

Black and White Basics

Presented to the Charlottesville Camera Club
January 14, 2020

What's happening

- Presentation on the basic principles of black and white (“monochrome”) photography. *Questions and comments welcome throughout presentation.*
- Demonstrations of tools and techniques from various members
- Final Q&A
- On-on-one reviews, as time allows
- PDF of presentation available by request (email: gbishop60@comcast.net)

Why B & W?

- For more than 100 years after the invention of photography, shooting in black and white was our only choice. But today, almost anyone can pick up a camera and create a beautiful color photo.
- So why would we now want to remove the color and render a photo in black and white? What does B&W provide that color doesn't, or doesn't provide as well?

B&W is transformative

Black and white photography “transcends reality and transforms an image into a realm that isn’t abstraction, but isn’t reality, either. A black and white image deconstructs a scene and reduces it to its forms and tones.”

--Jason Bradley
*Outdoor
Photographer
Magazine*

“It’s an alternative visual world . . . a surreal one because everything in that world is seen differently from the way we experience it.”

--Michael Freeman



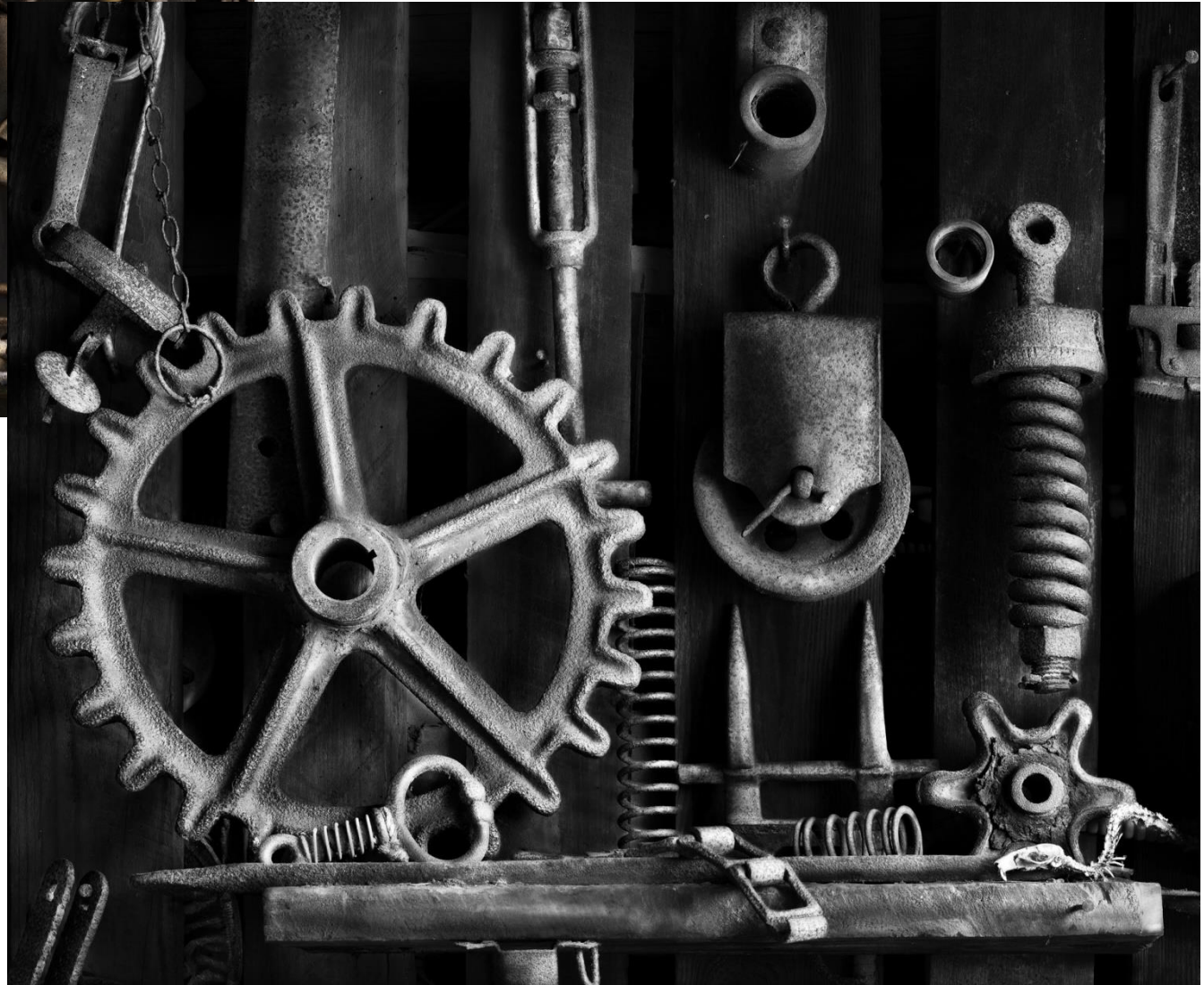
By removing color and thus simplifying the photo, whatever impressions you want to make, or story you want to tell, can become more apparent.



Photo by Pam Morris



Color can help define what a subject is. Take it away, and the subject becomes less familiar and more mysterious. "Rusty stuff" becomes "shapes and textures."



