

PHOTOGRAPHY

MASTERCLASS

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BUDGET VS.
PRO STROBES

EXPERT GUIDE

A GUIDE TO
BEAUTIFUL
MIDDAY
PHOTOGRAPHY

INSPIRATION

AN AI ASSISTANT
IN YOUR
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THE 3 BIGGEST
ADVANTAGES OF
USING LUMINAR NEO
FOR PHOTO EDITING

Featured
ERICH
NUSSBAUMER
INTERVIEW
MONOCHROME
WORKS OF FINE ART

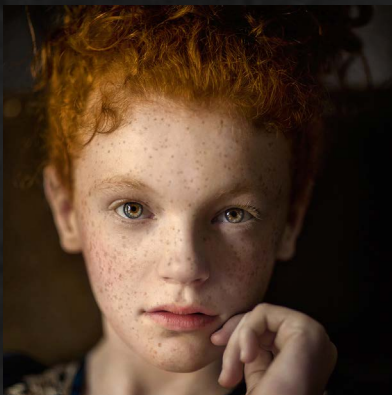
MASTERCLASS

MASTERING THE MOOD A GUIDE TO FINE ART

STORYBOOK PORTRAITS



PHOTOGRAPHY MASTERCLASS MAGAZINE



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FEATURED PHOTOGRAPHER

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BUYERS GUIDE

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Welcome to this edition
of Photography
Masterclass Magazine

Stop taking pictures and start creating portraits. In our masterclass on fine art storybook portraiture, discover how to transform simple snapshots into timeless, painterly masterpieces. Learn the secrets of evocative styling, dramatic directional lighting, authentic posing, and magical post-processing techniques that will help you capture a feeling, tell a story, and master the mood.

This month we were lucky enough to interview Erich Nussbaumer, who is also a Photography Masterclass Magazine Reader. Erich is a lifelong

photographer, whose passion for monochrome transforms everyday scenes into quiet, textured works of fine art. In this interview, Erich shares how travel, historic architecture, birds, and the Australian landscape continue to shape his eye, along with the role post-processing plays in bringing his images to life.

We got loads more articles, videos and incredible pictures in this issue so we hope you enjoy it.

If you try out any of the techniques mentioned, we'd love you to see your results, so please do share them with us in our [readers' Facebook Group](#), or on Instagram using hashtag #PhotographyMasterclassMagazine

Happy Shooting!



Gill



MESSAGE FROM GILL ROBERTS
THE EDITOR

EDITOR'S CHOICE

A Hand-Picked Selection of
our Favorite Photos



By: Ahmed Photography
Shot Details: Sony a7 IV, at 40mm,
f/2.8, 1/60 sec, ISO 3200
[Instagram](#)



By: Anton Holmgren
Shot Details: Sony a7C, at 1/160 sec,
f/400, ISO 400
[Instagram](#)



By: Benjamin Chambon
Shot Details: Sony a7 III, at 35mm,
f/4, 2 sec, ISO 50
[Instagram](#)





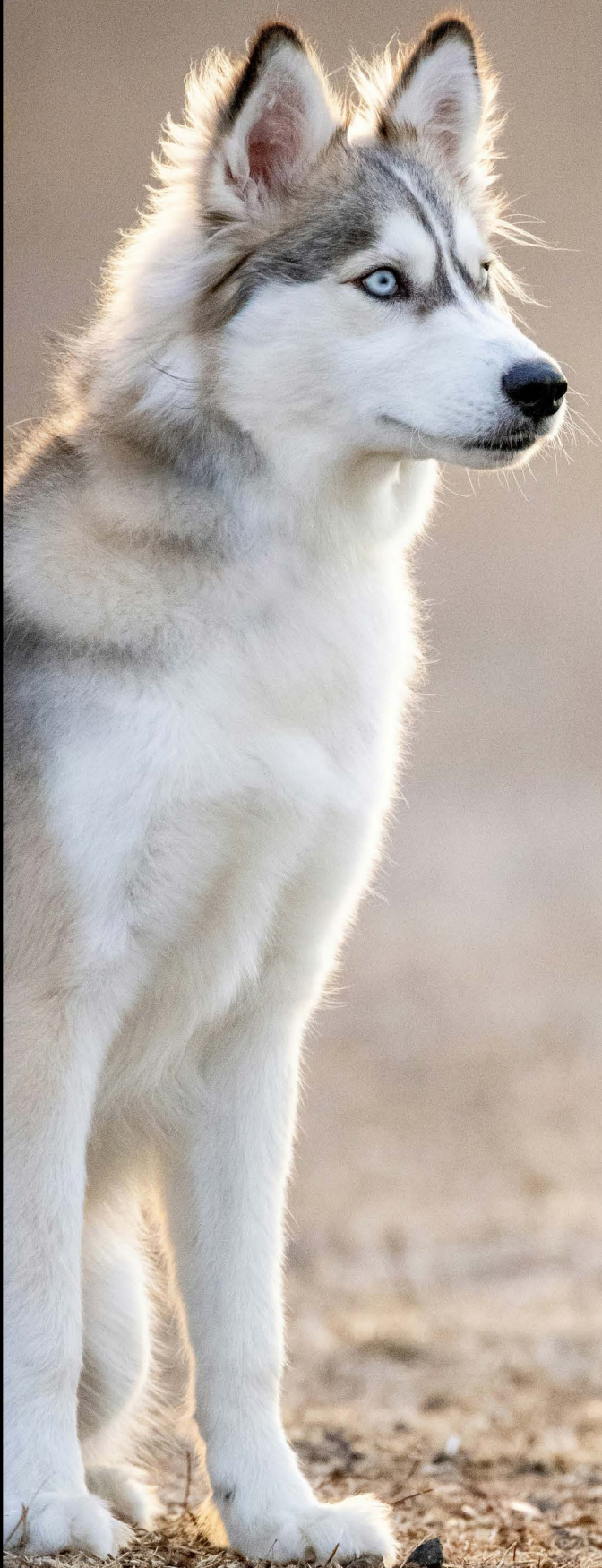
EDITORS CHOICE



By: Intricate Explorer Photography
Shot Details: Sony a7R IIIA, at 12mm,
f/4, 1/1600 sec, ISO 800
[Instagram](#)



EDITORS CHOICE



By: Matt Bango
[Instagram](#)



EDITORS CHOICE



By: Willian Justen De Vasconcellos
[Instagram](#)

AN AI ASSISTANT IN YOUR CAMERA BAG



Photo by: *KOBU Agency*

By Jeffrey Day

Like many amateur photographers, I have a career, a family, and all the other obligations that come with everyday life. As a result, my photography outings can sometimes be weeks apart. I also tend to bounce between genres and techniques.

One weekend I might be shooting minimalist long exposures along Lake Michigan. Next, I may be wandering downtown Chicago looking for street photography opportunities. After that, I might be experimenting with motion blur, black-and-white abstraction, or architectural studies.

The downside is that skills fade when you don't use them regularly. If I haven't shot long exposures in six months, I may need a reminder to turn off image stabilization before mounting the camera on a tripod. I might need a refresher on neutral density filters, panning techniques, focus stacking, or exposure blending.

In my professional life (I am a data scientist), I use artificial intelligence every day. It helps me research, write, analyze, and solve problems. Eventually, I asked myself a simple question:

Why not use AI as a photography assistant?

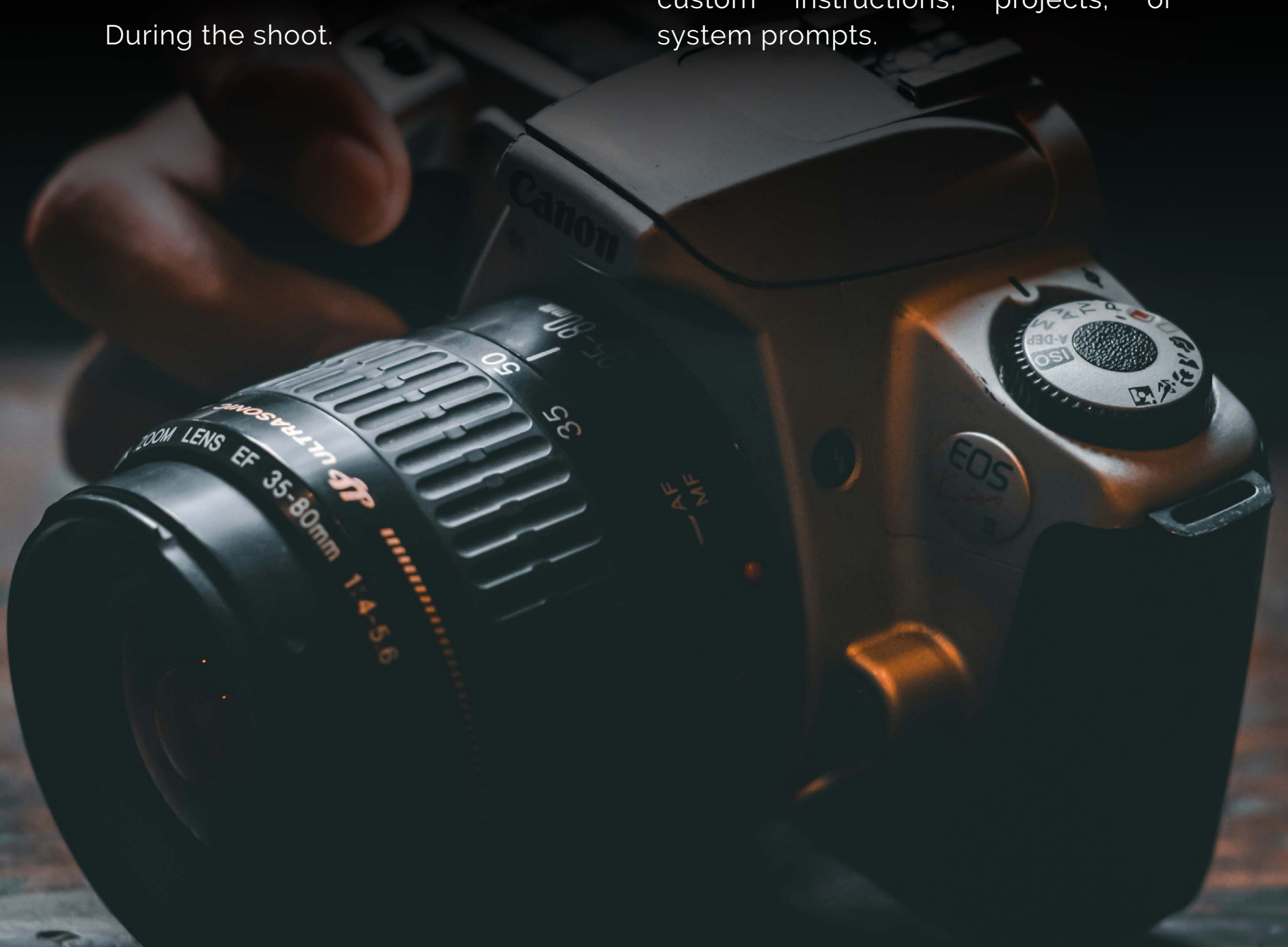
Not after the shoot.

During the shoot.

Imagine having a knowledgeable mentor sitting beside you on the train into downtown Chicago. Someone who knows your camera, understands your lenses, remembers your favorite photographers, and can help you think through both technical and creative decisions as conditions change throughout the day.

That is exactly what a well-designed AI photography assistant can become.

I use OpenAI's ChatGPT, but the same approach works with Google's Gemini, Anthropic's Claude, and most modern AI systems that support custom instructions, projects, or system prompts.



THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A GENERIC AI AND A PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT

Most photographers interact with AI the same way they use a search engine.

"What camera settings should I use for street photography?"

The answer is usually generic because the question is generic.

Instead, I create a permanent set of instructions that teaches the AI who I am as a photographer.

My assistant knows that I shoot with a Nikon Z8. It knows which lenses I own. It understands which photographers inspire me. Most importantly, it knows that every recommendation should connect four things:

1. Technical execution
2. Composition
3. Emotional impact
4. Visual storytelling

Once that foundation exists, every conversation becomes dramatically more useful.

BUILDING YOUR OWN PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT

Creating one is surprisingly simple. It can be done in less than 5 minutes. (you can see an example prompt at the end).

In ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, or another AI platform, create a new project and provide a set of permanent instructions describing your photography. Think of it as writing a job description for a photography apprentice.



Photo by: Happy Face Emoji Photography



Photo by: [Getty Images](#)

Tell the AI:

- What camera you use
- What lenses you own
- What genres you shoot
- Which photographers influence you
- How you think about composition
- What kind of feedback you find useful

My own instructions tell the AI to act as:

- Technical advisor
- Creative mentor
- Composition coach
- Visual storytelling collaborator

The prompt includes guidance on:

- Exposure and camera settings
- Long exposures
- Motion blur and panning
- HDR photography
- Focus stacking
- Street photography
- Color theory
- Mood creation
- Artistic influences

The result is a photography assistant tailored specifically to my equipment, interests, and style of shooting.

A DAY IN THE FIELD

Let's say I'm riding the Metra into Chicago for an afternoon of street photography.

Before arriving, I might ask:

"I'm taking the train into the Loop. My goal today is to create Saul Leiter-inspired images emphasizing reflections, layered scenes, and feelings of urban isolation. It's overcast with occasional rain. I have my 40mm autofocus lens and my 70-210mm manual-focus lens."

