

PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHER

P.31 CONCERT LOVE
Capturing the Action

P.36 BEYOND BOKEH
Sigma 135mm F1.4 Lens Review

P.68 FILM NOIR
Mysterious Cityscapes



Sister Act



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FEBRUARY 2026

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Contents

FEBRUARY 2026



©DANIEL SACKHEIM

68



COURTESY SIGMA

36



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58



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Features

50 **Unfiltered**
Laurie Victor Kay has found her artistic voice
By Evelyn Sacks

58 **One Thing Leads to Another**
Heather Crowder combines volume and boutique portrait photography
By Jeff Kent

68 **A Sense of Mystery**
Daniel Sackheim's enigmatic cityscapes evoke film noir
By Amanda Arnold

In Every Issue

- 10 Editor's Note
- 12 President's Message
- 20 On the Cover
- 22 Merited
- 78 Perspective
- 82 Background

Foreground

- 14 Leap of Faith: Daring mother
- 16 Posing Tricks: For authentic senior portraits
- 17 Ask ChatGPT: Prompts to improve your business
- 17 Declutter for Customers: Clean spaces impress clients
- 18 In Flight: The joy of fetch

Success

- 25 What does it mean to you to be bold? Mindset shifts encourage bolder moves
- 26 When Photos Sell Homes: Jonathan Lee found his niche in real estate photography
By Melanie Lasoff Levs
- 31 Feel the Music: Concert photography know-how
By Janet Howard

The Goods

- 36 The First of Its Kind: Sigma 135mm F1.4 DG DN Art Lens
By Tyler Rickenbach
- 42 Location Preparation: A guide to logistics planning
By Mark Edward Harris



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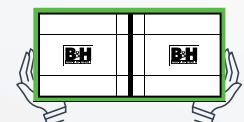


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A Benefit of Service

RELATIONSHIPS ARE KEY TO INVOLVEMENT

This month, we wrap up a year of Q&As featuring current PPA board members. I've been so inspired by reading their stories and insights, from how and why they got involved in photography to their leadership in PPA to their favorite vacation spots and books. As a former trade association board member myself, I remember the commitment, dedication, and hard work it takes to serve.

It's also a lot of fun.

I was struck by how many board members said the relationships they made were their favorite PPA benefit. I can relate. I first joined the Atlanta Press Club, the local trade association for journalists, in the mid-1990s to meet and network with others in my field. I was newly out of college and had just moved to a new city. I knew that relationships would be crucial to my success, both personally and professionally. Within a couple of years, I had volunteered so frequently and attended so many events that I was asked to serve on the board. During that decade, I gained friendships, business contacts, and valuable life and work experience. I am still a proud member of the organization and continue to nurture those relationships. There's something energizing about spending time with others in your industry who know the shared language, face similar challenges, and can offer the best advice.

I hope reading about your board members has connected you more to the organization. Maybe their experiences have motivated you to take another step forward in PPA, whether by joining a Community Network group or committee, taking a photography workshop, or diving into our recently launched content website, PhotoVision.

"I've received so much from our photography community over the years," says PPA board member and incoming treasurer Phaneendra Gudapati, M.Photog.Cr., CPP, "and I feel truly honored to give back to our members in whatever way I can." (President's Message, page 12)

"My heart is one of service; it's all I ever want to do," wrote board member Diana Robles, M.Photog., in our October 2025 issue (page 18). "My love of serving and my love for the PPA community is why I'm here today."

PPA is lucky to have so many volunteers across various platforms, working—and bonding—for the good of the entire membership. As incoming board president Makayla Harris, Cr.Photog., CPP, noted in her Q&A in the August 2025 issue (page 26), "It's funny how involved and passionate you can become when you're working on projects that have massive impact."

Melanie Lasoff Levs

Melanie Lasoff Levs
Director of Publications

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Meet the Board

PHANEENDRA GUDAPATI FOUND HIS VOICE IN PHOTOGRAPHY



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PHANEENDRA GUDAPATI

Every month, I'm using this page to introduce PPA members to one of our stellar board members. This month, I'm proud to introduce you to Plano, Texas-based portrait photographer Phaneendra "PG" Gudapati, M.Photog. Cr., CPP, who has been on the board since 2022. PG was elected by the board to be the next treasurer of PPA, starting in March.

—MARK CAMPBELL,
M.PHOTOGRAPHY HONORARY MEMBER, CPP
PPA BOARD PRESIDENT

How did you become a professional photographer?

When digital photography first became popular, I was fascinated by the instant feedback of seeing images, so I bought a simple point-and-shoot camera. Very quickly, I realized that photography involved much more than just pressing the shutter. I enrolled in evening courses at a community college. One of those classes, taught by Rob Hull, M.Photog.Cr., introduced me to Texas School, which opened the door to a much larger world of learning and growth. Since then, I've continued to study, practice, and explore photography, always discovering new ways to refine my craft.

Why did you want to serve on the board of PPA and how did you go about making it happen?

My first step into leadership happened unexpectedly, when a situation at a local Community Network required me to step up. That experience, and the contributions I was able to make there, eventually led to my nomination for the PPA board. I've received so much from our photography community and I feel truly honored to give back to our members in whatever way I can.

How do you start your workday?

I tend to be more of a night owl, so I usually start my mornings a little later. My routine begins with a cup of coffee and some soothing music, which helps me ease into the day with focus and clarity.

What PPA benefit has been most helpful to you?

The No. 1 benefit for me has been the relationships. While I'm more of an introvert, I feel completely at home surrounded by fellow photographers. A close second would be the Merit Image Review, which has been invaluable in helping me elevate the quality of my work. And of course, I can't forget the vendor discounts.

If you were not a photographer, what profession would you choose and why?

If not photography, I imagine I would have sought another creative outlet, most likely writing or music. I enjoy both as an audience, even if I'm not particularly skilled at them, because they have a unique way of stirring my emotions.

What piece of camera/photography equipment can you not do your job without?

My Color Checker Passport is essential for achieving accurate, consistent color. And while they're not technically equipment, I can't photograph without people in front of my camera. It's the human connection that inspires me to create.

What would a dream photography assignment be for you?

My dream assignment would be to spend time with someone in front of my camera having a long, meaningful conversation about their life: their experiences, philosophies, their good days, and bad. As we talk, I'd capture their story through their expressions, creating portraits that reflect who they truly are.

Where would you travel to if you had unlimited funds and time, and what would you do there?

If I had unlimited time, I'd love to live in a small village—either in India or somewhere in Europe—and enjoy the slower pace and simple things in life. With unlimited funds, I would focus on securing my family's future and planning for retirement, so I could enjoy that season of life with peace of mind.

How would you describe yourself in one sentence?

I'm a simple person who takes life as it comes and embraces its lessons along the way.

What is your favorite book and why?

One of my favorite books is "Amrutham Kurisina Raathri," a Telugu book of poetry by Thilak. Written as a poetic monologue, it captures the writer's inner reflections on the beauty of nature and humanity, alongside the struggles of war, greed, and hope. •

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FOREGROUND

By Amanda Arnold



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Leap of Faith

DARING MOTHER

Wildlife photographer Donglin Zhou of China spent 15 days exploring the limestone pinnacle forest of the Tsingy de Bemaraha Strict Nature Reserve in Madagascar to capture this photo of an airborne lemur. Each day she got up at 3 a.m. to begin trekking, and captured this primate after hiking an hour to get into position. As the sun set, the lemur leapt across a crevice from one limestone cliff to another with a baby clinging to her back. The photo is the Grand Prize Winner of the 2025 BigPicture Natural World Photography Competition, a nature photography contest chaired by conservation photographer Suzi Eszterhas. •



Posing Tricks

FOR AUTHENTIC SENIOR PORTRAITS

When it comes to senior sessions, the tiniest posing adjustments can completely alter the look of an image, according to Emily Drew and Erin Johnson of E-Squared Photography in Wisconsin. Here are some tips they've shared.



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Soften the hands. The hands reveal tension more than anything else, the duo says. Stiff or curled fingers make a pose look forced. So, before you make a photo, ask the subject to shake out her hands and then place them lightly on a jacket collar or on her hair. Sometimes they ask the subject to pretend she has a ring on and gently play with it.



Give the boys something to do. Senior boys often freeze up, Drew and Johnson have found, so they tell male subjects to crack their knuckles, rub their hands together, swipe their palms down their jeans, or adjust their watch. Photograph the movement and the moment right after the movement, they advise.



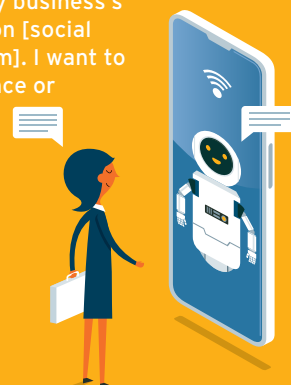
Try the jog-away-and-look-back move.

Have them take a few light steps away from you, then glance back over their shoulder like someone just called their name. This brings out genuine expressions, soft body lines, and sometimes giggles. •

ASK CHATGPT

PROMPTS TO IMPROVE YOUR BUSINESS

Want advice on how to improve your pitches to potential clients or increase your social media engagement? ChatGPT might be able to help, according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. It recommends entering this prompt into ChatGPT for improving your pitches: "Identify areas where I can improve my pitch presentation to demonstrate my value proposition to [my target audience]. My goal with this presentation is to [specific goal]." This prompt could be used to improve your social media: "Strategize ways to increase my business's engagement on [social media platform]. I want to target [audience or demographic] over [amount of time]."



DECLUTTER FOR CUSTOMERS

CLEAN SPACES IMPRESS CLIENTS

Is your studio space clean and orderly? Does it smell fresh? If you want to earn your clients' esteem, it probably should, according to *Entrepreneur* magazine, whose article reads: "Before a word is spoken or a hand-shake exchanged, the physical condition of your workspace is shaping perception."

Research has shown that people judge the credibility and trust of a business based on environment. "Dusty surfaces, clutter, or unpleasant odors can quietly erode confidence, suggesting disorganization or neglect," the article states.





In Flight

THE JOY OF FETCH

During a client session at a former limestone quarry in Augusta, Missouri, something caught Grace Fieselman's eye: A dog launched into the water-filled quarry with unusual intensity after a toy. "I immediately saw the potential for a unique side profile action shot with water droplets frozen in motion," says Fieselman, who runs Grace Marie Pet Photography. To get the perfect image, she'd need to be parallel with the dog's trajectory across the surface of the water. "The only way to do that was to physically get into the water," she says she realized. So, she went in,

chest deep. (See Background, page 82, for a behind-the-scenes shot.)

After that first experience, she decided to create a series. She recruited dogs who were high jumpers and extra motivated to chase toys to be her subjects. Fieselman prefers soft light, so she set up the sessions at sunset for crisp highlights on the water droplets and "enough shadow depth to capture the shape and structure in the dog's movement," she explains.

She used Canon EOS R6 and R6 Mark II cameras, which are ideal for lowlight capabilities at sunset. She at first used a 135mm f/1.8 lens but then

switched to a 70-200mm f/2.8 for a fast action lens that could capture the speedy motion of the dogs in flight. "Having the zoom also gave me the flexibility to get the right composition in camera because I couldn't back up any farther while I was in the water, as then I would've been *under* it."

"It was a huge learning experience to perfect the timing needed to capture the exact moment of the dog's jump," she says, so when everything clicked, it was rewarding. "There's just something so special about photographing dogs doing what they truly love." •



"There's just something so special about photographing dogs doing what they truly love."



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The Miller Bunch

Whitney Minten, M.Photog., CPP

Whitney Minten Photography

Madison, Wisconsin



CAMERA & LENS: Nikon D850, AF-S Nikkor 85mm f/1.4G lens

EXPOSURE: 1/250 second at f/10, ISO 200

LIGHTING: The main light was a Paul C. Buff AlienBees B800 camera left with a 5-foot octabox with diffusion panels, feathered to the right and in front of the subject. The fill light was a Paul C. Buff AlienBees B400 with a Westcott 32-inch shoot-through umbrella. The hair/rim light was a Paul C. Buff AlienBees B800 with a zoom reflector, placed behind and over the back of the backdrop, aimed down at the back of the head of the subject for hair and rim light on the subject. The backdrop light was a Paul C. Buff AlienBees B800 with a zoom reflector and barn doors, which lit the backdrop behind the subject and behind the mat. The barn doors prevented light spill on the subject and the mat.

POST-CAPTURE: "Although the final image is a composite, most of the work was done in camera," says Whitney Minten. She laser cut the oversized mat with ovals and hung it from a backdrop stand. Behind it, she used a DreamEasy DreamFlat from Baby Dream Backdrops fitted with colors that matched the family's home décor. She photographed each of the five subjects individually behind the same setup, keeping their final positions in mind and encouraging the girls to interact with where the dogs would eventually be placed. "The approach allowed me to avoid cutting out hair and fur or fabricating shadows," she says. "Everything fell naturally because the mat was physically present."

In Adobe Photoshop, she combined the five exposures into a single, large layout. She composited the dogs into the same opening. She blended the mat edges, unified the overall color tone, and harmonized the lighting.

