

Unruly Photography

By MJ

by Ken Tanaka

The "rules" so often cited regarding composition derive entirely from painting and drawing instruction, not from photography. They are also far from stone tablet engravings, having been amended, rescinded, and invented largely in response to changing tastes (and aping others' unruly successes) many times in the past several hundred years. That is, they are not "rules" at all, merely suggestions for the un-anchored artist, points of departure. During the course of my studies as a youngster I spend countless hours in art classes, mainly drawing and painting. I cannot remember ever having these guidelines presented as rules.

While knowledge of compositional formulae can be helpful there's nothing more powerful in photography than a talented keen eye unencumbered by obedience of rules. I submit, as an example, the work the late Harry Callahan. He had no formal photographic (or art) training yet he managed to record some of the 20th century's most significant photographic works and to become one of the worlds most celebrated photographers. Better still, he proceeded to teach photography at the venerable Institute of Design as well as at the Rhode Island School of Design for decades. He was a man of relatively few words but I've seen/heard a few interviews with him in which he repeatedly states, "I don't know what a good photograph is or what makes a good photograph." and, "I don't think you can teach people to be creative. It has to come from within." (Paraphrasing.)

Every time I hear or read that "learn the rules before you break them" mantra I want to scream. It's such an empty, reflexive remark. Learn to use your camera and its medium. Look critically at as much photography as possible to determine what clicks with you and your eye. Learn to visually reverse-engineer lighting and to dissect the elements of images you like. But don't, don't, do not start confining your creative ambitions with "RULES." They do not exist. Take the pictures that you like to take and let your own frustration be your guide to developing your own set of best practices. You may, indeed, find that, say, the "rule of thirds" works for your own eyes, or not!

Posted by: KEN TANAKA

Follow-Up by Ken: Tom Dills said:"I've had a number of images reviewed by well-known and knowledgeable photographers whose only comment was something like 'I really like the image but the horizon is too close to the center' or 'the subject needs to be on a third' or 'I prefer to run my subject diagonally from corner to corner.'"

Ya see, that's the nasty, insidious aspect of compositional rule acceptance; it leads to brain-lock. Rather like the station i.d. "bugs" that can eventually burn themselves into the corners of plasma televisions, rule-of-thirds templates eventually burn themselves into peoples' minds. Any image that doesn't align to these templates becomes unsettling to the "trained" viewer.

Nevertheless, it's unquestionable that attention to some compositional guidelines, even inadvertently, can sometimes produce more interesting images. To me, most of the compositional formulae really come down to motivation and reward. For example, the motivation for placing a bush on a vertical 1/3 line with a vast expanse of desert and sky in the background might be to convey an edge-of-nowhere feeling. Placing the same bush in the same frame location with a forest in the background might offer no such visual reward to the viewer. For me, the motivation for leaning on compositional formulas must be to (a) lead the viewer's eye in the first second or two and (b) to create a stronger lasting impression of the image.

One of the most powerful compositional guides I've ever learned came from (I believe) the late painter Josef Albers, although he may very well have been repeating what he learned from someone else. Put simply, he said, "Shape trumps color." That is, faced with any composition the viewer will first look for strong patterns of shape before they take much note to tonality or color. The (healthy) human brain cannot help itself from such a reflex. We look for shape patterns constantly. We find "man on the moon," religious iconography in rust stains,

etc. Flash an image showing the silhouette of an open hand in front of a row of houses to viewers for 2 seconds and ask them what they saw. I guarantee that six out of ten will say, "a hand." We're hard-wired to identify patterns first.

So the most powerful and constructive "rule"—actually a psycho-recognizance principle—I've learned and keep in mind is that shape trumps color. To me, drawing, painting, and photography are all personal experiments rooted in this foundation. Where you put all this stuff in a frame is really a matter of motivation and rewarding the viewer for being manipulated.

I'm actually a pretty simple fellow.

As a postscript, If you think still photography's "rules" seem staid and overbearing you should take a look at some of the rules for filmmaking.

Mike Sheepishly Adds: I have to admit I have a prejudice against the "rule of thirds." Pictures which follow it too closely have an extra hurdle to cross to please me. Sigh.

