

The Minimalist Photographer

Steve Johnson

rockynook

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Introduction

A short while after I first became interested in photography I came up against a problem that almost made me put my camera away forever. I have come to realize through countless discussions with many others that I am far from unique in having this problem and that it is very common among those who took or want to take photography seriously. The problem can be summed up in two words: “What now?” Although I knew that I wanted to make images, and the camera seemed like the ideal tool, I could not generate any real enthusiasm.

To find photographic fulfillment, I bought camera equipment and photography magazines, read technical discussions by famous photographers, and attended every photography exhibition within a fifty-mile radius of wherever I was at the time. This did little more than fill up my camera bag and bookshelf and deplete my wallet. None of this advanced my photography in any meaningful way.

After becoming competent with a new lens or learning a new technique, I always found myself returning to the question, “What now?” I gradually came to realize that the answer did not lie in acquiring more equipment or knowledge but rather in rethinking my relationship with photography. To cut a long story short, I realized that I needed to bring a philosophy to my photography rather than approach it as a blank slate.

This is where minimalism comes in. There are many definitions of minimalism, all revolving around the idea of simplification and how best to achieve it. This is true whether the sub-

ject being discussed is fine art, lifestyle, or just about anything else. All these have one thing in common, though, and that is that the process is not random, or simply a matter of getting rid of a certain percentage of something and hoping for a worthwhile result. The objective is always to remove the non-essential in order to get to what is essential.

It is easy to see how a minimalist philosophy can be applied to an area such as composition as it dovetails perfectly with the idea that visual clutter should always be reduced as far as possible. Less obvious areas where a minimalist approach would serve the photographer well are equipment choices, an understanding of the history of photography, and even the possible future of photography. I do not think that there is any aspect of photography or the development of the photographer that does not benefit from this reductionist approach.

The upshot of this approach is that, for me, “What now?” has been replaced by a different question, “What next?” I now have a half dozen photography projects that I am enthusiastically tackling at any given time. The realization that I had to bring a philosophy and a belief system to photography, and that the best philosophy was minimalism, underpins this book, and it is that idea I am excited to be able to share with you.

At the end of each chapter you will find a small gallery of images. Each gallery is based on a theme that is intended to teach, to inspire, and, last but not least, to simply be enjoyed.



Chapter 1

You

The more you know about yourself as a photographer—your preferences, your motivations, and your goals—the better your photography will be. Here we will take a look at these issues so that you can see the importance of defining them for yourself.

So You Want to Take Better Photographs

By far, the most profound change that occurred over the past 20 years was the shift from film to digital. The appearance of the first consumer-level digital cameras in the mid-1990s really did change everything. Producing photographs went from being an expensive pastime to something that was basically free after the initial equipment was purchased. The cost of early digital cameras was very high, and the image quality was low when compared with film cameras, but this is no longer the case.

I now take for granted that I can take 50 or 500 shots of a subject, whereas with film I may have limited myself two or three at most. The extra cost is nothing more than a miniscule amount of depreciation on the camera and on the rechargeable battery—a couple of cents against tens or even hundreds of dollars. This reduced cost of digital photography has made it much easier to experiment with the medium and has allowed many people to produce images who could not have afforded to do so with film. Another big technological advance is the modern-day ability to instantly see the result of a shot on the camera's LCD screen, rather



than having to wait for it to be returned from the photo lab. Adjustments to an exposure, and other on-the-spot modifications based on viewing the original, can now be implemented without an intervening period of days or weeks.

Since the cost of producing a perfectly serviceable photograph is only a fraction of what it used to be, and experimentation is now within reach of just about everyone, there are a lot of people taking photographs who otherwise would not have been. This includes, among other loosely defined groups, thousands of people taking photographs of their daily lives as well as visual artists who can now afford to use a camera for something other than simply recording the work they produced in other mediums. For the first time, photography has become

a serious medium for those whose background is not primarily photography.

