



THE VISION COLLECTIVE: WEEK EIGHTEEN.

Try it in Black & White: The Power of Monochrome

If a friend picked up a camera for the first time and asked me to teach him to make photographs, I would give that friend one camera, one lens, and ask him to photograph in only black and white for a year. Aside from its elegance, the power of monochrome lies in what it is not: colour. Colour seduces. It adds a layer of emotional and visual complexity to what we do. And done right, it has its own power. But because it is as seductive as it is and has such emotional and visual pull on us, it can overly complicate things. It can be a bit of a bully.

Without the concerns that colour brings to composition, that new photographer would be free to concentrate on the more fundamental building blocks of line, shape, tone, and the power of a gesture that might be lost with the introduction of hue. Colour changes the visual mass in an image, creates new balance, and requires a little more finesse to do well. And seeing our work without its distraction can teach us a lot.

On workshops, I get teased because too often the first thing I ask a student about their image is, “Have you tried it in black and white?” And it’s not because I necessarily think that the image ought to be presented that way, but because the removal of colour helps us *see* differently. If you go back to Week Three and the discussion about images that are about something rather than merely of something, this relates well. If that thing which your photograph is about does not find its best expression in colour, then the image might be best without it. If it doesn’t truly add to the photograph, remove it, even if that’s colour.

I’m a huge fan of colour work; my library has at least as many books of colour photography as it does monochrome. But it’s harder to do well because while tones can contrast, they can’t conflict: colours can. And I truly believe that your colour photography will be much better if you learn to study or evaluate the images in black and white, even if you never present them so.

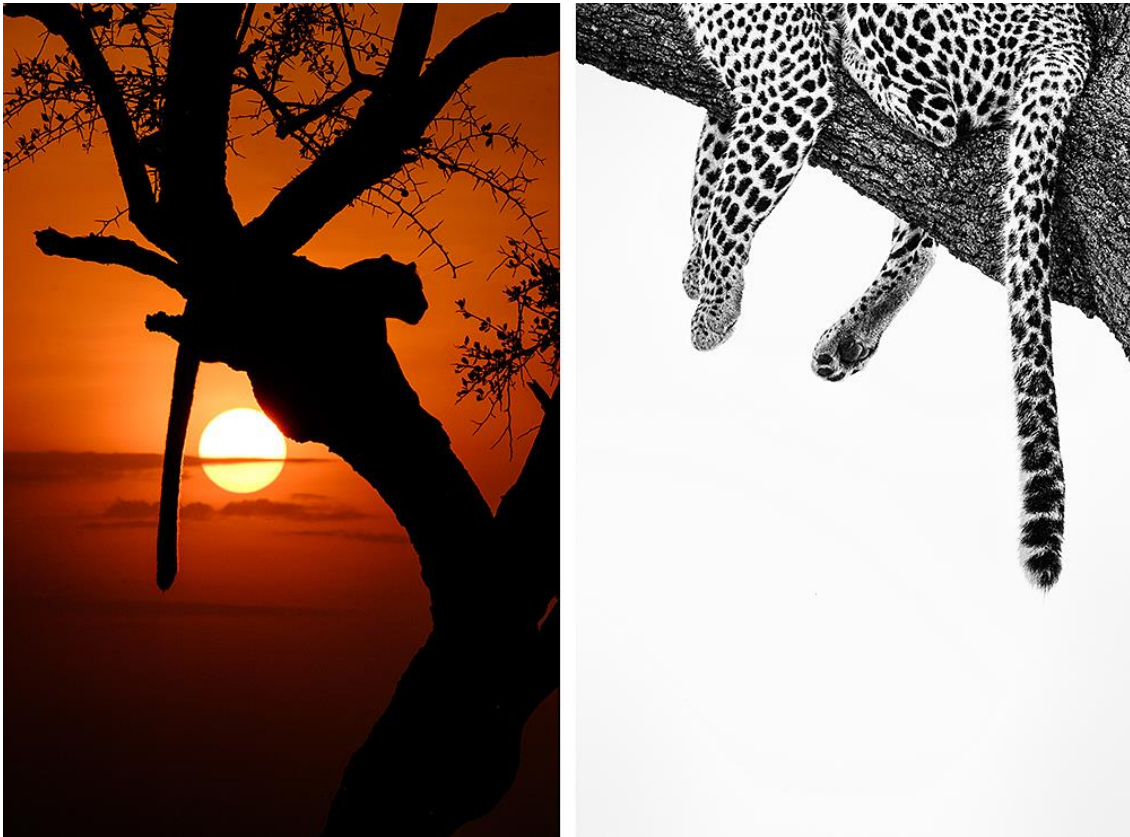


Aside from changing the mood in this photograph, removing the colour changes where my eye goes, and changes the tone of the story.