Saturday, July 01, 2006

Feet Are Optional

A long time ago I taught photography in a very tony prep school, the kind of place where very driven, accomplished, successful people spend appalling amounts of money to send their kids. To give you a general idea, not long ago I found a sketch of one of the school's former students in the "Talk of the Town" section of The New Yorker, and happened across another presenting news on ABC. Some of their parents' names I'm sure you would recognize.

So, anyway, I discovered something curious early on: the kids who did well in photography and the kids who didn't were turned upside-down vis-a-vis the school's usual hierarchy of achievement. Many of the best photography students came from among the school's rebels and outcasts, the low-achievers and the marginalized. Many of the school's academic hotshots, by contrast, didn't fare well in my classes.

The reason? I came to believe that it was because success in art is a "no-no-no-no-no-yes" proposition, whereas success in, say, math is a "yes-yes-yes-yes-yes-yes-yes and it better be learned in the right order too" proposition. The kids who functioned at a high level in terms of the school as a whole were simply uneasy with my assignments.

I'll give you an example. Once, I assigned a class to shoot a roll of film over a weekend. "What do you want us to shoot?" came the chorus. Anything, I answered. Whatever you want.

Well, this was good enough for a lot of them (one girl hustled out exclaiming, "I'm leaving now before he changes his mind!"), but a few of the kids stayed behind. "What do you really want," asked one, "because I know you don't want just anything. We'll come in here on Monday and you'll tell us what we should have shot." I managed to convince the stragglers that the assignment really was open, that it wasn't a trick, that they weren't going to be judged. But one girl, a high-flyer who eventually went off to Yale and glory, wasn't having it. "You have something in mind," she insisted. "I'm not leaving until you give me the real assignment!"

"Okay," I said, "You have to shoot 36 frames, each one different, and your feet must be in each picture."

"What?!?" she snorted, "I'm not doing THAT!"

"Too late now," I said sweetly. She returned on Monday, grimly, with 36 pictures of her feet, for which she got an "A." (And I didn't hear from her parents, although I certainly might have.)

What these straight-A kids wanted was for me to set the terms of their success for them. They wanted me to set up the hoop so they could jump through it for me. They wanted to be told how they could be certain of success. It was what they encountered everywhere else. But what I wanted was for them to set up their own hoop, or, better yet, look askance at the hoop and go, "Nah, not today," and wander off somewhere and see what they could find. The fact is, you need to fail a lot if you want to succeed as an artist. That's why the kids who were used to failing weren't fazed by my classes: they weren't threatened by the idea of falling flat on their faces 90% of the time. The good students definitely were.

Accordingly, here (drum roll, please) are my Official Rules of Photography:

1. Feet are optional.
2. Never stop trying to lower your hit rate.
3. Resist your Inner Dork: stop thinking about rules.*

Posted by: MIKE JOHNSTON

*Unless, of course, you want to

[Distrust of Beauty](#)

By MJ

by Paul Butzi



I happened across the amazon.com entry for

[Regeneration: 50 Photographers of Tomorrow](#), a book that the publisher describes as focusing on what young photographers are up to at the start of the 21st century. It looks like an interesting book, and I have a copy on the way. What caught my eye, though, was a single sentence in the Publishers Weekly review, which reads "A number of distinct trends are visible: the use of digital technologies is widespread, social comment is ironic and oblique, a distrust of beauty and landscape is omnipresent...." The phrase "distrust of beauty" caught my eye, because some time ago I heard an excellent lecture by playwright Stephen Dietz, about what he called "The Four Seductions"—the four big things that seduce artists away from making the best art they can. Three of the four are disparagement of craft, criticism, and blaming the audience; number one on Dietz's hit parade is distrust of beauty.

What Dietz was saying is that it's seductive to advance our work by making it "edgy." There's a consensus that "beauty" has been done to death, and that if a work is beautiful, then it must be passé. There's a sense that since beauty is a quality that's awfully hard to pin down, it must therefore be unimportant, and that striving for beauty is a fool's errand. It's a whole heck of a lot easier to arouse an emotional response by doing art that's gratuitously offensive than it is to make beautiful art that arouses a passionate response.

