

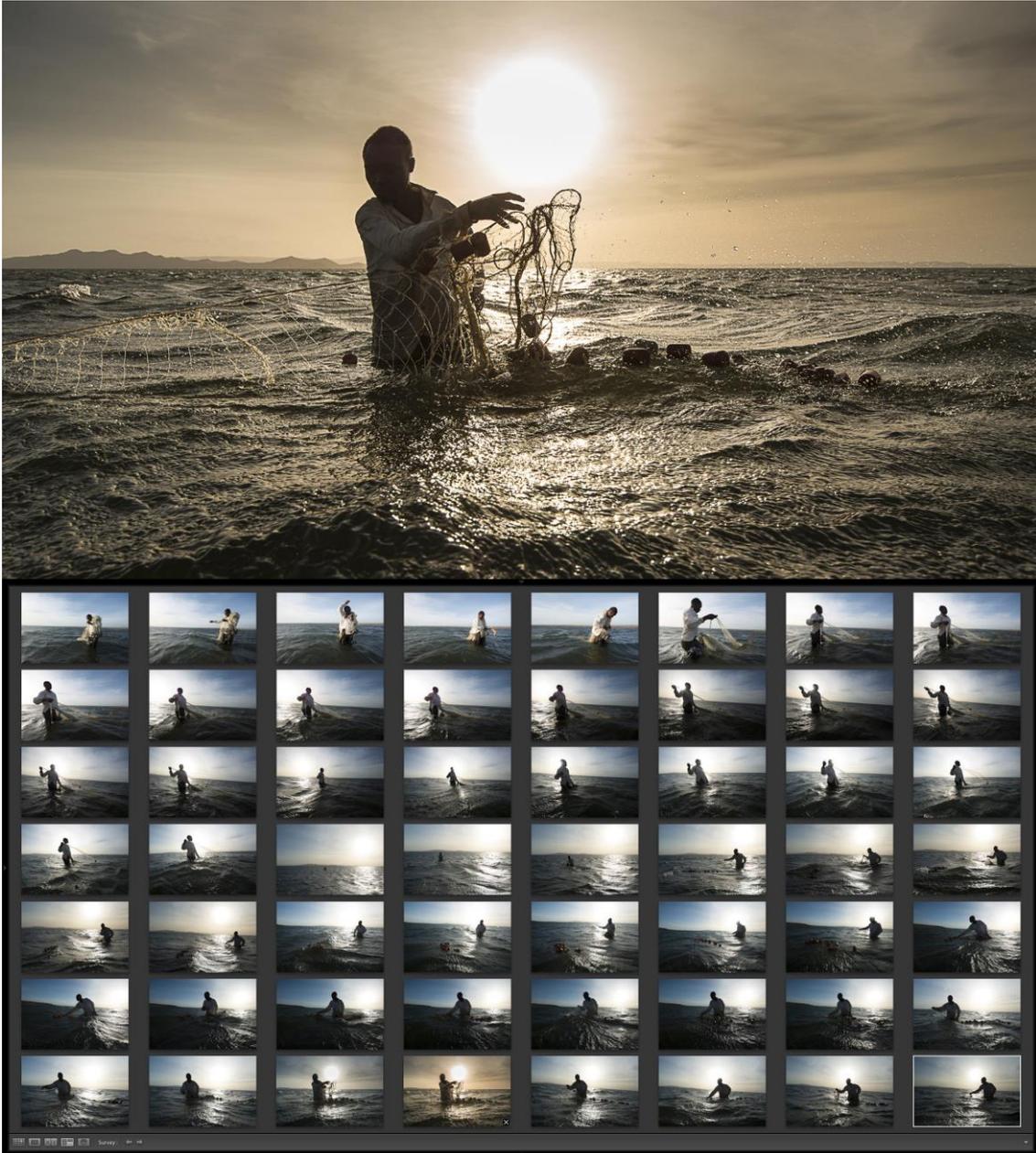


THE VISION COLLECTIVE: WEEK EIGHT

The Creative Process: Making Sketches

Last week I addressed a very specific area of creativity because of all the things I could discuss about the broader subject of creativity, it is the practice of intentionally choosing constraints that is probably the most pragmatic. I used to encourage others to embrace their constraints; now I don't think that goes far enough. We certainly need to do that, but when those constraints aren't there, it is the act of choosing them and pushing against them, testing their limits, and allowing them to force us in new directions that is most powerful. I hope you've begun to see just how powerful that can be in your own work. However, creativity is a very broad subject, and I want to touch on a couple more ideas before moving on. The coming weeks will begin to touch on visual language, composition, storytelling, and the way we use the tools of our craft. This is a last chance for me to address the foundation.

