There is something about the way Scandinavian photographers use light that so often makes their work distinctive. And it’s hard not to believe that the very different quality of light to be found in the far north and the long, dark days of winter have something to do with it. Certainly, the work of Norwegian photographer Pål Hermansen reflects his passion for the polar regions, in particular Svalbard, and a fascination with light and dark contrasts.

Pål also regards the exploration of nature through photography as the highest form of photographic art, given that it deals with the most important things in life. He also sees photography as a type of scientific activity, in the sense that the camera can reveal things that have never been seen before and record them with accuracy as well as artistry.

Pål’s strong interest in nature and nature conservation was born of a childhood spent roaming the forests around Oslo, Norway. He began to experiment with images in the 1960s, starting out by making short Super-8 films. But when he bought his first SLR camera, he fell in love with still images, setting up a darkroom so he could experiment with processing. In 1971 he decided to become a professional photographer. At that time, it was almost impossible to make a living as a photographer of nature, and he didn’t want to end up being a wedding photographer or for hire freelance. So he trained as a dentist and a homeopath to provide a second income when times were hard.

In 1985, Pål published the first of more than 30 books, many with text by him (he loves the creative process of writing almost as much as he does photography), covering many topics involving nature but also incorporating a human presence. His books include Bird Magic – birds and particularly the motion of birds in flight are one of his passions – and Out to Play, which looks at the importance of children being able to use the natural environment as their playground.

Relatively recently, Pål undertook a degree in art and photography, to more fully appreciate the history of art and understand the diversity of contemporary photography. His desire is to have his work appreciated as art rather than being labelled as nature photography. He has certainly achieved that in Scandinavia, where his pictures have been widely exhibited and he has had more than 25 solo exhibitions.

With a restless, curious mind and a science training through dentistry, he sees the scientific aspects of his work as intrinsically linked to the creative. Photography, especially the technical innovations of digital photography, is ‘a way to enter realms that are not seen with the naked eye – microcosm, macrocosm, time, night, and so on’.

Pål is fascinated by the ability of photography to both ‘freeze the split-second action and compress a longer period of time’. But he also is aware of the danger of the technical solution becoming the aim. ‘To me, the story – the idea, the depth for interpretation and the emotions it evokes – has to be the most important aspect of an image.’

Today, he is working on ways to ‘integrate nature photography into the landscape of contemporary photography’ and to make people part of the photograph and so highlight the relation between us and nature.
Exploring nature photographically is the most existential and essential activity you can do with a camera. In nature you deal with the basic questions of life and death, which is not something you can say about many other branches of photography.

**NIGHT MAGIC**

Today’s cameras offer fantastic exposure-speed possibilities. But sometimes these can be too good. This image is the oldest in my selection, made before the digital era. It was shot on a summer night on the coast of Trøndelag using what was then an incredibly fast film with an ISO of 1600. The blue night light and the mist haze over the field is enhanced by the grainy film. There is no need to show any more detail of the red deer – the roughness contributes to the night magic.

Trøndelag, Norway, 1988; Nikon F3, 600mm lens, 1/8 sec at f4, Fuji Provia 1600.
I have met many polar bears in the vast, icy Arctic landscapes. But this bear was in the most breathtaking setting I had ever seen. Our small expedition vessel got as close as 15 metres from its breakfast table. But rather than a close-up, I wanted to show the bear within the whole, magnificent scene. I waited until it lifted its head from its meal of ringed seal and then took a series of shots as a panoramic stitch. It’s a picture that can be interpreted in many ways. When it was made, the timing was perfect to highlight the latest news about the effects of climate change in the Arctic: less summer ice forces the bears to hunt where they find it – along the edge of glaciers. But it also illustrates the interaction between landscape and animal, as well as the harshness of nature and the food chain. But maybe I like it because it’s simply telling a story about nature.

Svalbard, Norway; Canon EOS-1Ds Mk II, 28-300mm lens, 1/250 sec at f9, ISO 320, two frames stitched.
ICE FORMATION

On an icebreaker expedition in the Arctic or Antarctic, one of the most fascinating visual experiences you can have is when the ship forces its way through one-year-old ice. Standing high on the deck, you are presented with a treasure-trove of forms and shapes. Now and then birds fly over the ice, offering interesting juxtapositions of shapes. On this passage through melting ice in Franz Josef Land, in the Russian high Arctic, I followed the flight of an ivory gull shadowed by a skua until they presented the perfect mirror-image arrangement.

Franz Josef Land, Russia, 2004; Canon EOS-1Ds Mk II, 100-400mm lens, 1/640 sec at f6, ISO 100.
FLIGHT TRACES  IMPROPER

I’m fascinated by how photography can capture phenomena that can’t be observed, in particular, the nature of motion. Now short exposure times and fast motor-drives can freeze motion, I’m even more excited by how long exposures compress time and reveal a pattern of motion. A favourite subject is the motion of birds. I don’t care what species, as long as they are either white against a dark background or dark against a light one. FL then reveals both the spiralling pattern of each bird and the directional pattern of the whole flock.

