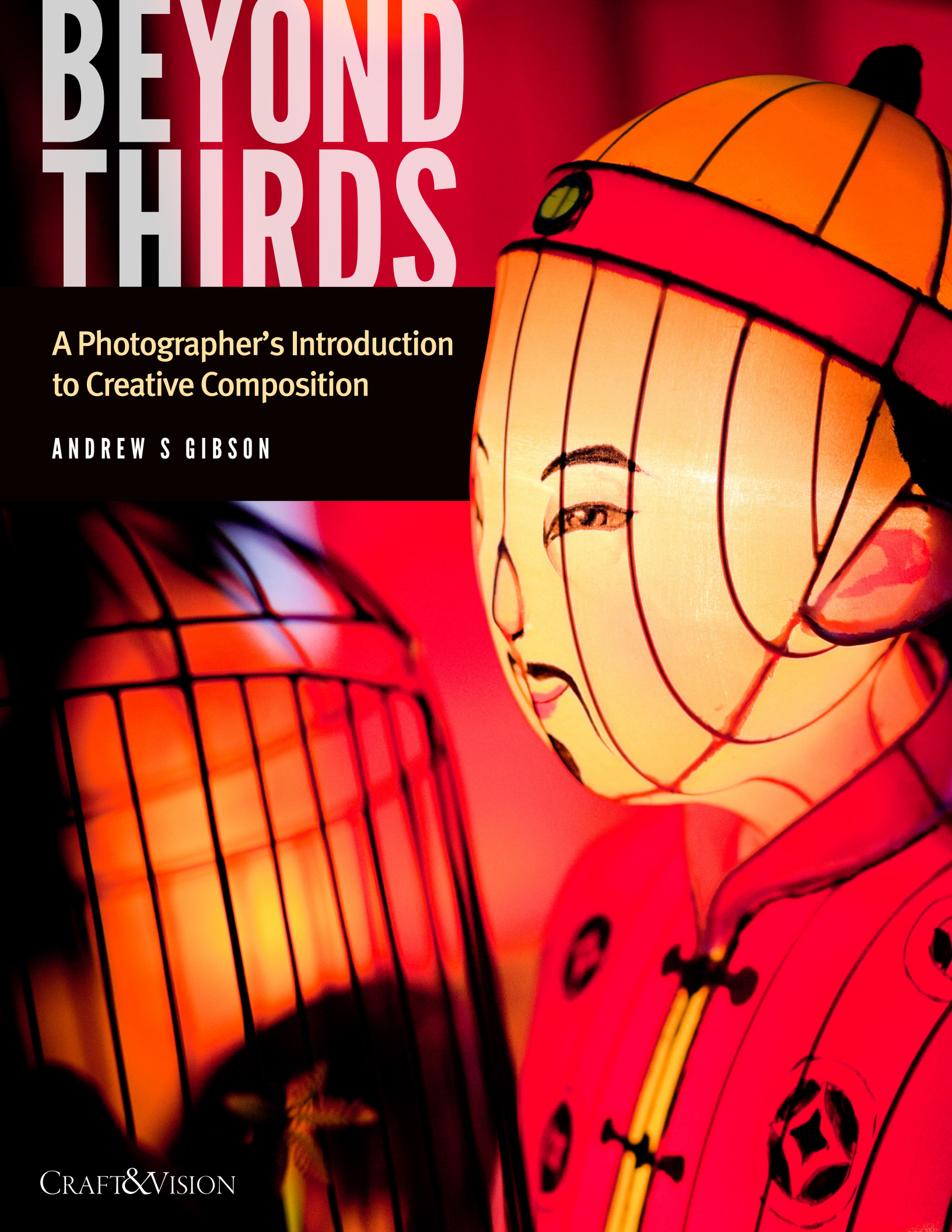
BEYOND THIRDS

A Photographer's Introduction to Creative Composition

ANDREW S GIBSON



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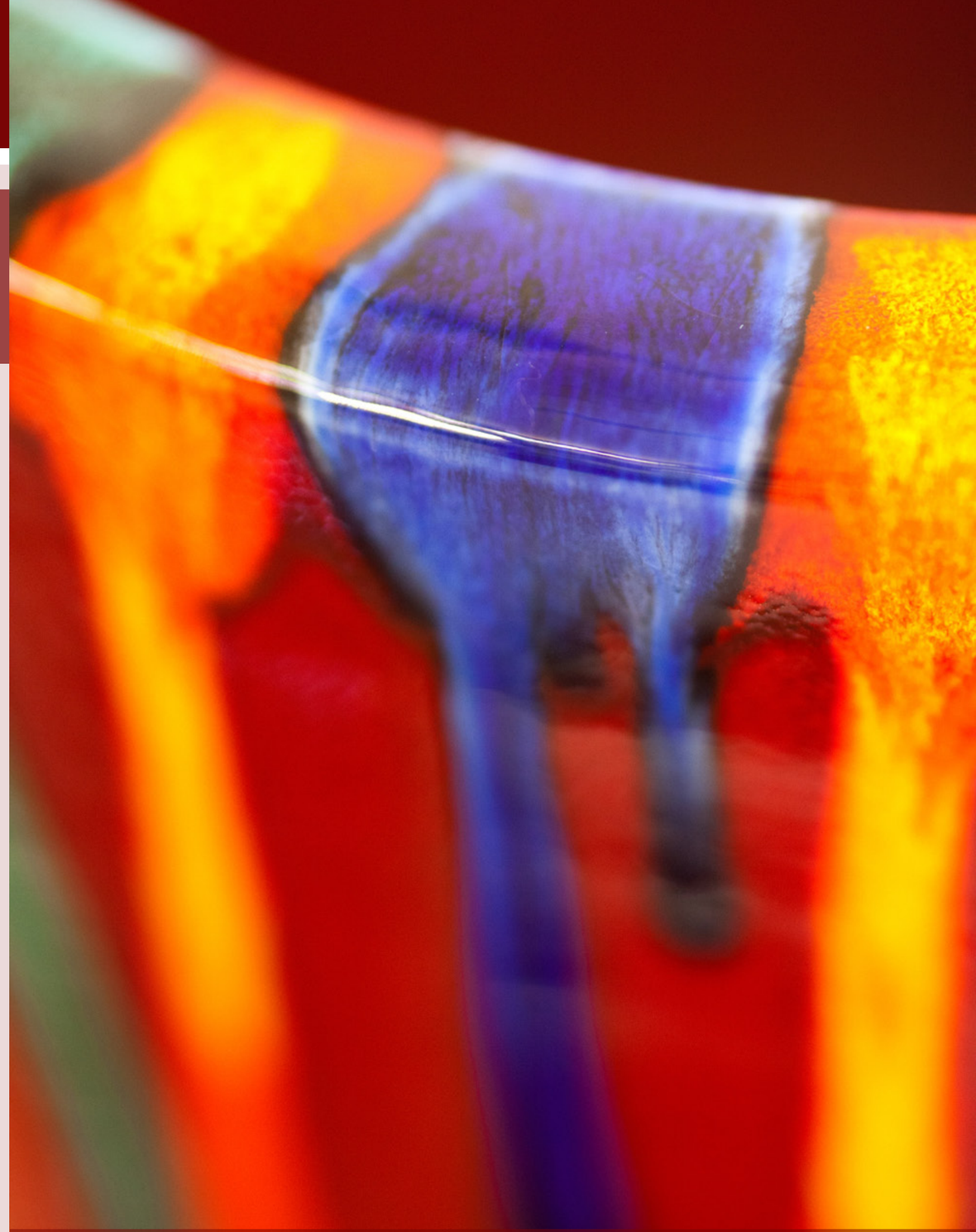
INTRODUCTION

There is no such thing as “correct” composition, just bad composition, good composition, and inspired composition.