Of course, the digital revolution has influenced more than just camera technology. The computer has now replaced the darkroom. What used to require a small room, lots of chemicals, and lots of waiting for stuff to happen can now be accomplished on the same machine that most of us use for our taxes and letter writing: the computer. Of course, specialized software is required, but this can be had for free. Now on a computer, anyone can do much more to an image than was ever possible in even the best-equipped darkroom. Even more amazing is the fact that this often involves no extra financial outlay. It is easily possible for one to have purchased a smartphone and a computer without even a thought about photography, yet they will have all the tools required to produce stunning images. Anyone can make a photograph, from choosing the subject to shoot to doing the final editing. Sometimes it is easy to forget just how far things have come.

In the days of film, one of two things was likely to happen: a print would end up in an album and be shown to a couple of dozen people. Or the print might be placed in a shoe box, or possibly an old box file, and it would be lucky to ever see the light of day again. Today, websites like Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, and more recently Google+ provide virtual spaces where anyone can publish their images and receive feedback from photographers and non-photographers alike.

Historically, for a photograph to have appeared in a print publication, other than in rare cases, it had to be approved by someone, probably a picture editor. The Internet dynamic is completely different—photographers decide for themselves what they publish and exactly how they publish it. With a little self-promotion, it is possible for unknown photographers with something interesting to share and a feel for the Internet as a medium to have thousands, or

even tens of thousands, of people viewing their work on a regular basis.

The importance of this change from a virtual dictatorship to a democracy cannot be overstated. Photographers can publish what they want, and others can decide whether it has merit or not. This situation may pass the test of time, but I'm not overly optimistic. I suspect that a new class of gatekeepers will emerge, albeit a less rigid one than in the pre-digital days. At this moment in photography history, though, things could not be better for the photographer who wants to find and connect with an audience. The other thing that this democratization of photography has led to is an explosion of styles and approaches. If you have something different to communicate, there has never been a better time to do it, because photography is no longer the backward-looking sibling of the other, more enlightened, visual arts. This really is the best time to be a photographer.

Why Do You Want to Take Photographs?

At first, this may seem like a question with an obvious answer, rather like asking someone why they want to drink coffee. But this is one of those questions that seems to get harder the more it is grappled with. Let's return to the coffee example for a second. There are several possible, easily defined reasons why someone may want to drink coffee. These reasons include taste, stimulative effect, and possibly social contact. Now try answering, with some level of clarity, the question of why you want to take photographs, and then write down your answers. The good news is that any effort you put into answering this question at any time during your photographic career will pay for itself many times over.

This is my most recent attempt to answer the question: I am obsessed with aesthetics and composition. The camera and digital editing

Any effort you put into answering the 'why' question at any time during your photographic career will pay for itself many times over.

tools provide a means to capture and manipulate lines, tones, colors, and shapes very quickly and relatively easily. Photography allows me to cover much more ground than any other visual medium. I am interested in showing the connection between the photograph and human emotion. More specifically, I want to experiment with how much information can be removed from an image before it loses emotional impact. Allied to this, I want to study why contrast seems to be the most important quality when it comes to eliciting an emotional response. I enjoy exploring the relationship between the logical and the emotional, and the camera is the best tool for this process.

The less generic and more personal the response, the more useful it is likely to be. I have no desire to go all Zen at this point, but the answers should come from within and should be *your* answers. While you work on answering this question, forget my opinions and the opinions of writers and photographers that you admire. For the moment, it really is all about you.

One other bit of advice is to make your answers as open, as opposed to closed, as possible. Think in terms of exploration, not being the best or getting to some imaginary winning post.

If I had taken the time to ask this question of myself when I first started out, the answer would have been along these lines: I want to find the most beautiful scenes, people, and objects and produce the best possible two-dimensional representations of them.

This answer is a lot less open ended than my current working one, and consequently it would be a lot less useful. It is also much more generic, and while it would be better than nothing, it is nowhere near as useful as my current answer.

Of course there are many possible answers; the important thing is to be honest. The worst trap to fall into is writing something down because you think it is more worthy than what you really want to use the camera for.



