



LIGHT FALLS LIKE BITS
THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF TREY RATCLIFF

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BECOMING UNSTUCK WITH TREY RATCLIFF

By Michelle Bogre

Trey Ratcliff's masterful high-dynamic-range (HDR) landscapes challenge the classic semiotics of what an image is and how it should function. His business model and eponymous blog Stuck in Customs belie traditional thinking about how to create a successful photography practice. Seamlessly merging art and business, Ratcliff might just be the quintessential twenty-first-century photographer-as-disruptive-force. Borrowing from the technology world, the term "disruptive technology" (coined by Harvard Business School professor Clayton M. Christensen) brings to the market the artist's product (his extraordinary landscape photographs) and business model (Stuck in Customs), which have a radically different value proposition than what was previously available. Disruptive technology unexpectedly displaces the status quo—and has the potential to alter and transform life, business, or the global economy.

In eight short years, Ratcliff, a former computer scientist, has altered and transformed the photography profession with Stuck in Customs (www.stuckincustoms.com), which has become the world's number-one travel photography blog with more than 175,000 daily views. He freely shares his work and ideas, perhaps his most disruptive practice.

Pulsing with kinetic energy, Stuck in Customs exists at the intersection of art and technology. Ratcliff promises and delivers one

new photograph daily. He posts free HDR-technology information and some of the industry's best photography-tip video tutorials. His camera and photo-editing software reviews are among the most honest in the industry because he will not accept free equipment for a review.

Clicking on Stuck in Customs is rather like falling down the rabbit hole in Wonderland and having a marvelous adventure with images, information, and inspiration. Of Ratcliff's many accomplishments, he is most universally known (revered or reviled) for his mastery of HDR, perhaps the most polarizing technology in the history of photography. He was drawn to the medium, in part, by a fascination with time, visualization, and memory. He thought that a photograph would be a great way to share the "beautiful truths" he encountered every day, and that photographs would help him to remember his experiences. Maybe because Ratcliff was formally trained as a computer scientist and not as a photographer, he didn't cling to the silver halide ghosts of the past as so many photographers do, nor did he question the value or authenticity of digital imagery. He wasn't concerned with either the truthfulness of a photograph or the questionable truth of a digital image so easily manipulated.

His first digital landscapes "failed" in his mind because they were flat and empty, not at all representative of the multisensory experience he remembered when making the photographs.

Ratcliff tackled the “flatness” of his works as a computer problem: a digital image was just a “little cube” of data or numbers that could be manipulated until the image better replicated the emotions he felt at the time he made the picture. He wrote some algorithms and experimented more or less successfully, sometimes producing what he says were “interesting truths in the textures, lines, and colors.” Then he discovered white papers about HDR written by computer scientists at Stanford and MIT that augmented the algorithms he had written. Excited and enthusiastic, he blogged his discoveries to the world as video tutorials, another bit of disruptive behavior in a world so fearful of copyright violations. “I just started sharing my discoveries because I didn’t know that photographers weren’t supposed to do that,” says Ratcliff. “It feels naturally human to share.”

Maybe because of his social media presence and his early proselytizing about the benefits of HDR, Ratcliff received “hate” emails, accusing him of “doing more to damage the integrity of photography than anyone else.” Social media does attract outliers, but some of the intense reaction to Ratcliff’s images must be attributed to fear: HDR images challenge our collective neural memory of not just what a path in a forest looks like, but what a *photograph* of a path in a forest *should* look like. Because Ratcliff had no formal knowledge of photographic history, he had no fixed notion of what a photograph should look like. He just knew that his early images did not look like

how he felt about the scene. He grasped that HDR, simply a set of techniques (either through mathematical algorithms or by combining multiple exposures) that expands the dynamic range of light intensity or luminosity of an image, would render a finished work that closely replicated his sensory experience. Older photographic silver halide technologies and even early sensor technology compressed luminosity and forced photographers to make exposure decisions based on material limitations, not aesthetics. In reality, HDR technology, combined with digital post-production techniques, is not much different than the burning and dodging that photographers employed in the darkroom; it is just more precise because it is burning and dodging at a microscopic (pixel) level. As with any technology, it can be employed with a deft or heavy hand. An HDR image can appear as a garish, highly saturated, and overly manipulated soulless image, or as an artful and almost breathtaking moment.

