

Photography

# Monochrome vs. colour

June 2, 2018 | Charles T. Low

## It isn't as black-and-white as it seems

We know the standard arguments from colour photographers, which include:

- that we see in colour, and
- that it looks fabulous!

And although colour photography may, more often than not, be *easier* than monochrome, in terms of creating a pleasing image - "pleasing" by varying definitions, of course:

- where is it written that good image-making must be *difficult*, and
- why would "difficult" axiomatically *serve the image*?
- at photography's beginning, colour was not even technically possible, but where is it written that a good image requires technological *nostalgia*?

If I subscribe to any personal photographic paradigm, it is that *everything serves only the image*. I eschew purism concerning things like film vs. digital, unedited vs. edited, "faithful" vs. abstract (and "faithful", in the photographic context, can rarely be anything other than in quotes), or monochrome vs. colour, completely cognizant of how vigorously some disagree. None of those things, however, can I connect very directly with making the best possible images.

I confess at the start to a longstanding preference for colour work. I like the pop, the dazzle. Nonetheless, from time to time an image arises which renders particularly well in monochrome. Peter Bryenton's two versions of his image illustrate the conundrum very well, providing ample fodder for a compare-and-contrast analysis.

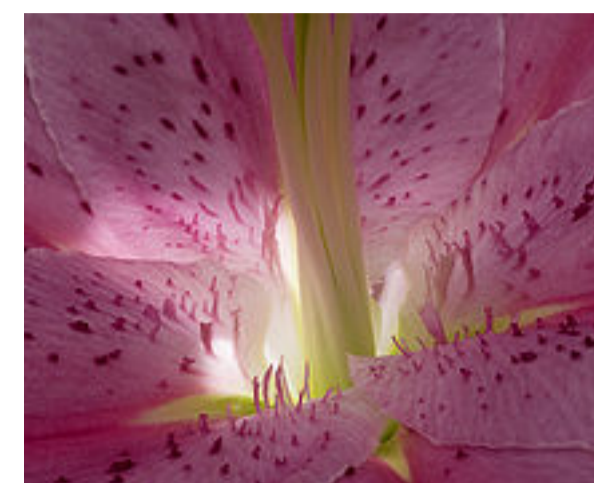


Let's first just analyze why this image pleases viewers at all, acknowledging that such explanations are often to some degree retrospective to an initial visceral appeal.

This image contains shapes within shapes, arranged with considerable horizontal symmetry, connoting solidity. If the rule-of-thirds applies here, it does not apply side-to-side (well - it might, but in a mirroring style), but interestingly it clearly applies top-to-bottom, in that the transverse thirds-lines run almost directly through i) the bottom of the upper, smaller inset rectangle and ii) the centre of the dial. The rectangles amplify that sense of stability, softened however by their rounded corners and by the gentle arc of the top of the pump. Note also the subtle convergence, towards the top, of the vertical lines: stable ... but not dauntingly stable!



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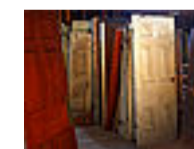
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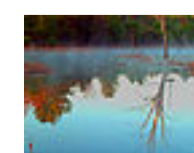
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Inside the big rectangle lies a circle (of numerals, a punctuated circle, but a circle nevertheless), a more dynamic shape, although still self-confined, but with a gauge-needle to anchor it. The entire structure is worn, rusted, faded and marred. Editing the busy background has caused it to recede, visually, reducing unproductive distraction from the main theme.

What effect the trade names and other writing creates I will leave to others. The upper rectangle does need content, and the text (and type-face) need not signify anything other than the literal subject material itself. Good photographs typically need:

- good composition, and
- a subject which is tangibly intriguing.

When both factors work together is when the magic happens.

All of those design elements harmonize beautifully, and evoke a (probably mythical) simpler, more gentle time. Other viewers will certainly bring alternative or additional insights.

Note incidentally how a skilled practitioner makes such a careful composition with what was presumably a fairly quick cell-phone exposure.

Upon seeing the two images of this ancient gas pump, the colour iteration immediately drew my eye more than the monochrome. It came therefore as a bit of a shock to find that my own circle of advisors generally preferred the monochrome image. It had seemed to me so obvious: colour added such vibrancy! Why listen to a chamber orchestra when you can have the full symphony?

Then I recalled the several musical compositions for which I prefer the smaller-ensemble version. True: any flaws in the performance, individual or collective, become more audible. But when performed exquisitely, on both technical and artistic levels, there is a purity and an intimacy to chamber music which is possible in no other way.

Perhaps, I thought, that at least partly explains monochromatic photography. The composition and light must stand on their own merits, *without the safety net of colour*. A pleasing monochrome photograph might arguably require a construction three times more skilful than one in colour, so we would hope that finely-wrought monochrome work might more often be of a higher artist calibre.

Still I wondered: in *this* instance, what might lean people towards the monochromatic version of this decrepit petrol pump?

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Well, what primarily draws the eye in the *colour* version? Many will say "the rust". The colour itself is gorgeous, and with it the photographer need not work much harder to convey "antique". The oxidizing enclosure leads the eye around the dramatic perimeter fairly early on, before allowing it to settle back into the interior subject matter.

What draws the eye in the monochrome version? Many will say, in marked disjunction from the colour rendition, "the circular scale". How amazing that the entire initial focus of the image changes as we view it in monochrome. The outer casing of the pump has simply vanished from consciousness, refocussing the eye on what has all along been the visual centre of the image. We experience less background distraction. (Does it matter, in emphasizing the "old" concept, that the now-more-evident scale is analogue?) Decay remains a prominent theme, now however requiring greater subtleties of texture and tone (monochrome often allowing, as well as needing, a greater tonal range than colour). Having less to work with reveals more (like chamber music), especially in the hands of a master.



