

The fact is: No one can take a photo that will make the viewer feel like they're standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon. It's simply not possible any more than it's possible for a dancer to choreograph a dance that will make someone feel like he or she is standing at the Grand Canyon. Although it appears that a photograph can capture an incredibly believable facsimile of a scene, you must remember that photography is a representational medium. Your live experience of the Grand Canyon involves much more than the visual stimulation you're receiving. First, it involves a very complex visual stimulus—a 3D, panoramic stimulus with far more color and brightness information than your camera can capture. In addition, all of your other senses are mixed in as well, along with other emotions that you might experience for other reasons (happiness from being on vacation, the culmination of a dream to see the Grand Canyon, etc.).

However, although you may not be able to create a photograph that truly re-creates the experience of standing in a particular location, you can create a photo that evokes some of the feeling you had while you were there. Your job as a photographer is to determine what it is about a particular scene or moment that is compelling to you. In the case of the Grand Canyon, it might be the size or the colors. Perhaps it's the sense of geologic time that you can see in the layers of sediment. Or perhaps it's the people you're with, or simply something about the way the light is playing off of a particular rock formation.

Rather than trying to capture the entire experience of where you're standing, you need to try to identify a more refined feeling of what it is about that moment that compels you. Then you can employ your craft skills to figure out how to represent that feeling as a flat, two-dimensional photo. Photography is a representational medium, not a literal duplication of an experience.

Alfred Hitchcock once described drama as “life with all the boring parts removed.” Dramatists very often take a normal, everyday event and blow it up into drama. They exaggerate some things, remove others, and make up entirely new things to create a representation that the audience will respond to. Photography is the same way.

For example, a few years ago I was in Death Valley. Because parts of Death Valley are below sea level, there is an interesting phenomenon where sand blows off the surrounding mountains, hits the weird air currents of the valleys that sit below sea level, and immediately falls to the ground, to form giant sand dunes. There are four such dune fields in the park, and when you see them from afar, they're quite striking. The dunes are huge, and when viewed from above, you get a tremendous sense of scale—you can imagine the sand flying off the mountain to be deposited on the valley floor.

One morning, I was driving out of the mountains and came across such a vista. I grabbed my camera and took the picture shown in Figure 9.7.

Then I drove down to the valley floor to get closer to the dunes and took the picture shown in Figure 9.8.

The next day, storm clouds blew in, and I hiked into the dunes themselves. Being in a dune field is a unique experience. The scenery is a constantly shifting play of geometry, and the mountains of sand are huge. All these factors add up to a profound sense of otherworldliness. I took my time, worked my subject, and shot the image shown in Figure 9.9.

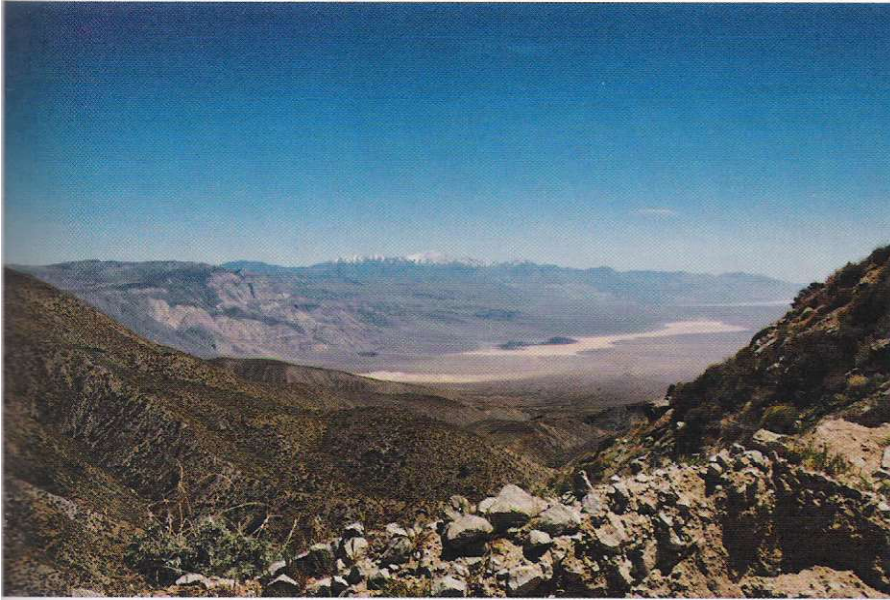


Figure 9.7

This isn't much of a picture. There's no real composition, and nothing for the eye to follow. What's more, the majestic dune field in the distance appears as a fairly boring, small patch of beige near the bottom of the image. The picture in no way captures what I was seeing and feeling.



Figure 9.8 This isn't much better than Figure 9.7. There's no sense of scale, and still no real composition to speak of. Your eye doesn't know how to read the image, and it's not particularly evocative of anything.



Figure 9.9

Finally, by getting into the dunes themselves, and working the shot, I came up with something that may not show a broad vista of scenery, but still captures the feeling of the place.

I can say outright that it didn't look exactly like the image in Figure 9.9. However, it did feel like that image—mysterious, beautiful, and strange. So, although that photo is not a literal image of the sand dunes, it still effectively captures something about the truth of the experience I had there. This is your goal as a photographer.

Not Just for Artists

You might be thinking: *I'm not interested in having a gallery opening, I just want to take better pictures of my kids.* Don't worry, the things that make a good photo, and the artistic and craft issues you face as a photographer are the same whether you're shooting your family or fine art shots.