

# **THE ART OF BLACK & WHITE**

## **WORKSHOP NOTES**

### **SLIDE 1 - Welcome**

Good evening.

Hopefully we will all gain something from this evening's workshop although it is quite daunting seeing some considerably more skilled black & white photographers than me here tonight.

This can work to our advantage however as the program becomes more interactive later in the evening.

We will be looking at a number of images some will be mine. They will be used for illustrative purposes, and I'm not showing them as perfect examples of the art. I don't expect you to necessarily like them.

Please remember that people have written entire books on this subject, so we are clearly only able to scratch the surface tonight and I may well have overlooked key factors in my hasty preparations or ignorance! Do speak up if you spot the obvious omissions or mistakes.

OK so let's begin.

I may well unintentionally use mix the terms 'black & white', 'mono', 'monochrome', for tonight's purposes they all mean the same.

### **SLIDE 2 - Workshop Objectives**

This sounds rather conceited of me, but I'm hoping that by exploring black & white photography we can be mutually encouraged to extend ourselves with this genre, which is by its very nature creative, to produce more dramatic and artistic images that will stand out from the norm.

Let's see where this exploration takes us.

Oh and this is not a one way street. Feel free to chip in although I don't think we should get bogged down with discussions about the best way to do this or that. Alternative methods can of course be mentioned but let's not forget that there are a thousand and one ways of achieving any desired result using modern software.

### **SLIDE 3 - What we are going to attempt to cover**

### **SLIDE 4 - Examples**

The following images I hope will give some idea of what can be achieved. I have many very creative artists that I follow but it would be impossible to

show any more than a few images, and for simplicity these are all from the same author.

I'm not expecting you to like them necessarily or to comment on them but we'll look at one or two again later as we continue to explore the genre.

## **SLIDES 5 - 19 - Images**

### **SLIDE 20 - What makes a good black & white image**

I have identified some elements we need to master in order to make a good black and white image.

Most these will be found in varying degrees within successful images.

I'm sure you can come up with others but most are likely to be subsidiaries of these main elements which are ...

### **SLIDE 21 - Composition**

You may be surprised to see this one up first but let's face it a badly composed image is just that however skilfully you have edited your conversion.

The best photos be they colour or black and white have an underlying sense of purpose - a hint that the photographer deliberately captured the scene in a particular way rather than by chance.

The image has structure and order i.e. it has good composition. It is not a snapshot.

So the normal codes of composition that the judges bang on about should be there, although we will look at breaking the rules later.

### **SLIDE 22 - Shadows**

remember when shooting black and white is that shadows have an out-sized impact.

They are no longer just darker regions of a photograph – they are major elements of composition, and sometimes your subject itself.

Your treatment of shadows in black and white photography affects every other aspect of how a photo appears.

Are the shadows black without any details? That signals a feeling of intensity and emptiness.

Or, on the other hand, if your shadows are subtle and detailed, it may make for a more complex photograph overall.

Note that nothing about black and white photography requires regions of pure black in order to look good (or pure white, for that matter).

It is a bit of a myth that you need the complete range from deep shadows to crisp highlights before a black and white photo is optimal. JUDGES MAY NOT AGREE

Instead, just do what looks the best to you, but keep an eye out for the shadows in your frame.

They often have a stronger “pull” in black and white than in colour, and your composition may need to change accordingly.

### **SLIDE 23 - Contrast**

Contrast matters in black and white photography because of the message it sends.

A photo with high contrast conveys a sense of dynamic intensity – often, again, because of the dark shadows. This is why photographers often add contrast to monochromatic images. It helps them stand out.

Low contrast photos don't attract as much attention, but their softer, muted quality can work equally well.

The key is that a photo's level of contrast needs to make sense for your subject – which is something you can finesse, at least to a degree, in post-production.

Perhaps it is a mistake to photograph a gentle, spring day with intense contrast that distracts from your mood.

Likewise, if you are taking monochrome photos of a powerful landscape, high contrast is a natural choice in order to make the subject stand out.

## **SLIDE 24 - Tones (Tonal Contrast)**

Not all photographers use the word “tone” in the same way. Here, you can take it to mean *the underlying brightness, darkness, and shades of grey that appear in an image*.

Tones are the cornerstone of every black and white image.

If you have ever heard the phrase “high-key” or “low-key” in photography, you’ve probably seen examples of tones taken to the extreme.

Although most photos are neither especially bright nor especially dark – they’re somewhere in between – you still need to pay attention to tones when you take a photo. That’s because, just like contrast, tones can send a powerful message about your photo’s mood.

Even tiny variations in the tones you capture can swing a photo’s emotions significantly.