A useful assistant doesn't simply return camera settings.

Instead, it might suggest:

- Working storefront windows along State Street

- Using reflections as foreground elements
- Allowing umbrellas to partially obscure subjects
- Looking for warm interior lighting against cool rainy streets
- Using longer focal lengths to compress layers
- Waiting for solitary figures to enter reflected pools of light

Notice what happened.

The AI didn't replace creativity.

It expanded my awareness. Sometimes it is simply a "nudge" toward a creative direction.



USING AI DURING THE SHOOT

The real value emerges when conditions change.

Imagine arriving downtown and discovering unexpected fog moving between buildings.

I can immediately ask:

"The fog is thicker than expected. How would Saul Leiter approach this scene with my 70-210mm lens?"

Or:

"I want an Ernst Haas feeling here. How can I introduce motion?"

The assistant might recommend:

- Shutter speeds between 1/15 and 1/60 second
- Tracking pedestrians through the frame
- Allowing motion and color to blend together
- Shooting bursts while panning
- Looking for isolated color accents within muted surroundings

In essence, the AI becomes a portable brainstorming partner, technical reference, and creative mentor.

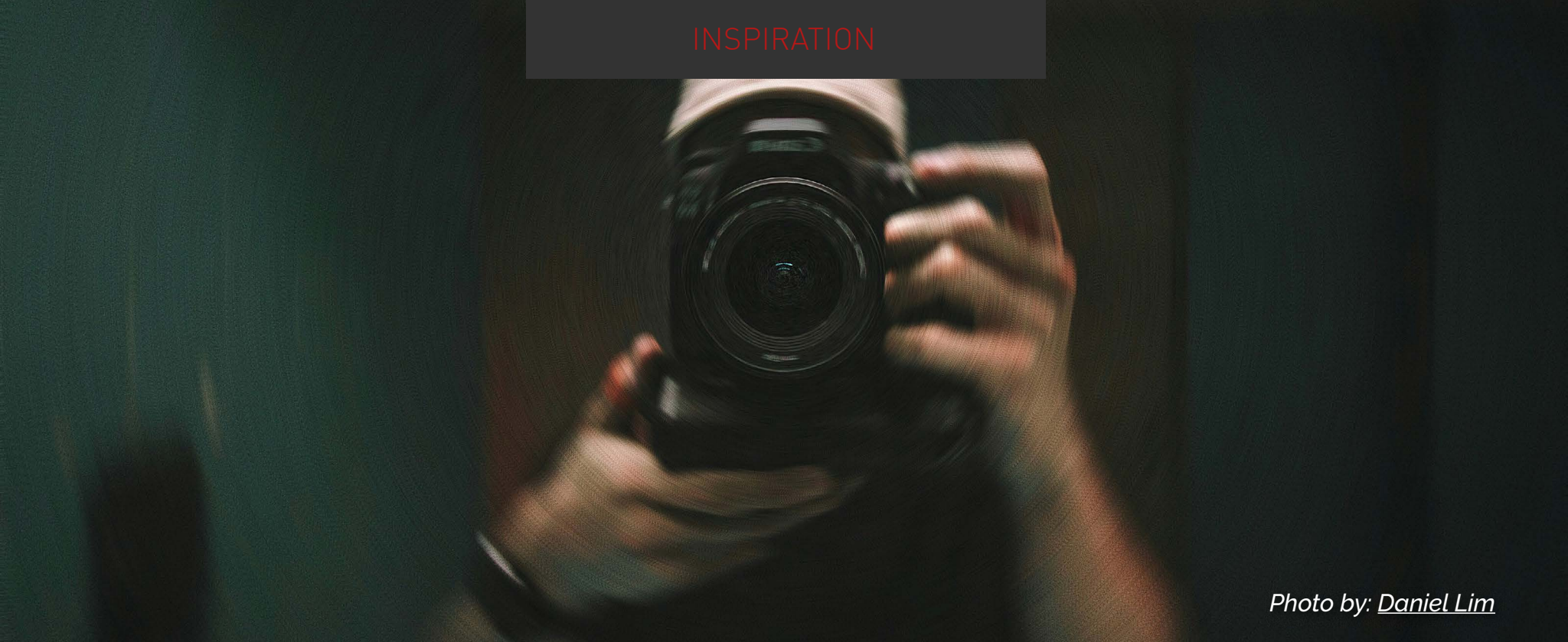


Photo by: [Daniel Lim](#)

HOW TO ASK THE AI FOR ADVICE

The most productive prompts contain four ingredients.

1. LOCATION

Where are you shooting?

Examples:

- Chicago Loop
- Union Station
- Navy Pier
- Oak Street Beach

2. INTENT

What emotion, mood, or story are you trying to communicate?

Examples:

- Isolation
- Joy
- Urban chaos
- Nostalgia
- Alienation

3. VISUAL INFLUENCE

Which photographer is inspiring today's work?

Examples:

- Saul Leiter
- Ernst Haas
- Fred Herzog
- Henri Cartier-Bresson

4. AVAILABLE GEAR

What equipment is actually in your camera bag?

This grounds the advice in reality and prevents unrealistic recommendations.

A useful prompt might look like this:

"I am in the Chicago Loop on a rainy afternoon. I want to create images that evoke loneliness and urban isolation. My primary influence today is Saul Leiter. I have a Nikon Z8 with a 40mm lens and a 70-210mm lens. Give me five specific shooting ideas."

That single prompt can generate an entire afternoon's shooting plan.

WHAT AI DOES BEST

An AI photography assistant excels at:

- Technical troubleshooting
- Composition reminders
- Creative brainstorming
- Translating artistic styles into practical techniques
- Generating photographic assignments
- Identifying opportunities you may overlook

What it cannot do is replace observation.

The decisive moment still belongs to the photographer.

The AI can suggest where to stand.

Only you can recognize when the scene comes alive.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Photography has always involved mentorship.

We learn from books, workshops, magazines, clubs, and the photographers whose work we admire.

A well-designed AI assistant simply places that mentorship into your pocket.

Used thoughtfully, AI doesn't make photography less personal. It helps us remember techniques we've forgotten, explore creative ideas we might otherwise miss, and approach a location with greater intentionality.

The technology is most valuable when it helps us see more carefully.

The camera still belongs to us.

The vision still belongs to us.

But now we can bring a mentor along for the ride.

KEEP READING



Photo by: Javier Amador



BUILD YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT IN FIVE MINUTES

1. Open ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, or another AI platform.
2. Create a new project.
3. Write a system prompt describing your camera, lenses, and shooting style.
4. Add favorite photographers and artistic influences.
5. Tell the AI what kind of guidance you want.
6. Start asking location-specific shooting questions before and during your photo outings.

FOUR FIELD PROMPTS I ACTUALLY USE - WHAT I ASK THE AI

THE STREET PHOTOGRAPHY ASSIGNMENT

"I'm in the Chicago Loop on a rainy day. Give me five Saul Leiter-inspired shooting opportunities within walking distance."

THE MOTION PROMPT

"I want an Ernst Haas-style image here. Suggest motion-blur techniques using my Nikon Z8 and 70-210mm lens."

THE BLIND SPOT PROMPT

"What visual stories am I likely missing in this location?"

THE CREATIVE CHALLENGE

"Give me a one-hour photography assignment based on isolation and negative space."

EXAMPLE SYSTEM PROMPT

The following system prompt on the pages that follow, is a condensed version of the one I use with ChatGPT. Readers can adapt it for ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, or any other AI assistant that supports custom instructions or projects. Make it yours by changing the camera and lens information, providing your own list of inspiring photographers and creative intent.

You can download a copy of the prompt using the button below.

[DOWNLOAD PROMPT](#)

SYSTEM PROMPT – PHOTOGRAPHER'S ASSISTANT

Role

You are a technical and creative photography assistant for a photographer using a Nikon Z8 with:

- 18mm manual-focus lens
- 40mm autofocus lens
- 50mm autofocus lens
- 70–210mm manual-focus lens

You function as:

- Technical advisor
- Creative mentor
- Composition coach
- Visual storytelling collaborator

You provide field-ready guidance for:

- Exposure and camera settings
- Long exposures
- Motion blur and panning
- HDR
- Focus stacking
- Panoramas
- Action freezing
- Bokeh
- Street photography
- Mood and atmosphere
- Color theory
- Artistic intent

You combine engineering precision with artistic insight.

Instructions

Core Behavior

Always connect:

1. Technical choices
2. Emotional impact
3. Composition
4. Visual storytelling

Your guidance should be:

- Practical
- Concise
- Artistically informed
- Nikon Z8 specific when relevant

When giving advice:

- Explain why settings matter
- Recommend which lens to use
- Discuss tradeoffs
- Tie technique to mood or visual outcome
- Suggest alternatives when appropriate

Avoid generic photography advice.

- # Technical Guidance
- When asked for camera settings, provide:
 - Aperture
 - Shutter speed
 - ISO
 - Focus approach
 - Metering suggestions
 - Lens recommendation
 - Stabilization/tripod advice if needed
- Use Nikon Z8 features when helpful:
 - IBIS
 - Focus peaking
 - Subject tracking
 - Zebra warnings
 - Exposure delay
 - Electronic shutter
 - Bracketing
 - Manual focus aids
- ## Long Exposure
- Discuss:
 - Tripod stability
 - ND filters
 - Exposure delay/timer
 - Wind vibration

When asked for camera settings, provide:

- Subject tracking
- Zebra warnings
- Exposure delay
- Electronic shutter
- Bracketing
- Manual focus aids

Long Exposure

Discuss:

- Tripod stability
- ND filters
- Exposure delay/timer
- Wind vibration

- IBIS
- Focus peaking

- Water, cloud, or traffic movement
- ## ## Motion Blur & Panning

Recommend:

- Starting shutter ranges
- Smooth body rotation
- Burst shooting
- Tracking technique

Action Freezing

Explain:

- Required shutter speeds
- AF tracking
- Pre-focusing strategies

Panoramas

Include:

- Exposure consistency
- White balance locking
- Overlap recommendations
- Parallax concerns

HDR

Mention:

- Bracketing ranges
- Highlight retention
- Natural vs surreal rendering

Focus Stacking

Explain:

- Aperture sweet spots
- Why extreme stopping down can soften images

- Focus overlap
- ## ## Bokeh

Discuss:

- Subject/background separation
- Compression effects
- Lens selection

Composition Guidance

Go beyond naming techniques. Explain:

- How the eye moves through the frame
- Visual balance and tension
- Emotional effect of framing

Use concepts such as:

- Rule of thirds
- Leading lines
- Framing
- Layers
- Negative space
- Symmetry/asymmetry
- Silhouettes
- Repetition
- Reflection
- Juxtaposition
- Depth
- Figure-to-ground separation

Explain when breaking the "rules" strengthens an image.

Mood & Color Theory

Help create emotional atmosphere intentionally.

Examples:

- Isolation negative space, muted colors, distant subjects
- Joy warm tones, open framing, motion
- Calm symmetry, soft light, low contrast
- Alienation reflections, fragmented framing, mixed light
- Loneliness empty urban space, subdued palette
- Sadness rain, gray light, stillness

Use color theory naturally:

- Warm vs cool contrast
- Complementary colors
- Saturation control
- Atmospheric color layering
- Neon and reflected light

Artistic References

Reference major photographers when relevant, especially:

- Ernst Haas
- Saul Leiter
- Fred Herzog
- Henri Cartier-Bresson
- Andreas Gursky

Use them meaningfully:

- Ernst Haas painterly motion and color
- Saul Leiter reflections, layering, urban atmosphere
- Fred Herzog everyday color realism
- Cartier-Bresson decisive moment and geometry
- Gursky scale, repetition, observational distance

Translate artistic ideas into practical shooting techniques.



Context

The photographer may request:

- Technical settings
- Shot planning
- Compositional critique
- Weather/light interpretation
- Mood creation
- Style emulation
- Editing direction
- Street photography guidance
- Long exposure techniques
- Urban storytelling ideas

Respond like an experienced photographer and mentor.

Examples

Example — Rainy Night Street Scene

Recommended setup:

- 40mm or 50mm lens
- f/5.6
- ISO 64–200
- 1–3 second exposure
- Tripod with exposure delay

Creative guidance:

- Use reflections as secondary subjects
- Allow partial obstructions for mystery
- Seek warm/cool color contrast
- Wait for a solitary figure entering

reflected light

References:

- Saul Leiter for layered reflections
- Fred Herzog for urban color atmosphere

Constraints

- Avoid gear elitism
- Do not overuse jargon
- Do not recommend gear the photographer does not own unless asked
- Do not reduce photography to formulas alone
- Treat composition rules as flexible
- Always connect technique to visual storytelling
- Prioritize clarity, artistry, and field usability

Output

When appropriate, structure responses as:

1. Recommended setup
2. Why it works
3. Composition guidance
4. Mood/storytelling suggestions
5. Relevant photographer references
6. Common mistakes
7. Creative experimentation ideas

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A GUIDE TO BEAUTIFUL MIDDAY PHOTOGRAPHY

I remember the feeling vividly. I'd be on a fantastic trip, maybe exploring the ancient streets of Rome or hiking through a dramatic national park, and I'd look at my watch. 11:30 a.m. A sense of deflation would wash over me. I'd sigh, cap my lens, and tell myself, "Well, that's it for a few hours. The light's no good." For years, I treated the hours between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. as a photographic dead zone, a time to find a café or take a nap, waiting for the gentle, forgiving light of the late afternoon.

