

LENSWORK

No. 167 March 2024

Tablet Edition



Photography and the Creative Process

Articles • Interviews • Portfolios

Brooks Jensen & Maureen Gallagher, Founding Editors



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by Vlad Dumitrescu



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EDITOR'S COMMENTS



Things I've Learned About Photography

Redux, Round #3 — 30 Years Later

In December 1993, in *LensWork* #5, we published the first version of this article — to an audience, back then, of only a couple hundred readers. That article has been the most frequently requested update. Accordingly, we next published a revised version in *LensWork* #50 in December 2003, after a 10 year period of maturation. Now, 20 years after that initial update, while equipment and materials have changed so much, it is amazing how the *creative challenges* remain the same. We live, we learn. Here is Round #3 — updated once again and very likely for the last time.

I've taken the liberty of removing some items that are hopelessly outdated, and added more that reflect new lessons learned during the last 20 years.

I've been involved in photography for over 50 years. I developed my first roll of film in junior high school. Since then, there is not a day goes by that I don't think about or do photography. Certainly in all that time I must have learned something of value! In fact, the learning never stops.

From my earliest days with a camera, I've been gathering random tidbits of wisdom as well as practical observations. Some are from my direct experience; some I've picked up from others. These may not be true for all. Why publish them? Well, even if they are not true for you, perhaps they may stimulate thought — which in itself, might be of some small value. In no particular order, here are 158 things I've learned about photography.

1. Finding great subject matter is an art in itself.
2. Most people see good pictures and photograph bad ones. Real photography begins when we let go of what we have been told is a good photograph and start photographing what we see.
3. Some things just can't be photographed. Trying to do so anyway is worth while.
4. Photographers are more scared of people than people are of photographers.
5. Cameras can get wetter than you might guess.
6. It takes a lot of practice to learn how to see what makes a good photograph better than a bad one.
7. Your success depends as much upon the viewer as it does on yourself.
8. For the first several years one struggles with the technical challenges, making sure and steady progress—a learning curve and growth process that is rewarding, stimulating and self renewing. Eventually, however, every photographer who sticks with it long enough arrives at a technical plateau where production of a technically good photograph is relatively easy. It is here that real photography starts and many photographers quit.
9. If you believe in regular habits, don't take up photography.
10. Most books on photography offer little of help for your creative life. Most books on art do.
11. You can do everything right and still fail.
12. Emotions are more important than details.
13. The scarier it is to make a photograph, the more you are likely to learn.
14. There is no such thing as "good" or "bad" photographic light. There is just light.
15. The least valuable thing you can tell another photographer is that you either *like* or *dislike* their photograph. (David Bayles)

16. Breaking the rules is one of the greatest sources of growth and will often result in lots of criticism from the small-minded.
17. Breaking the rules does not ensure anything of value, either in learning curve or in a good photograph. Sometimes the small-minded are right.
18. If you want to sell a lot of photographs, use color and lots of it. If you want to sell even more, photograph mountains, oceans, fall leaves, and animals.
19. Photography, too, is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.
20. If you are even the least bit tempted, make the photograph now! Neither the subject nor the light will be the same later.
21. If you are not in the least tempted now, guard against blocking the subject out of mind from future possibilities. All things change.
22. The second, third and fourth times you photograph something, will produce more refined compositions than the first. These may or may not be better photographs. You will never know, however, unless you make the second, third, and fourth photographs.
23. Ninety-eight percent of all photographs can be improved by getting closer to the subject. Telephoto lenses are not always the answer.
24. Every piece of gear you will ever own will be a compromise between what you need and what you can afford.
25. A full 30% of your best photographs will be lucky accidents.
26. It's better to photograph with the camera you own than to wait for the camera you want. (Adapted from Stephen Stills)
27. The photographers with the most good photographs are the ones who spend the most time photographing. (Stewart Harvey)
28. Photographic technique is easy to master, but lack of it is an incredibly handy excuse for poor work.
29. The hardest thing to do in photography, as in life, is to make a commitment.

30. The production of a “greatest hit” is always the result of immersing oneself thoroughly in a project. Purposely setting out to make a “greatest hit” photograph will likely fail.
31. If you’re looking for a social art, try dancing.
32. The more your equipment costs, the better it is supposed to be. This is simply not true. Great photographs are not the result of exotic equipment — they result from the application of a creative mind.
33. At least 9 times out of 10, there is a conflict between marketing potential and artistic value.
34. The worst technical problem of all is an unknown hair stuck inside the camera. Dust on the sensor is a close second.
35. It is much harder to make a good black-and-white photograph than a color one.
36. If someone made a \$100 cable release, I’d buy one. No, I’d buy two — one as back-up.
37. Tripods are the curse of photography. A good tripod is worth whatever it costs.
38. Taking meticulous field notes is a waste of time unless you are fully committed to review them later.
39. The time spent organizing negatives or digital files is worth it.
40. There is no magic technique. Any technique will work fine providing one thoroughly learns how to use it.
41. The debate between analog and digital media is a total waste of time. To think that one specific kind of equipment makes better photographs misses the point. Better *photographers* make better photographs. Equipment is never the answer to producing great work.
42. A well-tested and intelligently employed used lens is better than an untested, new, and expensive one.
43. Faith is good. Knowledge is good. To confuse the two is foolish.

44. There is no such thing as a “perfect exposure.” If you have to err on one side or the other, more exposure is always better than less. Do keep in mind, however, that blown highlights cannot be recovered. Not yet, anyway.
45. Bigger prints are not always better, but better prints are always better.
46. It is not the size of the prints that counts, but the “size” of the impact it made on the viewer’s brain/heart that matters.
47. To give away 10 prints is more rewarding than to sell 1. But, to sell 10 prints is more rewarding than to give away one!
48. The more gear you carry the less likely you are to make a good photograph.
49. The most influential technical decision is not which film, camera, lens or exposure setting to use, but whether or not to use a tripod.
50. No amount of darkroom work or digital processing can make up for an out of focus or poorly composed image. [Insert *Taps* playing here.]
51. The most valuable personality traits for photographers are patience and humor. The most troublesome are perfectionism and procrastination.
52. Without compassion, photography is a bore.
53. Critics are valuable to Art — and should be ignored while making photographs.
54. Photography classes can be of some help. Workshops are better. The instructors make or breaks either.
55. Workshops and/or instructors can be addictive and can take up valuable time that is better spent doing photography.
56. It is better to study with an instructor who wants to help you develop your own work, particularly if it is very different from theirs, than to study with one who wants to tell you how they did their work.
57. If your main interest in a workshop is to learn how the photographer “did it” so you can do it too, question your motives.

58. A good photograph is never “about light.” Good photographs are about *life*.
59. A good photograph, when first seen, hits you like a ton of bricks. A better photograph is often almost unseen at first but comes back to mind over and over again long after you’ve stopped looking at it. This often happens unexpectedly.
60. Lots of photographers will claim that a photograph that needs a caption is an inferior photograph. This is silly and denies the obvious fact that all photographs are made, seen and interpreted against a social background that influences their appreciation and understanding. No photographer is an island, either.
61. Creating art requires money. Most often that money comes from self-funding rather than from the sale of photographic prints.
62. The most expensive part of photography is not cameras, film, paper or chemistry. It is travel.
63. For 99% of all prints, there is no functional difference between limiting it to 500 prints or limiting it to 5 prints. You will rarely make print #3.
64. If you price your work over \$20, you have eliminated 98% of the people in the world from your potential market.
65. Artists who take up photography find their “photographic turf” more quickly than photographers who decide to make Art. (Stewart Harvey)
66. Every photographer has dry spells. Good photographers work anyway. Those who do grow by leaps and bounds.
67. Selling prints is, to a large degree, a function of the number of choices you can offer a potential buyer. Breadth of choices is more important than depth of inventory.
68. When showing work to another photographer, they will often try to help by offering comments about how they would have done it. This is the epitome of insensitivity.
69. The *process* of photography is more important than the *product*.

70. The word “photographer” is a verb.
71. When a photographer can deeply appreciate another’s work and not feel compelled to duplicate it, they have begun to mature.
72. Show 20 photographs to 20 people and you’ll find there are at least 15 different choices of a favorite.
73. If you find, while reviewing your images, that you do not remember taking a particular photograph, print that one first. It will be the best photograph from the session.
74. Extra batteries will, eventually, save the day.
75. The most valuable tool you can take with you into the field is an extra day.
76. Drug stores in small towns never stock sheet film. Or exotic memory cards. Or camera batteries. Or carbon fiber tripods.
77. I believe it was Ted Orland who once said, “If you can’t make a great photograph of a mundane subject, make a mundane photograph of a great subject.” If these are your only two choices, take up knitting.
78. Developing a new gimmick genre of photography may get you some press, but it also will get you forgotten.
79. The tortoise does, in fact, beat the hare.
80. Galleries, like banks, are more than happy to help you, providing you can demonstrate that you don’t need it.
81. A calibrated monitor is as necessary as a good pair of eyeglasses.
82. D-max never is. Archival is a relative term. The “circle of confusion” is aptly named.
83. Acquiring a new camera can be both a door and an excuse.
84. Very few people can cut a square matte. Even fewer can cut a square window. Good oval mattes are a direct gift from God.

85. Most famous photographers work their entire life and produce tens of thousands of negatives and hundreds or perhaps thousands of prints, but are remembered for fewer than five and famous for just one. (Cherie Hiser)
86. The fault with most photographers is that they spend 1/60th of a second making a photograph and the rest of their life explaining it. (Richard Brown)
87. We are fast approaching critical mass on photographs of nudes on a sand dune, sand dunes with no nudes, Yosemite, weathered barns, the church at Taos, New Mexico, lacy waterfalls, fields of cut hay in the afternoon sun, abandoned houses, crashing waves, sunsets in color, and reflected peaks in a mountain lake.
88. Always eat before going to a gallery opening and avoid, at all costs, anything with shrimp in it. Trust me on this one.
89. Never ask a person who collects cameras if you can see his photographs.
90. What one photographs says as much about an internal and personal process as it does about an external bit of subject matter.
91. The quality of a photograph is inversely proportional to the amount of thinking used and directly proportional to the amount of intuition used when composing it.
92. If a photographer really expects to produce great work, they must, just like a musician, be prepared to practice their craft every day. EVERY DAY. This does not mean one has to take pictures every day, but one must at least practice seeing every day. (David Bayles)
93. The more controversial your work is, the more press you will receive and the more people will talk about you and your art. This means nothing, but it will open doors that were previously closed.
94. If you create controversial art just so it will open doors, you will be disappointed at how fleeting fame is.
95. The most amazing thing about Weston's *Pepper #30* is not that he made a great photograph of a pepper, but that he saw it as photographic subject material. The second most amazing thing is that he endured 29 "failures" to

- make the one that satisfied him. Few people remember his Banana #18, but he made it.
96. A large negative or sensor records more detail than a smaller one. This has less influence on the quality of the photograph than you think.
97. Just as a large negative records more detail than a smaller one, a large mind is more sensitive to more emotions than a small one.
98. If your budget is limited, buy a cheap camera and the best lens you can afford.
99. You will always be disappointed with your prints because making a photograph is a cumulative process with each step accumulating degradation. The physical print will never look as good as your mental vision of it.
100. If your work looks like someone else's, ask yourself why and don't answer right away. Think about this deeply. If you do, your work will become better almost immediately.
101. Don't be shy about approaching "famous" photographers. They are, almost without exception, giving and generous people who will be happy to help you if you are serious about learning.
102. Before you sink a lot of time and money into your MFA degree, think carefully about what you will do after you graduate.
103. If your work gains attention because of your extraordinary craft and technique, your fame will be fleeting. Pretty soon, everyone will be able to easily do work that is just as good as your masterpiece of craftsmanship from yesterday. When that happens, your work will have to stand on the merit of its artistic content alone. When "everyone can do it" is when the artist's role is clearest.
104. It is easy to make a picture of someone that shows what they look like. It is a much higher achievement in portraiture to tell us a bit about who they are.
105. There is art. There is entertainment. They are not the same thing, but when a piece of work is both, it achieves a higher plateau.

106. It is easier to make a viewer angry than it is to make them cry. The most difficult is to make them laugh.
107. Organizing and planning is good as long as one is sure it is not a clever procrastination device to avoid doing the real work.
108. Permanently dry mounting your work to a mat board virtually guarantees that mat board will become dirty and dinged. You will be better served to mat your print so it can be removed at a later time and re-matted if necessary. You will learn this when “the big gallery” calls you for a career-making show — next month. Take this advice seriously.
109. Don’t allow yourself to become too enamored with your current choices of equipment and techniques. There will be new stuff that will make obsolete everything you are now using and doing.
110. Everything you learn will become obsolete, but at the same time will be the platform from which you move on to the next phase. As long as you are working, there is no truly “wasted” time.
111. Finishing work which you later think is bad is far better than waiting until you can finish it better. The only way to get to better is by working through the bad.
112. In ten years most of your work today will seem trivial and dated. A small percentage won’t. This is why you photograph.
113. You would never know it by looking at the photographic press, but there are an amazing number of creative people engaged in photography who couldn’t care less about equipment but who love photographs.
114. “Learning” and “living” are two words for the same process.
115. Every click of the shutter records an instant of history. A goodly number of your images won’t be important until long after you are gone.
116. Whatever the limitations are to the camera you currently own, there is a work-around that will get you the picture you want.

