

THE **PRO** INTERVIEW

VALERIE MILLETT





The magnificent scenery of America's southwest never looks less than spectacular through the lens of Valerie Millett. The Arizona-based photographer reveals to Keith Wilson why she never tires of exploring her own backyard...

ALTHOUGH she is a prolific blogger with a huge following, Valerie Millett prefers to let her photos do all the talking. Her love of the great outdoors is indisputable – she devotes most of her free time to capturing the landscapes of her adopted home state, hiking deep into the Arizona wilderness, often for days at a time, never happier than when she has a canyon trail, or river bend all to herself. Unlike many of her peers, Valerie rarely seeks the limelight and maintains a low profile, despite the growing popularity of her landscape imagery and regular publication in American magazines, calendars and web platforms. Interviews have been few, particularly on this side of the Atlantic, but we wanted to hunt her down to find out more about her techniques and motivations...

You're a California girl, what brought you to Arizona?

I do refer to myself as such. Born and raised in Orange County, California, when it was a suburban paradise.

01 THE MITTENS, MONUMENT VALLEY
These two buttes are referred to as 'The Mittens' because they resemble hands coming from the earth, near Kayenta, Arizona

Lens	Canon EF 17-40mm f/4L USM
Exposure	10.3 secs, f/11, ISO100



02 PERFECT REFLECTION

The mirror-like surface of Upper Emerald Pool, Zion National Park, Utah, photographed early in the morning

Lens Canon EF 70-200mm f/4L USM

Exposure 2 secs, f/8, ISO50

03 AGATHLA PEAK

"This was literally a pull-the-car-over moment", says Valerie, during the middle of a monsoon storm

Lens Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM

Exposure 1/320 sec, f/11, ISO200

04 DESERT SNOW

Taken on a December morning after a snowfall in Arizona's Sonoran Desert

Lens Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM

Exposure 1/4 sec, f/13, ISO200



We could ride our bikes to Newport Beach and play and explore on the Santa Ana River. I loved growing up in California and I'll always be a 'California Girl'.

A year after I married in California, my husband at the time, and a high school friend of his, decided to start a new

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company based in Arizona. I'd been hiking in northern Arizona a few years before and I knew it was a place I could easily adapt to, so we went for it and made the move.

Watercolours and blogging were your first passion. How did those interests start and evolve?

Right out of high school, my first year in college, I was a fine art major. I really can't ever remember a time when I wasn't either drawing or painting. My mother was a teacher and we always had art supplies around – tablets, watercolours, pastels, books were always available. Both my mother and father painted as well. I also have a younger brother who is

a professional animator in Los Angeles. I started a watercolour blog in 2005 and was adding in posts about my Arizona hikes. When I'd compare my images on the blog to the images in *Arizona Highways* magazine, I was driven to improve my work. I was obsessed with having my images match my experiences. I became enthralled in the medium.

A watercolour is very different to the tack sharp landscapes that you are renowned for now. How did you find making the transition from one art form to another?

Actually, my style as a watercolour artist is very 'realist'. In fact, my *real* first introduction to photography was the



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GPS taking me on a cattle trail in the middle of the night. I'll scan the areas via satellite images, read recent reports of actual trips or hikes – I invest a lot of time in planning, timing, weather, lighting. I'll be first to admit that I over plan sometimes because most times nothing goes as planned. It's all good.

Does your dog always come along?

Halo has travelled with me on most of my local backpacking and hiking trips. She is my most trusted backup and alerts me when any other animals are around. I've always been so impressed with her boulder manoeuvring skills and her patience with my tinkering. She's 15 now and is starting to lose the use of her back legs. I have to lift her in and out of my SUV. Soon I'll be going back to California to visit family and I'll be taking her with me so she can see the beach for the first time. It may be her last long road trip.

Which was your first Canon DSLR and when did you get it?

On my hiking blog, I was using an Olympus C770 point 'n' shoot, but in 2010 I invested in a Canon Rebel XTi (EOS 400D) and one Sigma lens. I left the camera in the box for a year because I had no idea where to start... I knew nothing about photography, so I just started devouring any books or videos I could on the basics: exposure, composition, f-stops, aperture, etc. Then, I spent every free second roaming the creeks and canyons of Arizona to practice, practice, practice! A year later, I bought a used Canon 5D Mark II and started adding on used lenses as well. With each change, I could see my images improving.

And what's in the bag now when you go on a hike?

Now, I have a Canon 5D Mark IV and I love it. I also have a Canon Rebel SL1 (EOS 100D) and some Lensbaby lenses that I always keep in a hiking bag in my SUV. When hiking casually, I'll leave the Mark IV at home. I'll throw in my Mark II or SL1 in my hiking bag, usually one lens, 24-105mm. I always carry a head lamp and space blanket – it takes little space and could save my life. A clean dry towel,

Minolta SLR I was using to set up my still life images. At that time, the camera was just a tool and I had no idea about the basics of exposure or lighting.

