

Photography

# Charles T. Low's Amazing Photography Adventure

April 18, 2019 | Charles T. Low, Photographer

## My take on art-photography, as presented to the Brockville Area Photography Club

As a recently-joined member of the Brockville Area Photography Club - the [BAPC](#) - they asked me to do a presentation, on a topic of my choice. I felt very honoured, and in my usual paradoxical state of humility and narcissism, I chose a topic about which I care and know something: my own personal journey into the world of photographic art.

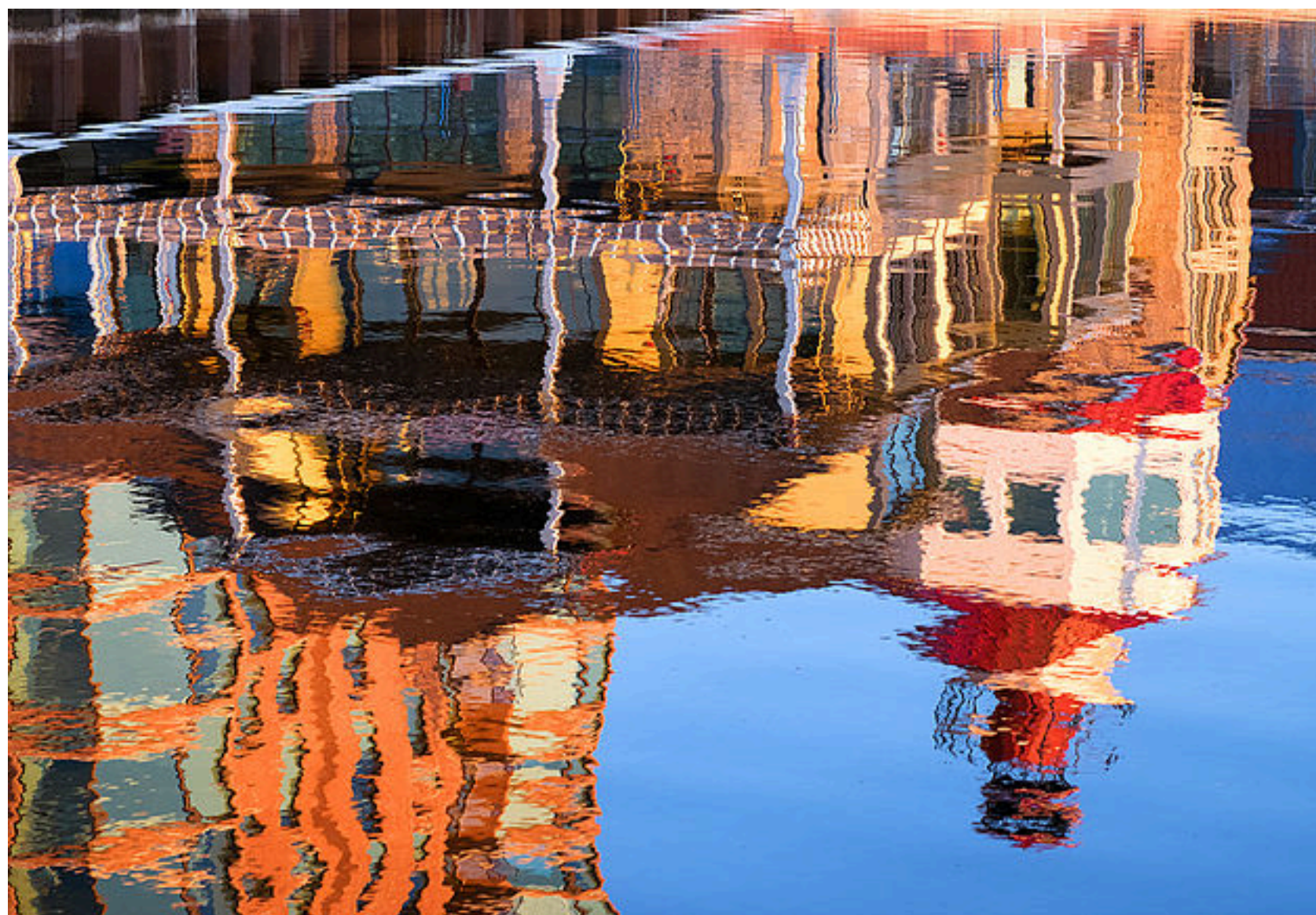


It appeared to go well. If not life-changing, I believe that I gave the well-attended room some useful things to ponder, and people said nice things to me after.