117. One of the most revolutionary improvements in photography in the last 50 years was the introduction of two-sided printing paper. This opened the door to handmade artists books of our photographs.
118. Other game changing improvements in photography in our lifetimes have been image stabilization, stitching, inkjet printing, and the digital workflow. That said, there is still a romance to the analog wet darkroom that will never leave me.
119. With the introduction of the digital workflow, a new skill we all need to master is *editing*.
120. Keywording in your image database is a pain in the butt, but worth every second you can devote to it.
121. A photograph can make wonderful decor. There are lots and lots of us who have no interest in making decor with our photographs.
122. It used to be common wisdom that budding photographers needed to find “their style” as a form of branding. Now we need to find the right style for every project we do — and each project will be different.
123. Cameras may be impervious to water, but they are not impervious to salt water.
124. Camera manufacturers are more interesting in selling you new equipment than they are in improving your artwork.
125. The worst new camera you can purchase today is far better than the best camera Edward Weston ever owned. And he did okay, didn't he?
126. If you want to be a fine art photographer, it is more important that you read Gombrich's *The Story of Art* than it is that you read Weston's *Daybooks*.
127. The vast majority of us know more images from books than we do from viewing original prints in museums or galleries. Does that mean that books are the true medium of photography?
128. No one will ever look at your photographs and be able to tell which camera or lens you used.

129. Social media offers an innovative and massive opportunity to get your work seen. It also applies subtle but powerful pressure on everyone to conform. Thumbs up, thumbs down is not a useful way to explore your art life.
130. Bill Jay once stated that he thought there were only about 2,000 collectors of photography in the world. I'm pretty sure he was an optimist.
131. iPhones will be either a great advancement in photography or the death of photography. At this point, we still can't tell which.
132. What you see is far less important than how you *respond* to what you see.
133. Parkinson's Law applies to photography, too, especially when it comes to hard drives and memory cards. The files expand to fill the available space.
134. It's said that avid golfers can remember every shot they've ever taken. It's the same with photographers. That said, those "capture stories" have no ability to improve your images.
135. When you are out in the world exploring, you cannot make a photograph if the camera is at home in the closet.
136. In the gelatin silver darkroom, it took ten years to gain reasonable control of the craft. That is accomplished now in a weekend or two by today's digital mavens. Seriously.
137. At first, photography feels like a proactive acquisition activity. If you pay attention, you will come to know that it is more a matter of humbly receiving gifts.
138. Complicated processing might make more visually stunning photographs, but that's no guarantee it will make better artwork.
139. It is possible to make an interesting photograph of anything. ANYTHING. I guarantee you that someone, somewhere has made a great photograph of something you gave up on long ago. Hopefully, you find this inspiring.
140. Some of the photographs I was proud of in my earlier years have not worn well with the passing decades. The same can be said of some of the photographers who were my heroes back then.

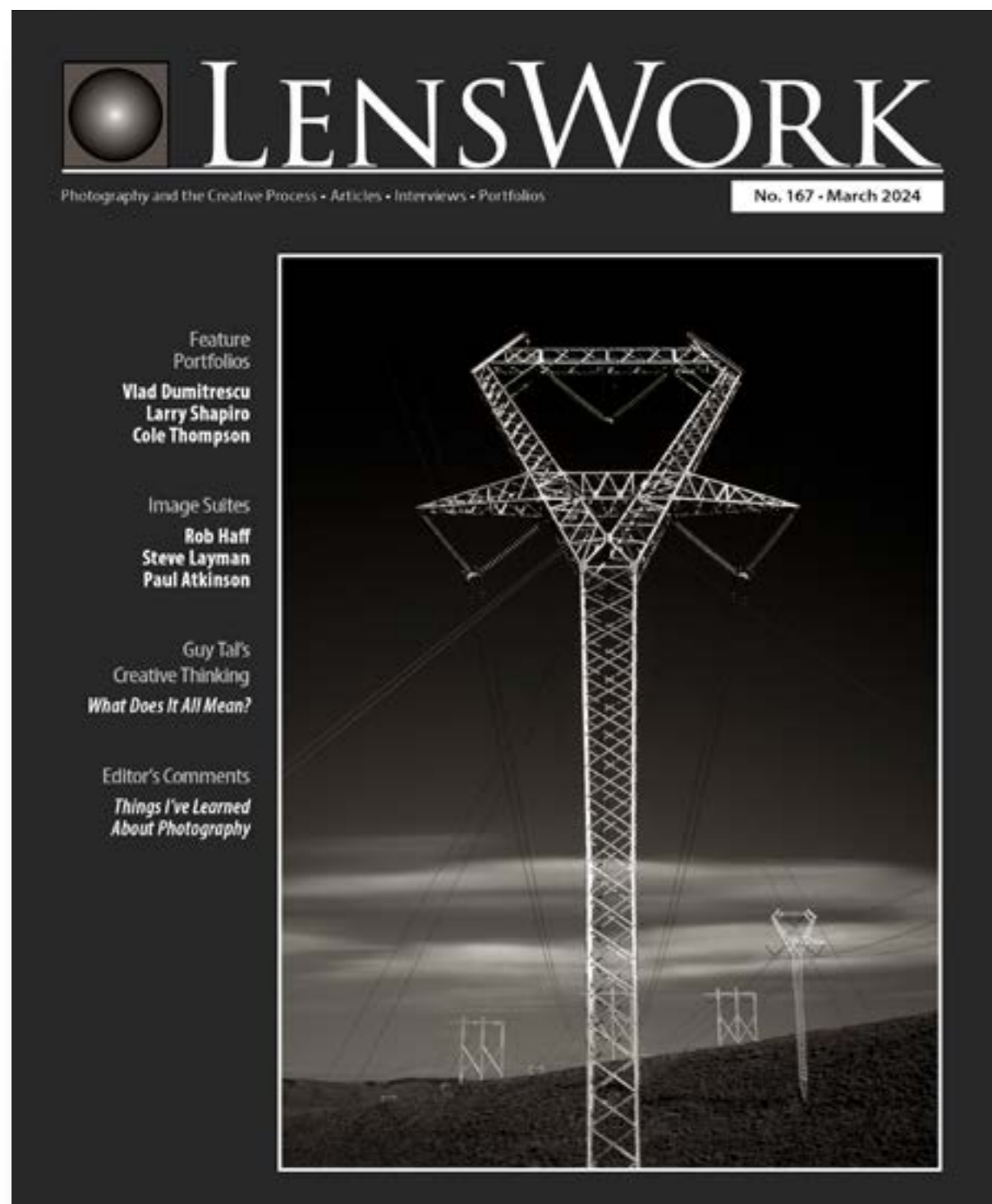
141. First opinions can be spot on, but that is the exception. After I've lived with a new photograph for a while, I invariably see things in it that I missed at first printing.
142. Never announce what you are "going to do." Wait until you've completed it and then share it with the world.
143. I once heard a photographer brag that he was true to the craft and still doing work at age 60 like he did in his twenties. I felt sorry for him.
144. One of the best ways to become visually inspired is to close your eyes and listen to music.
145. The magic that makes a great photograph does not come from the great subject. It comes from the heart of a great photographer. A trip to photograph in Yosemite will result in bad photographs if you bring with you blind eyes and a closed heart.
146. A successful photograph is one that changes you, even if just a tiny bit.
147. It's so odd that we are encouraged to be creative and innovative in every aspect of photography except the presentation of our prints in bevel-cut, white, cotton rag mat board. Violate that standard and you will be scoffed at.
148. In my youth, I would run around frenetically seeking photographs. Now, I find it much more productive to sit and let the photographs come to me. Is this an age-related thing, or a mature strategy for engaging the world?
149. Another word for artist is *seer*—in both the mystical and biological senses of the word.
150. Minor White said that you haven't really seen a photograph unless you have looked at it for 30 minutes. I might disagree with his math, but his concept is absolutely true.
151. Physically handling and touching a photograph adds to the experience in ways that cannot be accomplished visually.
152. If photography is merely a memory aid, it is a poor medium indeed. If it is an encouragement to look and feel more deeply, it is a gift from the gods.

153. The reason to limit your editions is not a monetary one; the reason to limit your editions is so that you won't become bogged down with repetitive drudgery of reliving the same experience over and over again.
154. You walk past hundreds of trees that you don't photograph until you find one that captures your attention. Why? What is it about that particular tree that calls out to you to photograph it? Answering that question is at the heart of being an artist.
155. The best equipment is that which imposes the fewest barriers between you and your intended photograph.
156. From time to time, leave the camera behind, close your eyes, let the sun shine on your face. That sunshine is what makes photography possible. That sunshine is what makes *life* possible. Write your life with that sunshine. *Lux Vita, Photos-graphie.*
157. Photograph and engage life as though it is very short. It is — as you will learn when you see how quickly the next ten years goes by.
158. And remember, in the cosmic scale of things, photography is not that important.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bruce", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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Here's a Thought . . .

Short Commentaries with snippets, fragments, morsels, and tidbits from Brooks' fertile (and sometimes swiss-cheesy) brain.

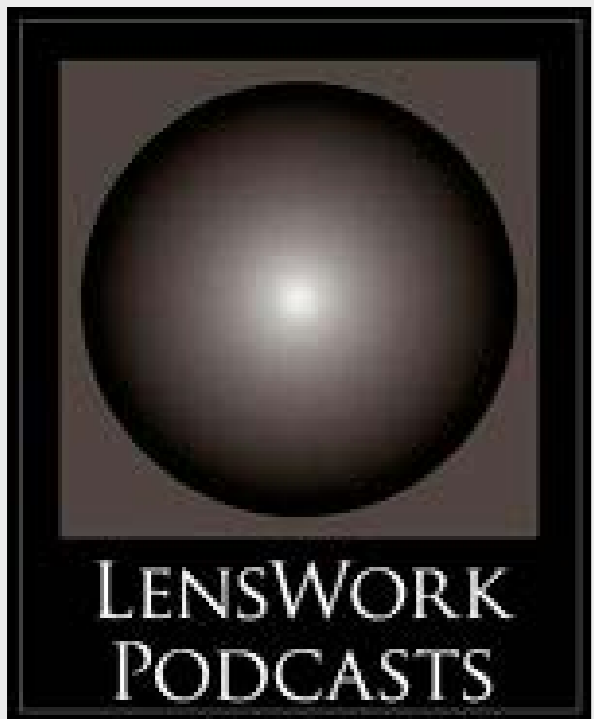
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A new "failure" each Mon-Fri. The learning never stops. This is a series about also-rans (i.e., failures). With each, lessons worth sharing.

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Photography and the Creative Process

(Podcast) Our long-running podcast channel *On Photography and the Creative Process*. An in-depth look at photography and the art life.

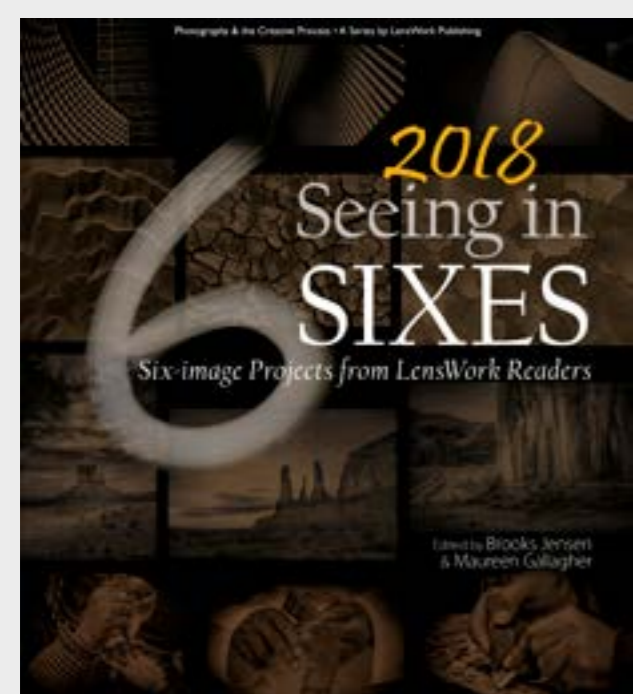
New post every Monday



Looking at Images

Commentary on images that have appeared in *LensWork*. An extension of Brooks' popular book by the same title, now long out of print.