What is composition? Put simply, it’s the way that you arrange the elements of a picture within the frame. The way you do this depends on your intent—the mood or ideas you wish to express with the image. Composition has been studied and refined by artists for centuries, and by photographers since the invention of photography nearly 200 years ago. Artists have the advantage over photographers in that they can paint things onto the canvas in any arrangement they desire. Photographers have the challenge of working with whatever is in front of them at the time. Sometimes the photographer will be able to change things around to improve the image, and at other times will be powerless to change anything.

Composition is important because you have to get it right when you take the photo. It’s one of the things that separates good photographers from the less skilled, and master photographers from the merely good. Great photographers use composition in skilful and inspired ways to tell their stories. You can wield the magic of Photoshop and Lightroom to do some amazing things—but you can’t use them to fix fundamentally flawed compositions.

My approach to composition has never been over-technical. I tend to operate on instinct and compose photos without thinking too much about it. But I’ve read a lot on the subject of composition and spent time analyzing my images and photos taken by photographers whom I admire. While I don’t consciously obey any rules (or guidelines), my research has given me a deeper understanding of the principles of composition. This eBook outlines some of the things that I’ve learnt. I hope it inspires you to think more deeply about composition and use some of the principles discussed to create some memorable photos.



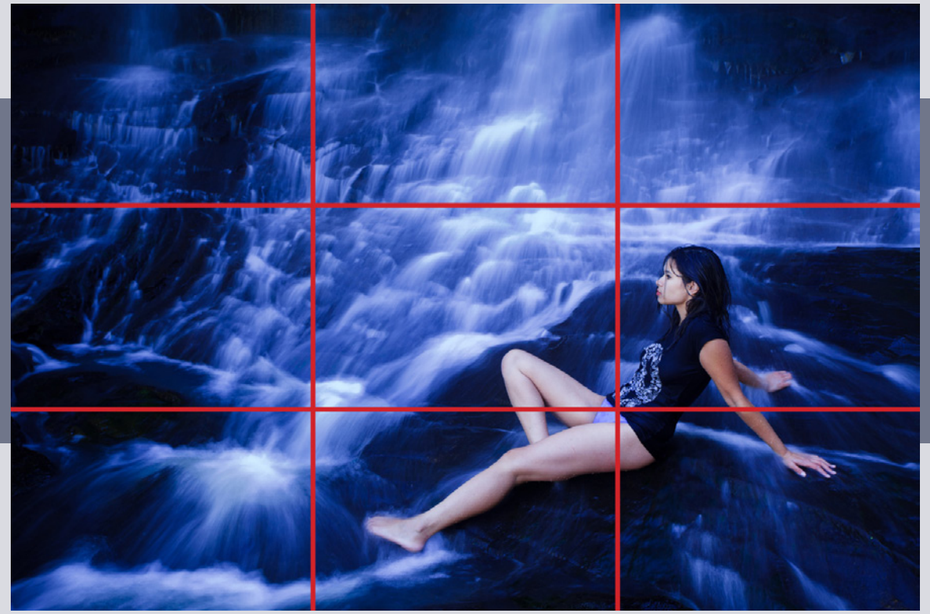
Pottery pattern, New Zealand, 2011
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85mm, 1/180 second @ f2.5, ISO 3200

THE RULE OF THIRDS

The rule of thirds is one of the first principles of composition that most photographers come across as they learn about photography. The basic principle is very simple—that you can make a more pleasing composition by placing the main point (or points) of interest one third of way in from the top or bottom and from either side of the image. An easy way to visualize this is to imagine a grid superimposed on the image. The grid divides the frame into thirds both horizontally and vertically. The four points where the lines of the grid intersect are said to be the ideal locations to place the main point of interest of the photo.

The photo on the right illustrates this perfectly. My model, Hayley, is placed more or less on one of the intersections of the grid. In theory, this creates a better composition than placing her in the centre, or close to the edge of the frame.

It's important to understand the rule of thirds, even though by the time you've finished this eBook you'll hopefully understand why I don't place much faith in it. But in order to learn more about composition, and move beyond the rule of thirds and take better photos, we need to first understand what the rule of thirds is telling us to do.



In this image the intersection of thirds is the perfect place for my model. But I didn't put her there because I wanted her on one of the thirds. First of all I had to find a place for her to sit in the waterfall. She needed to be able to keep still so I could take the photo, and there was really only one place available for her. Then, with her in position, I had to find the best composition. The fact that she's on a third is really just coincidence. My main aim was to create a strong, dynamic image, and to find the best composition to do so.

Mokoroa Falls, New Zealand, 2011
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 40mm, 1/2 second @ f9.5, ISO 200

THE RULE OF THIRDS

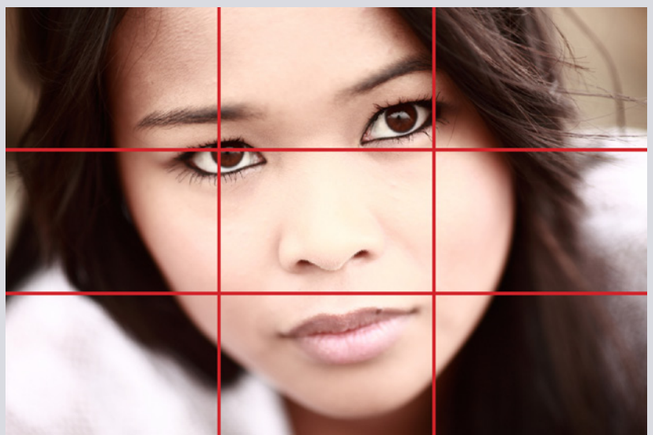
Another place you'll see the rule of thirds come into play is with landscape photography. The general advice is to place the horizon on one of the thirds so that you end up with one-third sky and two-thirds land (or the other way around).

The same advice also applies to portraits. The general wisdom is that you should place the eyes of your subject as close to the intersection of thirds as possible. You can see that idea in action in the portrait on this spread.

Does this mean that you should compose your photos according to the rule of thirds all the time? No it doesn't. You should think of the rule of thirds as the "guideline" of thirds—a suggestion as to where you should place the subject. Sometimes it's the best place for your subject, and sometimes it isn't. The challenge is learning some of the other principles of composition that help you decide when to go with the rule of thirds and when to ignore it. I will explore these in this eBook.

I'll finish this section with a final thought on the rule of thirds from fine art photographer Cole Thompson, quoting his version of the rule:

"A great image is comprised of 1/3 vision, 1/3 the shot and 1/3 processing."



Abbey, New Zealand, 2011
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85mm,
1/360 second @ f2, ISO 200

1939 Ford 10HP, Classic Car Show,
Auckland, New Zealand, 2011
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85mm,
1/350 second @ f4, ISO 100

MOVING BEYOND THE RULE OF THIRDS

The golden section and Fibonacci spiral laid over one of my photos. The golden section is based on a mathematical formula. The theory is that photos composed according to the ratios of the golden section are aesthetically pleasing. The theory relies on the photographer using the 3:2 aspect ratio of the 35mm format, which is close to, but not exactly, the same ratio of the golden section. Does it have any validity? There's an easy way to decide for yourself. Download a graphic of the golden section from Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fibonacci_number) and lay it over some of your favourite images in Photoshop. Is there any relationship between your most successful compositions and the golden section?

A danger of composing according to the rule of thirds is that it can make photos look formulaic. It works sometimes, but not all the time—and when it does work it seems to me to be more through good fortune than anything else. You could pick any spot at random within the frame and sooner or later you will find a well-composed photo with a focal point at that spot. That doesn't mean that every photo should be composed the same way, and it doesn't make it a rule.

