

THE VISUAL TOOLBOX

60 LESSONS FOR STRONGER PHOTOGRAPHS



DAVID DUCHEMIN

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David duChemin

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*To Cynthia Brooke.
Walk through this world with me.*

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About the Author

David duChemin is a humanitarian and world photographer. He has photographed on all seven continents, looking for adventure and beauty along the way. He is the author of several books about the craft and art of photography, including the best-selling *Within the Frame: The Journey of Photographic Vision*. He is also the author and publisher of a growing library of eBooks, which can be found at CraftAndVision.com

David's work can be found at DavidDuChemin.com, as can his blog and the growing community of kind and talented people who read it.

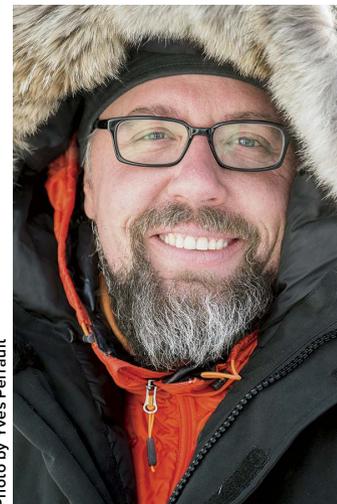


Photo by Yves Perrault

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Introduction

IF I WERE TO BEGIN a school of photography right now, it would send the geeks screaming for the hills. Or at least avoiding my school in droves. Every student would spend one year with one camera—a fully manual 35mm camera like the Pentax Spotmatic or the Canon AE-1. It would have one prime lens and a light meter. Students would be restricted to black and white film. And they'd be restricted from using anything digital except an iPhone. There'd be no magazines and no how-to books. Students would spend a year making photographs, talking about them, studying the work of photographers—past and present—who had something to say, those who made their mark in some way. They'd study stories, and painting, and some art history beyond merely the annals of photographic history. For some people it would be a long, long year.

► Leica M (240), 21mm, 1/500 @ f/4, ISO 200

Fogo Island, Newfoundland, 2014.



A friend asked me recently if I felt photographic educators were these days too strongly biased toward the technical, that they did not pay enough attention to the aesthetic. I do. But it isn't just a problem today. It was the same almost 30 years ago when I first picked up a camera. And that was when there was little more to learn technically than how to focus and expose. Easily mastered with some time and a hundred rolls of film. I know, I'm painting with a broad brush, but really, what more is there in terms of how the camera itself works? The rest is making a photograph that comes alive in some way—for us, or for others.

So, because it's not likely that anyone is signing up soon for my sadistic school of photography—despite the likelihood that grads would have a better chance at making more powerful images in less time—this is my short-form curriculum. It contains some compromises because I know my own brand of idealism doesn't appeal to all, nor does it work for all. I've written it to be somewhat nonlinear, so you can pick any point and begin reading. But the lessons are all interconnected, so starting at the front isn't the worst idea. I've also written it with what Scott Belsky, author of *Making Ideas Happen*, calls a “strong bias towards action.” In other words, we learn best by doing and there's a minimum of handholding in these pages. I've given you as much as I feel you need to know in that beautiful brain of yours, the one none of us gives enough credit to. The rest you will learn, as you learn everything in life—by repetition, failure, and trying again until it becomes yours.

You will notice here an absence of rules, because there are none. We will not be exploring the Rule of Thirds, because there is no such rule, and I want to encourage a healthy anarchy among my students. I want to introduce you to a handful of photographers who changed this art form and taught their generation, and later us, to see in new ways. I want to show you principles and invite you to play with them, turn them on their heads and try new things until you prove me wrong. I won't be marking your assignments, so there's no one to please and there's no exam to cram for only to regurgitate the contents the next day and forget about them. There is no right way—only ways that will give you the tools you need to create new and beautiful, honest things with your camera.