Kittiwakes, Finnmark, Norway, 2011; Canon EOS 5D Mk II, 70-200mm lens, 1 sec at f16, ISO 50.

LAST SUNBEAM  OVERLEAF LEFT

This is a traditional image, but it’s the drama of light that makes it special. It reminds me of the chiaroscuro technique of baroque painters, invented by Caravaggio, involving dramatic contrast between light and shadow. This image was taken as the last rays of sun fought with drifting fog banks over the gannet rookery on Great Saltee. During a few exciting minutes, I waited to see what would happen first – the final exit of the sun or a gannet flying into my composition. Luckily the bird arrived first and the light faded a minute later.

Saltee Islands, Ireland, 2009; Canon EOS-1D Mk III, 24-105mm lens, 1/800 sec at f4, ISO 200.

FULMARS IN FLOODLIGHT  OVERLEAF RIGHT

The platform for this shot was a fishing vessel off the Lofoten Islands. The catch had been good, and the cleaning of fish lasted till after dark. But the sea was rough, and so I stayed outside on the deck. Suddenly the floodlight was turned on, and I discovered that thousands of fulmars were still following the ship. It was a golden opportunity for motion studies. Hanging over the rail, dodging the huge waves and trying to keep the camera steady, I kept taking shots until, after half an hour, the light was turned off.

Lofoten, Norway, 2008; Canon EOS-1Ds Mk III, 24-105mm lens, 1/2 sec at f6.4, ISO 1250, flash.
CHAOS

So many nature images tend to be ‘tidy’ and easy to understand. Nice when you see them the first time, but after a while, there is nothing more to find in them. Like cheap chewing gum – after a burst of exotic taste, it becomes an indifferent piece, of no interest. Here the picture shows layers of leaves and branches merging in a natural pattern. Some are reflections mirrored in a lake, some are actually in the water. As the foreground and background merge, the reality is difficult to understand. But then that chaos and confusion is the point of the picture. In Greek mythology, chaos was what existed before the world was created. I try to find chaos in nature and reflect it in my images. Chaotic images invite more interpretation and wonder than the simple, straight, beautiful images. A good quality control for an image is to put it on the wall and look at it every day. If you are not bored with it after several months, the image is possibly a good one. Your experience may change day by day, relative to your mood – and the weather.

I prefer images which have a quality of evasiveness – they don’t reveal their true selves without a fight – some quality that unnerves the spectator and takes your attention captive.

Mullsjö, Sweden, 2010; Hasselblad H3D 39, 50-110mm lens at 90mm, 8 sec at f29, ISO 50.
A birch tree forces its way up and out of the skeleton of a car, one of many old wrecks in a Swedish car graveyard being taken over by the forest. The interaction between nature and humans is one of my favourite topics. Rather than taking images that tell a story about overexploitation, pollution and greed, I’m now trying to show how nature takes its revenge, how its power is strong. Even in a static image like this one, I can almost hear the breaking forces of nature. The car, human symbol of engineering and prosperity, is in the end transitory.

Värmland, Sweden, 2011; Hasselblad H3D 39, 30mm fisheye lens, 1 sec at f16, ISO 100.

On rare occasions, a picture has something engaging about it, a detail perhaps, some strange attraction that enables the viewer to make some special connection or association. Such a picture attaches itself to one’s consciousness and remains – it somehow emanates a punctum, a certain point. 

TREE-TRUNK CAR
For me, no creatures are as impressive as emperor penguins. Their adaptation to such a harsh environment, their size and beauty and the confidence they show us humans is extraordinary. A visit to their colony on the drifting ice is a lifetime memory. Photographically, however, the stunning impression they make has been captured so many times that images of them when viewed far from Antarctica often appear too similar and without that special nerve.

This image is the only one I’m left with after a tough selection from many thousands of emperor penguin images. What do I see in it? I guess it’s something about the human-like postures of these creatures in the blizzard, heading to an uncertain future.

Weddell Sea, Antarctica, 2008; Canon EOS-1Ds Mk III, 28-300mm lens, 1/200 sec at f18, ISO 200.
In the early twentieth century, Alfred Stieglitz made a series of images of the sky that he called Equivalents. The contemporary Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto has created a series he calls Seascapes. Both sets of images have a timelessness and lack of place. This shot leaves me with some of the same sensation. It’s a sort of equilibrium between the sea and the sky – an image that tells no specific story but is open to interpretation. It was made in the Canadian Arctic off Baffin Island, from the top of an icebreaker. The sea was absolutely flat, and a thin layer of fog had wiped out the details of the water. It was August, when the sun disappears below the horizon for just a few hours each night. I was on deck at four o’clock, just after the sun had risen into the fog – a time of unearthly experience.

Canadian Arctic, 2001; Fuji G6 6x7, 90mm lens, 1/500 sec at f16, Fuji 400 film.