

# Learning Photographer

## A great way to learn is to teach A framework can help

Continuing to benefit very richly, as I do, as the recipient of [others'](#) profound fine-art photographic wisdom. I really enjoy sharing what I have learned, and always, always find that I too grow in the process.



So I would like to finish off our tumultuous 2020 with a review of some recent photographs, a bit more didactically than usual, thinking more analytically about what worked (or did not), and why.

If you don't fancy yourself a photographer, then stop now ... well, wait, just read a little further and see how it feels. You might learn something interesting. In the process, I know with certainty that I will too.

**Framework.** I believe that most conceptual frameworks function simply as tools to help us understand something, so I do not promote this as the only \*\*\* Framework for Understanding \*\*\* which alone can explain how to make fine-art photographs; of course not. But it does help me. Avid readers I love all three of you will have seen these somewhat arbitrary six items before:



- Beauty
- Interest
- Meaning

- Composition
- Light
- Background

Sometimes by nuancing the interplay of those factors, a spark of magic can occur; art can arise.

And I want that to happen.

If some of the components of the **framework** under-perform in a certain image, then the others require more-than-usual strength to carry it. We would for example likely excuse some technical or artistic flaws in an image if a photojournalist with lightning reflexes was the only one on the planet who had managed to capture a pivotal moment in history. Or we might value something which means nothing more than its acting beauty.

Let me use some recent photographs to illustrate the framework principles.



Seed pods (monochrome) - possibly wild clematis

So:

Beauty. I, and others, have found it attractive. YMMV. (For the most part I do not intend at this time to ask why - i.e. to review the basics of composition or technique - a past and future topic.) Interest. Do seed-pods engage you on some level? They do with many people. Meaning. This might have something to do with the cycle of life.

Composition. I chose the placement of the objects in the frame quite consciously, nothing exactly centred, a little subliminal triangle formed by three visual anchors (not the explicit subject but absolutely essential for the image to work). I very much enjoy the structure of the curving tendrils sprouting innumerable fluffy little hairs. Note the shallow **depth-of-field** (large aperture)—enough to show good definition while allowing the subject to stand out from the background.

The question often arises of whether the artist/photographer went through all of these factors consciously at the time of exposure, and I think usually not, or only partly; things happen too quickly, even in "static" scenes. But it matters profoundly that we know about the factors. Personally, I dynamically frame and zoom and reassess my vantage—often in very small increments, which can make a substantial difference—to make a more vicerally pleasing composition. The details, of what appeals to me more, sometimes rise to consciousness at the time, and sometimes only later.

But I rarely accept the scene as it first presents in the viewfinder.

Light. In visual art, I and many other photographers feel that nothing matters as much as **light**. Let me say that again.

### Nothing matters as much as light.

I made that seed-pod photograph under the light of an overcast sky (just the right amount of contrast), and allowed in a bit more light than the camera meter **recommended**, because of course I wanted all of the light tones to look bright, not average (so used an EV of +1 for you fellow photographic-geeks). Also, for good or ill—and I stand by my decision—I converted it to **black-and-white**. (I love colour and generally view myself as a colour-photographer, but it's all about the **image**, and it will tell you what it needs.)

Background. Even if I get everything else optimized, I absolutely need to pause and think about "**backgrounds** and borders". Because of the way the human brain **sees**, the photograph will show things which the eye missed, and they can completely ruin an otherwise exceptional image. In this case, as mentioned, I let the background blur, included I hope no distracting elements, and found an angle to keep it darker so that it complements the brighter subject.

Absent those factors, we have a **snapshot**, which although a very valuable and pleasurable commodity, means (to me) that the photographer saw something and thought, "Oo, that's nice!", pointed the camera at it, and released the shutter. The ubiquitous snapshot has many legitimate uses, and I do them myself frequently; they rarely result in fine art.



framework struggling

Another similar photograph from that session I believe does not meet my own criteria.

Among the most obvious things, the background doesn't work nearly as well, cluttered and too bright and yet—the seed pod itself differs but little from the one previous. This rendition does not capture the luminance of the earlier version above. Compositionally, plunking the pod at the "thirds" point accomplishes little more than following a "rule" which we only need use as a thinking-point, and which in this case works poorly.



Limnos, Canadian Coast Guard ship

The photograph above resulted from an early-morning awakening, and then finding this ship moored for the night at Blockhouse Island in **Brockville**, Ontario ... in fog ... with Christmas lights (and bicycles, if you look closely enough).

