



A Tree of Fire

Symmetree



TIM SAWYER reflects on creating beautiful images using symmetry from elements of the world around us.

My photography really took off after a visit to the Lake District in 2012 where, along with my wife Sharon, I did a landscape photography course with John Gravett. This intensive course had us out all day taking photographs, and then there was a critique session in the evening featuring ten photos from each person. This was the key educational section of the course for us, and

it opened our eyes to what 'good' landscape photography was.

With a subsequent house move to the north side of Leeds, we joined Ilkley Camera Club and our minds were expanded. Looking at quality work week in, week out, trains your eye and opens up possibilities. I was especially inspired by a camera club lecture from Dianne Owen who showed



Blue Symmetree

creative prints. I was struck by how different her work was from traditional photography, and it switched on something in my brain. I was up early the next day, and I had to get on the computer and start messing around with Photoshop to see what I could create. Seeing Dianne's work was almost a 'permission' thing for me – I was somehow now allowed to be wacky and creative and I wasn't limited to doing everything in camera. I've been on a mission to learn more Photoshop techniques and 'make good art' (to quote Neil Gaiman) ever since, where 'good art' is images I'm proud of.

Following in the footsteps of John Gravett I have an account on BlipFoto.com and I post a photo a day there. I now have a photo each day for the past four and a half years. These images are sometimes simple snapshots taken during my lunchtime wanderings near work or, when time allows, I produce more elaborate creations from what I've taken. Inspiration for these comes from

films, books and other creative photographers on the web. I believe that finding a photograph each day keeps your eye in, and means you're always looking out for images. I will freely admit that sometimes what I produce is rubbish!

Creating images this way is a double edged sword – it keeps your mind focused, but also can lead to relaxing once you have a 'good enough' image. I sometimes need to push myself to create quality work. My images also tend to be made quickly, as they are usually done on the same day they are posted. On the whole, I find this approach works for me and it had led me to produce some images that have gone on to gain various awards.

I have a 'just mess about' approach to creating my arty images in Photoshop. I often start with an idea of what I want to achieve in terms of shape, but when it comes to textures or effects I play around with filters, trying things out, and then I



The Wishing Tree

decide whether the change improves the images or makes it worse. If it's worse, I'll delete the layer and try something different. If it's better, then I'll build on that with something else. With textures I will pick a favourite of the moment, stick it into my images, and try different blending modes until I like it. Or until I get fed up, delete the layer and try something else!

I've been fascinated by symmetry for a while. I think it's wonderful that the brain interprets a symmetrical image as pleasing, and that a simple image reflected upon itself becomes so much more. I'm also intrigued with the idea of adding elements, such as birds, that unbalance the symmetry.

Many of my early creative images were based around photos taken in the mist at a local park, and the first time I reflected an image was a simple one of a bush framed by trees. I liked it just flipped and made symmetrical, but then

for some reason I added a bird of prey just to one side. This was the start of what became the Symmetree theme.

The 'Blue Symmetree' image started life as a photograph of a skeletal tree in the mist. I first did some basic processing in Lightroom: blacks, whites, shadows, highlights, clarity. It was then opened up in Photoshop, duplicated onto a new layer then flipped horizontally and a mask added to half the image to make a symmetrical tree. Next, *Nik Colour Efex* was used to add Sunlight and Fog giving it an ethereal look. The birds were then added, and masked using *Blend If*. I find *Blend If* to be a useful tool when adding birds – if you have dark birds against a bright sky, you can make the layer transparent where it is bright leaving just the birds. I find this is often quicker and easier than trying to select just the birds. A total of four textures were then layered on top – the bottom of a boat from Malta, a blue wall from Devon, some rock from (I think!) North Yorkshire



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Time Flies

and out of focus water from New Zealand – using a variety of blending modes – Subtract, Color and Soft Light. The moral of this story if you want to produce this kind of work – always keep a look out for interesting textures, wherever you are! The background circle effect was made using a masked curves layer.

I have found that I normally end up using Soft Light or Hard Light blending modes with my textures, and I start off with an opacity of 100% and then reduce it until it looks right. Hard Light usually needs a lower opacity percentage to work well. I've also been experimenting with the other options that are available – Divide and Subtract are often fun to play with.

The 'Symmetree Fire' image again started with a reflected tree. The red background texture was made using a photo of a green mug, and the subtract blending mode. I like the fact that the trunk of the tree is not symmetrical.

'The Wishing Tree' still uses the same concepts of a symmetrical tree within a non-symmetrical landscape, but has a little less of an abstract feel. There are still numerous layers and textures involved. You should be able to see the out of focus water texture in the sky; it's one of the favourite textures that I keep coming back to.

'Time Flies' was inspired by an abstract image I found online. It's more of a conceptual image but uses many of the same ideas as the earlier ones. You might be able to spot the New Zealand water in the background again!

'A Tree of Fire' is one of the newest in the series. The background here is wool, not flames. There are faces to be found in the tree trunk if you look hard enough.

Make sure to give yourself permission to try something new, and see what you can create.

See more of Tim's work at tim.sawyer.photo.