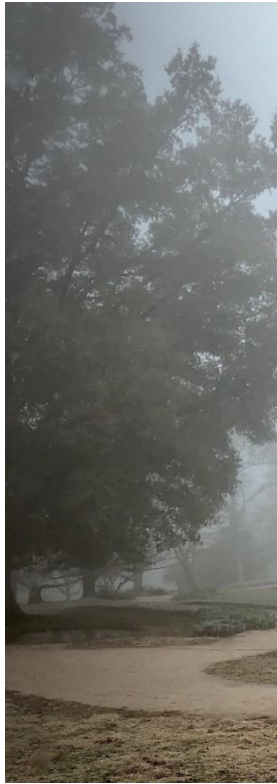
The B&W Challenge

- Because our lives are lived in full color, because color is the medium through which we observe and understand the world, taking it away forces us to see in a new way.
- In the absence of color, we begin to search for *other* elements in a photo that might otherwise be less obvious and even overlooked: lines, shapes, textures, patterns, contrasting elements.
- When we choose to make a black and white photo, we commit to searching for and *providing* those elements—elements that are stronger and more revealing than the color they replace.

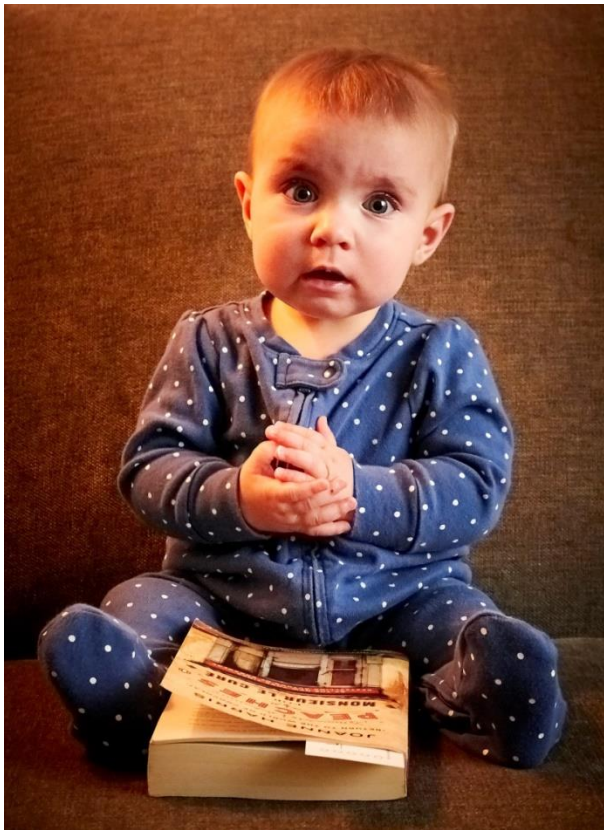
First Step: Learning to See

- Learning to “see in B&W” can help us fully appreciate all the more subtle aspects of a good photo.
- When considering a subject, ask yourself, “Does the color add or distract? Is it not especially attractive or interesting? Not a key part of the subject?”
- What *other* aspects of the photo, besides color, might I be able to make *more* compelling?
- Can I *compose* the subject in a way that enhances those aspects?
- Is the *lighting* as good as it can be to enhance those aspects?