A landscape photograph is always, at its essence, a photograph of a place, mixed or interpreted with personal expression. It is a slippery concept, though, because a landscape can be literal or metaphorical, real or represented, pristine or marred by human intervention. Traditionally, landscape photographers photographed places to visually transport the viewer there; that is, to show the viewer what she might have seen had she stood where the photographer stood. However, standing, say, on a mountain, looking out



The Bamboo Forest

at a vista, is a multisensory experience of smells, sounds, colors, and natural elements (wind, heat, rain). Traditional landscape photographs tend to fall flat because although they might document the specifics of a scene (mountain, path, light) they do not reflect the emotional memory and the multisensory experience of being somewhere. In Ratcliff's hands, however, HDR technology creates an image with such detail, nuanced color, light, and depth, that viewers truly feel as if they are standing where he stood, experiencing what he experienced. His photographs are stunning and transformative; they have an immediacy that keeps viewers rooted in the present, but simultaneously transports them to the place as if they had been there, so past and present coexist.

Ratcliff also mixes fine detail with mysticism, art with intense craft, and documentation with fantasy. Because he creates archetypal images, his photograph of a sunset, for instance, doesn't just transport me to that moment, but to a memory of a sunset that I have seen. His images trigger the neural network of a memory formed when I was viewing another sunset, so I can layer his sunset image onto my neural pathways, thus forming a new memory. For example, *The Bamboo Forest* depicts an archetypal path leading me through a canopy of bamboo trees that envelope me with pulsating nuanced shades of the green that can only appear in a forest after an early

spring rain shower. As I lose myself in this walk through the forest, I know I've been here before just as surely as I know I haven't.

Robert Adams wrote that “landscape can offer us, I think, three verities—geography, autobiography, and metaphor. Geography is, if taken alone, sometimes boring, autobiography is frequently trivial and metaphor can be dubious. But taken together, the three kinds of representation strengthen each other and reinforce what we all work to keep intact—an affection for life.”¹ One thing that we get from a visit to *Stuck in Customs*, and when we enter a Ratcliff image, is affection for life because Ratcliff maintains childlike curiosity. He seems to live in the interstice between reality and fantasy, as a child does, effortlessly lifting or piercing the veil that separates them. The fantasy in his images allows the viewer to think and dream. But the images are not so fantastical that the viewer plunges into a mystical abyss. “I like my images to be just barely on the real side of the veil, with just enough reality for people to grab onto,” he says. In most of Ratcliff's images, we feel as if he just stepped out of the frame, and we stepped in. We visually and effortlessly move through the image, filling in the mysteries with our own neural networks, as brains naturally do, and make the pictures our own.

1. Robert Adams. *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values*, p. 14 (Aperture, New York, 2005).



Hakone

As real as his images might be, they all also have a few deliberate mistakes, bits that don't quite make sense. For example, *Hakone*—taken from a train winding through the mountains of the Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park in Japan on a day heavy with mist morphing into fog—exemplifies the fine veil between reality and fantasy. Ratcliff manipulates focus and perspective to create the illusion that we are Lilliputians, and that this image is from a tiny world of bonsai-sized trees and light posts. He creates a magical feeling by freezing the moment when what appear to be maple leaves are falling in midair, floating as gossamer illusions on the very surface of the image. The mystery, however, is that we don't see any maple trees at all.

Just as he broke with prevailing methods for making images, Ratcliff also ignored all the advice about how to create a successful photography practice. Instead of relying on client work, he based his business model on generating revenue from maximizing the potential of social media. In fact, he almost never accepts client work (he recently made one exception) because he doesn't want to waste creative and emotional energy. "There are only so many brain cycles in a day, and I would rather spend mine on creating images than thinking about clients," he says. What brain cycles he doesn't spend on creating images, he spends on growing his enterprise, which now includes mobile apps, self-written e-books; a new publishing venture, flatbooks, that publishes books by other authors,

video tutorials, speaking engagements, image licensing fees for commercial use, workshops, and print sales to his loyal followers, as well as The Arcanum, the Magical Academy of Artistic Mastery, his newest and potentially most disruptive innovation.

The Arcanum is a new approach to photographic education that relies on the very old idea of the master-apprentice relationship but with a twenty-first-century twist, using technology such as Google Glass to connect master to apprentice. The ultimate goal of this online Hogwarts-style institution is to create a more human way of learning. Once accepted into the academy, apprentices pay a modest monthly fee to be paired with photographic masters who personally guide them through “levels” of mastery. If successful, the academy has the potential to disrupt photographic education because it can deliver a personalized education for a fraction of the cost of attending a public or private art school. “This is the decade of the artist,” says Ratcliff. “Art education is broken. It doesn’t do a good job of creating artists. We can do so much better. Imagine being able to use any Internet-enabled device to see your master as he roams around the academy of the earth.”

