

FEATURE

All images
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MOTHER EARTH

In 14 short years, **Mats Andersson** has published over a dozen books and won numerous awards. He spoke to Charlie Thomas about his start in photography, how he arrived at his unique style, and what it takes to find your creative voice.



At first glance, it's hard to distinguish whether a Mats Andersson print is a painting or photograph. He blends the abstract with the surreal, resulting in landscape imagery that can simultaneously evoke feelings of unease, tranquillity, forbidding and calm. His style is instantly recognisable, a dark, gritty, analogue look with deep blacks, a rich grain structure and often plenty of motion, which contributes to his painterly style. It's a combination that has seen him win countless wildlife photography awards, while his 13 published books speak to an enviable work ethic.

Can you talk us through your career beginnings?

I got my first camera as a nine-year-old. As a child, I often travelled around the world with my parents and visited art museums. I was fascinated by how great masters such as Picasso, Chagall, Matisse and Monet created something completely different than a pure depiction of reality.

Many years later, I started working for an advertising agency. I had a Nikon F3 and through the company I was also able to get a very nice 85mm f/1.4 lens. This camera was my faithful servant for many years. But sometime in the late 1990s, I started photographing digitally. The quality of the cameras was lousy, but the digital technology

was important for my development as an image creator. Now, I could experiment and see the results directly, which created opportunities for new creative solutions. But it would take many years before the digital cameras were so good that they could measure up to analogue technology. My first digital camera, a Nikon D200, I bought in 2006. Since that day, my photography took a completely different path and I started to find a style that felt a little more like my own.

How did you arrive at your style? And what advice do you have for someone looking to find their own?

The year 2009 was when I finally found home. I took two creative nature photography >





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courses, and then I attended a workshop with the famous Swedish photographer Anders Petersen. This was also the year I published my first photo book, *Årstiderna* ('The Seasons'). I was inspired by photographers who made everything but traditional nature photography. Instead, I turned to art photographers such as Michael Ackerman, Sally Mann, Arno Rafael Minkkinen, Anders Petersen and others.

My advice would be to look to, and be inspired by, photographers who work in a completely different genre, and I can guarantee you will be going places, and take in interesting features in your work.

A number of your black & white photos have a painterly quality to them. Do you also find inspiration in painting?

I find a lot of inspiration in painting. Munch, Picasso, Chagall and Matisse are some of my favourites. Creating my 'painted' pictures started as a mistake. I had been out in the woods for several hours on a dark winter day and couldn't really find the inspiration to create images; I didn't have many pictures on the memory card that I was happy about. Slowly, I started walking back where I had parked my car, the camera hanging in front of my chest. I was bored and while I was walking, I pressed

the shutter from time to time without lifting the camera to my eye. The camera was apparently set to a long shutter speed, but I didn't reflect on it then. When I got to the car, I looked through the pictures on the display, and to my surprise, there were a couple of images that looked almost like impressionist paintings. I looked at how the camera had been set up and tried to repeat what I had done.

A few years later, in 2012, I released the book *Fotografi* ('Photography'), where most of the images were single exposures with camera movement. The title came naturally as, of course, the word means 'to paint with light'.

How do you get so close to the animals in your photos? Do you have to be patient to get the shot? ›

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◀ For the large predators, I have always used hides to get close to them. It is not easy to get close to them naturally, and a brown bear can be dangerous to a human. These hiding places are built in the woods, and you just sit there for many hours waiting for something to happen. As you can imagine, you must be very patient. I can do this for days on end. When I photograph elk, wild boar, deer and badger, for example, I often walk quietly in the forest, against the wind, preferably at night when it is very windy. The wind in the trees camouflages the sound of my footsteps and the animals don't get the scent of me. If you are lucky, you can get very close.

The image of the badger in silhouette took me 20 nights in a row to pull off. I put my camera on a tripod by the log on the ground. Then I put out pieces of fish to attract the badger. With a transmitter, I exposed the camera, but the problem was that the badger became very scared of the sound of the shutter the first few nights and immediately ran away when it heard the camera. The exposure time was about 1sec, so there were only pictures of the log. Finally, I got some images where the badger sat still for 1sec.

What have you got coming up next – any new projects or exhibitions?

I always work with ideas for new books in my head, but as of now, I don't know exactly when the next book will come or even know what the theme will be. The process is constantly ongoing. I have published 13 books since 2009, so I work quite diligently. I have some plans to produce an exhibition with the pictures from my latest book, *Mother Earth*.

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□ Mats Andersson studied photography at the Industrial Art School in Gothenburg, Sweden. He has won numerous awards, including the black & white category of Wildlife Photographer of the Year, and has published 13 books. His latest book is *Mother Earth*, which features 188 images and is written in English and Swedish. It's available at matsandersson.nu.