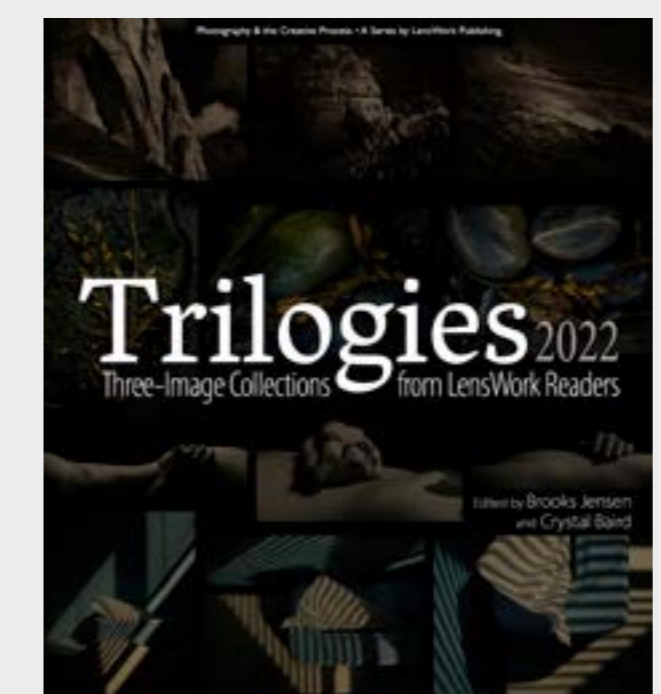
New post every Tuesday



Seeing in SIXES Commentaries

In this new channel for 2024, we present an entire 6-image spread along with audio commentary by Brooks Jensen. So much to learn about multi-image projects and our *Seeing in SIXES* books.

New post every Wednesday



Trilogies 2022 Commentaries

Every three-image project in *Trilogies 2022* offers clues to how to make small project succeed. In this channel Brooks will discuss each of the 125 "trilogies" for what they can offer when thinking about groups of images.

New post every Thursday



Backstories - Evolution of an Image

From RAW capture to publication. A "behind the scenes" look at processing, strategies, principles, methods, media, editing and sequencing, and other topics pertaining to multiple-image projects.

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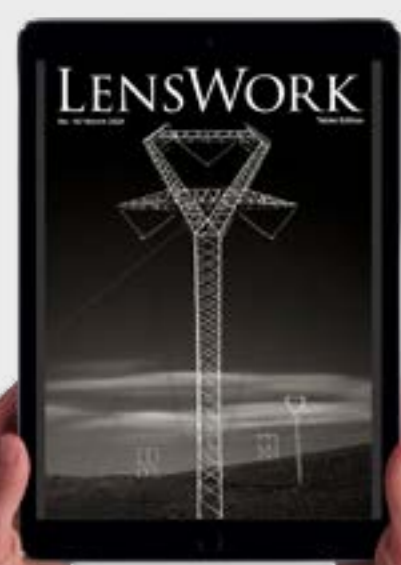


Finding the Picture

The world is a chaotic place. Finding a picture in all that chaos can be fun — and challenging.

New post every Friday

Digital Editions Membership Downloadables



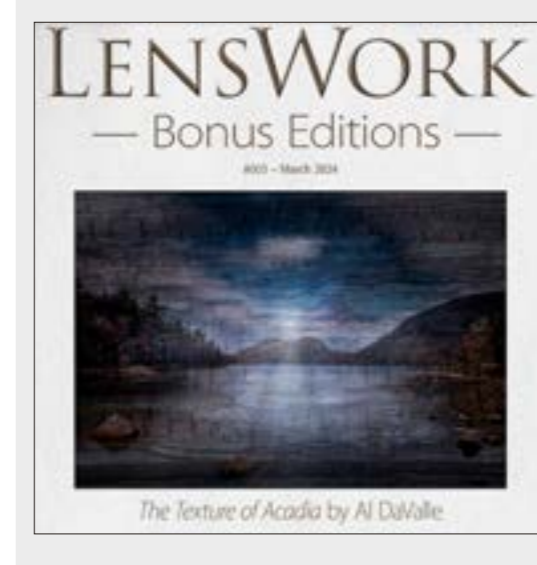
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THE DANCING BEARS



Vlad Dumitrescu

Additional images from this project not seen here in the tablet edition of *LensWork*, are included in the downloadable PDF *LensWork Extended*, available to all members of *LensWork Online* or individual purchase from shop.lenswork.com.

Vlad Dumitrescu has also been published in *LensWork* #152, #158 and #162.

Other projects and images plus the photographer's bio/contact info can be found online at:
vladdumitrescu.ro ♦ adresa_la@yahoo.com





A tradition with its origins in the pre-Cestian period, takes place every year in northern Romania during the New Year. Hundreds of people, dressed in bear furs, march through towns and villages, knock on people's doors, to wish them health and luck in the new year.









































Vlad Dumitrescu

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The Ellipse



Francesco Borromini's 17th-century staircase in the Palazzo Barberini in Rome stands as a masterpiece of Italian Baroque art. Famously referred to as "The Ellipse," it was built in an oval, or "helicoidal" design, meaning that it follows the principle of turning around its rotational axis and slowly getting tighter and smaller as it rises, as opposed to the more traditional circular design. Why did I return again and again to photograph this stairwell? It sounds ridiculously simple. It was for its elegance and beauty, and because I have simply never seen anything else like it. In this world of chaos, it is absolute perfection.

An *Image Suite* by Rob Haff















Old Vine



*Old vine muscadine,
Too many threads to unwind,
Oh, how sweet the wine.*

An *Image Suite* by Steve Layman

www.flickr.com/photos/29184698@N08/ ♦ meerkat@bellsouth.net























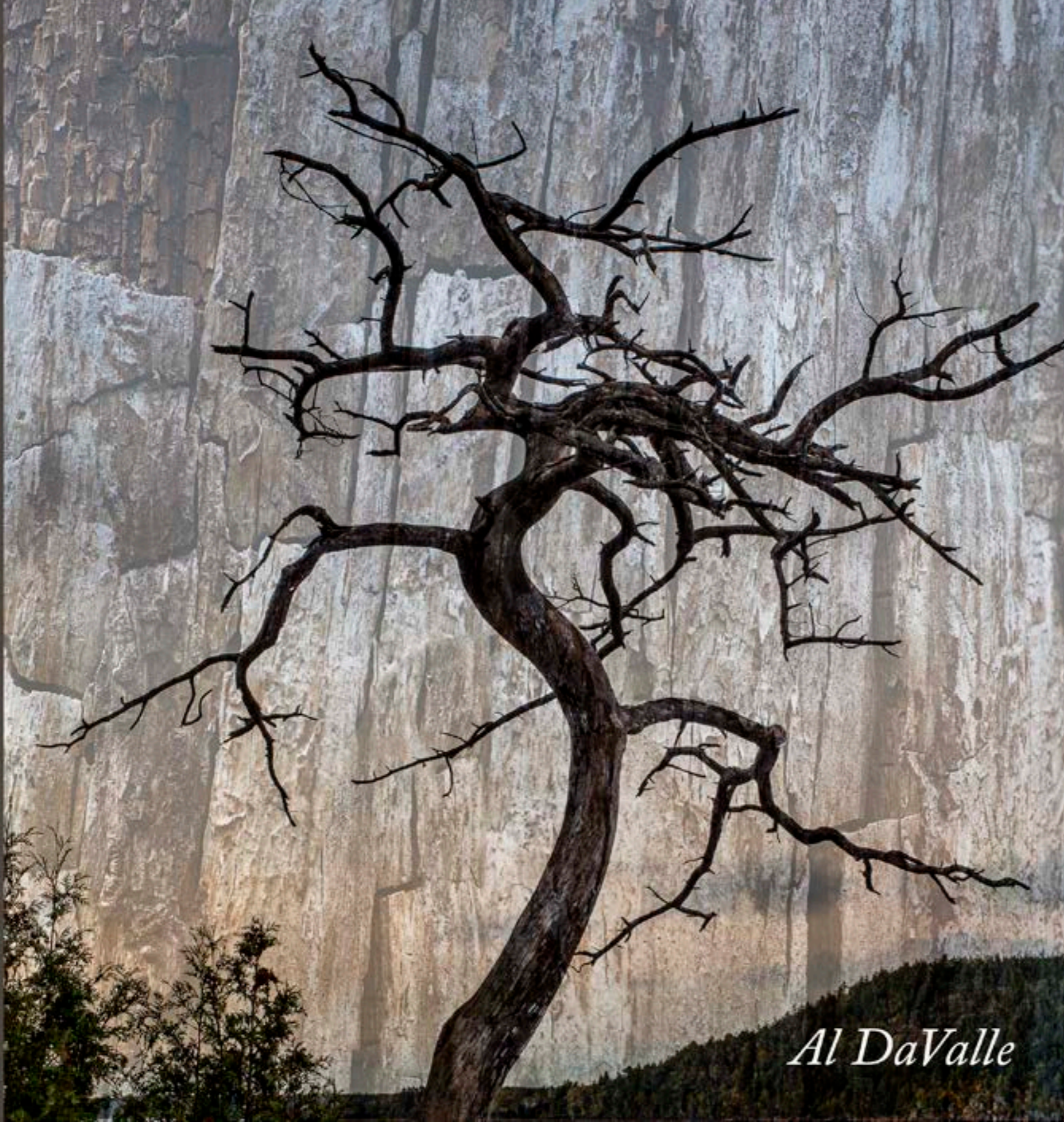
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THE TEXTURE OF ACADIA

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SERIES

21



Mailing soon!

Monograph #21

The Texture of Acadia by Al DaValle

Acadia draws us in from the moment we set our eyes on its granite shore, serene lakes and ponds and pristine forests. Our heart-beat slows as we drive the small bridge across the Narrows onto Mount Desert Island, the primary home of Acadia National Park.

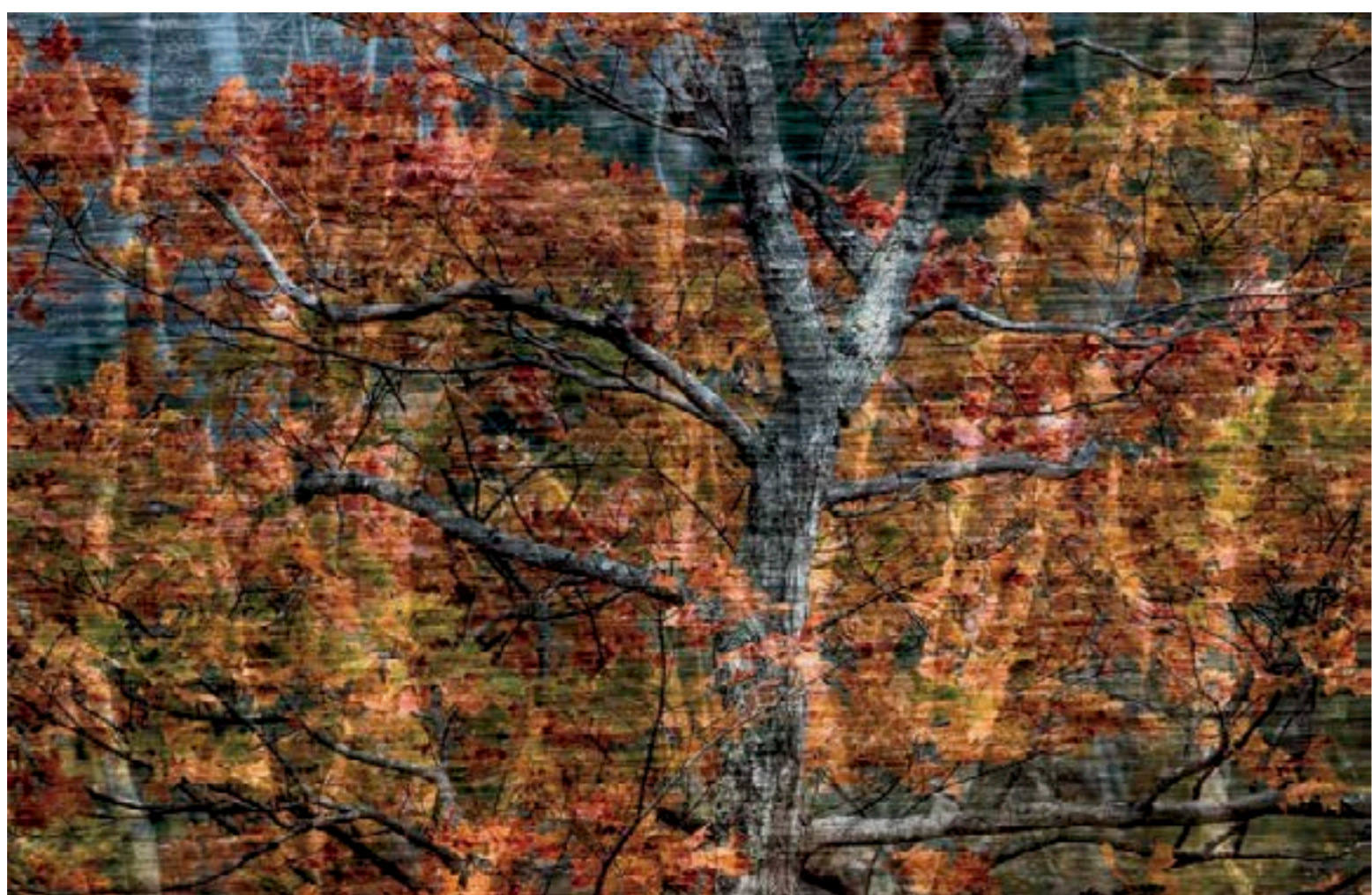
~ From the Artist Statement by Al DaValle