Personally, I like the appearance of dark, moody photographs but the specific tones that work the best depend upon the scene you are photographing.

The most important thing to remember is this: The tones of your image – whether dark or bright – should harmonize with the character of the subject itself. Use them deliberately to tell the story you have in mind.

## **SLIDE 25 - Shapes**

Every photo is a collection of shapes, simple or complex.

When you remove colour from your toolbox, shapes become even more important as a part of the story you tell.

People are drawn to shapes automatically. If there is no colour to an object, the only way we recognize it is by its shape.

Imagine a monochromatic photo of a lamp, silhouetted. The only tones in the photo could be white and black. There are no shadows or texture to indicate what the photograph shows. But is there any doubt that you are looking at a lamp?

Shapes anchor and simplify a photograph. Some famous locations are photographed by thousands of people each year simply because they contain a mountain or river with a pleasing shape.

With black and white photography, there's no colour to make an image more familiar (or more abstract, if that's your goal). So, shapes are especially important – they're one of the primary ways for a viewer to make sense of a photograph at all.

### **SLIDE 26 - Texture**

While shapes create the “big picture” of an image, texture fills in the rest.

And, like all the elements of black and white photography we have covered so far, the textures you capture have the power to affect a photo's mood and emotions.

From smooth pebbles to coarse grass, and sleek aluminium to dull rust, texture is the foundation of an image's personality.

It is very tricky to take harsh photos of a gentle stream, for example, in large part because of the water's soft texture. (But if you *did* have such a goal, you might want to boost contrast and capture deep shadows – balancing out the soft texture by making the overall photo more intense.)

When you can't rely on colour to form the emotional backbone of an image, texture is even more crucial. It simply has a major impact on the way your black and white photos feel.

### **SLIDE 27 - Emotion or mood**

At some level, emotion is the most important part of photography

All the elements we have discussed so far are important primarily because they are tools of emotion; they help you pin down the mood and message of your black and white photos.

Emotion is not some separate variable that you need to get right in order to capture good black and white photos. Instead, it is the culmination of the tools we have discussed so far.

Used well, the other six elements of black and white photography let you sculpt your emotional message in a way that resonates with viewers and shows them something worth seeing.

**Slides 28 - 33** Let's go back and see which of the above 'tools' Tony Sellen used in creating some of his images.

### **SLIDE 34 - When to create a mono image**

Black and white images can be very powerful, but colour lends itself to great shots too.

Which should you use?

It's a question that doesn't have a right or wrong answer.

So, how do you decide when to convert an image to black and white, and when to stick to colour?

Since photography grew from black and white, converting an image to monochrome makes the shot appear timeless.

I like this statement ....

*"When you photograph people in colour, you photograph their clothes. But when you photograph people in black and white, you photograph their souls."*

OK so that is being very specific but you get the gist.

We see in colour, so when we see a black and white image, it gives us a reason to pause and consider an image a little bit longer.

But, colour can be a big compositional tool, is playful and fun and leaves more of the details of the moment they happen.

Both colour and black and white have their advantages. Which one do you choose?

Every photographer may have a bit different process for making that decision, but here are five reasons that suggest an image should be presented in black and white.

## **SLIDE 35 - When colour isn't a strength**

Colour can be a great compositional tool.

When the colour of the subject contrasts with the surroundings, the viewer's eyes are drawn right to the subject. Using complimentary or contrasting colours within the same frame allows the viewer's eye to take in the entire frame.

But, when colour isn't a strong point in the image, you should consider converting it to black and white.

A shot with similar colour tonal range may look better in black and white. If the colour isn't jumping out and grabbing your eye, view the photo in black and white and you might engage with the image more.

Colour is at its best when the light is good. Black and white will have a distinct advantage when the weather is indifferent.

A bad weather forecast signals a great time to set out to take black and white images.

## **SLIDE 36 - When the image has odd hues**

Sometimes, odd colour hues can be distracting; such as over-the-top coloured lights at a wedding, a flash bounced off a coloured wall or even red skin tones from heat or embarrassment. Whatever the reason, there are colours in your shot that aren't quite right.

Switching to black and white while editing a RAW file allows you to easily adjust the lightness of that inaccurate colour with sliders. So, it's easy to tone down facial redness or a blue light cast so it's not darker than it should be in the final black and white shot.

## **SLIDE 37 - When black and White conveys the right emotion**

Colours have long been associated with certain emotions.

Yellow tends to lift the spirits, green is relaxing and pink has ties with love.

Use of colour can bring out these emotions for the viewer. That's why golden hour images are so popular—the orange hue instantly creates warm emotions.

