

Scenes of the American West

Photographs by Stephen S. Ashley

January 16 through February 19, 2016
the LightRoom
Berkeley, California

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Puebloan Petroglyphs, 2015

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A Catalog

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Introduction

To anyone who started making photographs in the 1960s, black and white is the default setting. Color film, paper, and chemicals were more expensive than their black and white counterparts, and color processing was more difficult. I shot some color transparencies and tried my hand at making color prints, but I always came home to black and white. When the digital revolution came along, I clung to the darkroom, but circumstances forced my hand, and I put my view camera on the shelf and joined the throngs of DSLR-toting tourists crowding the national parks. But I still make black and white photographs. When I click the Photoshop button that turns a color image to black and white, I get a tiny burst of delight. Black and white is the format that nature intended for landscape photographs. It's magic.

Some photography devotees who do not care for landscape photography dismiss it as depicting nothing but “rocks and trees.” My view is that you cannot have too many photographs of rocks and trees. That's what you will find in this exhibit and in this catalog. And cacti, water, and clouds.

Last year I had occasion to reread the mystery novels of Tony Hillerman. As he recounted the adventures of his Navajo detectives, Hillerman imbued his stories with the Navajo world view. In the first novel, *The Blessing Way*, Hillerman described the Navajos' ceremonial chants as “the old songs to the Holy People—not prayers of humility or supplication, and not pleas for forgiveness, but *songs which sought nothing but to restore man's harmony with all that was elemental.*” It

struck me that Hillerman's description of the purpose of the Navajo chants describes what for me a good photograph should do: it should heighten the viewer's feeling of harmony with the world. To that end I try to avoid letting my equipment, my processing, or myself come between the viewer and the subject. Nature has already created the perfect aspen. I cannot do better.

I also try to keep my photographs uncomplicated. The Shakers valued simplicity, which was reflected in their spare, unornamented, but elegant furniture. "'Tis the gift to be simple," their song tells us. I try to make photographs the way Shakers would have made photographs if they had had cameras.

You can find these photographs, along with dozens of photographs of other beautiful places, on the website at nigrumetalbum.com. You may track my photographic activities by following me on Twitter (twitter.com/sashleyphotos) or on Pinterest (pinterest.com/NigrumEtAlbum). You can reach me by email at stephen.ashley@strattonpress.com. Printed versions of my photography books, including this catalog, are available at www.blurb.com/user/store/sashley; pdf versions of the same books are available for free at nigrumetalbum.com/books.html.

Finally, I would like to thank Rob Reiter for offering me the opportunity to exhibit my photographs at the LightRoom.

Stephen S. Ashley
Alameda, California

Rocks

In Kyoto, Japan, one may visit a Zen temple called “Ryōan-ji.” It contains a *karesansui*, a dry landscape rock garden, of great beauty. No one knows for sure what the designer meant the stones in the garden to represent, but no one can dispute that his handiwork, in its stark simplicity, engenders a meditative mood. *Boulder #1* reminds me of the Ryōan-ji garden.



Boulder #1, Joshua Tree, 2014

The Fremont River bisects Capitol Reef National Park as the river descends through the canyon it carved in the sandstone. Highway 24 follows the river from Fruita to the park's eastern boundary and beyond. Along this segment of the highway one can see intricate designs that the river sculpted in the canyon wall in eons past.



Fremont River Canyon #6, Capitol Reef, 2015

Dawn revealed a splendid view of Capitol Reef and of the Henry Mountains in the distance. These wild, remote mountains are reputed to be one of the last-surveyed ranges in the lower 48 states.



Panorama Point, Capitol Reef, 2015



South Mesa, Caineville, 2015

To the east of Capitol Reef National Park, Highway 24 passes between two desolate formations, the North and South Caineville Mesas. The Fremont River supports vegetation in the valley, but the South Mesa, which soars above the valley, appears from its base to be utterly barren.

At the top of the Elk Camp gondola in Snowmass, Colorado, one is presented with a view of what I believe is Willoughby Mountain.



View From Elk Camp, Snowmass, 2013

Cacti

I came across this composition while wandering the grounds of the Westin Kierland resort in Scottsdale. Cacti growing in cultivated settings rather than in the wild have the advantage that they tend to be less weather-beaten, as this specimen illustrates.



Agave Cactus #1, Scottsdale, 2014



Thorny fronds in a desert canyon.