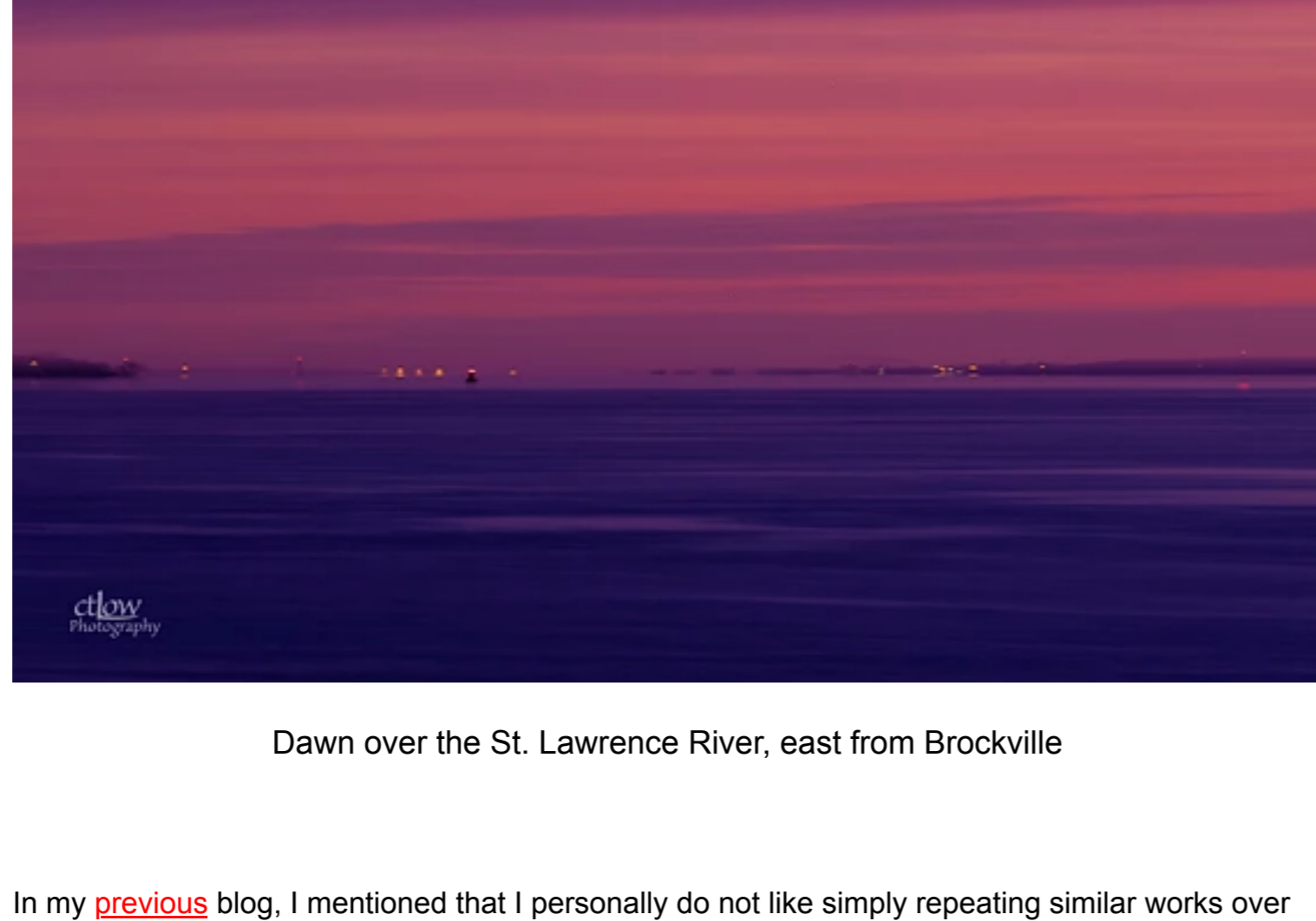
I find it pretty, but that brings into play all of my life-experience and preconceptions about ships and water, and everyone will have to form their own opinion.

I find it interesting and meaningful. As the shipping season draws to its annual seasonal closure, work had to occur, and this boat participates in in those fascinating processes. Although secured for the night, they will soon cast off and once again have to navigate the Thousand Islands of the St. Lawrence River, possibly still in fog, feeling the motion of the water, the power of the engines, tending the buoys, and using years of skill and training to operate the vessel. These ships enable all of the other traffic on the river, recreational as well as (mainly at this time of year) commercial (although I do see a very few intrepid people still out in small boats hunting and fishing). Humans have long felt the draw of the water and of boats, and they have long drawn me. And then, someone had taken the trouble to decorate the ship—marvellous!

I like my composition. (In all of this, I in no way intend to tell you what you should like.) The curve of the mooring lines against the many straight edges, the long diagonal, the amount of border on all four sides—all intentional. I used a large depth-of-field (small aperture), to keep everything in focus from near to far - the exact converse of how I managed the seed pods.

I like the light, as the faintest glimmer of dawn begins to dispel the inky blackness, to me infinitely more intriguing than full sun. I underexposed this image by one stop (EV -1, because I wanted to represent the actual darkness of the scene), requiring a two-second exposure (on a tripod), so again illustrating a very conscious approach to the many decisions, technical and artistic, involved in making such an image.

