



THE VISION COLLECTIVE: WEEK ELEVEN

Stories or Poems?

Rarely does a week go by that I don't read someone saying that the best photographs tell a story; I've probably said the same thing at some point. But if I did, I was wrong and I probably left a number of photographers confused about how they could possibly make their abstract landscapes or impressionistic images of flowers into a story. Photographs need not be stories any more than books do. Some books are full of poems, some are full of facts, and yes, many are full of stories. Stories are so powerful the human race has been using them for thousands of years. We couldn't stop telling stories if we wanted to, but they aren't

remotely the only way to connect to the hearts and minds of those who will experience your photographs. I want to touch on a few ideas this week.

About Stories

Stories take different forms from age to age and culture to culture. The forms are often different, but the basic elements are not. Most of them have a strong sense of setting, character, theme, action/plot or change, and conflict. Some stories will focus more on one of those elements than others, but it's safe to say that if your story has none of them then, well, it's not a story. That doesn't mean a landscape can't have characters: the raging sea or driving rain can be a character. And it doesn't mean that wedding photographs, full of only love, can't have a conflict of sorts. They can, and do. But if we're going to tell stories, let's not screw around with it. Stories are their own medium, their own language, and many of the images about which we say, "that really tells a story" don't. Stories aren't as easy to tell in a still frame as we'd like them to be. More often we imply them than tell them, and there's as big a difference between a story and a *strong story*, as there is between art and *good art*.

We might look at a photograph of an old man and think it really tells a story, when what we mean is we imagine he might have lived a good story (which he might have). But a photograph that tells that story is a different thing. He might indeed be a wonderful character, but a character without setting, theme, action/change/plot, or conflict is not a story. To tell a story, we need more than one element; we need them all working together. Sometimes the best we can do is imply a story, and that too can be powerful. But if you want to *tell a story* you need more.





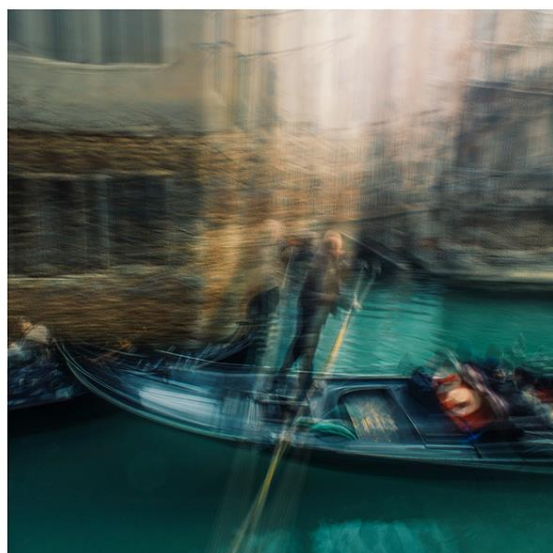
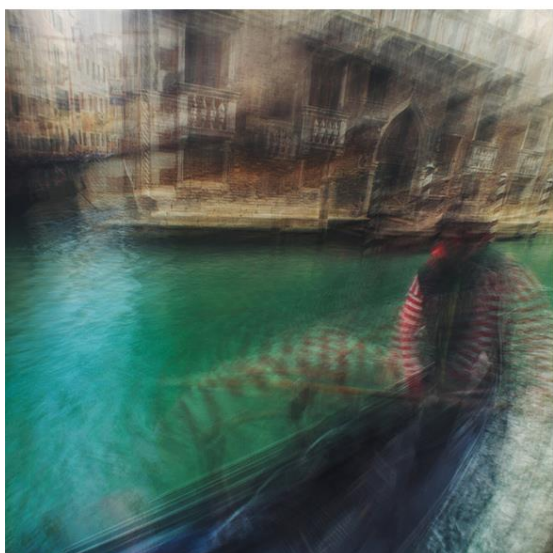
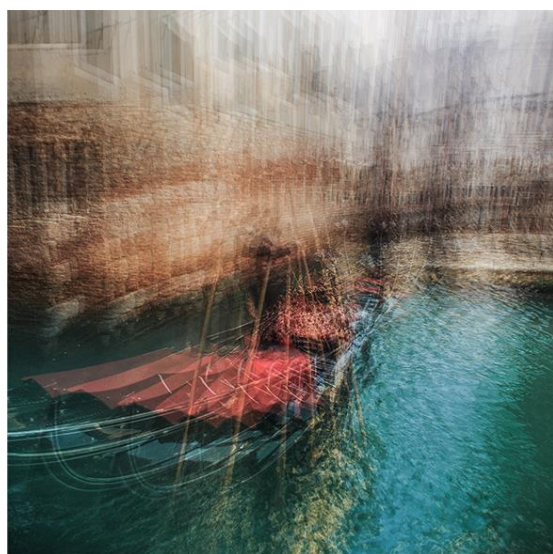
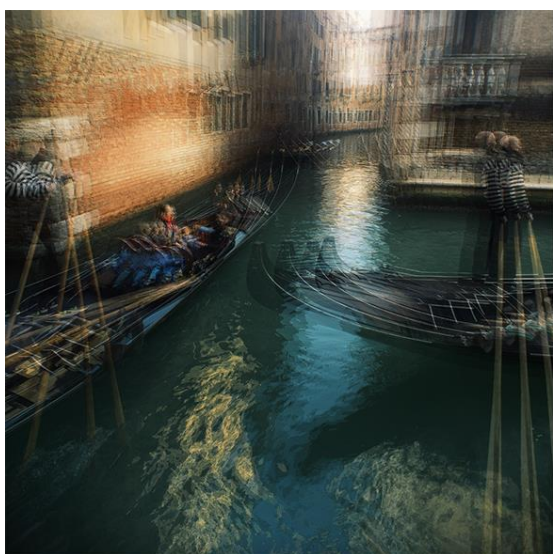
Each of these images imply a story and have all the basic elements of a story: setting, character, conflict/contrast, action/change, theme, and mystery. What stories do these photographs imply for you? How would they change if, for example, you removed the moment from the top image, the fish from the second, and the cell phones from the third? Would that change the emotional charge or the interest for you?