Note throughout that the speaking-notes are peppered with [links](#), which look like that word, "links", each leading to somewhere with more information - many of them to previous of these blogs.

Without an exact transcript, but also without further ado:

### Forty-five Years Through A Viewfinder



Thanks so much for inviting me to speak with you this evening. As a recent member, I'm already meeting great people and expanding my own photographic horizons. I realize that there is a wealth of knowledge and experience in the room, and that some of what I say may appear too basic, but sometimes the basics deserve revisiting, and I hope that you will find things to help you in your own photography.

I would like to talk i) briefly about my own journey - culminating in how I got to be standing in front of you today - and then ii) spend more time on how I conceptualize my own production of photographic art.

But first, let me mention two background points.

**1/ Process.** Although we all enjoy the process of photography, or else we would paint (or play paint-ball, or something), it helps me, every time I release the shutter, to remember this:

Ultimately, *it's all about the image*. So if I like using film, or shooting in black and white, then I'm good with that, but I like to be clear in my own mind how much my choices depend on *enjoying the process* and how much on *getting a good image*. The two sometimes differ widely.

Whether I would *hang something on my wall* cannot be the final arbiter of the value of any image, mine or

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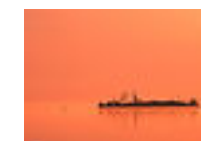
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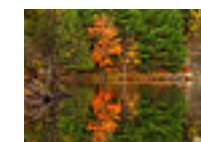
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Would I want that on my wall?

art.

**2/ Equipment.** Check out [Freeman Patterson](#), whose books came to me at just the right time in my life, and whom I have heard speak in person twice. He was asked - of course - about what equipment he uses, and ... declined to answer! He said to have good [equipment](#), to know how to use it, and to [practise](#) with it, but that he wanted to teach us to [see](#), and not get distracted by talking about his equipment.

someone else's, but I also find it a useful [tool](#) in evaluating whether my enjoyment has translated well into an image which qualifies as

*It's all about the image.*

*"The most important piece  
of photographic equipment you have  
is between your ears"*

*-Freeman Patterson (paraphrased)  
[freemanpatterson.com](#)*

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## Journey



Around the age of 10, I received a Kodak Hawkeye camera, winding on rolls of precious black-&-white film, and some years later, my benefactors upgraded that to an Olympus Trip 35, a completely automatic, no-battery camera, with an excellent lens. Hopping out of my tent one morning, in Algonquin Park, I saw this misty sunrise, did what felt like nothing more than snap, and although I can't say that this is when photography caught with me, I still like that image, and have it hanging in my home.

A decade or so later, I received a Minolta X-700, having long been pining for a single-lens-reflex camera, popped in a roll of film, and gleefully set about to shoot anything I saw. My anticipation changed to desolation when viewing the prints a few days later; they were all rubbish. The thought flitted through my cerebrum that perhaps the camera was defective ... but I knew that it was me. I either had to up my game immediately, or look for a new hobby.

(Gradually, over many years, I built up the now-outdated system you see here.)

Not long after, I took myself into the woods, just looking for anything which might seem photographable, and came across this:

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If the Algonquin misty sunrise hadn't hooked me, this did. Without analyzing its technical features right now, I still like it, and still have it displayed in my home. The awareness that I could produce something like that kept me going through many subsequent photographic disasters. I later revisited that location, but was never able to improve upon this image. Among other things, I got lucky, that first day, with the light.

None of that means that *you* have to like it. Individual tastes will and should vary enormously.