Palm Thorns, Coachella Valley, 2011

Trees



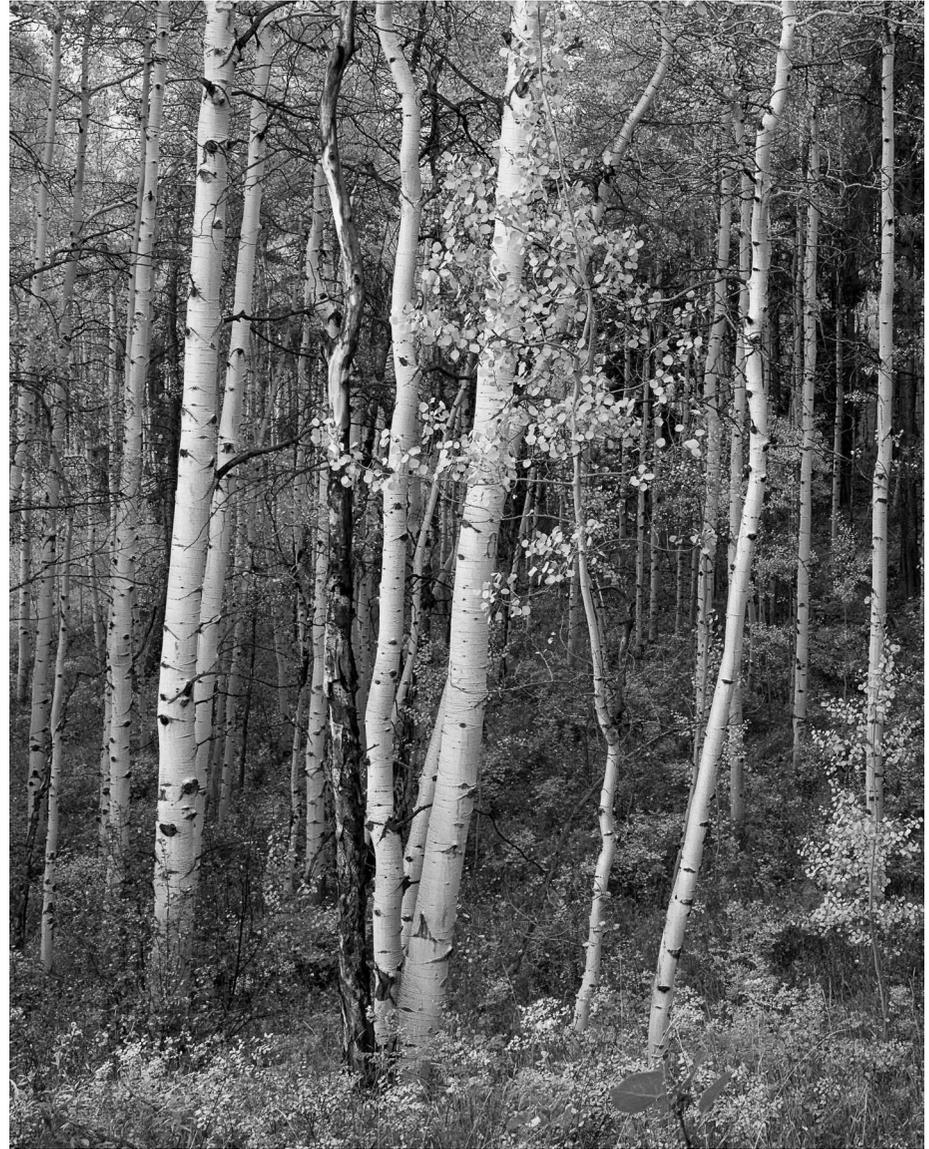
Aspens in Beaver Creek #1, Colorado, 2013

I took these two photographs while hiking the ski area at Beaver Creek in the fall.



Aspens in Beaver Creek #2, Colorado, 2013

These trees grew on an exposed spot; winds blowing up the canyon pushed them to the right.



Leaning Aspens, Beaver Creek, 2014



At the end of the day the last rays of light filtering through the trees illuminated the aspens at a bend in a dirt road traversing the Beaver Creek ski resort.

Road Through the Aspens #1, 2014



Cottonwood trees make excellent subjects, as they combine sculptural forms, deeply textured limbs and trunks, and a world-weary attitude that comes from years of Utah summers and winters.

Cottonwood #3, Capitol Reef, 2015

Water



Four cormorants graciously posed before a crashing wave along the Sonoma Coast not far from the town of Gualala.

Cormorants #1, Sonoma, 2015

Another crashing wave, this one photographed at Salt Point State Park.



Crashing Wave #6, Sonoma Coast, 2015



A yacht passes between Lopez Island and Orcas Island on its way to Friday Harbor.

San Juan Islands #1, 2015

A view from the Puget Sound ferry going from Friday Harbor to Lopez Island.



San Juan Islands #3, 2015

Clouds



Clouds #1, New Mexico, 2011

I took a day trip from Santa Fe to Taos. The scene presented a constantly changing array of clouds, showers, and virga against a deep blue sky.

As I was driving in the late afternoon from Steamboat Springs to Avon, the setting sun illuminated a sudden downpour to the east.



Rain Showers, Highway 131, Colorado, 2011

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About the Photographer

When I was a young teenager, my parents rented a house with a bomb shelter in the basement. I discovered that when I turned off the lights, the bomb shelter was perfectly dark, and I realized that it would make an ideal darkroom. I assembled one, using a Kodak slide projector as an enlarger. The light from the projector was so bright that it solarized the enlarging paper. Thus began my photographic avocation.