What is it about Arizona and the American southwest that you find so inspiring photographically?

Arizona is expansive, big, huge, open, historic, ancient, empowering, inspiring and alluring. Shorts and flip flops eight months out of the year, windows down, breezy days with a camera always in tow – what's not to love? I remember when I was a kid, we made a horrific family trek to the Grand Canyon, driving from California in a station wagon no less. My mother let me come home with the

Painted Desert in layers in a little glass jar. That fascination never left me and I've followed and photographed the real Painted Desert here in the southwest for many years. I could shoot local for the rest of my life and still be blown away.

Hiking is essential to the way you work; how do you go about planning an excursion?

Once I determine a future location to shoot, I start doing research. I try to make my trips as stress-free as possible so that shooting is carefree and light. Off the grid takes a bit more time and effort. I don't like driving in the dark so I want to know exactly what to expect in the areas I'll be frequenting. I've never gotten over my

STORY BEHIND THE SHOT



THE FALL

On a trip to her favourite spot, Valerie could not walk out...

"Lush pinyon, ponderosa, cottonwood, oak, maple and fir create a shady canopy while fern, lupine, horsetail, wildflowers and ivy cover the forest floor. The high Sonoran Desert. I've been hiking here for years and formed my education in photography in this forest classroom. In 2015, while doing an overnight backpacking trip here, seven miles into the canyon, I fell from the trail into the creek. I was evacuated out by the Coconino County Search and Rescue with significant injuries. I took my last injection

into my back from the injury in August 2018. In October 2018, I took this photo. Of all the hundreds of images I've taken of this enchanting place this one is special to me. Gone was the fear of the canyon that lingered after the incident. Something I could always see in my photographs. Light-hearted and free, it was like home again. West Fork, she was in peak stunning colour after several off-years. My favourite canyon smiled in colours, and I see it in my pictures all over again."

05



05 TREE ICON

The 'Lone Cypress' on California's 17-Mile Drive in Pebble Beach, is one of the most photographed trees in North America

Lens Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM

Exposure 2.5 sec, f/16, ISO100

06 GRAND CANYON INVERSION

It had rained for more than 12 hours when Valerie was camping at the Grand Canyon. She woke to see these inversion clouds

Lens Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM

Exposure 0.8 sec, f/4, ISO100

07 COAL MINE CANYON

"As the canyon starts to dim, all the bats come out of these little hidden pockets. It's quite an experience," explains Valerie

Lens Canon EF 70-200mm f/4L IS USM

Exposure 1/16 sec, f/8, ISO100

lens wipes and blower. I like to take my Lee grad filters since the desert can be harshly lit. I have two 'go-to' lenses, my Canon 24-105mm and Canon 70-200mm that I use – both have a polarizer. I also always carry pepper spray and water.

Is there a particular lens or focal length you find yourself using more than others for your work?

I go between my Canon 24-105mm and my Canon 70-200mm equally. I don't think I prefer a particular focal length. I adapt to the scene in front of me and then I'll experiment with various focal lengths and exposure settings and find which makes the best images. I mostly shoot with both lenses and varied focal lengths, then assess the images later.

Is the new EOS R likely to find a place in your backpack?

It most certainly could! As much as I love my Mark IV, it is much larger and heavier than the EOS R. I'd love to get a feel of the EOS R and see the image quality and difference in size. However, I'm sure it'll be a long way down the road as I don't upgrade very often.

I'm struck by the clarity, sharpness and depth of field of your work. Some of your images look like they've been shot on large format. Can you tell us more about your technique from setup to composition and exposure?

It's always been my natural inclination to show my images as these large grandiose celebrations of nature. So, I'm happy to hear that you feel what I'm aiming to convey! When I was first starting out, I'd get feedback from more seasoned photographers that I included too much

His tip was to always view the LCD with some form of magnification to be absolutely precise on the focusing

Most importantly, follow your heart and occasionally break the rules.

Do you draw inspiration from other photographers' work or other art forms?

Absolutely! I'm inspired every single day by my contemporaries. I follow many photographers simply because their images bring joy to my life and compel me to always be moving forward.

How do you choose the quotes that accompany many of the images you post and what do you feel they add to your photography?

I'm an avid reader and a fan of written word. I've used my own writing and the words of others I admire when I see that those sentiments go hand in hand with the experiences. John Muir and Edward Abbey come to mind. No one does the desert justice in words like Abbey. Try *Desert Solitaire*. I'm often struck by the sense of humility and smallness I've felt out in the landscapes – sometimes my words are not as profound.

Do you have a favourite quote, one that's stayed with you?

in my images. I treat the concept of composition a bit differently. For me, it is an innate sense of balance in the image. It isn't so much as something I see, as I feel. I usually know it the second I see it. I use the same sense of composition I used as a painter as I do as a photographer. It's not about how many 'things' you have in your image, it's about how well balanced it is. I do, though, plan for exposure. I rarely photograph outside of the early morning or late afternoon hours. Unless I'm in a slot canyon, then I'd hit that at high noon. I try hard to compose my Raw images with the best exposure possible to save the image from being overly edited.

