



THE BIG PICTURE (Article by Sean O' Toole) SUNDAY TIMES – September 2006

Photography, despite the march of the megapixel and the general hullabaloo about digital, is still incapable of some very simple things. For proof, take a stroll to your favourite tree (bonsai's don't count). Try compressing its abundance into a single frame. Not so easy is it.

Trees are hard to photograph, I propose to Martin Osner. "Yes and no" he responds ambiguously. "The one thing with trees is that they have a very strong triangular shape, and they also work in rhythm. Then you also have texture."

Trust Osner, whose portfolio includes many colour-rich and abstracted renderings of South African flora, to detonate my theory that trees are hard to photograph.

This picture, taken while on a trip to Magoebaskloof, an area renowned for its forest-covered gorges, also bears out another of Osner's clever insights. "Every tree has its own character – and when they are grouped together, they are actually quite exciting."

Just when I think my theory is completely dashed, Osner throws it (and me) a lifeline. This picture, he tells me, was very difficult to photograph. Armed with a cumbersome 8 x 10 inch camera, he strolled through an industrial forest (they're blue gum's after all) compelled only by a photographer's nous that there was something out there. Two-and-a-half hours later, the last significant bits of sunlight illuminating the very tops of the tree, he chucked in the towel on his big arty camera.

Looking up at the warning light again he suddenly realized he had found his shot. "When I saw the shot I set up the tripod very flat and lay underneath it" He snapped this scene using a garden-variety 35mm. Adds Osner: "The moment you photograph something, it loses its three-dimensional contact with the world. Because of elements like contrast, compression and depth of field, things look different when they're photographed." It is a fact that delights and surprises the photographer. "Some people see the camera as a means of recording an end result, but the camera changes things." Even the way we see trees