



Photographer's FOCUS

THE INTERPRETATIVE IMAGE

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*“A great photograph is one that fully expresses what one feels,
in the deepest sense, about what is being photographed.” –Ansel Adams*

Since the invention of photography in 1822, changes in camera technology, lens design, and image processing have allowed photographers to transform how they depict the natural and manmade worlds surrounding us. Modern camera technology, advanced lenses, and sophisticated software enable photographers to produce remarkable images that were inconceivable just a few decades ago.

This article focuses on interpretative images, the ones that capture how photographers envision mushroom subjects and their natural environment. These images are constructs using the processes of discovery and invention. They are self-expressive and, therefore, subjective. And like all great works of art, the photographs invite viewers to interpret their meaning.

This article features photographs by two professional European photographers. Inspired by their love of nature, storytelling through photography, and European folklore, they portray mushrooms and their rich environments as dreamscapes steeped in fantasy, mythology, and symbolism. These interpretations are conveyed through technically challenging photographic techniques perfected after years of experimentation and practice.

Photo Impressionism

Impressionism allows photographers to experiment with light, multiple exposures, deliberate camera movements, soft focus, and long exposures to create imaginative photographs that often appear as altered realities that capture a subject's essence, rather than its reality. This style of photography usually results in ethereal works of art that elicit strong emotions from viewers.

Impressionism and the Mushroomscape

Most cultures have a rich history of oral and written traditions related to mushrooms and other fungi. European traditions, for example, are filled with supernatural characters like fairies, elves, pixies, sprites, and witches, who live among the mushrooms in rich magical forestscapes and fields. This connection is also evident in the vernacular names of many mushrooms—elfin saddles, fairy rings, witches butter, and pixie cups being familiar examples. Influenced by this European lore, photographer Olivier Douchamps utilizes creative camera techniques, supplementary lighting, and conventional and unusual

compositions to turn the forest floor into fantasylands he imagines are home to these mythological creatures.

The Douchamps photographs featured in this section are all created in-camera. In Figure 1, he combines rules-based photography and creative use of depth of field to transform the forest floor mushrooms and vegetation into an enchanted world. Captured at ground level, the image includes something of interest in the foreground, middle, and background sections to engage the viewer throughout. Douchamps uses “focusing through” to blur the foreground vegetation, to create the illusion that the viewer is in the frame, seeing the mushroomscape as the camera sees it. He uses selective focus and a shallow depth of field to isolate the subject, a cluster of mushrooms placed slightly off-center in the middle ground, and balances the image with circles of light (bokeh) that silhouette the blurred background mushrooms. The pastel hues and soft foreground and background lighting create warm tones, hence a soft dreamy look and a welcoming atmosphere. The composition, framing, and eye-level perspective encourage viewers to engage with the photograph's visual elements and to immerse themselves in the mushroomscape.



Figure 1: The elements of mushrooms, forest floor vegetation, and background lighting are brought together to create a welcoming mythological dreamscape. Olivier Douchamps photo.

Ominous Mushroomscapes

Douchamps creates a very different impression of the mushroomscape in Figure 2. Shooting from an eye-to-eye perspective, he uses the rule of thirds to position a pair of mushrooms, side lighting to highlight their form, and selective focus to separate them from their surroundings. He also uses a shallow depth of field to blur the background and foreground vegetation into creamy light and dark green hues that create a dark mood and foreboding atmosphere.

Douchamps balances the image by placing two mushroom caps silhouetted against a few bokeh light circles opposite the mushrooms. These mushrooms appear as beacons against a night sky, maybe clarion calls for help and hope in a dark and ominous world. A ribbon of dark green hues and blurred foreground combine to separate foreground from background and give the photograph a three-dimensional look.



Figure 2: The dark green tones create foreboding overtones in this mushroomscape. Olivier Douchamps photo.

Douchamps creates yet another impression of a mushroomscape in Figure 3. He uses a portrait orientation

and a ground-level perspective to capture the tall, thin-stemmed mushrooms and render them as multiple



Figure 3: Mushrooms as spooky characters in a jovial fantasy world.

layers of ghostly characters telling a whimsical tale of enchantment. Silhouetted against the background light circles, the mushrooms look like wonky yet grandiose figures magically cascading out of a hidden dimension and towering ominously over a few unsuspecting foreground fungi. The pale hues of the forest floor vegetation, the light circle highlights, the swirls of soft green blur, and the muted mushroom silhouettes all create a jovial mood rather than a foreboding atmosphere.