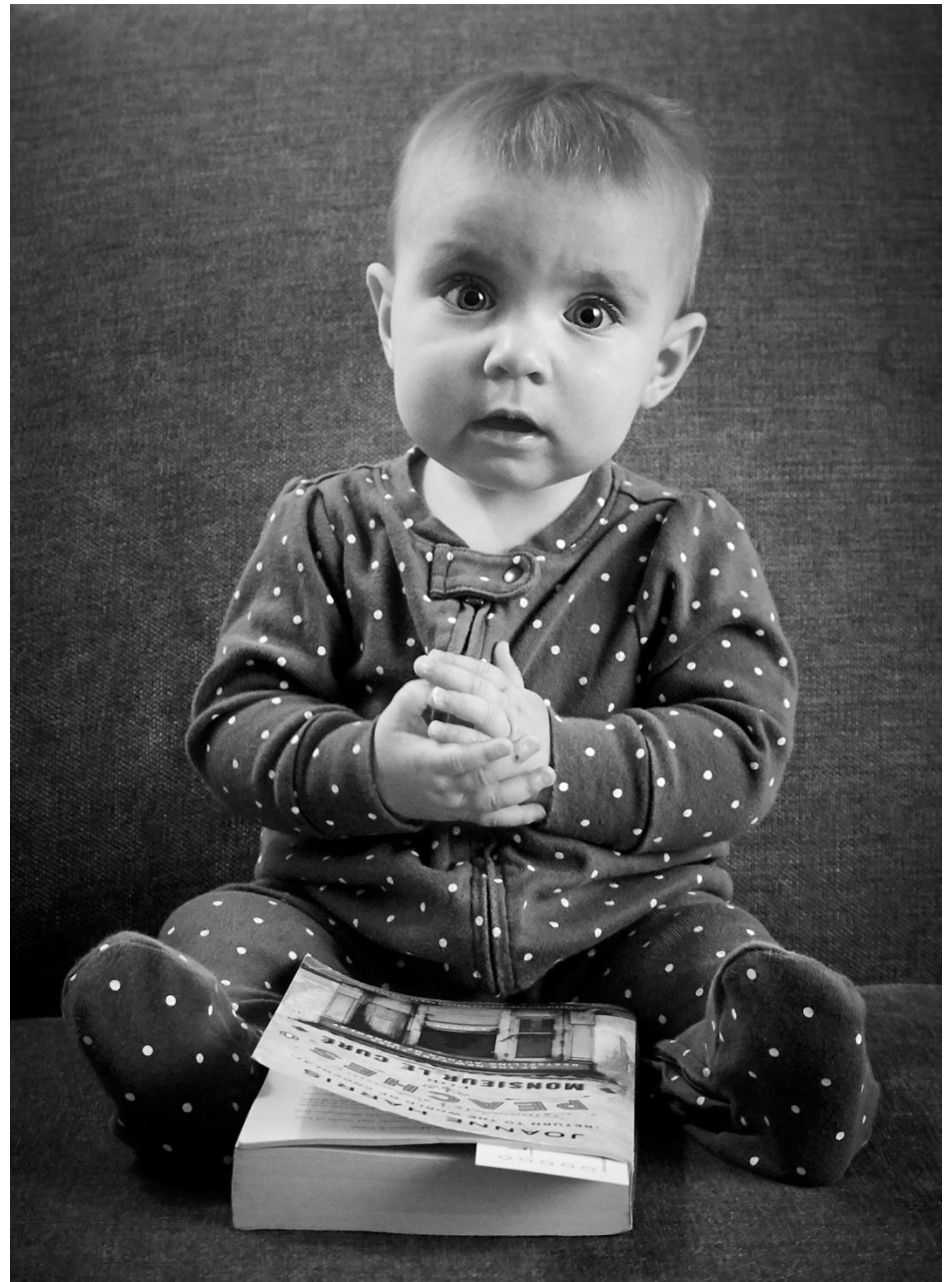




Photos by Liz Marshall



- Sometimes, color can be unattractive or distracting.
- One solution? Delete it!



Photos by Jay Hirsh



- What's most compelling about this photo? The color?
- No, it's the shape and texture of the trees, which are made more powerful by eliminating the color.



Photos by Bill Shaw



“By [converting color to monochrome], you aim to reduce the world to its essence, to its primordial force, to what overpowers everything and makes the world go around: *EMOTION*.”

--Julia Anna Gospodarou



“As a photographer, you are often trying to capture the *essence* of a subject more than just a precise replica of what you saw. Sometimes, that essence is more about shadow, texture, shape, and contrast than it is about particular hues.”

--Spencer Cox
*Complete Guide to
Black and White
Photography*



Photos by Jim Marshall



Photos by Gene Runion



Photos by Seth Silverstein

Learning to see in B&W (cont.)

- Set camera to shoot in raw* (“image quality” setting).
- But show your LCD *display* in B&W (“picture control” setting in Nikon, “picture style” in Canon).

*It’s not an acronym, so it’s not RAW! If you love acronyms, use RIF, for “raw image format.”



Bonus shooting tip:

- When your camera can't capture the brightest and darkest tones all in one exposure, *bracket* your exposures and then combine in HDR.



- As with shooting raw, having more tones available will allow more options when editing in B&W.

5 cornerstones of good B&W

1. Wide Range of Tones:

In color photography, the separate elements within a photo are enhanced and made distinct by the different colors. The colors provide separation.

When those colors are stripped away, a range of tones, from pure white to pure black, are all that separate one element from another.

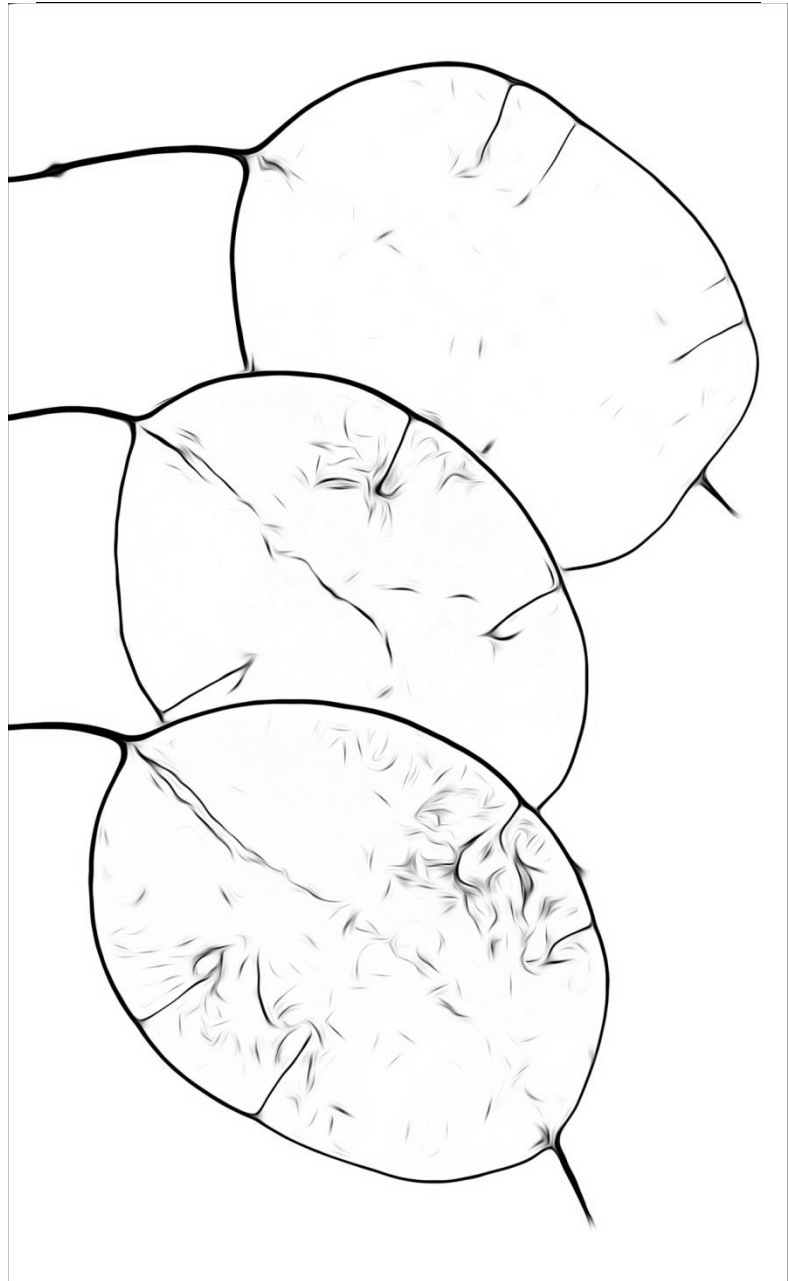


2. Strong Contrast:

Contrast is the difference between the tones of a subject.

