

# Black & White Photography Finding Your Focus

By Doug Caplan



As one navigates around a scene or structure, the perspective and the relationships between the multiple facets and surfaces change, yet they always seem to remain complimentary to the structure as a whole.

In many ways, one can draw a parallel between perfection and non-perfection, both existing as two sides of the same

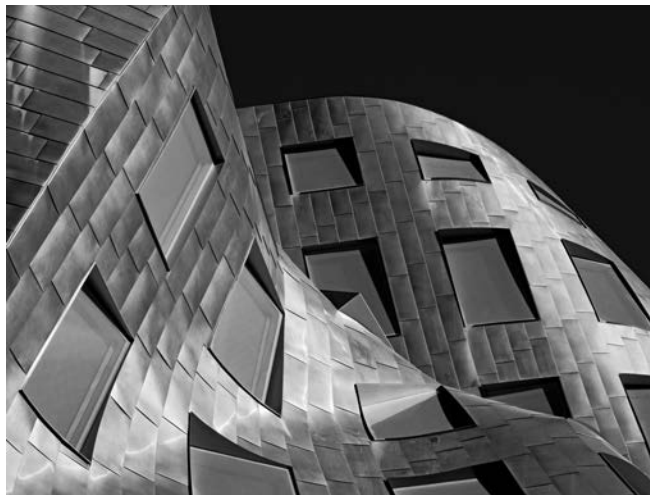
coin, and can therefore be considered a single entity.

This is an important concept I try to capture with my art and, to me, is the essence of black and white photography.

One of the key elements I always seek to exploit when composing my images, particularly in black and white, are patterns of repetition. Patterns do not exist in the universe; patterns “are” the universe, so when approaching a subject, keeping this thought helps me construct the image composition in my mind.

It’s important to know the images I capture are for the sole purpose of self-reflection or expression and are not created to convince anyone of anything. It’s just self-expression I choose to share.

In my opinion, many artists put too much value in how others view their work. To be viewed as authentic, the work should flow from the inner-self outward. Inner-self creates ideas and the ideas move outward to be shared or expressed. There is no right or wrong,



good or bad. There is only an expression that exists.

Once you give yourself permission to create without expectation or the need for validation you will find that creativity flows more freely.

My monochromatic odyssey started about 25 years ago. I started to attend Ampro Photo Workshops in Vancouver so I could learn the art and science of photography. Building a fully functioning darkroom was priority number one, so I built one in my home and started

developing my own black and white film and producing my own prints. I upgraded to a Mamiya 645 medium format camera and got down to business.

Looking back at my early work I can't help but think to myself "What was I thinking?!!!" I was missing the point completely. I had some good work, but I was missing authenticity. But not all was lost. I learned a lot about tonality, shape, composition, contrast and luminosity, all critical components of black and white photography.

It wasn't a technical issue that left me with incomplete ideas. I failed to realize my efforts were focused too much on interpersonal communication and I lacked the awareness of myself. I needed to understand INTRApersonal communication.

Interpersonal communication is how you communicate with others. This is an important skill, but to express creativity, INTRApersonal skill needs to be developed. INTRApersonal means how you communicate with yourself.



Black and white photography is an excellent vehicle to develop your INTRApersonal communication skills. You can't hide behind colour, poor composition or a lack of clarity. There is nothing to distract from what is expressed.

There is no right or wrong so the only way to view your work objectively from your own perspective is to view it from a different point of view. For me, a different point of view was from where I was currently but looking back to where I was formerly.

Life experiences and events force most people to look at things differently as

time passes. Life doesn't happen to us, life happens for us. It may be difficult to accept, but there is no built-in meaning to anything. We apply filters given to us by others to determine what is good or bad. You can only communicate INTRApersonally to someone who you truly value. From this vantage point your awareness will expand and your point of view will shift.

Simplicity is an expression of complexity. Conversely, complexity is an expression of simplicity. Lack of clarity or focus is the death of all potential. In other words, when you try to create something out of complexity, without

clarity, you get a confused expression of creativity. Black and white photography, much more than color photography, distills this equation into the essence of what your creative expression is saying. Keeping your attention on the "simplicity" aspect of everything will yield clarity.

A message can only be understood if it is a cohesive and clear. If someone starts speaking to you using nothing but random words, you would have no idea what that person was trying to say to you.

Try this exercise. Pick your 10 best images. Print them and look at them all simultaneously. You can also do



this on a computer monitor. Is there a creative expression that spans the 10 images or are they just random images? Is there something in those 10 images that says “This is an expression of me?” Where is the compass needle pointing?

One of the best photographic exercises I learned was to go out with a roll of black and white film and a camera with a fixed lens and then take 10-15 images on a single theme within a single linear period of time - by myself. This exercise forces you to apply “filters” to your creative thought process and to minimize any distractions.

The majority of my work is done in colour, but the years spent working in black and white photography forced me to learn how to communicate with myself. The years spent in the darkroom taught me the art of pre-visualization and how to translate my creativity into something that I felt was worth sharing.

My current camera is a Fujifilm XT2 with Fujinon lenses. All of my work is done in 16bit, from a 14bit raw file. I prefer to work from a raw image in 16bit to achieve maximum quality. Fujifilm XT2 raw files are about 50MB each and saved as 14bit @ 300dpi. Raw image files are unprocessed and uncompressed,

which means that I have total control over virtually every aspect of the image and I don't have to worry about image deterioration from any type of filter application or processing. Jpeg images are compressed and pre-processed 8bit images @ 72dpi, making them very prone to deterioration from any type of cumulative processing.

All of my work is done in Adobe Photoshop with Topaz and NIK filters. ✨

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