

Composition

Nov 3, 2020

Peter North

Context

- I am not a pro – have never earned a penny from photography
- My talk is based on established concepts and experience of 8 years in club photograph & visiting many exhibitions
- My opinions are subjective and are no more valid than any other club member
- Some of the content will overlap with Keith's excellent Landscape talk given 24 Sep last year – available on the website

Intention

- I don't want to use this talk as a vehicle to showcase exclusively my own work
- Instead, I will showcase your work wherever possible
- I'm acutely aware that there is a wide spectrum of experience and photo knowledge in the club – I will be starting with the basics

Composition

The Dilemma

- What is art?
- Is photography an art?
- Is any discussion about composition ever valid?

What is Art?

- Art encompasses a diverse range of human expression - music, literature, poetry, film, theatre, sculpture, dance, painting, (photography).
- Over the centuries many philosophers have argued that art cannot / should not be defined
- They argue that any discussion on composition that attempts to define / explain / restrain creative endeavour is invalid

However.....

- Art could be loosely defined as the product of **deliberately and consciously** arranging elements in a way that engages the senses or emotions
- If you accept this definition, is photography an art?

Can a photograph engage the senses / emotions?

- Humour
- Empathy
- Love
- Sympathy / Compassion
- Amazement / Wonder
- Nostalgia
- Curiosity
- Aesthetic appreciation
- Anger
- Joy
- Fear / horror
- Sadness
- Desire

Amusement / Humour



Helen Unwin



Paul Ravenscroft

Love / Empathy



Jo Norcross



Theresa Penfound

Sympathy / Compassion



Lynne Cole



Dave Cole

Amazement / Wonder



Ian Tulloch



Alan Linsdell

Nostalgia



Roger Care

Graham Martin



Curiosity / Ambiguity



Gary Baker

Nick Bongiorno



Aesthetic Appreciation



Keith Truman

Peter North



Sadness



Jenny Collier



Nigel Northwood

Joy



Pam Aynsley

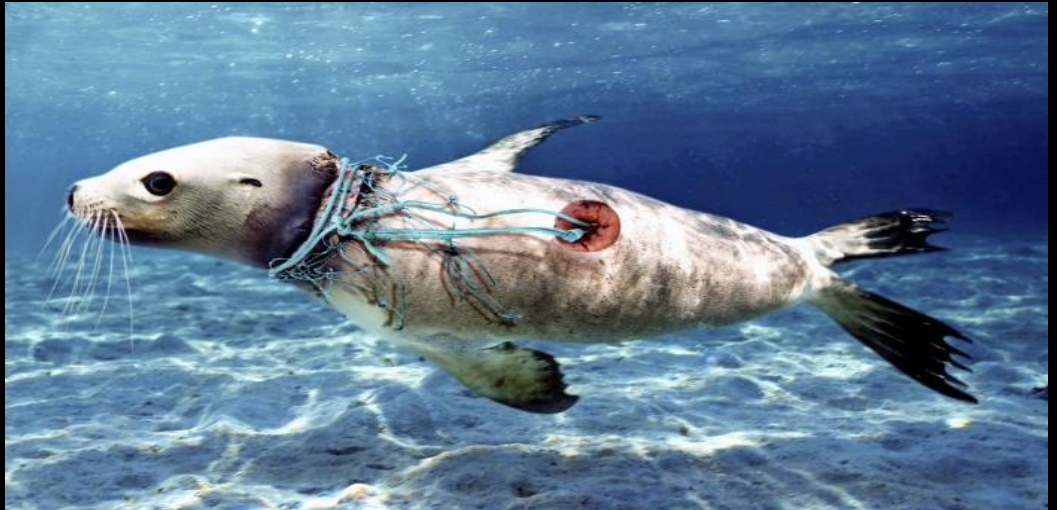


Jo Norcross

Anger



Blueocean.net



Fear / Horror



Rusty Lindsay – Beyond Group

Desire



bbcgoodfood.com



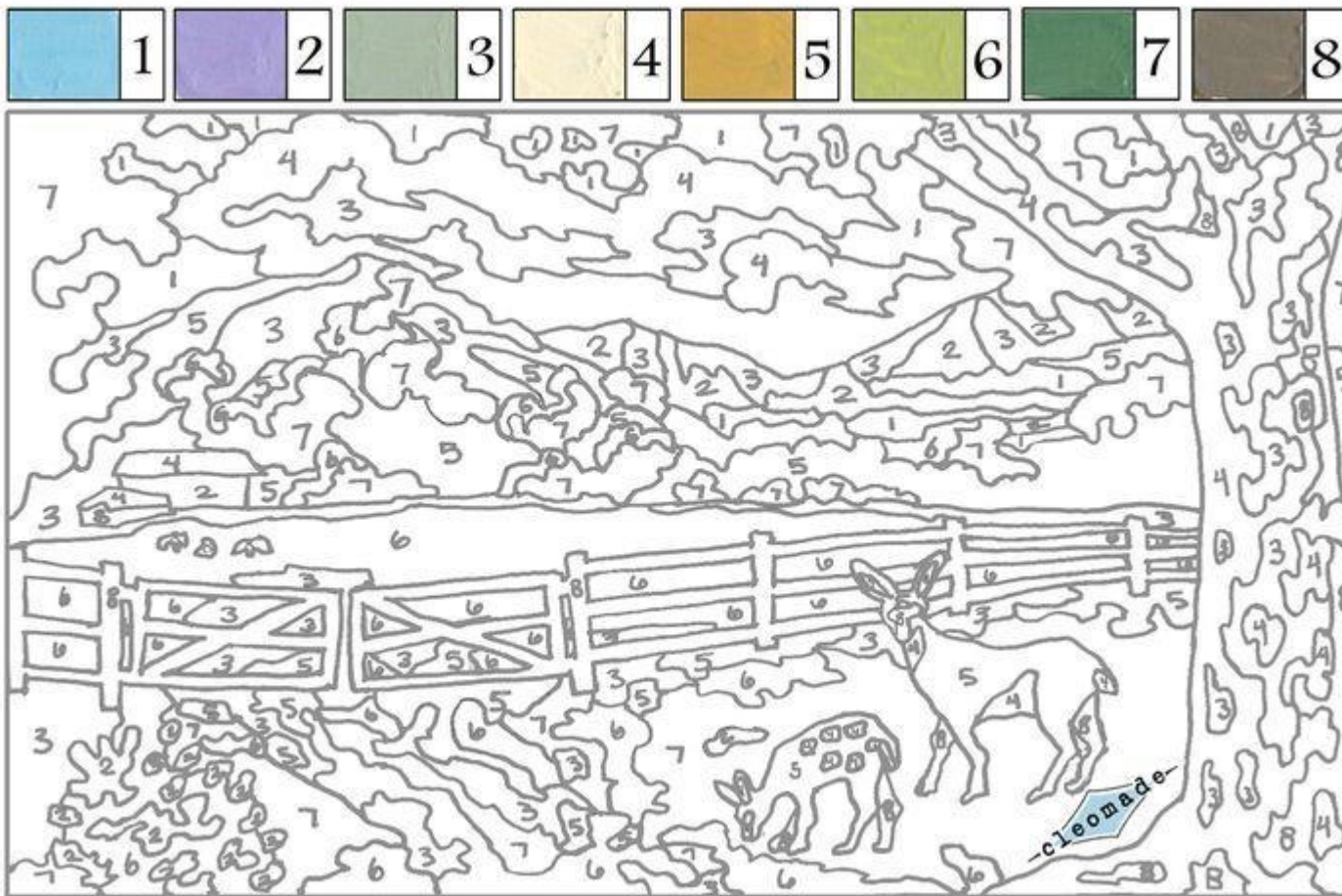
What has all this got to do with Composition?

- Do photographs engage the emotions? - Yes
- Is photography therefore an art? - Yes
- Can art can be defined as the deliberate and conscious arrangement of elements in a way that engages the senses or emotions - Yes
- Then **composition is the MEANS** of arranging those elements to maximise emotional (artistic) impact
- Composition is therefore important when creating a photograph

Composition

- Like all humans, artists are sentient and are always aware of composition – consciously or instinctively (but not randomly)
- It is therefore valid to explore aspects of photographic composition
- But not to present these aspects as ‘rules’ that should not be broken - as bad as ‘Painting by Numbers’

Painting by numbers



Some Fundamental Compositional Constructs

- Nature of the frame
- Placement / nature of main subject
- Connecting elements within the frame
- Patterns
- Symmetry
- Simplicity / negative space
- Inversion
- Making the most of nature subjects
- 'Breaking the Rules'