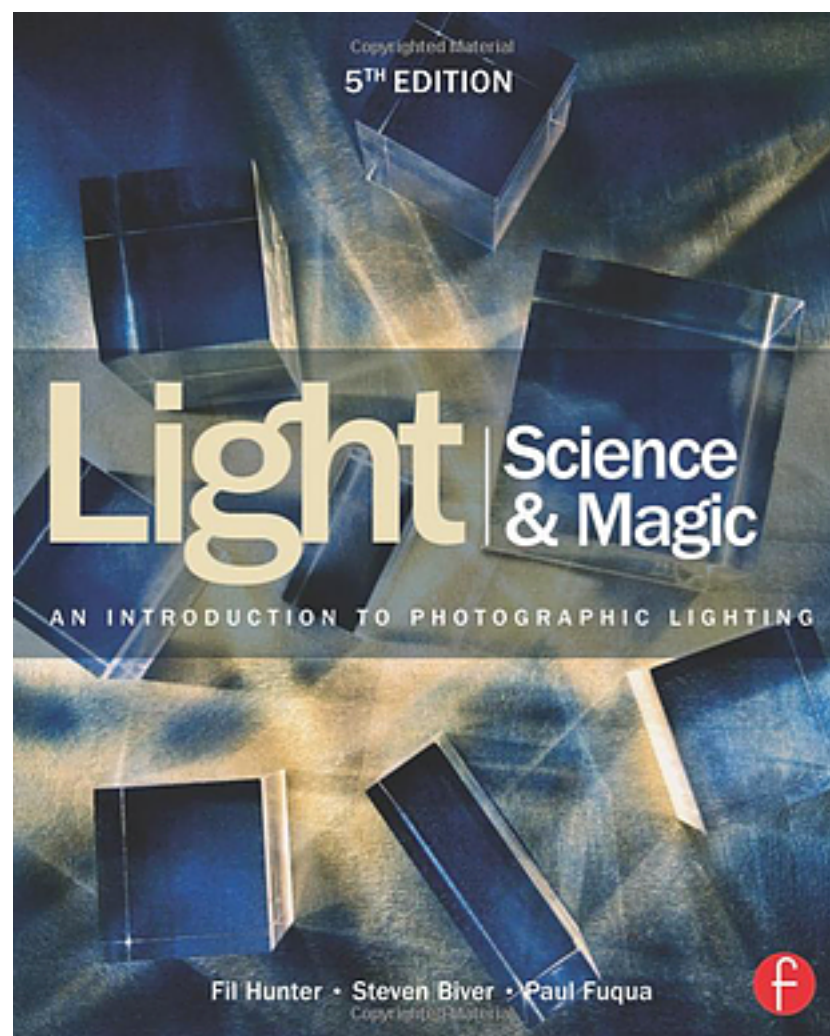
But I like it.

Throughout the ensuing decades, I sought occasional other means of furthering my craft. These included:

- looking at as many photographs as I could, good and bad;
- subscribing to a professional photography magazine;
- taking private lessons, for specific questions, at the School of Photographic Arts of Ottawa (SPAQ);
- having photographer friends and mentors.

The latter has been life- and career-changing, and involved a good dollop of serendipity. But I cannot over-emphasize the value of having an expert to coach me along, day by day, stage by stage. Without a very specific constellation of circumstances, it would also be hard to replicate.

One of the first things Peter did with me was to suggest reading *Light, Science and Magic*. After that, we had more of a common language (which we continue to use quite liberally!).





## Art

Why do we practise **photography**, rather than painting or sculpting (or singing or dancing)? I have thoughts on that, but the over-riding principle is to question not only what I do, but why I do it. It may seem tangential, but I believe influences the quality of my work.



The above photo, in its out-of-camera version, seemed too stark, and I de-tuned it. That seems counter-intuitive for a discipline which concentrates so much on technical issues like "resolution", but the point I try to make is that **it's all about the image**, extending the concept stated earlier to: whatever the artist-photographer decides she or he wants in the frame is what is allowed to go in the frame.

That in no way means that anyone else has to like it. If having one's work *liked* is among a photographer's goals, then they can very legitimately attempt to adjust their output accordingly.

My primary personal restriction is that I do not wish to produce anything which could be construed as unkind or harmful. That's just me.

But apart from that, I find no such thing as a "proper photograph". Within fairly large limits, I know of no rules about what should or should not be inside a frame.