When initially developing his business and with his latest creation, Ratcliff intuitively grasped that information was the most precious commodity on the Internet, and that in the early half of the twenty-first century everyone on earth would be connected, either

via mobile platforms or the Internet. To capitalize on this connectivity, he analyzed how information and money flow throughout the global economy. He figured out that sharing information and creating a frictionless experience for people who found their way to his blog would generate loyal followers. Drawing on ideas about genomes, biology, and super-organisms, Ratcliff visualized the Internet as one big organism—a huge beehive. Its current 5.6 billion users are like bees looking for food sources (information and content), leaving scent trails (IP addresses) so others can find the “food,” and doing waggle dances (sharing information about websites with other members of the bee colony). He reasoned that freely sharing his ideas and images (his own waggle dances) would lead users to his website; in turn, they would lead other users.

To date, Ratcliff’s site has received more than 60 million visits. With his background as a computer scientist he understands Search Engine Optimization (SEO) better than most, but his knowledge increased when one of his fans suggested that he attend an Internet conference on SEO marketing techniques. Although he thought he knew enough about SEO, the always curious Ratcliff went to the conference. What he didn’t know was that the other attendees ran gambling or pornographic sites. “I was the only legitimate business there, but those guys were experts in innovative marketing and figuring out how to use back-end tools to track where visitors to their

sites came from, how visitors searched to find sites, and then how to employ that data to make it easy for people to find their sites,” he says. By implementing those techniques, now all roads lead his 13 million followers to Stuck in Customs.

Ratcliff has always freely shared his images with his followers for noncommercial use. He simply requests that the work be linked to Stuck in Customs and that he be credited. Or, in Ratcliff speak, “Feel free to use images on your blog, for fun and the like...” Even though he posts huge high-resolution images (most photographers only post low-res 72 dpi images), and doesn’t watermark them, he is not worried about people “stealing” his work. He believes that art is meant to be shared, not hoarded, and that businesses and corporations will contact him to license work. “I am an artist and I create for the sake of creation, and I share because I want to connect to the world,” he says. “I am honored when anyone looks at my photographs. When you start thinking about money and protection, that’s just a weird cultural economic layer that has been put on top of art that does it no service.”

These ideas put him at odds with professional photography organizations as well as most photographers who watermark images. Both actively seek new and more powerful software to search out any unauthorized use of images, and employ code to prevent any right-click downloading. They cling to the belief that monetizing every use

of every image is the key to a successful photography business—even as they watch their own businesses decline. Ratcliff’s model of freely sharing does comport with leading-edge contemporary theory posited by technologists and legal scholars who understand that to be successful doesn’t require extracting money for every noncommercial use of an image; rather, success can be derived from creating new revenue streams by maximizing and monetizing the potential of social media—a radically different value proposition for a photography business. It evidences an understanding not just of how information and money flow, but also of the mindset of the most Internet-literate age group: the millennials. It also situates Ratcliff at the epicenter of the current paradigm shift as photography transitions from an artifact- (print-) based economy to an image- (digital data-) or screen-based one, and the photograph morphs from autographic to an allographic art. As artifacts, prints are fixed in time and look backward. Digital images are more ephemeral, not fixed in time, forward looking. Ratcliff realizes that to be forward leaning, he needs his images and his blog to connect him to the world.

The Stuck in Customs site begins to realize the full potential of the photograph as image, not artifact. Ratcliff knows that a screen-based image needs to be seen in high resolution, so he posts the power of social media, and how using it causes the physical and virtual worlds to coexist, collide, and complement each other; the loyal

fan base he created by sharing his knowledge, ideas, and work, now wants to own his screen-based images as artifacts, creating another revenue stream and another way to connect with his followers.

Although Ratcliff calls himself a “travel photographer,” that’s an inaccurate category. He is a storyteller who spins and shares visual tales. Spend one afternoon in *Stuck in Customs* and you will be hooked.

Michelle Bogre is Associate Professor of Photography at Parsons The New School for Design. She is an educator, documentary photographer, copyright lawyer, and author. She frequently speaks on issues of copyright, and photography as activism and advocacy. She authored a seminal book on activist photography, *Photography as Activism: Images for Social Change* (2011) and her new book, *Photography 4.0: A Teaching Guide for the 21st Century*, came out in July 2014. She has served as an Advisory Board Member for the Young Photographer’s Alliance and was elected National Board Member for the Society of Photographic Education.