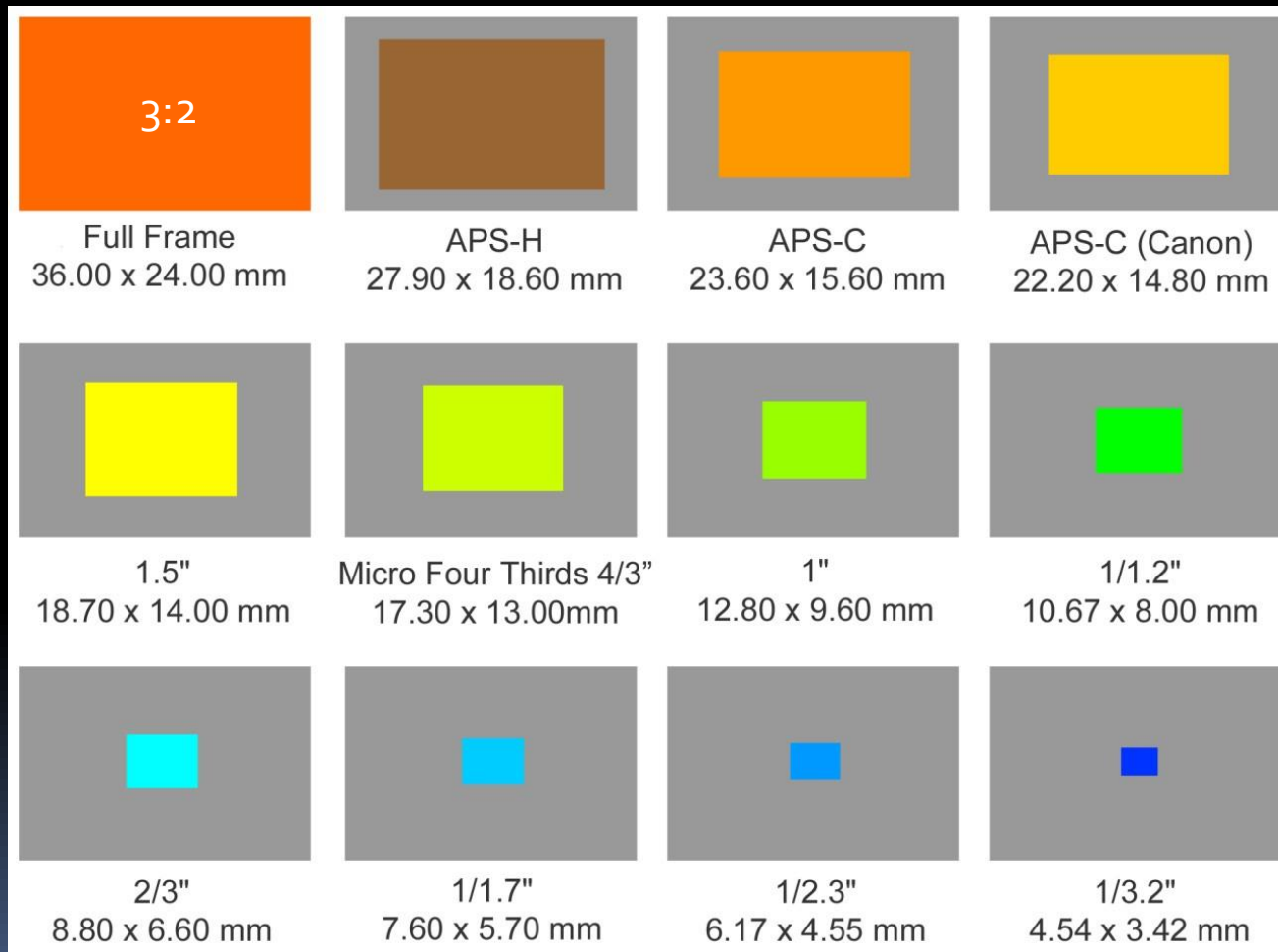


Decreasing degree of
understanding and
adoption
in most photo
communities

Nature of the Frame - Cropping

- Probably the first decision you will need to make when presenting your image to the best effect
 - Old 35mm film / full frame digital based on a 3:2 format
 - Pro large format cameras (Rollei) usually have a square format
 - You can present your image in any format of your choosing – you do not have to stick with the format of your sensor
 - For centuries, artists have been aware of the ‘golden ratio’ about 1:1.6 – it occurs in nature, classical art and a lot of architecture

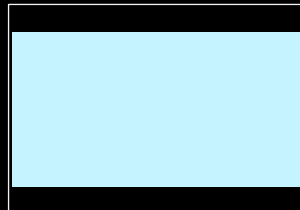
Most digital cameras shoot ca 3:2 aspect ratio regardless of sensor size



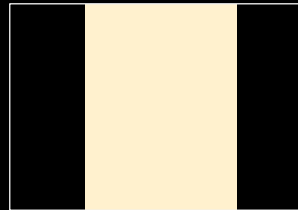
The Crop - Your First Decision



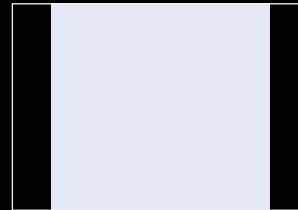
3:2
(as shot)



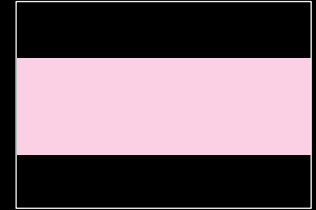
Landscape
(e.g. 1:1.6)



Portrait



Square



Panorama
(1:3 max)

- If you shoot in a non-native aspect ratio you are wasting pixels
- When editing, you can crop / construct your image in any format – you do not have to stick with the format of your sensor
- You should choose the crop carefully to complement your image – not the other way round

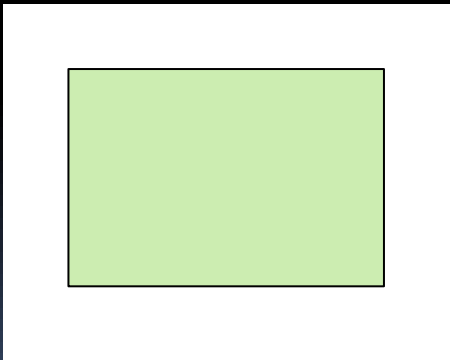
The Square Crop



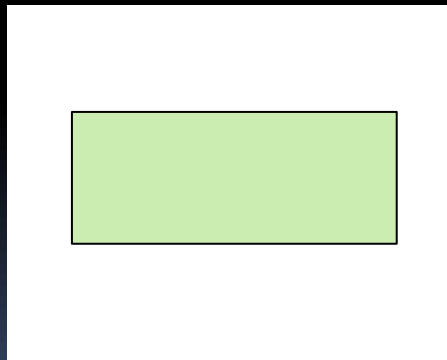
- The square crop seems to prime the subconscious to expect the unusual (it prevents us looking side-to-side or up and down)
- It encourages the gaze to circulate within the image
- It works well for placing subjects / focal points in the centre or near the edge of the image
- It works really well for simple, highly stylised or “fine art” images

Other Considerations

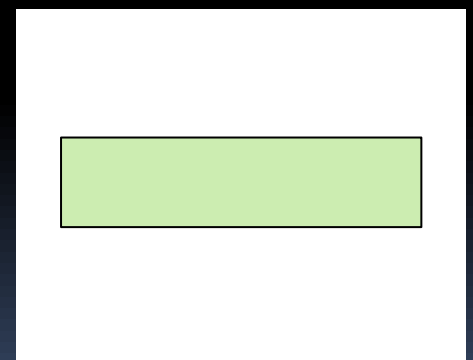
- When Projecting a PDI (1600 x 1200 pixels) the max projected image ratio is 4:3 – this ratio will fill the screen the most
- The standard club print mount is 50cm x 40cm (5:4)
- Don't print too big (35 x 25 cm to 30 x 20 cm is ideal)
- Panoramas that are too wide won't occupy enough area on the mount or on the screen



35 x 25 cm in
50 x 40 cm mount



1:3 panorama
in 50 x 40 cm mount



1:4 panorama
in 50 x 40 cm mount
Too wide?

Choosing your crop

- When taking the photo always give yourself options regarding the positioning of the main subject – you can never go back to that same scene and memory cards are cheap!
- When editing, crop out anything that does not 'support' your main image
- Be aware of the following 'guidelines' that some judges consider:
 - Elements of the main subject should not be cropped
 - Main subject on a 3rd
 - Enough space around the main subject (especially nature)
 - Too much sky
 - Too much foreground
 - Horizons that bisect the vertical axis
 - Space for the main subject to move into (moving person, vehicle, animal)
- Above all - experiment when shooting and cropping
- Generate multiple versions if not sure



Keith Truman

- 1:1.6 Golden Ratio landscape crop
- Sky and foreground connected by trees
- Sky held in at top
- Leads into the centre from 3 corners



André Neves

- 1:1.6 golden ratio landscape crop
- Top-lighting highlights main subject
- Background has context but does not distract
- Space to fly into



Alan Linsdell

- 1:1.5 **Vertical crop**
- Tight but just the right space around subject
- Asymmetric lighting
- Complimentary colours
- Zero redundancy



Peter North

- **Square crop** – gaze circulates
- Stump on a third
- Horizon on a third
- Frame held in by widest trees
- Sky & foreground connected by light
- Stump grounds the base