Here are just a few possible reasons for wanting to pick up a camera:

- ▶ Record family life
- ▶ Record another interest, such as a sport
- ▶ Sell stuff on an auction website
- ▶ Build a record of beautiful things
- ▶ Understand visual language
- ▶ Explore artistic concepts
- ▶ Expand personal horizons
- ▶ Supply images for a website or social media page
- ▶ Spend time with your photographer friends

Ideally, the question of why you want to take photographs should be a fundamental part of your ongoing internal dialog about photography. Every image you make changes you, usually by a tiny amount, but occasionally by a massive amount. These changes accumulate and will cause you to periodically revise how you think about your own photography.

The question of why you want to take photographs should be a fundamental part of your ongoing internal dialog about photography.

However dedicated you are to photography—or even if you’re obsessed with it—there will be times when pointing a camera at stuff no longer excites you and editing your images becomes more of a chore than an exercise in discovery. We all have days like this, but if these days start to stretch into weeks or months, then it is a fair bet that you need to take another look at your reason for taking pictures. If it’s just for a day or two, though, do something other than photography if at all possible. We all get jaded from time to time.

If this whole approach seems a bit daunting, another exercise to try is to look at images on the Internet, or in books, museums, and galleries; find photographs that appeal to you and then find out a little about the photographer and his or her motivations. In addition, you can look for common features in photographs that appeal to you. A quick indication of your artistic preferences can be gleaned by determining whether it is the subject matter that appeals to you or the use of color, strong lines, or other compositional elements. This exercise will aid you toward expressing why you want to take photographs. It may take a little time, but that is perfectly okay; this is not a race.

I suspect that most people who buy a camera and then leave it at the back of a drawer or let it gather dust after taking a few dozen photographs do so because they don’t take time to address this fundamental question.

What Type of Photographer Are You Now?

What was the first thing that came to mind when you read this question? At the risk of stating the obvious, if you like to photograph landscapes, you would probably have answered that you are a landscape or possibly a nature photographer, and if you enjoy making images of people, then you might have answered that

you are a portrait photographer. The problem with this type of labeling is that it can be self-limiting. If you think of yourself as a nature photographer, for instance, you might stop yourself from seeing the slightly less obvious beauty of urban and industrial environments.

A better approach is to categorize the type of photographer you are in a way that doesn’t restrict the subject matter. Professional photographers often prefer to use terms such as *fine art photographer*, *stock photographer*, or other terms that define the market they are selling to.

Another way photographers define themselves that is less common is by using a philosophical or artistic label. Minimalist, experimental, and even abstract are among the more obvious examples. Whereas more commercial photographers are likely to use market-based terminology, more academic-minded or, for that matter, hobbyist photographers are better served by using the philosophical approach. The reason is simple—this method of labeling provides a lens through which just about anything in the visual world can be understood.

I call myself a minimalist photographer for several reasons, but the main reason is that it forces me to focus on the essential and find ways to either lose, or at least minimize, everything else. The label helps me achieve what I want to achieve. If I am struggling with an assignment, it is because of a lack of clarity. I solve the problem just by the act of thinking about what type of photographer I am. If I called myself a portrait photographer and was having trouble with a shoot, say, of street photography, reminding myself that I was a portrait photographer wouldn’t help me nearly as much.

It may seem that I have belabored this point, but it is important, and as much as we may have problems with labels, they are important. A label communicates a lot of information in short-hand form to other photographers, viewers, and clients, but most important, to ourselves. Give yourself the wrong label, and you could be

fighting it for the rest of your photographic life. Choose a label that expands your horizons and provides clarity, and it can be one of your biggest assets.

What Type of Photographer Will You Become?

The short answer to this question is that no one knows, and other than in rare cases, that includes you. That said, certain changes and shifts on your photographic journey are likely. You will see things very differently after spending time with a camera. This is a continual process; it never stops. Photographers who have worked for half a century still discover new things regarding their relationship to the art.

I know that in a year's time I will see differently than I do now. The change may be a massive, fundamental one, or it may be of a smaller, more incremental nature. I know this much based on past experience: A year has not gone by in which my photography has remained static. The thing that keeps me going day after day is not knowing where this journey will end up. If I knew, there would be little point to continuing with it.

Photography writing tends to treat the art as a top-down process. The assumption is that there is this finite amount of technical and artistic knowledge required, and when you have this knowledge, you are a master. You can then call yourself a photographer and charge money for your services, with no need to do more than keep up-to-date with equipment advances. This approach is fundamentally wrong. Photography is a bottom-up process; it is about learning from the past, experimenting, making mistakes, and heading toward an unmapped future. This approach produces great photographers.