Tomoko Uemura in her Bath, Mike's recent selection for the T.O.P Ten, is a case in point. Smith didn't just

happen to make a beautiful photograph—he deliberately contrived to make the photograph beautiful. The lighting, the posing, the way shadow and darkness are used to simplify the composition, even the facial expressions—Smith did that on purpose. By constructing the photograph this way, Smith connected the photograph directly to every viewer who has ever watched a mother cradle a child in her arms and thought "that's a good thing." Had Smith stuck with a simple, straightforward depiction of Tomoko Eumura's disfigurement, would the photograph be anywhere near as compelling? Making a beautiful photograph of a horribly disfigured child wasn't easy, but it's what makes this photograph transcendent.

So I read the words "distrust of beauty and landscape" in that review with a great deal of trepidation. Is this where photography (and the art world in general) have ended up—where young photographers are unanimous that art shouldn't be beautiful, and that we shouldn't trust the very real landscape around us? I'm not at all in favor of a photographic world in which we're all compelled to mindlessly repeat "Pepper #30" and "Tenaya Lake." But I'm very much afraid of an art world that insists that we must never risk making a beautiful photograph because beauty is old-fashioned.

Practical Traveler

Using Cameras to Turn Tourists Into Travelers

By [FRED BIERMAN](#)

ASK yourself honestly, "Do people really want to look at my vacation photographs?"

Everyone travels with a camera, and the urge to document a vacation usually results in hundreds of photographs, but for friends and family members, looking at all of these pictures has all the appeal of jury duty.

This does not have to be the case; a couple of easy tips from a professional and a slight adjustment in outlook can turn an indiscriminate camera-clicking tourist into a travel photographer capable of taking captivating vacation pictures.

Peter Guttman is a New York-based travel photographer who takes pictures that people not only want to look at, but will also pay to own. He has traveled to more than 190 countries, is the author of three books on travel and has had numerous gallery shows, including a recent one at Sotheby's, and in 2000 he was named the Lowell Thomas Travel Journalist of the Year by the Society of American Travel Writers.

Despite his success as a professional, one of Mr. Guttman's most impressive feats has been to turn the slide show — a typically dreaded family and social event — into a hugely attended and widely anticipated occasion.

In 1986 he held an end-of-the-year slide show as a way to keep friends up-to-date on where his travels had taken him. As word of mouth began to spread, his Upper West Side apartment could not handle the hundreds of people who wanted to come.

So he and his wife, Lori Greene, actually had to start holding repeat performances and now they hold these shows up to seven times a year. The show garnered even wider attention when [National Public Radio](#) called it "one of the hottest tickets in [New York City](#)."

With his tousled hair and his lanky frame, Mr. Guttman stands in the back of the crowd and leads his visitors across the globe via hundreds of slides at a blistering pace. As the slides change, he takes palpable pleasure in the gasps and laughs that his photographs and his enthusiasm elicit. But over the years he has found that there is one drawback to being host of these shows.

"People naturally feel that since they sat through an hour and a half of my slide show that they have a license to show me their snapshots," he said with a sheepish grin in an interview at his apartment. "Charitably speaking, 90 percent of the time they are really poor photographs."

Mr. Guttman, who has had numerous photos published — including in The New York Times — and has taught classes in travel photography at the [International Center of Photography](#) in [Manhattan](#), knows what makes for a great photograph and is all too familiar with the errors that many amateurs struggle with. “The main mistake that people make is that they don’t get close enough to the action,” Mr. Guttman said. “You have to decide whether you want to be a tourist or a traveler.”

The time-honored tradition of taking pictures of loved ones in front of monuments and landmarks does not make for interesting photographs. When Mr. Guttman travels he researches a destination in order to better figure out what makes it unique.

“You have to decide whether you want to be a tourist or a traveler,” said Mr. Guttman. “A tourist basically stands to the side and takes timid candids of things that they see from a distance as a shy spectator.”

“A traveler,” Mr. Guttman said, makes an effort to enter an experience, “and tries to feel all the essence and the joy and the drama of what a place has to offer.”

As important as getting closer to what you are photographing is knowing when to photograph and how to use natural light to your advantage.

“The most effective time to photograph is at the margins of the day,” Mr. Guttman said. “Early morning, dusk and most particularly during blue light, which is after the sun sets but before the sky turns totally dark. It gives photographs a cobalt blue essence that’s almost out of a fairy tale and contrasts with the sparkling golds of man-made light.”