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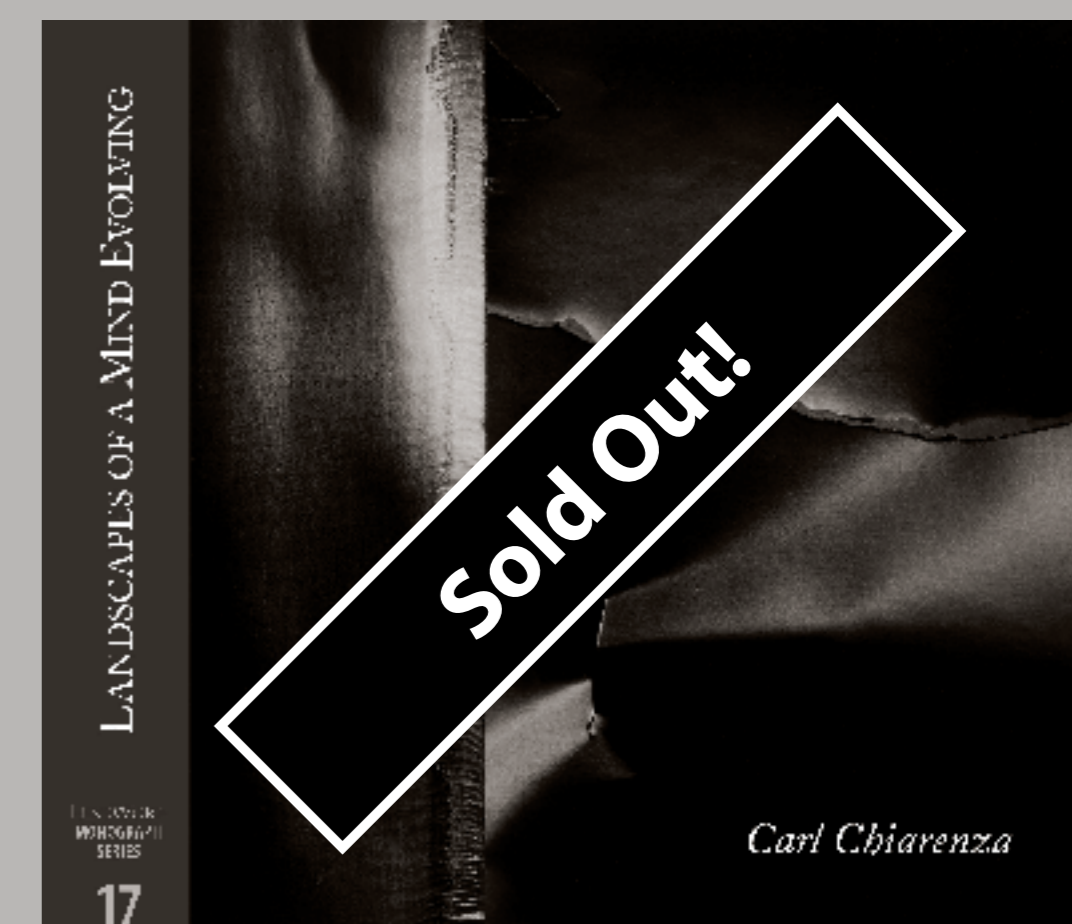
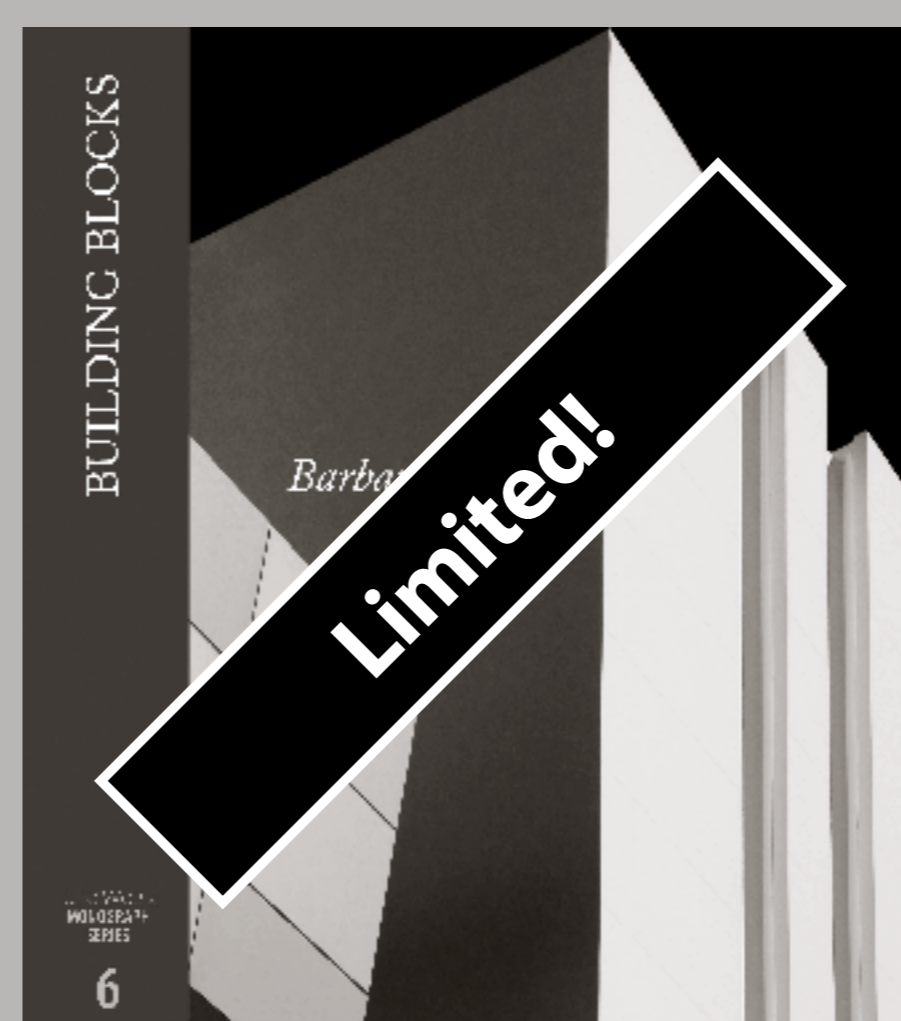
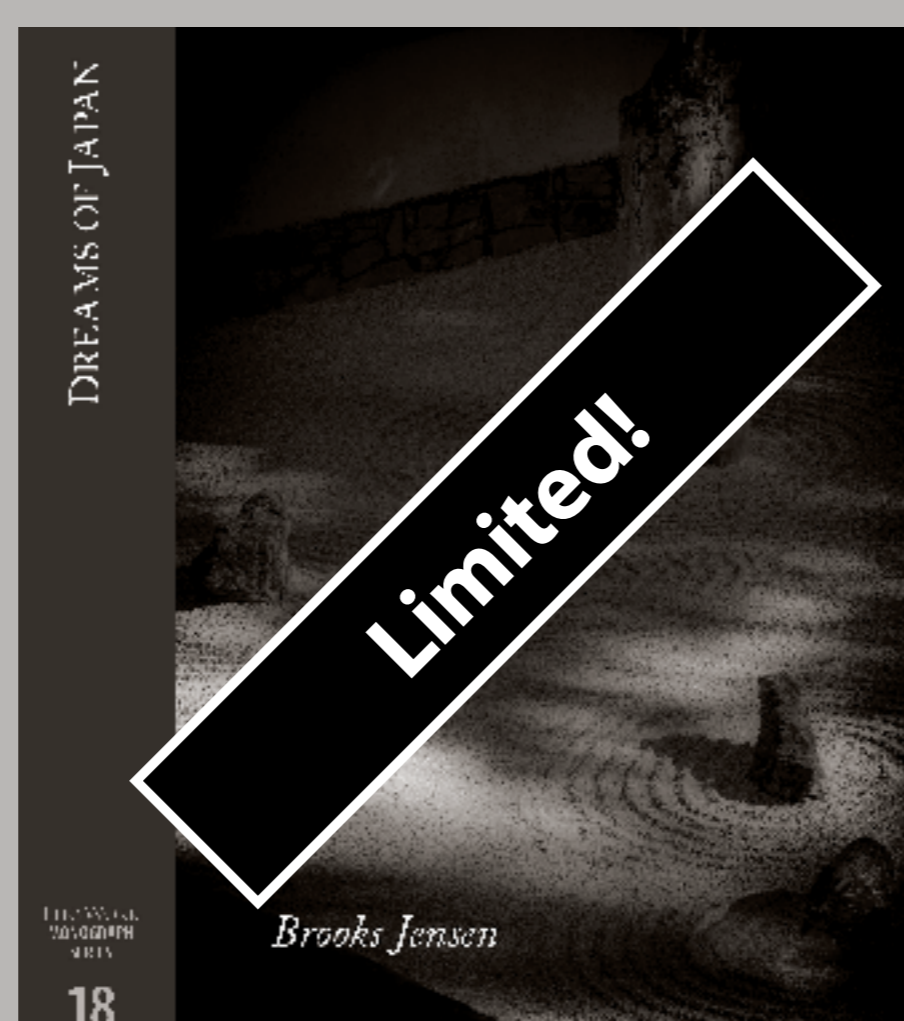
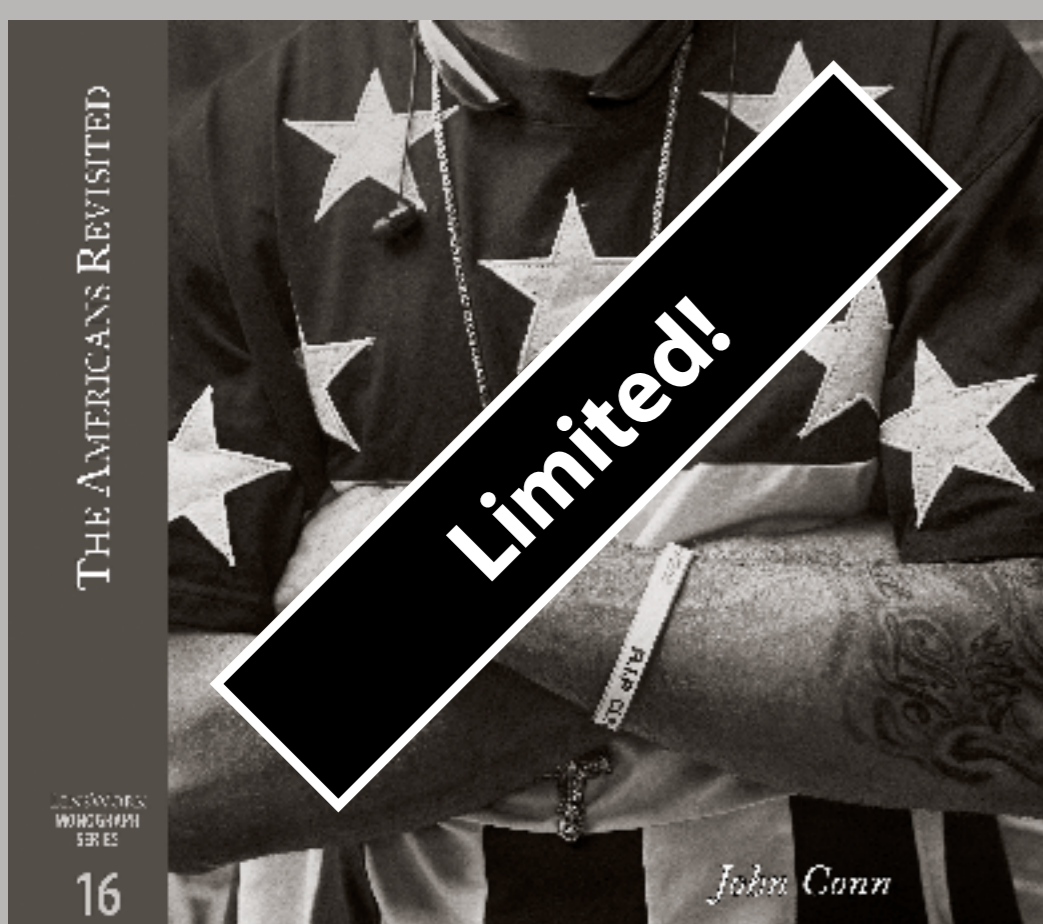
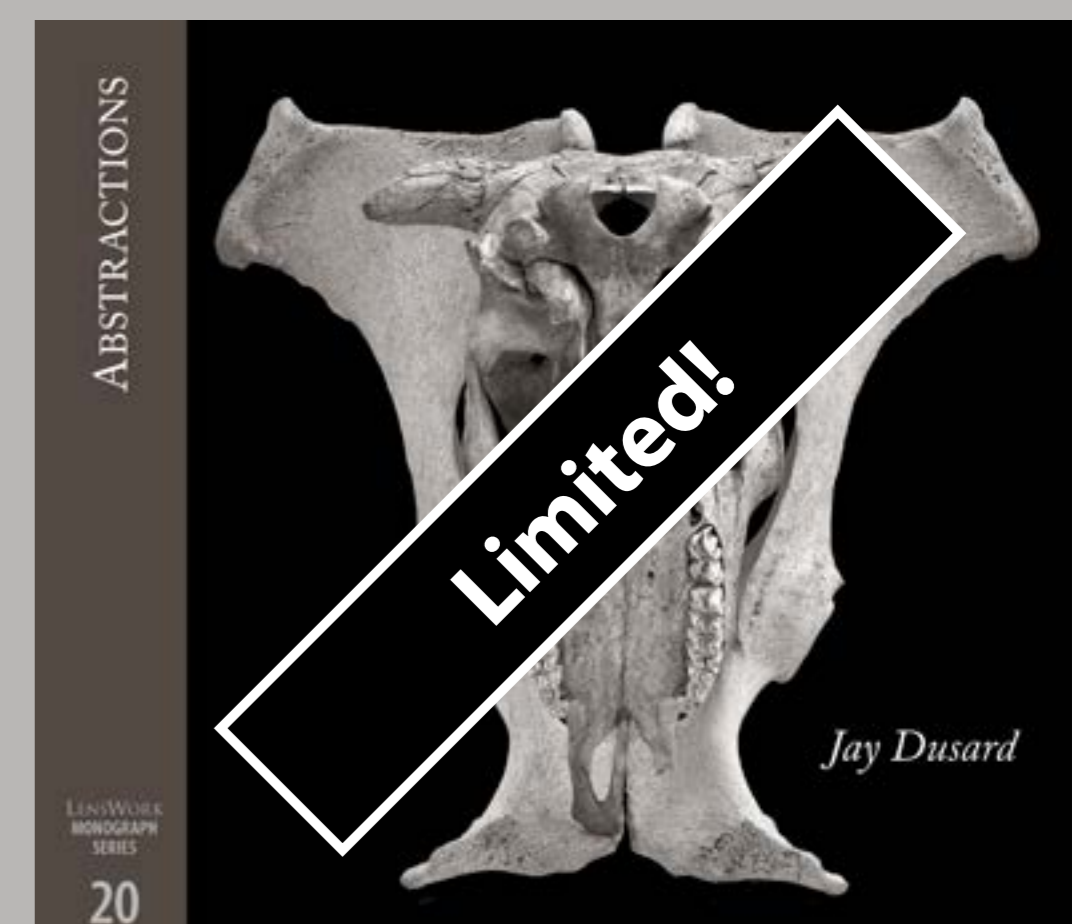
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RECONSTRUCTIONS



