



To Moab and Back

by Stephen S. Ashley



Published in *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended* #115

Commentary

There is a great scene in the movie *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Kahn* in which Spock identifies a fatal weakness in Kahn's thinking. Unfamiliar with space battle, Kahn thinks only in two dimensions. Captain Kirk orders the Enterprise to drop along the Z-axis until Kahn passes overhead. The good guys win.

Life often imitates art. Photography, too, has a tremendous opportunity to exploit the Z-axis to create interesting points of view and compositions. I remember years ago seeing a photograph of Ansel Adams photographing from a platform he'd built on the top of his van, just to gain a few extra feet of height in composing his photographs. If this was an anomaly, I doubt he'd have gone to the trouble to build the platform. Clearly, he must have found that extra height useful in more than a few situations.

Scan any collection of images (like the ones in this book) and count the number that are photographed from eye-height. It's amazing how infrequently photographers exploit the possibilities in even a slight change in the Z-axis.

Stephen S. Ashley is not the only photographer to take advantage of the height perspective available from a small aircraft. That the number of his fellow pilot/photographers are so few is what amazes me.

As I write this in 2017, the new technology of photographic drones has caught hold of many photographers' imaginations. We are starting to see more

and more work captured from a few dozen to a few hundred feet in the air. Good! Fun! But like all photographic tricks, there is more to it than merely raising the camera and pointing down. Like any new trick in photography, it is necessary to work our way through the obvious ones, push ourselves, and learn the true potential of this new capability.

When Photoshop first became popular, there were lots and lots (and lots) of bilaterally symmetric floating trees perched in fanciful skies. Thankfully, we have all outgrown that novice phase of recombinant imagery. Similarly, now that drones have made aerial photography so much more accessible, we are seeing lots and lots of cliché images. Perhaps those of you with new drones might look at the work of experienced photographers like Marilyn Bridges, William Garnett, and our two *LensWork* alumni Stephen S. Ashley and Luc Busquin for some guidance, just to name a few. I can't resist the obvious pun in that great Isaac Newton quote: *If we have seen further than others, perhaps it is because we have stood on the shoulders of giants*. Or at least seen the world from their elevated perspective, and learned from them what we can by viewing their photographs. Like every new gimmick, photographing from a height can be much more difficult to comprehend the subtleties than might first meet our eyes.