

## FEATURE

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## SUMMIT OF ACHIEVEMENT

As his new book *Above* hits UK bookstores, **Thomas Crauwels**, a former IT engineer from Belgium, describes how 'a man with a boring job in a flat country' became a leading mountain photographer. Nick Smith reports.

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It was a synchronisation of the universe when I discovered mountains and the camera. It was bizarre,' says the man who at the turn of the last century had no interest in either climbing or photography. Today, Thomas Crauwels is one of a new generation of Alpine photographers whose monumental, clean-cut, monochromatic landscapes have been collected in his first book, entitled in his characteristic matter of fact style *Above*. His almost minimalist approach to the European range looks both backwards and forwards, acknowledging the classic genius of the 19th-century Alpine School of painting, while raising the bar for what can be achieved in the genre of black & white mountain photography.

When a photographer only photographs mountain landscapes and only in black & white, there's only one question to ask of him. Responding to the seemingly

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innocuous enquiry of 'why?', Crauwels replies that this is the hardest question any interviewer has ever put before him.

To help explain, he describes the central contradiction that defines his career: when he first started making images of the Alps, he was neither mountaineer nor photographer. While some might see this as something of an obstacle to their ambition, Crauwels took it in his stride, devoting the next decade of his life to acquiring the skills that would propel him to the summit

of both the mountains and his genre.

Although today he's a professional photographer based in Switzerland, Crauwels is from Belgium, where he was an information technology geek, doing what he cheerfully confesses was an 'incredibly boring job'. His move to Switzerland a decade ago was in hot pursuit of his computer career. 'The mountains were new to me. Belgium is a flat country, so I started to take snapshots of the area to share with my friends back home, but this was just because I'd changed country and I wanted to make my Belgian friends come to see me. And that was the beginning of all this,' he says, referring to what by any metric has been a rapid rise through the ranks of specialist mountain photographers.

The 38-year-old photographer compares his first encounter with the Alps to 'love at first sight, and I knew that I wanted to photograph these mountains'. Describing >







◀ the psychology behind overcoming his lack of expertise in Alpine photography, he says that he merely reverted to type. 'I have a black and white personality. When I decide that I want to achieve something, I give it all the energy that I have to give, and I do only that. I wanted to communicate the emotions that I felt as I explored the area from Chamonix to St Moritz. I wasn't interested in blue skies at all. Too boring. I liked the drama of the clouds. I wanted to share that,

and so for me there's no point going up the mountain on a beautiful day, but it was hard for me to climb these mountains and I didn't know how to capture the images.'

**T**he past decade for Crauwels has been 'like living two lives in one life'. On the one hand, he has always been convinced that he would be successful at something, while on the other there was the matter of

establishing a route and a process to get there. 'I have always been creative and with a Romantic feeling for landscapes, but I also understand the idea of having to put in the 10,000 hours,' he says, referring to an academic paper dating back to the 1990s that goes under the distinctly prosaic name of *The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance*.

These hours, explains Thomas, 'are part of the stuff you need to get your head







around. How to hold the camera. What does this button do?’ Coming from the digitally native millennial generation and working in the Swiss fintech sector, Crauwels confesses that analogue technology was ‘no use’ to him, forcing his hand into transferring his ease and expertise with digital technology from IT systems to cameras. ‘Either the digital single-lens reflex came along at the right time, or I did,’ he says.

Having served his self-imposed

apprenticeship, ‘I reached the conclusion that photography isn’t so much a technical thing. It’s about what you feel and what you want to say. It’s something inside of you. You’ve got to know how to use a camera, but it’s all about how you see things.’ There could be 10 photographers standing in the same place looking at the same thing,’ he says, ‘but we would all take a different picture.’

What makes his distinct, he suggests, is that out of that hypothetical group of

10 photographers, he’ll be the only one with a 400mm lens, ‘so that I can focus on a small detail of the mountain, which is what really interests me. It’s not a magic camera – I just know what it is I want to do. The people next to me will do something completely different, because they’ll all have 24mm lenses... maybe.’

There’s something in Thomas’s work that speaks directly of the physicality of being in the mountains. He finds them >







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◀ ‘impressive’, while the characteristics he wants to communicate to the viewer are often to do with physical geography and geology. He describes the Alps as ‘steep and big’ in contrast to ‘how small humans are. And I want to create this contrast as a “wow effect” in every picture. I want people to be impressed by the photography, and I understood quite quickly that the most powerful pictures are the simplest ones. I try to keep it very clean, and so if it is just a mountain coming out of the cloud with some great lines, the mind can work directly with the photograph. You’re not going to be disturbed by other elements, and this is the way I try to make the images communicate. It’s a very classical approach to photography and the compositions are very basic.’

Perhaps instinctive, because Crauwels says he never consciously thinks about composition. ‘Maybe this is where the 10,000 hours come in to help me without my knowing it. I see the mountains and I can see the final result – I know how it will look and I know what will work.’

**T**he photographs are the result of confidently getting it right in the camera. ‘I’d rather spend another four hours on the mountain waiting

for the right conditions than spend those four hours at the computer doing post-processing’. Which means that Crauwels spends a lot of time out in the field putting into practice his philosophy of ‘finding the beauty and photographing it – you have to be there when the beauty appears.’

To increase his chances of producing the work he visualises, Crauwels will devote hours at the computer before going into the field, analysing weather forecasts and trying to predict what conditions will be like. ‘And I spend a lot of nights on the mountains sleeping in huts waiting for the snow to clear and hoping that in the morning there will be the right level of cloud for my images. But sometimes you wake up and there is no cloud at all and that is a failure for me.’

Learning about how to survive in the mountains was every bit as steep a challenge as mastering the camera, says Thomas. Arriving in Switzerland with zero experience in mountain craft, he had to learn the ropes literally step by step. ‘I started by walking in the mountains. Then I had to learn to ski. Then walking with crampons. Then rock climbing. It took 10 years to be where I am now, and I still find skiing difficult.’ He says that he knows that this will amuse other photographers, but he’s made his peace with

the fact that he finds it easier to ski uphill than down. ‘It’s horrible. I’m from Belgium. We don’t do skiing.’

Our conversation keeps coming back to the processes behind the pictures that make up *Above*. The reason for this is that the photographs speak for themselves, while the man behind them has battled with learning two completely new skills from scratch in order to return from the mountains with the raw materials for a book. Looking back over the past decade, that has been both a physical and creative challenge. ‘Who would have thought I would come to Switzerland and that I would become a mountain photographer? It’s life. I just followed what’s inside of me.’



▶ **Above** by Thomas Crauwels is available from Hemeria ([hemeria.com](http://hemeria.com)), price £70.  
▶ [thomascrauwels.ch](http://thomascrauwels.ch).