Larry Shapiro

Additional images from this project not seen here in the tablet edition of *LensWork*, are included in the downloadable PDF *LensWork Extended*, available to all members of *LensWork Online* or individual purchase from shop.lenswork.com.

This is Larry Shapiro's first appearance in *LensWork*.

Other projects and images plus the photographer's bio/contact info can be found online at:

www.larryshapirophoto.com ♦ larryshapirophoto.com





Pink House, Ocean Beach

*On a flight to New York, I was listening to a photo history podcast by Jeff Curto on the relationship between photography and painting. He referenced Picasso's early cubist painting *Les Femmes d'Alger*. A day later I was standing before this large painting at the Museum of Modern Art thinking how I could use cubism in my photography. How do you look at a building? From the front or the sides, perhaps from the back. Separate images of each view might give the viewer a sense of the experience of being there. I wondered if like the Cubist painters, could one image made up of many parts give the viewer a sense of what I saw when I stood before the structure.*



Carmelite monasterey, Santa Clara



Paulsen House, San Diego



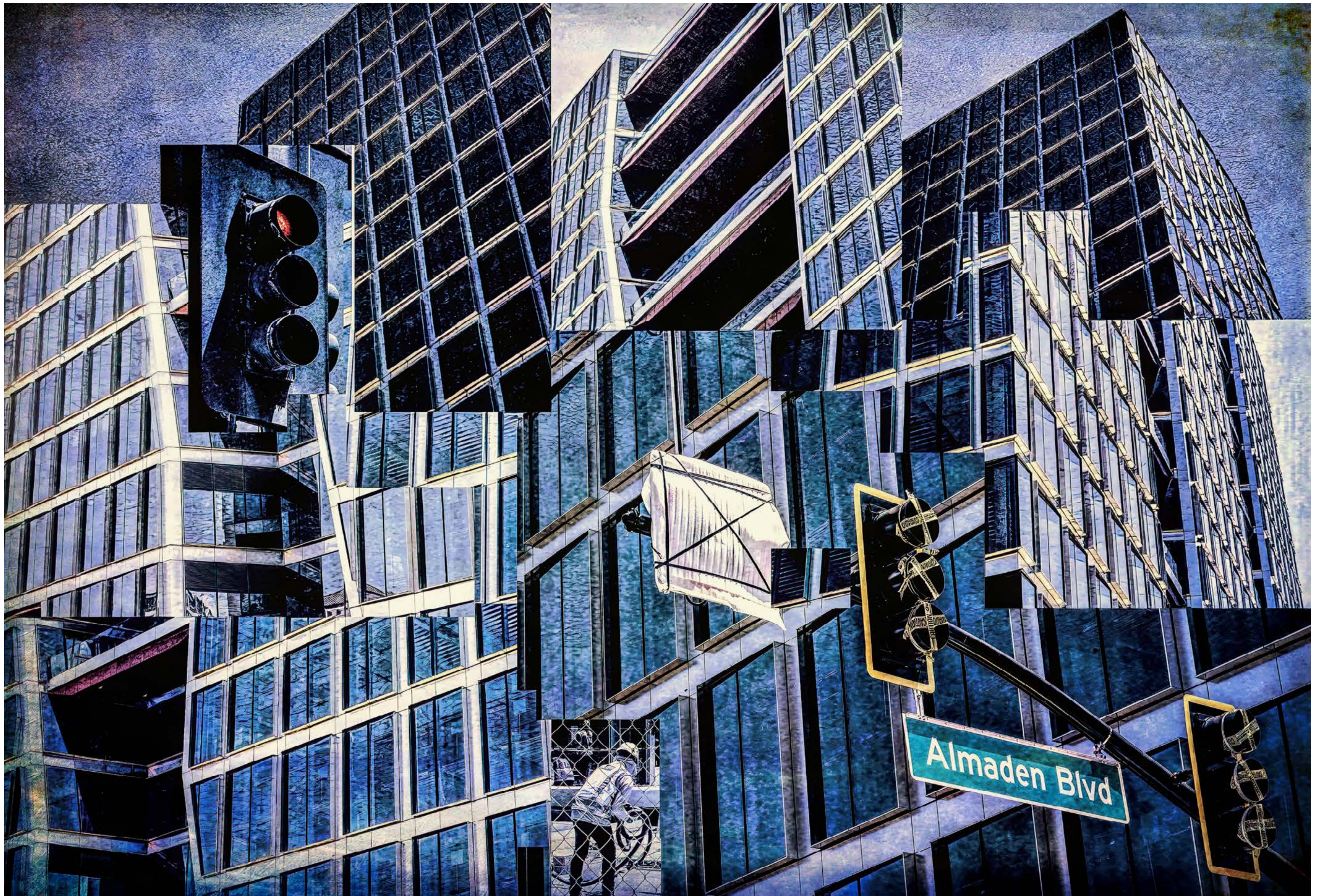
Southern Pacific station, San Jose



Sikh Temple, San Jose



Storm King Museum



Almaden Blvd, San Jose



Zoom building, San Jose



Winchester House



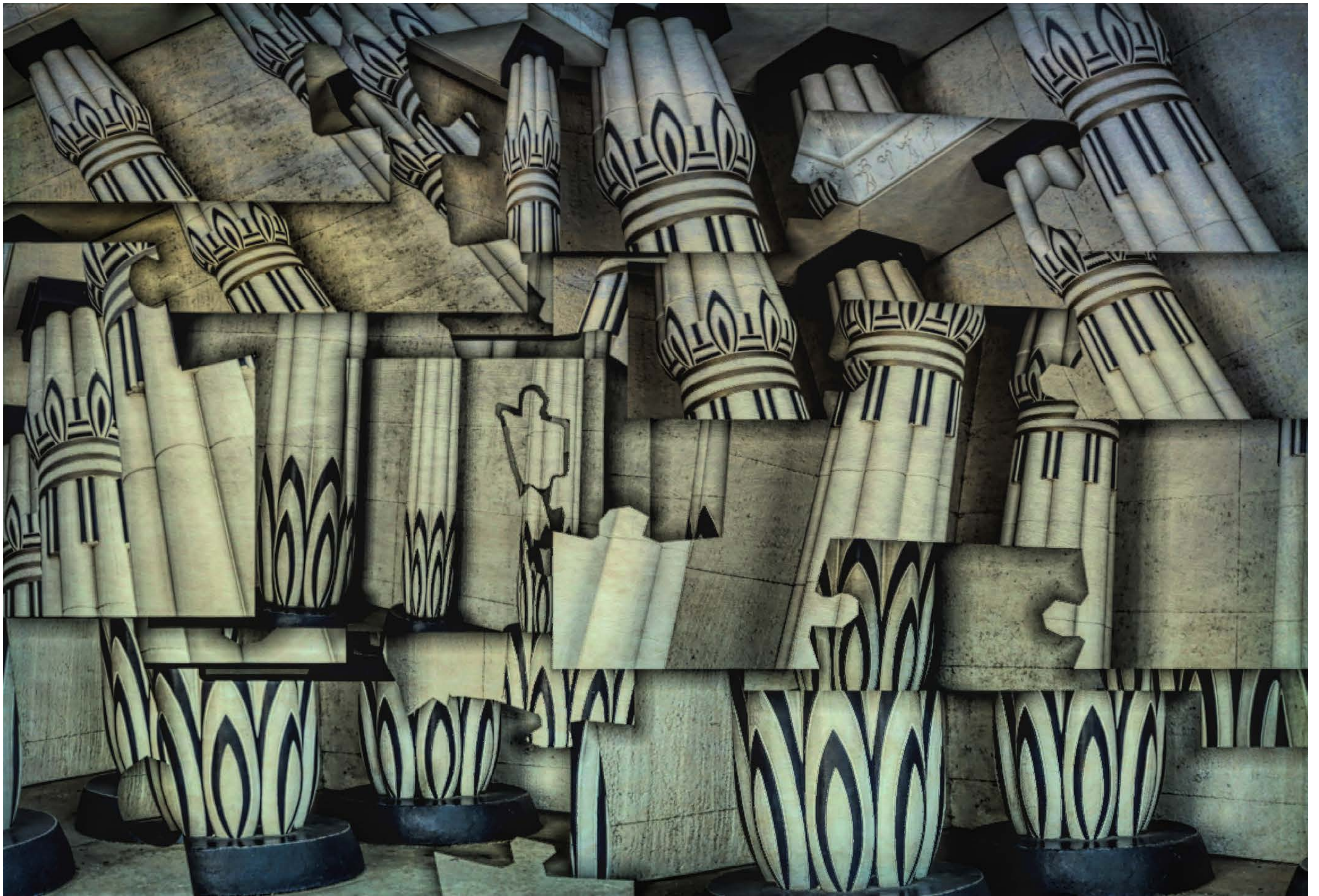
New Jersey Central Terminal



The great insane asylum, Agnews State Hospital



Five Wounds Church, San Jose



Rosicrucian Egyptian Musuem, San Jose



Pulgas Water Temple, San Mateo

Larry Shapiro

www.larryshapirophoto.com

larryshapirophoto.com

Yellow Dog Village



All that remain today of the century-old mining company housing are two short streets lined with duplexes and a few single-family homes, which have stood empty for a decade or more. Time has peeled back layers of paint and wallpaper, and exposed the plaster and lath bones. In addition to the antiquated construction materials and floor plans, what I found fascinating were the things left behind.

