



## *Melting Giants*

by Cole Thompson



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### Commentary

Although we don't often think about it consciously, there exist a few fundamental — and often unconscious — decisions that influence everything that follows in the making of a photograph. One of those unconscious decisions is the question about *what it is* that you're photographing — specifically, are you photographing what you *see*, or what you *feel*? Said another way, what is your objective for the photograph you are making? Do you want a viewer to have the same *visual experience* you have while you stand there and look at something with your eyes? Or, do you want the viewer to have some *emotional experience* when looking at your photograph, perhaps one that is only remotely related to the what you see through your viewfinder?

Here in the early decades of the 21st century, the topic of global warming and climate change has become subject matter for a great deal of photography. Photographic workshops and adventure trips to Iceland, Greenland, and Antarctica have become common. We see this in the submissions to *LensWork* — which now include numerous portfolios of icebergs from both of the planet's poles.

Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the resulting photographs show a large white block of bluish-white ice floating in a deep bluish-green ocean. We see this photograph over and over again. By the hundreds. And what differentiates one photograph from the next is the shape of the white ice, the reflectivity of the blue water, and which of these two

components comprises 60% of the area in the photograph and which comprises the remaining 40%. By the hundreds. Indistinguishable from one another, and from one *photographer* to another. It has become the quintessential formulaic cliché landscape photograph of the early 21st-century. Icebergs floating in a blue ocean are the lacy waterfalls of the new millennium.

And then, to our visual delight, we received a portfolio of iceberg photographs from Cole Thompson. His work stood out so prominently compared to all the others because of how he answered that fundamental decision — clearly he wants us to share an *emotional experience* rather than a visual one.

His images are dark, in fact so dark they presented a significant challenge for us to reproduce them in the magazine — rocks and water that is deep, moody, and emotionally *terra firma*. His icebergs are white, but not so white as to be blank paper, colder, lonelier, and more isolated than other photographer's work that is more visually accurate. Thompson's photographs do not represent in the least what he saw with his eyes, but rather what he felt with his heart and interpreted through his mind's eye. In my way of thinking, this is precisely where photography rises to the level of fine art.