The Golden Section

Where does the rule of thirds come from? I've always seen it as a simplification of the principle of the golden section—a mathematical means of dividing the frame into pleasing proportions. While the math behind the golden section is interesting, it's really just a theory that has been used by some artists (and certainly not all) throughout the ages since the time of the ancient Greeks. These artists don't place focal points or horizons on a third, they place them according to the golden section. It's close, and I'm being a little pedantic here, but it's not on a third.

Furthermore, the golden section only works when applied to a frame that is roughly 1.618 times as long as it is wide. This is close to the aspect ratio of the 35mm frame—the golden mean goes out the window if you're using a different aspect ratio (such as micro four-thirds, the square format, or a medium- or large-format camera).

And that's all the rule of thirds is—an approximation of a guideline used by some artists.

Bruce Barnbaum tells an interesting anecdote in The Art of Photography. (I recommend you read this book.) The rule of thirds was first put forward as an idea by a nineteenth century statistician who studied 250 highly regarded works of art to see where the artists placed the focal points of their compositions. He simplified his findings into the rule of thirds. Bruce's point is that the rule of thirds has no validity because it's an idea arrived at by a statistician (not a photographer) who used a flawed analysis to come to a conclusion on a subject he knew little about.

MOVING BEYOND THE RULE OF THIRDS

The Golden Section – continued

My feeling is that a lot of attention is paid to the golden section because Henri Cartier-Bresson composed many of his photos according to its principles. But I am not Henri Cartier-Bresson, and neither are you, and we need to find our own ways of expressing ourselves through photographic composition.

Whatever its origin, the rule of thirds is a useful way of teaching a complete novice that the best place for their subject within the frame is usually not the centre, or the edges, but somewhere in between. Beginners tend to need strong rules to guide them until they gain the understanding and confidence to make their own way. Composition is more complex than the rule of thirds suggest. You can't just place your subject on a third and think "job done!" More effort is required to create strong images.

An Holistic Approach

When I'm taking photos I consider how all the visual elements within the frame work together to create a pleasing composition. I'm not thinking about the rule of thirds (or any other guidelines) as I do it, but about how the elements within the frame work together.

The important thing is not just the placement of each element, but the relationships between them and other parts of the photo, including any negative space. Visual elements need to be placed where they have the most impact. They need room to breathe, they need to be related to the other elements in the photo, all the while considering the overall balance, harmony, and energy of the image.

The correct place for a horizon, for instance, is not necessarily on one of the thirds. It depends on what you want to show in the photo, how much space other elements need, and how interesting the sky is. There's a lot to think about, and a danger that if you compose to the rule of thirds as an end in itself, you won't take any of the other principles of composition into consideration.

Take the photo on page 5. It seemed obvious to me that the Ford logo needed to be placed in the centre of the image (looking left to right). The image wouldn't work if it was placed on a third—there would be too much empty space on one side of the photo.

Everything I write in this eBook is intended to be a principle or a guide—it's never a rule. Composition is an art and, when it comes to composition, the right solution depends on the vision, style, and purpose of the photographer as much as it does on any guidelines. Think of these principles as signposts along the way that help you understand where you are and where you're going, rather than absolute truths. Hopefully they will make the path to finding your own way of photographing things a little clearer.

Photographers make good photographs by photographing interesting things in dramatic or appropriate light. If your subject is boring, or the light doesn't suit it, then you are just trying to rescue the situation by coming up with a good composition. Don't waste too much time on this. Instead, seek out inspiring subject matter, and aim to photograph it in the best light possible, with the best composition that you can come up with. That's when you'll create some magical images.

A benefit of digital photography is that you can use the camera's LCD screen to gain instant feedback. When you are looking through the camera's viewfinder you are seeing the subject in three dimensions. What you are trying to do is visualize how it will appear in two dimensions—the photo. The LCD screen will tell you. It's a useful tool for checking both exposure (using the histogram) and composition, and gives you a chance to make corrections in the field.

Portland Bill, England, 2010

Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 28mm, 25 seconds @ f8, ISO 100

BALANCE

This image is all about balance. There is balance between the lighthouse, the sea, the rock ledge in the foreground, and the empty evening sky. The warm lights in the lighthouse also balance the deep blue of the encroaching night sky.

There's conceptual balance too—the balance between the fading daylight and the falling night. There was a narrow window of opportunity where the ambient light and artificial tungsten lights were in balance. Earlier, the daylight overpowered the tungsten, and later on there would be no colour in the sky.

The lighthouse is small, but it's also the focal point and balances all of the things around it. Should the lighthouse be larger in the frame? For me, the answer is no. It needs room in the landscape to breathe. The surrounding sea, rocks, and sky are an important part of the composition because they create atmosphere and provide a setting.

The horizon is near the middle of the image. I didn't have much choice—if I had pointed the lens down to include more rock, or up to include more sky, the lighthouse would have tilted due to the converging verticals effect. I wanted the lighthouse to be straight, and had to set the camera up so it was level to achieve that. That's one reason why landscape photographers like using tilt lenses or cameras with tilt movements. It lets them keep buildings vertical while tilting the lens up or down to get the right balance between foreground and sky.

There are a number of reasons here for not composing according to the rule of thirds. If I had used the rule of thirds, and nothing else, to compose the photo the result would have been entirely different.

A quick check (above) confirms that this photo doesn't conform to the rule of thirds. The bottom photo was taken the same evening, from the same spot, but with a shorter focal length of 21mm. While the lighthouse is closer to one of the thirds, it's too small in the frame and the sense of balance is lost.

Winscombe Cove, Auckland, New Zealand, 2011

Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 19mm, 30 seconds @ f11, ISO 400

BALANCE AND STABILITY

The rocks at the bottom of this photo provide foreground interest and bring balance and stability to the composition. Foreground interest should be unobtrusive—it has to complement the main subject of the photo, rather than pull the eye away from it.

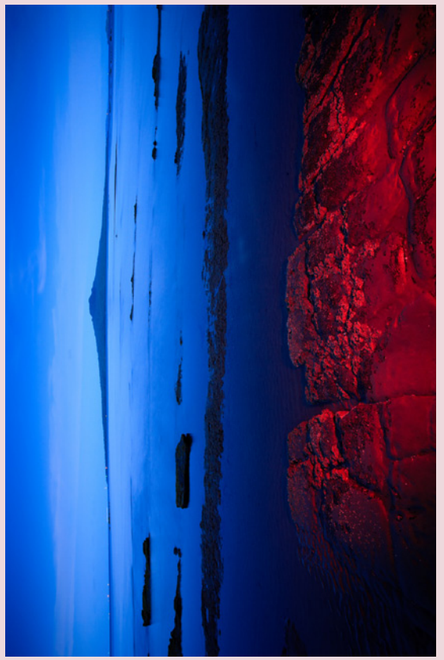
This photo is a good example of why I rely on instinct for composition rather than composing to "rules" like the rule of thirds. The rocks occupy a third of the frame—but the horizon is not on a third and Rangitoto, the island in the distance, is in the centre. The result is a balanced image.

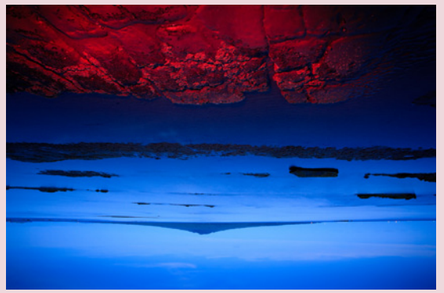
What makes a balanced landscape? The dynamics of balance occur in a sideways direction. In a balanced landscape, the right hand side of the frame balances visually with the left. The composition in this photo is symmetrical, creating a simple, balanced image.

Balance works differently in an up and down direction. In the natural world we have land under our feet and the sky above us—and that arrangement looks natural in photos because it is what we expect to see. The rocks in this photo belong at the bottom of the frame, where they bring stability to the composition and reinforce the natural order of things (ground below, sky above).