An *Image Suite* by Paul Atkinson







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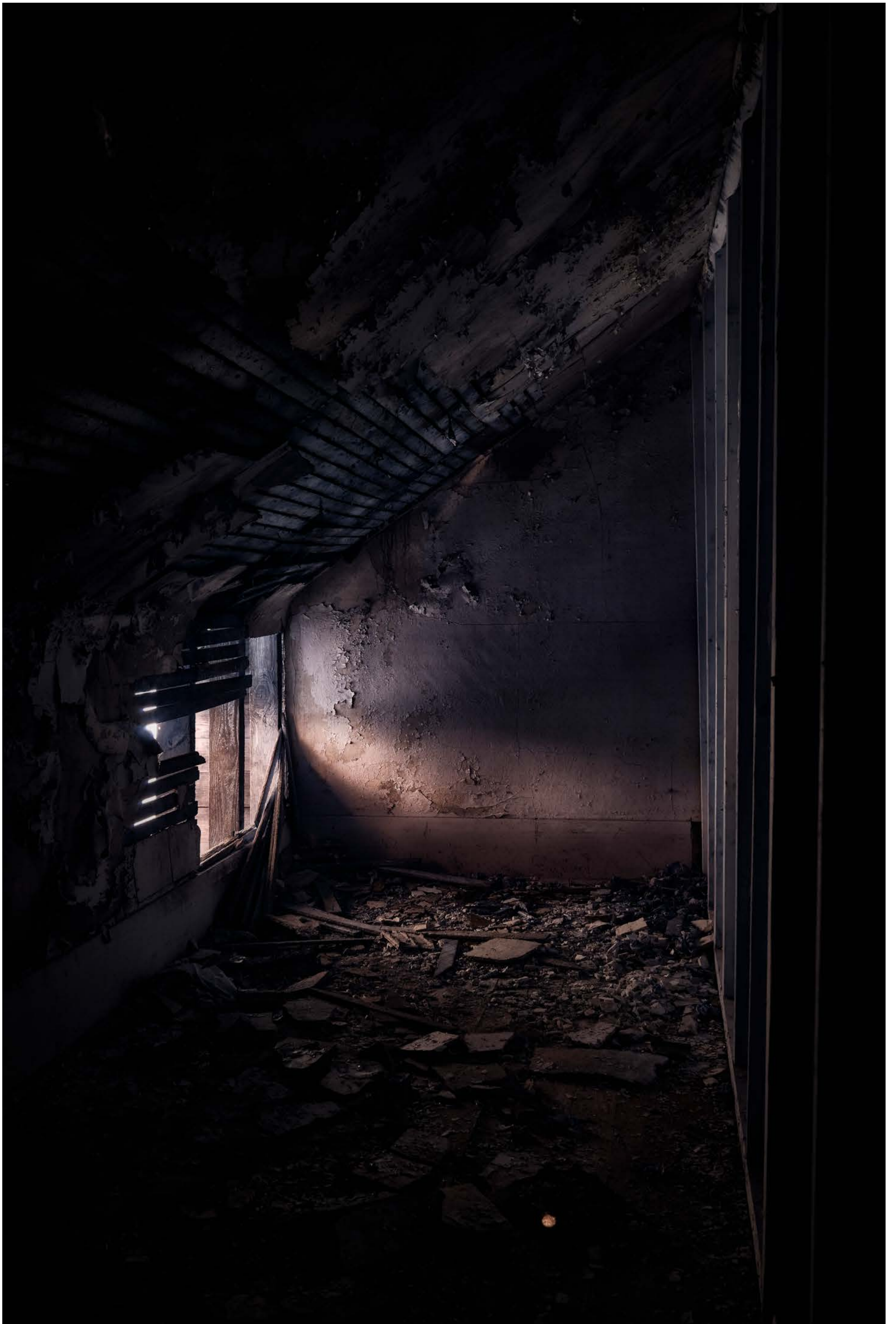
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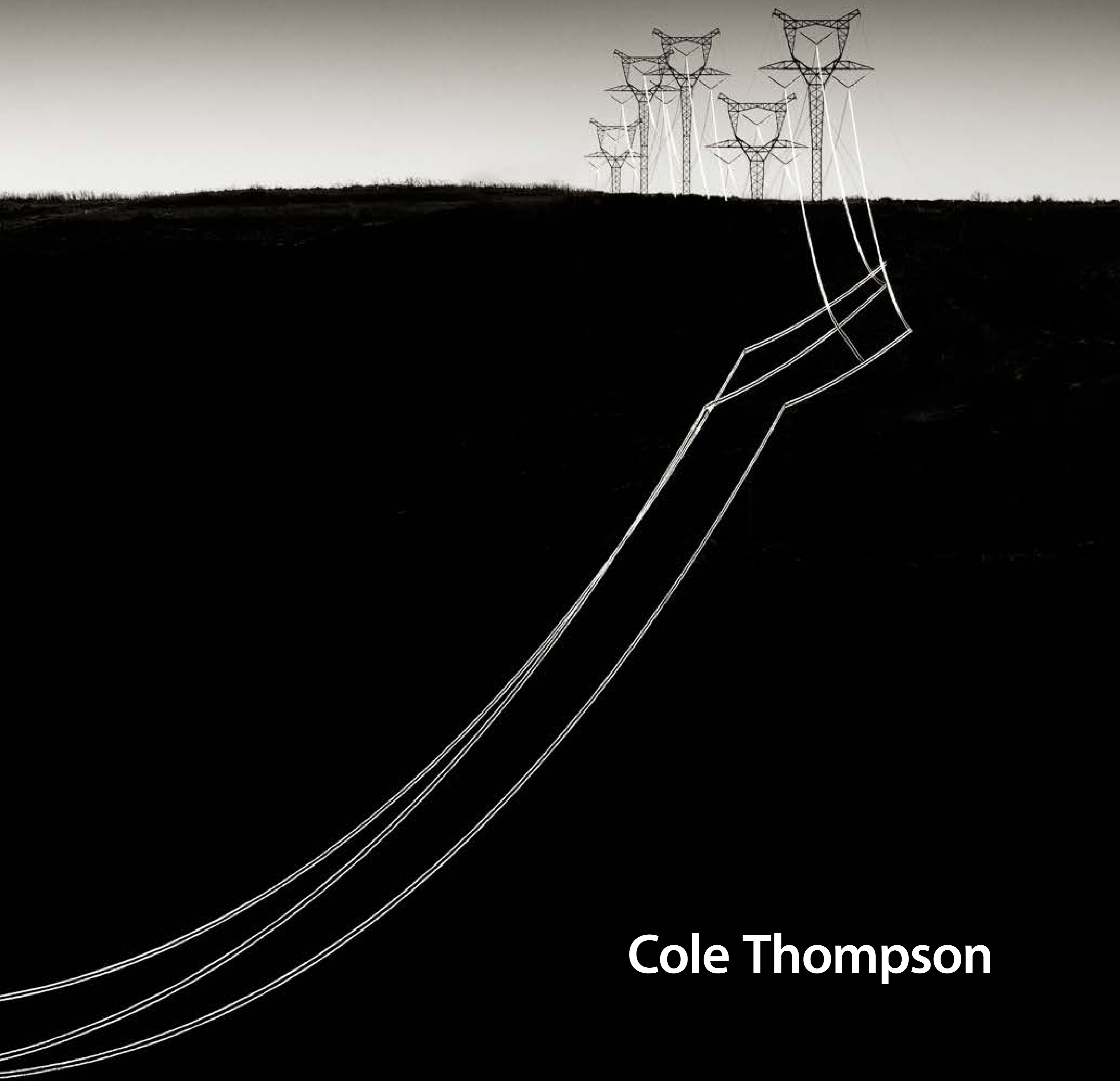








POWERLINES



Cole Thompson



Additional images from this project not seen here in the tablet edition of *LensWork*, are included in the downloadable PDF *LensWork Extended*, available to all members of *LensWork Online* or individual purchase from shop.lenswork.com.

Cole Thompson has also been published in *LensWork* #81, #102, #122, #127, #132 and #147.

Other projects and images plus the photographer's bio/contact info can be found online at:
coletompsonphotography.com ♦ thompsoncd@fastmail.fm



As I was driving along in western Idaho near sunset, and saw the light reflecting off of these towers, I decided that I had to pursue this as a series. Powerlines No. 10 (above) is the image that pushed me to this conclusion. Up until that moment, I had dabbled at creating Powerline images, but never pursued it as a project.

I put this project off for over 30 years because I didn't think it a "proper" fine art subject. But then I realized that if I had a passion for the subject, then it is the proper project for me to pursue. And who's to say what fine art is anyway? I don't even know what that means!