When pure white and pure black exist within a photo, you will have *high* contrast.

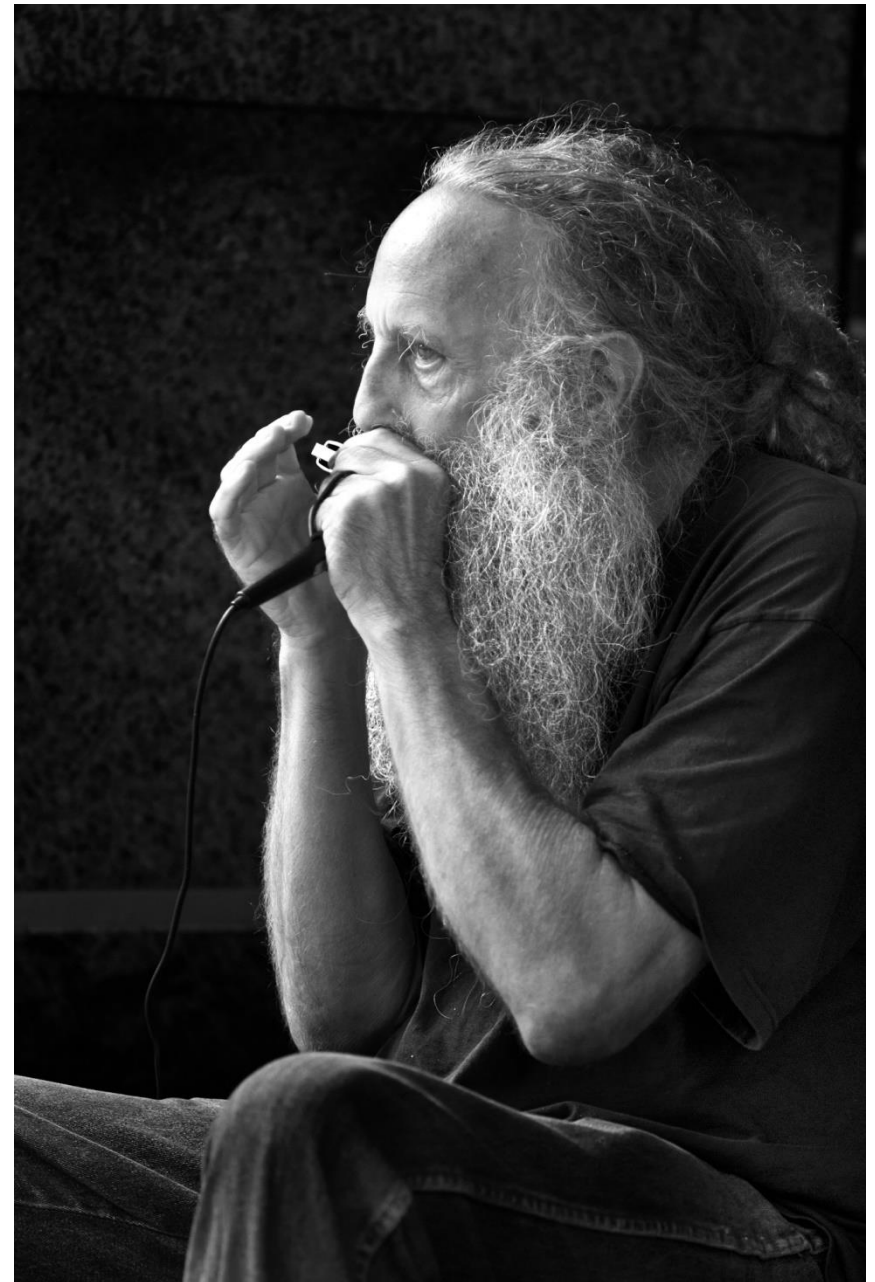
Even without a wide range of tones, high contrast might be all you need for success.



Regardless of the range of tones, its important to achieve contrast among the different elements.



High luminosity skin and hair against a low luminosity background, for example, can create strong contrast and a powerful B&W photo.



Photos by Jim Demas (left) and Gerry Bishop (right)

Even small areas of white and black can provide enough strong contrast to make a photo successful.



A bright sky
full of clouds
against a dark
landscape can
create great
contrast.