How much sky is appropriate in a landscape photo? That depends on the image—the only way to judge it is by feel, and considering what you are trying to say with your photo. Whatever you do, don't place the horizon on a third just for the sake of it. The horizon doesn't belong there. Its natural place in the composition depends on how light (or dark) the sky is, the visual weight of any clouds in the sky, its colour, and how it interacts with the rest of the photo. If this coincides with one of the thirds, that's fine. And if it doesn't, that's fine too.

As an experiment in painting with light, I used a torch with a red gel to paint the foreground rocks red, setting up an intense colour contrast between the red rocks and deep blue sky. The eye moves back and forth between the red rocks and the island, creating visual energy. Warm colours appear to advance towards the viewer and cool ones appear to recede. This adds depth to the image.





Compare the photo with one taken earlier, without any painting with light and while there was still a little colour in the clouds from the setting sun. The dynamics of the photo are completely different. It is still a balanced, peaceful composition. I've darkened the foreground to help direct the eye towards the volcanic island.

The red foreground in the first image adds energy to the composition by encouraging the eye to move from the rocks to the island and back again.

Turning the image on its side and upside down confirm that the composition is only balanced from top to bottom because of the rocks at the bottom. You can flip the image back to front and while it looks a little odd compared to the original, is still balanced.

TWO FOCAL POINTS

Where do your eyes go in this photo? Mine go to the tower first (the sunlit side is very bright and pulls my eye) and then to the flag, and bounce around between the two.

The composition of this photo is very simple. I stood at the base of the tower with a wide-angle lens and pointed the camera upwards. The converging verticals create diagonal lines that pull the eye towards the top of the tower. But a tower, however photogenic, by itself against a blue sky gets lost within the rectangular shape of the 35mm frame.

I needed something else within the frame to add interest and fill the empty space. The backlit flag was the answer. It provides a counterpoint to the tower and helps guide the eye around the composition. The two focal points, the tower and the flag, are quite evenly balanced. This encourages the eye to move around the photo and creates energy within the composition.

It didn't take me long to figure this out when I took the photo. I can make quick decisions about composition because of practise—the more you practise the more the principles of photography become internalized, and the quicker you can react when time is limited. It's a bit like sport; the more an athlete practises kicking a ball, or swinging a racquet, the more likely they are to perform at their peak in the heat of the action.

The time-consuming part of the photo was waiting for the wind to blow the flag into the right position. I wanted the flag to be as open as possible. I took lots of images with the flag in various states so that I could choose the best image afterwards. This is another situation where the camera's LCD screen was useful. I was able to review the photos to make sure that I had a good one.

How does this photo stack up against the rule of thirds? The tower is on a third, the flag isn't really. But I wasn't considering thirds when I composed the image. My main concern was to create a strong, simple image, and to make sure that the flag had enough space to unfurl within the frame. Thinking of thirds is the wrong way to approach composing an image like this, because there's a danger that you will try to "force" the composition so that the main elements are on a third. This can be a distraction that prevents you from finding a better way of composing the image.

TWO FOCAL POINTS

The image has two focal points—the white structure at the top of the tower and the flag. The brightness of both areas makes them stand out against the background. The image wouldn't be nearly as effective if the flag wasn't backlit or the tower was lit from a different direction. The light is as much a part of the composition of this image as the arrangement of the tower and the flag.

There is colour contrast between the warm tones of the flag and the tower against the blue sky. This is created by the warmth of the light from the setting sun, although you can add it in post-processing too.

Venice, Italy, 2009 | Canon EOS 40D
20mm, 1/125 second @ f5, ISO 200

The tower and flagpole form two powerful diagonal lines that lead the viewer's eye to the top of the tower and the flag.

Maori Bay, New Zealand, 2011

Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 26mm, 30 seconds @ f8, ISO 100

THE POWER OF THREE

Focal points spread throughout the image help guide the eye around the image. This photo has a simple composition. The eye moves from the big rock to the small islands in the distance and back to the large rock again. The large rock is the main focal point of the photo, and the others pull the eye through the photo so that the viewer takes in the rest of the scene. The movement of the eye through the photo creates energy.

Try holding your thumb over the photo to obscure one or both islands to get an idea of the difference it makes to the composition (I've used Photoshop to help you out). If there were just one island in the background, the viewer's eye would move between the two focal points. It still has energy, it's just that the eye moves between these two points instead of all around the scene.

Now, look at the image without any islands in the background. The composition has changed again. It's become a lot more restful as the absence of the islands in the background doesn't pull the eye through the image. The composition doesn't have as much energy.

I'm not saying that one or the other composition is correct, and the others aren't. They are all sound compositions. It's important to remember that we're talking about photography here, and while Photoshop gives you the power to add or remove elements, in general you have to use what's in front of you.

1979 Jaguar XJR, Classic Car Show, Auckland, New Zealand, 2011
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85mm, 1/2000 second @ f2, ISO 100

THE DYNAMIC IMAGE

Directing the viewer's eye around the photo is an important part of composition. Sometimes it's done subtly, perhaps with an understated use of colour or by darkening the edges of the photo to guide the eye inwards.

But sometimes the eye is pushed dramatically and forcefully towards the focal point of the image. You can almost hear the sound as the eye whooshes through the frame to its destination. The composition is strong and dramatic and gives the photo energy and impact.

One tool that the photographer has for creating dynamic images is line. The eye tends to follow lines in the photo. Some lines are gentle, like an S curve that meanders through the landscape. Others are solid and stable, such as the horizon, which takes the eye from side to side.

Diagonal lines, however, shoot across the photo like an arrow. They take the eye directly from one part of the photo to the other. Like a knight jumping across a chess board, they have the power to connect different parts of the frame.

Diagonal lines are strong and powerful. They create a strong sense of direction and purpose. Use them when you want to create dynamic photos with impact.

Is this image balanced? In one sense it is—the chrome jaguar is balanced against the background in terms of the space it occupies. It doesn't need to be any smaller, or any larger, in the frame.

In terms of motion, there is no balance. The left hand side of the image doesn't balance with the right. The composition is dynamic. It has far more energy and impact than the preceding balanced landscape photos. Part of working out how to balance your composition is deciding how much energy you want to impart in the photo.

I went to a classic car show with just one camera and one lens. I prefer to travel light and I find that one lens focuses my mind as I look for photos that can be made with it. Here, at the classic car show, I wanted to concentrate on details. By necessity, hand-holding the camera when I take close-up photos ensures I will be using a wide-ish aperture. That's not a bad thing—I enjoy using limited depth of field. Notice that the head of the jaguar is the only sharp part of the photo. The jaguar leaps into sharpness from a dreamy blur. Sharp areas pull the eye, and here the eye goes along the body of the jaguar until it reaches the head. It's not just down to sharpness, however—the effect is enhanced by the diagonal line created by the curve of the jaguar's body. The two principles work in harmony to create a more powerful compositional device than if they were working in isolation, or worse still, in opposition to each other. There's another concept at play here too. I composed the image to give the jaguar its own space. If I had taken the photo from a viewpoint much higher or lower than this one, one of the silver lines would have run behind the jaguar's body. The composition here is very simple. Three basic principles at play, all working together to create a dynamic image.