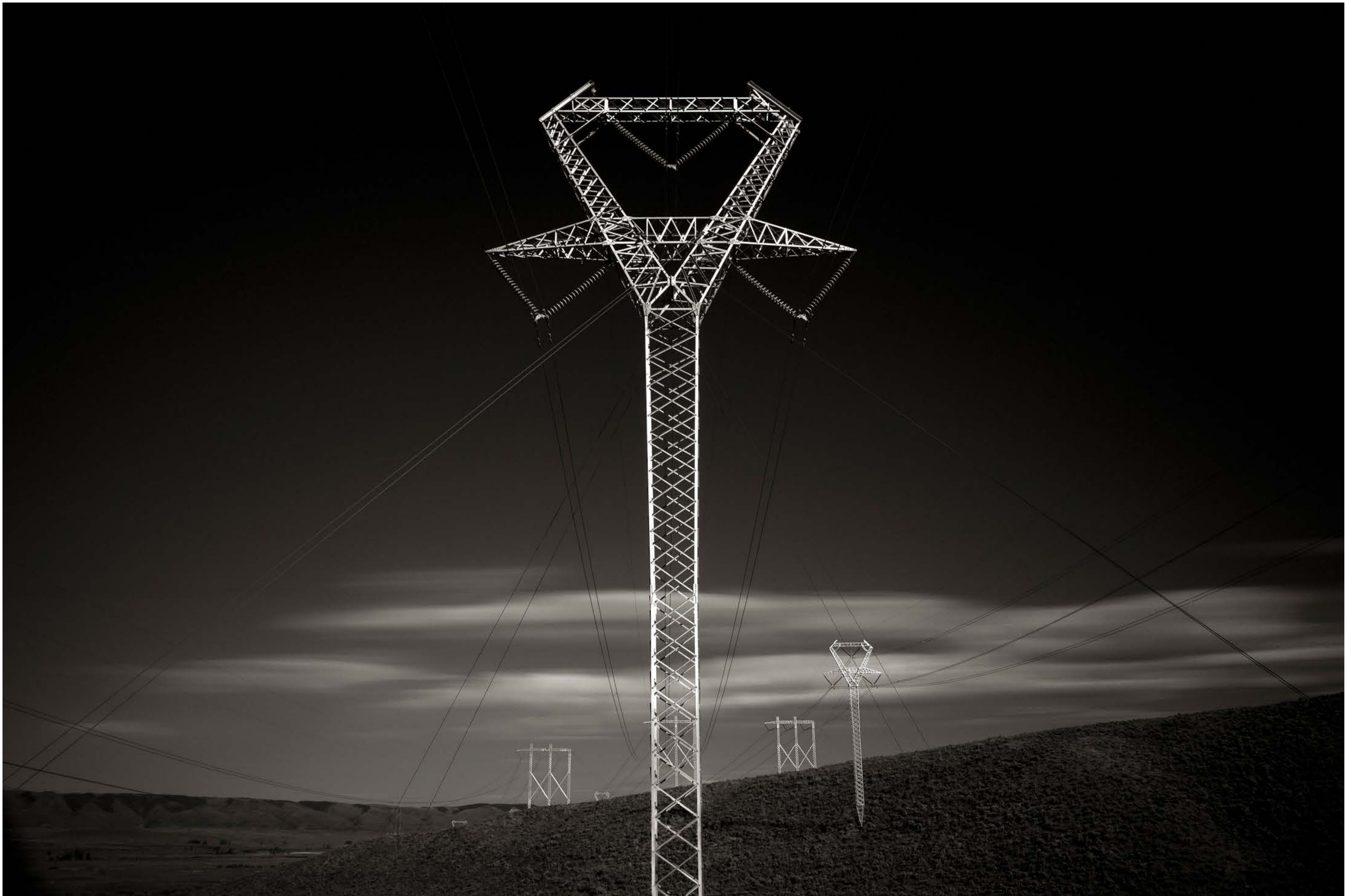


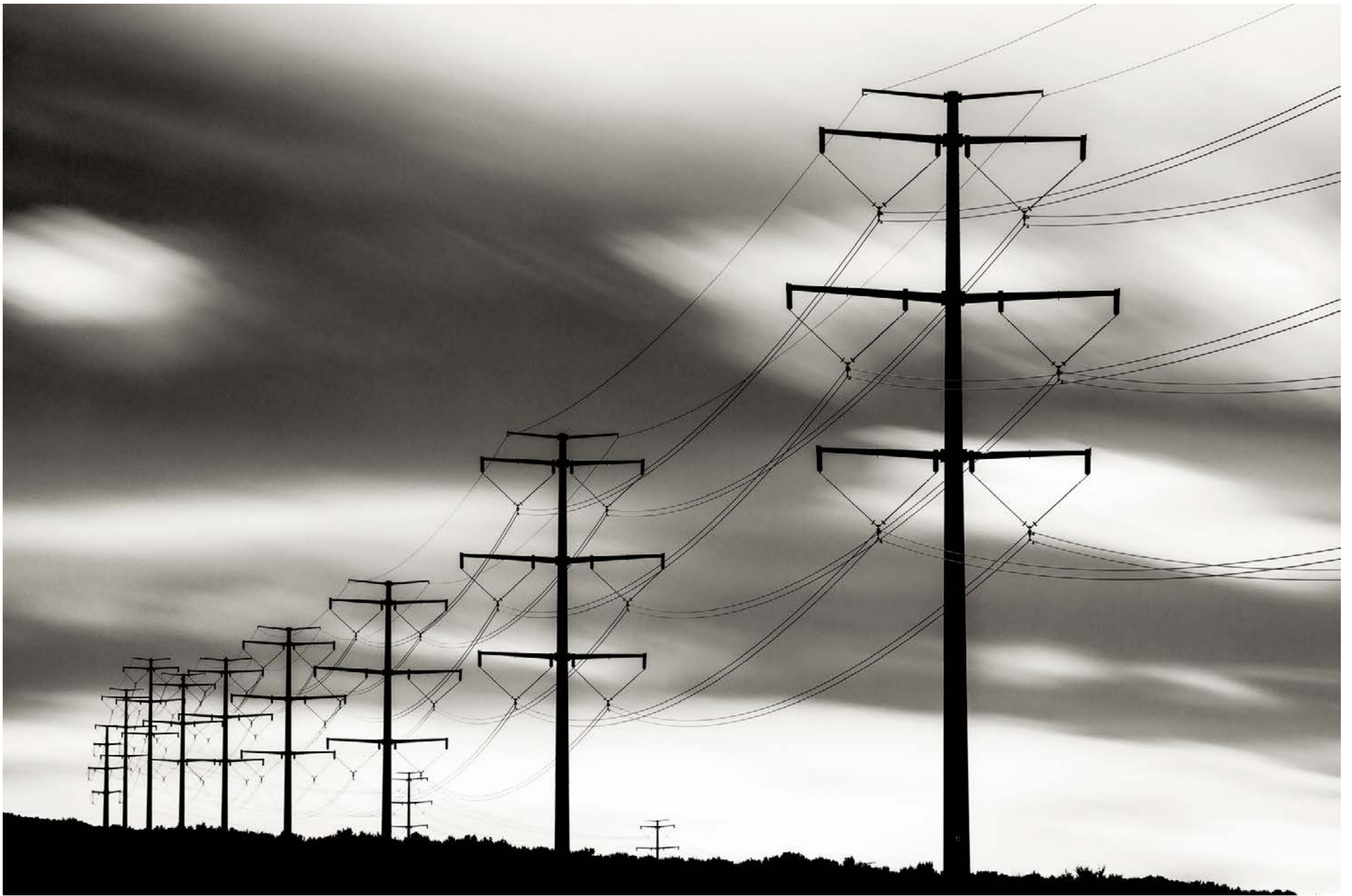
















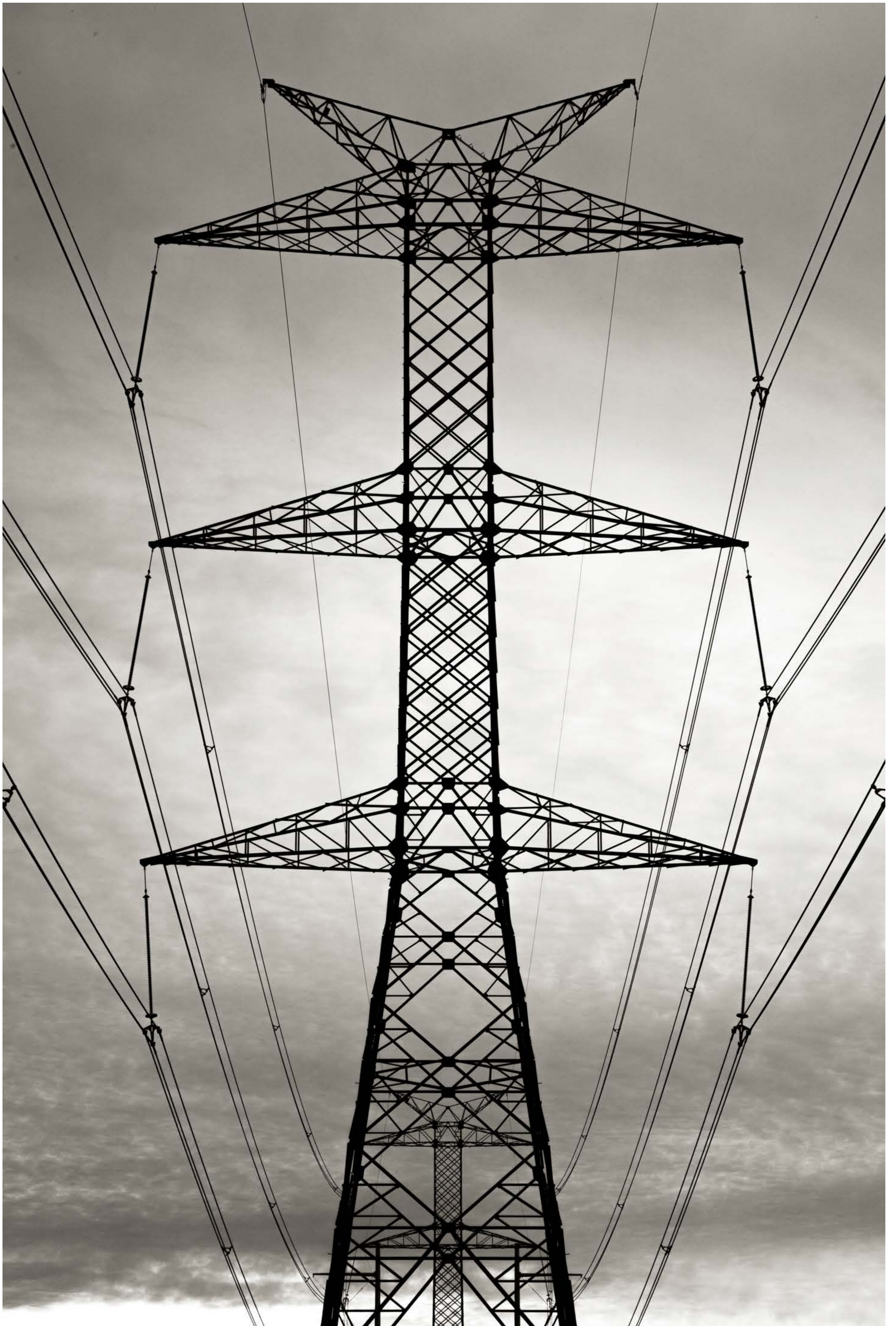














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Creative Thinking WITH GUY TAL



What Does It All Mean?

So it is with every true work of art: each is susceptible of infinite interpretation, as though there were an infinity of intentions within it, yet we cannot at all tell whether this infinity lay in the artist himself or whether it resides solely in the artwork. On the other hand, in a product that merely simulates the character of a work of art, intention and rule lie on the surface and appear so limited and bounded that the product is nothing other than a faithful impression of the conscious activity of the artist and is altogether merely an object for reflection, but not for intuition.

~ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling

Oscar Wilde wrote, "The work of art is to dominate the spectator: the spectator is not to dominate the work of art. The spectator is to be receptive. He is to be the violin on which the master is to play." Similarly, Edward Weston expressed what may seem obvious to many of us who consider ourselves as fine-art photographers when he wrote, "In common with other artists the photographer wants his finished print to convey to others *his own* response to his subject" (my italics).

For many of us, self-expression — the desire to imbue our creations with specific meanings of our own making — is at the core of what we do. We relish seeking personal, creative ways to convey through our images certain feelings and moods — to learn, discover, and master the language of visual expression: the use of colors, tones, lines, shapes, and other visual cues composed such

that we may, in the words of Minor White, “direct the viewer into a *specific and known* feeling, state or place within himself” (again, my italics). We aim to prompt in our viewers feelings that are, to use Alfred Stieglitz’s term, *equivalent* with our own. Often, when we solicit critique of our work, we ask of our viewers specifically to assess whether we have succeeded in conveying our intended meaning: whether our images rise to the level of art which serves as, in the words of philosopher Arthur Danto, “embodied meaning.”

But do we really get to decide what meaning viewers will ultimately make of our creations? Is it even realistic to expect that we can control this meaning with any degree of specificity? And if we can, should we? Why impose on our viewers a meaning (which may not necessarily be as inspiring or relevant to them as it may be to us), rather than allow them to form their own?

In 1967, philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes argued that interpretation of texts (and by extension, of any creative product) should not be, in his words, “tyrannically centered on the author.” In an article titled, “The Death of the Author,” Barthes claimed that, as viewers or spectators, we should avoid trying to decipher the meaning of works based strictly on what we presume the intent of the author was (which may still be relevant in a historical sense but may not necessarily be useful or important to any given reader or spectator).

For most of my years as a “serious” fine-art photographer, I considered Stieglitz’s *equivalence* as the highest aim for photographic art. I found Barthes’s idea of ignoring the artist’s meaning and leaving it to viewers to decide for themselves a hard pill to swallow. I now believe he was correct. One reason for my change of heart is this: the meaning I experience arises from who I am and ensues from events, circumstances, personality traits, moods, and many other subjective factors that make me, me. It would be naïve of me to expect that the same stimuli — views, sensations, feelings — that inspire a given meaning in my own mind will necessarily have the same effect on another person. Perhaps this person may even derive greater value and enjoyment from interpreting my work in his or her own way.

The author, according to Barthes, is just a linguistic reference to the one who created the work. The author comes into being at the time of creation and is no longer relevant once the work is done. From that point on, the work — whether

a text, an image, or anything else — is given to others to make their own meaning from. In Barthes's words, "the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author." This may seem in conflict with the goal of personal expression, but in fact it is not.

Striving for personal expression may be every bit as powerful and personally rewarding to the creator, regardless of whether any viewer ultimately infers (or even cares about) the same meaning the creator intended to express. Ansel Adams described this sentiment well when commenting about his approach to equivalence. "I'm a total believer in the concept of the equivalent," Adams wrote, but then added, "I present the photograph as an equivalent of my response to this world which I wish to share with the spectator. But, I might add, only if it means anything to him. I hope it will mean something to him, but not necessarily just what it means to me."

What finally convinced me of the truth of Barthes's argument was an experience I had several years ago, listening to a piece of music on headphones while hiking in a favorite desert canyon. The music consumed me. After a while, the notes began to weave in my mind with other sensations: align with shapes and patterns in the landscape, accent lines and colors, even combine with the scents in the air and the feeling of the breeze on my skin to produce a rich and powerful multisensory experience.

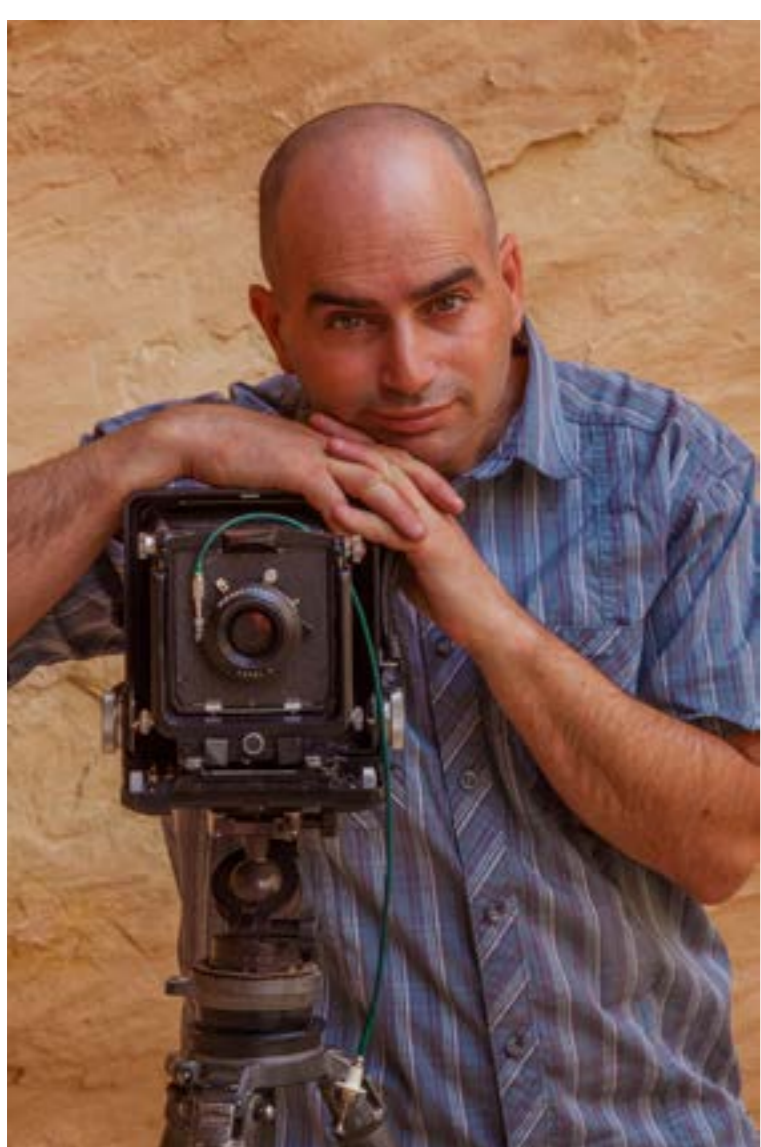
As it happened, the music was an overture written by Romantic composer Felix Mendelssohn, titled, *The Hebrides*. I have never been to the Hebrides islands — a landscape I know to be vastly different from the desert I know and love. The fact that Mendelssohn's music was inspired by his visit to the islands was entirely irrelevant to my own experience. Likewise, I often reveled in the beauty of artworks like Mozart's requiem or Michelangelo's Pieta despite not having any strong feelings for the religious references that inspired these creations.

Pablo Picasso asked, "How can you expect a beholder to experience my picture as I experienced it?" "A picture," Picasso wrote, "comes to me a long time beforehand; who knows how long a time beforehand, I sensed, saw, and painted it and yet the next day even I do not understand what I have done. How can anyone penetrate my dreams, my instincts, my desires, my thought,

which have taken a long time to fashion themselves and come to the surface, above all to grasp what I put there, perhaps involuntary.”

