

# MICHAEL FREEMAN

# THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S EYE

Composition and Design for Better Digital Photos

Design is the single most important factor in creating a successful photograph. The ability to see the potential for a strong picture and then organise the graphic elements into an effective, compelling composition has always been one of the key skills in making photographs.

Digital photography has brought a new, exciting aspect to design—first because the instant feedback from a digital camera allows immediate appraisal and improvement; and second because image-editing tools make it possible to alter and enhance the design after the shutter has been pressed. This has had a profound effect on the way digital photographers take pictures.

*The Photographer's Eye* shows how anyone can develop the ability to see and shoot great digital photographs. The book explores all the traditional approaches to composition and design, but crucially, it also addresses digital techniques such as stitching and High Dynamic Range imaging, which use new technology to extend the possibilities of the medium without compromising the photographer's vision.



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#### ◀ ▲ DIAGONAL TENSION

The dynamic movement in this wide-angle photograph comes from the interplay of diagonals with the rectangular frame. Although the diagonal lines have an independent movement and direction, it is the reference standard of the frame edges that allows them to create tension in this picture.





### SOFT

The very fine texture of this marsh grass near Mono Lake, California, is made to appear even more delicate by choosing a viewpoint against the sun.



### HARD

The dull lighting, drab urban setting, and foreshortening effect of a telephoto lens all contribute to the spiky, aggressive quality of these architectural roof pyramids.



### FLAT

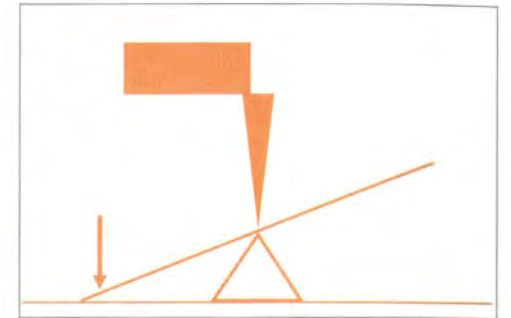
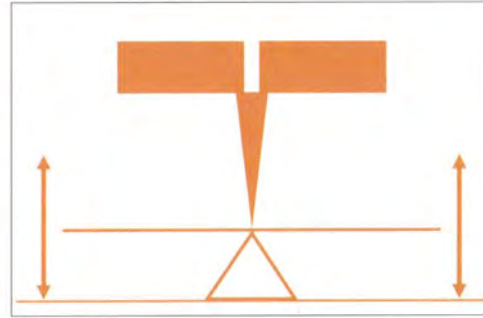
The low contrast in this view of a Shaker village in Maine is due entirely to the quality of lighting: early morning fog.



### CONTRASTY

The highest-contrast lighting effect is produced by a high sun in clear weather and unpolluted air. The strong relief of these rock arches creates deep, unrelieved shadow.





#### ▲ ▲ STATIC BALANCE VS IMBALANCE

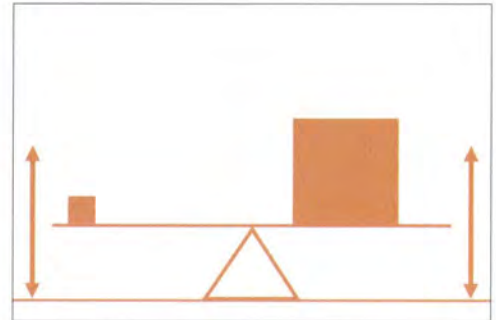
Using the analogy of a weighing scale, think of a picture as balanced at its center. In this close-up of the eyes on the Buddhist stupa at Swayambunath in Nepal, the simple arrangement is symmetrical. The arrangement is balanced exactly over the fulcrum; the forces are evenly balanced. However, if we remove one element, done here digitally for the exercise, the visual center of gravity is shifted to the left, and the balance is upset. The natural tendency would be to shift the view to the left.