Background: I could have later cloned out the branches in the upper right, and I could have removed the footprints in the snow, and I could have cropped it in more tightly at the top. I chose not to do any of those. The fog obscures any visual intrusion from things in the distance. The navigational beacon seems to fit in quite well, thematically, while appearing small enough to leave the mental focus on the ship.



Dawn over the St. Lawrence River, east from Brockville

In my [previous](#) blog, I mentioned that I personally do not like simply repeating similar works over and over, however well they satisfy my framework (or however well they sell!), but that I do enjoy finding new ways to present familiar scenes. In the dawn photograph above, looking east from Brockville over the St. Lawrence River towards the Johnstown Bridge, I again noted that I had never before seen a light quite like that—truly never the same twice.

Do you find beauty, meaning, or interest in it?

What do you think about the composition? I followed the **rule** of not bisecting the frame, although I hope intelligently, not slavishly; I had to decide how much sky, and how much water, how much land to show on each side (and then later in editing, how much emphasis to allow it [less]).

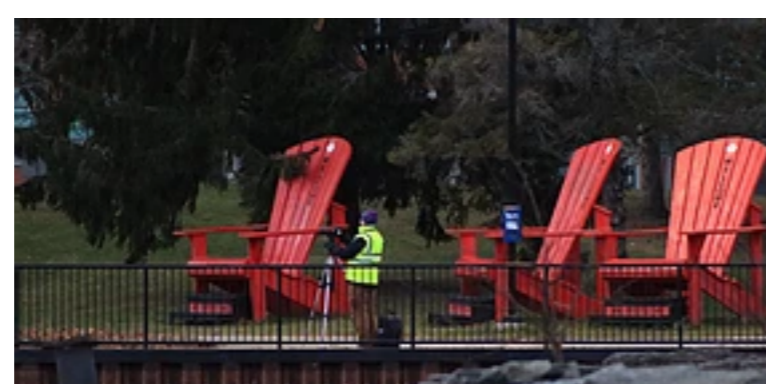
None of these things just happen. The photographer, although to some degree bound by the scene before them, makes them happen.



Oversize Adirondack chair, Blockhouse Island, Brockville, Ontario - winter, snow

I like this simple image, or perhaps I should say "deceptively simple", but rather than run it through my framework, I wish to point out that *the human eye/brain complex cannot see it this way*. Without going into too much detail:

i) the eye can only focus on one very tiny spot at a time, and from those spots our brains construct the illusion of a larger, in-focus image. But at the scene, we're either focusing on the chair, or on the background; we cannot do both. The camera, when the photographer chooses a large depth-of-field, can keep it all in focus. So, despite having been at this for decades, working purposefully at developing a sense of photographic pre-visualization, this scene surprised me when I lined it up through the viewfinder. To the eye it appeared much less impactful.



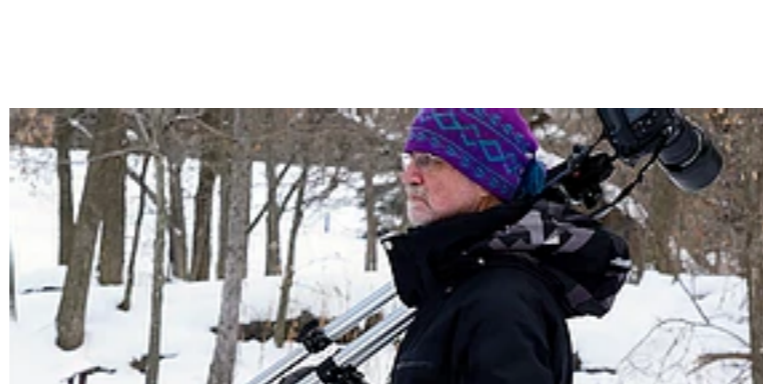
Me & (other) chairs, shows scale. © 2020 K. Fetter

ii) In a [previous](#) blog, I described the illusory nature of focal-length perspective effects, but powerful illusions they remain, and in the case of this chair, above, I used a wide-angle lens, and got right in close. I tried other options and only this one worked for me, in pushing the background (apparently) farther away, and letting it confer just the amount of context I wanted for the subject. The scene did not—could not—look that way to the eye.

So, "seeing like a camera" represents a critical learning point for making art-photographs. I have to think about it volitionally, every time, although it does get easier and more reflexive with mileage.

I could add that as another point for my framework, although really that's what the framework details amount to: **see like a camera** rather than like the eye.

I will stop now, having spartanly, for me, discussed really only four photographs. In the interval since my previous blog, I have close to seventy new images in my art-portfolio, so this feels fairly finely honed.



And, as with these thoughts on making photographs, I offer that focus intentionally.

Please check out my [website](#), and refer friends to this blog. If you haven't yet but wish to subscribe, then you can do so [here](#) or [contact](#) me.

Thank you all for reading, and have a Happy New Year. We hope for an end to the pandemic, but it won't end until it ends, so keep the faith in the meantime and stay safe. As with art-photography, that will only happen if we make it happen.

See you all in 2021.

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Photographer

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