This image isn't about blue so much as it is about the dolphins. It's about grace and elegance, but to my eye, the blue felt a little heavy-handed: yeah, we get it, it's serene down there. But the change to black and white helped me pay more attention to the individual personalities of the dolphins. Canadian photographer Ted Grant said, "When you photograph people in colour, you photograph their clothes. But when you photograph people in black and white, you photograph their souls." This might be a bit more of

a generality than I'm willing to make, but I like the idea he's presenting. We can only pay attention to so much, and sometimes colour gets in the way.



Each of these images is of the same African leopard, though photographed a couple hours apart. The image on the left is not just about a leopard but about the sunset as well; part of that is the colour. So the colour stays. But the image on the right isn't about colour. It's about line and pattern, and frankly, the colour wasn't great. Did I print this in black and white? I didn't. But looking at it black and white then back to colour again made me realize that I was fighting against the colour. So I pulled the colours back (considerable decrease in saturation) and tweaked the hues (pushed towards green a little) so they were no longer competing. The final toned images are below, but I likely wouldn't have arrived at this point without my insistence on looking at my work in both colour and monochrome.



Creative Exercise





Pull a couple of your favourite images up in Lightroom (or use the images above) and make Virtual Copies of them. Now, one by one create a good black and white conversion. Toggle them back and forth. How is your eye drawn to different parts of the image with and without colour? Are some lines stronger in black and white? Is the emotional strength of the image stronger in one or another? Why? If the colour truly adds something, great! But what does it add and why? Does the balance change a little when you see the image in black and white? Is that because the visual mass has changed from one area to another?



Study the Masters

Since we're talking about black and white images, I'd like to introduce you to **Edward Weston** (1886-1958). To me, Weston's black and white work is so purely about form, and while it might seem simple now, it's important to recognize that we're used to seeing such pure form and shape work today only because photographers like Weston were the first to explore it and open the genre to us. I especially like the collection of work presented in the book *Edward Weston: 125 Photographs*. It's a nice overview and beautifully reproduced. The sensuality and organic beauty to his work pulls me in.

“My true program is summed up in one word: life. I expect to photograph anything suggested by that word which appeals to me.” ~ Edward Weston

“The fact is that relatively few photographers ever master their medium. Instead they allow the medium to master them and go on an endless squirrel cage chase from new lens to new paper to new developer to new gadget, never staying with one piece of equipment long enough to learn its full capacities, becoming lost in a

maze of technical information that is of little or no use since they don't know what to do with it." ~ Edward Weston

"The photographer's most important and likewise most difficult task is not learning to manage his camera, or to develop, or to print. It is learning to see photographically – that is, learning to see his subject matter in terms of the capacities of his tools and processes, so that he can instantaneously translate the elements and values in a scene before him into the photograph he wants to make."
~ Edward Weston

Further Study

Here are a few additional resources to follow up on as you have time.

- Piet van Den Eynde's eBook, *The Power of Black and White*, is an excellent look at black and white conversions in Lightroom and Photoshop.
- Andrew Gibson's 3-eBook set, *The Magic of Black and White*, is also a great resource.
- *Edward Weston, The Flame of Recognition* is worth finding if you like books.
- Lastly, [here's a 1948 documentary film about Weston, created toward the end of his life and work.](#)

Final Comments

Thanks again for being part of this. There are still eight weeks left to go, but remember you can space these assignments out. My promise to you was to deliver 26 weeks of lessons that would teach and inspire; I didn't say you had to do it all at once. And if you've missed any of the lessons, [the Vision Collective archive is here for you.](#)

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