About Poems

Poems are altogether different. They are not always meant to be understood the way a story is; rather, they are meant to be experienced. When I talk about poems I'm using metaphor. Using Monet or Kandinsky as an example, I could just as easily talk about a kind of painting. They transport us. They make their trade in emotion, not understanding. Their tools are colour and shape and rhythm more than literal representations of real people (for example) doing real things. To borrow from the painters known by the label, they give us impressions. They might be blurred, unfocused, abstracted, or exposures stacked on top of each other, but their lack of conformity makes them no less powerful.

Why I make the distinction is because I've found it helpful to approach them differently, experience them differently, and try them both. They are different languages, and as such, they express or

convey some things more powerfully than others. To understand the language of both—even to recognize each language as legitimate—is a big step forward for the photographer, especially those of us for whom the more literal approach is the norm. There is great freedom in looking at our photographs as visual expression or communication and using the strongest tools possible, and when that perspective either gives us the tools to tell stronger stories or “write” more evocative poems, it results in stronger forms of both.



This series from Venice doesn't really tell a story, but it includes elements of a poem, like imagery, repetition, and rhythm.

Note: I'm not saying all photographs are only either stories or poems. I'm sure there are some that are strongly both, and some that might be better described in other terms. What I'm trying to do is give you the freedom to choose the right form for what you're hoping to express. If art is not liberating, what is it?

Creative Exercise

Pull a couple of the images you think of as telling a story. Identify the character, the setting, the action (past, present, imminent, or implied), the theme, and the conflict. It's OK if you struggle with this. The goal is not to satisfy me; I'll never know. The goal is to ask the question. If the answer is, there is none, perhaps it's not a story, and that's OK. For most of us, what is not OK is that our photographs do not connect with people. Ultimately, you need to make me care. What is it about that photograph that you think would make me care? I don't mean care enough to click "Like" on Facebook, but care enough to linger over, to think about. Will it make me sigh, wonder, laugh, cry? Will it calm me? Will it anger me? Does it do that for you? Do whatever else you want with your photographs but make me care. Stories and poems can both do that in different ways. Explore those.



Study The Masters

This week I'm linking you to a page of various projects by [Brent Stirton, a photographer who tells some of the most evocative stories for National Geographic](#). My introduction to Stirton's work changed the way I thought about stories and changed my desire to tell them with all my heart, to dig deeper, to stop being so damn safe. He inspires me deeply. Pick two or three of these stories and study them. What makes them so powerful? How can you apply that to the work you do?

Further Study

With apologies, the link to the [blog article by Ming Thein on Aspect Ratio and Compositional Theory](#) from Week Nine got a little screwed up. [Here is the working link](#). Sorry about that.

Read this article about [4 Ways to Tell Stronger Stories](#).

Check out [Time Magazine's 10 best photo essays for the month of January 2015](#). This is a great place to study long-form photographic storytelling.



Special Offer: *The Photographic Story* - Save 40%

Lastly, we are just launching [The Photographic Story](#), a new eBook/workbook and teaching video, and I wanted you to be the first ones to see it. If you want to take a deeper dive into photographic storytelling and the use of story elements to make stronger photographs, [The Photographic Story](#) is only \$15 until January 25th (a 25% savings on the regular \$20 price).

*As a thank you for being part of the Vision Collective, if you want a copy of this new resource, use this coupon code: **VCSTORY** to get an additional 15% off. This coupon is valid until the end of January 25th.*

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