OUR COVERS: *Professional Photographer* staff chooses each month's cover image from the top 32 images across each category in the International Photographic Competition.



Unspoken Bond

Beth A. Doyle

Beth A. Doyle Photography
Shippensburg, Pennsylvania

CAMERA & LENS: Sony Alpha 7 IV, Tamron 28-75mm F/2.8 Di III RXD lens

EXPOSURE: 1/200 second at f/6.3, ISO 320

LIGHTING: Beth A. Doyle used a 47-inch Godox octa soft box with a Yongnuo YN560 IV speedlight as the main light, positioned camera left and feathering the subjects. She also used two Godox 12x47-inch strip beehive honeycomb grid soft boxes with Yongnuo YN560 IV speedlights. One was camera right as a fill light and the other was camera right but behind the subjects to separate them from the background.

POST-CAPTURE: In Adobe Lightroom, she made minor adjustments to highlights and shadows, increased the clarity, and converted the image to black and white. In Photoshop, she adjusted the contrast, did some dodging and burning, and removed distractions.

ABOUT THE IMAGING EXCELLENCE COLLECTION: The Imaging Excellence Collection comprises photographs chosen by trained jurors as being the best of the best in PPA's Merit Image Review. The Imaging Excellence distinction is awarded to compositions that successfully address the 12 elements of a merit image. **NOTE:** Lighting diagrams shown here are not to scale. ppa.com/mir

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Medina, Ohio

©KRISTY STEEVES / kristysteevesphotography.com



PHOTOGRAPHER'S NOTE: "I was photographing endangered emperor penguins, who were on a massive chunk of floating sea ice, from the deck of a ship," says Kristy Steeves. "At one point I noticed the way the light moved across a distant mountain. I liked the contrast on the rocks and snow, along with the clouds drifting down over the summit, so I trained my camera on it."

CAMERA & LENS: Nikon D750, AF-S Nikkor 80-400mm f/4.5-5.6 G ED VR lens

EXPOSURE: 1/1,000 second at f/11, ISO 400

LIGHTING: Natural light

POST-CAPTURE: "Antarctic ice looks blue because of the way it absorbs longer wavelengths of light—reds and yellows—while scattering and reflecting the shorter, higher-energy blue wavelengths back to our eyes," explains Steeves. To compensate for that, she slightly saturated some of the blue color out of the image to give it more of a white and gray look. She also toned down hot spots in some areas of the ice and used dehaze in Photoshop's camera raw filter to give the image more contrast and pop.

ka POW!

Brian Baer, M.Photog.Cr.

Baer Studios

Kearney, Nebraska

PHOTOGRAPHER'S NOTE:

"Every winter season we do a pet promotion at our studio to benefit our local shelter," says Brian Baer. "Using cardboard boxes and scrap seamless background paper, I build a custom box with a hole punched through. Cats love it. With a little help from a feather wand, cats know instinctively what to do and how to pose."

CAMERA & LENS: Sony Alpha 7 IV, Sony FE 24-70mm F2.8 G Master lens

EXPOSURE: 1/125 second at f/5.6, ISO 200

LIGHTING: Baer used a Godox AD400 Pro at 1/128 + 0.7 power with a 22-inch Mola Demi beauty dish with a front sock. The light was boomed in from above with a c-stand, and a white bounce was placed below the subject.

POST-CAPTURE: The raw image was imported into Adobe Photoshop with Lightroom, where minimal editing was done to clean up the image and add saturation to the eyes.



©BRIAN BAER / baerphoto.com

What does it mean to you to be bold?

In her book “One Bold Move a Day,” author and nonprofit executive Shanna A. Hocking says a bold move is “one that challenges you to grow.” It could be reminding the server (politely) to bring the mustard you asked for instead of quietly accepting its absence, she writes, or raising your hand and sharing an idea at a work meeting. To prepare for your daily bold moves, Hocking writes about making four bold mindset shifts.

AND MINDSET

Accept that multiple truths can exist at the same time. You can be exhausted and still love what you do. “Find the *and*,” Hocking writes.

HAPPINESS MINDSET

What do you focus on, and how do you approach whatever your current reality is? Happiness can be about where you are now, not after you accomplish X goal.

GRATITUDE MINDSET

Focus on being grateful for the good things in your life, which can help you stay grounded in the moment.

PROGRESS MINDSET

Appreciate your small wins and the positive steps forward on the journey rather than the end.



Which of the four mindsets will you try first, and how will you get started?

Source: “One Bold Move a Day: Meaningful Actions Women Can Take to Fulfill their Leadership and Career Potential” (McGraw Hill, 2023) by Shanna A. Hocking

When Photos Sell Homes

JONATHAN LEE FOUND HIS NICHE IN REAL ESTATE PHOTOGRAPHY

By Melanie Lasoff Levs



IMAGES © JONATHAN LEE / jweimedia.com



Get more insights from the
"Professional Photographer"
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ppa.com/podcast

Jonathan Lee, M.Photog.Cr., CPP, spent 21 years in the U.S. Navy as a jet engine mechanic, drill instructor, and government contractor before turning to photography part time in 2009. By 2017, he was photographing weddings and portraits full time. He thought about "filling in the gaps" with real estate photography. "It's just a house. How hard can it be?" he says was his mindset. "Boy, was I mistaken," he tells "Professional Photographer" podcast host Pat Miller in the episode titled, "How Real

Estate Photographers Make 6 Figures (Without Shooting Weekends)." Lee realized his technical background aligned with the specialized skills needed for real estate photography, so he hung his shingle in his home base of North Florida and got busy.

"I felt like anything in business, you find a need, you plug the need. And I felt like there was a need for somebody who kind of does everything," Lee says, adding that real estate photography is not just photographing houses. It includes floor-

plans, video, virtual tours, interior and exterior images, and aerial photography. “There were a lot of photographers that just did photography or just did this or just did that. I wanted to be able to do the entire package,” he explains, which included earning his commercial drone license.

In 2019, Lee photographed 53 weddings. Since that year, he has photographed four, “because I traded working on the weekends for only working Monday through Friday and making way more money,” he says, adding that in his third year in real estate photography, he made six figures and has been increasing every year since. “If you’re motivated, if you’re a go-getter, if you don’t mind working some pretty heavy hours and a lot of driving,” Lee says, “there’s a lot to be made in this industry.”

BREAKING IN

Since realtors hire photographers, Lee knew he needed to appeal to them for work. The first couple of years, Lee drove around North Florida visiting real estate agencies and distributing flyers about himself and his services. After that initial marketing boom, he says, “everything that I do now is all word of mouth.” How has he kept many of the same clients for his more than eight years of business, and continued to grow? It’s because he knows exactly what his clients need and expect, he tells Miller.

“Their baseline expectations are consistent quality. That’s the name of the game,” he says about real estate agents. “When somebody is looking through Zillow or wherever, that realtor can’t talk to them. The only person that can talk to that client are the pictures and the media that you provide for that realtor. So you are that realtor’s face and brand when they can’t speak. So, they want to align





themselves with somebody who is a consummate professional, that you're always on time, that you produce high-quality results all the time, and that you hold yourself accountable for any mistakes that you may make and get out there and make them right."

Another factor that sets Lee apart is his "lightning-fast turnaround," he says: He delivers to his clients by 9 a.m. the next day, every time. "That's setting myself a little bit ahead of some of the competition," Lee says, "and my clients absolutely love it because a lot of the times they get a listing that just gets dropped in their lap one afternoon and they're like, 'Oh my gosh, I've got to get this thing online. And, you know, I want my pictures yesterday.'"

Lee still markets himself by offering a \$100 credit to each client who refers him and he includes his logo on every floor-

plan he creates. Though realtors are competitive, he adds, they recognize his value can elevate the overall industry. "I feel like my wavelength kind of aligns with really high-performing real estate agents. ... The way that I think and the way that I approach my business is very similar to the way they do," he says. "And they appreciate the fact that I bend over backwards for them and really do everything that I can for them. And most of them are absolutely ecstatic about sharing me with other people."

TECHNICAL EXPERTISE

There are two ways to approach real estate photography, according to Lee:

Flash and ambient technique: This method combines ambient light in a room with a flash. "The flash basically creates a sanitary frame. It can help remove color cast that you're going to

get from your daylight-balanced light that's coming in through the windows and the incandescent light that's coming in from the living room and the fluorescent light that's coming in from the kitchen," Lee says. "It can kind of wash all of that out and give you a sanitary frame to work with that has good colors because you know the color that you're pumping into the room."

High Dynamic Range (HDR): This "run and gun" method, Lee's preferred way of photographing homes, involves taking multiple images of the same area using different exposures. Lee typically does a three bracketed frame and sends the images to an overseas editor, who works overnight on the images so they're ready for Lee the next morning. "They're able to do some tricks and techniques that even I don't understand," he says, adding that having a good editor for this process is key. The HDR approach is quicker and allows him to photograph more homes per day, he says. "So you can go from shooting three homes a day to maybe six or seven homes a day, and you can double your revenue."

Real estate photography does have challenges, Lee explains. For one, it's not necessarily creative. Unlike photographing an Airbnb or vacation home rental, where you can play with lighting and editing, and highlight images of amenities, there is less creative freedom photographing homes for sale. That means "you've got to get it as right as possible in camera," he says, including angles, camera height, camera placement, and composition. "You have to be very, very strong in your compositions because you only have maybe eight seconds to capture somebody's attention when they're looking through those photos online."



Psychology is also at play in real estate photography. When architects design homes, they design the interior to be viewed from a seated position, Lee says. “So, when you go through and you shoot the home, you typically want the camera at about eye level where you’re seated. That way, you can play into the psychology of the person that is looking at the photo, and you can put them in the space without them being there.” Lee understands that psychology and knows his images sell homes. “When I first started this, I thought there’s no way in the world anybody would ever buy a home without actually seeing it in person,” he says. “But if I had a dollar for every time I heard one of my clients say, ‘Hey, we went under contract in less than 24 hours and it was

bought cash, sight unseen, by a guy on the other side of the country, just based off of your pictures and your media alone,’ I’d have a little bit more money.”

Lee is happy to spread the wealth by teaching classes on real estate photography, including a five-day intensive last summer in Miami. Giving back is important so others don’t face the struggles he did as an inexperienced photographer in Chicago. “It was very difficult to find somebody that was an open book that would maybe kind of hold my hand and help me along,” he recalls. “I love helping and I love teaching people. I love sharing what I know and if I can help anybody to have the financial and personal freedom that I’ve gained by doing this business, I’m all about it.”

Real estate photography is a steady, potentially lucrative niche for someone who doesn’t mind driving a lot—as he averages about 100 miles per week—and who invests both in their own skills and in their clients. Being interested in houses is also a perk, Lee notes. “Not every house is a million-dollar house, but I do get to go into some really, really cool places. I’ve shot homes for movie stars and politicians and professional athletes, and everywhere in between,” he tells Miller. “So if you’re the type of person who is outgoing, can have a conversation with anybody, is really all about taking care of your client and just being that linchpin in their business, then this is definitely the right type of business for you.” •

A woman in a black dress is taking a photo of a bride and groom in a park. The bride is wearing a white dress and the groom is wearing a black suit. They are standing on a paved path with trees in the background.

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Feel the Music

CONCERT PHOTOGRAPHY KNOW-HOW

By Janet Howard

In the electric moment before the first note of a concert, Sandra Döhnert is in her element. She has exactly three songs to capture images that will define the performance for those not in attendance. In her 15 years capturing images of concerts, photographing artists like The Rolling Stones, Ed Sheeran, and Ziggy Marley, Döhnert has learned that success is less about glamour and more about reliably doing the work.

Döhnert's career as a band manager led her to photography. At first, she took photos to promote her artists, then expanded on her photography skills to

create images to draw people to shows. Soon, her portfolio meant she was in demand. Most of her business today is in concert photography for venues, press, and the artists themselves.

BUILD A CONCERT-READY SKILLSET

Döhnert shares what she's learned in this genre:

Technical mastery under pressure is essential. Concert photographers work in challenging conditions: low light, fast movement, and stage lighting that constantly changes color. "You need to be very quick with shooting, adjusting,

and getting it right," Döhnert says. And since concert photography is typically restricted to the first three songs, there is limited time to get the perfect capture. That means photographers need to change settings and trouble-shoot in seconds.

Preparation and timing are key.

A moment can mean the difference between a good concert photo and a great one. Experienced photographers learn to read performers, anticipating what will happen next. It's part technical skill and part intuition developed through photographing hundreds of shows, she



IMAGES ©SANDRA DÖHNERT / sandrasonik.com



says. “I get a feel for what they might do at certain points,” Döhnert explains. “If I’m working with a new artist, I look at previous photos and videos of that artist. How fast are they moving? Do they do tricks or are they still most of the time? What kind of lighting do they prefer? That’s when I start formulating what I want to capture and planning the equipment I’m bringing.”

Be adaptable. Every venue and performance presents unique challenges.

Stage setups vary, and lighting can range from massive rigs to a single spotlight. You must be able to adjust your approach quickly by changing lenses, repositioning, or completely rethinking your settings.