Although many of Mr. Guttman’s most arresting images are of local tribesmen in Papua New Guinea or glaciers in [Norway](#), his photographs of the Northeastern [United States](#) get just as big a reaction as those of exotic locations at his slide shows. His photograph of Stark, N.H., during the Christmas season uses the post-sunset blue light to contrast with the yellow lights decorating a covered bridge to create the quintessential image of [New England](#) in the winter. A photograph of the cranberry harvest in the Pine Barrens of [New Jersey](#) thrusts the viewer waist deep in a sea of red berries right alongside a worker whose partly submerged hands are in the foreground.

By getting closer to his subject and by using light to its fullest, Mr. Guttman creates a stunning image regardless of how far he travels. A wider selection of his photographs can be found at his Web site, peterguttman.com.

Mr. Guttman also stresses that travelers need not have top-of-the-line cameras or expensive lenses to take great photographs.

“The type of equipment you use is so not the point,” he said. “It’s all about your attitude and your confidence.”

A key element of photography that Mr. Guttman sees amateurs struggling with is composition. The standard practice of putting the focus of the photograph at the center of the image often results in a static frame. By placing subjects well off-center you can give yourself a more interesting image and create what Mr. Guttman calls a “frame within a frame.”

Another important aspect of composition is the background of the image, particularly when photographing people.

“The backdrop is the stage set that you are putting your main characters on,” Mr. Guttman said. “I’m first looking at backdrops before I try to find the perfect face.”

Mr. Guttman's final suggestion involves paying attention to scale. Particularly when photographing wildlife and scenery, the majesty and the proportions of mountains or a forest can often be lost when there are no people in the photograph.

"Putting people in the frame makes the landscape more meaningful and decipherable," he said.

Of course there will be people who say that a destination viewed through a camera lens inhibits their ability to enjoy their vacation. "I laugh when people say, 'Are you really experiencing a trip when your face is behind a viewfinder?'" he said, leaning forward. "I don't know where to begin to tell them how much richer it is. Travel becomes a very cinematic experience. I am so much more finely tuned to the mystique of the environment around me and the drama of a place when I have my camera."

So, You think you've got the picture?

Something happened in photojournalism class yesterday. Something important. After years of leading hundreds photo critiques, I stumbled across a way of explaining why looking at pictures can be such a meaningful experience. This may sound silly, but I have never been able to not feel guilty about the impact a critique will have on a student's motivation and creativity. Some students are ready to be hammered with what's wrong about a picture they have made, but many are not. Many students need to learn how to handle criticism.

After so much time evaluating students' work, I realized that what I was looking at over and over again has affected me for two reasons. The first reason is that the image I am looking at has a clear point of focus to the story being told. In other words, "I get it."

The second reason the picture affects so much is that it stirs me emotionally. Beyond "getting it" I am "feeling it."

Having a strong point of focus as well as the ability to convey a mood in a picture appears to be a fundamental part of ways of making things seen.

For an image to have meaning for me, then, I not only need to understand what is in the frame, with deliberate immediacy and intensity, but also I want to be made to feel something toward the thing I am looking at. Without this double-whammy, the picture will never be as effective as it could be – the image will have failed to embed itself in my memory bank.

Without feeling, the picture is all context and no impact.

Pictures are persuasive when they have a strong analogical appeal to viewers. The analogical relationship between what we know as "real" and what is represented in a photograph helps to validate us. To have just a clear point of focus in a picture, however, is not enough. The point of focus, the subject, must also evoke, goad, prod, provocative some feeling in us.

This is what I realized when looking at an endless stream of images. This is why looking at pictures seems so natural. For the past two weeks I have been looking carefully at the front pages of several hundred newspapers across the nation on the Newseum's website. If you want to really understand what I am trying to say here, spend a week looking at every newspaper displayed on the site.

Although there is always a danger in reducing human experience down to formulae, thinking in very basic terms is helpful in learning how to make pictures with deeper meaning. Elsbeth Brown in her new book, *The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture* (John Hopkins, 2005) offers an excellent perspective on making sense of pictures.

Brown, using Roland Barthes' model, contends, "Photographic signification is a historical process, dependent upon the specific choices of cultural producers and the historically specific sign vocabulary of particular readers." In others, Brown is saying, we make sense of pictures based on what we already know to be "real" for us. Making sense of pictures is historically contingent -- Signification is a process fixed in memory and time. Signification, the act of making sense of something, depends on a viewer's capacity for decoding the literal and figurative meanings in an image.