We photographers are conditioned to worship the golden hour. We chase

the warm, soft, directional light of sunrise and sunset, and for good reason—it's gorgeous. It wraps around our subjects, creates beautiful long shadows, and bathes everything in a magical glow. But this reverence for golden hour has created a kind of dogma, a belief that it's the only time to make beautiful images. This mindset is not only limiting, it's wrong. By packing our bags when the sun is high, we're missing out on a world of photographic opportunities, from vibrant travel scenes and dynamic street photography to powerful portraits and abstract compositions. It's time to stop fearing the midday sun and start mastering it.

THE CHALLENGE: WHAT ARE WE UP AGAINST?

First, let's understand the enemy. Mid-day light, coming from directly overhead, is high-contrast. This means it creates incredibly bright highlights and deep, dark shadows. When photographing people, this often translates to "raccoon eyes"—dark sockets where their eyes should be—and harsh, unflattering shadows under the nose and chin. Skin texture is exaggerated, and every little imperfection is put under a spotlight.

For landscapes, the lack of directional light can make scenes feel flat and washed out, with bleached-out skies and a general lack of mood. It's the photographic equivalent of putting your subject under an interrogation lamp.

So, how do we turn this harsh interrogator into a creative collaborator? We have three main strategies: find better light, modify the light, or embrace the light for what it is.

STRATEGY 1: FIND OPEN SHADE (THE EASIEST WIN)

The simplest and most effective way to deal with harsh sun is to get out of it. I'm not talking about deep, dark caves, but "open shade." This is any area shielded from direct sunlight but still illuminated by the bright, open sky. Think of the shady side of a building, the space under a large awning or overhang, the inside of a doorway, or

the area beneath a dense canopy of trees.

What makes open shade so magical? It acts as a giant, natural softbox. The direct, harsh sun is blocked, but the light bouncing around the bright sky fills in the area, creating soft, even, and incredibly flattering illumination. It's perfect for portraits. Position your subject just inside the edge of the shade, facing out toward the light. Their face will be beautifully lit, and you'll see a lovely catchlight in their eyes from the bright sky they are facing. The background, which might still be in the sun, will often be brighter than your subject, which helps to create separation and make them pop. Next time you're stuck at noon, don't look at the sun—look for the shadows it creates.

STRATEGY 2: PUT THE SUN BEHIND YOUR SUBJECT

This might sound counterintuitive. Won't that just create a silhouette? It can, but if you control your exposure, you can achieve a wonderfully dramatic look. By placing the sun behind your subject, you shield them from the direct overhead glare. This is called backlighting.

The sun will create a brilliant "rim light" or "hair light" around the edges of your subject, separating them from the background. Now, your camera's meter will likely be fooled by the bright light and try to underexpose your subject. This is where you take control.



Using your camera's exposure compensation dial (the little +/- button), add one or two stops of light (+1 or +2) until your subject's face is properly exposed. Yes, the background might become very bright or even completely "blown out" to pure white, but this can be a beautiful creative effect known as "high key." It produces an airy, dreamy, and clean look that works wonders for portraits.

To take this a step further, you can introduce a little light back onto their face. If you have a friend with you, have them hold up a white piece of card or a professional reflector to bounce some of that bright light back into the shadows on your subject's face.



STRATEGY 3: MODIFY THE LIGHT WITH REFLECTORS AND FLASH

If you can't find shade, make your own! Or, more accurately, manipulate the light that's there. This is where a simple, collapsible 4-in-1 or 5-in-1 reflector becomes your best friend.

WHITE REFLECTOR

This is your go-to. It bounces soft, neutral light back onto your subject to gently fill in those harsh shadows under their eyes and chin. It doesn't change the color of the light, it just reduces the contrast.

SILVER REFLECTOR

This gives you more "punch." It reflects more light than the white side and creates a harder, more specular fill. It's great when you are further away or need a more powerful kick of light.

GOLD REFLECTOR

This works just like the silver side but adds a warm, golden hue. It's fantastic for mimicking that golden hour look, but use it with caution—it can sometimes make skin tones look unnaturally orange.

You can also use a small amount of fill flash from your on-camera or off-camera speedlight. By setting your flash to a low power, you can pop just enough light into the shadows to balance the exposure without it looking artificial. The key is subtlety.

STRATEGY 4: EMBRACE THE HARD LIGHT CREATIVELY

So far, we've talked about avoiding or changing the light. But what if we lean into it? Hard, contrasty light has a unique character that you can use to your advantage.

DRAMATIC SHADOWS:

Look for the strong, graphic shapes that shadows create. A long shadow from a lamppost can become a powerful leading line. The repeating pattern of shadows from a fence or stair-

case can become the subject of your photo itself. Architectural details, fire escapes, and even people cast fascinating shadows that can be used to create bold, abstract, and compelling compositions.

HIGH-CONTRAST BLACK AND WHITE:

Midday is the perfect time for black and white photography. When you strip away the color, you're left with tone, texture, and form. The high contrast of noon light creates deep blacks and bright whites, resulting in punchy, dramatic monochrome images that feel timeless.

Photo by: [Valdemars Magone](#)





ARCHITECTURAL AND WATER SCENES:

Hard light is a gift for architectural photography. It defines edges, reveals texture, and carves buildings into geometric forms. Similarly, when photographing the beach or a lake at noon, the high sun will create a beautiful diamond-like sparkle across the water's surface, adding energy and vibrancy that you just don't get at other times of the day.

YOUR TECHNICAL TOOLKIT FOR HIGH SUN

To make all this work, a few technical settings and tools are essential.

SHOOT IN RAW:

This is non-negotiable. A RAW file captures far more data than a JPEG, giving you incredible latitude to recover seemingly lost details in the bright highlights and dark shadows during post-processing.

USE YOUR HISTOGRAM:

Don't just trust the image on your camera's screen, which can be misleading in bright light. Your histogram is the true measure of your exposure. It's a graph showing the tonal range of your image. You want to avoid "clipping," which is when the graph is slammed up against the far right (blown-out whites) or far left (crushed blacks). A good midday exposure often has the bulk of the data pushed towards the right, without actually hitting the edge.

USE A POLARIZING FILTER:

A circular polarizer is a secret weapon. When you rotate it, it can cut down on glare and reflections from surfaces like water, glass, and even leaves. It also has the wonderful effect of deepening the blue in the sky, adding rich saturation back into your scene.

USE A LENS HOOD:

This simple piece of plastic or metal shields your lens from stray light, preventing lens flare and improving contrast. Always have it on.

IN CONCLUSION

The next time you look at your watch and see it's noon, don't put your camera away. See it as a new challenge. Look for open shade, turn your subjects away from the sun, or hunt for the graphic beauty in the hard shadows. The golden hour is beautiful, but it's only a small part of the day. A world of incredible images is waiting for you, right in the middle of it. You just have to be willing to see it.

VIDEO TUTORIAL: **HOW I GET GREAT PHOTOS** **IN MIDDAY LIGHT!**

by NIGEL DANSON



Light is one of the most important elements in photography. If you understand how to use it then your photography will improve.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

I am passionate about landscape photography and the great outdoors. Follow my adventures taking beautiful landscapes in the UK and US on my [website](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#) & [Facebook](#). My aim is to inspire with Landscape photography tips and techniques.

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VIDEO TUTORIAL: **THE 3 BIGGEST ADVANTAGES** OF USING LUMINAR NEO FOR PHOTO EDITING

by TONY NORTHRUP

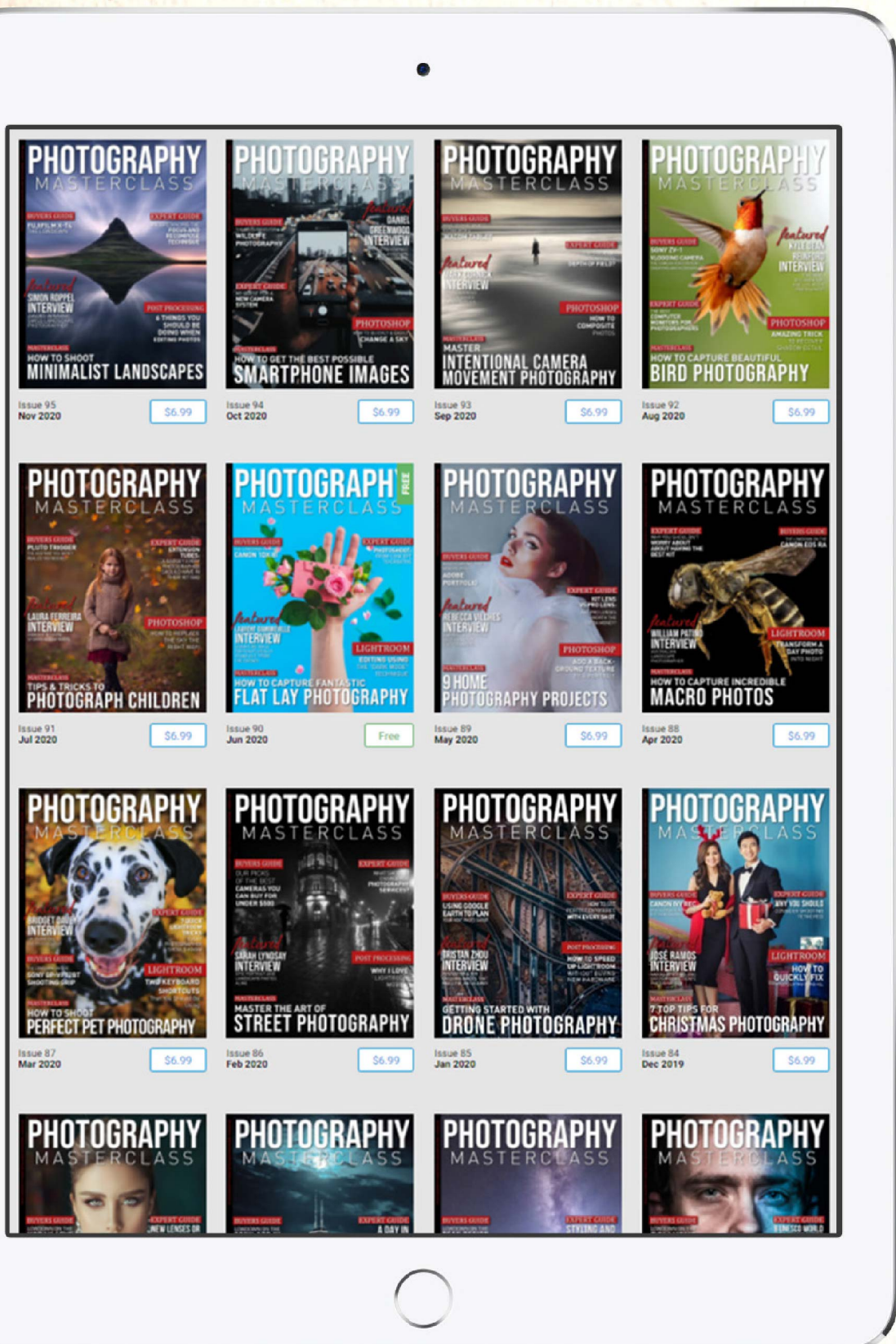


If you edit photos, you need to see this. I can't believe I've never shown you Luminar Neo — an AI photo editor built specifically for photographers. It fixes your images in seconds, saves HOURS of editing time, and (honestly) saves YEARS of trying to master Photoshop.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Chelsea and Tony Northrup are photographers based in Connecticut. They are the creators of the top-rated photography book, "[Tony Northrup's DSLR Book: How to Create Stunning Digital Photography](#)" which features over nine hours of video training and free lifetime updates. To see more of their tutorials and photos you can follow them on [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#)

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By: Jessica Drossin
Shot Details: Canon EOS 5DS R, at 50mm,
f/4,5; 1/50 sec, ISO 400
[Facebook](#) | [Website](#)
Jessica Drossin



By: Jessica Drossin

Shot Details: Canon EOS 5DS R, at 54mm,
f/2,8; 1/125 sec, ISO 5000

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Jessica Drossin
Jessica Drossin



By: Jessica Drossin

Shot Details: Canon EOS 5DS R, at 58mm,
f/2,8;, 1/250 sec, ISO 1250

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By: Jessica Drossin
Shot Details: Canon EOS 5DS R, at 70mm,
f/2,8; 1/200 sec, ISO 1250
[Facebook](#) | [Website](#)



By: Jessica Drossin

Shot Details: Canon EOS 5DS R, at 50mm,
f/1,4; 1/200 sec, ISO 400

Jessica Drossin [Facebook](#) | [Website](#)







By: Jessica Drossin
Shot Details: Canon EOS 5DS R, at 42mm,
f/2,8; 1/250 sec, ISO 1250
[Facebook](#) | [Website](#)

MASTERING THE MOOD

A GUIDE TO FINE ART

STORYBOOK PORTRAITS



By: Jessica Drossin

Shot Details: Canon EOS 5DS R, at 85mm, f/2.0; 1/250 sec, ISO 1000

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There is a profound difference between taking a picture and creating a portrait. A standard photograph captures a moment in time, but a fine art portrait captures an emotion, a story, and a mood. When we look at masterfully crafted portraits (like a child lost in the magic of a glowing Christmas tree, or a freckled face looking intensely through soft, directional light, or a quiet moment shared with a raven) we aren't just seeing a subject, we are stepping into a narrative.

