Downside of a Full Moon

by Stephen Perfect

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Commentary

My personal photographic work, at least for the first 35 years, was exclusively black-and-white. My experience with color, therefore, is considerably more limited. Nonetheless, I've been told by friends who worked strictly in color that in the days of film the principal challenge of rendering color was *accuracy* or *exaggeration*. With the introduction of digital techniques, another alternative is available — *mood*.

Perhaps this can be ideally illustrated by a simple consideration of terminology: photography was, for 70 years, split between work that was "monochromatic" and work that was "full-color." Neither of these terms address the sophisticated rendition of color that we see in this wonderful image by Stephen Perfect. With increasing frequency I now see color employed cinematically — that is to say, to create or enhance a mood. The warmth of this image lends to it a certain air of nostalgia that is amplified by the objects themselves — or perhaps it's the *objects* that are nostalgic and the color rendition simply amplifies their age and antiquity.

The reason this is so important and a significant breakthrough in photographic thinking is not obvious at first glance — at least it wasn't to me. When the technical pursuits of color rendition are founded in *accuracy* or *exaggeration*, the essence of the photographer's labors in rendering that color is technical, mechanical, founded in some sort of visual truth. But when color rendition becomes a matter of creating mood or enhancing feelings, then the photographer's attention shifts away from mechanics and technology and redirects toward *emotional content*. Feelings take center stage — as they should always do in the creation of artwork.

I think it's safe to say that if we had been standing in front of this scene, we would have seen, with our own eyes, a different color rendition than we see in this photograph. I have no doubt that this is not what Stephen Perfect's camera saw as he made the image. He needed to override his camera to *make* this image. In retrospect, it may seem an obvious decision to render the color as he has, but that's only because we are seeing it here in the finished result. The real challenge is whether or not we can *imagine it* when our eyes see accurate color.

To me, this small example encapsulates the difference between general photography and fine art photography. Can we see, in our mind's eye, the feelings and emotions we hope our work will encourage in our viewers? And if we can, do we then have the imagination to override photography's mechanical tendencies to render images that are accurate? Do we have the sensitivity and technical skill to know when and how to deviate from accurate rendition in order to make a more emotively powerful experience for our viewers? That is the key to art-making.