Focus on composition and storytelling. For your work to stand out, it’s not just about getting the artist in focus. It’s about capturing the energy, emotion, and atmosphere that makes live music powerful. “I try to get action shots. I try to get feeling. I try to get movement,”

Döhnert says. The best image generates a physical response in your gut, she notes. She aims for a photo that “elicits a memory from that moment or makes you connect with the moment.”

Learn the etiquette. Success in the field means working well with others and learning the unwritten rules of working in the pit. It’s common for new photographers, swept up in the excitement of making great images, to park themselves in a prime spot, blocking

the view of many others. "Let's say you got a good position; give someone else the courtesy of taking that spot at some point," she advises. "You need to move around, be conscious of the people around you, and be aware of the public standing behind you as well. They pay good money to be right up front, and you might be in front of them."

"WHEN AN ARTIST IS
HAMMING IT UP FOR
THE CAMERA AND JUST
STARING RIGHT AT ME,
IT'S LIKE A PRIVATE
CONCERT, EVEN JUST
FOR A FEW SECONDS."

Vary your approach. Moving around not only helps build relationships with others in the industry, it also results in better images. "Front and center is not always the best angle." By being mobile, you might find that a less obvious spot provides a better view. Also, to tell the full story, you need to get a variety of perspectives. Some will be closeups, some wide shots of the stage or the environment.

Work deliberately yet quickly. Döhnert often returns from a concert with 1,000-2,000 photos and must deliver final images the next day, if not immediately. "With portraiture, there is a lot more editing and more time," she says, "whereas when you photograph an event or a concert, you're getting home at 11:30 p.m., and then you're downloading, doing a quick cull, and then batch edit, crop, and they're out into the world." She has developed a signature, distinctive look by batch editing with

FACES OF PPA

TRACY ALLARD

M.PHOTOG.CR., CPP

Carrollton, TX | PPA Member Since 2015

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When I opened my photography studio, I searched for the most widely known and respected organization with which to align myself, and PPA was the clear choice. Coming from a corporate career, belonging to a trade organization was a given. They provide industry insights, resources specific to your business, networking opportunities, and more.

I used to be a frustrated artist, but thanks to an early retirement package I had the time and money to start taking photography classes. A switch flipped in my head, and I became obsessed with learning everything I could about photography — how to manipulate the tools at my disposal and deliver on my creative visions. I had found my creative home. I'm inspired by nature and the animals we share the world with — whether they're wild or part of the family.

SHARE YOUR STORY!
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© Valerie Bueller of Rough Coat Photography





specific settings. “I like to manipulate my tone curve to achieve a finish that, with consistency, has become characteristic in my edits,” she explains, adding that she advises photographers to find the edit process that works for them. When she uses her signature settings for edits, Döhnert says, “people can sometimes recognize my photos just from how they look.”

FIND SUCCESS IN A CROWDED FIELD

Concert photography is a natural fit for professionals who already work in street photography, and/or take photos for nightclubs or stage performances,

according to Döhnert. If you are asked to photograph a band, she advises that you set a fee and be willing to negotiate. “Remember, you’re investing your time, equipment, and resources to provide them with professional photos,” she says, “and if the experience also helps you sharpen your skills, that’s an added bonus.” Döhnert offers additional tips.

Take initiative. Döhnert suggests approaching local venues, artists, and newspapers or magazines that cover concerts, asking if they need photos. “There is a theater near where I live, and I just came in and asked, ‘Do you have a house photographer?’ They had several

people coming in, but nothing regular,” she explains. “I became their house photographer, and now I’ve been shooting there for seven years.” By taking multiple approaches to getting work, you build not only your skills and portfolio but your network in the music community. “The more people see you out there, the more they will remember you when they need photographers. Talk to people and tell them you’re available.”

Get your name out there. Make it easy for media and artists to credit you. “Every time I turn in photos, I also turn in a document that says how to credit me, including my name and social accounts.”

Work toward your PPA degree, one image at a time.

© Joycelyn Elaiho

But, Döhnert adds, “people might forget to provide credit, so it’s important to make sure your file names include your name, and also include copyright information in the metadata.”

Respect requests. While growing a reputation in concert photography, it’s important to work well with the artists, and that might mean sharing some of the decision making. Cultivating a public image is a big part of the industry, she explains, which means “some artists want to see the photos before anything is published so they can pick the images that go out. So be respectful of their choices.”

Prove your trustworthiness. Being backstage at a concert is a privilege, particularly if you are photographing someone well-known even just to a local community. Respect the privacy of the artist and their entourage, give them space, and assume confidentiality, Döhnert says. You may be a fan yourself, but you are there as a professional, she adds, which means do not share media passes with friends or on social media, and refrain from asking for autographs.

Above all, appreciate your position and enjoy the experience. “Don’t be shy about introducing yourself to other photographers during downtime, asking which publication they work for, or requesting tips based on their experience if they’ve photographed the artist before,” Döhnert advises. “You might make a new friend, and it can help you feel more comfortable in a new environment.”

Even after 15 years of photographing musical artists, Döhnert still gets a thrill being part of the concert experience. “When an artist is hamming it up for the camera and just staring right at me,” she says, “it’s like a private concert, even just for a few seconds.” •

Janet Howard is a photographer, author, and business coach based in Atlanta.



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The First of Its Kind

SIGMA 135MM F1.4 DG DN ART LENS

By Tyler Rickenbach

The first time I heard of Sigma, I was watching a storytelling workshop by Garrett King, aka Shortstache, who was standing on a beach, lens in hand, capturing a surfer backlit by golden light. The lens was the Sigma 105mm f/1.4. It was a monster of a portrait lens. I remember wondering, *How have I never heard of this before?* That was my introduction to Sigma as a company doing something different, innovating in ways that weren't about shaving weight or going mainstream but about opening new creative doors. Now they've created the 135mm F1.4 DG DN Art lens, the first mirrorless 135mm f/1.4. If you've never shot with a 135mm at f/1.4, you don't know what you're missing.



COURTESY SIGMA

See more images at
ppa.com/sigma135mmf1-4



IMAGES © TYLER RICKENBACH / tylerickenbach.com



I took the image on the left with the Sigma 135mm f/1.4 DG DN at f/1.6, 1/1,000 second, ISO 200, and the image on the right with the Sigma 85mm f/1.4 DG DN at f/1.6, 1/500 second, ISO 320. For these two images, I stood in the same position in order to show the compression and how the two focal lengths compare.

DISTANCE CREATES EMOTION

At first, I didn't understand the impact of the Sigma 135mm f/1.4 DG DN or the emotion you could draw in at such a shallow depth of field. As someone who gravitates toward emotional closeness in portraits, I found the 135mm a creative challenge. There's a physical distance from the subject you need to maintain, and it shifts how I approach a scene. But the challenge turned into an invitation to see differently, to step back, breathe, and

let the story unfold. It's not my default, but sometimes that's the point. Growth doesn't always feel like comfort. One realization I've had with this lens—or with any portrait lens—is that it forces you to ask, "What kind of emotion am I trying to evoke? What kind of story am I telling?" That's what determines the focal length you'll gravitate to.

The Sigma 135mm f/1.4 DG DN is incredibly sharp wide open. It produces stunningly soft, painterly backgrounds,

and it's technically extraordinary. What impressed me most is the emotional tone this lens achieves. It's different from the Sigma 85mm or even the legendary 105mm Art. Why? Because distance changes things. At 135mm, you're not physically close to your subject, and that space shapes the story. The emotion it creates is less about intimacy and more about presence with elements of observation, solitude, sometimes even reverence. The more I leaned into that tension,



the more I realized this lens doesn't just capture portraits. It provides a different perspective. Distance from your subject can create depth or intimacy. Depth gives the background space to support the story; your subject becomes part of a larger narrative. Intimacy, on the other hand, removes distraction. It narrows the viewer's gaze. It places all attention on the person in front of the lens. So, before you choose a focal length, ask yourself: What story am I trying to tell, and who or what is meant to support it? If it's the background, pull back. Give your subject context and space to breathe. If it's the main character, fill the frame. Let every detail of expression take center stage. That's how the Sigma 135mm f/1.4 DG DN can be so powerful.

MORE THAN A PORTRAIT LENS

In the early morning light at Joshua Tree National Park, I watched the desert come to life. Golden light painted the landscape, warming everything it touched. I fired off a few frames, watching how the light reflected off the lens glass. At a certain angle, under the right conditions, it creates a natural "light leak" effect that feels more like film than digital: subtle, cinematic, and full of character.

Later that day, as the sun dropped below the horizon, I photographed a lone Joshua Tree with a wide aperture. Would the whole tree hold focus with this lens? It did—and beautifully. The tree remained sharp, while the backdrop dissolved into a creamy wash of texture and contrast (left). It reminded me that even as the light fades, you can keep creating and keep photographing until the last streak of light disappears.

Then I found myself stranded in the Salt Lake City airport due to flight delays, so I challenged myself to see the world through the Sigma 135mm f/1.4 DG DN

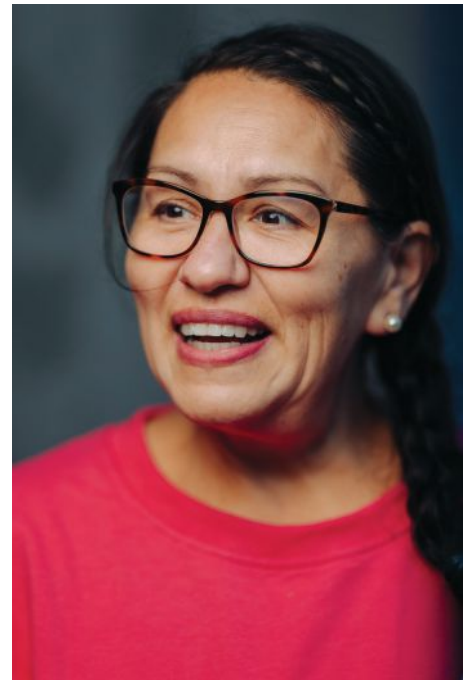


wide open. The results (above) surprised me. Passersby walked past streaks of window light. Life unfolded at a distance. Each frame was crisp, but the falloff was painterly. The depth felt cinematic yet natural. It's hard to describe, but what became clear is that the Sigma 135mm f/1.4 DG DN isn't just a portrait lens; it's a storytelling tool.

WHY IT MATTERS

There are a lot of fast lenses out there and a lot of 135mm lenses too. But there is nothing like this. I've bought and sold the Canon 135mm f/2 more times than I'd probably like to admit. It's a beautiful lens that is lightweight and sharp with lovely compression and subject separation. Even at f/2, it renders with grace. But there's something wildly different and distinct about photographing at f/1.4. It's not just the shallower depth of field; it's the feeling it gives the image, the dimension, the presence. The subject





leaps from the frame. You can't get this kind of depth and separation from a 70–200mm f/2.8. From f/2.8 to f/1.4, that's two full stops of light, and it makes all the difference, like clean bokeh compared to a painting. It's the difference between nice separation and a truly three-dimensional image. This lens makes your subject lift off the screen. It creates intimacy and presence in ways a zoom never could.

And then there's the surprise: the handling. When you hear 135mm f/1.4, you imagine something huge. But this lens isn't as heavy or front-loaded as you'd think. Yes, it has a 105mm filter thread, but it's beautifully balanced at just over 50 ounces and just under 5.5 inches long, especially on a camera like the Leica SL3 or Sony a7RV. It feels intentional in the hand—not cumbersome. This is a lens you can shoot with all day, whether you're on your feet during an eight-hour wedding or on location for editorial work.



NOTHING LIKE IT

The combination of focal length, aperture, rendering, and balance with this lens is one of a kind. And it's not just technical. It's visceral. The compression is different. The way it handles light is different. The way it wraps around your subject and drops everything else into a dreamy haze is something you must see to understand. Whether you're photographing weddings, portraits, fashion, editorial—or even sports—this lens will change your toolkit. You'll start building shots around it and seeing scenes you didn't know were there. Your clients will be wowed by the results.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The applications for the Sigma 135mm F1.4 are broader than you might think. First and foremost, priced at \$1,899, this is a portrait lens. It's made for working with people. It's intimate, sharp, emotional—everything a storytelling lens should be. But I can also see this lens being used to capture sports in a completely new light—literally. Whether you're on the sidelines of a football game or tucked into the corner of a dimly lit basketball court, this lens could create art out of chaos. Even though it doesn't live in the traditional “sports lens” category, it deserves serious consid-

eration for those moments when depth, isolation, and light-capturing power matter most.

If you're a photographer or creative who works with people—portraits, weddings, fashion, editorial—this is a lens that will elevate your work and stand the test of time. It will help you create images unlike anything you've seen before. •

Tyler Rickenbach is a filmmaker and photographer based in Idaho.

Location Preparation

CASE STUDY: HOKKAIDO

By *Mark Edward Harris*



IMAGES ©MARK EDWARD HARRIS / markedwardharris.com

When it comes to location photography, especially when international travel is involved, a relatively small amount of time is spent behind the lens. While no assignment can be a guaranteed success, proper planning can dramatically increase the odds.