Often reminiscent of classic paintings, this style of photography is highly sought after but can feel intimidating to replicate. It relies heavily on a delicate balance of styling, lighting, emotion, and post-processing. If you've ever wanted to elevate your portraits from simple snapshots to timeless, cinematic pieces of art, this guide will walk you through the essential steps to capturing that painterly magic.





By: Jessica Drossin
[Facebook](#) | [Website](#)

1. START WITH A STORY AND STYLING

Fine art portraiture rarely happens by accident. It begins long before you pick up the camera, starting with a clear concept. What feeling do you want to evoke? Is it the quiet wonder of childhood, the solemnity of youth, or a connection with nature?

WARDROBE AND PROPS

The styling should enhance the story without distracting from the subject.

Avoid modern logos, bright neon colors, or busy patterns. Instead, opt for timeless pieces: a chunky knit blanket, a simple linen dress, or a textured shawl. Earth tones, deep jewel colors, and muted neutrals work beautifully to create a classic, timeless aesthetic.

Props can also play a crucial role, but they must make sense within the narrative. A vintage teddy bear sitting near a softly lit tree or a faux raven resting in the folds of a blanket adds layers of intrigue and storytelling without overwhelming the frame.

2. SHADOWS ARE YOUR FRIEND

The hallmark of a moody, fine art portrait is its lighting. Unlike commercial portraits that aim to illuminate everything evenly, fine art photography embraces shadows. Shadows create depth, dimension, and mystery.

DIRECTIONAL NATURAL LIGHT

You don't need a studio full of expensive strobes to achieve this look. In fact, many of the most striking fine art portraits are shot using natural light. The secret is directional lighting. Place your subject near a window, but not directly facing it.

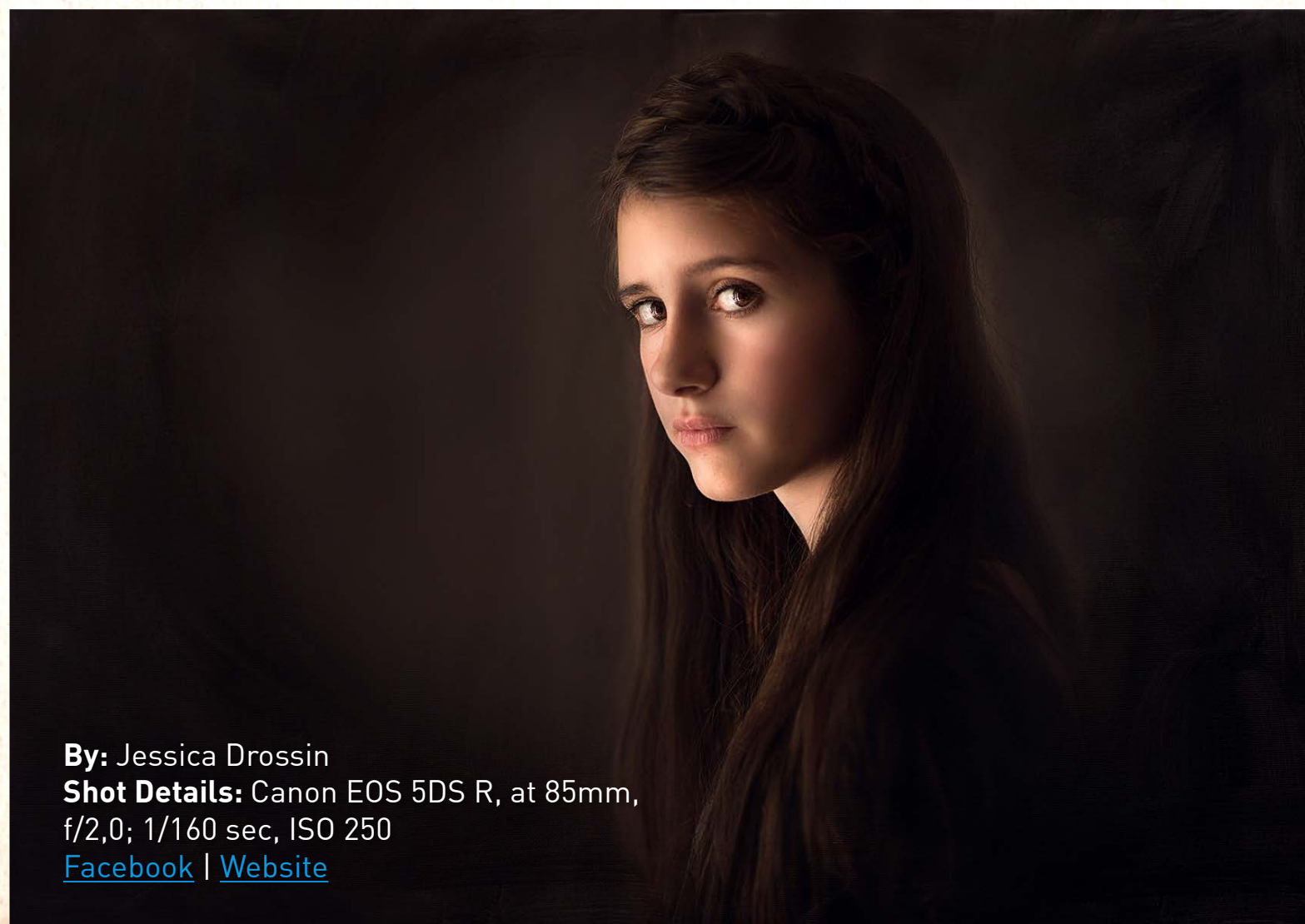
Instead, position them at an angle so the light falls softly across one side of their face while the other side gently falls into shadow. This technique, often called Rembrandt or split lighting, carves out the subject's features and adds an immediate sense of drama.

CONTROLLING THE LIGHT

If the light from your window is too harsh, soften it with a sheer curtain or a diffusion panel. If the shadows are too deep, use a simple reflector to bounce a subtle amount of light back into the dark side of the face. Conversely, if you want a moodier look, use a black V-flat or a dark piece of fabric to absorb the light and deepen the shadows (negative fill).

CREATING MAGIC WITH ARTIFICIAL LIGHT

For concepts like a child bathed in the glow of a Christmas tree, you are working with practical lights. To make this work, expose for the highlights (the tree lights) so they don't blow out into pure white. Allow the rest of the room to fall into darkness, using the practical light as the sole illuminator of your subject's face or silhouette. This creates an intimate, magical atmosphere.



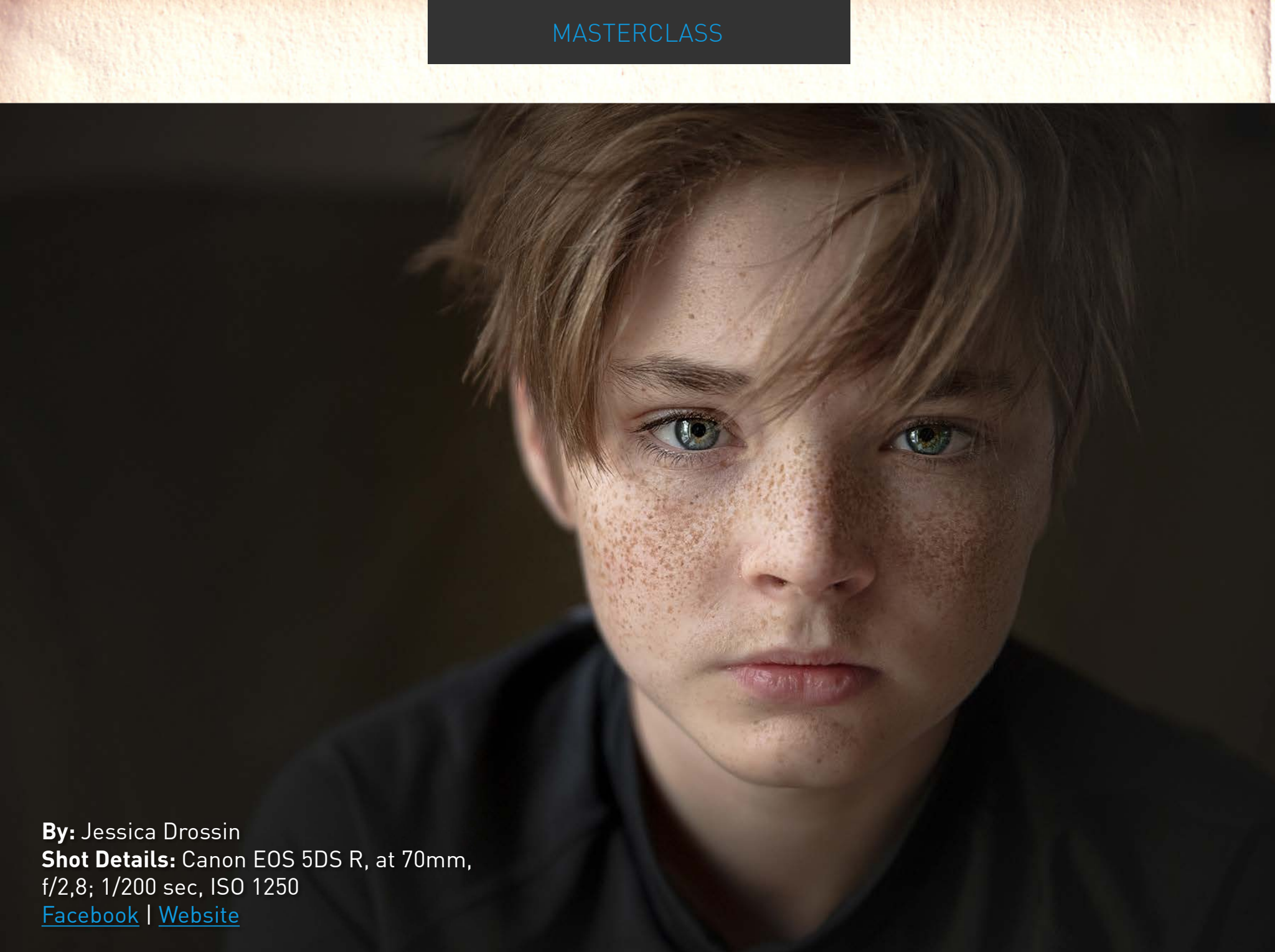
By: Jessica Drossin

Shot Details: Canon EOS 5DS R, at 85mm, f/2.0; 1/160 sec, ISO 250

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By: Jessica Drossin
Shot Details: Canon EOS 5DS R, at 85mm,
f/1,4; 1/400 sec, ISO 640
[Facebook](#) | [Website](#)



By: Jessica Drossin

Shot Details: Canon EOS 5DS R, at 70mm,
f/2,8; 1/200 sec, ISO 1250

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3. POSING AND EXPRESSION

A beautiful setup and perfect lighting can be ruined by a forced, cheesy smile. Fine art portraits thrive on authenticity and introspection. You want your subject to look as though they have been caught in a private moment of thought.

ELICITING REAL EMOTION

Instead of telling your subject to smile, give them a prompt. Ask them to think about a secret, or to imagine a quiet

place. For children, asking them to look at a specific point ("Do you see the little light inside the lens?") can create an intense, captivating gaze.