It's tempting to tell you there is no magic wand. I've been telling students that for years. But I was wrong. There is a magic wand: it's making photographs. Thousands and thousands of photographs. It's being honest with ourselves and not trying to be someone else. It's giving the craft time to grow and not

expecting to master something overnight that others have taken a lifetime to do. It's studying photographs and knowing what they provoke in you, and why. It's looking to painters and designers and others who work in two dimensions and learning from them. It's relentlessly looking for light, lines, and moments. Some of us can do astonishing things with 12 strobes or can HDR the crap out of 16 frames taken on a \$40,000 Hasselblad but still can't make a photograph anyone truly gives a damn about. The Internet is full of those kinds of images: technically perfect, frequently lauded with "Nice capture, man," and utterly forgettable. I think I'd weep if the best you could say about my photographs is that they're tack sharp or perfectly exposed.

We're all looking for the perfect little box with a hole in it, and they're sexy little things, I'll give you that. The best ones feel good in the hands, and I'm the first one to tell you I love the tactility of this craft. But Leica's red dot isn't going to make my photographs any better if they're not already good. Thinking differently will do that. Wrestling with new ideas and compositions will do that. Replacing the gear catalogs and popular magazines that are packed with ads—voices telling you, "You can shoot like a pro" with the newest camera—with books of actual photographs will help you do that. Putting down your fancy D4 and picking up a completely manual 35mm camera for a while might do that, too. And yes, a small mirrorless camera might do that for you. Or it won't. If you aren't making beautiful, honest photographs with the camera you have now, you won't do it with the one you're lusting for. I promise.

I know I've preached this sermon before. I know it gets old. I also know it might get read as a rant, but it's truly not. The camera collectors will collect, with no interest in making something that moves hearts or opens eyes, and God bless 'em if that's what makes them happy. But most of you, at least the ones reading this, want that. So do I. We want it so badly it hurts, and the long years ahead to mastery feel like a joy on the rare days they don't feel so damn frustrating. But things get cloudy sometimes, and it doesn't help that people like me once in a while tell you how great this new camera or that new lens is. And those people—including me sometimes—need also to be reminded that none of it really matters. Just get a camera that feels good in your hands and does what you need it do without getting in the way, and then go make photographs. How new, shiny, sexy, small, large, or European your camera is doesn't make a hill of beans' worth of difference to how it moves the human heart. Astonishing work

“There is a magic wand: it's making photographs. Thousands and thousands of photographs.”