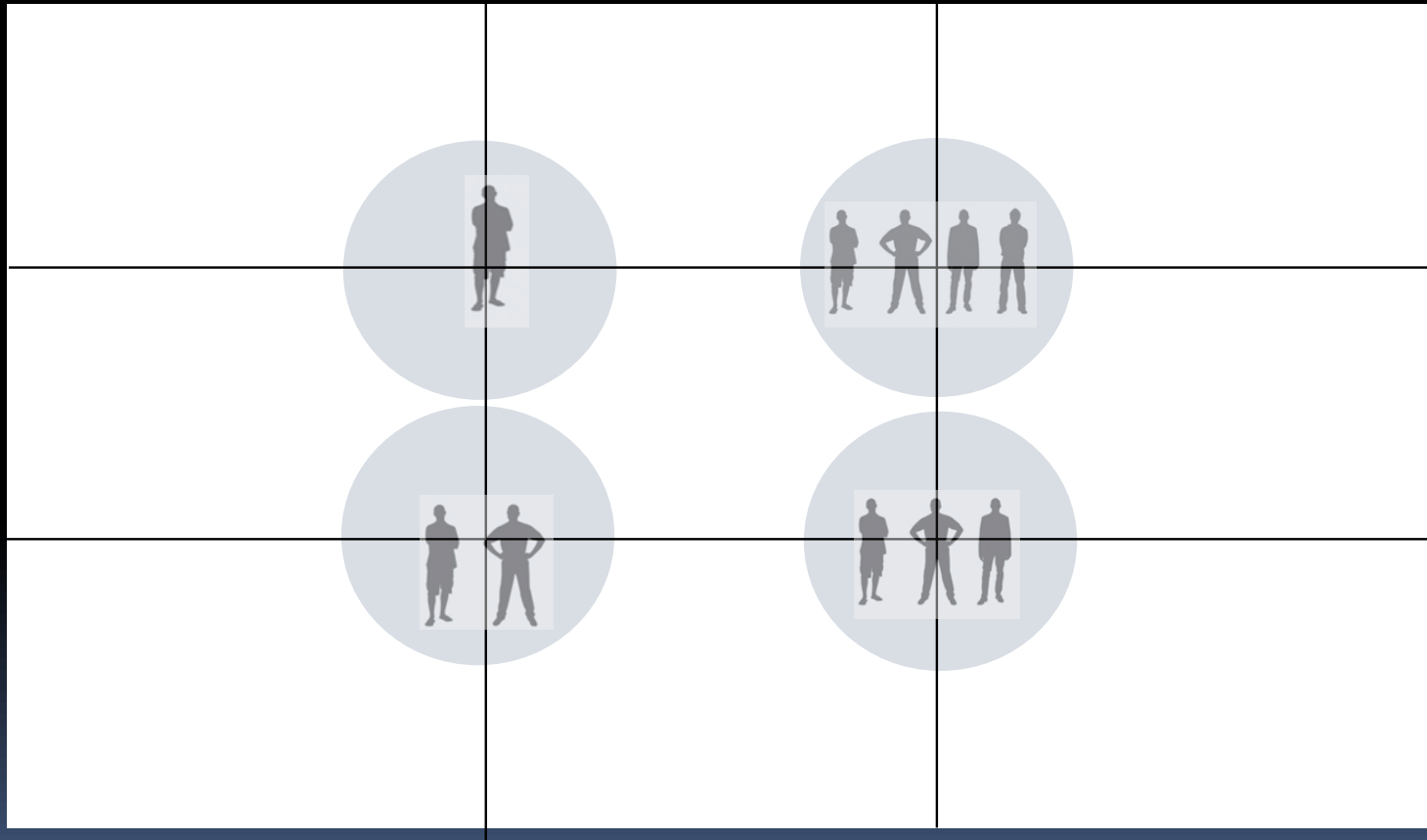
Stephen DeHavilland

- 1:2 **panorama crop**
- Horizon on a third
- Tree on a third
- Sky and foreground held in

Placement / nature of the Main Subject

- Subject placement on (or near) a bisecting third will give a pleasing composition (The 'Rule' of Thirds)
- Odd numbers of objects appear more visually appealing than even
- But... in reality this usually means 1 or 3 objects look better than 2 or 4 (with 5 and above the impact of this declines rapidly)
- Frame the 'ideal' shot when shooting BUT always take other compositions to give yourself options when editing later – you can never go back to that moment
- When editing experiment with subject placement – you may surprise yourself!

Intersecting Thirds / Odd no of Objects





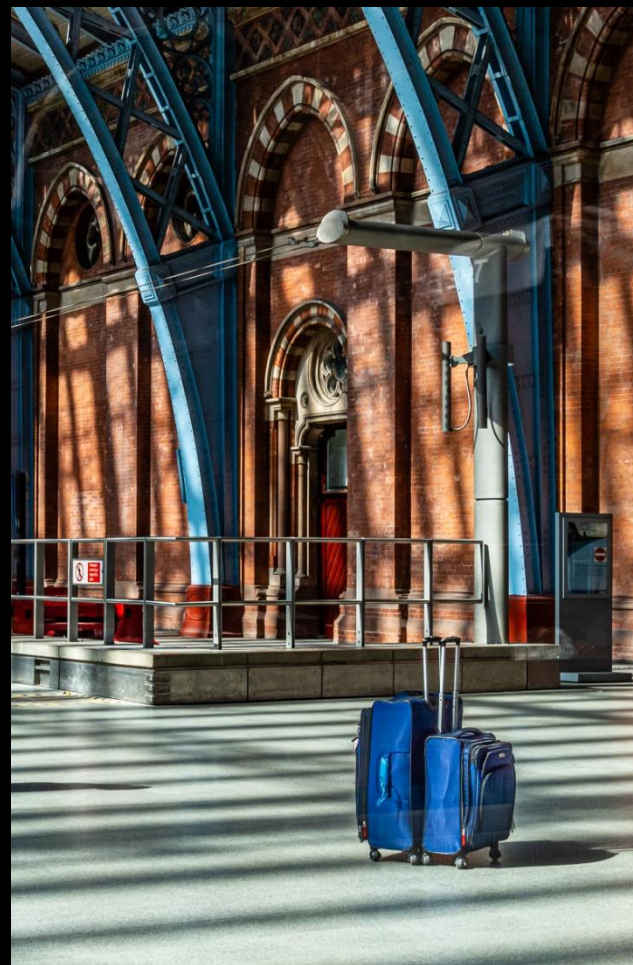
Anne Truman



Bob Dennis



Theresa Penfound



Rosemary Burt



Richard Shaw



Richard Schramm



Phil Dent



David Brock



Penny Harper



David Gray



Bob Smith



Rod Bufton



Karen Butler-Clark



David Stocks



Richard Stubbs



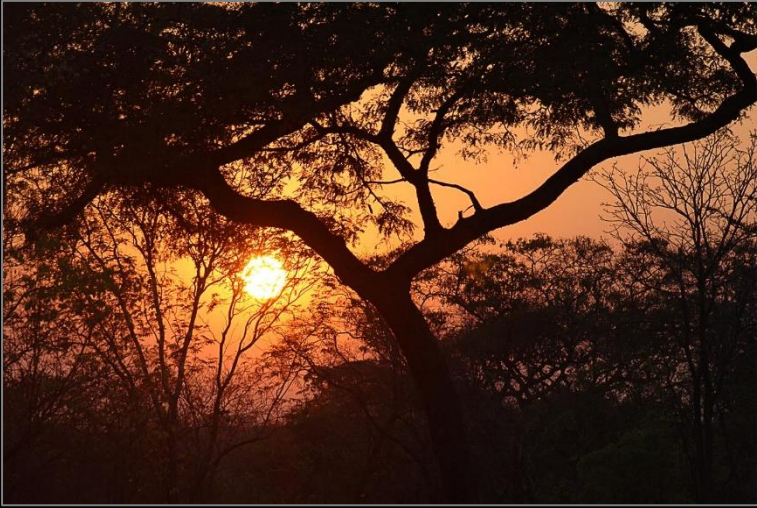
Debbie Saunders



Steve Anker



Bill Hamilton



Eve Maythorne



Robin Southgate



David Reynolds



Ron Byfield

Connecting Elements Within the Frame

- Leading lines that lead the eye to the main subject
- Elements that lead through the frame to connect different parts of the image together