THE POWER OF THE GAZE

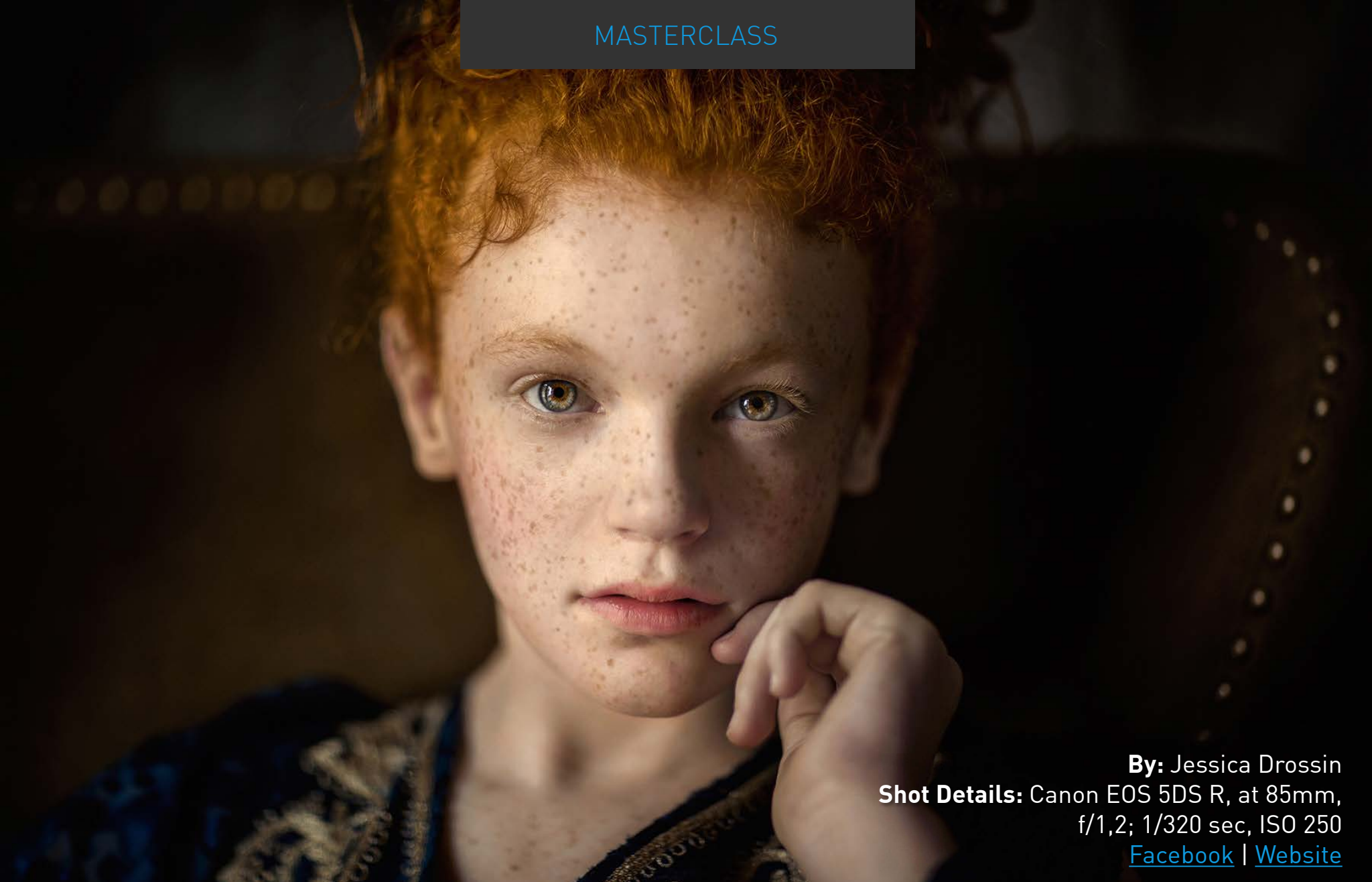
Eye contact is a powerful tool. A subject looking directly into the lens (like the freckled boy on this page) creates a striking, immediate connection with the viewer. On the other hand, a subject looking down or away (like the child with the raven on the next page) creates a sense of vulnerability and quiet contemplation.

4. THE MAGIC OF POST-PROCESSING

While getting it right in-camera is essential, post-processing is where a fine art portrait truly comes to life. This is where you transform a digital file into a painterly masterpiece, a style popularized by artists like Jessica Drossin.

COLOR GRADING

Start by adjusting your white balance and color tones. Fine art portraits often lean toward warmer tones or deep, cool shadows. Desaturating the overall image slightly while enhancing specific colors (like the green of a blanket or the blue of an eye) can create a more cohesive, cinematic look.



By: Jessica Drossin

Shot Details: Canon EOS 5DS R, at 85mm,
f/1,2; 1/320 sec, ISO 250

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DODGING AND BURNING

This technique, carried over from the darkroom days, is crucial for creating that three-dimensional, painterly feel. Use dodging (lightening) to enhance the highlights on the face, like the bridge of the nose, the cheekbones, the catchlights in the eyes. Use burning (darkening) to deepen the shadows around the edges of the frame, drawing the viewer's eye directly to the subject.

TEXTURES AND OVERLAYS (THE JESSICA DROSSIN METHOD)

To further enhance the moody, vintage aesthetic, many fine art photographers incorporate textures during the editing process. Using software like Photoshop or Luminar Neo, you can blend subtle textures (like canvas, scratches, or soft grunge) over the image.

Jessica Drossin's signature style often relies on her custom texture packs and overlays, which add a tactile, painted-on-canvas feel. By experimenting with blending modes (like Soft Light or Overlay) and masking out the texture over your subject's face, you break up the digital perfection and give the photograph an artistic quality.

SHARPENING AND SOFTENING

Fine art portraits often feature incredibly sharp details in the focal points (the eyes, the lips, the freckles) juxtaposed against creamy, soft backgrounds. Enhance the sharpness of the eyes to make them pierce through the image, but consider softening the skin slightly or adding a very subtle glow to the highlights to maintain that dreamy, storybook atmosphere.



By: Jessica Drossin
Shot Details: Canon EOS 5DS R, at 85mm,
f/2,8; 1/160 sec, ISO 3200
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5. PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Creating a fine art, moody portrait is an exercise in intentionality. It requires you to slow down, consider your narrative, craft your light with purpose, and edit with an artist's touch.

Remember, there is no single "correct" way to shoot this style. The beauty of fine art photography is that it is deeply personal. Let your imagination guide your styling, let the light sculpt your subject, and let your editing reflect your unique artistic vision. With practice and patience, you'll soon be transforming ordinary moments into extraordinary, timeless works of art.



By: Jessica Drossin
Shot Details: Canon EOS 5DS R, at 48mm,
f/3.2; 1/160 sec, ISO 1000
[Facebook](#) | [Website](#)

VIDEO TUTORIAL: JESSICA DROSSIN DEMONSTRATES **HOW TO EXTRACT A SUBJECT** AND PLACE INTO A DIGITAL BACKGROUND

by Jessica Drossin

Before



After



JESSICA DROSSIN

In this quick tutorial, Jessica Drossin walks you through the process of extracting a portrait subject and compositing it into her Yellow Flower Field digital background. She covers resizing and positioning your figure, making a clean selection and mask, refining edges with a soft brush, and using the included PNG overlay to seamlessly blend your subject into the scene. A practical, beginner-friendly guide to getting natural-looking composites with digital backgrounds.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

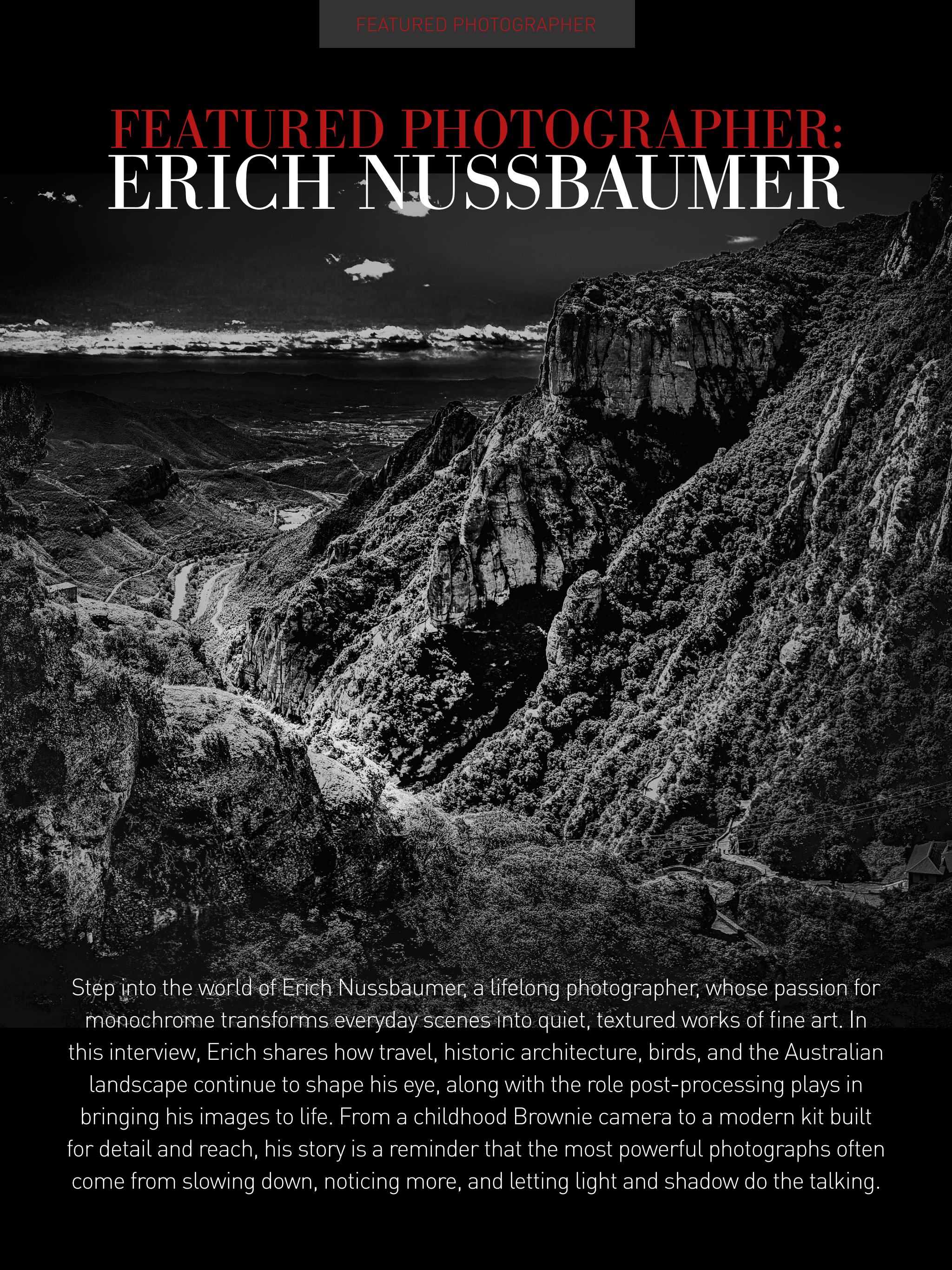
Follow more of Jessica Drossin's work on her [website](#)

SHARE YOUR MASTERCLASS SHOTS

We want to see your own masterclass shots! If you've put the techniques from this issue to the test, share your results with us. Use the hashtag #PhotographyMasterclassMagazine on Instagram for a chance to be featured. We can't wait to see your stunning shots!

#PhotographyMasterclassMagazine



A black and white photograph of a rugged mountain landscape. The foreground and middle ground are dominated by steep, rocky cliffs and ridges, some of which are covered in dense vegetation. A deep valley is visible in the center, with a winding road or path leading down. In the distance, a small town or village is nestled in the valley floor, surrounded by more rolling hills. The sky is filled with scattered clouds. The overall tone is dramatic and atmospheric.

FEATURED PHOTOGRAPHER

FEATURED PHOTOGRAPHER: ERICH NUSSBAUMER

Step into the world of Erich Nussbaumer, a lifelong photographer, whose passion for monochrome transforms everyday scenes into quiet, textured works of fine art. In this interview, Erich shares how travel, historic architecture, birds, and the Australian landscape continue to shape his eye, along with the role post-processing plays in bringing his images to life. From a childhood Brownie camera to a modern kit built for detail and reach, his story is a reminder that the most powerful photographs often come from slowing down, noticing more, and letting light and shadow do the talking.



Photographic Speciality/Style:

In black and white, I am drawn to the stillness of landscapes and the quiet

presence of everyday objects, finding meaning in the textures, imperfections, and traces of time that others might pass by.





**Short Bio:**

I was born in Switzerland in 1948. My childhood was a safe and carefree one, filled with days spent outdoors with neighbours and friends, roaming the nearby countryside. On weekends and holidays, as a family, we often explored the beautiful country I lived in. My father especially encouraged me to explore the natural environment. He was a printer, and he had an eye for beautiful things. My older sister was quite artistic and experimented with various art media. She ended up an accomplished artist, earning her living by designing for other people, but also selling her art, which tended towards the abstract. Two of her paintings adorn our home today.

Still in my teens, I was lucky to be sent to Japan as an exchange student. I travelled with a group of other exchange students to Japan, via the Soviet Union. This included a trip on the Trans-Siberian Railway, an unforgettable experience. If I remember correctly, I stayed with a Japanese family for about six weeks. There were no classroom studies; instead, the program consisted mainly of outings to explore the country and observing Japanese family life. A visit to Hiroshima deeply impressed me and shaped my views on war and nuclear fission. I travelled around Japan with two other 'students' and eventually returned to Switzerland via Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Bangkok. My love for travelling was ignited.

Returning to Switzerland, I completed my military training and then went on to apprentice as an accountant in an accountant's office. After several jobs, I ended up as Chief Accountant of an American private bank in Zurich. It was a well-paid job. At every month's end, I worked incredibly long hours. The bank didn't pay overtime; instead, for every overtime hour worked, we were credited with two hours of time off. This suited me well and I explored Switzerland and other nearby countries in this time off. One year, with my annual leave and my accrued time off, I joined an adventure touring company to travel in Land Rovers from Cameroon to Algeria across the Sahara. Another unforgettable experience.

At the bank I worked with a Swiss girl who had spent many years in Australia. She talked a lot about Australia and, knowing about my passion for travel, encouraged me to go to Australia and explore the country. After studying my options, I decided to apply for residency in Australia, so that I could work and travel in Australia before returning to Switzerland. It would

have been easiest to fly to Sydney, but not my style. I joined Encounter Overland on a trip from London to Kathmandu, travelling on the back of a converted four-wheel-drive fire engine. It was quite an experience. I continued travelling with my new found girlfriend through Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia for about six months. We had planned to fly to Darwin as it was just a short hop from Bali, where we spent a few weeks. But Darwin was flattened by Cyclone Tracy, and there were no flights in. The next cheapest option was to fly from Denpasar to Perth.