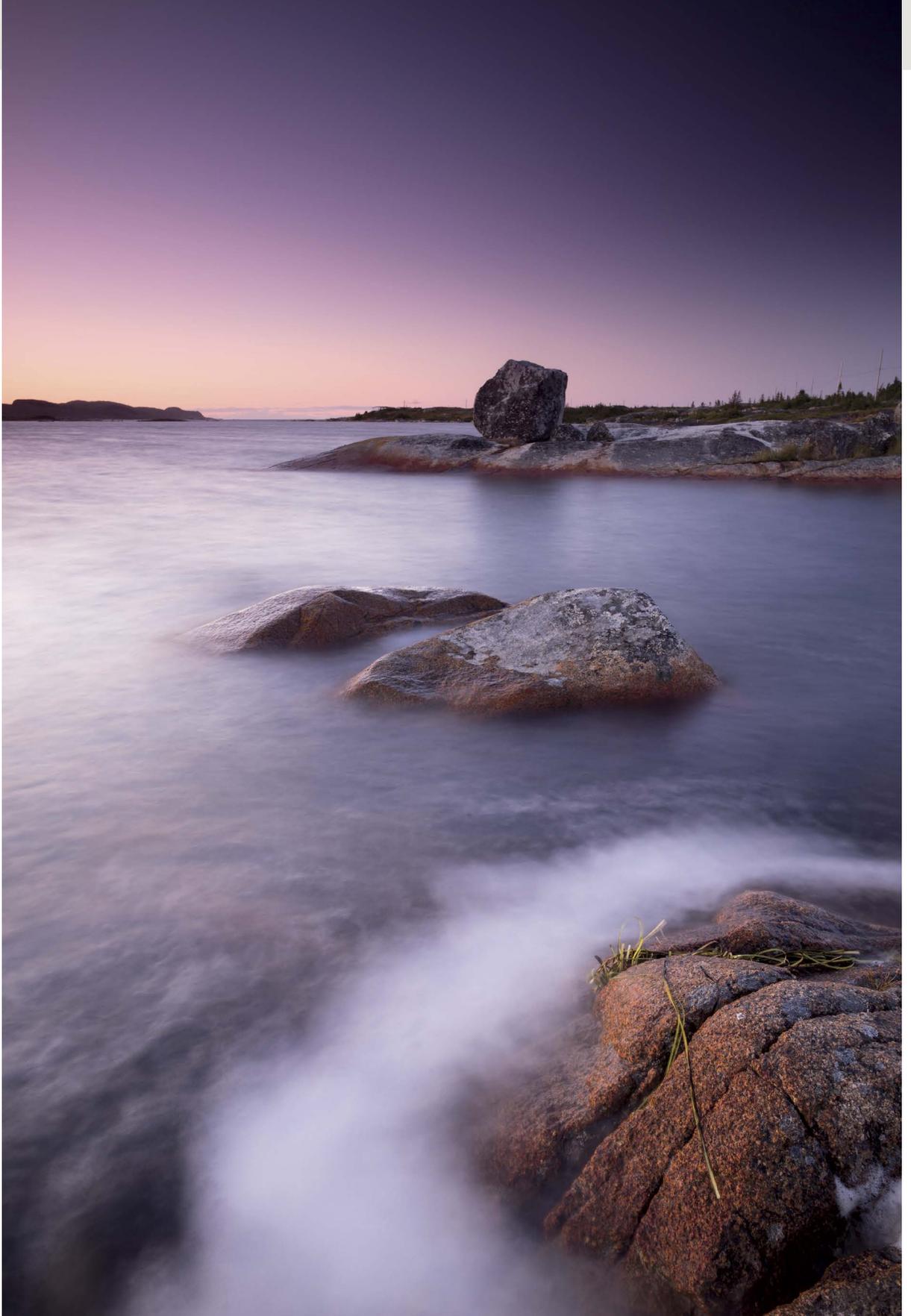
“Head knowledge will not get you any closer to mastery. It is in *doing* these things—the basics—over and over that you will find they become intuitive.”

is created on old lenses, Polaroids, Holgas, old Digital Rebels, and the venerable AE-1. You won't impress anyone (other than other photographers) with your list of Canon L lenses. The only thing most of us truly care about are the photographs. The rest is irrelevant. Don't let it sidetrack you. Envy, gear lust, and the lie that better gear will make more compelling photographs just pull your mind and heart away from making art. Beauty can be made with the simplest of means.

And just as you will become no better an artist or craftsman merely by the purchase or use of a new tool, neither will you become so with new knowledge. You will read nothing in this book that proves itself to be a secret formula of any kind. Some of the lessons will seem basic. They are. But don't dismiss them. You will not get better at this craft with merely a passing familiarity with the basics. Head knowledge will not get you any closer to mastery. It is in *doing* these things—the basics—over and over that you will find they become intuitive, that suddenly you're speaking this language fluently and creating not just dry prose, but poetry that moves the heart—visually speaking. Mastery doesn't come quickly, and after nearly 30 years I see it more as a journey than a destination—it comes incrementally with practice. There is no secret thing you will learn here or anywhere else, except this: study, practice, and don't forget that your most important assets as an artist are imagination, passion, patience, receptivity, curiosity, and a dogged refusal to follow the rules.

Let's get started.

► Leica M(240), 21mm, 8s @ f/4.0, ISO 100
Fogo Island, Newfoundland, Canada. 2014.