It is only because I can place the meaning of a picture within the larger historical context of human memory and experience that I can ultimately be moved intellectually and emotionally by what I am looking at.

February 09, 2006 in Books, Education, Elsbeth Brown, Photojournalism, Southern Oregon University, Visual Rhetoric and Metaphor, documentary Photography, photography, teaching, visual journalism education

[And Speaking of Definitions....](#)

By MJ

...Which I was a moment ago, I wanted to mention that Paul's "Beauty" post is not something I have much sympathy with. I find it almost bizarre that people can talk about "beauty" in any specific way, as if we all know what we're talking about.

One of the great epiphanic moments in my critical thinking about photography came when Owen Edwards, the great columnist for the old American Photographer magazine, attempted, for his final column, to summarize the essence of photography in grand Cartesian fashion—and came up with the word "glamor." The reason it was an epiphany for me is that glamor didn't then, doesn't now, and probably never will have anything at all to do with what I see as essential to photography.

And neither does "beauty," whatever that means. Certainly if it means sunsets and flower pictures, and [scenics](#). (And cats. I'm a dog guy.) What matters in a photograph to me is honesty, and to a lesser, and secondary degree, grace, or gracefulness. And also I think I value a certain singularity, the property that makes one photograph mystifyingly great and another one almost exactly like it nothing.

Even humor ranks above beauty, for me.



True...but not beautiful.

It's a good thing to know—about myself. No reason for anybody to agree or disagree, any more than they might if I said, "I'm tall" or "I get tired easily."

But you wouldn't believe how many comments I've had to reject in that thread. I have no idea what "beauty" means, but boy, if you haven't got it, there are some people out there who don't approve of you, brother.

Posted by: MIKE JOHNSTON

I agree 100% with you, Tom. (And appreciated Dave's earlier post.)

In fact, when I see a great picture, even if it has become a cliché in the photographic world, I will try to imitate it myself. When *I* do it, it's not a cliché to *me*. It's an achievement. Treading in the feet of the master, if you like. And if I fall short, as I usually do, well, there's something to learn in that. What did she do that I didn't? Where did I go wrong? How can I do better next time?

I feel the same about "picture postcard" photos. If it's a beautiful view, who cares that it might make a nice postcard? But so many seem to think that it is "damning by faint praise" to say it would make a nice postcard.

And I even feel the same about "seed packet" photos of flowers. I would be proud to think that my photo of a flower might encourage people to buy a packet of seeds to grow it!

If you're only a modest talent, as I am, you take your examples and models where you can find them... It's all about having fun, right? And originality is nice if you have it. But not having it doesn't eliminate fun. Thank goodness!

Roger

On Fri, 08 Sep 2006 16:03:57 +0900, Tom Fenwick <super.wide@gmail.com> wrote:

> You can get too wrapped up in originality; after all, it's ALL been done
> before. If our photographs are clichés then so are our lives..!

>

> Why are they bothering with their flip - acrobatics has been done to
> death,
> and after all why fly up in the air? You only have to come down.

>

> Hmm. Just do it and enjoy it. Winogrand was great, but he's not
> photographing in your street right now, is he?

>

> Tom

>

> PS Nice shot :-)

>

> On 07/09/06, David Elden <ccc03reg@magma.ca> wrote:

>>

>> I took this pic in July, next month I was looking at a book of twentieth
>> century photogs

>> and a somewhat similar one by Gary Winogrand. I'll be the first to say
>> his is the more
>> interesting by a large margin but the subject matter & point of view
>> have
>> something in
>> common.

>> If you think you have an original shot you likely just haven't looked at
>> enough of other
>> people's work...
>>
>> I took mine with a CV25mm/f4 lens & Bessa L but a 35mm would have been
>> better, the image
>> is cropped about 50%.
>>
>> Mine:
>>
>> <http://www.pbase.com/mononation/image/66410429>
>>
>> Mr Winogrand's:
>>
>> http://masters-of-photography.com/W/winogrand/winogrand_flip.html
>>
>> Enjoy at least one of them,
>>
>> Dave in Ottawa.

Key Thoughts and The Zen of Fishing

I liken the thoughts that I keep in mind when photographing to "swing thoughts" or "key thoughts" in golf. Sam Snead used to say that he'd just hit some practice balls and try to find one or two swing thoughts that worked for him that day, and go out and hope for the best.