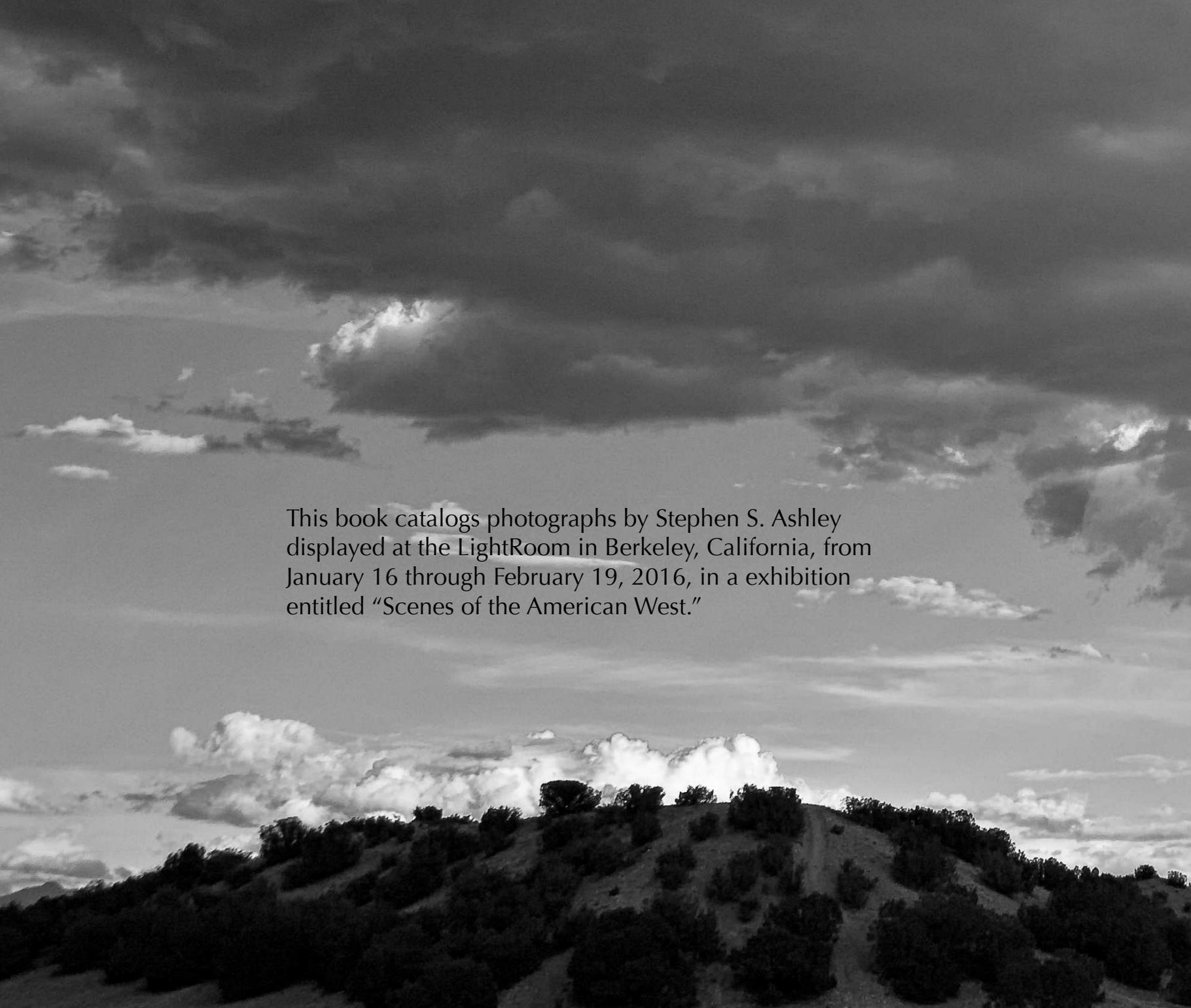
During my career I engaged in many occupations—fire fighter, typesetter, lawyer, writer, publisher, law professor, software developer, flight instructor—but all the while I honed my photographic skills. After a serious illness forced me to give up my law-related work, my retirement gave me the opportunity to devote my time to expanding my portfolio and to finding an audience for my photographs.

I had no formal education in

photography but learned from many teachers. My primary mentor was my uncle, Roy Stratton, who freely shared with me his deep knowledge of photography. In the 1970s and 1980s, the University of California Extension programs at Berkeley and Santa Cruz offered a wide selection of short courses on various aspects of photography, and I enrolled in several. These courses gave me the opportunity to meet and learn from Stuart Scofield, Mark Citret, and others. I also had the good fortune to attend a Friends of Photography program, where I met Ruth Bernhard, Morley Baer, John Sexton, Marilyn Bridges, and William Christenberry. More recently, in May of 2014 I flew myself to Moab, Utah, to attend the Moab Photography Symposium, where I had an opportunity to photograph with Judith Zimmerman and Colleen Miniuk-Sperry. I returned to Moab in 2015 and had an opportunity to work with Bruce Hucko and Guy Tal.



Designed using Adobe Photoshop Lightroom



This book catalogs photographs by Stephen S. Ashley displayed at the LightRoom in Berkeley, California, from January 16 through February 19, 2016, in a exhibition entitled "Scenes of the American West."