Surely by now you've heard the story of photographer Jay Maisel telling a student if he wanted to make more interesting photographs he had to become a more interesting person. It's hard advice. But we need to hear it. We get inundated in this particular little subculture of popular photography, with the message that our creativity will get better if our tools get better. It's such bullshit. It keeps us on the hook for more and more, newer and newer. Once in a while, a new tool or a change in direction will spark new ideas; I get that. But that odd occasion is a rare moment in the creative life. The creative life is one of a work ethic. It's showing up and working. It's understanding how we work best creatively, and it's a rejection of the idea of inspiration or magic. Of course we use those words a lot. I do. But if there is inspiration at all, it comes with working. If there's magic, it's in working the process. The reason I mention Jay Maisel is because it's the more interesting person, the one asking interesting questions, peering around corners, following curiosity and trying new things, that has the best chance at creating the more interesting, stronger photographs. It is not the one with the newest or best gear. As often as not the new gear just gets in the way.



The top image is one of the last of a sequence of sketches that took me over 200 frames to get to. I played, moving around, looking at the light, dodging the spray, and reacting to the moments as they came. Some had something I like, others had something else. It wasn't until I'd almost packed it in that I found what I didn't know I was looking for. Only sketching could have gotten me there. Stick it out. Keep working the scene. Don't pray and spray. Be intentional, reactive, and open-minded.

First: an admonition. For the love of Ansel Adams, please don't even start on that bullshit about you not being creative. You are. Differently creative than others, but

creative. I hear this at every conference and workshop from at least one person and it's a cop-out. A sad, heartbreaking cop-out, and I don't believe it. I don't think you do, either. If you really believed you weren't creative you wouldn't be reading these notes. You wouldn't be working so hard to make more compelling photographs. Photography is a creative endeavour and the sooner you accept that the sooner you can begin to understand how to better work that creative process.

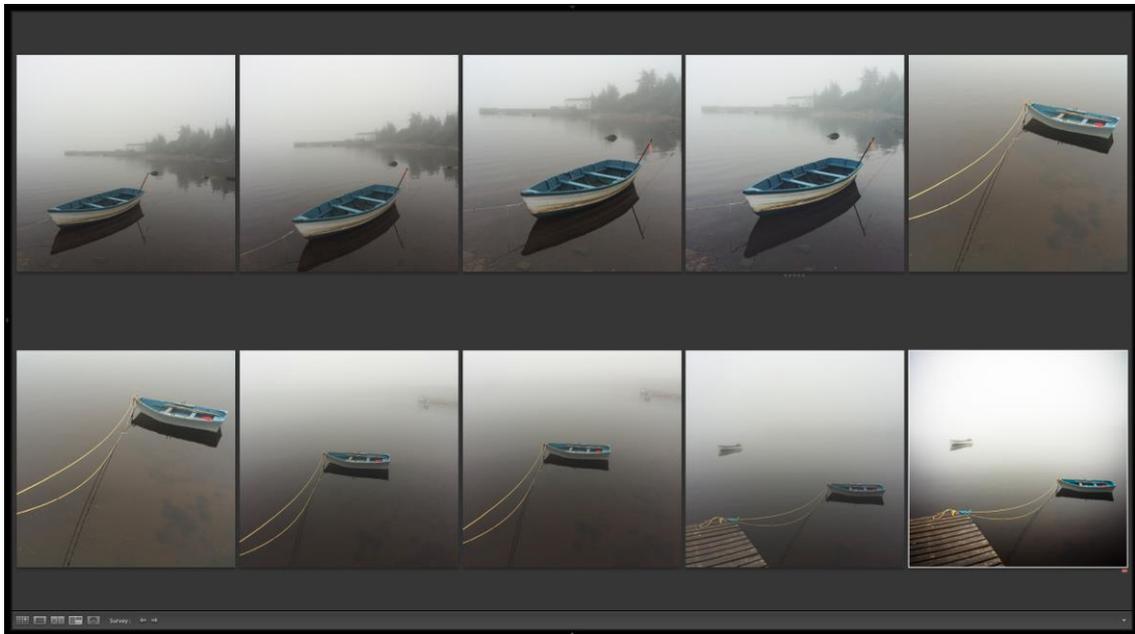
That was a long preamble, but it was necessary. I want to talk to you first about one of the ways in which creative people all work, and the one thing I do that takes advantage of that and gets me to better final images.

Creativity is problem solving. It's connecting dots in unexpected ways. It's finding new ways to express even the most mundane things. It has a reputation for being a little mystical and hard to understand, but it's not. It's reliable because our brains work in certain ways and we can generally count on those ways. We may know what will come out of that process as new ideas often look much different than we expected, but we know the broad strokes of the process and one of the things we know is that creativity is iterative.