Forget the Camera

IT IS EASY, in a craft where we rely as heavily as we do upon the cameras in our hands, to get a little too attached to our gear. So maybe now is a good time to ask you to—no, to beg you to—forget the camera. Photography, the way I practice and teach it (which is not the only way, not by a long shot, but I assume it’s a way that resonates with you because you’ve chosen to read this book and not another) is about you and the world around you. It’s about stories, and life, and photographs that say something about those things. It is not about cameras. It is not about impressing people with the brand of camera you carry or the length of the lens you use. Very few people care about those things.

► Nikon D3s, 23mm, 1/25 @ f/4, ISO 1600

I could have made this photograph with any camera I own. Sure, some might handle the low light a little better, but software helps with that, and when’s the last time someone was deeply moved by how good your sensor is?



► Nikon D800, 85mm,
1/320 @ f/8.0, ISO 400

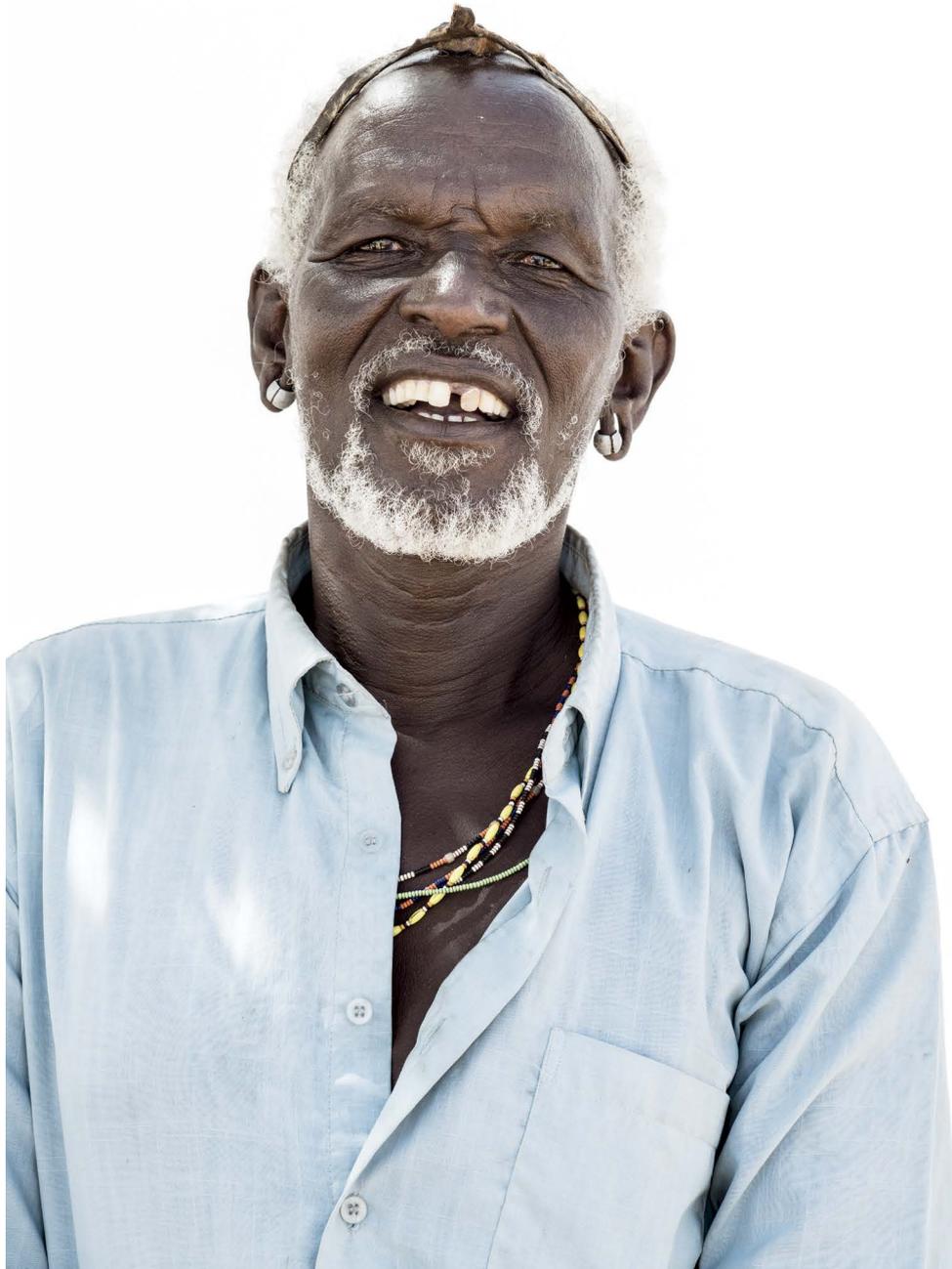
It's the relationships, the light, the moments, and how you deal with them, with the camera in your hand, that will make your photographs stand out. This is Gabriel, a man I met in Kenya. After our time together he gave me a camel. It happens all the time (though not usually with a camel) and it has everything to do with connection. Don't get sidetracked by the gear.