Hood ornament, Classic Car Show,
Auckland, New Zealand, 2011
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85mm,
1/360 second @ f4.5, ISO 100

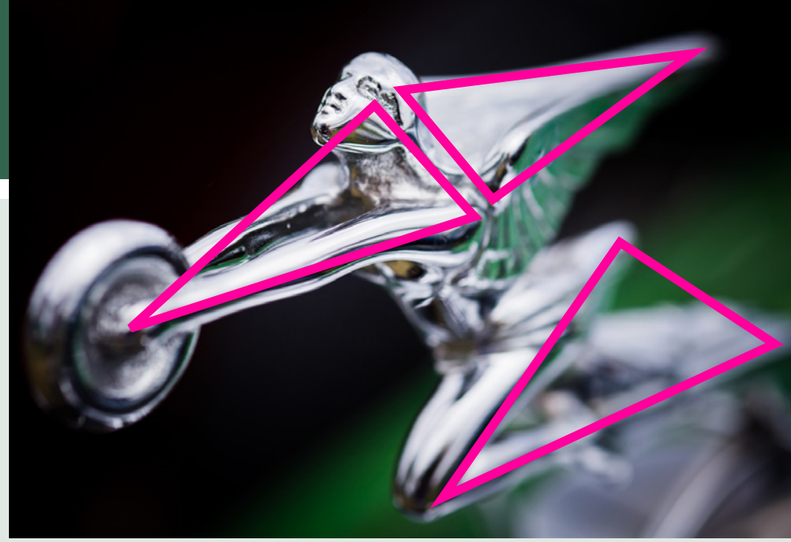
SHAPES WITHIN THE FRAME

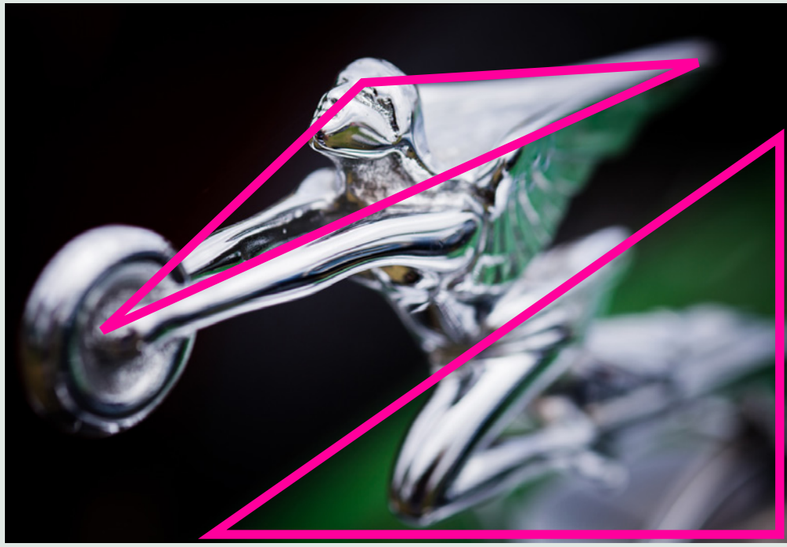
How many triangles do you see in this photo? I have to admit that I didn't see any when I took it. I wanted to fill the frame with the hood ornament in the most dynamic and interesting way possible. I'd realized that the out-of-focus black and green blobs behind the ornament made a great background, but the triangularity of the composition completely escaped me.

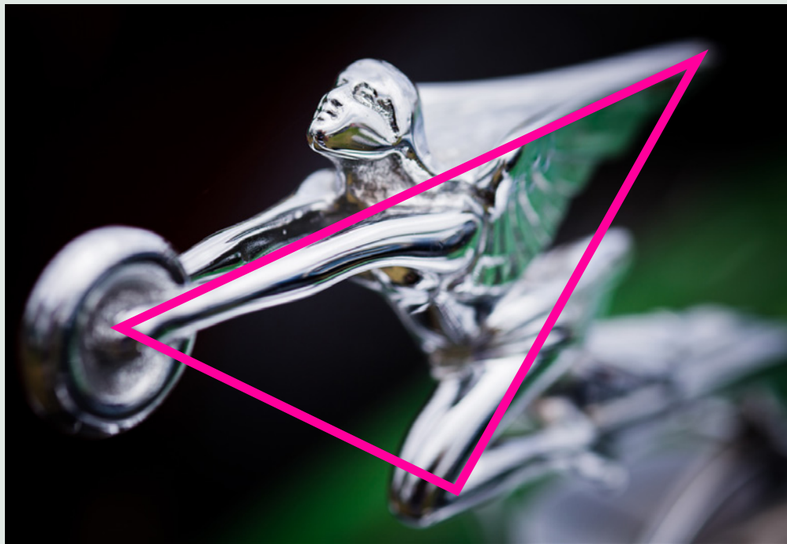
Sometimes geometry exists where we don't expect it. I'm sure that the designer of this hood ornament purposefully included the triangles in the design. Looking for shapes is one way of simplifying composition and bringing order to something that is potentially visually chaotic.

The shapes within this photo are interesting, and they are part of a dynamic composition that starts with the eye going to the head of the ornament (the sharp part of the photo) and working its way down in a zigzag to the bottom right corner and back up again. The composition has energy.

The viewer's eye goes straight to the head of the ornament, then travels around the rest of the image, following the zigzags created by the triangles within the design of the ornament, before returning to the head. The narrow depth of field helps keep the viewer's attention on the hood ornament.







Auckland Lantern Festival, New Zealand, 2011
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85mm, 1/1000 second @ f2, ISO 1600

FILLING THE FRAME

We owe the dimensions of the 35mm frame to Oskar Barnack, who decided to use the 3:2 aspect ratio when he designed the first 35mm rangefinder camera for Leica in the 1920s. The reasons why he chose this particular aspect ratio are unrecorded, but as 35mm camera users, we are more or less stuck with it (the only widely available alternative, unless you move up to medium- or large-format cameras, is the relatively recent micro four-thirds format).

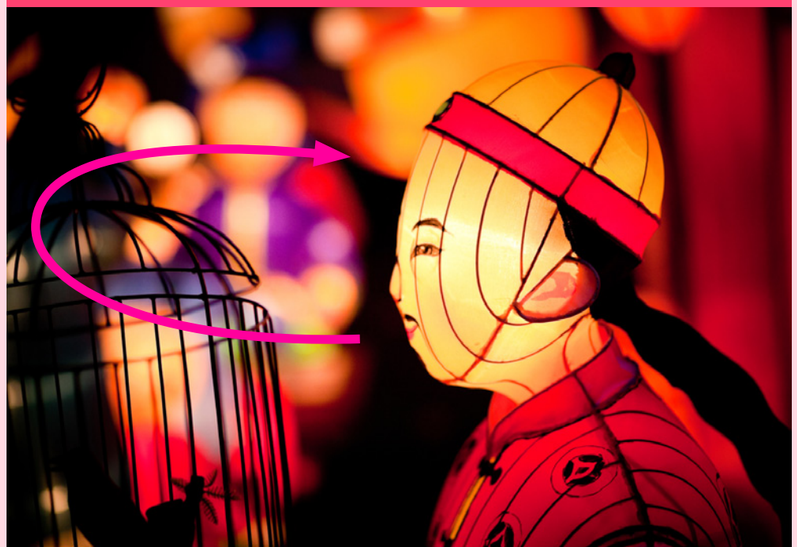
But is it the most appropriate size for the photo frame? One of the challenges of composition within the 35mm format is using the space efficiently. It's easy to end up with too much empty space on either side of the subject, especially in the portrait format.

Getting to grips with the dimensions of the frame is a compositional challenge for 35mm photographers. It's easy to fill the frame if the subject is rectangular in shape, but how do you do it if the subject doesn't conveniently fit the frame? The answer lies in what you put in the background. I filled the frame in this photo with the silhouette of the bird cage and the out-of-focus shape in the background. I took care to leave black space between the lantern and the bright background, so that the two didn't overlap.

Is the background more atmospheric when it's in focus or out of focus? In this case I used a wide aperture and focused on the lantern, so that the background was thrown out of focus. I didn't have much choice—the photo was taken at night with a hand-held camera, so I had to use a wide aperture and high ISO. Rather than fight these restrictions, I used them by exploiting the bokeh of the lens to create interesting shapes in the background. Filling the background does two things. First, it fills the space and helps me make good use of the entire frame. Second, it creates mood. It's soft and it's not entirely clear what it is—I'm guessing that most people wouldn't realize that it's another lantern. And that's where the mood comes in—the viewer isn't presented with all the information, and has to fill in the gaps with their imagination.