**Brain-seeing.** This relates to "seeing like a camera", and means that our eyes only collect data, but we *see with our brains*. Damage that part of the brain: go blind. Our brains fill in missing data for us constantly, powerfully, and very effectively. The brain removes extraneous data (e.g. poles growing from heads, or our car-keys on the mantle-piece), and also fills in holes in the data, so we often see what we expect to see, rather than what is there. How we see depends not only on the literal scene in front of us, but on our unique biology, our life experience involving innumerable influences ... what could be condensed as our "biases".

And beyond that, there is the fact that we can only focus on the tiniest pin-point in the centre of our field of vision. Our eyes scan a scene and deceive us into seeing it all sharply. That cannot not only not be replicated in a two-dimensional photograph, but the opposite pertains, in which out-of-focus segments of the image cannot be brought into focus. It is simply not possible for the brain to see like that 'in the wild'.

With our eyes, we also do not see things as framed.

These are among the unique joys - and challenges - of photographic composition.

So, at some point this major realization (shared and taught by generations of photographers before me) revolutionized my photographic trajectory: "seeing like a camera" means understanding at least a little of how the brain sees, and incorporating that into my decisions about how to make any particular photograph.

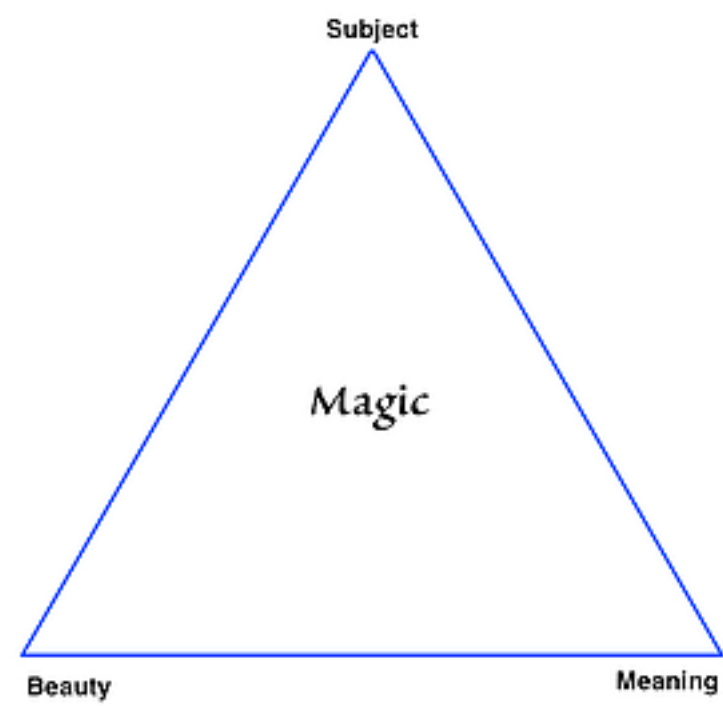
I personally like large apertures, blurring the background and thereby separating the subject - but not universally, and it's not a rule; it's just *often* my artistic preference. It produces images which the naked eye - the brain, actually - cannot replicate.



**Why?** Again, why do we practise photography, and why do we choose to make specific images?

Acknowledging that any framework is arbitrary on some level, it helps to me to think about this before I release the shutter and again before deciding whether to display the work.

## Reason for a Photograph



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The obvious answer is that we have found something interesting to take a picture of: a **subject**. And fine - that often works, and works really, really well. The photo above, while having other interesting elements, would not hold together without the inscrutable person sitting on the steps. It's always more complicated, but I'm using this as an example of "subject".

But at the pre-opening dinner for the 7x7 fine-art photography Exhibition and Sale, in the recent past at [Gallery Raymond](#), Ray asked us to go around the table and all say why we felt the drive to produce art. Beyond "subject", I congratulated myself smugly for intoning "beauty", when someone else went deeper and said "meaning".





The above image contains, to my way of thinking, nothing of interest! I don't care much about dead trees in swamps, nor about rushes, but ... the whole thing holds together (for me) very well visually, compositionally, and I'm using it as an example of **beauty**.



I certainly tried to make the image above look nice, but the impact it has on those who know has much to do with what it **means** - involving a type of societally-unacknowledged grief. For those who wish to know more, I have written about it [previously](#).