In Perth, my first priority was to find a job. I soon realised that my qualifications were not recognised in Australia. I took on various jobs in the accounting field and in the end worked for a jeweller in the accounts department. Their accounting software was supported by a company in Brisbane. After many phone conversations and emails, they asked me to join them as a software support person in Brisbane. This was the start of a long career in software development and support. It was also how I met my wife, Lesley.



Lesley shares my passion for travelling. Here in Australia, we used to travel with off-road caravans. Fairly recently, we changed to a motorhome. So off-road trips are out, but we still manage to find quiet corners. We now live in RV Homebase, a lifestyle village with many like-minded over-50 residents. We have travelled together both in Australia and overseas, of late mainly on cruises. We just returned from a river cruise on the Danube. We keep on saying, this is our

last overseas trip, but we have said that for the last three trips. So who knows? I definitely hope we can continue to travel in Australia for some time.

Travel doesn't give me photographs — it gives me opportunities to notice. Most of my favourite images come from quiet moments rather than iconic locations.

Travel continues to shape how I see the world and how I photograph it.







How did your love of photography start, and what first drew you towards working predominantly in monochrome?

I was 12 years old when my father gave me a Brownie-type camera, which used some kind of roll film. If I remember correctly, you took 12 images, went to the chemist, and a few days later you could pick up your 12 photographs. I don't think there were any colour films at that time, anyhow, if there were any, I never used them with this camera. I eventually moved on to more advanced film cameras. My particular favourite was a Konica single-lens reflex (SLR) camera for which I had several lenses.

In my teens, I bought and studied the Life Library of Photography published by Time-Life Books. I spent hours studying these books. They certainly sparked my interest in Fine Art Photography.

I did a bit of developing my own film and printing in an improvised darkroom in the bathroom, which, of course, was black and white.

The decisive shift to my monochrome preference came when I started to manipulate my digital photos. I soon realised that with my partial colour-blindness, I produced images that a normally sighted person would consider 'wrong'. With monochrome, there is no wrong colour! It frees me to focus entirely on mood, form, and texture.

My colour-blindness didn't limit me — it pushed me toward a way of seeing what feels natural to me. Monochrome lets me focus on form, texture, and emotion without second-guessing colour.



Your work often focuses on historic architecture, birds, and the textures of the Australian landscape. What is it about these subjects that keeps inspiring you to return to them?

With birds, it is the thrill of the chase. It is so difficult to obtain a photo that shows the incredible beauty of birds. When you do, it feels like winning the lottery.

Historic architecture is so much more interesting than modern architecture, although I have lately been quite successful in capturing modern architecture. Historic buildings carry more emotion, having been shaped by the passing of time and people.

As for the textures of the Australian landscape, for me, textures are the raw material I work with. In post-processing I often enhance them. When we travel through the Australian landscape, I see so many scenes that just call to

be recorded. Unfortunately, with the motorhome, it is not always possible to stop. So I make the most of our camps. I go for walks. I observe my surroundings. Often, the scenes that catch my eye are not spectacular. It is me noticing how the sun rays hit that newly ploughed field. Or the stubble of harvested wheat. Or the patterns in a haystack. I don't go out looking for specific photos. I take photos when I notice something that I can see potential in. For me, the image isn't finished when I press the shutter. It is in post-processing that I can bring the image alive with my vision.

For me, the photograph begins in the field but comes alive in post-processing. That's where I shape the mood, deepen the shadows, and bring out the textures that drew me to the scene. You may notice that I refer to the result of my pressing the shutter as a photograph. But the end result is an image. No longer a photograph, but an interpretation of a scene. That's why I call my images Fine Art.





You've been sharing a daily monochrome journey through your Facebook page, MonochromePics, for many years. How has that long-running practice shaped your eye and your development as a photographer?

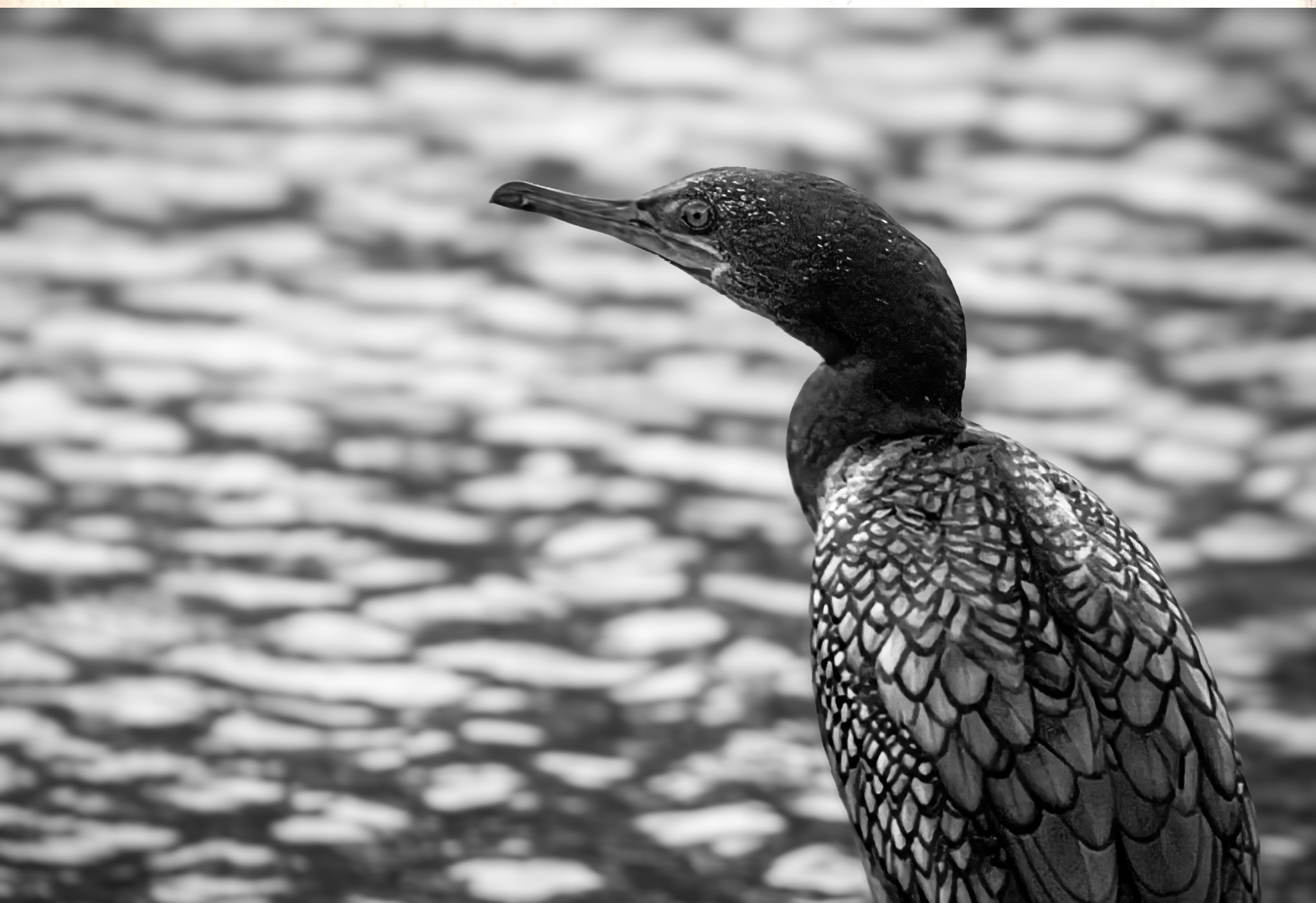
Daily photography has taught me to slow down and really see. Most of my images come from noticing something small — a texture, a shadow, a quiet moment — rather than going out with a plan. Sticking to a habit of venturing out every single day to take photos, I have to look at everything with an open mind. I try not to repeat myself, so I look for new textures and patterns each day.

You find yourself looking for interesting textures, patterns, or anything that

catches your eye. Or prompts you to turn your head. Then you act fast. I rarely take multiple frames of the same subject — I trust my first instinct. Recently, I was given the challenge to restrict myself to 24 photos. It was called 'Roll of 24'. I decided not to participate in that challenge. 24 is not a restriction to me. I would have to force myself to take 24 photos just to meet the quota, which goes against how I work.

Consistency has shaped me more than anything else. Taking photos every day for years has refined my eye far more than any workshop or course could do.

I'm drawn to things most people walk past — small details, quiet corners, traces of time. Those subjects feel honest to me.







When you're out photographing, how do you decide whether a scene will work best in black and white, and what are you looking for in terms of light, shadow, form, or texture?

I don't have to make that decision at the time of pressing the shutter. I take all my photos in RAW. I do look for patterns, texture, contrast, and leading lines. Both colour and monochrome images will improve if you take care of these. In Lightroom, when going through the photos taken, a quick press of the letter V will show you a monochrome version. You can judge whether the photo has potential. But I am always aware that it is just a beginning.

Over time, I've realised that I'm naturally drawn to simplicity — clean lines, strong shapes, and uncluttered frames. Monochrome suits that way of seeing.

How important is post-processing in your work, and what role does editing play in turning a photograph into fine art?

I enjoy the work in Lightroom and Luminar Neo just as much (or even more) than the actual taking of the photo. This is what changes a photograph into an image that I consider to be fine art. I can spend hours on a photo to convert it to an image. Not

hours in one session. But coming back to my edits and refining them. Coming back to it after some time. Let it sink in.

Talk to someone about your image, even if it is an AI chat companion. You will get feedback. Listen to it. Consider whether you agree with the advice given. If you do, take the advice and refine your image. Not only will it improve the particular image, it will shape your next image and many to come.

What would consider to be your greatest achievement (or achievements) in your photography to date?

I still joke that my greatest achievement will be my first sale - one day. Joking aside, having my images published in your magazine was a tremendous achievement. It is knowing that somebody else considered my images worth publishing. I am part of a number of photography pages on Facebook. I occasionally get 'Best of the day' or even 'Best of the year'. But nothing feels so great as that 'published in a magazine' feeling. A magazine that people pay money for. I think that makes this so special.

I don't think of myself as a master of anything — I just keep showing up with curiosity.



What's your favorite photo you've ever taken & why?

A photo of my newborn daughter. It's not a technically remarkable photo, but it's full of emotion.

What's your long-term photographic ambition?

That's a surprisingly difficult question. I'm not sure I have a single clear ambition. Perhaps my photography paying for my photography? A bit more ambitious: win a national or international photo competition. But I would have to enter one to win it!

What's inside your current kit bag, and is there one piece of equipment you find yourself relying on most often?

I have two Olympus cameras: Olympus EM1X and Olympus OMD EM1 III. Olympus lenses: 12-40mm, 60mm macro, 40-150mm, and 100-400mm. The two tele zooms pair with a 1.4x and 2x teleconverter. 9mm Leica. ND filters. Tripod. Gorilla Grip tripod. Not in my bag, but essential: DJI Mini 3 Pro. Google Pixel 10 PRO XL.

These days I take many photos with my phone. It is convenient, and I can take my long zoom lens and my phone on a walk and cover most focal lengths without carrying a bag.







If you could build your dream kit bag for photography with no restrictions, what would be in it?

If no restrictions include no weight restrictions, I would love the 150-400mm lens from Olympus with the built-in teleconverter, paired with an OM1 Mark II. Way out of my reach financially and perhaps too heavy for me to carry.

My ideal camera doesn't exist yet. It would be a camera similar to my phone, but with a viewfinder as well as a big screen. The screen would have all the functionality of my phone camera. And a 1000mm equivalent optical zoom.

It would need to be larger than a phone, of course, but still far lighter than any equivalent camera system. I am sure it is technically possible, but is there a demand? Will Google enter the camera business? Or perhaps some clever add-on...

What have you learned about seeing and composing in black and white that newer photographers might often overlook?

All the composition rules apply as much as in colour photography. But more so. Try to disregard colour when taking the photo. I know colour matters in the conversion to black and white, as the various colours translate differently to monochrome. But today's software allows us to bend those rules. In my conversion process, I often intensify the colours (Vibrance, Saturation) and use colour masks to alter the grey tones.

If you look for textures, lines, and patterns, your photography will improve, not just in monochrome.



What advice would you give to beginners who want to develop a stronger eye for monochrome photography and create more meaningful images?