Keith Truman



Pam Aynsley



Roger Care



Stephen DeHavilland



Helen Unwin



Debbie Saunders



Paul Ravenscroft



Lauren Gray-Stephens



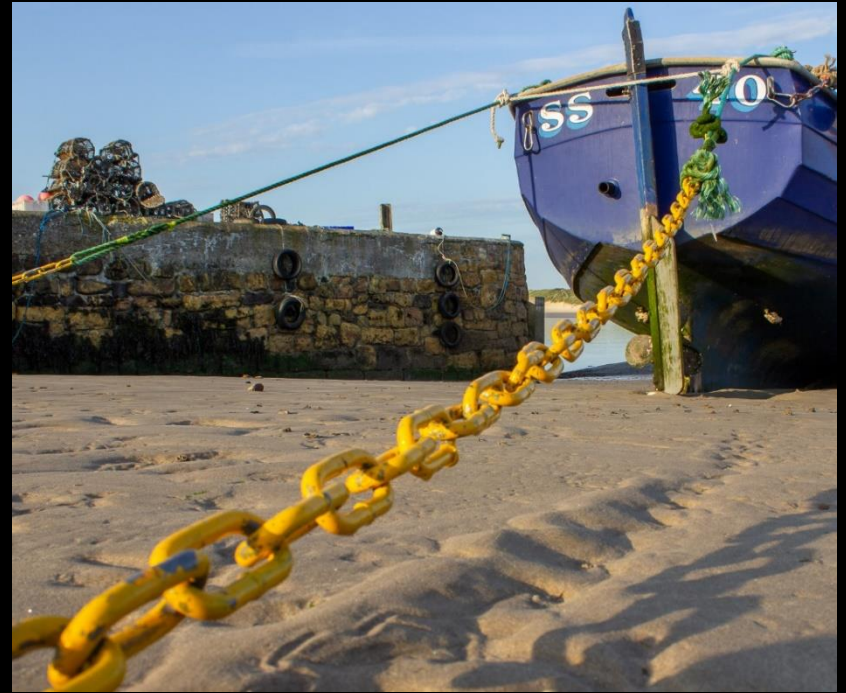
Penny Harper



Peter North



Ian Tulloch



David Stocks



Ian Jeffries



Paul Lidbetter



Anne Truman



Jenny Collier



Rosemary Burt



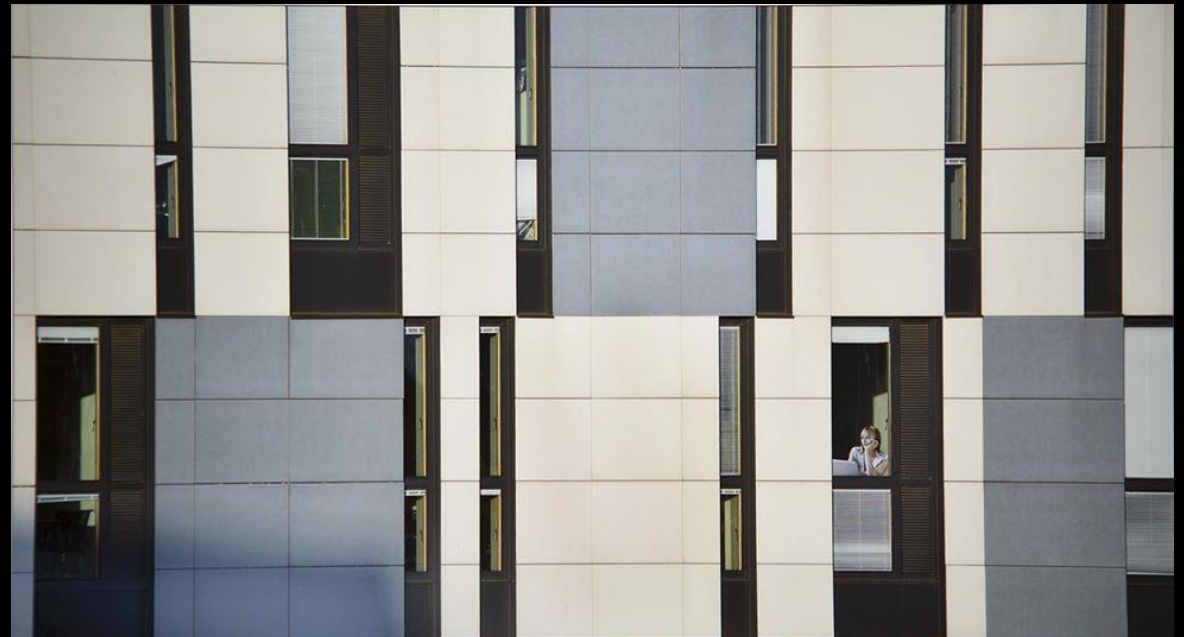
Trevor Marcusson & Jenny Collier

Patterns

- A 'Pattern Shot' uses a regular pattern as the main compositional element
- The pattern can be naturally occurring or in an urban environment
- The pattern usually dominates >75% of the frame
- In order not to compete with the dominant pattern, the colour palette should be simple or be converted to monochrome
- The shot usually benefits from having another element in the frame that breaks the pattern or gives a focal point



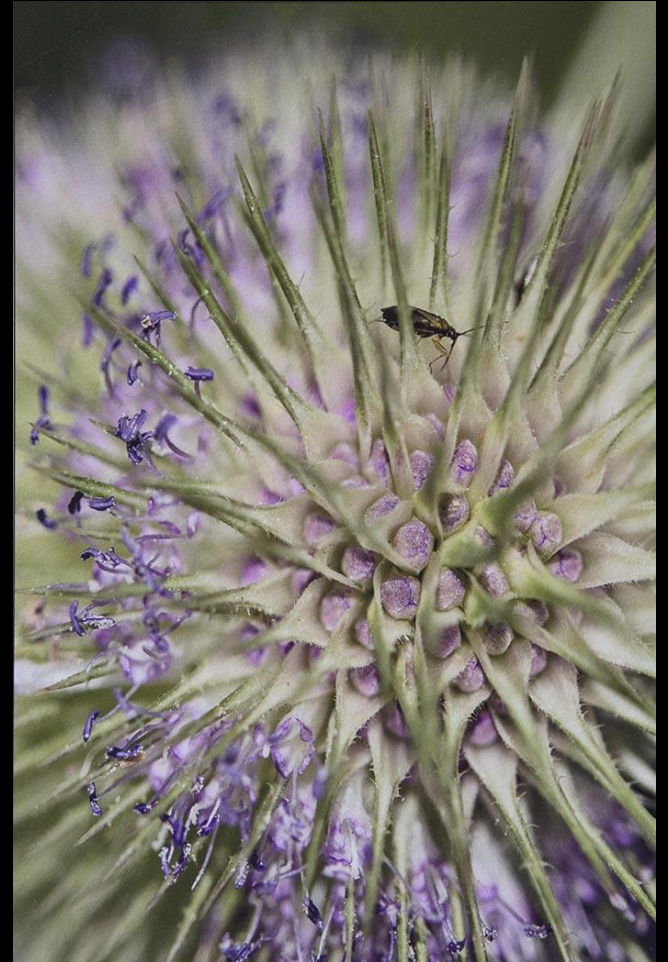
Richard Stubbs



Paul Ravenscroft



Theresa Penfound



Jenny Collier



Keith Truman





Paul Ravenscroft



Ken Crane



Gary Baker



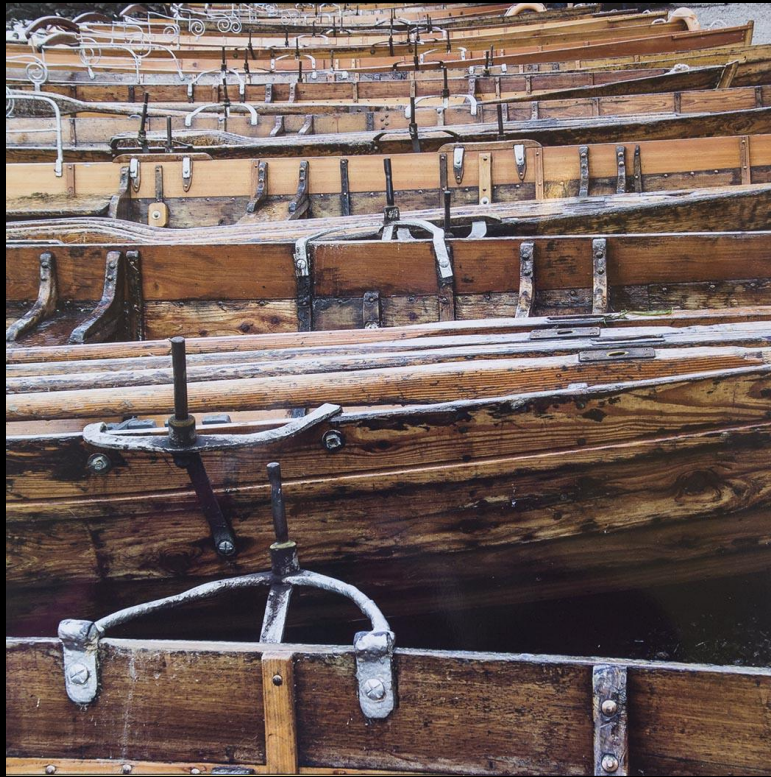
Jenny Collier



Peter North



Roger Care



David Stocks



Jo Norcross

Symmetry

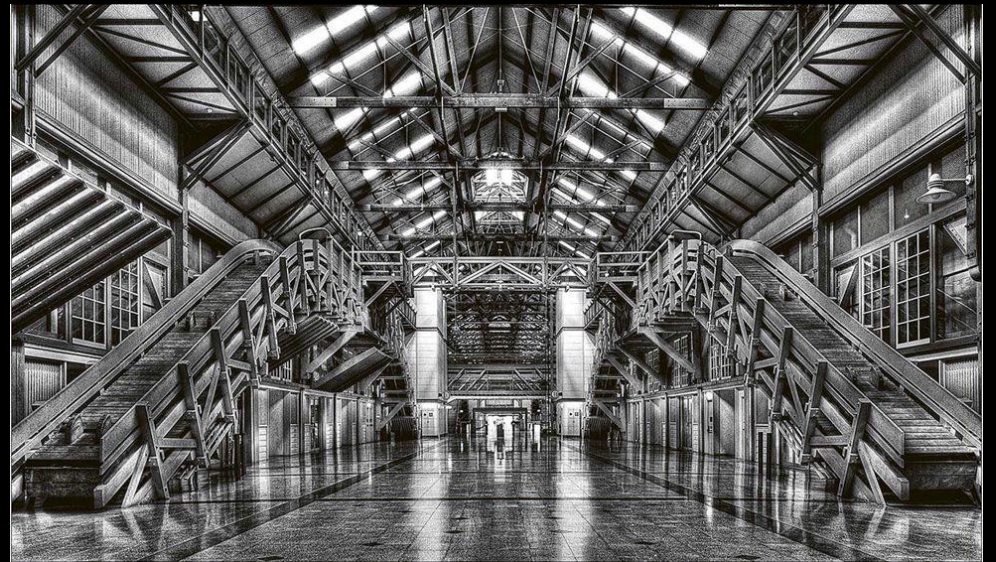
- Similar to a 'Pattern Shot' but uses symmetry about a vertical or horizontal axis to give impact
- The pattern can be naturally occurring (usually via reflections) or in an urban environment
- The shot usually benefits from having another element in the frame that breaks the symmetry or gives a focal point
- In order not to compete with the dominant pattern, the colour palette should be simple or be converted to monochrome