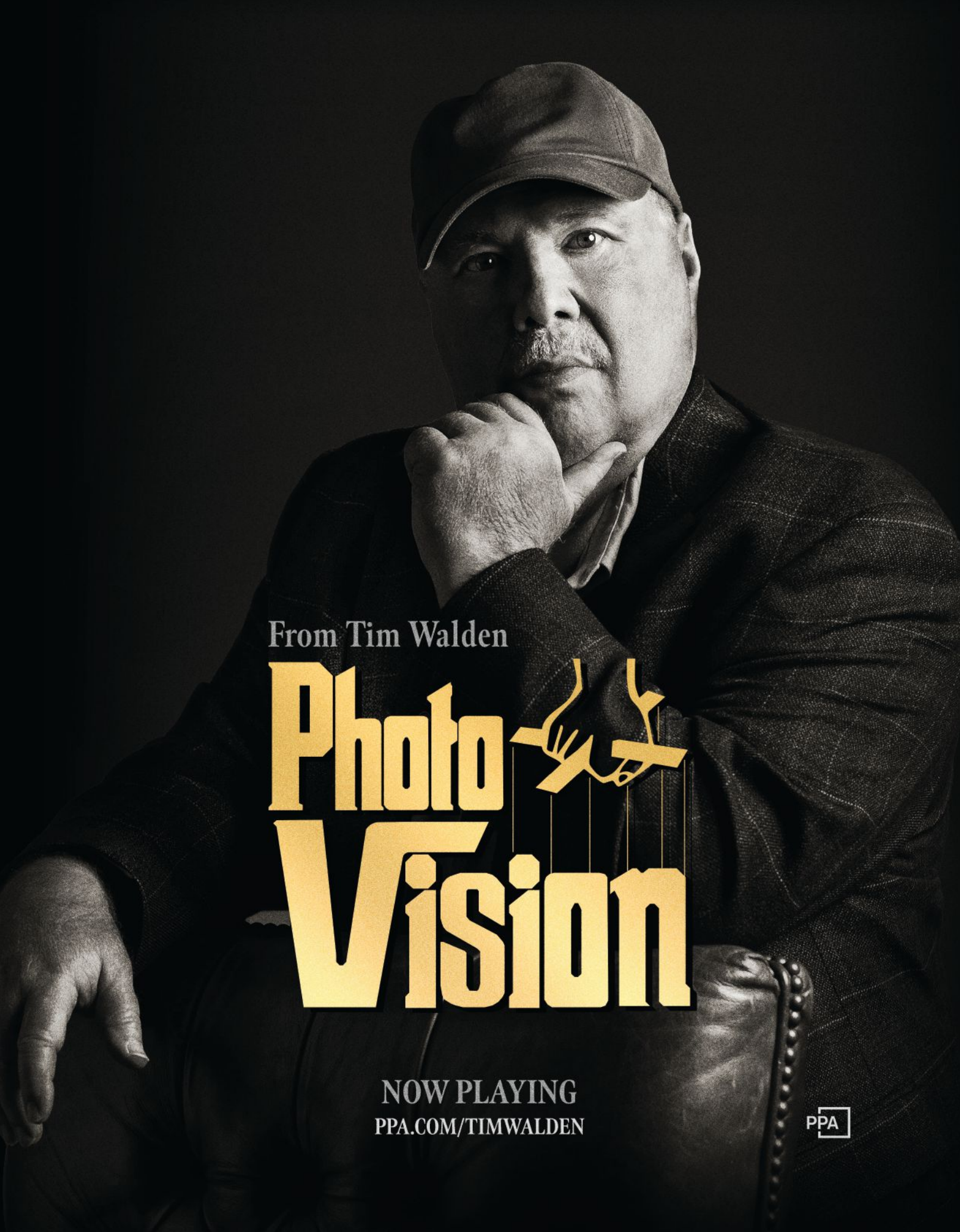
My latest project in Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost main island, can serve as a case study. Though I've been there in the past and images from there are part of my book, "The Way of the Japanese Bath," there is no way I'm going to *yudan suru na* (let my guard down). Once I had a clear picture of the latest assignment—show-

casing adventure travel, nature, food, and hot springs in Hokkaido—I could chart a course.

It is crucial the images your client requests match the circumstances. For example, one of the most striking combinations of wildlife and landscape are *tancho* (Japanese red-crowned crane) in the snow near the town of Kushiro (above). These images are unattainable in the summer. The same is true if a client asks for images of colorful fall foliage in any other season. I had to explain this years ago to a client who had hired me for a travel brochure in Nagano and wanted

me to join a tour in early September, the low season not just for tourism but for those multicolored leaves. Earlier in my career I may not have spoken up, but a bit of wisdom has crept in, so I replied, "If you want fall colors, I have to be there in the fall." I considered adding, "I'm a photographer, not a magician," but I kept my sarcasm in check. I ended up going in October and captured the desired results. As Helmut Newton once told me, "People never remember discomfort they go through [to produce photos], but they remember bad pictures."

If my assignment for Hokkaido had



From Tim Walden

Photo Vision

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Fuel for Photographers

Ideas to Shape the Artist You're Becoming

from Tim Walden

A second-generation photographer, Tim and his wife Beverly took ownership of Walden's Photography in 1980, honoring the foundation built by his father while redefining the studio through their signature "Relationship" black-and-white fine art portraiture.

Today, they run a high-end studio known for their beautifully crafted portraits and exceptional customer experience.

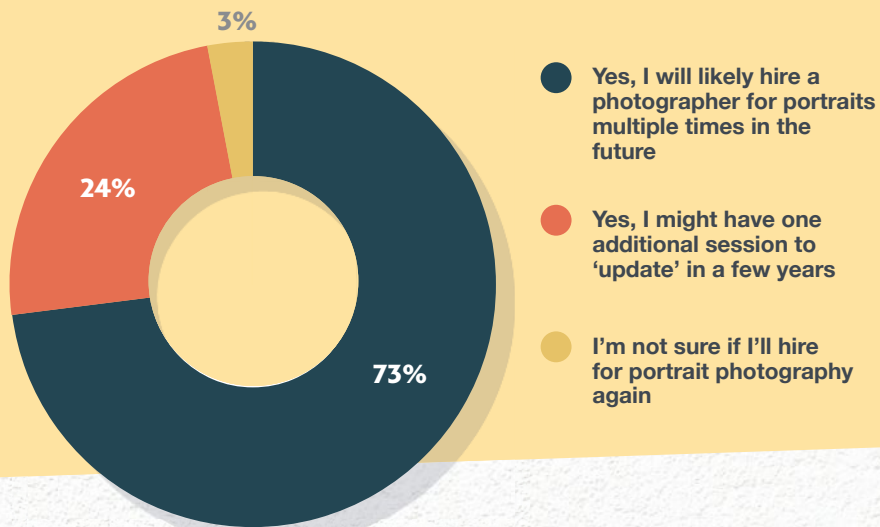
"Look for the story, not the perfect expression."

Excellent customer service brings repeat business & new clients.

73% will hire a photographer multiple times in the future and 79% of consumers are very likely to recommend their photographer to others.

PPA.com/Research

From PPA's Consumer Insights: Family Portrait Photography Report



To-Do-List

SHARPEN YOUR STRATEGY

1. DEFINE YOUR ARTISTRY
2. AUDIT YOUR EXPERIENCE
3. STRENGTHEN CONNECTIONS

In three sentences or less, clarify who you are, what you do, and what clients value most about working with you.

Client experience is your biggest differentiator. Review every touchpoint—from inquiry to delivery—and look for ways to make it memorable.

25% of family portrait clients find photographers through friends or family, and 19% say meeting in person is the most important step. Where can you show up more intentionally?



Dive deeper into Tim's philosophy on posing, lighting and running a fine art portrait studio.

[PPA.com/TimWaldenTips](https://ppa.com/TimWaldenTips)



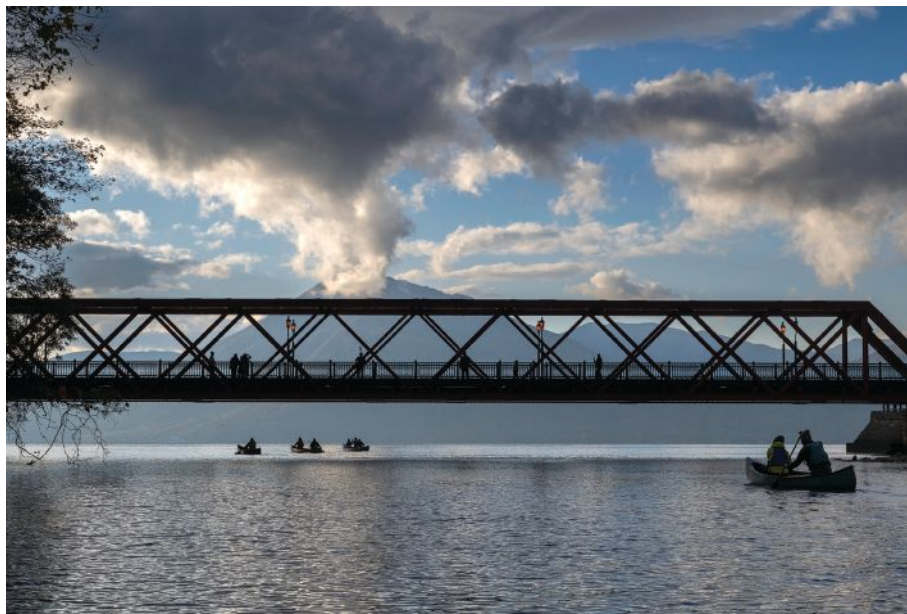


involved sakura blooming, I would follow the *sukura-zen* (cherry blossom report), a forecast published annually that tracks the northward progression of blossoming cherry trees, which would increase my chances of being at the right place at the right time to photograph them. Since Japan is a longitudinal country, cherry trees bloom much earlier in the south than in the north. So, while Kyoto might be bathed in sacred petals between late March and mid-April, there might not be even a hint of red/pink in the landscape in and around Hokkaido's capital of Sapporo. By the time the cherry trees bloom

on the northern-most island, it could be early to mid-May, when the flower petals in Kyoto are a fading memory.

On this trip, late fall was the ideal time to catch the colorful foliage and then stay for the snow as a backdrop to photograph the cranes. Hot springs are also much more dramatic when the natural heat of the water meets the cold air and produces a mystical steam, perfectly suited photographically to convey the sublime feeling of being immersed in an onsen (above). Once the basic schedule was set, I carefully worked out the details. With a busy shooting schedule, being at the right

place at the right time of day is imperative. For instance, late afternoon canoeing on Lake Shikotsu in Shikotsu-Toya National Park yielded the drama I was looking for. I relied on the sage advice of certified nature guide Yuya Shimada of Canoa, the adventure company that provided the canoes. My small team reached Lake Shikotsu by bike, traveling 30 km. If my deliverables included a video element, GoPros would have been a great choice, either attached to my helmet, chest, or handlebars. Instead, I got off my bike along the way, composed my images with fall foliage, and had



my appropriately outfitted guide Yuya Ishizuka from Cycling Frontier Company pass through my frame.

A night at Hoshino's magnificent Shikotsuko Tsuruga Resort Spa Mizu no Uta was also an opportunity to continue my hot spring series.

EQUIPMENT LIST

While my assignment dictates my equipment list, my equipment list dictates which camera bag I use. If it's an urban assignment, I turn to Think Tank's Urban Access Backpack 15 or the company's Airport Advantage XT if I want a roller bag. Since the Hokkaido project involved a good deal of both backcountry and city work, I opted for the best of both worlds, and went with the Think Tank Street-Walker Rolling Backpack V2.0.

Nikon Z 8 and Z 9 bodies, and the lens trifecta of a Nikkor 14-24mm f/2.8, 24-70mm f/2.8, and 70-200mm f/2.8, are my constant travel companions. My plans once I land influence what I take along for the ride. If portraiture is a serious part of my assignment or project, I use my Nikkor Z 85mm f/1.2 with its magnificent bokeh. Meeting members of the Ainu community—the indigenous people of Hokkaido—at the Kawamura Kaneto Ainu Memorial Museum in Asahikawa was part of the project, so this lens was a must. I used a combination of window light and a dangling lightbulb in a traditional Ainu house called a *chise* to do an “eyes are the window to the soul”-type portrait of Harumichi Kawamura, the museum's director (opposite page).

Using the StreetWalker Rolling Backpack meant carrying my Nikkor Z 400mm f/2.8 separately, but I only needed that focal length reach to photograph the cranes. I packed a Benro carbon fiber tripod and Delkin Black high-capacity cards, plus a B+W ND filter to slow down

the water at Asahidake spring. I also brought a Leica Q2 Monochrom for black-and-white street photography and for my hot spring images.

PAPERWORK

To get myself quickly in and out of the U.S. as smoothly as my equipment, I have both Clear and Global Entry. And no matter how well you plan a photo session in a foreign country, it won't do you much good if you can't get your equipment through customs. On bigger jobs, such as my worldwide campaign for The Coca-Cola Co.—which required Profoto lights, digital monitors, wardrobe, and other equipment—a carnet (pronounced *kar-nay*) is a must. Carnets are equipment lists submitted to customs officials with serial numbers and estimated replacement costs. These officials are tasked with making sure what you bring into their country leaves with you. Think of this document as a passport for your equipment, allowing temporary, duty-free import and export into participating countries. This customs clearance form simplifies moving professional photography equipment across international borders without completing separate customs procedures in each country. Several companies can assist in obtaining carnets, including Boomerang Carnets.