The best craftspeople and artists get so good that their tools become an extension of them, a mere afterthought. They choose the tool that works for them, the tool that gets out of the way as quickly as possible and allows them to do their work with as few frustrations as possible. And they know, in the case of photography, that the real work of making a photograph relies on skills you won't read about in the camera manuals, important as those little books are.

Of course, we need the camera to make photographs. But once you have learned to use the camera, the most important photographic skills are these: receptivity and an openness to see things as they are, curiosity, patience, and a willingness to fail and try again. In the case of photographing people, the key skill is an ability to empathize and connect. In the case of travel photography, it's an ability and willingness to engage a place, and a people, on its own terms. Whatever the genre, there is a skill, or a list of skills, that is more important than just knowing how to use a camera. And I'm not saying that to downplay technical expertise, but to elevate the role of the man, woman, or child (because many of us pick up a camera for the first time as kids) behind the black box. Give me, any day, a low-resolution photograph made with cheap optics and printed on recycled paper but made by someone with something to say and the courage to say it, over a perfectly sharp, 40-megapixel image made with the best lenses and no vision or creativity.

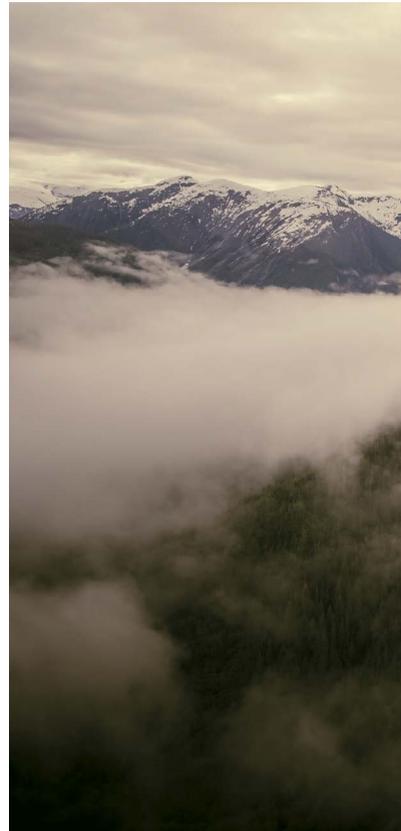
Too many photographers get sidetracked early on by the unimportant. Their lives become an endless obsession with the latest camera, lens, or software, and the hunt to acquire them, and that's okay if that's what you want to do with your too few days on this earth. Truly. But it won't make your photographs any more compelling, any more interesting, any more beautiful, or any more human. Those things take something more.

A photograph will only be as interesting, human, beautiful, creative, insightful, or motivating as the person behind the camera. So learn to use the camera. Learn it so well that you can forget it, and move on to making photographs that transcend their humble, technological origins. I know this doesn't sound like photographic advice, but if you can fall more in love with life, and the possibility of expressing something amazing through the humble photograph, than you do with the camera and the gear, you'll make stronger photographs than you ever imagined. Some of us took far too long to learn that.