Many photographs contain more than one of the elements, in some combination, in some state of harmony or otherwise, and it's when they all coalesce that the **magic** happens. I can't use the image from the actual presentation, because of lack of permission, but the image below has, I believe, good and harmonious quantities of subject, beauty and meaning.





We could call another category of photograph "novelty" - looking at objects in ways which only the camera ... or an imaginative photographer ... can see them.

(This example is a macro of the abrasive side of a scrub-sponge. Among other things, think of the plastic getting into our environment [i.e. does it also have "meaning"?.])

I find this use of photography for novelty very intriguing and appealing, and also feel that it works best when it has at least a modicum of the other elements as well.



**Then how?** Sooner or later, I have to stop philosophizing, and start making pictures. I will mention, only to dismiss as too basic for the present discussion (crucial though they are) things like:

- aperture;
- shutter speed;
- white balance;
- ISO;
- focal length.

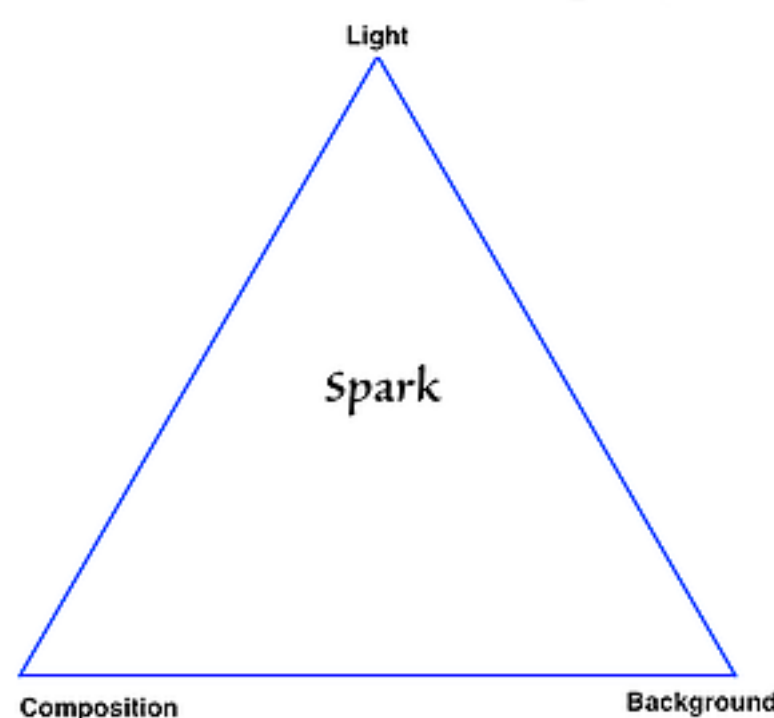
And for portraiture, just because it wasn't already hard enough, throw in:

- posing;
- expression;
- timing;
- rapport.

These could be separate presentations of their own. But I propose another framework.

At the beginning, I think that we tend - quite rightly - to think about composition: how to arrange the objects or how to choose a vantage and settings to control how the photograph appears. I present the following roof-top image as an example of that.

## To Make a Photograph



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It eventually dawned on me how much **light** matters. The saying goes, "Photographers paint with light." I too often do this badly. It's one thing to learn about studio lighting - itself not in any way simplifiable - but another just to *recognize* a good light, or a bad one. Sometimes when using ambient light, I can still tailor it to my advantage, and sometimes I cannot. In the latter instance I ideally would wait or return for the light (several seconds, an hour, a day ... or a season).





There's more to the image above than just light, but note that all I had available was, confusingly to beginners, the worst light a photographer can know - mid-day under full sun. The shadows are too hard, and the contrast too high. (The brain compensates for all of that - see above - but the photograph will not). So in this case, I moved to the shady side, although with still a little side-angle for accent. Importantly, however, I also adjusted the exposure value, increasing the camera's recommended exposure by one stop, without which the child's face would have looked distractingly dark.

And then I need to think about the **background**. This image of the Con Darling statue in downtown Brockville seemed nice to me, as I made it. "Nice" however didn't cut it when I got it into my digital darkroom and noted the devastatingly distracting background - a background which my brain had filtered out when looking at it with my naked eyes.