Even for small international solo projects, it's a good idea to have an equipment list with serial numbers stamped at a U.S. airport customs office before departure. The CBP 4455 is a U.S. Customs form of registration of goods taken abroad. While other countries are not obligated to accept the CBP 4455, I keep it on hand in case I have issues going to or coming back from an assignment, and when I'm traveling with a small amount of gear and do not plan to declare goods in a foreign country. Just like a carnet, the CBP 4455

 Boomerang Carnets
atacarnet.com/what-carnet

CBP Form 4455
cbp.gov/document/forms/form-4455-certificate-registration

Clear
tsaprecheckbyclear.tsa.dhs.gov



 Global Entry
cbp.gov/travel/trusted-traveler-programs/global-entry

Hokkaido Adventure Travel Guide
at-guides-hokkaido-japan.com/en/



form must be taken to the customs office before your flight. When returning to the U.S., these lists also prove that you didn't buy the equipment overseas and are trying to import it without paying tax.

LOCAL EXPERTISE

Local expertise is invaluable, especially on a tight schedule. Hokkaido's Adventure Travel (AT) Guides were vital to the success of my assignment, whether it was trekking through the winter volca-

nic wonderland of Daisetsuzan National Park on Mt. Asahidake with guide Kazuhiro Arai or a *shinrin-yoku* (forest bathing) hike with guides Chie Moue and Nara Wataru through Maruyama, a nature-rich area within the city of Sapporo. These guides are camera-savvy and know the best times of day to be at locations that will yield the strongest images. I always request guides that are photographically aware because I've been on many press trips and reviewed

many proposed workshop itineraries that have included dinners scheduled for the exact times a potentially spectacular sunset was to take place. I always spoke up respectfully, "Let's have dinner at 8 p.m.," or whatever time the sun disappeared below the horizon. We as photographers know what we need photographically to achieve success. •

Mark Edward Harris is an award-winning photographer and writer based in Los Angeles.



LAURIE VICTOR KAY has
found her artistic
voice

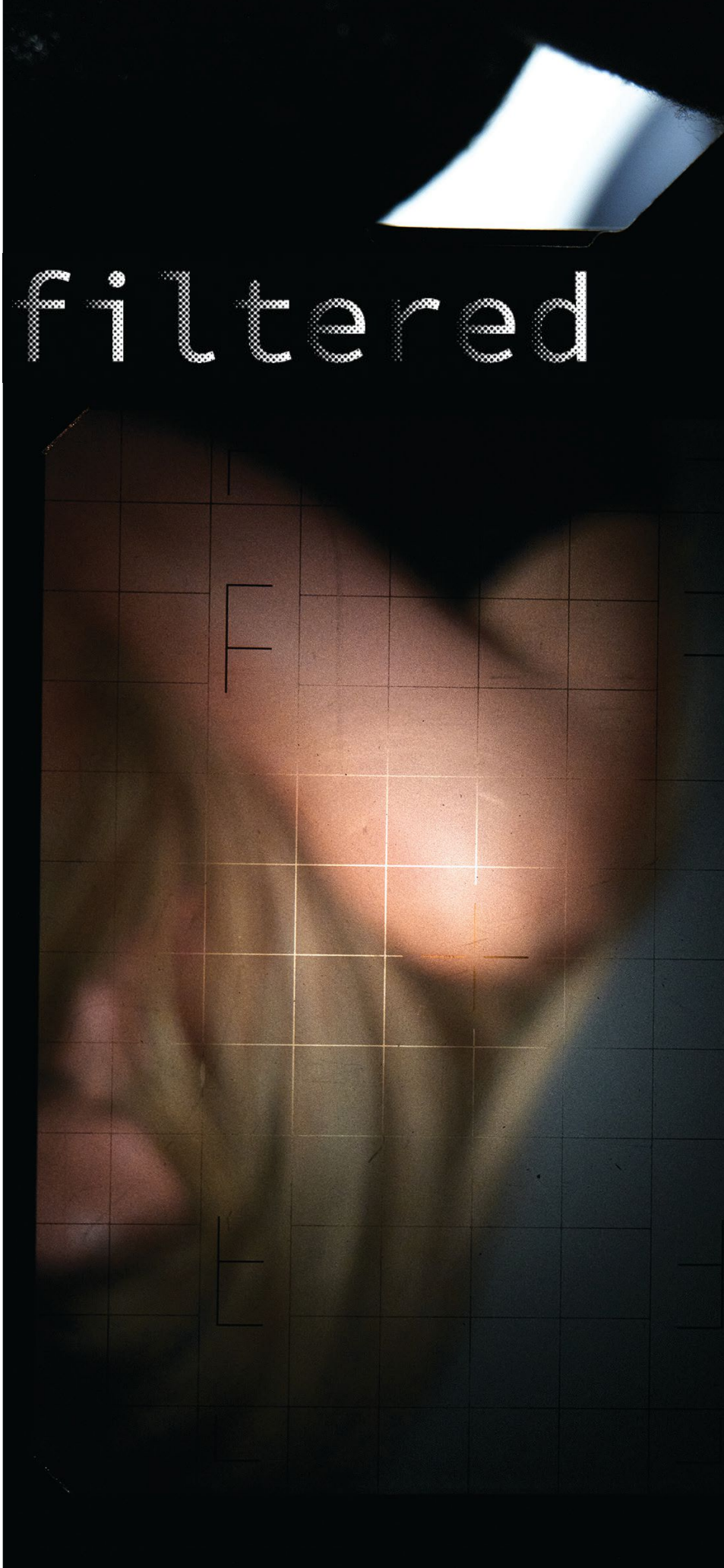
Unfiltered

Once you understand a few things about Laurie Victor Kay, her affinity for a giant cork tree in southern Portugal isn't surprising. The soaring spirit and heavenly reach of The Whistler Tree, the subject of a deeply felt piece of photographic art she created (page 54), align with her seeker persona. And like the massive tree, said to be the most productive of its species, Victor Kay is a prolific artistic entrepreneur.

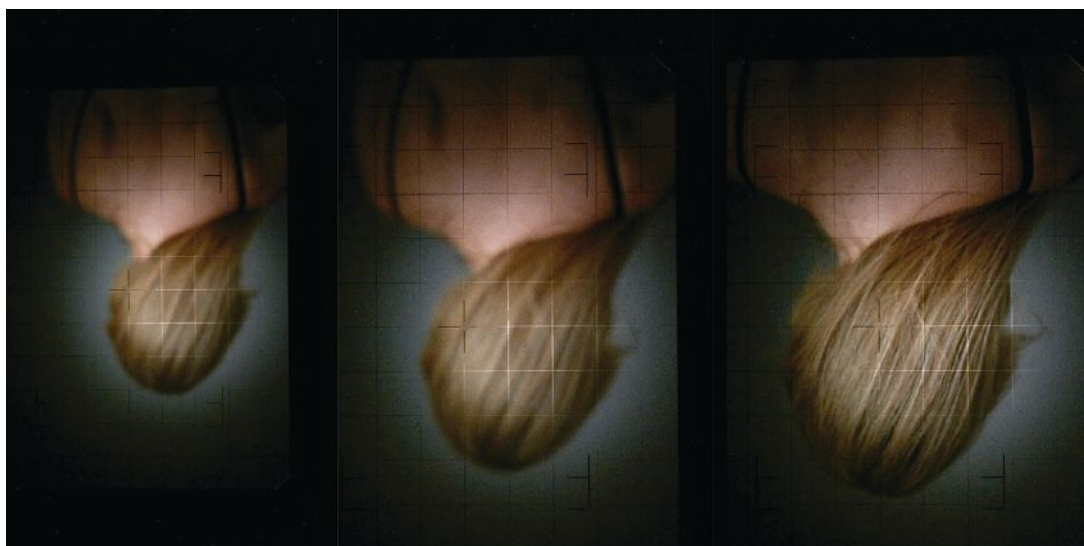
Without pushing the analogy too far out on a limb, there's also the tree's deep scarring, the result of regular cork harvestings over its 240-year lifetime. At age 54, Victor Kay proudly bears her own scars, reminders of a hard-fought quest for equanimity.

With a star-studded client list and robust international following, Victor Kay embraces photography, painting, drawing, 3D imaging, holography, digital installation, and large-scale projection mapping. A native of Minneapolis, Victor Kay's childhood was steeped in the arts. Her late mother, a community arts advocate whose Omaha home Victor Kay has repurposed as her studio and residence, encouraged her daughter to paint, draw, and act.

By EVELYN SACKS







HOME ALONE

When it came to a career, Victor Kay envisioned a future in law or international affairs. That vision morphed, however, as she amassed post-college art experiences and instruction in Europe and at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the city's Columbia College, where she earned a BFA in photography. While in school she assisted a photographer who owned one of the country's first digital galleries. It felt like a fit. Victor Kay moved home to Omaha, opened her own photography studio and later collaborated with a photographer who became her husband and business partner in Laurie and Charles Photographs. The commercial and advertising business they built was known for high-visibility work—commissions for Fortune 500 companies and celebrity portraits. They also did editorial work for publications such as *The New York Times* and *Travel + Leisure*.

The couple's marriage and business partnership ended in

2024 and marked the beginning of a period of personal and professional transformation for Victor Kay—not an easy, neatly-ordered change, but a slow, painful dissolution and recalibration, she recalls. “Lots of cathartic, seismic changes happened in a short time—leaving my marriage and business collaboration, my mom's cancer and death, the loss of several other family members, and two hand surgeries,” she says. Despite the challenges, or perhaps because of them, Victor Kay experienced a surge of creativity, producing large-scale installations and multi-media series that reflect her response to inner turmoil and a sometimes unyielding world.

An example is “Apothecary,” a series she describes as “a paradise made of medication: a prescription for internal perfection in a dreamscape of drugs (opposite page).” The work includes photographs, installations, and a digitized wallpaper featuring a pattern of DNA-like structures with

strands made up of individual pills representing “an updated, artificial version of our internal codes.” In “Pathos,” Victor Kay places herself in front of the camera, blurring her image to explore hidden emotions using grit, grain, texture, ground glass, painterly blur, and multiple camera lenses (opening spread, above).

INSIDE OUT

Her ability to turn her inner world inside out gives Victor Kay's work power and authenticity. That artistic fluidity has attracted a wide and diverse audience. Her art is featured in numerous public and institutional commissions—the Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center in Omaha and 4 World Trade Center in New York, for example—and at galleries, art fairs, auctions, and personal collections in the U.S. and Europe.

Victor Kay calls her process “intuitive and non-formulaic.” Imagery enters her consciousness as through a kaleidoscope. “Like a color wheel, the parts



“MY PRACTICE IS SO VARIED AND NOT TYPICAL OF AN ARTIST WHO WORKS ONLY IN ONE STYLE.”

inform one another and fit together in my mind,” she explains. “My practice is so varied and not typical of an artist who works only in one style.” An image captured in her camera (Leica preferred) may remain untouched for months or longer, only to emerge at the right time as the subject of one of her pieces. That gestational approach was the genesis of her work “Cork Tree Portugal.” Calling herself a “tree-hugger,” Victor Kay explains that she traveled to Southern Portugal to experience and photograph the iconic tree in 2022. She was bowled by its majesty and knew she would capture the tree’s sublime spirituality in a way that traditional photography had not. Two years later, the breakdown and re-creation that are the arc of a cork tree’s lifecycle spoke to Victor Kay, then amid her own return to emotional health. “I approached it in a Cubist,

fragmented way, knowing that I wanted a very physical piece that spoke to how we can look to nature to communicate the idea of healing,” she says. “The piece came over time, and now I’m doing a whole series of reconstructed trees incorporating painting, drawing, and graphite.”









Her tree series and other recent works have garnered critical acclaim and connected with viewers. “That’s because I’ve put myself into them and shared parts of myself,” she explains. “I’ve been unfiltered with my artistic voice.”

Victor Kay embraces technology and says visitors to her Omaha studio, LDK Atelier, are often amazed at how “tricked out” it is. She uses Capture One for editing raw files and Adobe Photoshop for her digital work. The studio is home to two large-scale Canon printers; she prints on Hahnemühle paper. Though the studio, established in 2024, exudes warmth and charm, there’s nothing loosey-goosey about Victor Kay’s approach to her craft. “My business practice incorporates the highest standards of both fine and commercial photography. Works sold on the fine art side retain their value as a result. For commercial projects, I charge for time, usage, and printing,” she explains.