Temperament will play a huge part in determining your photographic future. Possibly the

hardest work that you will have to do as a photographer is to mesh your art with your own nature. If you are easily bored and always looking for novelty in other parts of your life, then traditional landscape photography, for example, may not be for you, because it requires a high level of patience. For this type of person, the sheer unpredictability of street photography may be a much better fit. I may be stating the obvious,

but the fact that many photography courses and instruction books leave the photographer's temperament out of the equation never ceases to amaze me.

I do feel that photographers should explore as many different avenues as their temperament allows and I generally am opposed to the idea that specialization is a good thing. In fact, I think that specialization should be avoided for as long as possible, or failing that, the photographer should switch genres regularly to keep the eye and the mind fresh. Becoming a photographer is about developing a way of seeing. Ultimately, this way of seeing is something that should be applicable to just about anything in the visual world.

The rush to specialization is largely driven by the mistaken belief that specialization and style are intimately connected. Photographers are often told that they have to develop a style and that the developed style comes as a result of specialization. This is false. A style develops organically through constant practice and not

through the adoption of a photographic niche.

Great painters, for example, all have a recognizable style. If we are looking at a particular painting of a flower, a person, or a night sky, we do not have to read the signature to know that it is a Van Gogh. Painters do not set out to develop a style, they set out to paint. Throughout their careers, their styles evolve and mature independently of intent. As a photographer, my greatest satisfaction comes from someone recognizing one of my photographs, regardless of subject matter, as mine without any clues other than the image itself.

Although there is no way of knowing where the journey will take you, it is worth keeping a few things in mind:

- By and large, do things photographically that work with your own fundamental nature
- Do not specialize too soon; instead, build a broad foundation
- If you practice enough photography with these points in mind, a recognizable style may emerge

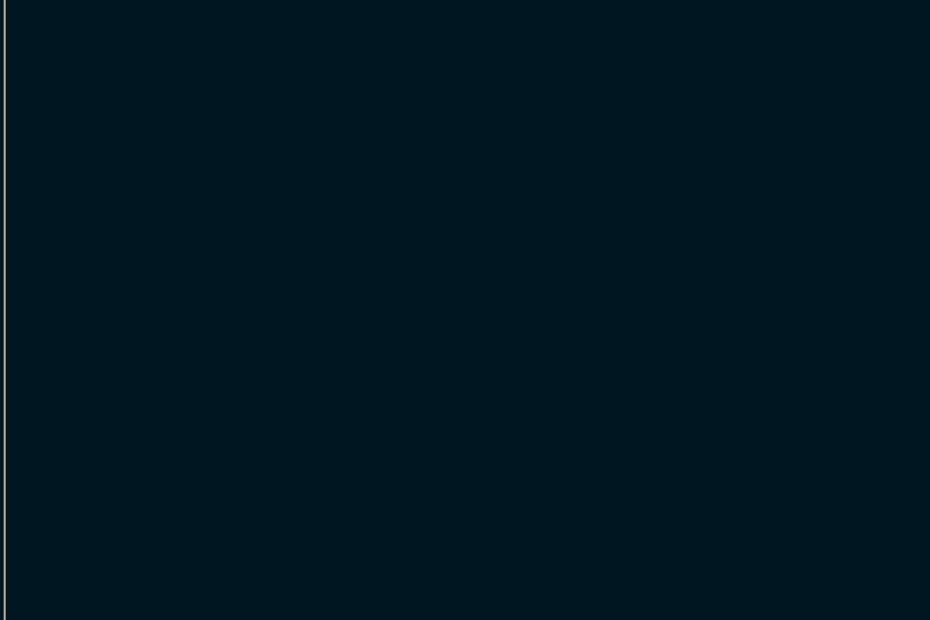
A note about the use of the term style: for the purposes of this book, style is something that develops through constant practice and is not something deliberately aimed for. It happens organically.