This photo fits in nicely with the rule of thirds—the Chinese lantern is positioned at one of the intersections and is the focal point of the image.

The viewer's gaze moves in a circle to the left around the image and back to the lantern again.



What happens if we crop the image? I tried it here by cropping to the same aspect ratio you would get from a 6 x 7 cm medium-format camera. It's okay, but not nearly as effective as the original composition. In this case the 35mm frame suits the subject perfectly.

A SHORTER RECTANGLE

If you find that you're not making full use of the 35mm frame, you should consider composing to a different aspect ratio. For instance, I dislike using the portrait format when I'm taking landscape photos, as I often end up with an unbalanced composition caused by a combination of too much sky and other visual elements being too small in the frame.

Aspect ratio is the term that describes the dimensions of a photo in a ratio of width to height (width:height). A single frame of 35mm film measures 36mm by 24mm. This is a ratio of 36:24, which becomes 3:2 when simplified (or 2:3 if you turn the camera on its side and use the portrait format). The ratio tells us that the frame is one and half times as wide as it is high.

The 3:2 aspect ratio has been preserved in most digital SLR cameras, for both full-frame or APS sized sensors. The exception is cameras that use the micro four-thirds format. The aspect ratio of images from these cameras is 4:3 (or 3:4 in the portrait format). This forms a shorter rectangle that some photographers find easier to compose with. The 4:3 aspect ratio is also found in 6 x 4.5 cm medium-format camera systems.

There are two more rectangular aspect ratios in common use: the 7:6 aspect ratio found in cameras like the Pentax 67 and the 5:4 aspect ratio found in 5 x 4 and 10 x 8 large-format cameras.

If you find yourself struggling to use the full width of the 35mm frame you may benefit from experimenting with another aspect ratio. Cropping is so easy with digital photos that you can crop your photos to any size. But I recommend that you try and stick with the basic rectangular aspect ratios listed above. They are all strong shapes to work with and have unique qualities that take time to master. It's a little like using a zoom lens. You'll learn more about the image-making qualities of a certain focal length by using a prime lens than you will by using a zoom lens and setting a different focal length every time that you take a photo.

Which aspect ratio works best for you? While I never intended the photo to be used in a ratio other than the 3:2 35mm format when I took it, I soon realized that the simplicity of the composition lent itself to cropping. My conclusion? Interestingly, the cards takes on more visual weight as the table is cropped away—it seems a lot heavier in the square format version than the 35mm version. My favourite is the 5:4 crop.

3:2 aspect ratio

4:3 aspect ratio

(micro four-thirds & 6x4.5cm medium format)

5:4 aspect ratio

(large format)

7:6 aspect ratio

(medium format)

If you're into landscape photography, I recommend that you take a look at Joe Cornish's book *First Light*. An interesting observation for me was that most of the photos were taken in the portrait format. This is possible because Joe uses a 5 x 4 large-format camera. The shorter rectangle of the 4:5 aspect ratio lets him take photos without wasted space at either end. Many of the images would have been more difficult to create with a 35mm camera because of this reason alone.

THE BEAUTIFUL SQUARE

This photo of a rock has a very simple, almost minimalist composition. It is just a rock in the sea, blurred to mist by the use of slow shutter speeds. Yet there is a stability and geometric beauty to the composition of the image, cropped to a square, that photos taken in rectangular aspect ratios can lack.

The dynamics of the square frame are interesting. The eye can't move from side to side like it can in a photo composed using the 35mm frame. Instead, it moves around in a circle.

The square format has its origins in medium-format cameras made by companies like Hasselblad and Bronica. I owned an old Bronica S2A many years ago, and I liked the simplicity of use and the image quality I got from 120 film. I never realized the potential of the square format and I didn't use it as much as I should have. But now, with so many photographers experimenting with the square format and uploading their work online, there is plenty of inspiration to be had.

The best square photos utilize the shape of the frame to create images that are studies of geometry, symmetry, and graphic design. It's a process that strips down the scene to its barest elements. This process of simplification helps explain why the square format has become popular in black and white photography.

The square format has found a place in black and white landscape photography. After stripping away colour you are left with the building blocks of black and white photography: shape, form, texture, and tonal contrast. Images become studies of graphic design using the shapes created by the elements in the photo. By photographing water and clouds and blurring their motion with slow shutter speeds, you create images composed of shapes within negative space. It's a bit like chess—simple to learn, but takes years to master. The simplicity of the technique belies the depth of the images behind it.

The eye moves in a circular direction around this photo, taken using the square format. This has been enforced by darkening the edges of the photo in post-processing. The conversion to black and white means that there is no colour to distract the eye. Colour is powerful, and it pulls the eye away from visual elements like texture, shape, form and tonal contrast.

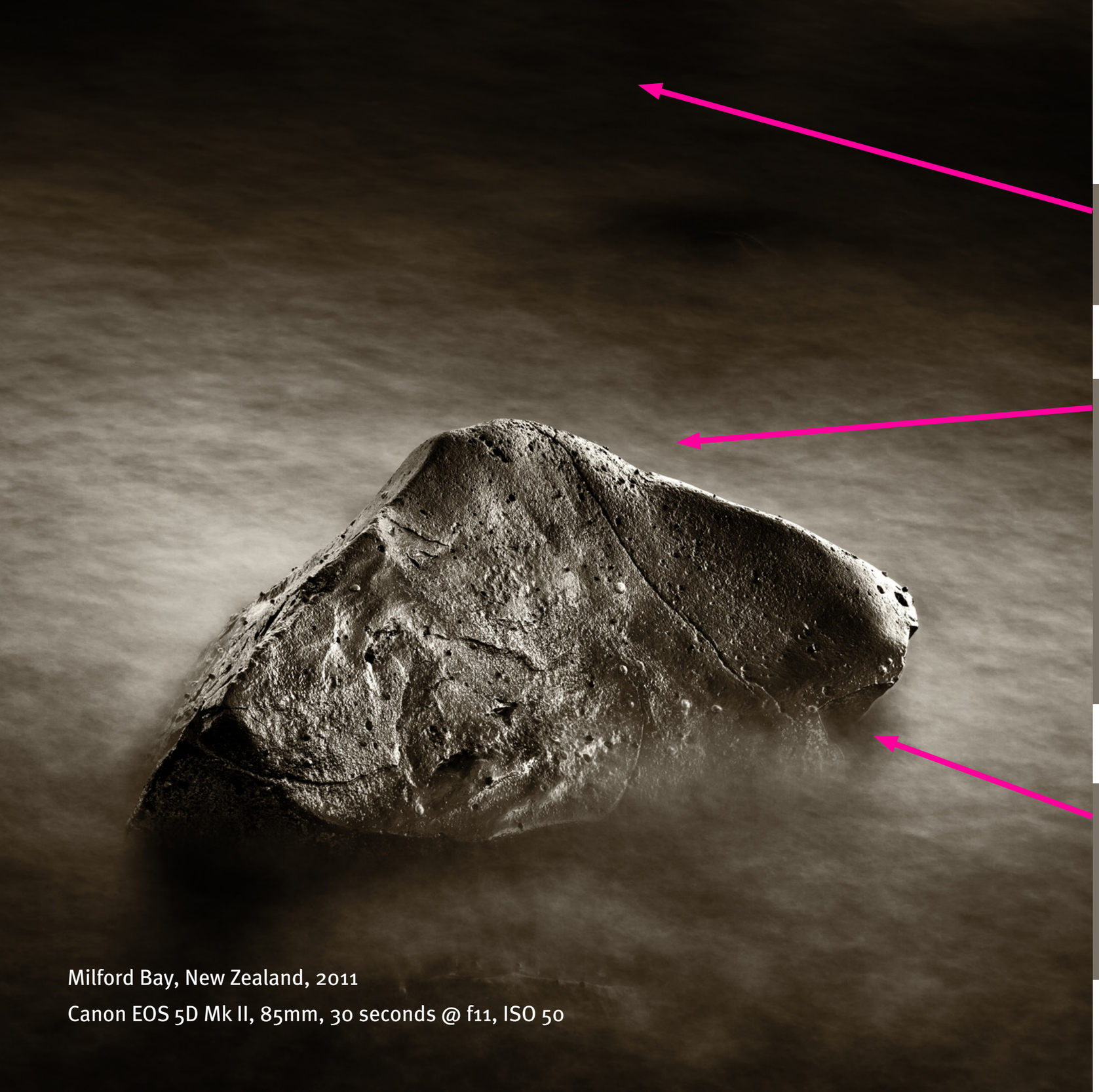
There is another type of contrast in the photo—the contrast between the smoothness of the blurred water and the texture and solidity of the rocks. Turning water to mist by using long shutter speeds is a common technique—but it only works well if there is something solid, such as a rock, in the photo to provide contrast.