GIVING BACK

A proud female entrepreneur with nearly 30 years of experience, Victor Kay generously shares her artistry and insights. For the past two years she has been invited to SCAD Atlanta

as a visiting artist and teacher. Following her most recent visit, photography chair Josh Jalbert praised her as “an artist whose work reminds us of what it means to begin again, to transform, to heal through the act of making.” She credits her mother with instilling passion for giving back, and she is a devoted member of the arts community in Omaha and beyond. Among other service commitments, she is a member of the Healing Arts advisory board of the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

Victor Kay is currently creating another large-scale digital installation for a public space. She’s at work on a book and is collaborating with an historic Parisian handbag

company that will incorporate her hand-painted designs into their products. To support this productivity, Victor Kay builds in time to rest, run, practice yoga, listen to music, and cook for friends. Luckily, the grace and self-care she now prioritizes for herself benefit those lucky enough to experience her bold art and unique voice. “I’ve come through suffering and healing using my artistic voice and business side, and I want to share what I’ve learned with others and encourage their success,” she says. “It’s about how we learn and grow in the world, while continuing to maintain industry standards.” •

Evelyn Sacks is an Atlanta-based writer.

LIGHTNING ROUND

Professional Photographer: *If not art, what might it have been?*

LVK: International law, humanitarian work, or maybe creative director at a magazine or fashion house.

PP: *Professional bucket list?*

LVK: Visiting various African countries where I would use my voice to share women’s stories.

PP: *Shopping on Rodeo Drive or hiking Machu Picchu?*

LVK: Machu Picchu!

PP: *Fine dining or outdoor food market?*

LVK: Food market!

PP: *Advice to fellow photographers?*

LVK: Value your work and the industry. Do not give your work away!



One thing leads to another

BY JEFF KENT

HEATHER CROWDER COMBINES
VOLUME AND BOUTIQUE
PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY

Heather Crowder's first foray into photography was underwater. For about 15 years, she owned and operated a scuba business out of Annapolis, Maryland, which involved teaching people to dive and leading dive trips to destinations like Egypt, Indonesia, and Fiji. Her photography played an important role in her marketing, helping connect her with clients.

After the birth of her first child in 2006, Crowder realized the travel-intensive scuba business was incompatible with raising a young family, and she sold the business shortly after her daughter's first birthday. The new mother repurposed her camera from dive trips to photograph her child. Word of her talent spread, and family, friends, and acquaintances started asking her to photograph their kids. A new photography venture began to take shape. By the end of 2007, she launched a simple





website and officially started a business as a family and child portrait photographer in the Maryland capital city.

INCREASING THE VOLUME

About 18 months after starting her business, an acquaintance asked Crowder if she'd be interested in taking individual photos at a preschool. Initially, she resisted, saying a fast-paced, volume-oriented school gig wasn't part of her brand. But, she recalls, she realized the families at the preschool were her target audience. So, she did the first school session, then another for a second campus. She recalls the work was tedious and time-consuming, but also much more profitable than she anticipated. "I didn't go into it thinking about the profitability of the school pictures," she says. "My goal was to get in front of the parents for my boutique portrait business. But then I was profiting off of preschool photography *and* all of these parents came into my fold and got on my email list."

When she launched family mini portrait sessions the following fall, she says, "the bookings went crazy." The school work fed the family sessions, which fed bookings for other child and family portraits, and additional word-of-mouth referrals. Today, about 75% of the bookings for Crowder's fall mini portrait sessions come from contacts made through her school photography, she says.

GOING CORPORATE

A few years into business, Crowder started fielding inquiries from adults—often parents at family portrait sessions—about professional headshots. Crowder started incorporating that genre into her business. The service gained momentum, and she began augmenting her offerings by including hair and makeup services. Before long, the individual headshot inquiries expanded into companies paying her to visit

their locations to photograph employees. “It was a relatively easy transition,” says Crowder. “Everything that I learned along the way photographing large numbers of children, I started to apply to corporate portraits. I’m now very easily doing offices of 25, 50, even 75 people in a day. Now high-volume corporate photography is the single biggest inquiry coming to my inbox.”

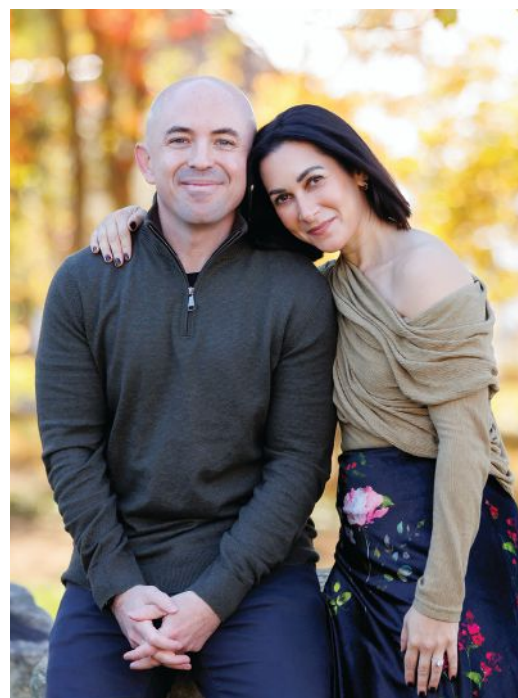
Crowder recently began contemplating the next stage of her business. “As I start to figure out what growth and scale looks like in this business,” she adds, “volume is absolutely where that growth opportunity is, because it’s replicable, there’s a system you can create, and you can implement a very consistent look across whatever you’re doing.” With school and corporate photography

“Everything that I learned along the way photographing large numbers of children, I started to apply to corporate portraits. I’m now very easily doing offices of 25, 50, even 75 people in a day.”

already in her schedule, Crowder says the next logical market is sports team photography. For this venture, though, Crowder is employing a more systematic model that involves additional photographers and admin teams, and following a predetermined playbook for efficiency and consistency. She’s branded the service Lightbox Media, a separate entity from her portrait photography business. It also plays on the studio space she owns, Lightbox Studio, which she rents out to photographers who need temporary studio space.

“As I’ve thought over the past several months about this growth piece and adding people to my team, I realized that under my name, it just wasn’t feeling like the right thing to do,” she explains. “I’m also building something





that potentially can be saleable in the future, and taking my name out of that equation is an important part of that. I think for anybody who's thinking about the long term and an exit strategy, you really have to consider the naming piece."

Beyond the future saleability of the business, there are practical considerations related to how people interact with photographers and photography studios. In some cases, they want that personal connection with an individual photographer. In others, it's all about a service. It made sense then, says Crowder, to separate her more personal portrait business from the volume photography experience. "When I'm photographing families, they are hiring me," she says.

"There's an emotional connection.

I have 18 years of history in this area, and in some cases, I'm seeing these families year after year. ... On the other hand, a company that needs 50 headshots doesn't care who's taking the photos. They just want them to be consistent, well-lit, well-composed, and high quality. So, they're not hiring me. They are hiring an entity to do a job. I think that same thing is true across volume photography in general."







ENGAGING ON ALL LEVELS

Whatever the genre of photography, Crowder says that quality imagery and positive client experience are ultimately what build a successful photography business. Her process often begins with nurturing a relationship with her clients. For example, her family portrait clients may arrive for a session feeling stressed or rushed, so she will try to lighten the mood. That includes using humor like asking kids playful questions, joking with dads, and generally taking the gravity out of the situation. “I’m 50% photographer, 50% entertainer,” she says.

Crowder keeps sessions moving and makes them as enjoyable as possible, avoiding poses that seem overly formal or stiff. For high-volume work, she gives direct instructions to guide clients through each pose. Her goal is to make the corporate photography experience feel like a well-choreographed dance—a “headshot ballet” as she sometimes calls it. Ultimately,



personality and connections are more important than technical perfection, she says. This includes being approachable and empathetic, and acting as a guide who provides confident direction while continually building trust.

TRANSITIONING FROM BOUTIQUE TO VOLUME

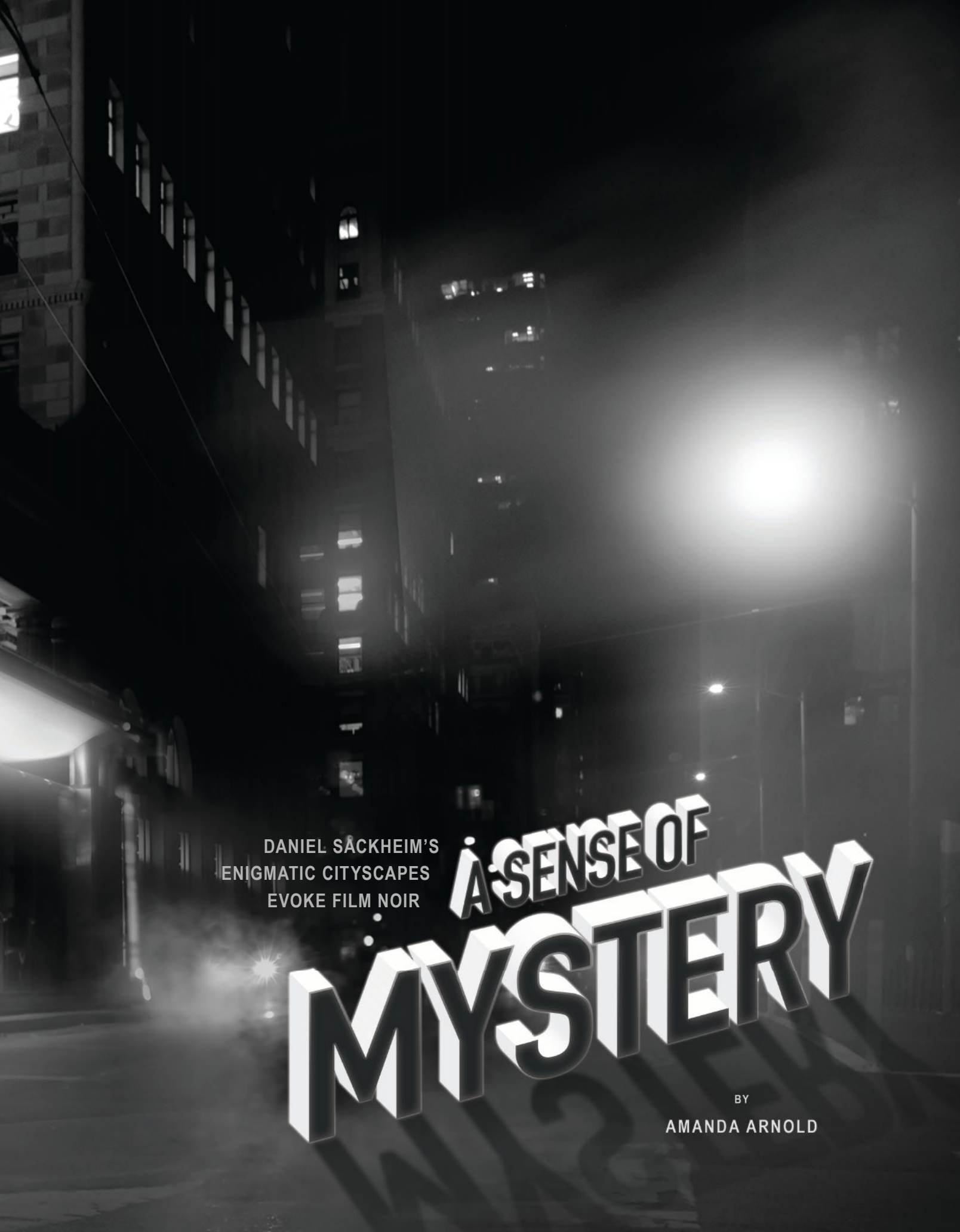
When considering expanding from boutique-style portraits to a more volume-based business model, Crowder offers some tips:

- Ask yourself questions such as: Why do you want to expand into volume work? Why do you want to shift your fundamental processes? Your motivation—whether it's generating more consistent income, taking on creative challenges, or reorganizing your schedule—will help define your approach.
 - Develop systems that are replicable, high-quality, on-brand, and can be taught to others if you scale or build a team. When working in a volume setting, it's critical to systemize processes for growth, she advises.
 - Ensure your work offers a unique and high-quality experience. There are always other photographers who claim to do what you do, and many will offer to do it cheaper. What do you provide that makes you the most desirable option?
 - If you hire, focus on personality and communication skills versus pure expertise. The ability to make clients comfortable is critical in any photography setting, and particularly a game-changer in high-volume settings that could otherwise feel like a robotic photo factory.
- Most important, Crowder says, be prepared to adapt as your business grows. What works for family sessions may not work for schools or teams or corporate environments. Applying your unique talents and approach will help you generate more consistent success across all facets of your business. •