Gallery 1: Only the Essential

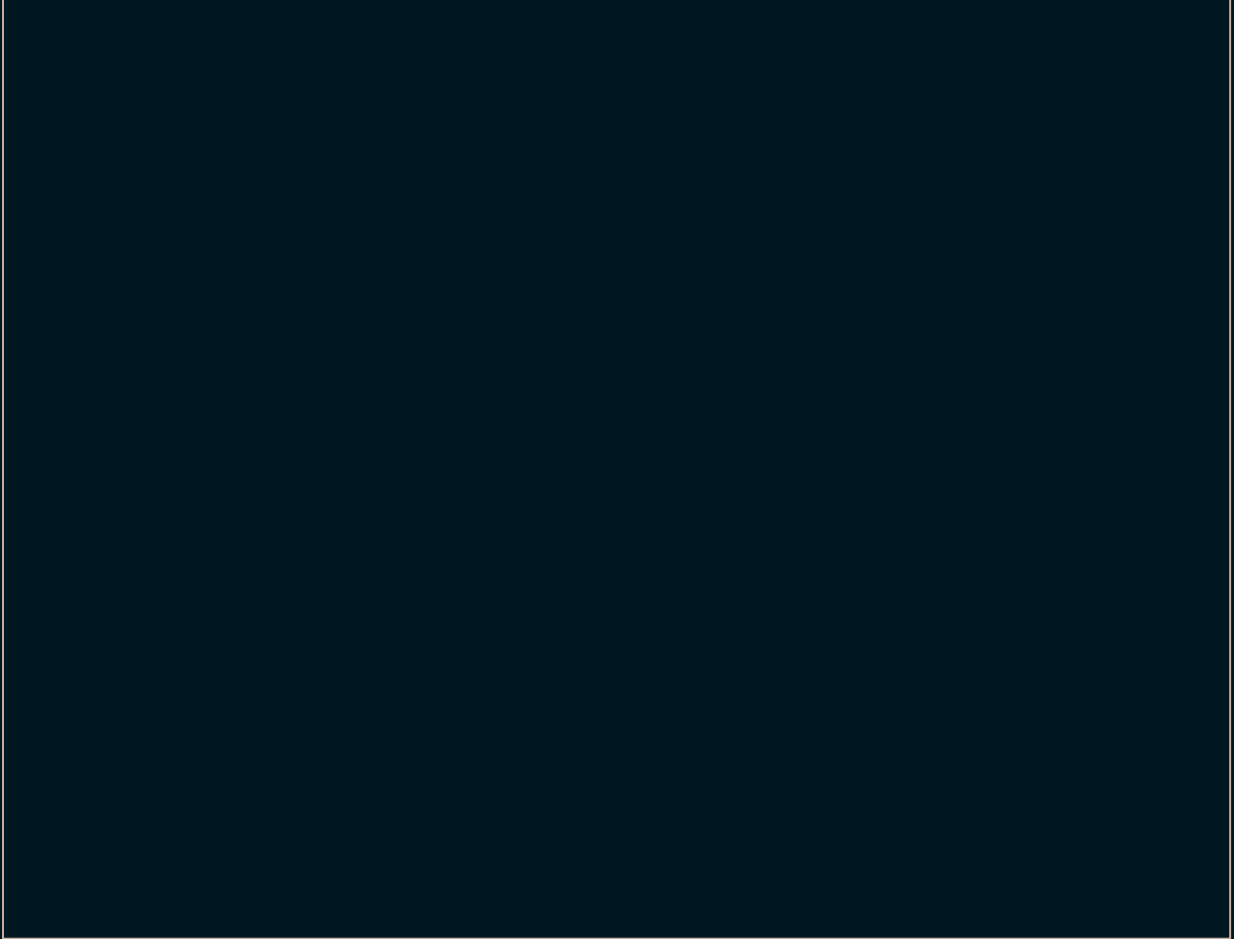
Losing background clutter is an essential photography skill. A minimal aesthetic takes this as far as possible without losing the essence of the image.