creative exercise

ASPECT RATIOS

Go back over some of your old photos and try cropping them to different aspect ratios. Try this with photos taken in portrait as well as landscape orientation. Does this improve the composition of any of your photos? What does this exercise teach you about the way you have been using the rectangular aspect ratio of 35mm cameras?

Don't be afraid to crop photos taken with 35mm digital SLRs. If you have ten or more megapixels to play with, you can quite comfortably crop to a square and still print to 11"x17" or A3 size if you wish. Digital photos are easy to crop, with the benefit that you don't need to buy a medium- or square-format camera to experiment with different aspect ratios.



Milford Bay, New Zealand, 2011
Canon EOS 5D Mk II, 85mm, 30 seconds @ f11, ISO 50

I darkened the edges of the photo in post-processing to push the viewer's eye towards the rock.

The rock is positioned centrally in the frame, but nearer the bottom than the top. I didn't use any rules or guidelines to place the rock, but put it at the point that looked and felt right within the frame. It seems natural that the rock is near the bottom because it is a heavy object. This helps the stability and balance of the image. If it were placed near the top, the result would be more unsettling (which is fine if that's what you are trying to express).

I concentrated on this rock, excluding any others, to make the image as simple as possible. The composition has been simplified further by the black and white conversion. Without colour, it's a study of light, movement, and texture.

SIMPLICITY

Avebury Stone Circle in England, at the end of a hot summer afternoon. I was surprised by just how many people had come to visit the stone circle, one of the largest in Britain. Perhaps because I've seen so many photos of the standing stones over the years, all of them without people.

Photographing the landscapes of Britain is a tricky task. It's a relatively small country, with some incredibly beautiful natural scenery, a large population, and a lot of highly skilled professional and amateur landscape photographers. The result is that no matter where you go, it is bound to have been photographed many times before by some very skilled photographers. How do you create something different?

I soon realized that it was going to be difficult to take full length photos of the standing stones without including people somewhere. So I decided to take a more abstract approach. Each stone has a different size and shape. I selected some of the most interesting, crouched down, looked up, and concentrated on making minimalist compositions. This photo is my favourite.

There are three parts to this photo—the dark sky, the light-coloured stone, and the dark shadow at the base of the image. A light stone against a dark background—perfect for black and white. I framed the image until the weight of the stone balanced the expanse of the sky—again, I did this by feel rather than following any principles.

Simplicity is an important part of composition and a recurring theme throughout this eBook. Always ask yourself how you can make your images simpler by excluding what isn't needed. Every visual element needs to contribute to the overall image.

Avebury Stone Circle, England, 2009
Canon EOS 40D, 17mm,
1/100 second @ f8, ISO 200

Devenport, New Zealand, 2011

Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85mm, 22 seconds @ f16, ISO 100

SPACE

Photographic composition is a little like a game of chess. At the start of the game, the board is cluttered with pieces and it's difficult to tell which player has the strategic advantage. Chess players aim to simplify the situation on the board by entering into exchanges of equal value—the process of removing pieces from the board makes it easier to see strategic elements such as lines of attack, defence, and the space that each piece controls. As more pieces are removed, each remaining piece gains power. Ultimately, in the end game, the power of each piece is greatly magnified. Even a single pawn, insignificant at the start of the game, can become a powerful element.

Photographic composition works the same way. Simplifying the composition makes your message clearer. The process of excluding unnecessary elements makes the visual elements you choose to retain more important. Each element needs its own space. Try to avoid important elements overlapping each other.

The photo on the previous spread does this. I've reduced the seascape to its most important elements – the sea, the distant rocks, the sky and the island on the horizon. Each element enjoys its own space in the composition.

Bethell's Beach, New Zealand, 2010
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85mm, 30 seconds @ f9.5, ISO 100

Telephoto lenses give you an easy way of simplifying composition by letting you take photos with less background. I used an 85mm lens here to create a photo of the rock stacks against a simple background of bright sky and sea. I darkened the storm clouds at the top of the frame in Lightroom to enhance the feeling of light coming from underneath an approaching weather front.

Muriwai, New Zealand, 2011

Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 29mm, 30 seconds @ f8, ISO 400

SUBTLETY WITHIN THE IMAGE

Bright colours, dynamic composition and bold, dramatic shapes grab the viewer's attention. When we start off in photography these are often the things that we photograph in our first steps towards learning to express ourselves. This applies in post-processing too—Photoshop's contrast and saturation sliders are useful tools, but often misused by photographers trying to create attention grabbing images.

I went through the same process as I learnt to make black and white prints in the darkroom. I printed everything with high contrast because it was dramatic and eye catching.

Then I went through a stage of printing from cross-processed colour slide film to create high contrast, brightly coloured prints. I got a few good images, but everything lacked subtlety.

My photography improved as I learned to appreciate subtlety within the image. It took me time to appreciate that photos don't have to be bright, colourful, or high-contrast to be strong images.

Look at the image on the previous spread and compare it to the one on the right—a black and white version of the same photo. Which do you prefer?

My initial idea was to use painting with light to create an image that would hopefully be more interesting than a photo taken with only ambient light. I used a torch to "paint" the foreground rocks. There's a strong colour contrast between the orange rocks (lit by orange torchlight) and the rest of the photo (lit by blue ambient light). I like it, and I'm happy with the result. But when I processed it I also created a black and white version, which you can see on the right. At first I didn't like it as much. Then a friend told me that he preferred the black and white version as it had a more powerful impact on him than the colour one.

That led to an "a-ha!" moment. I realized that the colour image is strong and dramatic—that's one of the reasons that I like it. The black and white image is subtle. Dramatic images grab our attention, but they don't always last. Subtle images may be slower to capture our attention, but they have a longer lifespan. Some of my favourite photos are the more subtle ones. They have staying power. I still like them years after I took them.

Subtlety is something we explore as our artistic voices get stronger. Our development as fine artists means that our images get simpler, stronger, and more subtle. Bright colours and high contrast get left behind in the search for simpler and more enduring tools of expression.

Thames, New Zealand, 2011

Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85mm, 1/180 second @ f1.8, ISO 3200

SUBTLE COLOUR

Colour plays an important role in the composition of any colour image. Colour is powerful—it pulls the eye and demands the viewer's attention. Colour is dominant—it can overwhelm visual elements such as texture, form, and shape. The strength and power of colour splits photography into two mediums, each with their own visual language—that is, colour photography and black and white photography.

