

## Building Stories

### ***How to think past pretty pictures to make images that engage the viewer and tell a story***

*Text & Photography By Mark Lissick*

If we create images not only for our own enjoyment but also for the enjoyment of others then it is necessary to make those visual stories the strongest possible. ***An image that does not contain a strong story loses its distinctiveness and is visually relegated to the "ordinary" category.***

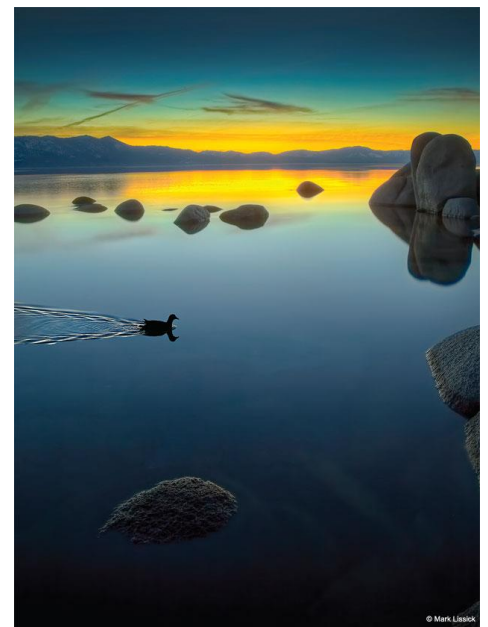
To enhance the visual appeal of an image, we need to push beyond the concept of a photograph ***as simply a slice of time or a visual document.*** This is where our imagination comes into play as it transcends these concepts to create the idea or story point of the image you will try to construct in the camera. Photography and reality have been inextricably linked since its inception, but we have come to understand that the ***definition of the reality created in a photograph is rather arbitrary.***



### ***Lake Tahoe Sunset and Duck, Lake Tahoe, Nevada***

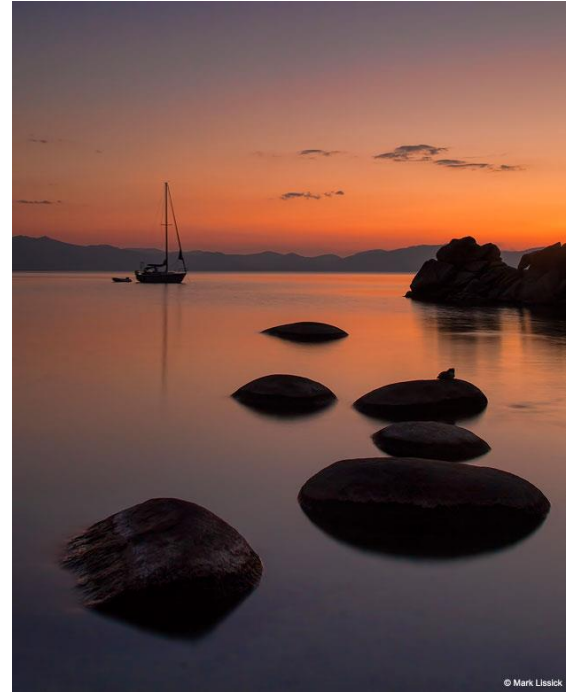
*Though small in comparison to the rest of the scene it is the lone duck around which the story is centered.*

Whether creating or looking at a photograph, both photographer and viewer utilize their imaginations to formulate their own interpretations. ***Our imagination tends to produce the strongest images when it is triggered by strong emotional responses.*** We all have emotions and a compelling image can pull them from us in the same way a moth is pulled towards a flame. This is the magic of an image that tells a story. As the creators of visual works, our challenge is to turn our photography into the ***art of transforming a simple image into a story*** — a story that can speak to the minds and imaginations of those who look upon our work. Producing an image that does this well requires that we ***create a composition*** that first draws the viewer's attention to the story and then allows them to be influenced by the pictorial narrative.



This starts with the need to keep the composition as simple and as visually uncluttered as possible. One of the benefits that come from the use of simplicity is the development of a narrative. Eliminate just enough visual information and the viewer will try to determine what happened before and what happened after the photograph was created.

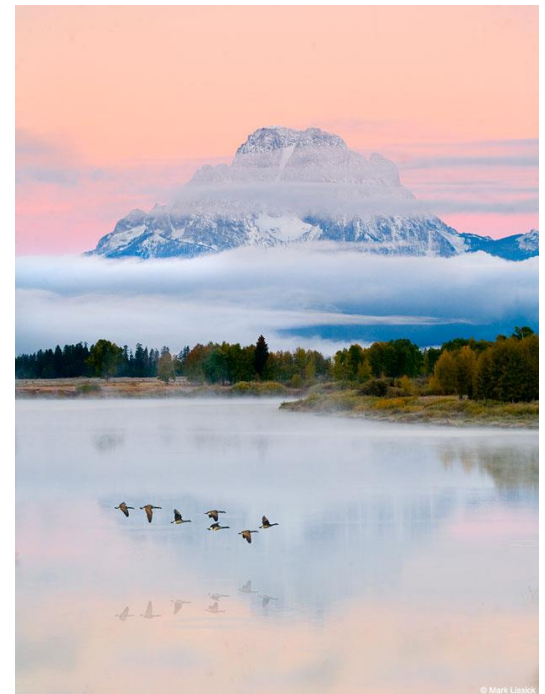
Determining what to use in a composition is first influenced by our perceptions of the contents of the world around us. How we perceive a scene is a function of how our brains process the visual information coming from our eyes. The result of this processing is that we perceive images and subjects as a whole rather than in parts. This method of processing has a direct impact on our photographic creativity as we interpret a scene based on the results of our brains combining the "parts" and giving us a visual "whole." While this is what we may see, what we are really responding to is the parts, the building blocks that came together to make the whole. As creative artists it is imperative that, as we visualize, we ***become aware of the components that really make up the scene before us.*** These visual elements: line, shape, texture, color, etc. are to photography what grammar is to language. Without an understanding of the former you cannot have the latter or at least one that can be understood.