If not viewed side-by-side, one might not appreciate that they originate from the same exposure.

The scales begin to fall. I understand better why some of my own favourite images are monochrome. Less can be more. Harder isn't automatically better ... and yet it can lead the artist in that direction. Colour can be beautiful ... and yet sometimes, simply distracting.

Both versions excel. May I leave it to the imagination as to which treatment I prefer?

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**Peter Bryenton** - introduced in my recent blog on photographers who have influenced me - photographs in colour as well as in monochrome, often preferring the latter (or infra-red). After a career in photography starting in his teenage years, and having worn many hats including those of photographer and teacher, as well as years spent in lighting for BBC television, he is free in retirement to follow his own artistic vision.

Check out more of Peter Bryenton's work on [Instagram](#).

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Peter's description of his **editing** process:

I edited the colour iPhone image using my standard process (mostly with the SnapSeed app), which is to increase some of the basic parameters such as saturation and tonal values to achieve a look which pleases me. I applied selected digital colour filters in several steps, then readjusted the white areas.

The final edit of the black and white version includes altered tonal values to simulate the style of print I would have made using multigrade paper and other techniques in my darkroom. Essentially I increased the peak whites and reduce the pure blacks as much as possible without losing detail. The low, mid and high tones can be manipulated within the same app.

For black and white photographs I usually apply some "sharpening" to simulate a granular, filmic look, using the SnapSeed's structure/detail options, which are more subtle than a "grain" effect.

I always check screen settings on mobile devices by displaying a grey scale step wedge before making any monochrome adjustments.

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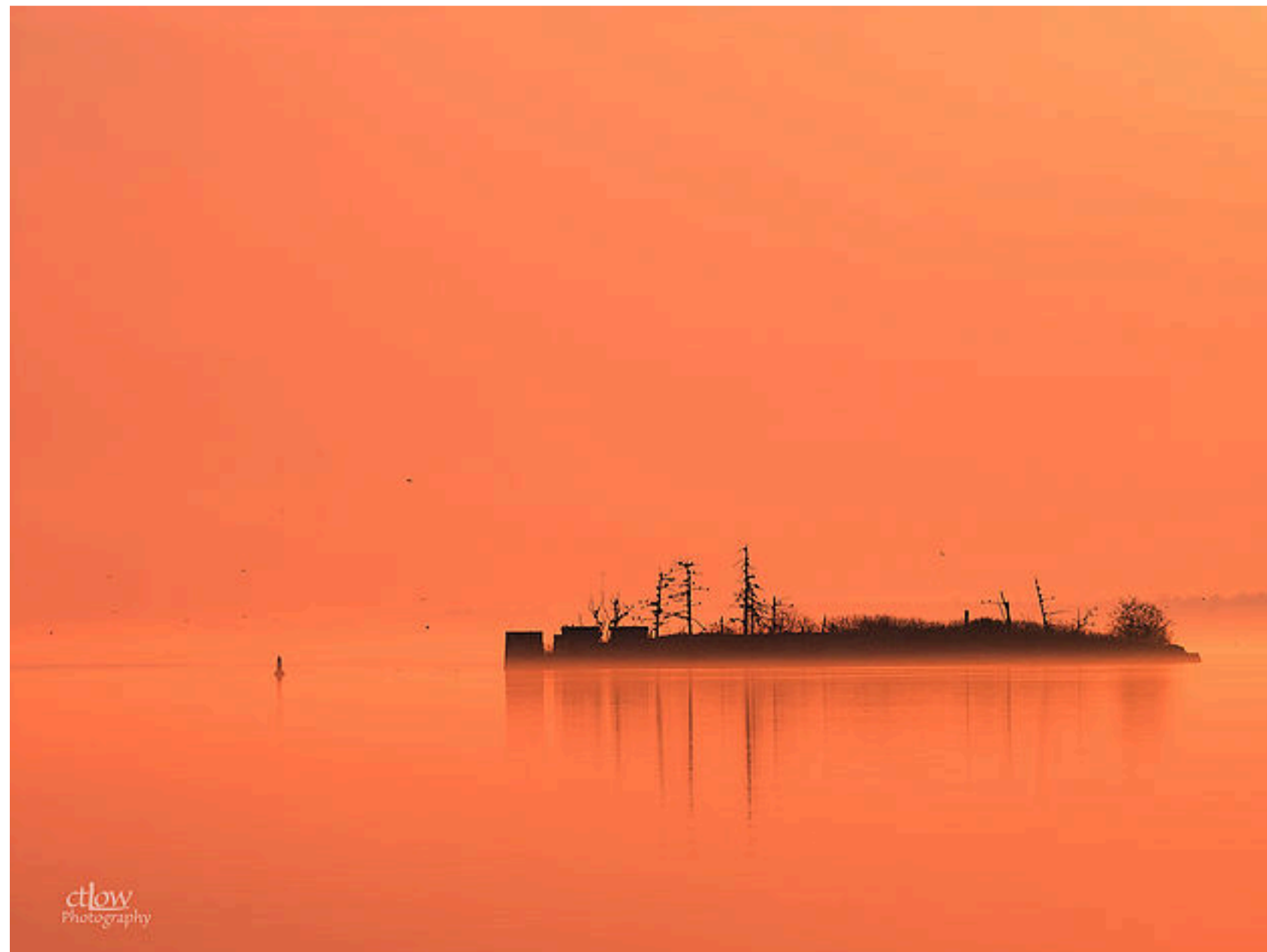
Thank you so much for reading.

**Charles T. Low  
Photographer**



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P.S. I've been photographing this island since 2006, often at dawn. Recently I got this:



But an early monochrome version has a very different but quite strong character of its own:



Which one do you prefer?



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