Colourful images also have a more playful feel.

But what if you are photographing a green object, and you don't want to portray a feeling of relaxation, for example? Converting the image to black and white is a viable solution.

Black and white photographs portray different emotions than colourful ones.

With more contrast and none of the pre-set emotions associated with colours, some images bring out greater emotion, or perhaps the right emotion, when they are in black and white.

### **SLIDE 38 - When shapes and patterns play a bigger role than colour**

Colour is often one of the first things that draws the eye in. We're naturally drawn to brighter colours. This can often be a useful element to use in photography.

Photographers can use colour to highlight an object, or even make it blend in.

Images that prioritize shape and pattern are often better in black and white because you then easily eliminate the distraction of colour.

Photographers can also manipulate a black and white image to draw a pattern out even more—like when the repeating objects aren't exactly the same colour.

### **SLIDE 39 - Photo Tate Modern**

Can you imagine this in colour? There is no way it would carry the same impact.

### **SLIDE 40 - When you want the viewer to look a little closer**

We see in colour, it's as simple as that.



Since our brains are so used to seeing everything in colour, a black and white image often makes us pause.

That quality often draws the viewer in a bit more.

Converting an image to black and white can be a powerful tool for getting the viewer to stop and look a little closer.

Black and white photography eliminates the distraction of colour, which often gets us looking at the shot a little longer, and looking at different elements as well.

We can typically use black and white to eliminate the confusion of a colourful and busy background.

### **SLIDE 41 - Chamonix Photo Colour**

Take a look at this image pretty much straight out of the camera, although I have pulled back some of the highlights in white T shirts etc.

It was taken during a trip down to Chamonix during the summer where this guy's girlfriend is eagerly welcoming him home, close to the cut off time, as a finisher in the Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc.

171km through 3 countries involving climbs totalling 10,000 metres. ( The start was 6pm on the Friday and the cut off was 5pm Sunday - the last finisher came in with 2 minutes to spare - this guy had about 15 minutes left on the clock - oh and the finisher completed the course in under 21 hours). But I digress.

What we have here then is an image with a busy and distracting background, poor composition in a grab shot, (I will persevere with primes), and lots of emotion.

It's a colourful scene but not one that works for me, so I set about a mono conversion ...

### **SLIDE 36 - Chamonix Mono**

So I have used a pretty severe crop to isolate my main subjects where the emotion is to be found.

The distracting writing on the banner has been cloned out and the background heavily burnt in to minimise its impact. There is still work to be done ( I find the baby in the pushchair a distraction) but hopefully you can see a benefit from a black and white conversion.

### **SLIDE 43 - How do we create a good black and white image**

Do as much as possible in camera. No different to colour.

But if possible take RAW images not black & white jpegs.

It is better to deliberately take an image for black & white conversion than to convert a disappointing colour image

### **SLIDE 44 - Learn to see in black & white**

Remember the factors already discussed that go to make a good b & w image

Look for contrast, patterns, shadows, shapes and textures etc.

Use your camera to help you 'see'

Most digital cameras allow you to change the jpeg picture settings to mono which will then enable you to see a mono image in an EVF or on the rear screen in preview mode. But still shoot in RAW.

Recognise when the use of graduated and neutral density filters can extend the exposure time and add drama to skies and water.

Poor light or the sunset or sunrise that failed to deliver no longer an excuse to pack up and go home.

Literally at any time of day, in any weather, in any light, you can find simple graphic situations that will make great b & w images.

Images can be bright and airy, dark and mysterious, rich in detail, or stripped down to the most basic elements.

B & W allows a huge range of emotions to be expressed.

As with any other discipline start simple and work up to complexity as your editing and expressive skills develop.

## **SLIDE 45 - tonal contrast in colour**

Try to recognise tonal contrasts in colours and where tonal contrasts don't exist.

## **SLIDE 46 - Rust**

Note how the rusty red and green are virtually indistinguishable in b & w. Learn how to change the hues to create the tonal contrast.

## **SLIDE 47 - Understand the Zone System**

The Zone System was developed by the late Ansel Adams and Fred Archer. Basically it was a system used to meter and continue on in the dark room when developing images, by breaking down the exposure into 11 zones ranging from 0 - pure black to 10 - pure white, with each zone representing one stop of exposure. **SLIDE 48**

**SLIDE 49** - A guide defining each zone.

**SLIDE 50** - How your meter works. Always setting the scene to 18% mid-grey or Zone 5 in the Zone System. **See SLIDE 51** for diagram.