### < DYNAMIC BALANCE

Dynamic equilibrium opposes two unequal subjects or areas. Just as a small weight can balance a larger mass by being placed further from the fulcrum, large and small elements in an image can be balanced by placing them carefully in the frame. Note here that the content of the upper right area—Chinese characters—increases its visual importance (see pages 98-99 for more on visual weight).



## THE DYNAMICS

In line, shot with a wide-angle lens, the action is graphically strongly directional, and for this reason the figures are placed left of center so that the direction is into frame. The stance of the woman closest the camera adds to the curved flow. Typical of such a situation, in which the basics are known but there is no control by the photographer, are the many distractions and small happenings that do not (of course) conform to what the photographer would like. This sequence shows things gradually getting closer to what the photographer had in mind.



1



3



2



4



5





## WAYS OF STRENGTHENING PERSPECTIVE

Choose a viewpoint that shows a range of distance.

A wide-angle lens enhances linear perspective if used close to the nearest parts of the scene, and can show a large foreground-to-distance range.

Place warm-hued subjects against cool-hued backgrounds.

Use more direct, less diffused lighting.

Use lighting or placement to keep bright tones in the foreground and dark tones behind.

Where applicable, include familiar-sized objects at different distances to give recognizable scale. Ideally, have similar objects.

Allow the focus to become unsharp towards the distance.

## WAYS OF WEAKENING PERSPECTIVE

Alter the viewpoint so that different distances in the scene appear as unconnected planes; the fewer the better.

A telephoto lens compresses these planes, reducing linear perspective, if used from a distance.

Place cool-hued subjects against warm-hued backgrounds.

Use frontal lighting, diffused and shadowless.

Equalize or reverse the distribution of tones, so that light objects do not appear in the foreground.

Maximize the depth of field so that, ideally, the entire picture is sharply focused. With a view camera or tilt lens, use the movements to increase overall sharpness.

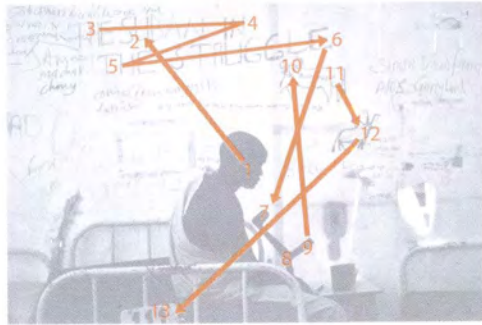
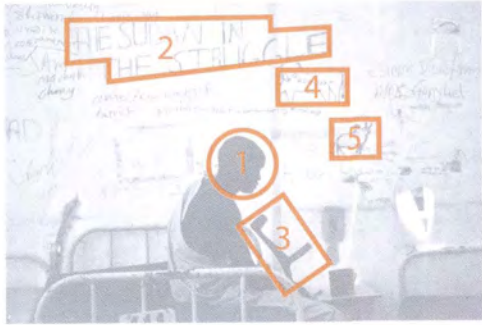
Reduce atmospheric haze by using ultraviolet or polarizing filters.



