



QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE MAKING A PHOTOGRAPH

Presentation at Lane Cove Creative January 2024 by Michael Smyth

The Five pillars of good photography tell us the necessary steps we should follow in creating a photograph. This presentation is all about the first pillar: **Conceptualisation**.

The five pillars are:

1. CONCEPTUALISATION
2. IMAGE CAPTURE
3. PROCESSING AND ENHANCEMENT
4. IMAGE EVALUATION
5. OUTPUT

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK YOURSELF:

SUBJECT:

What is the subject of my photograph? or what is it about?

The subject is a very different concept to subject matter.



Above: *These two photos show the ocean, but what is the subject?*

The image at left could be about movement, turmoil, coldness, threats or similar.

The image at right is about peace and tranquillity, warmth and restfulness.

The photos are therefore of two totally separate subjects, even though the subject matter is in many ways similar.

It is important to be able to look at a photograph and understand what the **subject** is, not just the content of the image. This is where many camera clubs fall down in assessing a photograph, they fail to understand what the photo **means**.

There are two types of photographs, those made **in front of the lens** and those made **behind the lens**.

Photos made in front of the lens can be described as a "**Picture**", or a document. In other words, a photo that invites close scrutiny or study (Studium in Roland Barthes' terminology – see the book "Camera Lucida" for more explanation). These photographs are a literal or eyewitness style of photography – "**This is what I saw**".

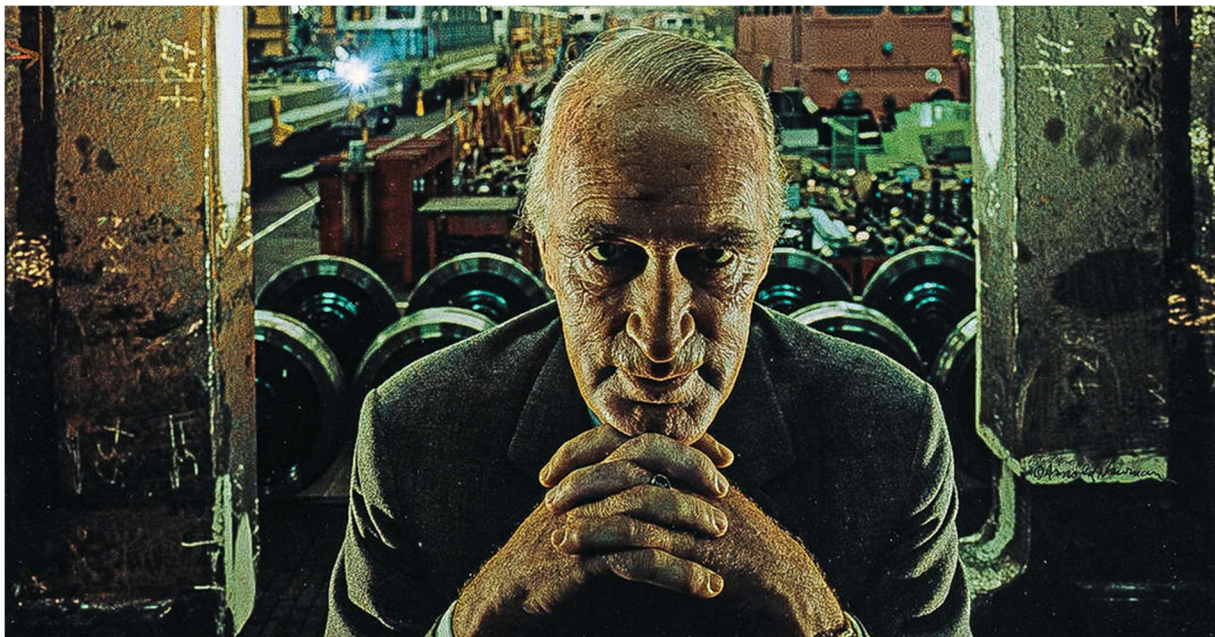


Above: A document or eyewitness photograph that invites study.

Photographs made in front of the lens are what most of us create most of the time and are a valuable source of information and memories.

A photo made **behind the lens** (in our imagination) can be described as a **"Map"** or a portrait. These images contain a meaning beyond their factual content and have an emotional impact on our senses (Punctum – Barthes). These photographs evoke a response from the viewer.

We describe these photos as **"Maps"** as a map contains symbols that reveal information that is not literal and requires interpretation. A portrait should reveal something of the character of the person or animal, and therefore contains more information than just the image.