Photos by Bill Shaw (1) and
Gene Runion (2)

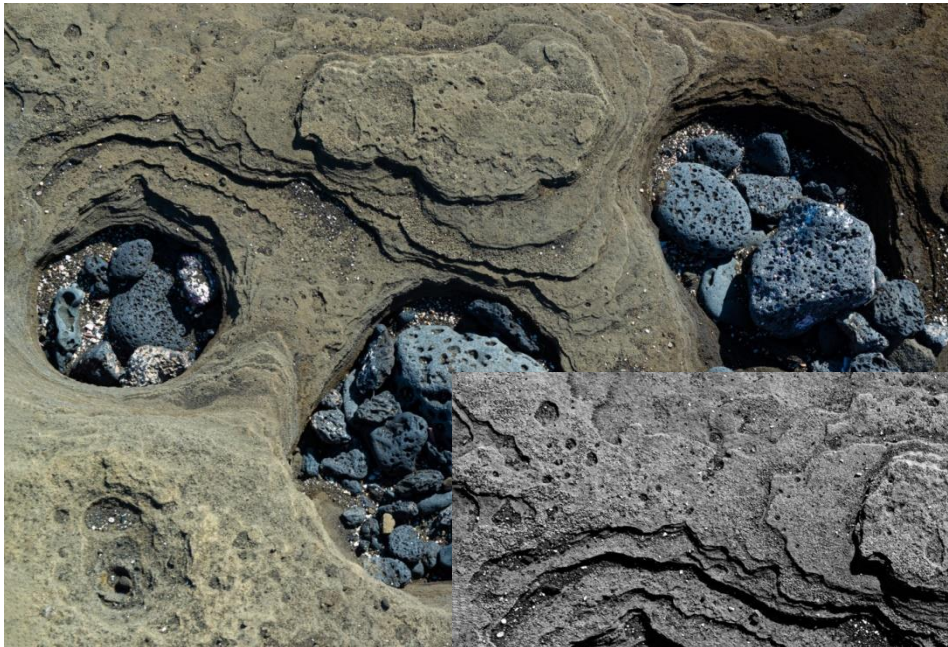
But
waterscapes
can also
provide great
contrast.



Elekala Falls, in
Blackwater Falls State
Park, is almost always
striking in color.

But why leave well-
enough alone, when
you can have a
beautiful B&W photo as
well?





With few exceptions, *low contrast* (“flat”) subjects are challenging to convert into strong B&W photos, unless the colors present can be separated into strongly contrasting tones during editing.



So, where there isn't much tonal contrast, you may be able to create it.

When a photo is converted to "grayscale," the colors become shades of gray.

These shades of gray can be individually lightened and darkened to create the contrast you need for a successful B&W photo.



3. Touchable Texture:

Often underappreciated in color, texture can become a chief attribute in B&W.

Texture is the surface quality, or *feel* of an object. A photo with good texture creates a *tactile* sense—the sense that you can feel something just by looking at it.

Texture is often enhanced by lighting from the side.

When such lighting doesn't exist, you can come back later or earlier in the day.



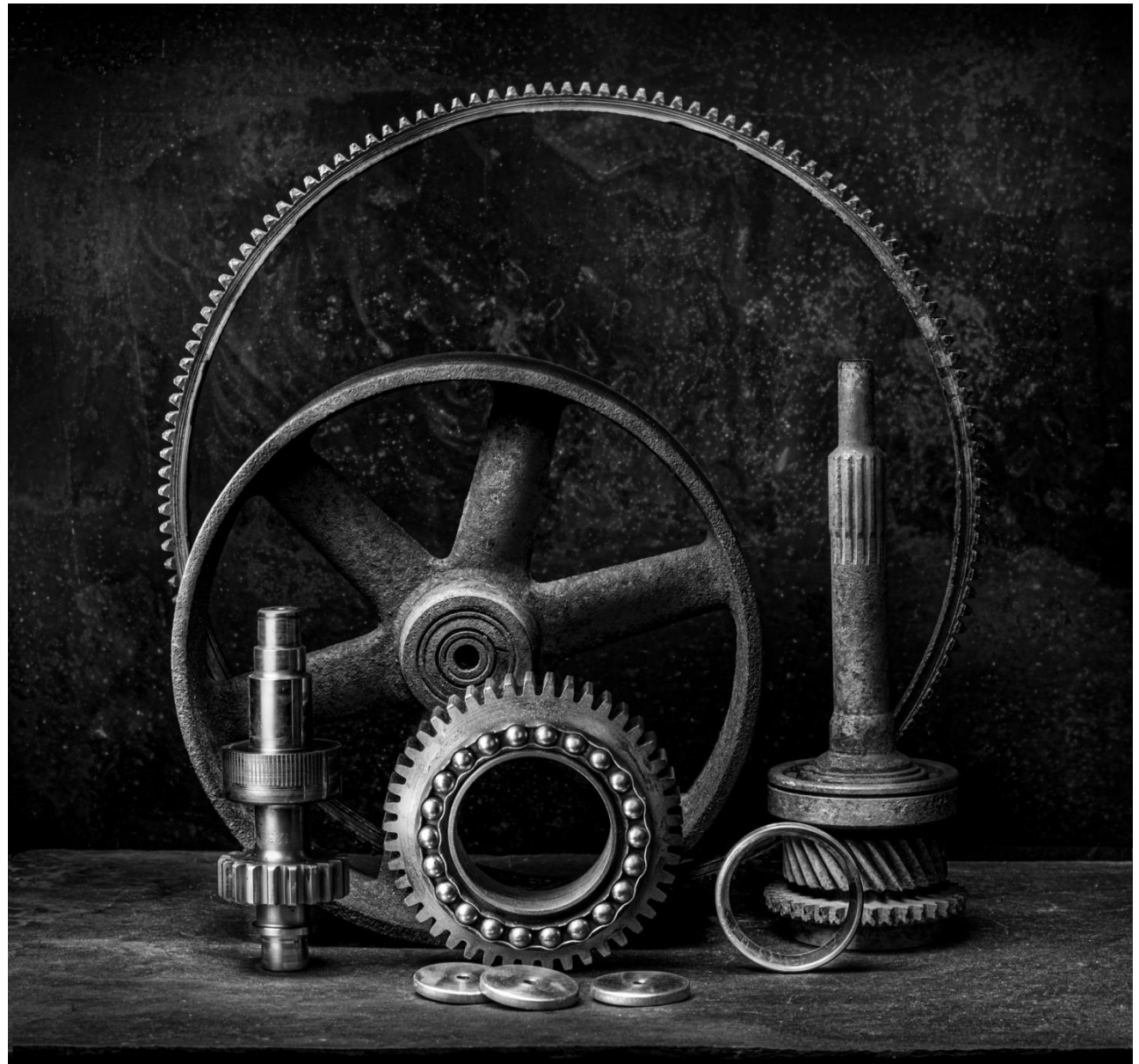
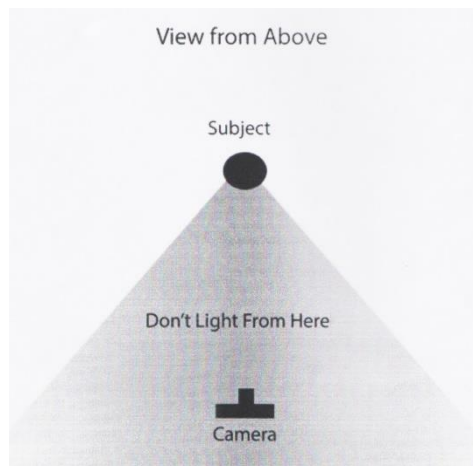
Photo by Rick Seaman