Above, I did things - "things" - to the background, and while quite dramatically different from the out-of-camera image, looks to my brain more the way it looked on site.

Put everything together, composition, light and background, and the following image has been one my most popular for over a decade now, with the public and with myself, and ... I have a print of it too.





I believe, if I may say, that there is some **spark** there. It also has an interesting compositional peculiarity - more on that some other time, perhaps.

A special consideration occurs with eyes. Although not prominent in this presentation, I make a lot of people pictures (which I also view as art), and although we all know intuitively that eyes are important, I can also tell you that my neurobiological understanding is that humans, specifically, home in on eyes. We do this from birth. So, with rare exceptions, if I'm going to include eyes in my photographs, I have to ensure that they're in razor-sharp focus. Anything less is visually unsettling. In the following photo, an extreme example and my most dramatic eye-photograph to date, it's the subject's right eye (camera-left) which is sharpest.



**Pet Peeves.** I have (only!) two (for now!).

I cringe even to show this photograph, but it illustrates i) **scruff**. If that's what was there and there's nothing I can do about it, then generally I don't show the photo. I find it ugly, not to put too fine a point on it. And I strive for beauty. (There isn't anything else very remediable about this image anyway.)

I said to someone in discussion later that you won't see scruffy images in the high-end photo-art opus - does not happen.





The above image overall pleases me, but is pushing my acceptance of my other peeve, ii) large areas of unintentional, coincidental **black** or dark in a photograph. There are small splotches of very dark foliage near the centre, but a large swath of it in the upper left. Now ... *intentional* and artistic use of dark is another matter, but more often I find it just creeping in, unbidden and unwanted, meaning that I'm not adequately respecting the light. I either should not take the photograph, or should not display it, or should bring out the shadows in processing, etc.

The converse, large areas of *white* in an image, barely bothers me. This may be simply a very personal thing, but I hear about the artistic use of the compositional device of "white space" much more often than of "black space".

Another basic principle for art photography is an adaptation of the old recipe for success in photo-journalism: "f/8 and be there." I made the following image during a half-day of photographing a sailing regatta, a half day I spent just because I wanted to, and along with lots of good images of boats and their crews, got this overview of a red spinnaker pushing through the white-sail fleet:



So, half of the solution is just showing up.

In general, however, I eschew photographic recipes. One book said that, for urban photography, use a wide-angle lens. I have never heard such rubbish. For almost anything I photograph, I will eventually need every piece of equipment I own, and will wish I had several more. I will eventually use every bit of knowledge and skill which I have accumulated over many decades. This is complex work, and I cannot reduce it to recipes. I do use checklists, which perhaps are related to recipes, but



