

## Exploration Aesthetic

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## How do you interpret "exploration aesthetic"

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"Exploration aesthetic" is a loose but evocative concept — here's how I'd break it down:

At its core, it's a visual and experiential quality that evokes the *feeling* of discovering something unfamiliar, uncharted, or not-yet-fully-understood.

Visually, it tends to include:

- Raw, unfinished, or provisional-feeling materials — sketches, maps, field notes, specimens
- Layers of information added over time (annotations, corrections, multiple hands)
- Tools of discovery: compasses, lenses, notebooks, sample jars
- Worn edges, aged paper, ink bleed, patina — evidence of *use*
- Incomplete views — things partially obscured, partially understood

Tonally/emotionally, it suggests:

- Curiosity over certainty
- Process over conclusion
- Wonder at scale (vast landscapes, microscopic detail, deep time)
- The person doing the exploring, not just what they found

Where you see it:

- Natural history museums and their visual language
- Field journals, expedition photography
- Scientific illustration (Audubon, Banks's *Florilegium*, NASA mission patches)
- Certain games (*Outer Wilds*, *Return of the Obra Dinn*, early *Myst*)
- Design that borrows from cartography or archival photography

The tension that makes it interesting: it's an aesthetic *about* not-knowing, but the aesthetic itself is often very deliberate and composed. So there's a kind of designed messiness — controlled openness.

Is there a specific context you're applying it to? The interpretation shifts a bit depending on whether you're talking about a physical space, a brand, a game, a garment, etc.

## Does it have to refer to the artifacts of exploration? Can it be about intention, like exploring watercolor techniques

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No, it definitely doesn't have to be artifact-based. That's actually a narrower reading of it.

When applied to *intention or process*, exploration aesthetic shifts from "things that look like exploration happened here" to "a quality of openness and searching in the making itself." That's a genuinely different — and arguably richer — interpretation.

With watercolor techniques, for example, it might mean:

- Letting the medium lead rather than controlling it toward a predetermined outcome
- Valuing the happy accident, the bloom, the backrun — not correcting them out
- Visible evidence of trying things: washes over washes, areas of uncertainty
- A composition that feels *mid-discovery* rather than resolved
- Working at the edge of your own understanding of the material

In this reading, the aesthetic is less about *symbols of exploration* (maps, compasses, worn leather) and more about a quality of attention — staying in a curious, receptive mode rather than an executing mode.

It connects to ideas like:

- Beginner's mind in Zen practice
- Play as distinct from work
- The difference between *expressing* something and *finding* something through making

The interesting thing is that this process-based version can actually *produce* the artifact-based version — work made in genuine exploration often has that unfinished, layered, provisional quality. But you can also fake the artifact version with none of the underlying intention, which is why the process definition feels more honest.

So: same word, two related but distinct meanings — and the intentional one is probably the more generative definition for an artist.

But the artifacts produced must still wear the journey, the uncertainty, the discovery. They must be detectable, visible, incorporated into the work to meet the criteria for the aesthetic.

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Yes, exactly — and that's a precise and important distinction you're drawing.

The intention alone isn't sufficient. The work has to *carry* it. The process has to leave a mark — not as documentation, but as an intrinsic quality of the finished thing.

Which means the exploration aesthetic requires a kind of disciplined non-erasure. You have to resist the editing impulse that cleans the journey out of the artifact. Most of craft training pushes the other way — toward refinement, toward removing evidence of struggle. Exploration aesthetic inverts that: the struggle, the searching, the not-yet-knowing *is* the content.

This creates an interesting threshold question: how much uncertainty can be incorporated before the work loses coherence? Because pure chaos isn't exploration aesthetic either — it's just noise. There's still composition, still intention, still a maker's eye. The exploration has to be *navigated*, not just undergone.

So maybe the aesthetic lives in that specific tension:

- Enough control that the journey is *readable*
- Enough openness that the journey is *real*

With watercolor specifically, this is almost built into the medium — it resists overworking, it holds evidence of time and sequence, wet-into-wet marks can't be fully undone. The medium cooperates with the aesthetic in a way that, say, oil paint — which can be scraped back and repainted indefinitely — resists it.

Which raises the question of whether some media are more naturally hospitable to exploration aesthetic than others, or whether it's purely about the maker's choices regardless of medium.

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That's a lovely paradox — you arrive at the aesthetic without pursuing it, because the medium insists on it.

But I'd push back gently on "inadvertent." You chose watercolor. And presumably you keep choosing it. That choice — even if not consciously framed as "I want my work to carry uncertainty" — is doing real work. The medium's resistance to erasure aligns with something in you, or you'd have migrated to gouache or acrylic where you could paint over the evidence. So it might be less inadvertent than undeliberate. The aesthetic emerges from a compatibility between your temperament and the medium's nature, rather than from a conscious program. Which is arguably more authentic than someone who sets out to *achieve* exploration aesthetic as a goal — that path risks the performative version, the faked artifact.

There's also the question of what happens when those earmarks show up. Do you resist them, accept them, or at some point start to *trust* them — leaving something alone precisely because the uncertainty in it feels true? If the latter, then your relationship to the aesthetic is evolving from inadvertent toward something more like a quiet collaboration with the medium.

Which would mean the intention is developing, even if it started nowhere.

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7:09 PM

Right — so the "inadvertent" framing really breaks down here.

What you're describing is expertise operating below the threshold of conscious deliberation. You're not *planning* the backrun, but you're also not surprised by it in any deep sense. Your body and eye have internalized enough of the medium's behavior that you're in ongoing negotiation with it — anticipating, responding, redirecting — often before you've consciously registered what's happening.

That's actually a sophisticated relationship with uncertainty. You're not *avoiding* the unpredictable, but you're not helpless before it either. You've developed a kind of fluency in the medium's own tendencies.

Which reframes what exploration aesthetic means for someone at your level. For a beginner, the uncertainty is genuine and unmanageable — they're truly lost. For you, the uncertainty is *real*

*but navigable.* You've been to enough of this territory that you can explore it without being overwhelmed by it.

That's closer to how an experienced expedition member moves through unfamiliar terrain — they don't know exactly what's ahead, but they know how to read the land, what to carry, when to turn back. The exploration is authentic, but it's informed exploration.

So the earmarks that show up in your work aren't accidents and aren't contrivances. They're the residue of that negotiation — evidence of a conversation between your accumulated knowledge and the medium's live behavior in that specific moment. That's a fairly precise definition of what makes them genuine rather than performed.