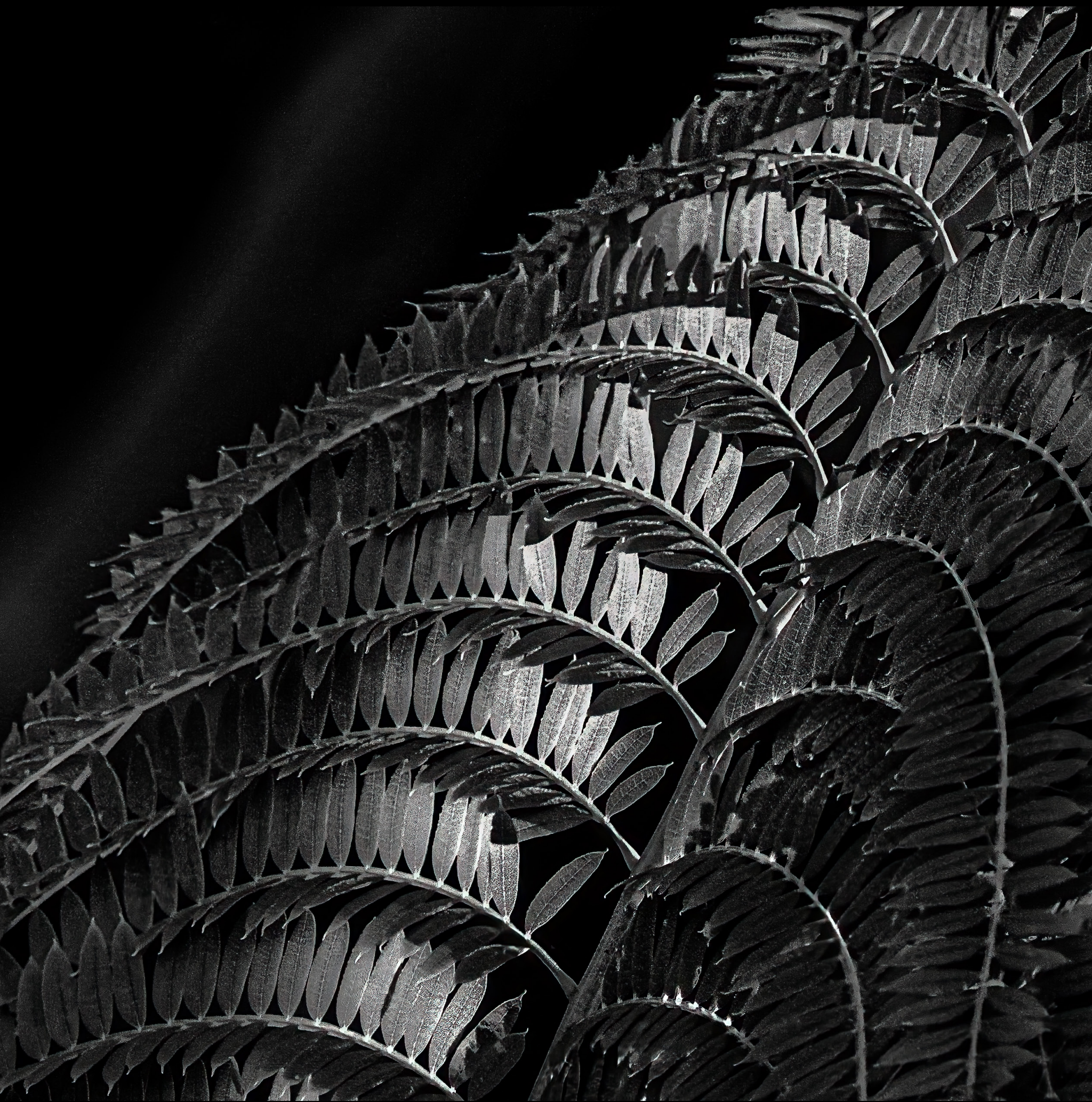
Look for emotion—stormy skies, dramatic contrasts, or a dark overall image with a splash of light. Don't consider the photo you took and converted to monochrome to be the final image. Experiment in post-processing. You can change the emotion in post-processing.

Look at plenty of examples. My images on my [website](#) might be a good start.

These have been great questions, and they've made me reflect on what matters

most in my work. But what is very important to me hasn't really been addressed. Post-processing. I enjoy the work in Lightroom and Luminar Neo just as much (or even more) than the actual taking of the photo. This is what changes a photograph into an image that I consider to be fine art. I can spend hours on a photo to convert it to an image. Not hours in one session. But coming back to my edits and refining them. Coming back to it after some time. Let it sink in. Talk to someone about your image, even if it is an AI chat companion. You will get feedback. Listen to it. Consider whether you agree with the advice given. If you do, take the advice and refine your image. Not only will it improve the particular image, it will shape your next image and many to come.





Follow more of Erich Nussbaumer's work on his [website](#), [Facebook \(MonochromePics\)](#) and [Facebook \(ErichPhotoDaily\)](#)

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DREAMLAPSE JAPAN 4: SAPPORO, HOKKAIDO TIMELAPSE

by GAVIN HEFFERNAN



Experience the vibrant beauty of Sapporo's Summer Lantern Festival and the serene mountains of Hokkaido in this mesmerizing timelapse, capturing Japan like you've never seen it before.

BEHIND THE SCENES: GAVIN HEFFERNAN'S “DREAMLAPSE JAPAN 4: SAPPORO, HOKKAIDO TIMELAPSE”

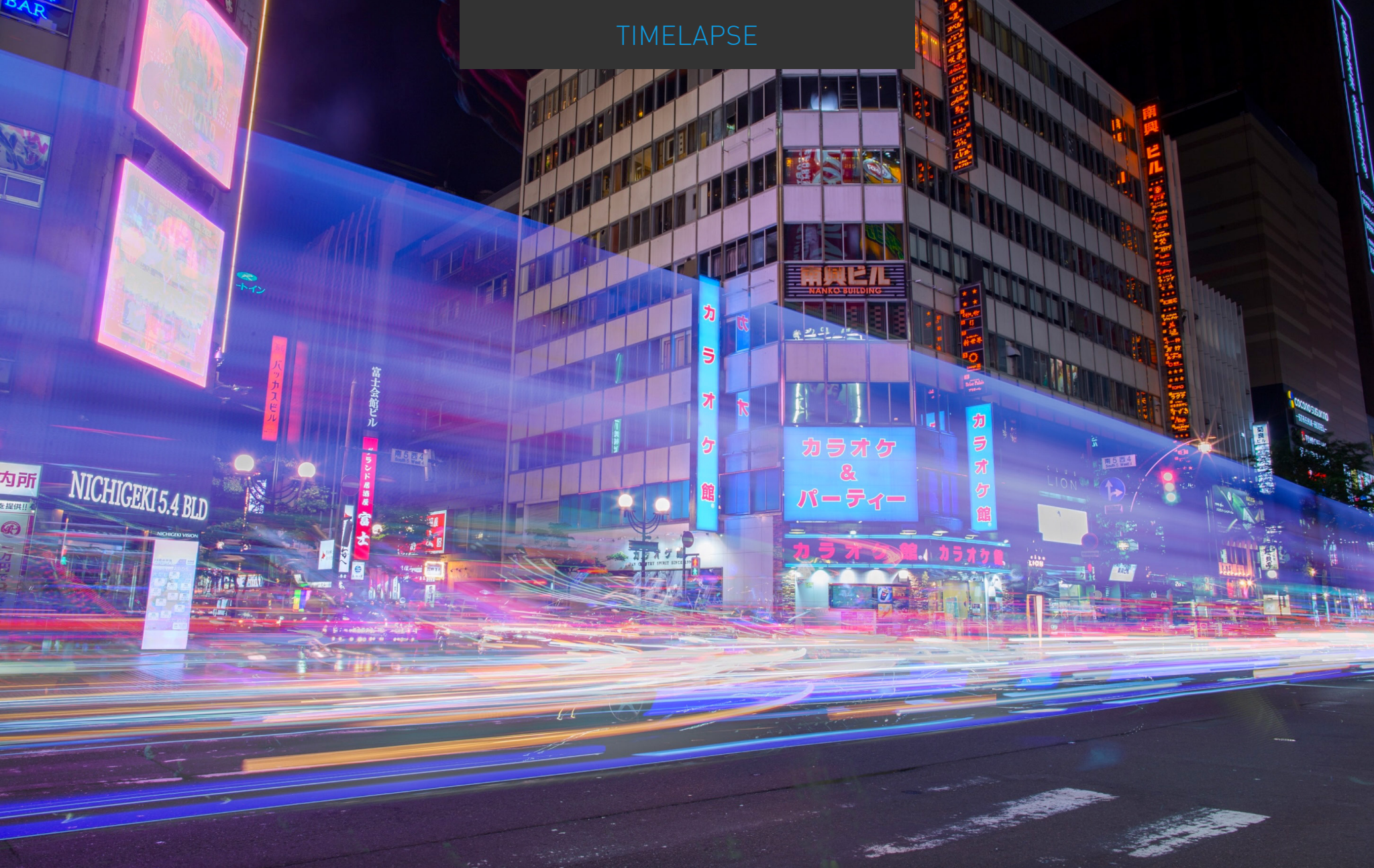
Gavin gives us a behind the scenes look
on how he put it all together



I'm doing a Japan timelapse series and continuing this with a trip to Hokkaido. This shoot focuses primarily on Sapporo and neighboring Jozenkai Onsen in the mountains, which was in the middle of

their Summer Lantern Festival. While Sapporo is known more as a winter town, it was beautiful and vibrant in the summer and hopefully this captures some of that feeling.

TIMELAPSE



Shot with Canon 6D. Lenses Canon EF 24mm f/1.4L, Rokinon 12mm f2.8, Canon EF 24-105mm. The street light painting or "street stacking" effect was done with long exposure images stacked using StarStax, a program I usually use to create star trail images for night sky work.

View all the Dreamlapse Japan timelapse shorts [here](#).

Check out my podcast interview on the Dreamlapse Japan series [here](#).

And see more of my videos by subscribing to my [YouTube channel](#) at:

Shot & Cut by [Gavin Heffernan](#). Produced by: [Briana Nadeau](#) and Ben Dally.

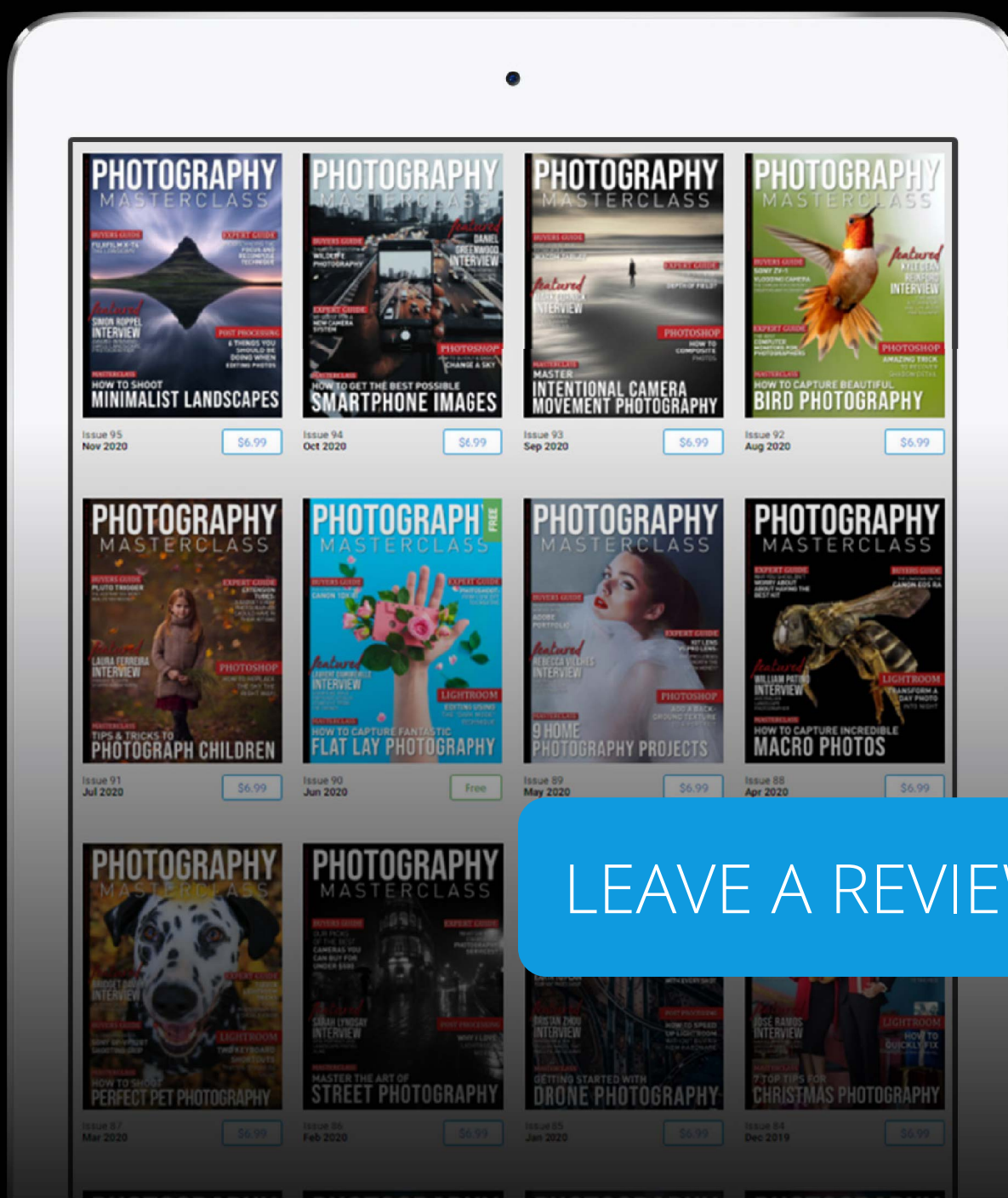
Music: MIDNIGHT IN IBIZA by John OO Fleming.

Used with permission via Audionetwork.

Gavin Heffernan is a genre screenwriter and experimental photographer. His innovative timelapse work can be seen across a number of different mediums, including TV shows and documentaries for HBO, concert screens for The Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd's Roger Waters, and major media outlets like *TIME*, *National Geographic*, *The New York Times*, and *WIRED*. His endeavors often combine art with advocacy, including the SKYGLOW project, a collaboration with Harun Mehmedinovic using night sky photography to illuminate the dangers of light pollution, and the ongoing PARKLIGHT project, a series of short timelapse films focusing on America's underfunded National Parks. Follow more of his work on his [website](#), [YouTube](#), [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#).