### ***Mount Moran and the Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming***

*While the pre-dawn light, weather and muted colors combined to make a beautiful setting and mood, it is the mountain, river and geese that create the sense of place and story.*

It is difficult for us to abstract down to such parts as we are taught to see the obvious. This can take some effort as we filter out much of what we see and hear, reducing the incoming stimulus to our senses so that we are not overly distracted. In many ways this is not such a bad thing — it's important to be aware of one's environment, but you don't need to process every detail, just the most important ones. While it is important to place labels on things to help us identify what it is we are seeing, this simple act of labeling begins to limit our awareness of the essence of the thing we have labeled.

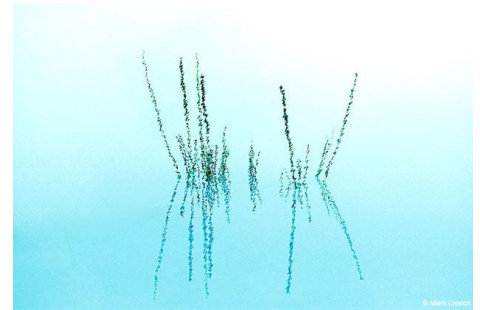


To enhance our creativity it is important for us to see through the obvious in order to understand the nature of a subject or scene, for it is that essence that really stirred our interest to begin with. You will also find that by turning off the filters you will begin to see your world with a new set of eyes. Plain, ordinary subjects like a plant surrounded by water can become marvelous to behold and fodder for the creative imagination.

***Grass Reflection, Norris Geyser Basin, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming***

*I turned a simple clump of grass and reflection into an abstract to force the viewer to establish their own interpretations and away from seeing just a definable object.*

If photographing subjects such as a cityscape, we need to look beyond the gross forms or shapes of the buildings and become aware of the fact that they also consist of more subtle design elements that are much less tangible and in some cases not even material. These elements are what combine to give substance and character to the subject as a whole. These must be the real building blocks of your composition as they are the true essence of your subject or theme and end up playing a greater role in determining a composition's visual strength or weakness than the gross forms of which they are a part.



This is evident in the Queen Anne's lace image. At first glance it is a tall plant covered with white blooms that umbrella out from the ends of the stems. While the large mass of white was the first thing I saw, it was the graphic array of lines that was the real essence of the scene. Photographing upwards against a cloudy sky and overexposing two stops visually removed the obvious and emphasized the merely obvious. The result was a graphic element-based image that was visually stronger than one of the overall plant.



Another downside to being conditioned to see only the obvious is that we tend to ignore aspects of a scene that have no physical properties. ***These aspects generally come in the form of tones— shadows and glare spots — or colors. Ignoring these physical intangibles can lead to images with unwanted distractions in the composition.*** Being aware of them though can create the option of choosing how to use them as part of the compositional design. Take a look at the image of the Gentoo penguin and its shadow. While the shadow has no physical properties it has visual properties that our brains treat as physical entities. Knowing this, I deliberately went about creating an image that made use of the shadow's design properties.



***Gentoo Penguin, Sea Lion Island, Falkland Islands***

*While the Gentoo penguin anchored the scene, the graphic strength of its shadow takes center stage.*

Perceiving these visual elements early in the creative process helps us to make decisions concerning perspective, use of space and relationships, as well as which ***focal length and depth-of-field to use.*** They become the building blocks we use ***to construct the image in the camera that our imagination has already created in our minds.*** Effectively combining the right set of design elements allows a viewer to process the visual





information contained within just as if they were viewing the scene directly, just without all of the visual clutter. When the visual grammar of an image is properly structured, its imagery as well as its message is strengthened.



***North Pond, Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico***

*In order to create a sense of place and capture the peaceful essence of the scene, I ditched the super telephoto in favor of a wide-angle perspective.*

Besides both these physical and visual building blocks there is one other element that should be considered in story building. It is one that I feel that has the ***strongest connection to our emotions: mood***. Mood can be created via such aspects as exposure choices, weather, facial expressions and dominant color. If they are incorporated in the proper degree to match the idea or theme of the image then they serve to focus, refine, and enhance the story.

***Black-browed Albatross colony, Saunder Island, Falkland Islands***

*Though endangered, the albatross were tolerant enough to permit a close approach to capture both nesting and flight activity with the colony.*

You'll know when you have created an image with visual strength, as it will ignite emotions by instantly passing on the idea, message and narration ***so that the viewer feels the same emotions and moods that were present when you created the image.***





***Sea Stack & Full Moon, Bandon Beach, Oregon***

*An extended exposure time softened the waves and set the mood but worked against the chance of including any shorebirds, except the one that paused for dinner, thus adding another level of magic to the image.*