I gather you always pack reading glasses, but not for reading. So, what do you use them for?

When I first started out I happened one day to be shooting with an accomplished

pro. I was trying to get some pointers on how to improve the sharpness of my images. It would seem like I was getting a sharp image in camera but when I'd get home, not so sharp. I'd tried hyperfocal charts, Lightroom sharpening plug-ins. I wanted to do it organically – get it right in-camera. His tip was to always view the LCD with some form of magnification to be absolutely precise on the focusing, either with reading glasses or a loupe. I was sceptical at first... Now I use both and frankly, yes, it was a game changer.

Any other key advice and tips that you regard as essential to share to those starting out in photography?

Learn the basics. A true understanding of aperture, shutter speed and ISO. Get a good old-fashioned book on exposure and live it. Know your camera, read the manual. Landscapers: a tripod is a must.

08



08 AUTUMN, SIERRA NEVADA

"I saw this dramatic scene as I was leaving Bishop in California, to head home for the season but couldn't resist this lighting. The contrast was so incredible."

Lens Canon EF 70-200mm f/4L USM

Exposure 1/80 sec, f/6.3, ISO100

09 PALATKI RUINS

The Palatki Heritage Site is an archaeological site located in the Coconino National Forest, near Sedona, Arizona

Lens Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM

Exposure 3 secs, f/18, ISO200

10 WHITE SANDS

The White Sands National Monument in the northern Chihuahuan Desert of New Mexico is known for its dramatic landscape of white gypsum sand dunes.

Lens Canon EF 70-200mm f/4L USM

Exposure 10 secs, f/22, ISO200

"My story isn't sweet and harmonious, like invented stories. It tastes of folly and bewilderment, of madness and dream, like the life of all people who no longer want to lie to themselves," Hermann Hesse.

What photographic goals or projects have you set for yourself?

My mind never stops trying to evolve my photography into the things that catch my attention or curiosity. As much as the landscapes are an integral part of my life, I also find architectural photography alluring. I find myself drifting on the internet to tutorials on how to shoot buildings and researching the history of the city buildings in Phoenix. Brand photography is something I could see myself checking out as well. So, I don't really set any personal goals or projects, I allow myself to drift to what I find appealing. Curiosity has always been my best guide.

I believe your photography is a pure, non-commercial pursuit, I mean, you have a 'proper' job! Does a separate income give more benefits to your development as a photographer?

I count myself lucky to have an actual 'side' income as a working photographer that has been increasing, and steady now, for the past few years and a steady income from a medical job. Believe me, I work every day on manifesting my perfect photography gig but in the meantime, I have an awesome health plan that I'd never be able to afford as a sole provider. I have stable income to pay for my trips and as much paid time off as I need. Most importantly, I don't have that pressure on me to require my art to provide my income. I've tried it before and found it anxiety provoking. Photography for me, first and foremost, is my art. If that becomes income on a full-time basis at any point, I say, win,



PROFILE

VALERIE MILLETT

US landscape photographer

Born and raised in southern California, Valerie Millett's passion for photography was kindled after she moved to Arizona. A fine art major, her first love was watercolour painting, following in the footsteps of her parents – both artists. Today, she devotes her free time to shooting the landscapes of America's southwest, particularly in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. A prolific blogger and writer, Valerie's photography is published in US titles including *Outdoor Photographer*, *Popular Photography* and *Arizona Highways*. An avid hiker, she makes many of her acclaimed photographs during excursions into the canyons, creeks, deserts and wild spaces of the southwest, usually with her dog Halo by her side.

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Next issue: Christian Ziegler, award-winning German photojournalist

win. I think it's a very personal decision and one that needs to be very well thought out.

Do you have favourite locations that you never tire of returning to?

I feel like every place I visit becomes my new favourite place. I fall in love with every landscape I meet! When I think of a favourite I think of places that seem to have a magical feel or energy to them. The northern Arizona riparian watershed areas and the canyons are my favourite.

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Skies don't feature as much in your landscapes as other photographers' work. Why is this?

It's my odd obsession... I have a certain disdain for bland skies. Once I've found a landscape I want to shoot, I'll keep coming back until the sky is right. If that never happens, then I don't use the sky at all. Unless the sky is spectacular, I don't include it. Too many great images are ruined by a boring sky. Only rarely do I feel an empty sky helps the composition. I realize it's my own quirky preference, but that's exactly the point.

So, will the beach girl from California ever return to settle, or will Arizona continue to be home?

I do return often to visit. In fact, I'm going in the next few weeks and most likely it will be Halo's last road trip. I'd never say never about moving back someday. But I've also always wanted to live in Utah and Colorado... I live day to day. 🍷