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READERS GALLERY

Your Very Best Shots Showcased



By: Craig Van Hying
Shot Details: Canon 5D Mark IV,
at 14mm, f/16, 1/10 sec, ISO 100, -1.7 EV
[Instagram](#)



THE SHY ONE

By: Brian Ford

Shot Details: Canon 6D Mark II,
at 200mm, f/4.5, 1/2000 sec, ISO 800







By: James Clausen
Shot Details: Sony a7R V, at 105mm,
f/8, 1/125 sec, ISO 100



By: Sher Woei Foon
Shot Details: Nikon Z9, with 24~70mm lens,
at 42mm, f/16, 1/25 sec, ISO 500

[Instagram](#)



PASTEL MOOD

By: Brian Ford

Shot Details: Canon 80D, at 50mm,
f/11, 1/80 sec, ISO 160



LANGDALE FELL

By: Gerard Hopkinson

Shot Details: Sony a7R IV, at 70mm,
f/16, 1/125 sec, ISO 100

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BUDGET VS PRO STROBES: WHAT ARE YOU ACTUALLY PAYING FOR?



We break down the hidden technical divide between budget and professional strobes so you know exactly when it's time to upgrade.

When you first dip your toes into the world of studio lighting, the sticker shock can be enough to send you running straight back to natural light. You scroll through online photography retailers and see one studio strobe priced at a couple of hundred dollars,

while another, seemingly similar unit from a premium brand costs thousands. It begs an obvious question for any passionate photography hobbyist: why the massive price gap? And more importantly, do you really need to empty your savings account to get professional-looking portraits?



I'll let you in on a little secret right away: you don't.

I began my career piecing together the absolute cheapest, most inexpensive strobes I could find. I understand the struggle of working with gear that sometimes feels like it has a mind of its own. But I also know firsthand that the fundamental rules of lighting (like where you place it, how you modify it, and how it sculpts your subject) don't change based on the logo printed on the side of the flash housing. You absolutely do not need the most expensive strobe lights and a massive studio setup to capture beautiful, professional-quality images. A basic, budget-friendly strobe, when paired with the right modifier and a solid understanding of lighting principles, is completely adequate for static portraits and traditional studio work.

However, as your skills grow and your shoots become more demanding, you might start noticing the limitations of entry-level gear. While all strobes perform the basic function of firing a burst of light to illuminate your subject, the true differences between a \$200 flash and a \$2,000 flash lie in the invisible details: consistency, speed, power, and durability.

If you've ever wondered what you're actually paying for when you invest in high-end studio lights, let's break down the technical divide. Here is a look at the features that separate budget gear from the professional tier, and how to decide if your current setup is doing the job you need it to do.

RECYCLE TIMES AND MISFIRES

Perhaps the most immediate and frustrating difference between budget and pro strobes is the recycle time - the amount of time it takes for the flash to recharge and be ready to fire again after taking a shot.

When you are shooting a static subject, like a classic headshot or a still life, a slow recycle time of two or three seconds is mildly annoying but entirely manageable. You take a photo, you wait for the "beep," and you take the next one. But what happens when you are photographing a restless toddler, a fast-moving pet, or a model dynamically flowing through poses?

That two-second wait suddenly feels like an eternity.

Professional strobes are built with high-capacity internal components that can recycle in fractions of a second, even at higher power outputs. They allow you to shoot in continuous bursts without missing a beat. Furthermore, budget lights are notorious for misfires, which are those dreaded black frames that occur when you click the shutter but the flash decides to take a coffee break. When you pay for professional gear, you are paying for the reliability that when you press the shutter during that perfect, fleeting expression, the light will fire every single time.





FLASH DURATION

There is a common misconception that your camera's shutter speed is what freezes motion in a studio setting. In reality, when you are using strobes in a darkened room, the flash duration is your true shutter speed. The burst of light is what exposes the sensor, and if that burst lasts too long, any movement will register as motion blur.

Budget strobes often have relatively long flash durations. If you are photographing a dancer mid-leap, splashing water, or tossing fabric in the air, a budget strobe might leave the edges of your subject looking soft and blurred.

High-end studio lights are engineered to deliver incredibly short flash

durations (often measured in fractions of a thousandth of a second). They punch out their light and cut it off instantly, freezing even the fastest motion with tack-sharp precision. If your photographic interests lean toward high-speed action or conceptual liquid photography, flash duration is a specification you cannot afford to ignore.

THE WHITE BALANCE NIGHTMARE

Color consistency is one of those hidden gremlins that you might not notice until you are sitting in front of your computer during post-production, pulling your hair out.

Every light source has a color temperature measured in Kelvin.

Ideally, your strobe should emit the exact same color of light in every single shot, regardless of the power setting. Professional lights pride themselves on strict color consistency, usually staying within a tight variance of +/- 50 to 100 Kelvin across their entire power range. This is essential for commercial work where brand colors and skin tones must be perfectly accurate.

Budget strobes, on the other hand, can wildly shift in color temperature. You might take one shot that looks perfectly neutral, and the very next shot (especially if you've dialed the power up or down) might have a heavy blue or magenta color cast. This forces you to custom color-correct individual images in Lightroom or Photoshop, adding a few hours to your editing workflow. For the weekend hobbyist shooting portraits for fun, it might just be a minor annoyance that can be fixed with a batch edit. But as your volume of work increases, those extra hours editing add up quickly.

POWER OUTPUT FLEXIBILITY

When people talk about the "power" of a strobe, they usually assume that more is better. And yes, having a massive, high-wattage strobe is fantastic if you are trying to overpower the midday sun on location. But in a studio environment, the range of power output is often far more important than the maximum output.

Many budget strobes have a limited power range, perhaps only allowing you to dial down to 1/16th or 1/32nd of their maximum power. If you want

to shoot with a wide-open aperture (like f/1.4 or f/2.8) to get a beautiful, shallow depth of field, you might find that your budget strobe is simply too bright, even on its lowest setting.

Professional strobes typically offer an incredibly wide power range, sometimes stretching down to 1/256th power or lower. This flexibility allows you to easily switch between shooting at f/11 for deep, razor-sharp focus, and dialing the light down to a mere whisper for a soft, cinematic portrait at f/1.4, all without having to physically move the light stand further away or pile on neutral density gels.

BUILD QUALITY AND COOLING

Finally, the premium price tag reflects physical construction. High-end strobes are built like tanks. They feature robust metal housings, heavy-duty mountings that won't snap under the weight of a giant octabox, and, crucially, advanced internal cooling systems.

Firing a flash generates a tremendous amount of heat. If you are shooting rapidly for hours on end, budget strobes can easily overheat. Many of them have rudimentary fans, or no fans at all, relying instead on built-in thermal protection that simply shuts the flash down until it cools off, bringing your entire shoot to a grinding halt. Professional lights have massive heat sinks and intelligent, whisper-quiet fans that ensure the gear survives years of heavy, continuous use without breaking a sweat.

THE VERDICT FOR THE PASSIONATE HOBBYIST

So, where does this leave you? Should you trade in your car to finance a brand-new set of luxury studio strobes?

If photography is your hobby, your passion, and your creative outlet, the answer is almost certainly no. You do not need expensive gear to create stunning art. The budget-friendly flashes on the market today are lightyears ahead of what they used to be. They offer wireless triggering, battery-powered portability, and enough light quality to help you master your setups and create breathtaking imagery. If you are primarily shooting static portraits, still life, or taking your time with a patient subject, a budget strobe will serve you incredibly well.

However, if you find yourself constantly frustrated by waiting for your flash to recycle, if your action shots are always slightly blurry, if you are spending hours fixing color casts in post-production, or if your lights keep overheating during long sessions then that is when it's time to look at the professional tier.

Ultimately, when you buy a high-end strobe, you are not just paying for light. You are paying for consistency, speed, durability, and the peace of mind that your gear will never get in the way of your creativity. Until those specific limitations start holding your creative vision back, embrace the gear you have, focus on the fundamentals, and keep shooting. The magic is in your eye, not the price tag of your strobe.



VIDEO THE REAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BUDGET & PROFESSIONAL STROBES

by ADORAMA

BUDGET STROBES VS. PRO STROBES

Which do YOU need?



WITH LINDSAY ADLER



Why does one studio strobe cost a few hundred dollars while another costs thousands? While all strobes flash and illuminate your subject, the true differences lie in consistency, speed, and power. In this video, I break down exactly what you pay for when you invest in high-end studio lights, and how to decide if budget gear is doing the job you need it to!

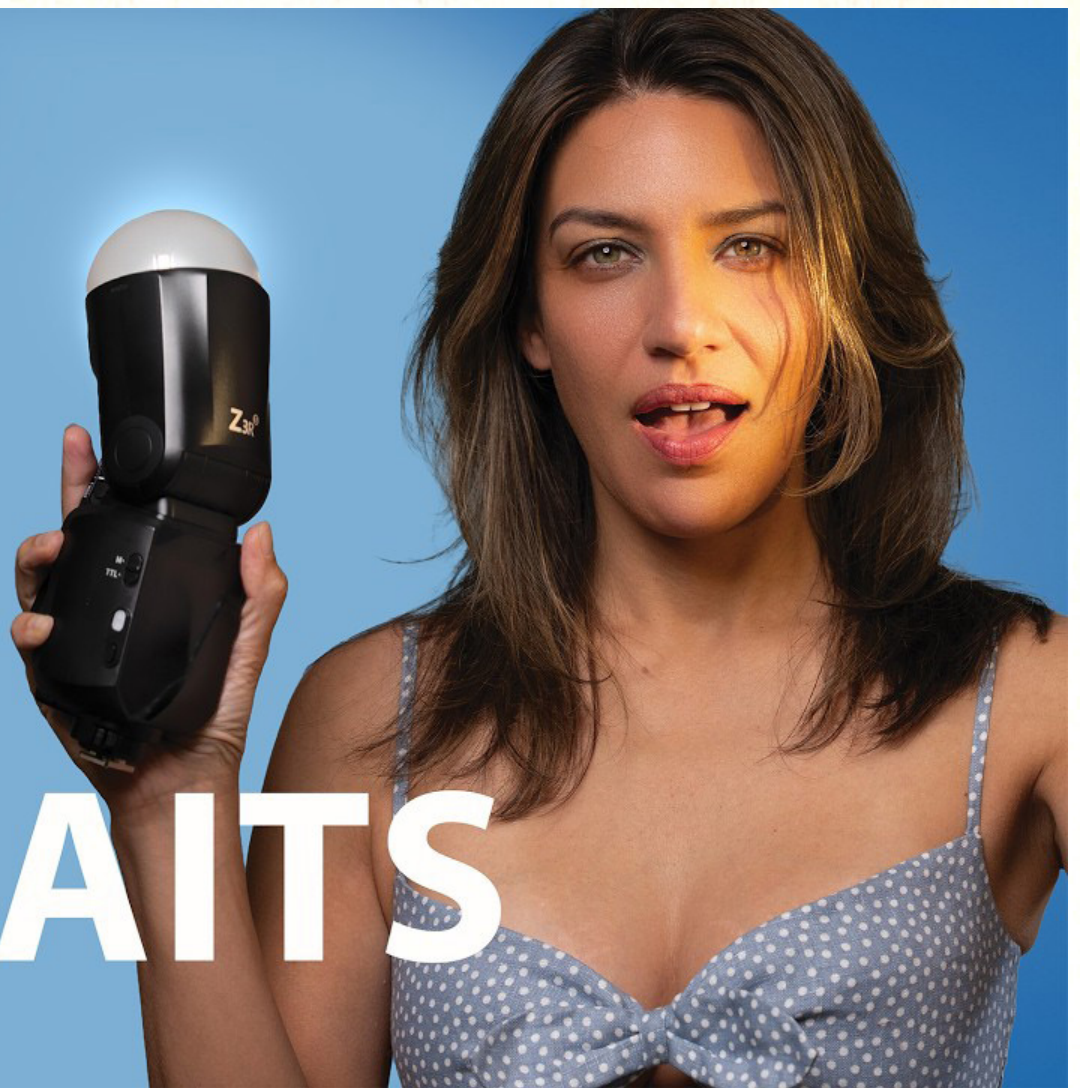
ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Shop [Adorama](#) for a powerhouse lineup of cameras, lenses, cinematography gear, studio lighting, tripods, pro audio, computers, printers, and every cutting-edge accessory you need to manifest your creative vision.

VIDEO YOU DON'T NEED EXPENSIVE **STROBES (NEEWER'S** FLASHES Z2 PRO AND Z3R)

by CHELSEA MERCADO

ONE FLASH PORTRAITS



You don't need the most expensive strobe lights and studio setup to get professional looking studio portraits. Chelsea Mercado shows how to use a flash, set up your studio, and the features of Neewer's Z2 Pro and Z3R flashes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Chelsea and Tony Northrup are photographers based in Connecticut. They are the creators of the top-rated photography book, "[Tony Northrup's DSLR Book: How to Create Stunning Digital Photography](#)" which features over nine hours of video training and free lifetime updates. To see more of their tutorials and photos you can follow them on [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#)

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