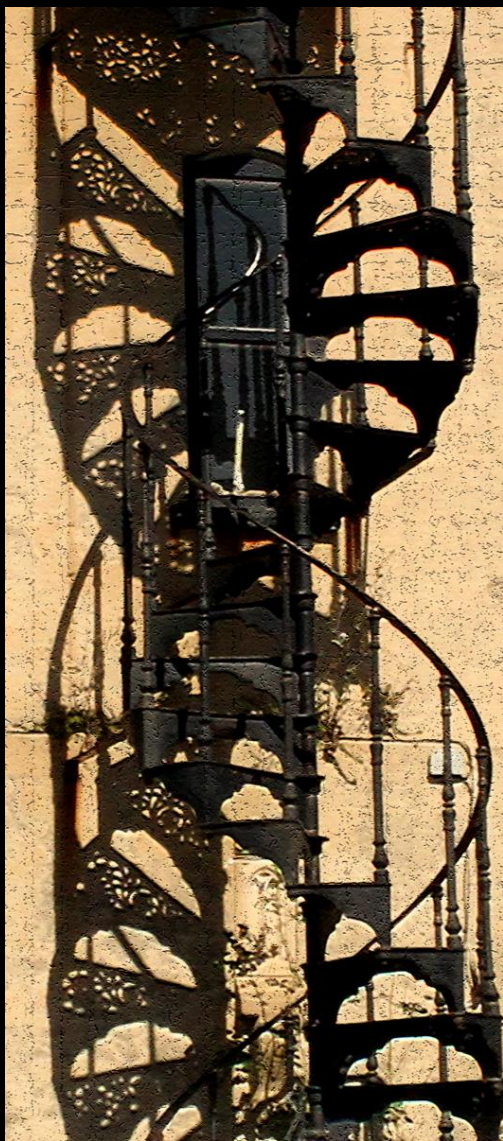


Keith Truman



Keith Truman





John Cameron



Helen Unwin



Debbie Saunders



Bob Dennis



Peter North





Sam Buchanan



Ian Tulloch

Simplicity and Negative Space

- What do you want the observer to see?
- What do you want the observer to feel?
- Try not to include anything that distracts from these intentions
- Simplification can be compositional (what's in the frame and where) or tonal (range of colour or greyscale)
- Simplification can be done when shooting or editing or both
- Negative space is a very powerful compositional tool – it focusses attention and seems to induce calm



Stephen DeHavilland



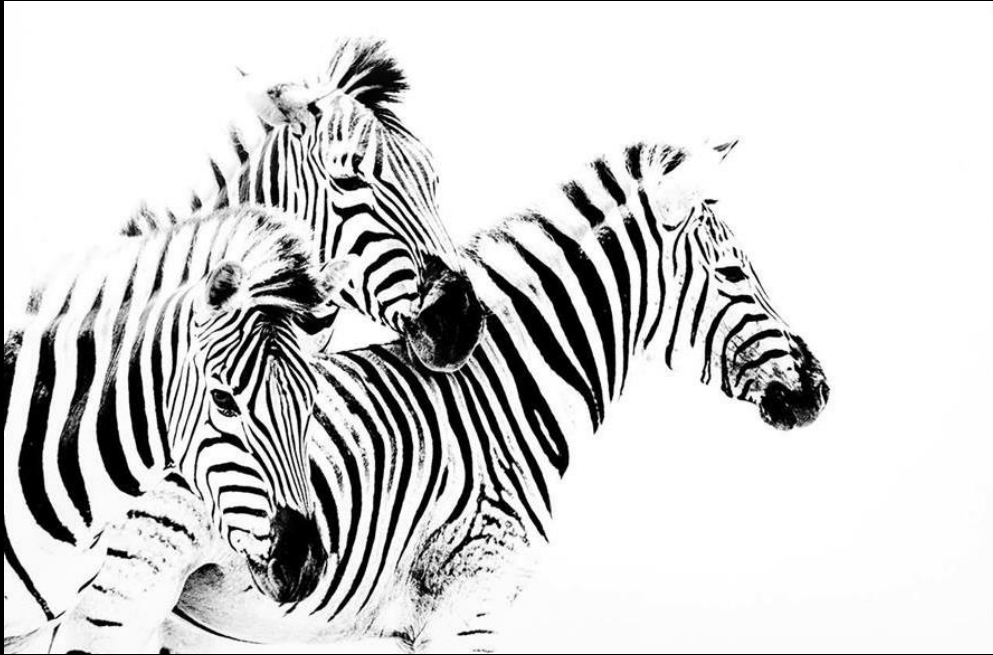
Nigel Northwood





Keith Truman





Graham Martin

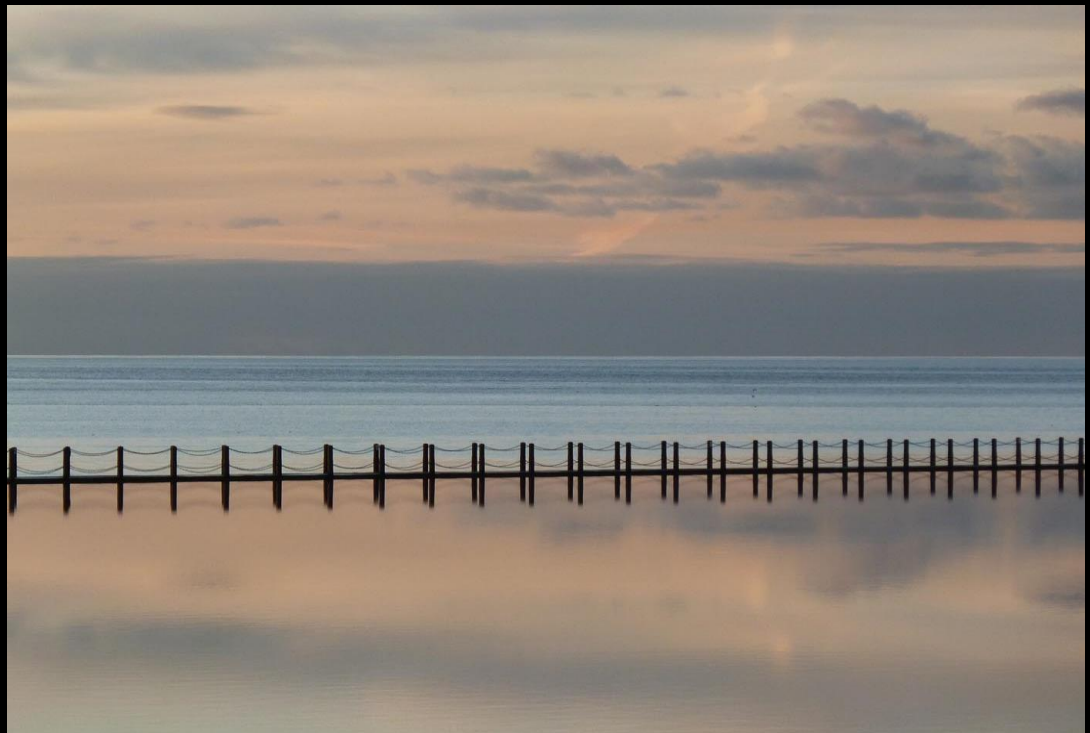




Peter North



Roger Care



Ken Crane



Sam Buchanan



Ian Jeffries

Horizontal Inversion

- The vast majority of images are asymmetric
- Always experiment by inverting your images horizontally
- The underlying compositional elements are not changed when inverting an image
- But..... the effect can be very dramatic (both ways)
- Why? (familiarity with original, left to right bias etc)



Paul Ravenscroft



Paul Ravenscroft



Keith Truman



Keith Truman



Bob Dennis



Bob Dennis



Stephen DeHavilland



Stephen DeHavilland



Peter North



Peter North



Tea Break

Making the most of Nature / Natural History subjects

- In these photos, the clear and accurate representation of the subject (and what it is doing) is paramount
- Composition is important but is usually subordinate to the quality (sharpness, depth of field) of the subject
- The compositional elements that always matter are:
 - The background / foreground – context without being distracting
 - The amount of space around the subject & its position in the frame
 - The nature / position of supporting structures (branches, stems, leaves, flowers etc) must support and not distract from the subject

Importance of background, crop and space around subject



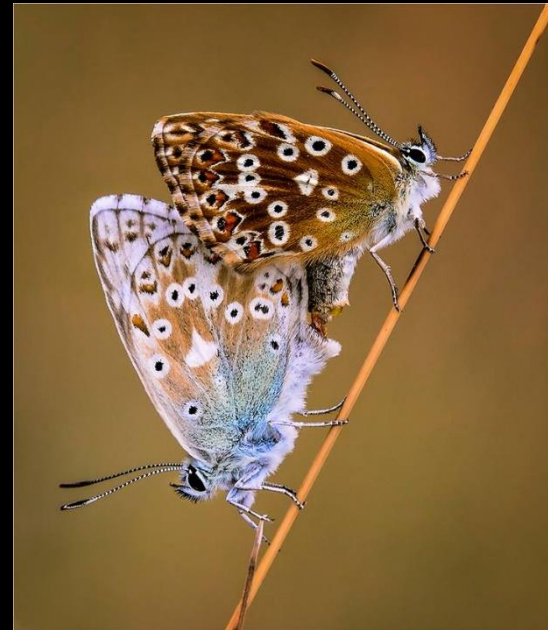
f11 – Background too busy
Too much space around subject
Distracting highlight top left