A texture layer has been added to this photograph to heighten the mood



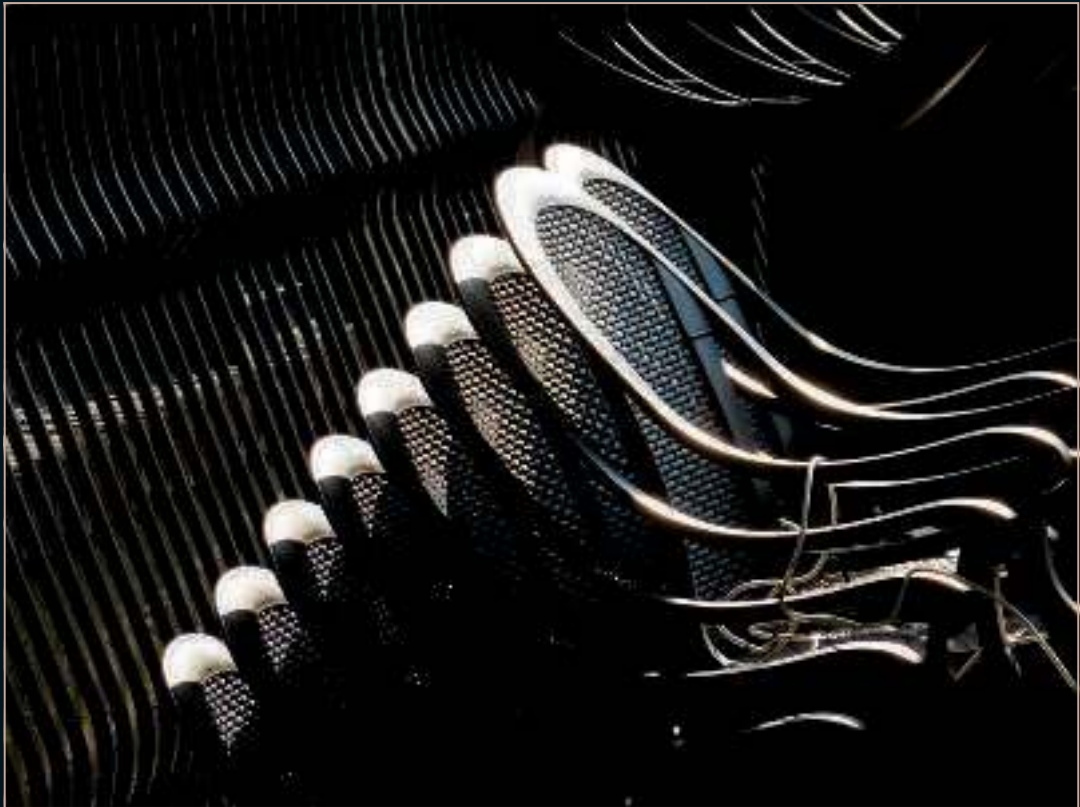
Repetition and strong shadows make this image interesting