**▲ FISH MARKET**

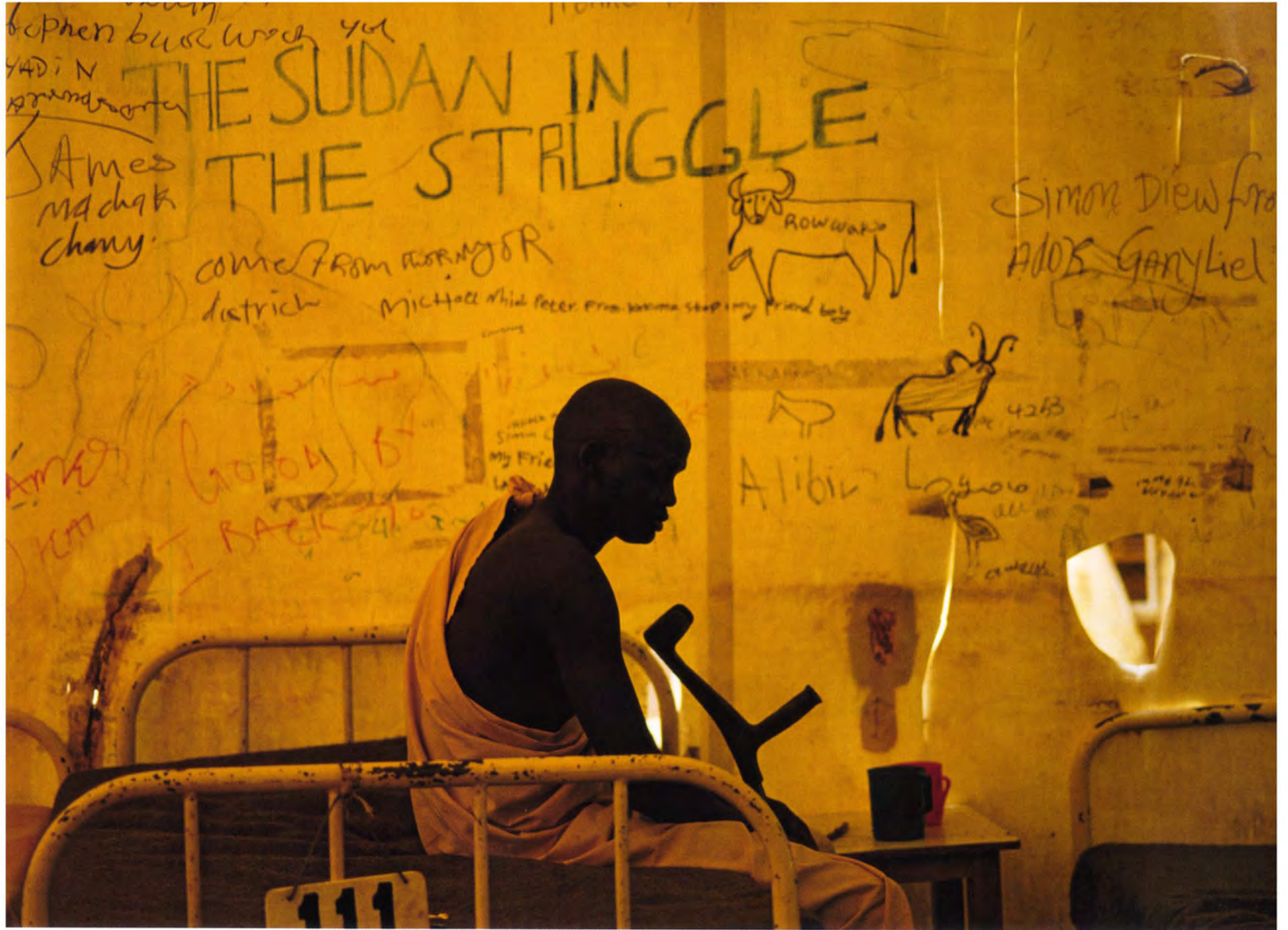
A close-up of fish parts in a Kyoto market unexpectedly offers three “attractants” in one—an eye (admittedly separated from the fish, but nevertheless still an eye), writing, and a strong color patch. These three framings were taken naturally, with no intention of making an exercise. In the first, the eye is the undisputed focus, and placed slightly off-center. Pulling back and up, in the second frame, reveals one-and-a-half Japanese characters, and the attention is strongly diverted towards this corner. Pulling back even farther, and down, brings a piece of blue plastic into view, so that the eye travels between the three points of interest.





▲ ► INTENDED ORDER

In this photograph of a holding tent at a Red Cross hospital for combat injuries in the Sudan civil war, I wanted to show two things more or less equally. One was the injured soldier, an amputee, and the other was the rich history of graffiti that had accumulated over time. This graffiti contained one obvious slogan that removes the need for a caption, and drawings of animals, in particular cattle (many of the patients had been from cattle-rearing ethnic groups), and recalled cave paintings. Although the way in which the photograph would be viewed was not mapped out with any precision, I identified the key elements in my order of intention (outlined and numbered in the upper illustration). From this I had an approximate intended order of viewing, as indicated by the arrows on the lower illustration (this admittedly reconstructed for the purposes of this page).