Almost no one begins with a great idea and then pulls it off on the first try. By "iterative", I mean A leads to B which combined leads to C and then D, and somewhere along the way someone tosses in E, F, and G and a few more steps down the line you get to Q and begin thinking you might just have something here. By Z, you're a long way from where you began. But without that process you would never have gotten there.

So I sketch. With my camera. I make dozens of sketch images. And like writers allow themselves really shitty first drafts, I allow them to be really bad, unburdened with a need to be anything more than a snapshot. And I look at each one and question it. Does it have mood? What are the lines doing? What is the light doing? Is the moment helping the story? What does my foreground contribute to my background or vice versa? I ask questions about visual mass and balance and framing. Shutter speed, and aperture. And with those questions I make a sketch of

the answers, always bringing the camera to my eye, making an exposure, and seeing what the result is.



I loved this little boat in the fog in Newfoundland, but as so often happens, it's not the first shot that is the best expression of the thing. This is a screenshot of a sketch sequence of close to 60 images. Sketching is play, exploration, and discovery. In the end, the frames I like best had a sense of scale and a feeling of lostness that the first images didn't. But I wouldn't have gotten there without starting at the beginning of the process.

Hear me on this: I know no photographer who gets it right the first time every time. Not even close. To saddle yourself with that expectation is binding in a process that should be liberating. At this stage, you need the freedom to make 20, 30, or 100 frames, each one getting you a little closer to the strongest image. Do not edit yourself, berate yourself, or give up. Eventually, once you've gone through this process a thousand times, it might take fewer sketches to get there, and the process will feel a little more fluid, even intuitive, but it'll still be a process. Bad ideas are to be explored and not tossed out; it's often bad ideas that lead to better ones or combine to make something unexpected. Questions (and that's what your sketches are) are more important than answers. Making a lot of sketches is not

magic. It's making sketches and reacting to them, finding in them new possibilities and ideas, and letting those lead you to the best possible expression of your vision of a place, a person, or a moment.



The final image from this rock-hewn church in Ethiopia took some work. Many of my sketches are quick, poorly exposed and out of focus, just quick shots I can react to : do I like it, or don't I? Do I need to move? Wait for a better moment? What about balance and geometry?

Creative Exercise

Find something to photograph. Don't worry about making a great photograph; make an interesting one. Then look at it. What do you like? What don't you like? Do the lines lead somewhere meaningful? Is there mood? Can you make it simpler? Try again. Keep asking. What would happen if you used more depth of field? Less? A slower shutter speed? Camera motion? Play. Keep the ideas that seem to work, and move past the ones that don't grab you. I want you to teach yourself to examine all the possibilities, and play with the ones that show promise. Ultimately, a creative approach to making photographs is finding a way to combine your vision + the scene in front of you + your constraints and tools (both technical and visual) in new ways to find the strongest possible combinations, and most of us have to try those combinations, see them with our own eyes, to know if they resonate with us. Go sketch.



Study The Masters

I want to introduce you to **Sam Abell**, another National Geographic photographer, but one whose work is, at least to me, immediately identifiable. It stands out from the tack sharp, hyper-realistic work of his peers, not because it's neither of those two things but because it's so characterized by mood and often a contemplative, even serene feeling. His stories happen more through an episodic series of emotional vignettes than a traditional narrative. Look at his work from **Newfoundland** and his **short series on canoeing** to get a sense of that. His colour palettes, composition, use of space, are all very unpretentious.

You can see more of his bodies of work here.

Further Study

I'm going to push **Magnum Contact Sheets** on you again. If you want to understand how other photographers approach their process, trying again and again until they get it right, this book will teach you, inspire you, and liberate you. There aren't many books I think are a must-study, but this is one of them, especially on the idea of sketching out your images.

If the questions I ask myself as part of my own process interest you, I wrote many of them down in **Making The Image**. If you have that book, go through it again. It comes with a handy PDF Quick Reference Guide (**which Vision Collective members can download for free here**). Put that on your phone and consider using it when you shoot. Not all of the questions will apply, but most will. If you don't have a copy, this course is not intended as a place for me to sell it to you, but I'd like to make it available to you for 50% off. **Use Coupon code CVEightFifty** when you check out and it's yours for half price. (This coupon code is valid until April 30, 2017.)

Sam Abell's latest book, **The Life of a Photograph**, was tremendously enjoyable. Along the lines of Dan Winters' **The Road to Seeing**, which I also highly recommend (though this one is shorter), I find myself reading books that not only show me the work of a photographer but give me glimpses into the way they think. After all, it's the thinking behind a photograph that sets in motion all the elements and decisions that eventually make it what it is.

As always, if you're looking for me, you can find me on **my blog**, on **Facebook**, and on **Instagram**.

For the love of the photograph,
David duChemin