IMAGES ©DANIEL SACKHEIM / danielsackheim.com

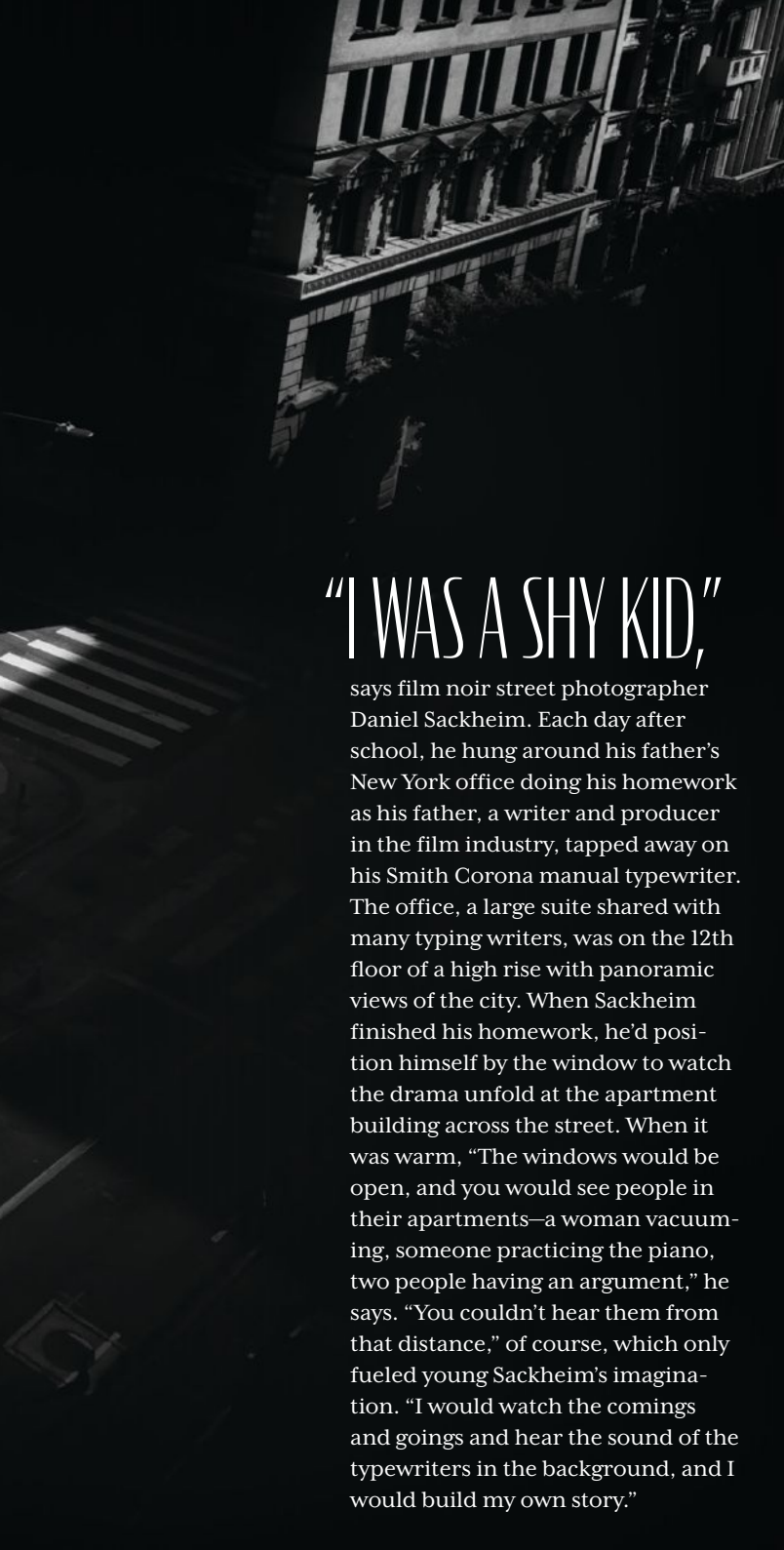


DANIEL SÄCKHEIM'S
ENIGMATIC CITYSCAPES
EVOKE FILM NOIR

A SENSE OF MYSTERY

BY
AMANDA ARNOLD





"I WAS A SHY KID,"

says film noir street photographer Daniel Sackheim. Each day after school, he hung around his father's New York office doing his homework as his father, a writer and producer in the film industry, tapped away on his Smith Corona manual typewriter. The office, a large suite shared with many typing writers, was on the 12th floor of a high rise with panoramic views of the city. When Sackheim finished his homework, he'd position himself by the window to watch the drama unfold at the apartment building across the street. When it was warm, "The windows would be open, and you would see people in their apartments—a woman vacuuming, someone practicing the piano, two people having an argument," he says. "You couldn't hear them from that distance," of course, which only fueled young Sackheim's imagination. "I would watch the comings and goings and hear the sound of the typewriters in the background, and I would build my own story."

It follows that Sackheim would go on to a successful career in film and photography. He's an Emmy-award-winning director and producer for TV series such as "Game of Thrones" and "True Detective" as well as an award-winning still photographer. "I think there is this connection between being a visual storyteller and having an interest in observing the human condition," says Sackheim, who is in the process of putting together a monograph of 50 of his film noir photographs from his acclaimed series "City Unseen."

"I guess I've always been fascinated with this idea of voyeurism," says Sackheim—not a "transgressive" kind of voyeurism, he notes, but "seeing people in their more naturalistic and unguarded states, without that performative mask that we all put on when we're in polite society." The film noir style of photography drew him in not just because of his background in film, but also because it delivers the "tension and mystery" he desires for his works and allows him to explore this idea of witnessing things from a distance, as he did in his youth.



"There's a double meaning to 'City Unseen,'" Sackheim explains. The photos in this series, which were made in various cities including Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and Tokyo, are intended to represent what it's like to live in a metropolis where one can feel "unseen and diminished around these large façades of buildings, and almost sort of captive in this environment," he explains. Meanwhile, Sackheim is also unseen, as the person observing and capturing these scenes on camera.

A MOMENT OF VULNERABILITY

The first film noir image Sackheim made was in Tokyo. Suffering from insomnia, he wandered the streets at night with his camera. One night, taking a winding course through the back alleys of the city, "I stumbled upon this little noodle stand where there was this one solitary figure of a salaryman—these kind of ubiquitous, dark-suited men with slicked-back hair and briefcases that were really prominent at that time in Japan," he explains. "I saw him sitting there, his back to me, this mysterious figure with steam rising up around him, and I took this photo" (right). It dawned on Sackheim at that moment that the photo reminded him of his early days in film, working on a retrospective of the work of film director John Huston. "Part of that job involved sitting in a screening room for a week watching three John Huston movies a day," he explains. He'd really connected with Huston's work, he says, which includes the films "The Asphalt Jungle" and "The Maltese Falcon." Sackheim's photo, which he wound up titling "A Salaryman's Night Out," got him thinking about "photography as a way of telling stories rooted in a different genre ... approaching it from a cinematic purview."



"I SAW HIM SITTING THERE, HIS BACK TO ME,
THIS MYSTERIOUS FIGURE WITH STEAM RISING UP AROUND HIM,
AND I TOOK THIS PHOTO."

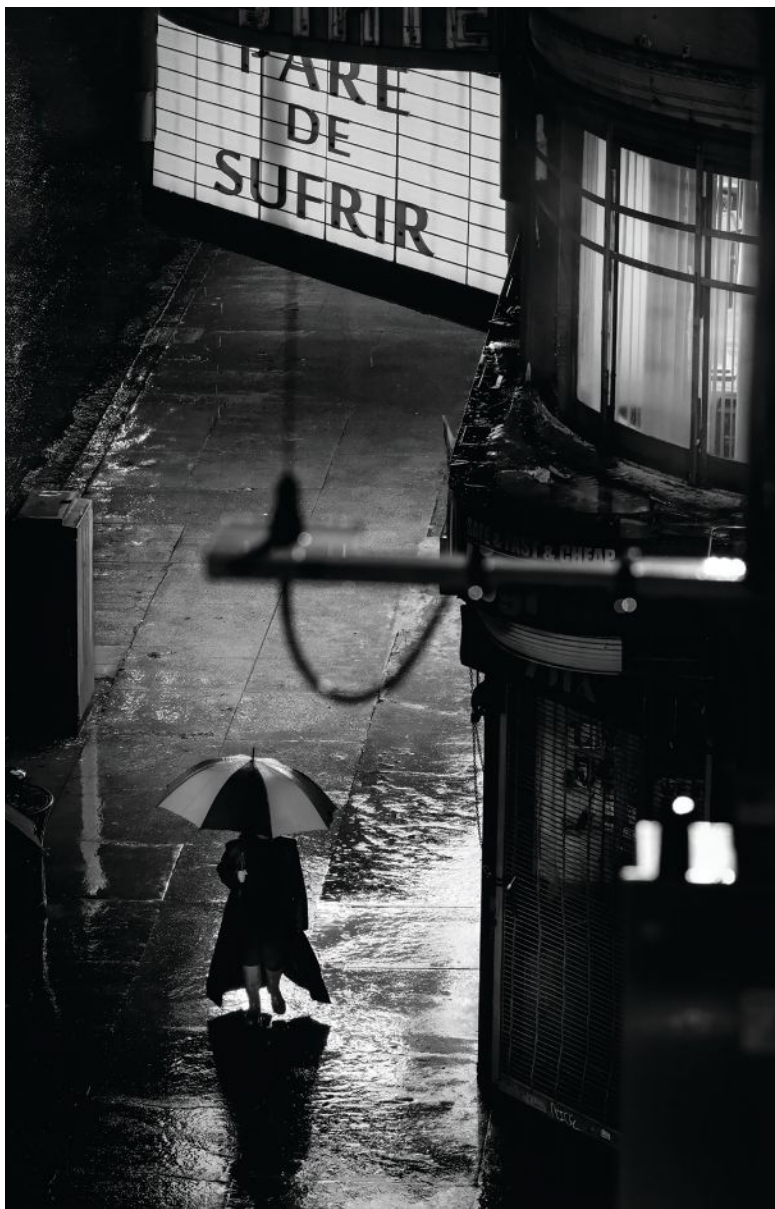


RANGEFINDER

Daniel Sackheim uses a Leica Monochrom camera for his film noir work. "For a photographer and director, I'm not vastly technically proficient," he admits, which is why he loves the simplicity of this camera, not to mention the way it feels in his hands. "I love the ergonomics of it. There is something about the weight of it that feels kind of comforting."

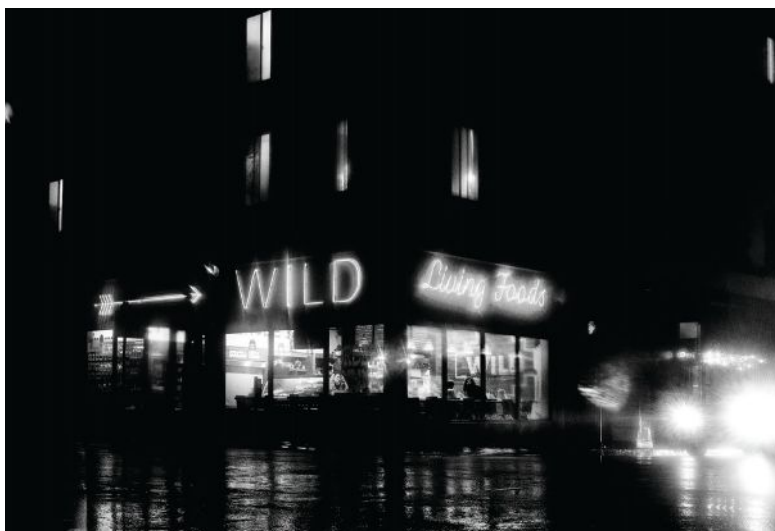
He also loves that it's a rangefinder camera, which means that when you look at the viewfinder, there is a space to the right and the left showing what's visible just outside of the frame in which the image will be captured, he explains. "So, you can actually anticipate and see for a brief fraction of a second what's about to enter your frame before it enters your frame," he says. "That's a real advantage ... that allows me to have a moment to find a composition, and I'm sure it has probably played a part in my process."

In addition, he notes that Leica lenses are coated in a way that cuts down on glare, which is helpful for him when he's making photographs on sets that are lit with movie lights. He also likes that the camera's small body doesn't draw attention, a benefit for street photography, as people get anxious when they see someone holding a camera. "It's just very small and it doesn't have any branding on it, so it just looks like some old timey film camera."



What makes a photo film noir? For one, there's a narrative that involves what Sackheim dubs a "curiosity gap." "The thing about film, television, motion pictures, is that you're privy to the moments before, during, and after," he explains. "It's all encapsulated in a scene." A still image is a miniscule slice of time, captured "hopefully just after something has happened or just before something else happens." A film noir image prompts the viewer to ask questions: What's going on in this scene? What's just happened? Who's this person and why do they look frightened? Why are they alone? Why are they walking into the shadows or out of the shadows? "I think as human beings we naturally want to know what's missing," says Sackheim. "When we're presented with a void, we want to fill that void. So, I guess I would say that's the thing that speaks to me as to why I should take a photo."

For his film noir works, Sackheim often photographs from above, which "naturally diminishes the subject," he says. "It makes them [appear] as if they're being watched, that they're vulnerable, that there are powerful things around them that are dominant. It helps illuminate, I think, both literally and figuratively, the standpoint of a moment of vulnerability." That, in combination with the narrative element of curiosity, work together to create a photo that "speaks in that film noir grammar," he says.