Light Painting Mushrooms

Light is a paradox filled with the secrets of reality we do not fully understand! In science, light is both particle and wave. In our world, light as a beacon from a lighthouse is a warning sign but when shining from a porch sconce, it is welcoming. Light is also metaphorical. Its presence suggests life, enchantment, enlightenment, and divinity while its absence suggests apprehension and despair. In photography, light is paint and can be used to create a myriad of real and surreal scenes.

Photography means “drawing with light,” a definition taken literally by light painting, a photographic technique that uses long exposures to capture light source movements or to selectively illuminate subjects like bridges, buildings, faces, or still life. Applied to mushrooms, light painting is not about capturing movement but selectively lighting mushrooms to create a surreal glow from their caps and sporebearing surfaces (Fig. 4). Done correctly, light-painted mushrooms are eye-catching because our brains instinctively know that this lighting is not natural.

The best mushroom subjects for this technique are the thin-capped gilled varieties that allow the light to easily pass through the cap context and illuminate the gills and other features below. For thickly gilled mushrooms, the best technique is to illuminate the gills from below.

The often dim and diffused daylight that reaches a mushroom-flushed forest creates ideal conditions for light painting. The photographic workflow is long, starting with the hours it might take to find pristine mushrooms and supporting elements that together tell a story. The workflow is also highly technical, requiring an understanding of composition, exposure, depth of field, precision focus stacking, and the expert use of colored filters and layers and layer masking post-processing techniques. The process often involves capturing multiple images at various exposures, taking additional shots focused on different points for photo stacking, and photographing distinct elements illuminated with a filtered secondary light source such as a flashlight. Selected Images from the shoot are then imported into Photoshop, aligned and edited in layers and layer masks, and blended to create the final image.

This section of this article includes light painting photos created by photographer Derek Griffin. Growing up in Ireland, Griffin drew inspiration for his photography from Irish folklore



Figure 4: *Amanita muscaria* is probably the most recognizable mushroom in the world. In this image, the use of light painting portrays the mushroom as it is often viewed—magical and enchanting. Photographed via photo stacking, the image is nicely composed using the rule of thirds. The inclusion of a couple of small ferns and a patch of forest floor moss adds mysticism, interest, and context to the image. Derek Griffin photo.



Figure 5: A cluster of light-painted mushrooms in an Irish oak forest. Derek Griffin photo.



Figure 6: The composition in this image is about juxtapositions—high and low, light and darkness and hope and despair. Derek Griffin photo.

and rich landscapes. He spent years perfecting light painting mushrooms, often blending realism with fantasy to capture the magic of mushrooms and their association with enchanted lands and the supernatural. For Griffin, mushrooms symbolize gateways to other worlds and his goal is “to create images that resonate with that magical and timeless connection, blending realism with a touch of whimsy.”

In Figure 5, Griffin uses a landscape camera orientation that enables us to peer into a sliver of an oak forest flushed with mushrooms, fallen acorns, and rich-looking ground vegetation. He uses light painting to create an enchanted nocturnal mushroomscape where it is easy to imagine the folk of Irish lore frolicking along pathways filled with acorn cobblestones lit by mushroom lamps.

In Figure 6, Griffin uses an eye-to-eye perspective to juxtapose the leaves high and the mushroom low. Can this be interpreted as a metaphor for our archaic classification of life as contrasting higher and lower organisms? Maybe it reminds us that plants and some fungi are equal in the natural world. Being in a mutual symbiotic relationship, one cannot exist without the other. For other fungi, their roles in the forest are also co-equal. Plants produce, fungi decay.

In all three of Griffin’s images, the subtle dark vignetting nicely frames the photographs and keeps the eye focused on the light-painted subjects and a sliver of the surrounding forest floor captured in the light. This focus on light is also a focus on hope, a recurring theme in Griffin’s photography. “Hope,” he writes, “is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.”

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The images in this article were provided freely by the following photographers. Olivier Douchamps is an amateur and creative photographer living in Belgium; Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100080256151342>. Derek Griffin is a professional photographer living in Ireland; Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/125835644@N06/>; Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/GriffinPhotographyire>. ↑