



The Texture of Arcadia

by Al DaValle



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Commentary

It's a little hard for me to believe that an image like this can be so controversial in photographic circles, but it is — or can be, for some individuals. Why is it controversial? Well, because it's not created by the straightforward use of capturing light with a lens/camera, and then being done with it. This is a more complex image than that because it is a *digital composite* consisting of no less than two layers of blended imagery. There may be more, but we'd need to ask the photographer about that. I always tend to resist such temptations for the simple reason that the creator may not always be available to explain their work — nor, indeed, capable of verbally explaining it other than on a technical level.

So, we are left to ourselves to visually and *emotionally* interpret what we see without the photographer's explanation. But isn't this the case with all works of art that use media in which we are not ourselves fully conversant? Does the controversy come from the subject, or from our insider's expectations of the medium?

Controversy is not a stranger in the history of art, but the overwhelming examples that come to my mind are those in which the practitioners of the medium deem a work of art controversial simply because it uses techniques that challenged the established norms. Think, for example, of the fuss made over those blasphemous Impressionists! Time resolved those arguments, either by propelling an Impressionist's work to popularity or to historical

obscurity. I have no idea and would be foolish to predict whether or not this image by Al DaValle is destined for notoriety or obscurity, but I would propose that neither of those eventualities stand in the way of us looking at his nontraditional photography — his *artwork* — for what it might say to us.

What is it? Well, clearly it's partly photography, partly graphic arts, partly traditional, partly avant-garde. Unfortunately all such attempts to *label* a piece of work like this simply get in the way of our appreciating its emotional content — a challenge that seems to me to be more to the point. What emotions are communicated with this image? Are they enhanced by his montage technique? If so, they are *useful* techniques. If not, they are a distraction.

This jagged, curved, spiked tree is witch-like, stark, and foreboding; the almost vertical lines in the background montage bring a storm-like element to the composition, enhancing the sense of foreboding. We can almost feel the unseen storm clouds raining a waterfall of rocks (or perhaps bark) down from the heavens. To my eye, that makes this a powerfully moody image, filled with emotion, in spite of its relatively light tones. Whether we call it a photograph or not seems merely a secondary matter of semantics. As artwork, it works — and that is enough.