.

I have always enjoyed sharing these narratives, having been on stage in amateur theater most of my life. Gallery visitors who request "the guided tour" have said afterwards that hearing the anecdotes made the images come to life. Both a rational and an emotional connection evolve, and that connection makes the prints a part of a home beyond just filling a gap on a wall.

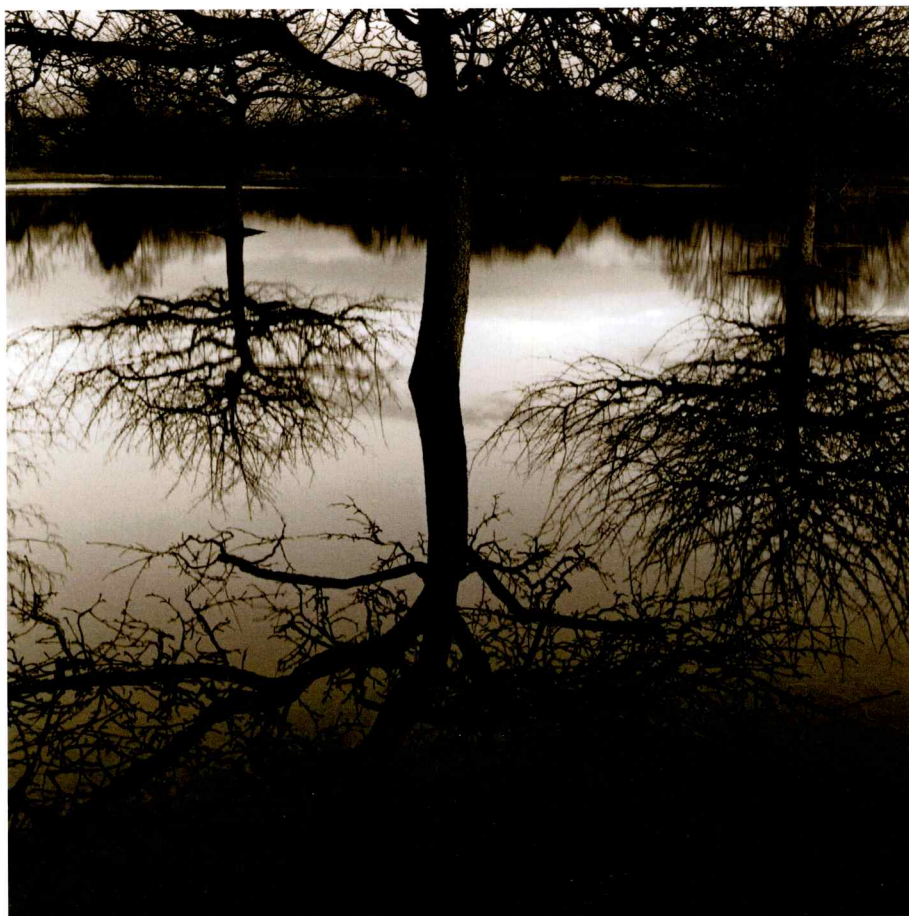
But whose stories to tell? Several photographers had been in touch with me, having seen a new gallery as a vehicle for sales and reputation growth. Although I welcome these contacts in general, I don't see my role as launching the career of budding photographers, particularly those who don't show a dedication to fine art photography. So how to select what to show?

After the first two exhibitions, which had already been shown at an English gallery with which I cooperate, I felt eager to organize my own. Although I often fight my personal preference for landscapes, my first move was to contact Roman Loranc in California. I was already familiar with Roman's wonderful landscape images, so I introduced myself and the gallery and to my surprise discovered that he had no gallery representation in continental Europe. Things snowballed from there and I soon had the name for an exhibition: "Silver Light."



Angus Haywood, Lovers Seats

In the scented botanical garden of Villa Monastero, along the length of the water's edge, Angus saw the setting sun playing across the scrolled gates' curves, drawing long fine shadows on the smooth stone. With the still water and distant peaks, this lake view gave itself up to him.



Birgit Maddox, *As Above, So Below*

A flooded apple orchard in southwestern Germany in late autumn — it may look like the epitome of calm, however shooting it was anything but tranquil. This scene is next to a road with no walkway for pedestrians. Passing motorists yelled at her for walking in the road, and she needed tall rubber boots in the half-frozen, flooded orchard. To Birgit, the image's name reflects human consciousness. The upper portion — *As Above* — represents what we are aware of, and the lower part — *So Below* — the invisible subconscious.

Birgit Maddox, *Stairway to the Nephilim*

The Nephilim are the offspring of angels and mankind in the Old Testament and connected to Atlantis, which reminded Birgit of the stairs down to the sea. This was captured at Cinque Terre in north-western Italy, where a railway runs at the top of the cliff. Birgit was right next to the rails, balancing camera, tripod, and herself on a water pipe attached to the cliff, trying not to fall over the side while the trains whistled past.