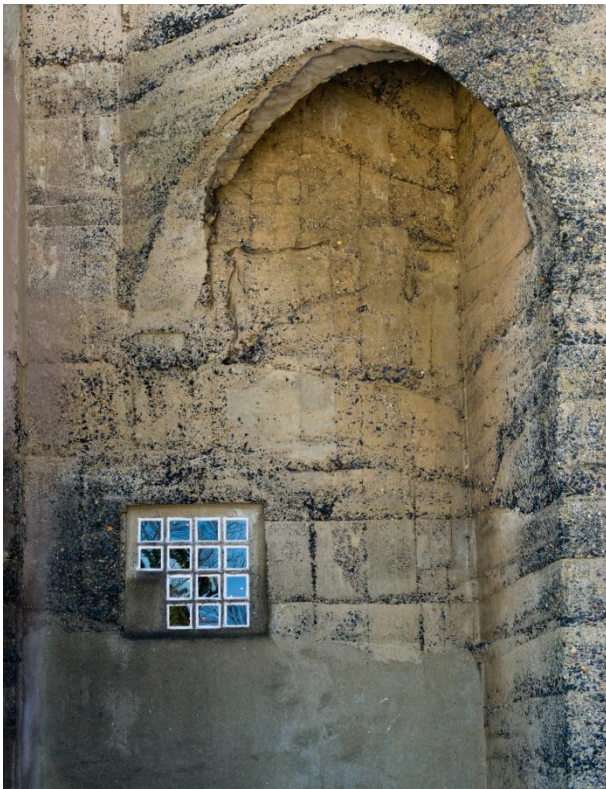


Photo by Gene Runion

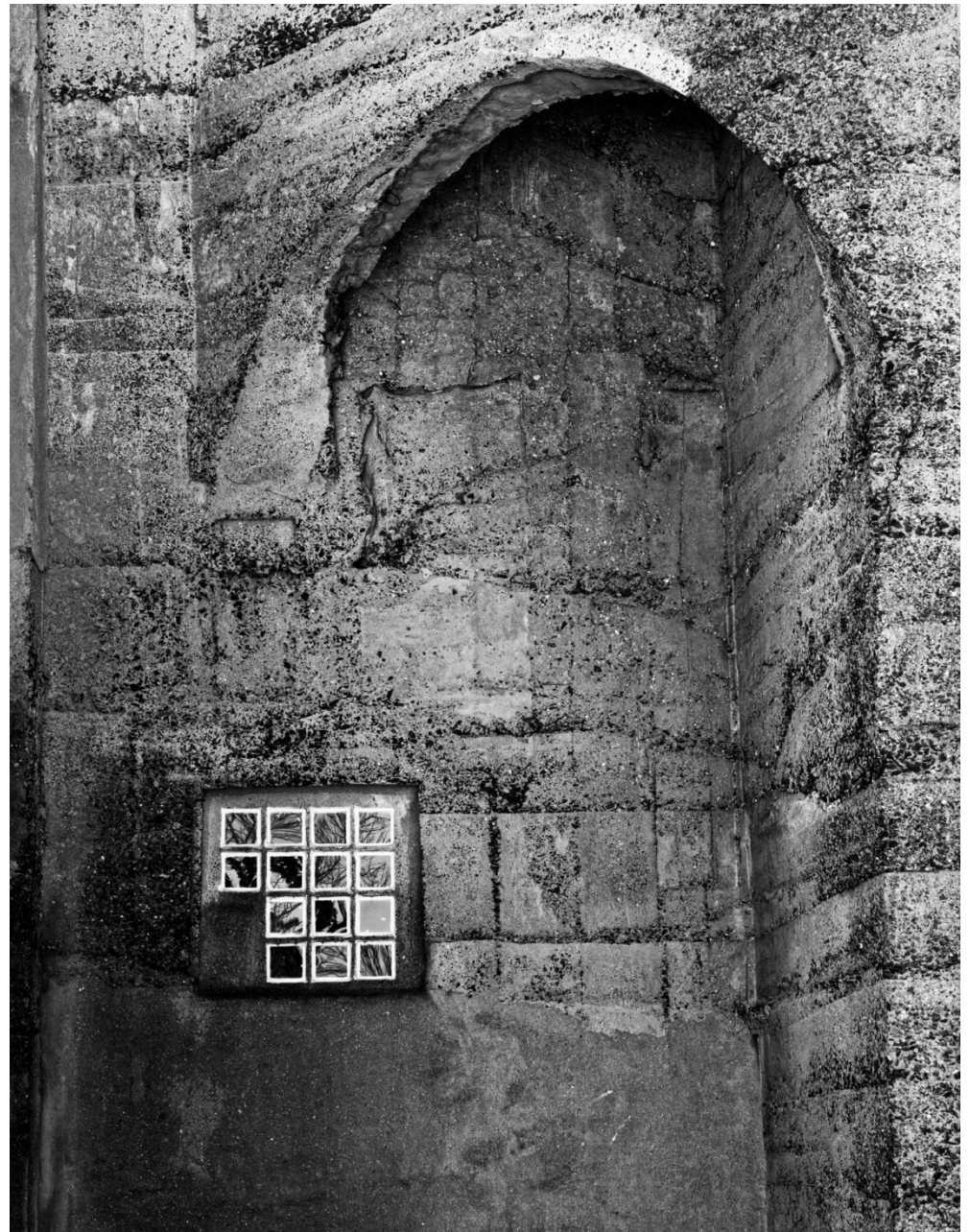
When shooting indoors, you can *create* the lighting needed for strong texture.