That doesn't mean that colour is bad or undesirable. But as photographers we have to understand the role of colour in the image so that we can harness its power and energy. We need to be masters of colour.

One way of doing this is to create photos with a limited colour palette. This photo does this by exploiting the orange colour of the keys. The composition is simple—I got in close and concentrated on the pattern formed by the keys. The photo was taken inside a museum and I kept the warm tones created by the tungsten light. There is no colour contrast here; the colours are harmonious, unlike the photo on page 10 where the composition is dominated by strong colour contrast. Here, the harmonious colour palette lets the eye concentrate on the shapes, texture, pattern, and tonal contrast within the image.

You can take this even further by converting the image to black and white and toning it.

The structure of the photo is quite simple—a line of keys from an old till stretching across the frame. I placed them on a diagonal to create interest, and used selective focus to pull the eye towards one part of the image. What would have happened if I'd used a small aperture? I'll never know for sure as I didn't have my tripod with me, but if all the keys were in focus the eye wouldn't have a natural resting place.

The image also works well in black and white. It retains its subtlety—there is no need to increase contrast or do much work in post-processing to make an interesting photo.

WORKING THE SUBJECT

Before a shoot, I try and have some idea of an image I want to create. In a shoot involving people, I'm working on the basis that I want to make a single, powerful image. I'd rather have a single strong image from a shoot than five to ten good images, but nothing strong.

In this shoot with Abbey at Fairy Falls, the image on the right is the one I visualized before we started. It's quite simple—a girl in front of a waterfall, shot with a slow shutter speed to blur the water. I knew in advance what she would be wearing, and that her white top would look good against the dark backdrop created of the rock face.

The light is an important element of this photo. When we arrived at the waterfall, it was in the sun and I couldn't take the photo I wanted, because the contrast was too high. We had to wait until the waterfall was in the shade. The soft light is important because it means that the contrast within the scene didn't exceed what my camera's sensor is capable of recording. The light is subtle and flattering, perfect for recording beautiful skin tones and subtle nuances of colour and tone.

The composition is also simple. Abbey's pose and white top create a strong shape against a dark background. The blurred waterfall adds drama. The twin pools of white water on the surface of the water echo Abbey's arms (this was a happy accident). Her outstretched arms form a triangle pointing upwards.

WORKING THE SUBJECT

This photo wasn't the first that I took at the waterfall—it was one of the last. The other photos were kind of like a warm up, a way of working out how to get the best out of the location. They were the prelude to the best photo—stepping stones along the way as I refined the composition by gradually simplifying it and trying different things until I got the image that satisfied my idea of what I wanted to get out of the shoot.

This is called working the subject—taking as many photos as you can while you can. It's not machine gunning—the process of taking lots of photos in the hope that you get a good one. Each composition should be considered. But one advantage of digital cameras is that you are free to take as many photos as you want as you experiment with new ideas and compositions—afterwards, you can discard the ones that don't work.

Here's one of the earlier images. It's in the same place, with Abbey positioned to the side of the waterfall instead of in front of it. I shot the photo in the landscape format, but there was too much empty space either side so I cropped it to a square. It's still a strong composition—Abbey's figure is balanced by the waterfall on one side and the ferns on the other. The three main visual elements—the ferns, the waterfall, and Abbey—all have their own space within the composition.

These photos are also powerful because of the colour. I lowered the colour temperature in post-processing to make the rocks blue, and found that I could do that with Abbey because her skin is dark—so the blue cast doesn't look unnatural. Colour is an important part of the composition (the limited colour palette comes into play), but so is the tonal contrast created by juxtaposing the light and dark tones.

Fairy Falls, New Zealand, 2011
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85mm,
1/2 second @ f9.5, ISO 50

Warm tones in a blue image also pull the eye. Despite the cool colour temperature, Abbey's skin tone is still warmer than the blue rocks. It adds to the depth of the photo, as cool tones recede and warm tones appear to come forward—creating a sense of distance between the two.

Light tones in a dark image create a powerful and dramatic contrast. Here, a small area of light tone is balanced by a large area of dark.

The central composition, square aspect ratio, and negative space all combine to create atmosphere by showing the environment. How much of the environment do you need to show? Not always a lot, as you can see by looking at the close-up photo of Abbey in front of the waterfall.

The blur of the water creates a dreamlike ambience—we know that the water doesn't really look like this.

There is colour contrast between the green ferns and blue rocks.

COMPOSITION IN BLACK AND WHITE

Composition in black and white has nothing to do with colour—we know that because the colour has been stripped away. Without colour, the important elements are texture, tonal contrast, shape, and line. These images have all those. Which work best, the colour or black and white images? Well, that's a matter of opinion (I like both). The point is that some images look good in both black and white and colour.

Black and white photos are in a sense "purer" than colour ones because they rely on the basic building blocks of imagery for their success. Colour is such a powerful and dominant element that it can carry a photo by itself. Without colour, you need tonal contrast, texture, lines that lead your eye around the photo, and interesting patterns and shapes to make a good photo. Sometimes you come across a situation, such as this, where you can combine these elements with dramatic use of colour. They help add power and drama to the photo.

Some images look good in both black and white and colour. Learning to see and compose in black and white can help your colour images too. There is nothing wrong with "thinking in black and white" while you are taking colour photos. This is what David Muench does, according to an interview with him that I read once. It's a good principle to keep in mind. Don't forget the crucial elements of black and white photography (line, texture, tonal contrast, shape, form, pattern, etc.) when you are taking colour photos. Look for ways to exploit all of these visual elements in your colour photos as well as your black and white ones.

The texture in the rock creates an interesting backdrop. Imagine the photo if the rock had no texture, it was just black, empty space (as if it were a studio photo taken against a black backdrop). Without texture, there is no visual interest. The addition of texture makes the photo richer and more interesting to look at.

Just like the colour photo, the tonal contrast is an important part of the composition. Here, it takes on a more central role. Without tonal contrast, this image wouldn't be worth converting to black and white. Imagine how it would look if Abbey were wearing a black bikini and black top. Imagine too that there was no waterfall, just rock. Then you would have a photo of dark tones against dark tones, and it wouldn't work. The tonal contrast is essential to the success of the photo.

The dark edges push the eye towards the centre of the photo. I darkened the edges in post-processing. Notice that the edges are darker in this image than the colour one. The contrast is also higher. In general I find that colour images look a little flat when converted to black and white, and that I need to increase the contrast to make a good image.

The photo has a subtle blue tone. It's very subtle—you probably wouldn't even realize it was toned until you saw it against the untoned conversion. I tried sepia and split blue/copper toning the image too, but the subtle blue tone enhanced the drama and mystery of the photo best.

CONCLUSION

Here are three key words to bear in mind when you're taking photos: order, balance, and energy.

Order: Photographers create images by bringing order to the visual chaos of the world around us. The best way to do this is by simplifying and excluding—exclude the unnecessary or unwanted elements to create the most simple image possible. Each element needs room to breathe, space to express itself.

Balance: The position of each element within the frame depends on the overall balance of the image. All the visual elements in the composition, plus the colours and tonal contrasts, need to be balanced. You can create tension in the image through subtle or strong imbalances—but you still need to understand the principles of balance to do this.

Energy: The way the eye moves between the visual elements creates energy. Photos can be peaceful and tranquil, or energetic and exciting, or anywhere in between.

These principles are easier to use if you have a strong sense of the way you see the world, and the mood and ideas you wish to express. Visualization is the process of understanding how the scene in front of you will translate into a printed image.

Part of visualization is post-processing. The better you become at using tools like Photoshop and Lightroom, the more you will be able to visualize the enhancements that you can make to your photos at the post-processing stage to enhance the composition and communicate your message.

The aim of this eBook is to deepen your understanding of some of the principles of photographic composition, and to inspire you to go out and create some amazing images. I hope that it's achieved that.

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