### ◀ ▲ ZIG-ZAGS

Oblique views of right angles produce zig-zags, a chevron effect of multiple diagonals. The angles are jointed, so the impression of movement along the diagonal is maintained, but with a sharp kink. As can be seen from this pair of photographs of rows of bathing tents, both taken within moments of each other, this type of dynamic effect is different. In the diagonal picture, the graphic movement is single-minded (the bias of direction is set by the walking figures). In the zig-zag version, the change of direction produces more internal activity.



## PEARLS

This arrangement of a variety of different types of pearls was for a magazine cover, and so not only had to be clear in displaying the pearls but also had to be attractive and simple, with room at the top for the masthead. The problem was that several pearls needed to be shown, too many to arrange in a single group. The solution was to split them up into three groups yet tie them together visually in such a way that the arrangement looked fairly natural and the eye could move smoothly around the picture.

The key to the picture's success is in the choice of oyster shells of different species, with the iridescent coloring typical of mother of pearl. Specifically, the two principal shells provide circular enclosures, one fitting into the curve of the other. The 15 mm South Sea pearl at right is large enough to be its own circle, and the three circles are linked in two ways—first by their triangular relationship, and also by the sinuous S-curve, which helps to direct the eye between them.

As in any still-life, the arrangement is built up carefully, with the camera locked in position. The main group was assembled in the large shell first, then a smaller group was added to the shell below, and some additions made to the first group. Finally, the large pearl was placed against a darker shell for contrast.

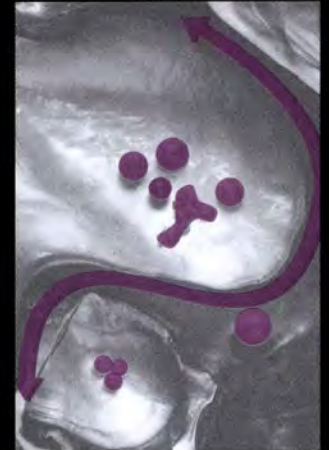
The principal design structures are the circles, the two largest formed by the shells. In turn, these three circles are inevitably linked into a triangular pattern. Finally, the arrangement of the background deliberately makes use of the reverse curve of the large shell to create an S-shaped curve.



IMPLIED CIRCLES



TRIANGULAR RELATIONSHIP



S-CURVE



► SCENE AND KEY VARIATIONS

One image treated in different tonal registers. The original was Kodachrome, but after scanning it was optimized as a digital file. Low key, by reducing the brightness, interprets the scene as glowering and stormy, with emphasis on the clouds. High key gives an impression of permeating bright light from the wide African sky, and is more graphic, with the tree and elephants almost floating in limbo. Note that the least successful version is high key in color, which seems more wrongly exposed than intentional.



ORIGINAL



BLACK AND WHITE



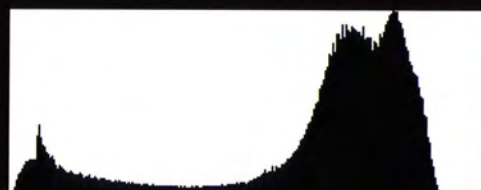
COLOR LOW KEY



BLACK AND WHITE LOW KEY



COLOR HIGH KEY



BLACK AND WHITE HIGH KEY

COMPOSING WITH LIGHT AND COLOR

COMPOSING WITH LIGHT AND COLOR



► SHIP PAINTER

The smaller image to the right (the first I took) is completely straightforward—a man painting a ship—but the angle of the sun casting a clear shadow on the side of the vessel suggested a less obvious, and so potentially more interesting, way of framing the shot. The shadow communicates what is happening well enough on its own.