Artificial light is best applied at angles from 45 to 90 degrees to the subject.





Even in soft, diffuse light, removing color and increasing contrast can reveal more of the texture, as well as the shapes.



Texture can also come into play with portraits. By converting to B&W, and simply using the clarity and texture sliders, you can transform this . . .

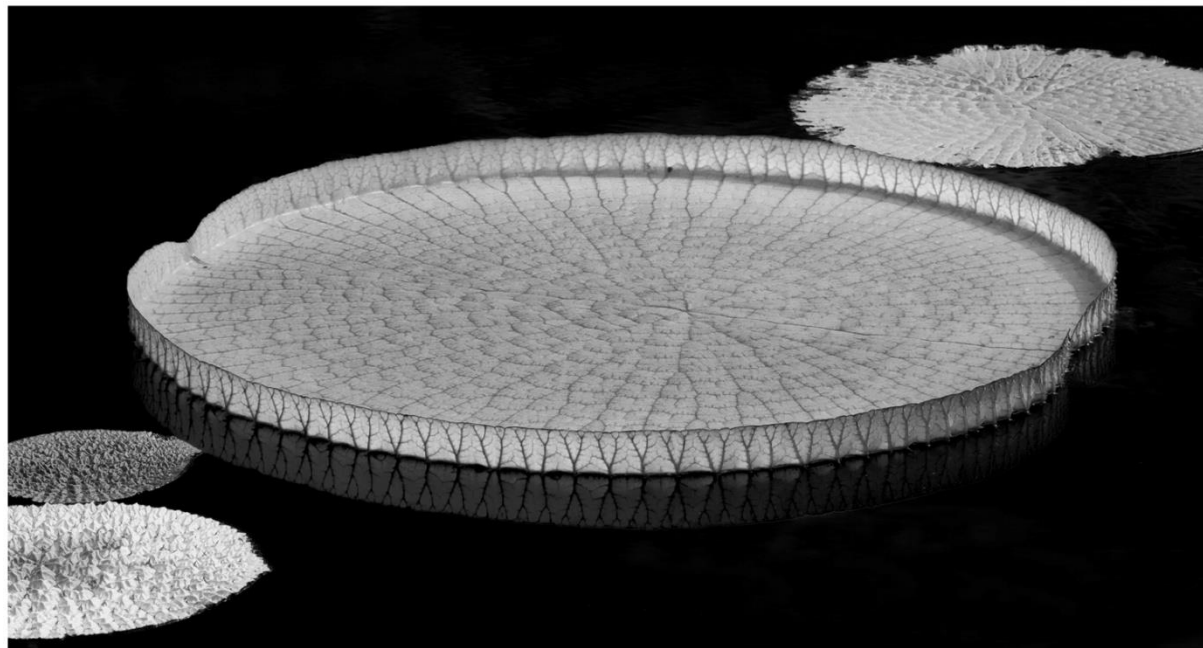
Into this!



Photos by CrazyLeafDesign (top) and Tom
Mirenda (bottom)

4. Basic Shapes: With color in place, rectangles, triangles, ovals, and circles can be overshadowed and underappreciated.

With color gone, those same shapes can made more prominent, especially when emphasized with added contrast.



Annie Leibovitz: “Simple shapes virtually guarantee striking black-and-white images. With their straight lines and dramatic angles, man-made structures are ideal for this type of shot.”