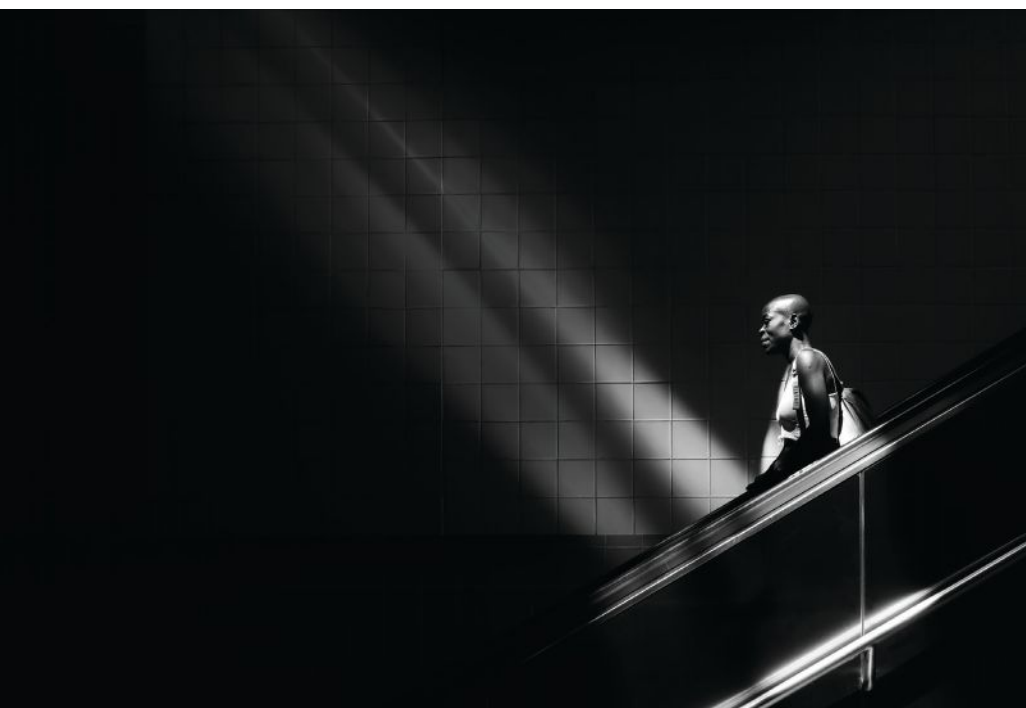


“THIS WOMAN CAME THROUGH, AND SHE JUST KIND OF HAD THIS RADIANCE ABOUT HER, AND SHE WAS HIT WITH THE LIGHT IN THIS PERFECT WAY.”

INTO AND OUT OF THE LIGHT

Sackheim's photo “A Woman on the Bridge” (right) prompts just the questions Sackheim brings up, despite the simple circumstances behind its making, which he prefers to keep to himself to ensure the image retains its mystery. *Why is this stylishly dressed woman walking alone on the bridge?* the viewer wonders. The story behind the image isn't particularly daring, he notes, but that speaks to the power of imagery and the power of the curiosity gap. “The lack of information is what makes something compelling,” he says.

The shaping and bending of light and shadow is another important element of film noir photography, Sackheim notes, and it was an important aspect of his image “Guided by the Light” (below). He was scouting locations at a Los Angeles subway station





when he spotted a narrow beam of light hitting an escalator that delivered passengers down to the platform. “Day after day I would go back and do light studies of it,” he explains, checking at different times of day to evaluate when the light was ideal for a photograph. Once he decided on a time of day, he returned more than once, photographing within the 15-minute window when the light was ideal, searching for just the right subject to come down the escalator at just the right moment.

On the third try, “this woman came through, and she just kind of had this radiance

about her,” he says, “and she was hit with the light in this perfect way.” Sackheim did some dodging and burning to the sides of the image in post-production but says it was 80% caught in camera. As with “City Unseen,” he notes there’s a double meaning in the title “Guided by the Light.”

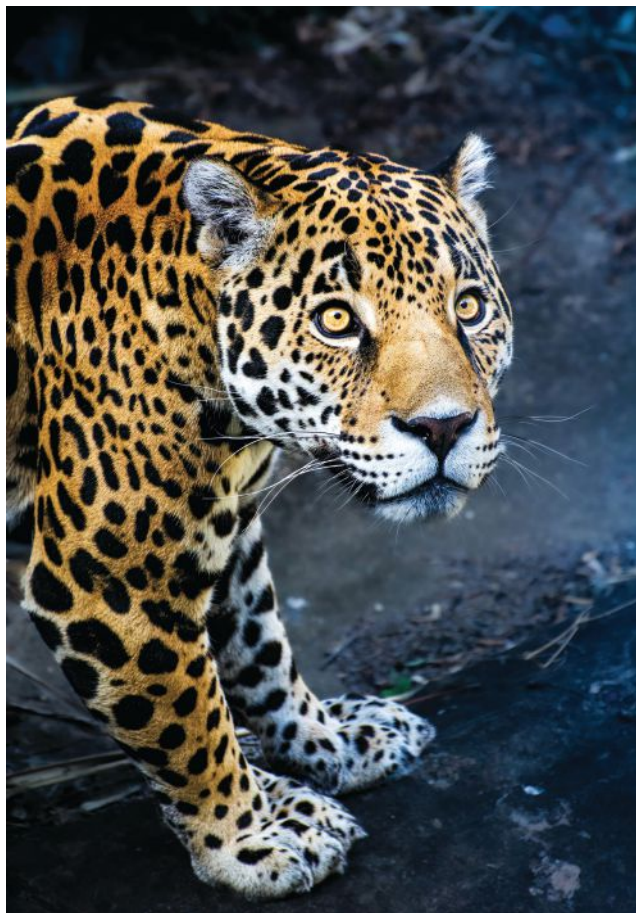
The subject was guided to that light by the escalator, he says. And he was guided to that light as well, “just waiting for a subject that was inspired.” •

A New Generation of CPPs

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS EARN CERTIFICATIONS

In late 2024, PPA opened the Certified Professional Photographer (CPP) exam to photographers with a student membership, and in 2025, some of the first high school students earned their CPPs. Two of the young photographers are Harvest, Alabama-based classmates Serena Dearman, CPP, and Mikayla Finucane, CPP, who graduated last spring. Finucane started taking photography classes during her freshman year of high school, when there were 50 students in the class. By her senior year, only five remained to take the exam. Dearman and Finucane have become two of the first high school students in PPA history to earn their CPPs.

Dearman's love of photography blossomed in the fall of her senior year of high school. She moved through the class's curriculum quickly with encouragement from her



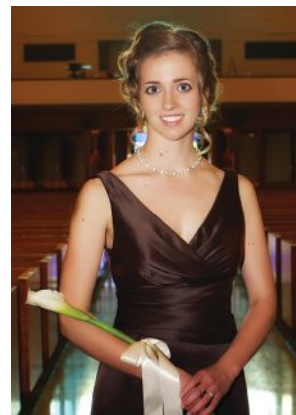
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MIKAYLA FINUCANE



SERENA DEARMAN

teacher, jumping ahead to complete level 6 of the program, which culminated in taking the CPP exam. Preparing for the exam solidified her technical understanding of photography, making concepts like the law of reciprocity finally click for her, she says. The new modular exam format also eased her testing anxiety.

Today, Dearman, an avid nature photographer, is in college in Tennessee. In her free time, she leads her friends on nature walks to photograph deer, turkey, and chipmunks. She also loves creating fantasy-inspired portraits using colored gels for dramatic lighting and bringing costumes to life through composite editing in Adobe Photoshop.

Like Dearman, Finucane discovered her passion for photography in high school. She loved the school's darkroom and made friends in photography class. The CPP exam opened her eyes to the unique way a camera interprets color and light. Although the technical image evaluation challenged her, she says, completing it gave her confidence.

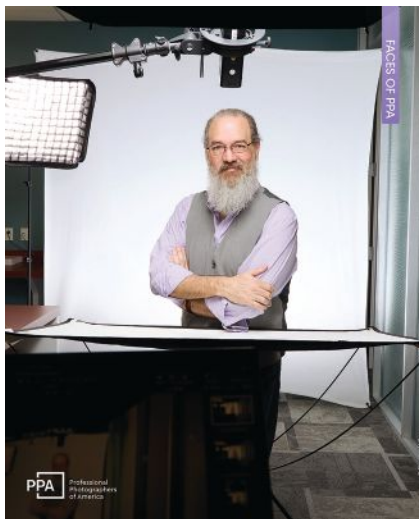
In her senior year, Finucane became the go-to photographer for her classmates in need of senior portraits. Portraiture remains one of her favorite genres, along with wildlife and zoo photography. Finucane pursues creative photography projects in her spare time, when she's not studying for her pre-nursing program. She recently applied for a student photographer position and continues to hone her craft.

Earning the CPP credential before graduating high school is no small feat, and both Dearman and Finucane approached it with a level of commitment well beyond their years. When asked her advice to photographers studying for the CPP exam, Dearman says, "Study, ask questions, and don't give up." •

SHARE YOUR UNIQUE PHOTOGRAPHY JOURNEY

BE A FACE OF PPA

Each PPA member has a unique journey as a photographer. If you'd like to share your photography story as part of the Faces of PPA campaign, follow these steps:



- Log in to your PPA member account on ppa.com.
- Visit ppa.com/faces-of-ppa.
- Complete your profile with as much detail as possible.
- Upload a high-quality photo of yourself that reflects your passion for photography.

Once approved, your profile will be featured on the Faces of PPA page, complete with links to your website and social media. Select profiles are also shared on Facebook and may appear in *Professional Photographer* magazine. • ppa.com/faces-of-ppa

PPA DEGREE

The Road to Mastery

JONATHAN LEE'S JOURNEY TO CREDENTIALS



IMAGES © JONATHAN LEE



JONATHAN LEE

Walking across the stage at Imaging USA to receive Master of Photography and Photographic Craftsman degrees marks a huge accomplishment, one that Jonathan Lee, M.Photog.Cr., CPP, couldn't have done without his sponsor, past PPA president, Susan Michal, M.Photog.Hon.M.Photog.Cr. When Lee was new to PPA, Michal acted as his "photography mom," he says, keeping him in line and remaining the dependable "rock" in his life.

Lee discovered photography through the lens of a Minolta camera as a child in Iceland, where his family was stationed. He followed in his

father's footsteps, joining the military and serving for 21 years in the U.S. Navy before pursuing photography part-time in 2009.

When Lee bought a "real camera," he says, he worked to pair his love of the technical aspects of photography with visual impact. Astrophotography and architectural photography particularly captivated him, he recalls. He resigned as a government contractor, and his boss joking that he'd see him in a year fueled Lee's determination to succeed as a full-time photographer. "Spice can push you into interesting directions," says Lee. In

2017, he joined PPA and the local community network in Jacksonville, Florida. He also started studying for his business degree. He noticed that the local network was struggling to attract new members and suggested strategies to revitalize the group and attract a younger crowd. The group changed its name to Professional Photographers of North Florida (PPNF) and focused on building community.

"I GET CARRIED AWAY. IT'S IN MY DNA."

Lee took on a leadership role in PPNF and by 2023, he had earned his CPP. In 2024, he taught his first class at Imaging USA. He was so inspired by the PPA members with "blinged-out" degree medallions at the Imaging USA award and degree ceremony, that he decided to pursue his own PPA degree. Within 17 months, Lee earned 50 merits and a gold bar, equivalent to 25 additional merits. "I get carried away," he says about his competitiveness. "It's in my DNA."

Lee, who now serves on PPA Council representing Florida, hosts photography retreats and travels across the country in an RV with his wife, Brenda, and their son. Together they went to Arches National Park, focusing on the Milky Way, and took photographers to Appalachia to capture images of wildflowers and waterfalls. He says his son has also caught the photography bug, creating three generations of Lee photographers. Read about Lee's podcast episode, "How Real Estate Photographers Make 6 Figures," on page 26, and listen to the "Professional Photographer" podcast at ppa.com/photovision/podcast. •



EXPLORE COMMUNITY NETWORKS

Looking for a way to connect with fellow photographers in your area? Check out PPA's Community Networks. These networks are a fantastic way to learn from other photographers and strengthen your local PPA community.

- Visit the Community Network Page on the PPA website.
- Click "Find a Community Network in Your Area" to see what's available near you.

2026 COMMUNITY NETWORK SCHOOL DATES

TEXAS SCHOOL:

April 26-May 1, 2026, Addison, Texas
texasschool.org

WEST COAST SCHOOL:

June 7-11, 2026, Tahquitz Pines Retreat,
Idyllwild, California
westcoastschool.com •

ppa.com/community-networks



Grace Fieselman of Augusta, Missouri-based Grace Marie Pet Photography realized the only way she could get the exact type of image she wanted to capture of dogs launching into a water-filled quarry was to get into the water herself. See page 18 for her story.



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Stronger Together

Join Your Local Association

Photographers helping photographers is what Community Networks are all about. These local creative communities nurture and provide the support and tools to help you grow. As a member of your local Community Network, you will:

- ♦ Connect with peers and mentors
- ♦ Sharpen your skills by competing in your local image competitions
- ♦ Earn merits towards your PPA degree by attending or speaking at a PPA Merit Program
- ♦ Get recognized, build credibility, and set yourself apart
- ♦ Give back to your photographic community
- ♦ And much more!

There's never been a better time to get involved. After all, it's together that we thrive.

Find a Community Network Association near you:

[PPA.com/Community-Networks](https://ppa.com/Community-Networks)