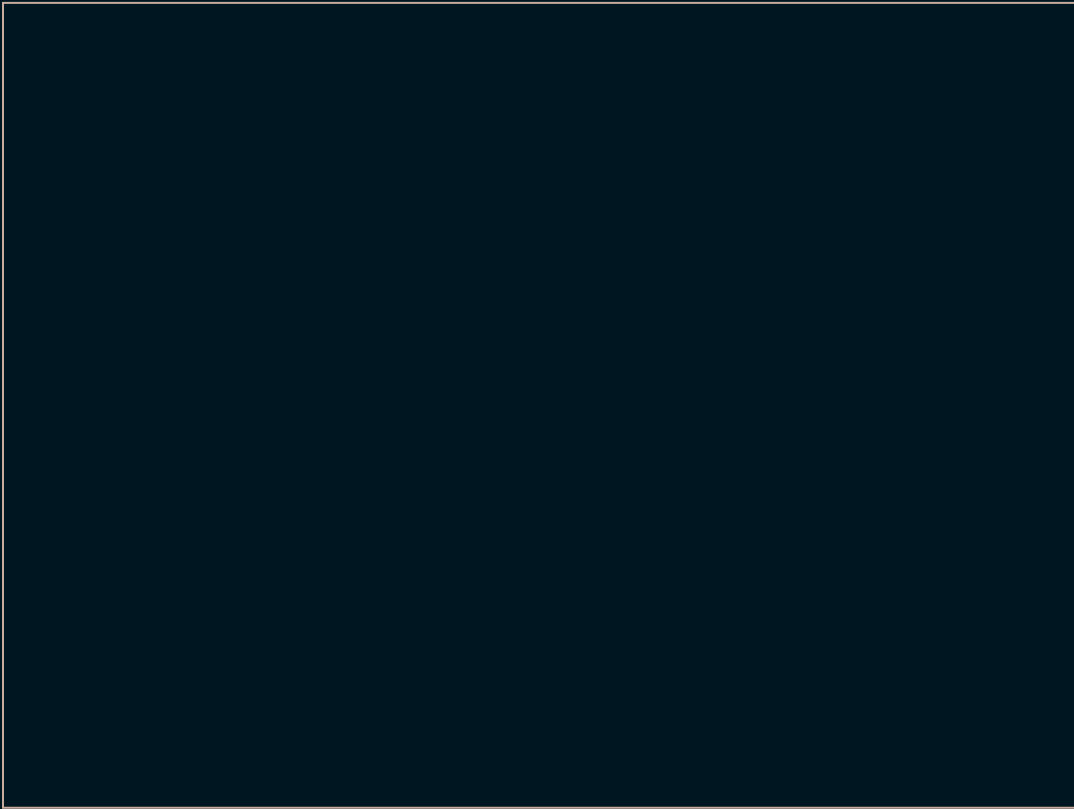
When photographing an object, it is worth giving some thought to the supporting surface. In this case, the glass of water is on the arm of an Adirondack chair.

Early morning sunlight on stacked chairs and tables. Getting the framing right was critical with this shot.



The obvious choice here would have been to focus on the tomato, but by focusing on a seemingly inconsequential part of the image, a bit of mystery is created





This image appears to be about the cotton spool, but the wood grain is an important part of the composition because it draws the eye into the image



A composition to focus the viewer's attention on the upright screw



Chapter 2

A Minimalist Approach

The following areas of photography can benefit from a minimalist approach: Equipment should be purchased according to need, the workflow should not increase the size of the task at hand, and a composition should never be cluttered. Let's take a deeper look at each of these elements.

Equipment

In the past, a photographer would simply buy the best equipment that he or she could afford. Things have changed a lot over the past few decades, though, and this cash-driven approach is no longer the only approach, or even the best approach. Under the old model, two things were regarded as absolutely key, both concerning lenses. First was the speed of the lens, or if it was fast enough for a correct exposure. Second was the quality of the components that made up the lens. This second factor determined the sharpness of the image. Faster and sharper lenses cost much more than the slower, slightly less sharp counterparts.

A fast lens makes it possible to work in darker conditions than would otherwise be possible, at least without a tripod or supplemental lighting. In other words, it enables photographs that would not otherwise happen. Sharpness, on the other hand, is an incremental thing. A less than perfect lens will not stop the photograph from happening; it will just make it slightly softer. It does not take a conspiracy theorist to see that the photography industry's interests

are best served by pushing the importance of speed and sharpness, because this is where the greatest profits lie.

I think the emphasis on speed is justified, but the obsession with sharpness is overdone. Just think of some of the photographs that have really affected you and try to remember whether they are tack sharp, moderately sharp, or not very sharp at all. I have my own favorite images by other photographers and cannot remember which, if any, are super sharp. The truth is that sharpness doesn't have the same influence on emotional and art-appreciating centers of the brain as contrast does. While absolute sharpness can be achieved at a cost, contrast can be optimized using relatively cheap or even free software tools. An impression of sharpness can also be created by judicious use of contrast, especially local contrast, but that is a discussion for a later chapter.

One thing needs to be clear: I am not making an argument for buying and using only cheap equipment, but rather I am making the case for not spending a fortune that you do not need to spend. If your images are going to be used as fine art prints, 300 dots per inch (dpi) at three feet per side, then get ready to spend some money. You will need a top-quality lens, a camera body with a large sensor, and some expensive software. Not many of us are producing such large, high-quality prints, though, so a considerable amount of money can be saved by not paying for incremental improvements that will be unnoticeable in our final output. The bigger and more expensive approach may be

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