Above: Arnold Neuman's famous portrait of Krupp, the pro-Nazi industrialist, tells us much about the man and his deeds.

So, understanding whether we are creating a **"Picture"**, or a **"Map"** is the first question we need to ask ourselves.

We would then go further to ask these questions:

What is my concept for the photograph? (Map or Picture)

What am I trying to say with the photo? And does it fulfil that purpose?

Does the scene before me say what I want to say?

How can I best highlight the relevant subject matter to illustrate my story or message?

Am I close enough to show the main subject matter, or do I need to leave more space to show context and a feeling of “place”?

Are there distractions in the scene in front or behind the important elements?



Above: This photograph shows the wrecked DC3 in the middle of a featureless lava field in Iceland. The framing and treatment is meant to emphasise its similarity to a skeleton of a dead animal.



Previous page: The photograph includes the background to emphasise the impression of isolation and loneliness



Above: The photograph is closely cropped to isolate the birds and create a sense of humour and incongruity. No background is needed beyond the immediate surroundings to express the story.

Further questions to ask to determine what the subject is, are:

Do I want the photo to generate a reaction? Positive or negative?

What is the feeling I am trying to communicate?

Has this photograph been done before, or am I creating something unique?

Is this an appropriate subject? Does it NEED to be taken?

Is this image part of a series and does it fit with the others in the series?



Above: This photograph has been processed to give a dark and brooding feeling, with birds (ravens?) circling. The intention is to convey a feeling of mystery and danger.



Above: This composite photograph shows industrial processes, polluted water and a smoky sky. It intends to convey a message about our environment. Is it clear?

FRAMING AND PERSPECTIVE:

Once we have a clear/er idea of what our subject is, we then need to consider what we include in the frame and what we exclude by asking these questions:

Are there distractions within the frame that should be excluded?

Is there something outside the frame that should be included to add to the story or message?

Am I in the best position to take this photograph, would a different position tell a different story?

What is my viewpoint? Should I be higher or lower?

What is happening with the lines in my frame? Straight or angled?

Do the lines (drawing composition) create a sense of direction or perspective?



Above: In this photograph of the old Inca foundations in Cuzco, Peru, the story is about the shapes and lines. A camera club judge would likely criticise the figure walking out of the frame, but it is only there to provide scale, the figure is NOT the subject.



Above: This photo of the dragon figure in Ljubljana, Slovenia was taken from a low viewpoint to emphasise scale and show how the myth of St George and the dragon (this is where it originated) dominates the city, including the churches.



Previous page: *The powerful lines in this photograph taken at Karijini in Western Australia draw the viewer through the image to the opening at the end. The camera was carefully positioned to emphasise these lines.*



Above: *This photograph from Greenland was made with a long telephoto lens that compressed the foreground figures against the icebergs in the background. The intention was to give a sense of scale to the icebergs, which were enormous.*

LIGHTING:

Photography is all about drawing with light, so it obviously plays a huge role in capturing the image data. Light comes in many forms, so understanding not only that the scene is lit, but also considering the essential qualities of the light in your scene is hugely important.

Ask yourself these questions relating to the lighting of the scene:

From what direction is the light coming? How is it illuminating my subject matter?

Can I use shadows as part of the composition?

How does the lighting draw my eye through the scene?

Is this the best time of day to take the photograph?

What are the qualities of the light falling on my composition? The direction, strength, colour, and intensity?



Above: This photograph of a waterfall in a gorge at Karijini was made when the early light was illuminating the cliff walls, giving the water an orange glow. Leaving it a little later to make the photo, the reflected light would be gone.



Previous page: *The trees near Mount Kosciuszko were illuminated by strong side lighting and using the shadows to aid the composition adds drama and definition.*

TIMING:

In photography, timing is everything, from capturing the “**decisive moment**” to getting those last rays of sunlight. Making sure you are managing the time when you release the shutter can make or break your photograph.

To aid in evaluating the timing of your photograph, ask yourself these questions:

Is this the best moment to press the shutter (decisive moment)?

Are these the best weather conditions to be making the photo? Would different conditions produce a different photograph?

If I wait for some time, will the conditions change? Improve or deteriorate?