It was conceived from the beginning to be centered around traditional silver gelatin prints, and I soon spoke with three other artists to cement their involvement. Roman's large format 4x5 field camera remained unique to the exhibition; Angus Haywood and Birgit Maddox both have medium format Hasselblads. They all enjoy the tactile sensations of film photography, hanging it up to dry after development, and dodging and burning while making their own silver gelatin prints. Oliver Miller completed the group of photographers with his monochrome portrait of the North Sea coastline. (Although Oliver apprenticed to the likes of Helmut Newton in the 1980s, the series at the gallery was made in a digital workflow and is thus not eligible for print in SilvergrainClassics.) I am very happy to be able to share a bit of their stories with you here.

"Silver Light" is still showing at the Taunus Foto Galerie at the time of printing, and the pandemic is still raging. It is too early to tell if my decision to open a photo gallery at this time was a stray notion of a concussion-addled brain or an excellent business decision. Perhaps in the end, like the prints in the exhibition, it will move in shades of gray between those extremes.

The Taunus Foto Galerie is located in Bad Homburg, Germany and can be reached per email: info@taunusfotogalerie.com. Information about exhibitions, artists, and purchasing prints can be found on the webpage taunusfotogalerie.com.

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS

Roman Loranc grew up in a small village in southern Poland and learned how to develop and print everything himself because there was no money to pay others to do it. He has lived in California since 1982, exhibited in the US and China, and museums have added his work to their collections. He does not try to be consistent in the darkroom. He intentionally tones each print differently (sepia and/or selenium), may crop them differently, and dodges and burns each one individually. If you see a Loranc print you like in a gallery, buy that particular piece, because it's a one-of-a-kind work and he won't make another one exactly the same.

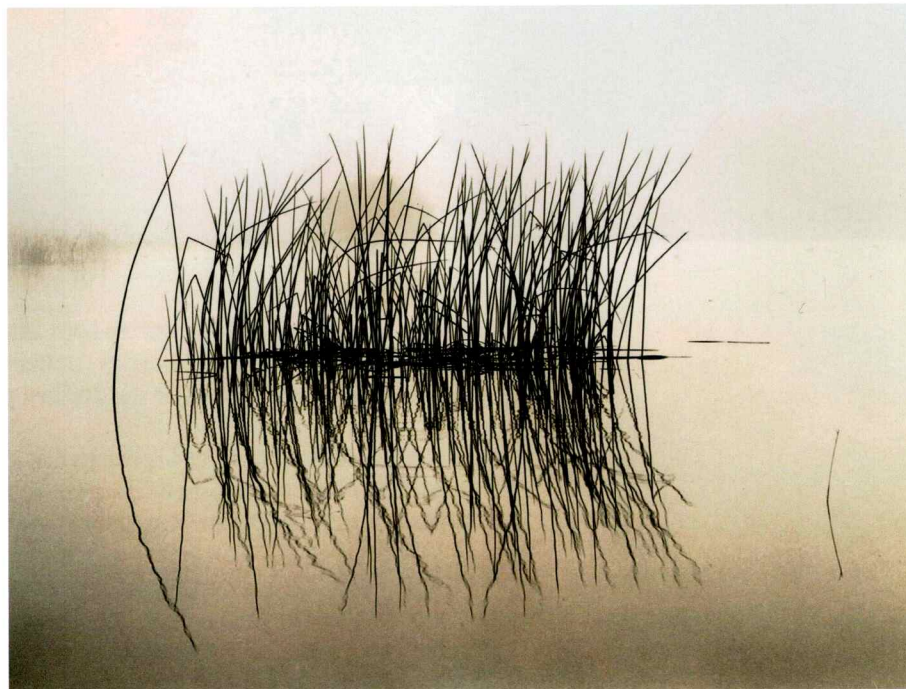
Angus Haywood photographs peaceful, elegant villas, gardens, and terraces around the lakes in northern Italy, and landscapes in southern England and Germany. If watercolor painters only used shades of grey, their pictures would resemble Angus' work. His images have a calming, meditative effect through his careful use of gentle early morning or evening light. Angus has worked together with Michael Kenna and Charlie Waite and numbers Bill Brandt and Cartier-Bresson among his influences. These two images by Angus are of the same terrace and both show the "watercoloriness" in his work.

Birgit Maddox was born in the Black Forest area of Germany but has lived in California for many years. She develops and prints all her own work and even mixes her own chemicals to achieve her desired toning effects. She returns to Europe every summer, working on her projects "Endangered," "Moments," and "Mystery." Birgit's landscapes have an element of impressionist painting and combine the visually immediate with a journey into the subconscious.



Roman Loranc, Two-Hearted Oak

Driving in Central Valley, California, Roman saw an oak woodland he wanted to explore, but also a sign "Trespassers will be shot." He continued exploring, heard a gunshot and saw an older man with a rifle. He then convinced the owner to allow him early morning access for several months and was even lent a canoe to explore the wetlands. One foggy morning, Roman captured the spirit of the area with Two-Hearted Oak.



Roman Loranc, Tule Raft

Roman was on his way to a dinner when he saw these bulrushes (the Spanish word "tules" is used in California). Dinner had to wait. To get close enough, Roman took his clothes off and waded through muddy water with camera and tripod, then stood still for a few minutes so the water could settle. After capturing the image Roman drove on, but was worried about the police pulling him over and having to explain why he was driving in his underwear in the middle of winter.