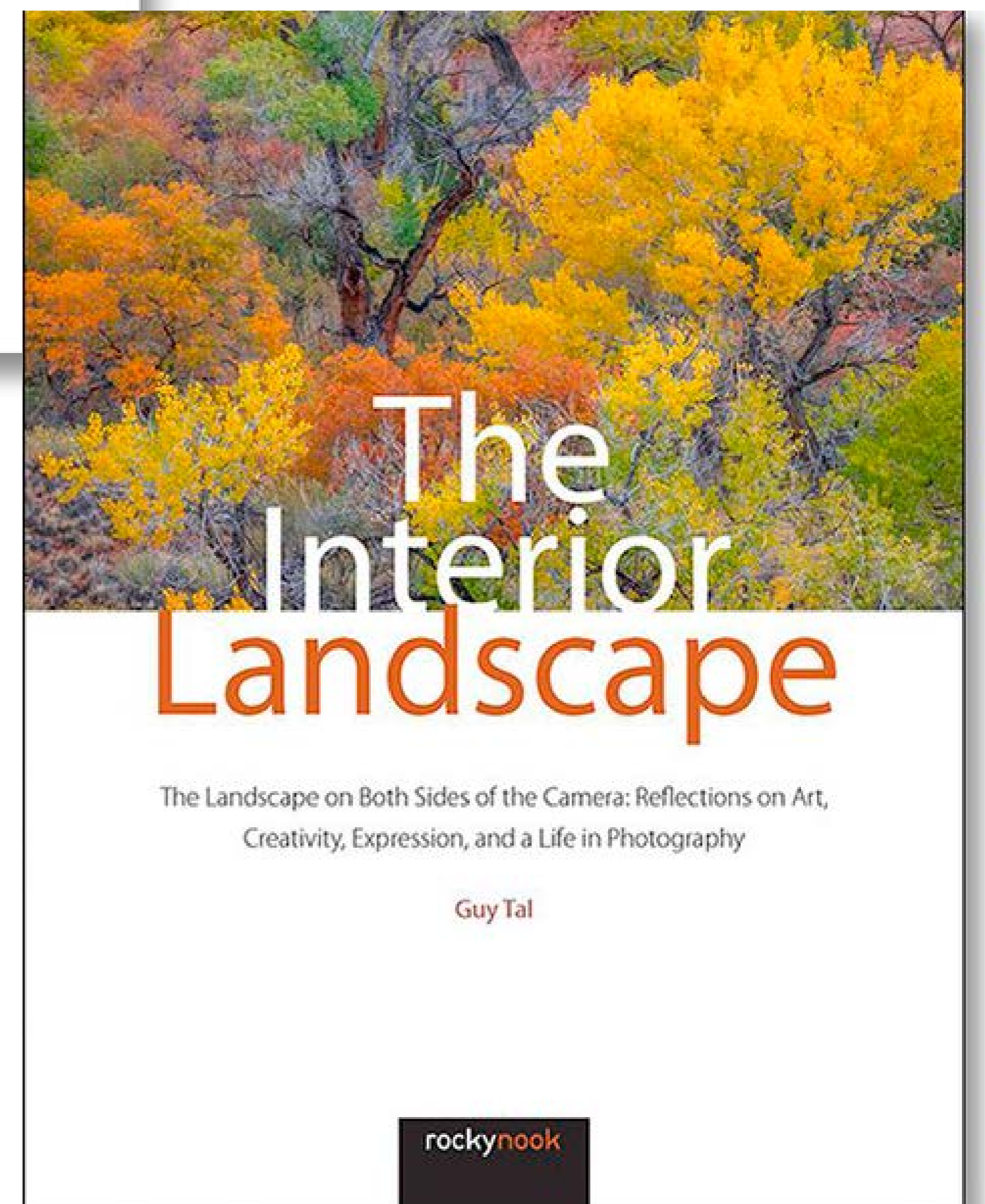
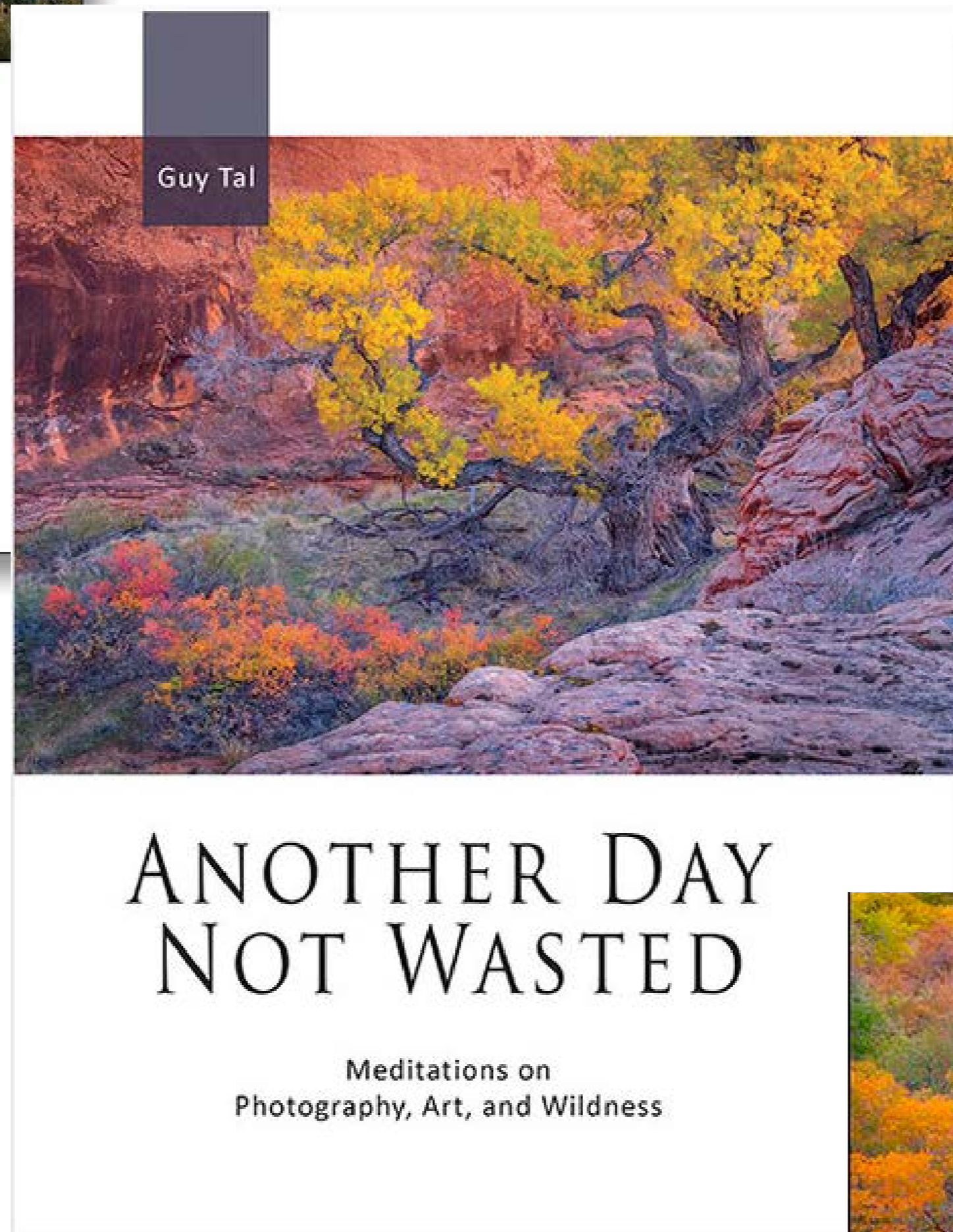
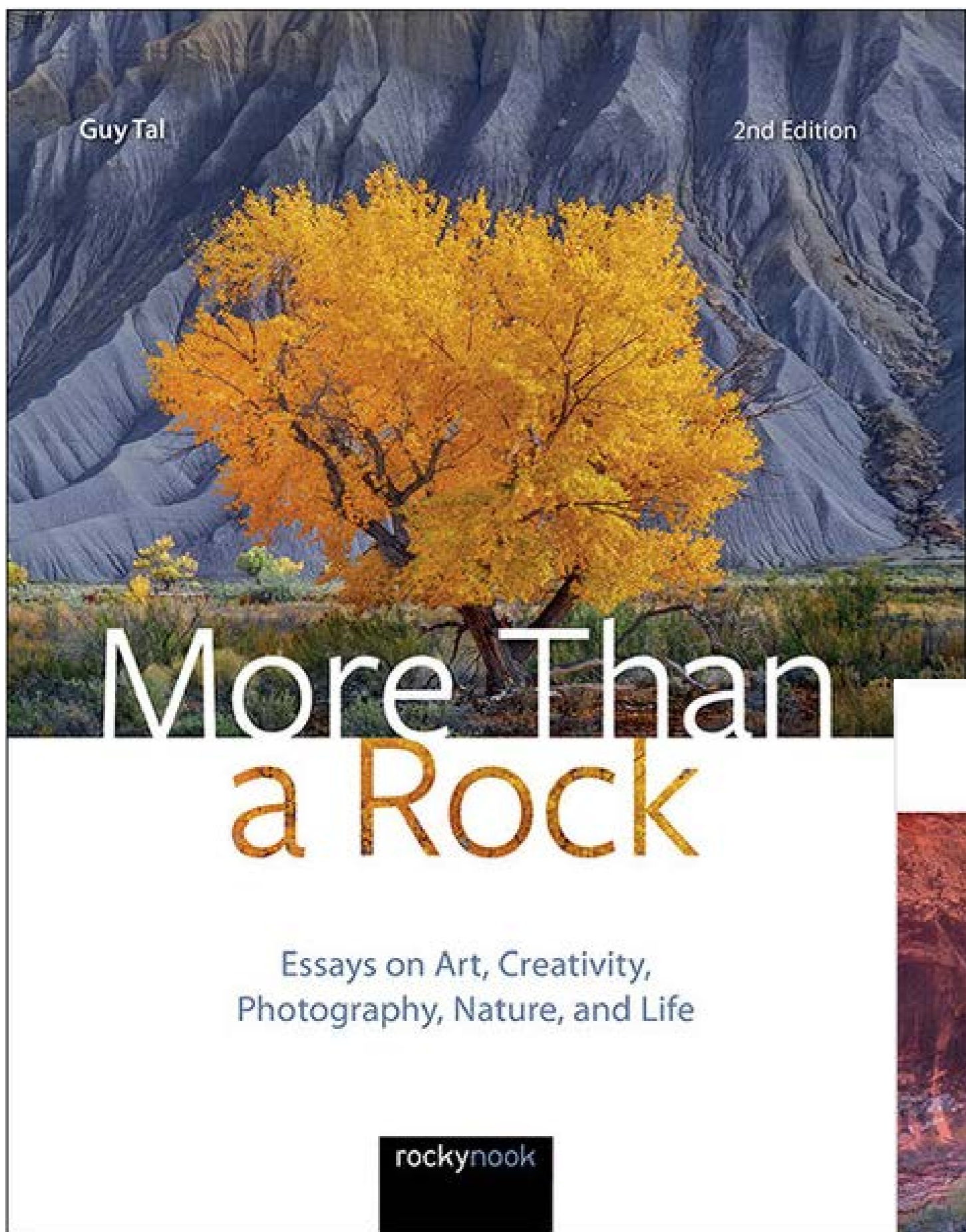
Similarly, Arnold Schoenberg — articulating what later came to be known in the philosophy of art as “The Beholder’s Share” — wrote, “An artistic impression is substantially the resultant of two components. One what the work of art gives the onlooker — the other, what he is capable of giving to the work of art.” In contrast to Wilde’s idea that an artist should “dominate” the viewer, Schoenberg proposed instead that the experience of meaning-making in art is in fact a collaboration between artist and viewer, each bringing their own share.

It seems that equivalence in the sense that Stieglitz had intended: a perfect parity between the feelings of the artist and the feelings of viewer, is only possible when the artist and viewer are the same person (as in, when an artist looks at a finished work and re-experiences the same feelings he or she had at the time of creation). This may seem anathema to some, but I think it is still a high and worthwhile bar for an artist to aspire to. Likewise, I think it is a high and worthwhile bar for viewers to strive to find the deepest and most elevated meaning they can in a given work according to their own personality, experiences, and sensibilities, regardless of whether it ends up being the same meaning the artist had intended.



Formally, I am a full-time professional photographer. I am not the typical pro in that I make most of my income not from selling photographs but from teaching, speaking, mentoring, and writing about photography. I do not consider myself a photographer who produces art, but rather an artist working in the medium of photography.

www.guytal.com



Guy Tal has been photographing and writing about photography for three decades. His currently available books, *More Than a Rock*, *Another Day Not Wasted*, and *The Interior Landscape* comprise more than 140 essays covering a broad range of topics related to creative and expressive photography, as well as his experiences and musings as a full-time fine art landscape photographer and consummate naturalist. His next book, *Be Extraordinary*, is due in 2024. You may see Guy's photographic work, read his regularly posted blog essays, and purchase his books (in print and electronic formats) at guytal.com.

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