

The world of contemporary photography resounds with post-modernist rhetoric and analysis...then there is the art of Charlie Waite and the simple joy in beautiful images for their own sake. Instantly recognisable, Charlie Waite's landscapes are rare perfections of light, colour and composition and offer the viewer a luxuriant portrait of a planet at peace and one where mankind and his activities are in harmony with his surroundings. There is no explanatory verbiage to endure, no theory to absorb and one's emotions are immediately engaged. It is no surprise that Charlie Waite has become one of the most celebrated landscape photographers in the world.

A charming and eloquent man, Waite runs his affairs from his attractive home, an old converted watermill by the River Stour in Dorset. He has developed his art and his business over a career of thirty years, during which time he has had innumerable solo exhibitions, sold widely and produced 27 books of his photographs. His tireless commitment both to his own work and to promoting photography in general as an art medium have made him highly influential both nationally and internationally. His promotional activities include major lecture tours, commissions and sponsorships of important competitions. In 1994 he also founded a leading photographic tour company called 'Light and Land'.

Landscape photography is a passion for Waite. When we talked he described the making of his images as a deeply involving personal experience, or as he put it "a rather fine interaction between me and the landscape with the camera as the intermediary". It seems to me that his pictures are as much about his state of absorption, rapture if you will, in which mind, technique and his feelings come into perfect alignment as they are a strict evocation of place and of the world external to his lens. In discussing his work he employed the term 'pre-visualisation' first used by the great American landscape photographer Ansel Adams, to whom he has been compared. This is the creative act of the artist-photographer who, in visualising a poetic or revealing image within the scene in front of him, anticipates what the final print must convey to express what he sees and feels. From this insight flow the creative decisions he must make to realise his vision, involving selection, framing, composition, light, camera setting and so on. Waite's images, therefore, are the inspired product of a deeply felt response to the visual world, followed by meticulous preparation and a total control over the photographic process and sometimes, inevitably, of patient waiting for the confluence of circumstance and conditions to permit what had been visualised to come about. "The fewer the compromises I have to make" said Waite "the closer I get to what I first conceived or 'saw' in front of me". Working in both black and white and colour, he largely uses a medium format camera and a judicious choice of filters, and strictly avoids subsequent manipulation of his images, considering that they would lose integrity and potency if he did. What the viewer sees is what Waite 'saw' in his mind at the time when everything was right.

Landscapes are constructs of our imagination and cultural predisposition. What makes Charlie Waite's work so special and so recognisable, therefore? There is no doubt that he sees the world within a very conventional aesthetic, his work sometimes presenting a pastoral ideal in which mankind uses the planet wisely and there is order in both the natural world and in human affairs. He offers, therefore, an alternative to the bleak realism and sombre concerns of much modern landscape photography. This undoubtedly gives his images great popular appeal. However, it is his supreme sensitivity to rhythm, shape and colour and his marvellous compositional sense which sets his work apart from mere romantic rhetoric, his reluctance to compromise permitting him fully to explore photography's unique relationship with light. In addition, the square format of his Hasselblad often confounds our expectations of landscape by subordinating breadth and a sense of space and enhancing the potential for the non-spatial qualities in whose exploitation he excels, to dominate. His photographer's eye selects with such precision that often what we see in his images are beautiful designs, some verging on abstraction, and one might almost believe that man's use of the land, where shown, has an aesthetic as well as a productive purpose. His pictures have luminosity, an inner quietness and possess a sense of 'being there'. "Nature suspended in one of its most powerful performances" he said of one of his images.

The reason for Waite's success, therefore, is clear. In these environmentally uncertain times, however, something else intervenes when we look at his work, something wholly unintended which would have been unnoticed in earlier times. We view photographs, no matter how reliable or in whatever style or context, as reports from the 'real' world and his beguiling images appear to show our planetary home as unspoiled and profoundly beautiful. In so doing they provide us the reassurance that sometimes it is. This is therapy indeed. Nevertheless, the very perfection of Waite's vision leaves a slight aftertaste of unease since we are reminded of what we might lose.