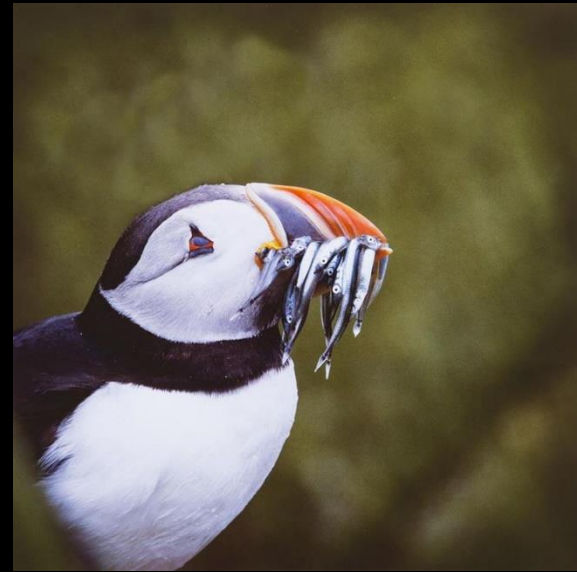


f4 – Manual focus stacking (3 frames)
Background blurred but still has context
Better crop (square - central subject)

Peter North

















Breaking the Rules

Breaking the Rules

“Learn the rules like a pro, so you
can break them like an artist”

-Pablo Picasso

Breaking the Rules

- Throughout the history of art, 'rules' have always been broken and boundaries breached
- This was not always well accepted by the establishment at the time
- With hindsight, this has always led to a much wider repertoire of available art
- This, in turn, has diversified the pool of talent and has made the appreciation of art available to more people having diverse tastes
- Unlike the evolution of technology, the evolution of art adds to the pool it never replaces it
- Any evolution of art does not need to be liked by all - 'legacy' art will always be there for you to enjoy



Rubens (1577-1640)



Van Gough (1853-1890)



Picasso (1881-1973)



Pollock (1912-1956)



Classical



Jazz



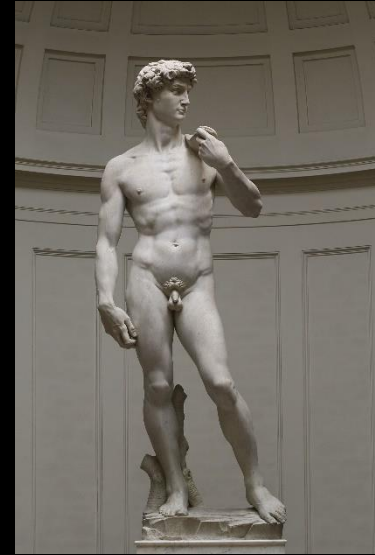
Pop



Punk



Ancient Greek



Michelangelo



Henry Moore



Armen Agop

Club Photography – “The Rules”

- “You should always aim to create art that ***you*** like and enjoy”
- However, as soon as you enter a competition you are willingly and knowingly opening yourself to the judgement of others
- Club photography is an environment where you can easily succumb to the notion of acceptance of judges / peer group and ‘rules’
- Established pro artists with a dedicated (and forgiving / tolerant) fan-base can usually express themselves without fear of judgement

Rules to break?

- Defining rules on how to break the rules is a paradox!
- However from a (club) photography perspective consider the following to increase your own repertoire and confidence
 - Camera movement / multiple exposure
 - No main subject in your image at all
 - Main subject central / not on an obvious third – square crop works well
 - Courageous use of negative space
 - A graphic image with ambiguous or no obvious meaning
 - A novel take on an iconic scene / genre
- Aim to surprise the judge / viewer by having an original, creative take on your work

Breaking the rules

Be audacious and bold –

make it obvious that you have willingly disregarded the “rules”
and have not just failed to obey them

An example of audacity



Rusty Lindsay – Beyond Group

Audacious crop – obviously intentional would never be mistaken for “not getting it quite right”



A judge would probably say:
"I would have taken a little bit more off the left hand side"



A judge would probably say:
“Nice idea, but I’m not sure that the aggressive crop works for me”

Breaking the rules

Be audacious and bold –

Some examples from Club
members



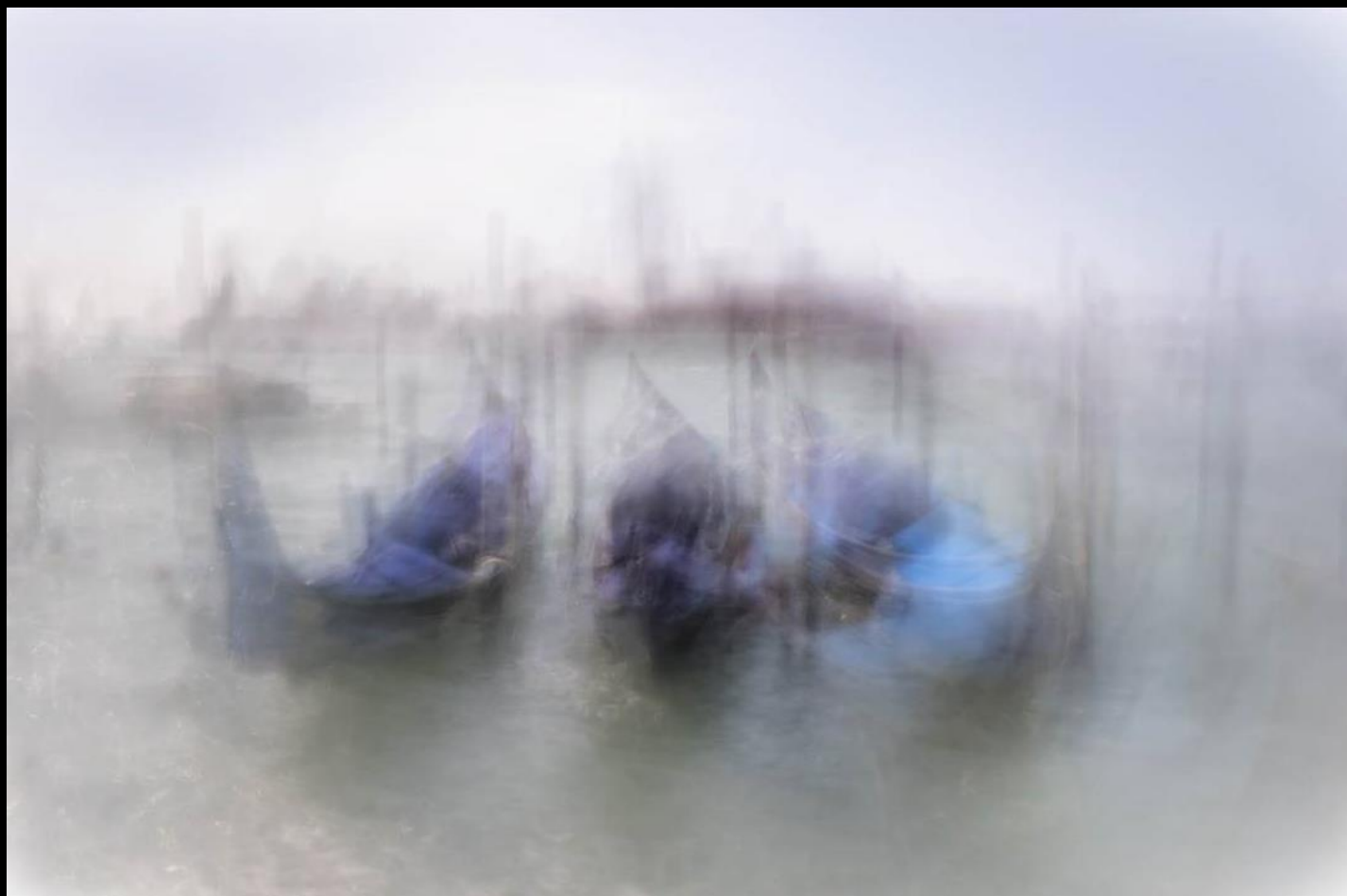
Pam Aynsley
Camera Movement but
highly recognisable