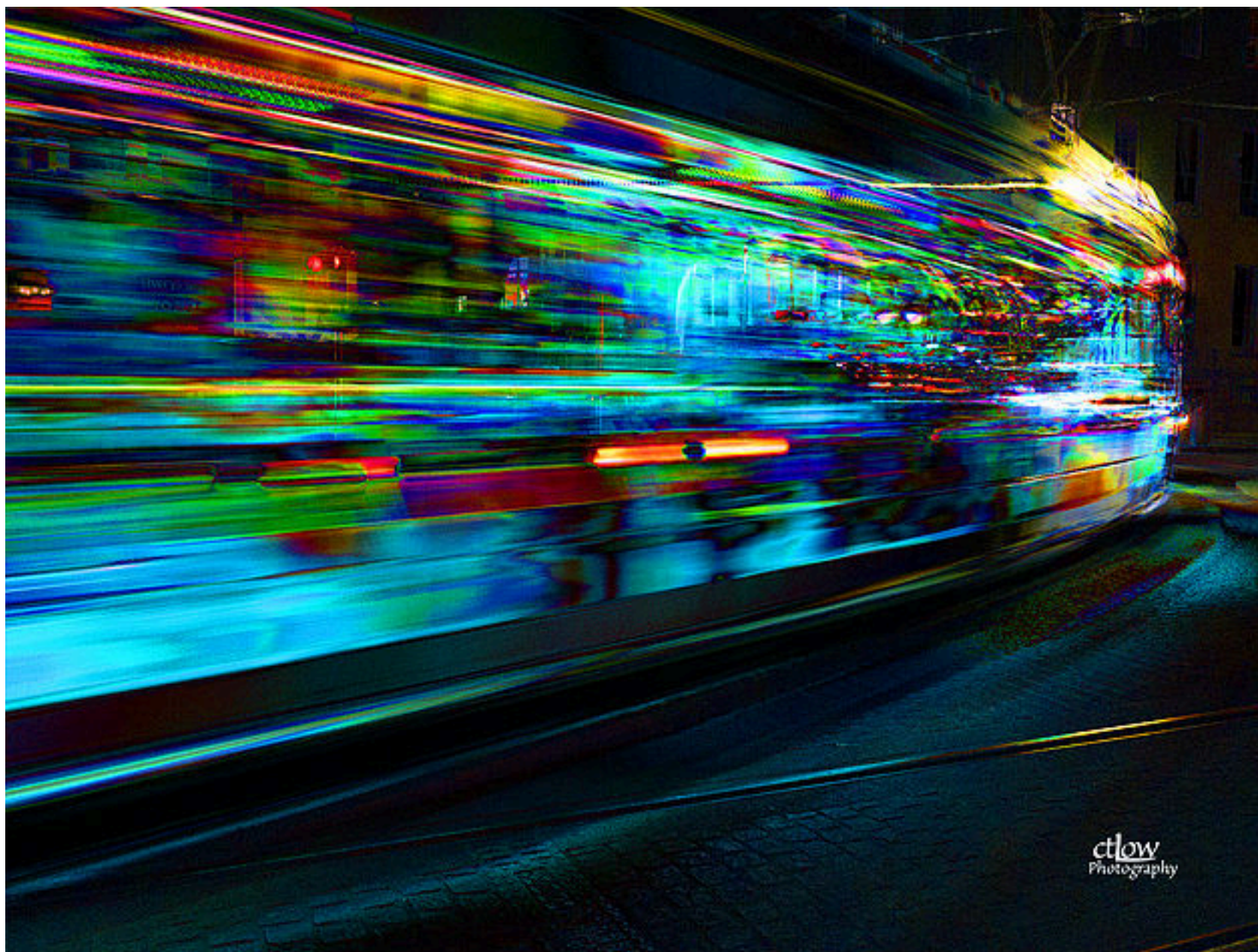


let me phrase it this way: I know that any photo-art recipe is only a starting-point, and I will often need to, and will need to be able to, go far beyond it.

The equipment you need for  
urban/landscape/people ...  
... photography is:  
everything you own.

The skills needed are:  
everything you ever learned.

-Charles T. Low



It sounds almost banal, but some facility with image editing has been essential to my progress to date. The light rail train in Dublin, Ireland (above) presented a fantastical moving image to the camera. But as the train went by, I continued releasing the shutter, making ten 1-second tripod-stabilized exposures, and later overlaid two of them ... then three ... then eight. Then it required further processing. I think it may be the most *dramatic* image I have ever made.

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One might wonder, given the myriad of factors I have discussed, how one could ever keep them all in mind while making photographs. Answer: I can't. A professional photographer, working steadily over many decades, ingrains them and they gradually become subconscious and fluid. It's coming!





So, that's about enough for now, I think, and I have more but had better stop. Thank you again to the BAPC for inviting me, and I hope that you all found it a good use of your time.



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## While you're here ...

Remember that I make photographs and that I sell photographs.

Most of the photographs which you see on this web site are for sale. Prices at the time of writing, for example, for an 11x14" fine-art print with a generous white border would start at about \$50, and you can go up or down from there. Check the [rates](#) page. More importantly, check out my [gallery](#). I would love to provide you with a work of fine-art photography, or to discuss a commission.

Book a portrait-sitting - the right frequency with which to commission formal [portraits](#) is a bit more often.

Remember also to leave a comment, or to [contact](#) me. Note that on the main [blog](#) page you can sign up for new-blog notifications. Recommendations to potential new subscribers appreciated. I am very careful and respectful with your privacy.

Thank you so much for reading.

**Charles T. Low**

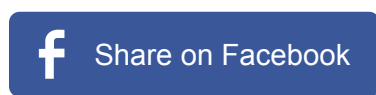


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