**SLIDE 52** - Exposure compensation.

Now that you have the information, how do you use it?! You know that your camera is metering for Zone V, or middle-gray, now consider your subject. How light or dark is it? If you were photographing a bride's white dress, that would be very bright with texture; so going by the chart that would fall into Zone VII or VIII, which makes the exposure compensation required for correct exposure PLUS two or three stops (the difference between Zone V and where your subject should fall).

**SLIDE 53** - Snow scene example

**SLIDE 53** - The Zone System in editing

In the wet darkroom the zone system was used to identify areas of the print that would need to be burnt in or dodged and by how much time during the exposure.

This is not required in digital editing but the principles can still be employed by printing out a basic image and then determining if the print overall needs darkening or lightening and marking up where you need to dodge and burn and by how much to achieve the result you are looking for.

**SLIDE 54** Noyer original and greyscale

**SLIDE 55** Noyer Final.

**SLIDE 56 - St Florentine original**

**SLIDE 57** St Florentine Final

**SLIDE 58** Fingrinhoe original

**SLIDE 59** Fingrinhoe Final

**SLIDE 60** Canary Wharf original

**SLIDE 61** Canary Wharf Final

**SLIDE 62** Orford Ness original

**SLIDE 63** Orford Ness Final

**SLIDE 64 - Breaking the Rules**

Are there any rules or should I say conventions?

In my book no but others will disagree.

Much depends on your intentions.

Work for competitions will do better if conventions observed.

**SLIDE 65 - Competition Pics**

All the usual rules will have to apply here if you want good marks.

For b & w a good range of tones from black to white

No burnt out highlights or blocked shadows

No bright spots.

No dark spots in high key images

No bright spots on the margins

etc. etc.

Still room for originality but within those confines.

**SLIDE 66** - Photo 'The Warm Up'

**SLIDE 67** - For yourself and others to enjoy

Here for me aesthetics rule.

Do the following images work?

Probably will do less well or fail in competition. Does it matter if I and others like them?

**SLIDE 68/69** - Tyne Cot

Emotion. An extreme edit to some up my feelings whilst at Tyne Cot. 'Dark Days'

**SLIDE 70** - Boulogne Cathedral

Reverse image to aid composition - away from reality

**SLIDE 71** - Model shot

Natural light day. Girl in doorway to a black hole, harsh external light. No bracketing. Burnt highlights. Imaged also softened in post. Published in international Leica magazine. Hammered at critique evening!

**SLIDE 72/73** - 'Gis a Bite'

Brick Lane snap shot. A failure 'almost' rescued by heavy grain added in post.

**SLIDE 74/75** - Aiguille du Midi

Getting away with a very severe crop in mono. Adding grain to add impression of sharpness.  
Would not have worked in colour.

## **SLIDE 76 - The creative process**

I'm not going into great detail tonight and recommend that you watch any of the hundreds of tutorials available on the web for details.

I can recommend Julianne Kost the Adobe Evangelist (<http://jkost.com>) for any of the Adobe products.

All of the other Software companies have extensive tutorials available via their websites.

All RAW converters be it Lightroom, Adobe Camera RAW, ON1, Affinity etc. all work in a similar fashion with similar controls.

For simplicity tonight I'll be using Lightroom but Adobe Camera RAW is almost identical for the most part.

We will also look at some add ons, notably NIK Software.  
B & W conversion is in its own right a creative process

Because b & w conversion has already escaped from reality, further creativity has no limits.

Here's where we run into trouble.

1001 ways to convert colour to b & w. Everybody has their favourite method.

Firstly do not just convert to greyscale. This process destroys all colour information and restricts further adjustment.

Always work with a copy not your original.

Use non-destructive edits where possible e.g. Snapshots and or virtual copies in Lightroom or layers in Photoshop.

Note that extreme selective edits are possible in Photoshop but they are permanent unless you are prepared to go back using the history option to start again at an earlier point in the edit.

I'm going to assume from now on that you are shooting in RAW.

Use any presets that are available in your software to search for creative ideas.

Look at image websites to get inspiration and to fathom out how various compositional 'tools' have been used to create images.

I can recommend '1x' (<https://1x.com/>) and 500px (<https://web.500px.com/>)

Look at some of the many books of images and use in the same way.

One of my favourites is 'Pictures on a Page' by Harold Evans.

([https://www.amazon.co.uk/Pictures-Page-Photo-journalism-Graphics-Picture/dp/B00121X9IG/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1549639654&sr=8-2&keywords=pictures+on+a+page](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Pictures-Page-Photo-journalism-Graphics-Picture/dp/B00121X9IG/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1549639654&sr=8-2&keywords=pictures+on+a+page))