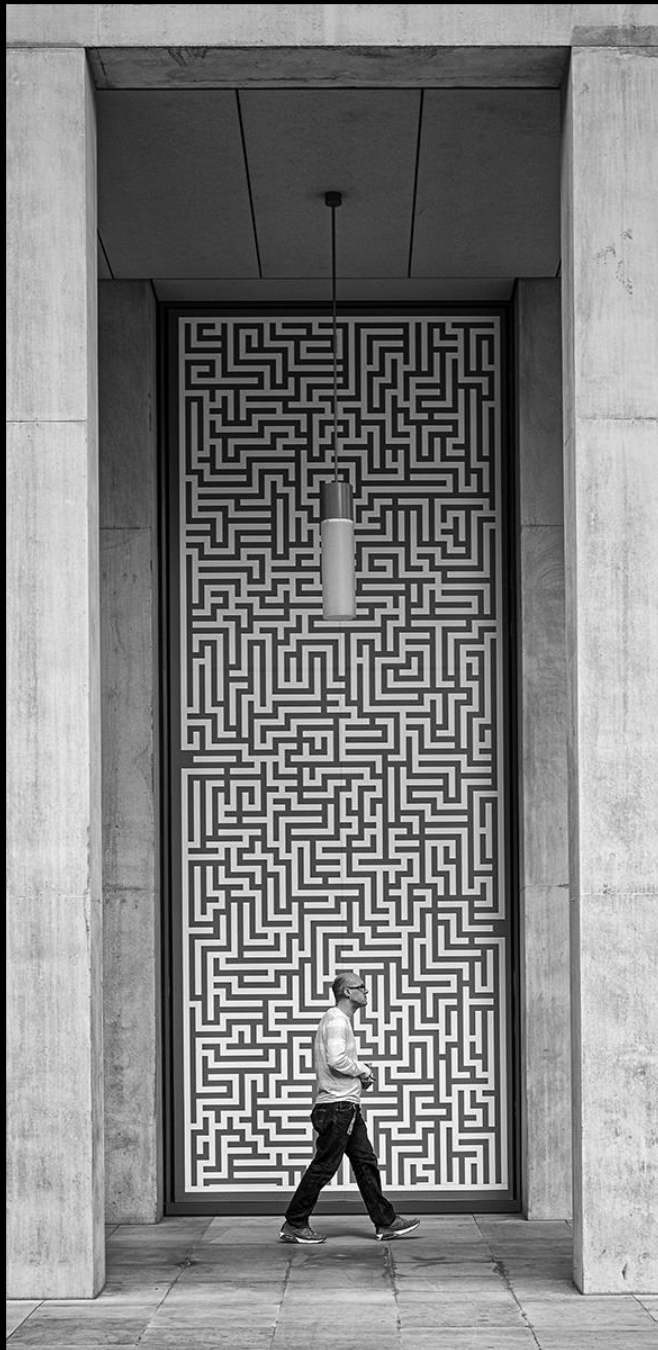
Stephen DeHavilland
Square crop to include negative space
– fine art nature shot



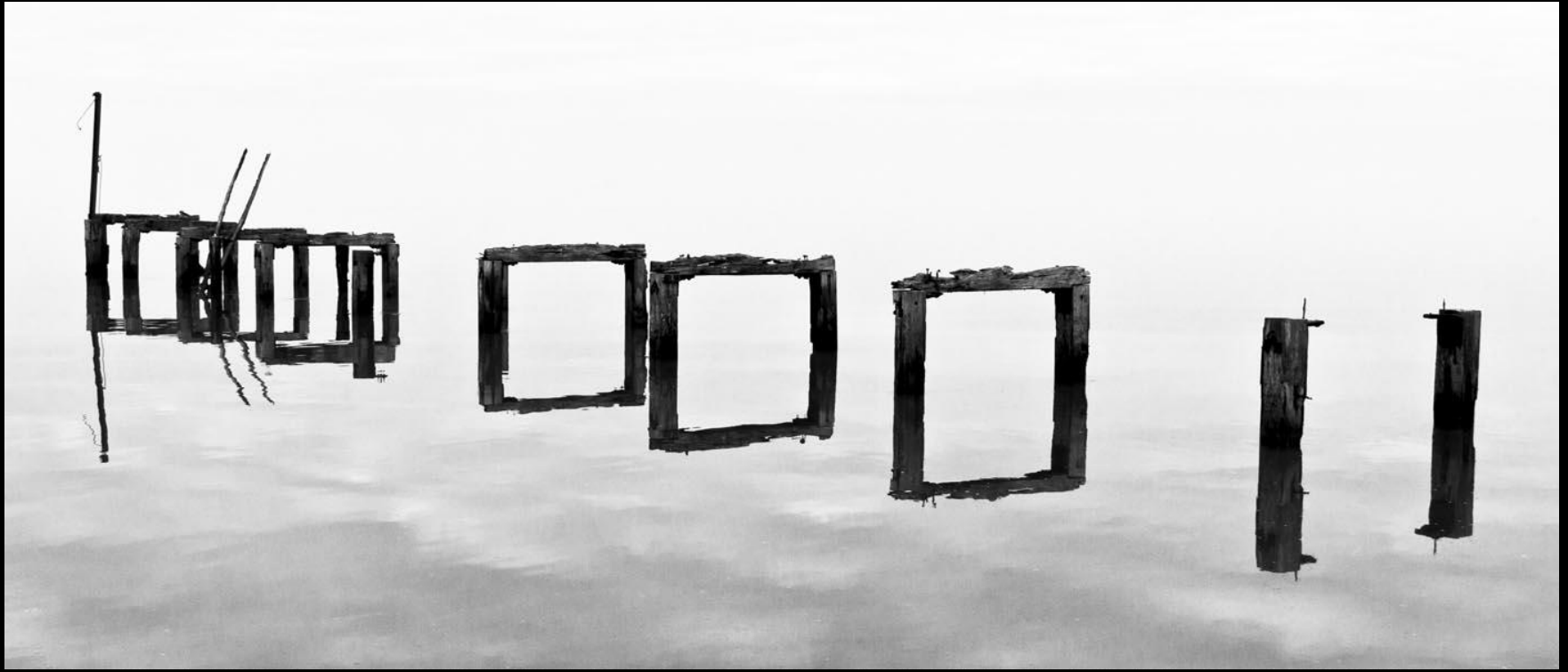
Alan Linsdell
No shadow detail and form
implied solely by rim light –
fine art nature shot



Keith Truman
Camera Movement but
highly recognisable



Keith Truman
Audacious crop with pattern &
Symmetry



Keith Truman
Suspended abstract patterns
from a seascape shot



Keith Truman
Main subject small in the frame
but effective and ideally placed



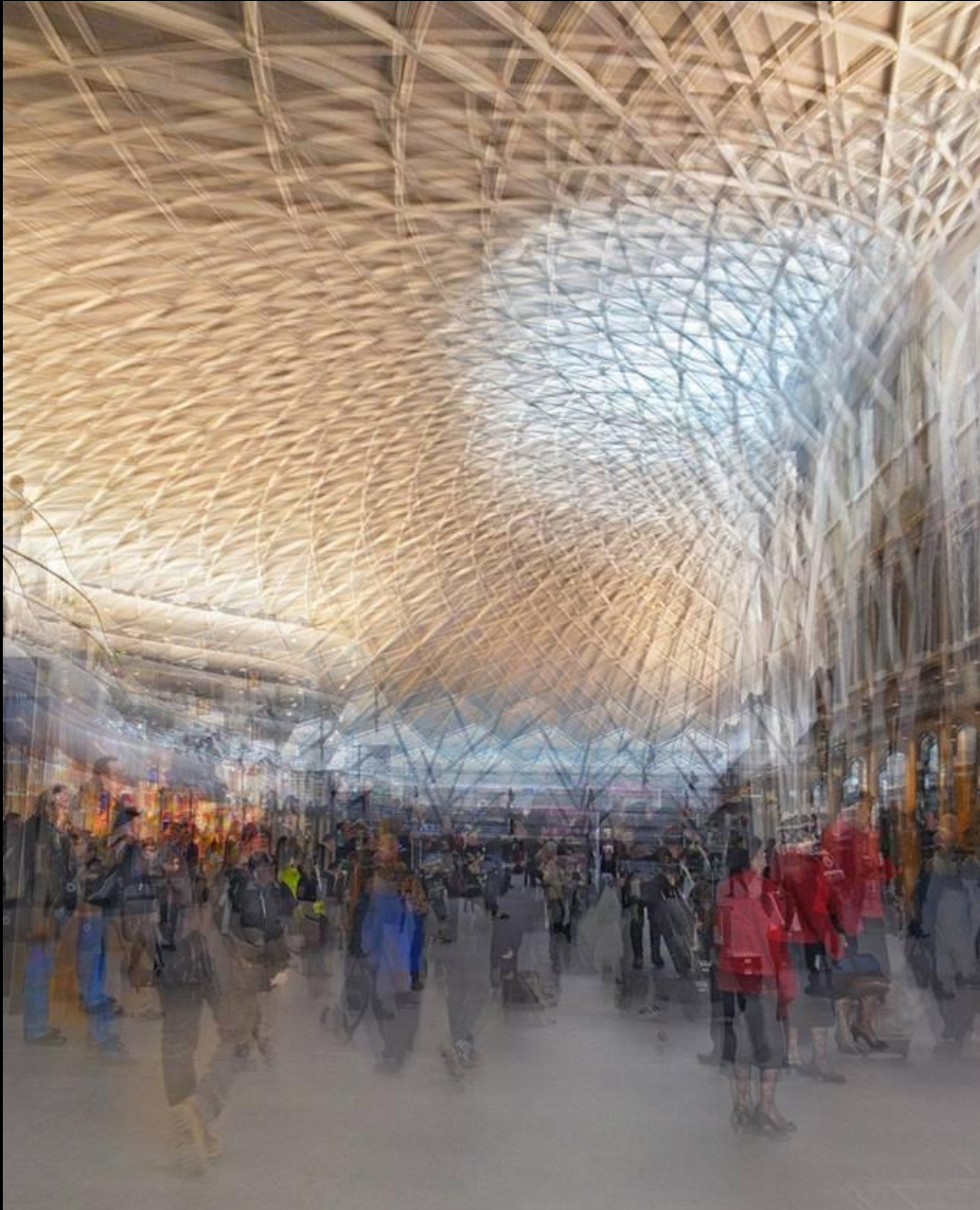
Keith Truman
Compositionally and tonally simple –
all about form and texture