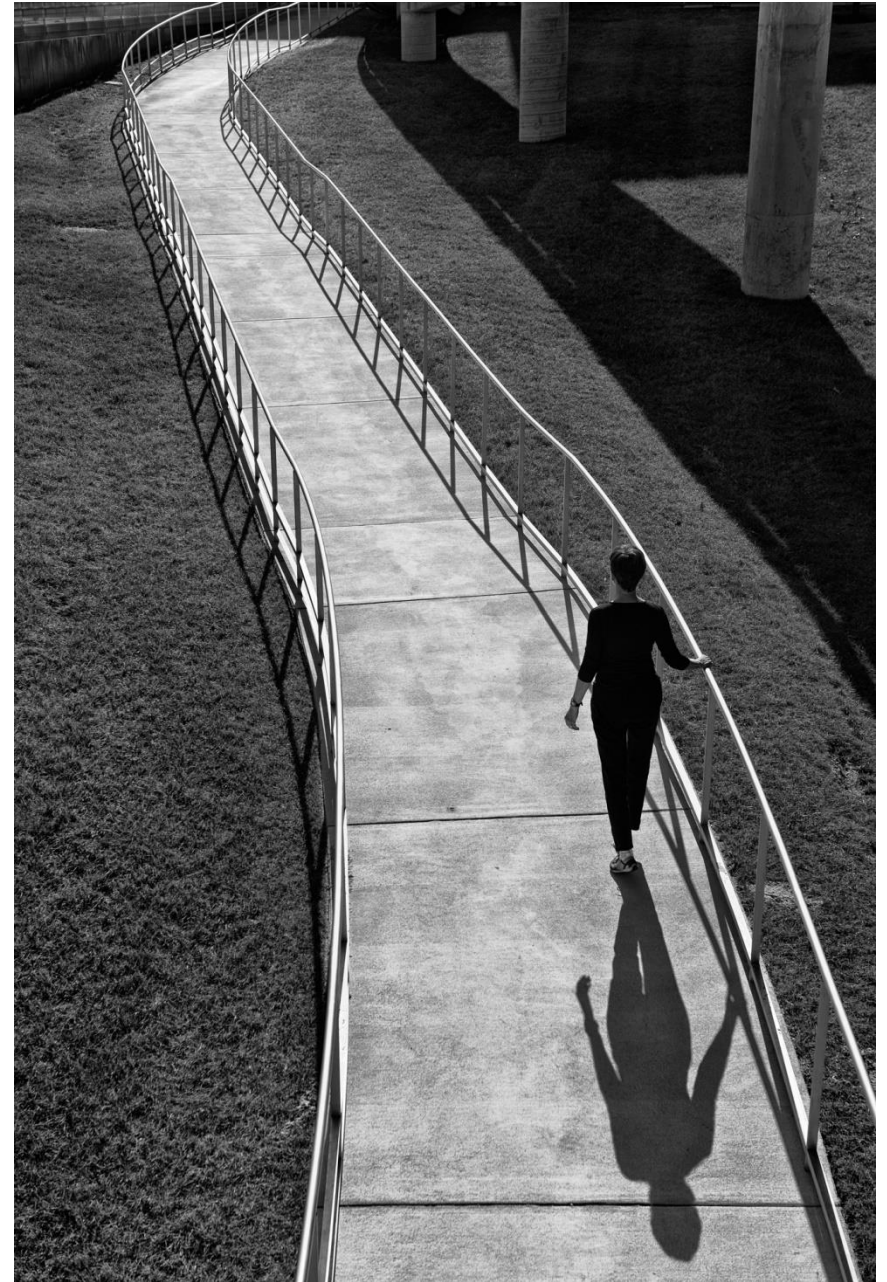
“For more organic shapes you can also try working with trees, rocks or foliage.”



Photos by Gerry Bishop (1,2) and Seth Silverstein (3)

5. Deep Shadows: Also may be underappreciated in color, or even liabilities. (Think of hard shadows at high noon on a sunny day.)

But in B&W they can add a point of attraction that can not just compensate for lack of color but even surpass it in interest.



Shadows can be shaped and oriented by shooting at different angles or by taking advantage of changes during the day.



And finally . . .

Shadows, shapes, tones, contrasts, and textures can *all* come into play in a successful B&W conversion.



Photo by Jim Demas

Questions?

Good resources:

- “Mastering the Art of Black and White Photography”
(<https://photography.tutsplus.com/tutorials/mastering-the-art-of-black-and-white-photography--photo-280>)
- “Complete Guide to Black and White Photography”
(<https://photographylife.com/black-and-white-photography>)
- *Black and White Photography—The Timeless Art of Monochrome*, by Michael Freeman.
- *The Complete Guide to Black and White Fine Art Photography*, by Julia Anna Gospodarou

Videos of presentation

Why B&W Photography, part 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAomm-denRo>

Why B&W Photography, part 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdHMnwfEkC0>

Why B&W Photography, part 3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mqTrKqpS6E>

B&W Editing

- A good B&W photo begins with seeing its potential in a subject you're about to shoot or in a photo you've already taken in color.
- The process continues with the editing of that photo with the appropriate software.
- There are many software options for converting a color photo into B&W, as well as many different ways to use that software.

Suggested conversion and editing process in Adobe Lightroom

- Make a virtual copy of your color photo.
- Go to Develop mode, open Basic panel, click on Treatment > Black and White option.
- Make adjustments usually made in color: crop, transform, exposure, spot removal, etc.
- Adjust “black and white points”: Hold down Alt/Opt key while moving Whites and Blacks sliders.
- Can open photo in a plug-in such as Silver Efex Pro or Topaz B&W Effects and try out the presets and editing tools.
- In LR, move Clarity slider to right to enhance contrast.
- Move Texture slider to right to enhance details.
- Open B & W panel and use sliders to adjust brightness of various shades of gray.
- Use Adjustment Brush to darken or lighten areas of photo as desired.
- Use Radial Filter to add patches of light for added interest as desired.
- Try a vignette (Effects > Post-Crop Vignetting) or overall darkening for effect.