In golf at least, the more swing thoughts you have, the worse you do.

Two of my best "key thoughts" while shooting are two mottos I heard about from two different photography teachers. They are "*Never clever*" and "*The name of the game is to fill the frame.*" I try not to complicate things beyond that. It ain't easy.

"*Never clever*" (which comes from a California photo teacher whose first name is Tom, by way of one of his former students, now a real estate agent in Vermont) is helpful because it prevents us from trying to assert ourselves all the way into every frame. Too many photographers are constantly striving to prove how creative they are, as if every photograph they make has to attest to their genius (or, worse, their "style"). Sometimes, what's in front of the camera is enough; getting out of the way of the picture is better than willfully interposing our own "vision" on every shot we take.



'Never Clever': Like a tape recorder, a camera is a recording device. Don't feel that the most important thing about every picture is to make people aware of what a genius you are. Just take the picture that's in front of you.

Just Fishin'

The other thing I find really helpful is to constantly remember to discard my expectations. Photography is a bit like fishing. You can think and prepare all you want, but sometimes the fish bites and sometimes it doesn't. (Also like fishing, those who know what they're doing stand a much better chance of success than those who don't. But there's still that element of serendipity involved.) Those of us lucky enough to be shooting as amateurs, for ourselves, ought to remain aware of this. Many photographers force their work to conform to the ideas they had when they shot. But the reality is, some shots work and some shots don't, and which is which does not always have much to do with what you wanted to have happen.

While shooting, you may get turned on by a certain situation and work it hard, taking many shots from many different angles. But it's still possible that none of them will be a very good picture. Conversely, you may snap a casual, offhand shot without having any real hopes for it — and it may turn out to be the best thing you shot that day.

When you edit and print, forget what you were thinking and hoping for when you took the pictures, and look at the pictures that are in front of you.

This is harder than it sounds. When I took the picture below, of a woman sitting at a piano, singing, the central event in the room was the sound of my friend B.'s lovely voice: clear, pitch-pure, and expressive of her innate good-heartedness. Naturally, as I shot what was happening I concentrated on her. I also had a very clear idea of what I wanted: I'd photograph her exaggerated facial expressions as she sang different songs for the kids, then print four pictures one above the other on the same page to try to convey the dynamism of the singalong.

Sure enough, when I got down to making the book page, I first tried to realize this idea. I printed out small versions of a bunch of the singing pictures, and tried different versions of the four-pictures-stacked idea. I picked two arrangements that seemed to work best and printed them out.

But they didn't quite satisfy me. They weren't quite...well, *good*. They didn't quite work. So how come?

Who knows? I had the right bait, right time of day, and I knew where the fish were; I just didn't catch what I wanted, is all. It happens.

I finally realized that this picture was the best of the group, and that it didn't need any other pictures to go with it. Some people are frustrated by the blurring...until they accept the fact that the picture isn't of the singer. It's a picture of the little girl on the lower right side of the frame. Who knew? At the time, not I.



'Discard your expectations': sometimes what works is not what you expected would work. Look at the pictures and don't get distracted by your own ideas.

Sometimes you're fishing for bluegill but you get a perch, is all.

Respect Where You Stand

As shooters, we all need to be mindful of where we stand in our own development. We need to know when to respect where we are, and when to stretch beyond what's become comfortable. As beginners, people tend to be impressed with clear, sharp pictures that have good color or tones and are well-exposed. (They look "professional," in the common parlance.) Well, nowadays I can take a clear, sharp, well-exposed picture of just about anything at any time, with any sort of camera; it's no longer any sort of challenge, and hasn't been for some time. Some people need to pay careful attention to everything in the frame, and look at all four corners and the background before they shoot. Me, I'd been doing that for so long and so habitually that the challenge for me as of a few years ago became to shoot quickly and reactively, without thinking, trusting instinct. (Using the LCD finder of a digicam has been a big help.) It was tough at first. So, some of my recent shooting is maybe a little too loose. That's okay. It's just where I happen to be right now, is all.

Oh, and there's one more nice correspondence between photography and fishing: the more time you spend, the more inevitable success becomes. You can't catch a fish without having your line in the water, and you won't take good pictures without your camera in your hand. Photography is comforting that way. Spend the time, and you'll get results. That's a nice "key thought," right there.