Nigel Northwood
Ambiguous pose in an unusual setting



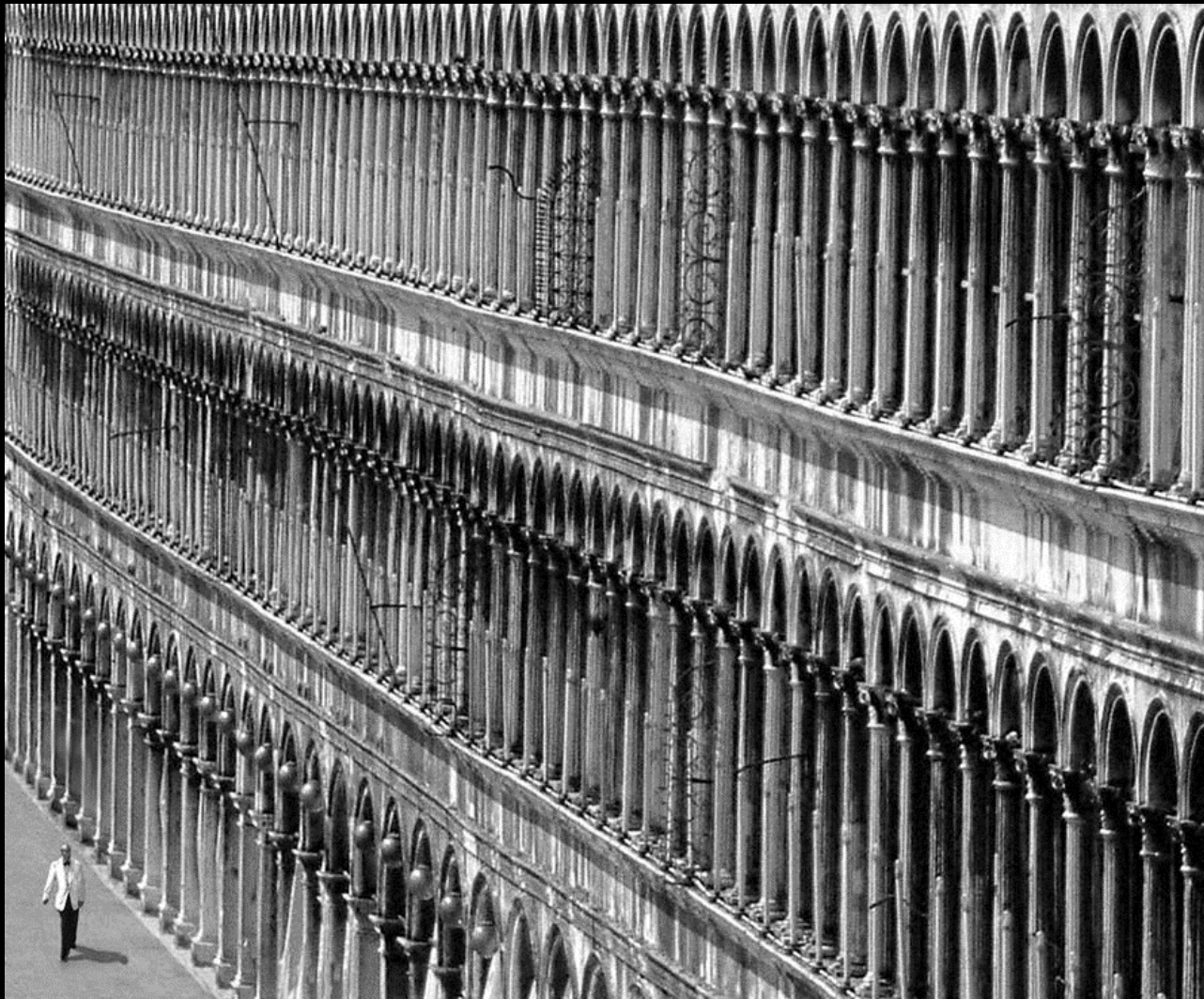
Gary Baker
Ambiguous - what does it all mean?



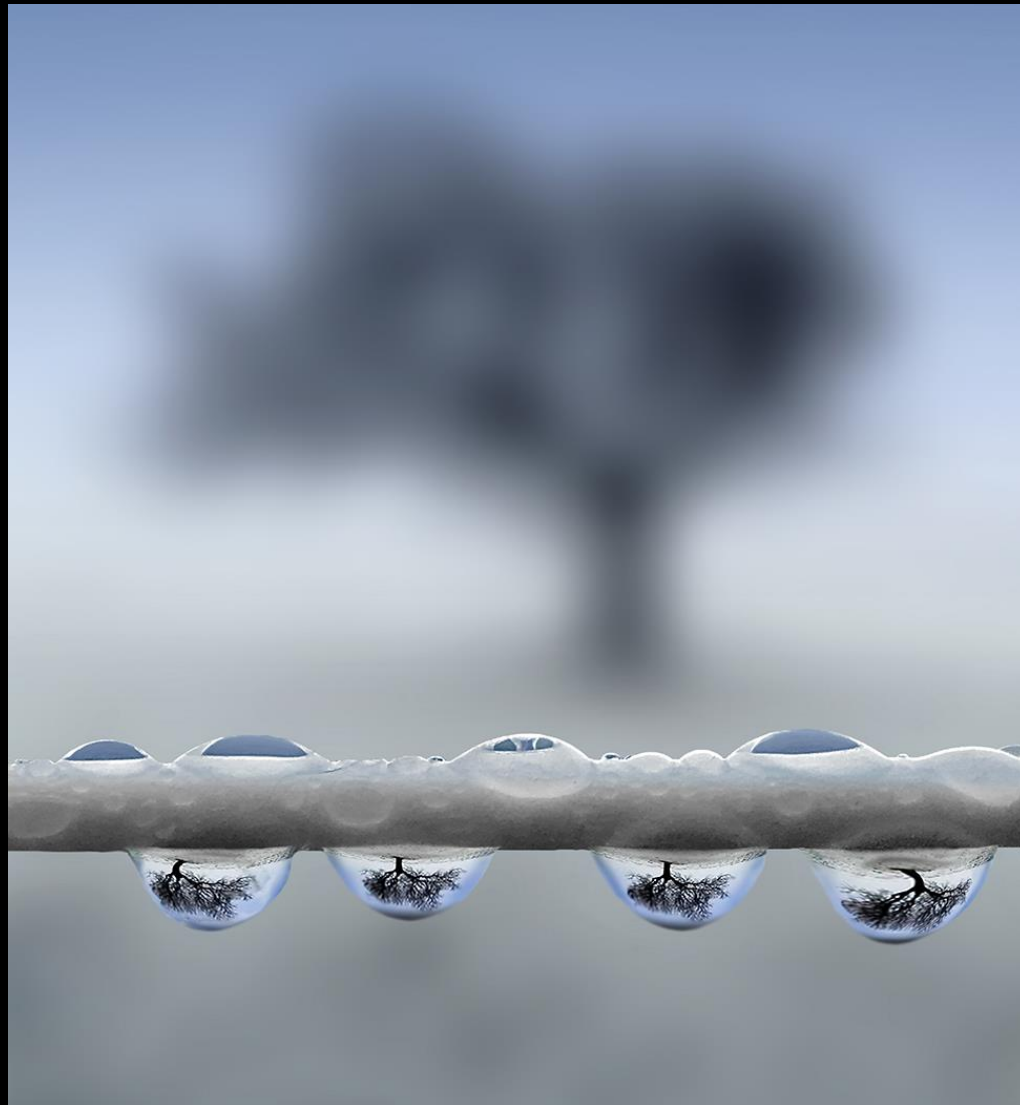
Peter North
Multiple exposures to
emphasise mood & movement



Peter North
No main subject / focal point at all –
all about light and texture



Peter North
Pattern shot with main subject in
unconventional place – square crop



Peter North
Unconventional (macro) take on a landscape
Square crop



Peter North
Topaz Simplify Filter
Main object in centre - Square crop



Graham Martin
High contrast B&W no context in background
A nature fine art "pattern shot"



Graham Martin
Angled composition adds tension good
great facial expressions – square crop



Sam Buchanan
Novel, dark take on iconic structure



Jo Norcross

Unusual juxtaposition

Looks like a formal hung picture on a graffiti wall



David Gray
Tree-like structures from metal
corrosion



Ian Jeffries
Massive negative shadow space
emphasises mood



Roger Care
Interesting light / tonal range and unconventional
subject placement – square crop



Body parts



David Stocks
Human body parts in everyday, familiar packaging

Take Home Message – If new to Club Photography

- You must always like the photos you take (unlike a pro who ultimately has to please their client)
- This does not conflict with wanting others (including judges) to like them too
- Try to understand the basic compositional guidelines and apply them to your work to your satisfaction
- Enter all club competitions and try to anticipate the comments / score of judges – this forces you to look critically at your / others images
- But.... never get knocked-back from the comments of a judge
- “Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist”

Take Home Message – More experienced

- Learn from looking at many, diverse images of others
- You should be pretty good at anticipating judges comments / scores
- Try to develop a personal style
- As you get more successful take risks and be audacious
- If club judges don't 'get' your work, enter national / international competitions – experienced judges like to be surprised by something different!

Thank you

for your attention

and, more importantly,

for your great images!