Consider Your Color Palette

ONE OF THE THINGS you'll consistently notice about the bodies of work of photographers who've been doing this a while is that many of them, though not all, seem to work very intentionally to create a consistency within a body of work—some kind of unifying element. Often that element revolves around a theme, so it'd be a body of work about the female nude figure, for example. That theme alone can create a visual unity. Another way of doing the same thing is with consistency in other constraints, like a shared crop ratio, such as every image being square or 4:5, for example.





▲ Nikon D3s, 140mm, 1/8000 @ f/5.6,
ISO 800



▲ Nikon D3s, 600mm, 1/100 @ f/5.6, ISO 1600



▲ Nikon D3s, 30mm, 1/125 @ f/11, ISO 200



▲ Nikon D3s, 16mm, 1/50 @ f/11, ISO 200



▲ Nikon D3s, 600mm, 1/400 @ f/5.6, ISO 800



▲ Nikon D800, 16mm, 1/320 @ f/13, ISO 200



▲ Nikon D800, 200mm, 1/500 @ f/8, ISO 200



▲ Nikon D800, 70mm, 1/8 @ f/16, ISO 100

▶ Nikon D800, 175mm, 1/100 @ f/7.1, ISO 400





▲ Nikon D800, 300mm, 1/800 @ f/10, ISO 800



▲ Nikon D3s, 23mm, 1/400 @ f/9, ISO 400



“You can choose this palette while you photograph, and refine it as you become more and more aware of what the body of work is becoming.”

A consistent color palette also does this powerfully, with every image sharing a common set of hues and tones. This creates a flow when the images are presented together, creating a common mood or emotion through the work, even when the gesture within the images changes dramatically. You can choose this palette while you photograph, and refine it as you become more and more aware of what the body of work is becoming. Not all of us begin a body of work to find it becomes the thing we imagined it. There’s often an evolution that leads to stronger, more unexpected, work than if we’d not allowed ourselves to divert in a new direction. You can also choose, or refine, this palette in the digital darkroom. In the case of my Hokkaido series I was very intentional while I photographed and needed very few adjustments in Lightroom. The grizzly series from the Khutzeymateen all shared a consistent palette when I photographed it, but not the one I wanted, so I worked hard to subdue some of the hyper-saturated greens and bring a common warmth to the images, which, shot over seven days in very different weather, needed some help with the tones to bring them all a little closer to being cohesive.

Intentionally chosen color palettes are not only for unifying bodies of work. A painter sitting at his easel and wanting to create a certain mood will choose a color palette. It’s a little easier for painters, but photographers work with an existing reality. Although we can do anything we want with Photoshop or Lightroom, it’s not my style to be so heavy-handed. But you can be selective while you still have the camera in your hand. Being intentional while you look at the scene, choosing weather or a time of day that contributes to what you’re trying to accomplish, or lighting the studio and dressing the set—none of these happen accidentally, and if you go into your work remembering that a well-chosen color palette is a powerful tool, you can at least begin to exclude elements that do not conform to your vision.



YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Fashion photographers and commercial photographers do this very well. If you can get your hands on either *Applied Arts* or *Communication Arts*, both magazines produce photography and illustration annuals. Take some time to look through them and examine the way both photographers and illustrators choose their palettes. You'll notice it in both single pieces and bodies of work. Often you can identify a photographer simply by her consistent use of color. My friend Dave Delnea—DaveDelnea.com—does this really well, and as of this writing his website has some excellent examples of this. Do a Google image search for Erik Almas—you'll notice an amazing intentionality and consistency. Same thing with Brooke Shaden. Spend some time looking at all three of these photographers' work. I like Google's image search because it shows the images well together and allows easy comparing and contrasting. Note that when I talk about consistency—and you'll see it in the work I've suggested you look at—that I do not mean homogeny or uniformity.

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