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[Mike Johnston](#) writes and publishes an independent quarterly ink-on-paper magazine called [The 37th Frame](#) for people who are really "into" photography. His book, *The Empirical Photographer*, is scheduled to be published in 2003.

You can read more about Mike and find [additional articles](#) that he has written for this site, as well as a [Sunday Morning Index](#).

I have often [compared photography to fishing](#). I think it's the best metaphor for the type of photography I do, and the type I like: you educate, prepare and equip yourself as best you can, and train by practicing, but, in the end, what you catch still depends on luck, chance, fate, and whim. One element of the eternal lore of fishing is the one that got away, and the best picture I ever saw that I never took—the one that got away, so to speak—was one that I experienced standing on the lawn of the big house. One storm (from the south) had just passed through, and another was following it, and for a brief few minutes the sun broke through. Instantly, a huge full rainbow was created, vivid against the deep purple-gray of the approaching clouds. It stretched from horizon to

horizon, and it was so bright that inside it was a second rainbow. As if by magic, there was one small shred of cloud, moving fast on the wind of the approaching storm, that from where I stood was centered exactly inside of the rainbows, brightly lit by the sun and contrasting with the purple sky behind it. It was coming right at me, so although it got bigger and changed shape, it held its position. The picture was completed by three single birds. Up the shore there came swimming a single white swan (also unusual, since they're often seen in pairs), and above the rainbow against the darkest part of the sky was a single, distant seagull, coming right at me as it fled the coming storm, an elegant white mark against the sky. And then—I still can hardly believe this—in the middle of the scene, just between the swan and the seagull, flew a Kingfisher. For several long moments—it might have been minutes, I don't know—all three birds, moving more or less directly toward me, seemed to hold their positions in the scene just like the little cloud did. The Kingfisher flew over my head and disappeared.

It just paralyzed me. I stood rooted to the spot, open-mouthed and wide-eyed. (It did cross my mind to run into the house and get the camera, but that would have taken me away from the sight itself, and anyway, I had the wrong camera, the wrong film.) Nowadays you could hardly show such a scene, because it would be assumed to be a Photoshop pastiche. It was certainly the most extraordinary arrangement of objects, forms, and colors that nature has ever presented to my eyes, the single most astonishing sight I've ever seen.

I've taken tens of thousands of pictures in Northern Michigan, I suppose. But no matter how many pictures I've taken, I've probably seen ten times as many, if not more. That's certainly the way photography is: there are far more fish in the river than one fisherman could possibly catch in the brief time he's got to fish. The photographs I've made, nice though many of them are, are no match for the ones that got away.

Posted by: MIKE JOHNSTON

[Remove Clutter from Your Photography](#)

In my last post on [Using Focal Points in Photography](#) I wrote the lines

“Don't confuse the viewer with too many competing focal points which might overwhelm the main focal point. Secondary points of interest can be helpful to lead the eye but too many strong ones will just clutter and confuse.”

I thought it was worth reiterating in a post of it's own.

Sometimes what makes a great image stand out is not just what you include in your framing of the image but what you DON'T include.

Each element of an image should add something to to the overall photograph. If it doesn't you should attempt to leave it out by either using one of the techniques below:

- Always check the foreground and background of your shots for distracting features. One such common mistakes is the site of trees or poles coming out the head of people.
- While looking into your viewfinder move your camera across a view to see if an alternative framing might produce a stronger result
- Be particularly aware of bright or contrasting colors or highlights which can draw the eye away from your focal point.
- Try different focal lengths (by zooming or changing lenses) to cut out unwanted features
- If zooming doesn't work use your feet to change the angle you shoot from.
- Move your subject. This is often possible when you're shooting people (ie move them to a new background).
- Move the distracting Object. If you are shooting macro shots it's often possible to manipulate the background to be less distracting.

- Use Depth of Field blur to lessen the impact of other objects that might clutter the image.
- Using Silhouettes is another technique that can add a simplicity to an image by taking out much of the detail of your subjects
- Converting an image to black and white or sepia similarly can have a de-cluttering effect if the mix of colors in your shot are the distracting feature.

Of course sometimes you can break this rule completely and fill your frame with so many focal points that the clutter itself becomes the point of interest in the shot. Be careful with this because getting it wrong could really hurt a shot.