Above: *In changing conditions, it is important to be ready for when the lighting breaks through. This photograph was made at a beach in the Daintree, under very changeable conditions. Waiting for the right time to press the shutter made a huge difference to the photograph.*



Above: *this photograph was taken at Gold Harbour on South Georgia, amongst chaotic scenes of King penguins coming and going. This chick was begging food from its parent, and I was fortunate to be ready when the chick lunged at the parent.*

Timing is everything in photography. When we make a photograph, we freeze an instant of time and represent the world as a two dimensional image. Knowing when to press the shutter is as critical as any of the other considerations we have outlined. Missing the important instant may make your photograph relatively meaningless.



Above: Two photographs of Mount Fitzroy in Patagonian Argentina. These were taken at different times and despite the different aspect ratios, are outwardly similar. The time of day and the lighting make for very different results.

Sometimes we have the option to visit a place at different times, other times we only have a single chance to make a photo when travelling, so we have to work with what we get. Closer to home we have the ability to choose the time of day.

EXPOSURE:

Getting an appropriate exposure of the scene is critical in giving you the most amount of data to work with when processing the photograph. "**Correct**" exposure is a technical consideration that implies "**Exposing to the Right**" to maximise the data in your file, with the aim of being able to offer the most flexible data to work with to create the processed image.

Beyond getting a "**Correct**" exposure, other questions need to be considered:

Is my combination of aperture, shutter speed and ISO optimal for the photograph I am creating and how I want to portray it?

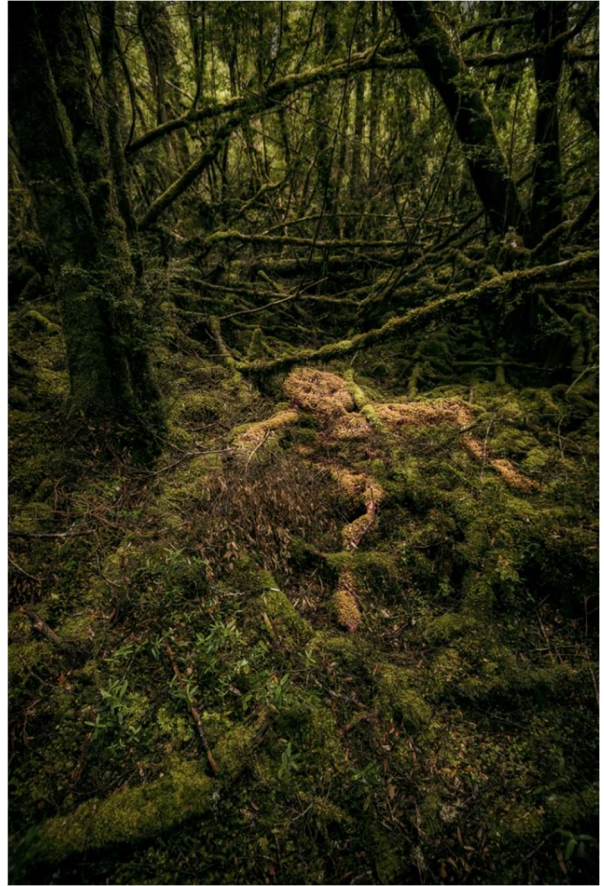
Should I be showing movement or freezing the action, or using intentional camera movement (ICM)?

Can I capture the dynamic range in the scene, or should I consider making an HDR capture to maximise the tonal range available for processing?

Should the camera be stabilised in order to best capture the scene, or would high/er ISO be suitable?



Above: *In this photograph both a slow shutter speed and camera movement has been used to convey the sense of motion and abstract the figure.*



Above Left: A fast shutter speed has been used to freeze motion. **Above right:** A tripod has been used to stabilise the camera and enable the use of a small aperture to give a large depth of field and still utilise a low ISO setting, for maximum quality.



Previous page: This photograph has been made using two different shutter speeds, one a very short shutter of 1/100 sec and the second of 4.0 secs. These were taken with the camera mounted on a tripod and the two versions blended together in Photoshop, as layers with masks. The result is a sharply defined landscape with blurred water to suggest movement.



Above: This photograph was made whilst walking and holding the camera for an exposure of 0.8 sec in order to give a sense of abstraction and movement.

Choosing the combination of aperture, shutter speed and ISO is all about how you want to portray the content of the photograph and support the intention of your photograph – the subject.

SUMMARY:

These questions to ask yourself are intended to assist you, the photographer, in utilising the tools we have available to us to make beautiful and meaningful photographs. At its heart, knowing what your subject is will drive all other aspects of image capture and determine your choices regarding framing, lighting, timing and of course, exposure.