MONOCHROME
-
MANUAL

INTRODUCTION

Black and white is the essence of photography. There is nothing more simple, minimalist, and sublime than a mono (singular) chromatic (color) image.

When I started shooting street photography, I embraced black-and-white, because I felt that it better communicated my emotions and feelings. Not only that, but I often found color to be a distraction to my images.

This manual will share you some practical tips when shooting street photography in black-and-white, and also provide some philosophical reasons *why* to shoot monochrome.

Always,

Eric

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WHY MONOCHROME?

One of the aesthetic philosophies I love is: "less is more." Not only that, but the phrase, "Less, but better" also comes to mind.

If you are a photographer that seeks to capture raw emotion in your photos, monochrome is for you. Monochrome helps you **cut distractions**, to **eliminate noise**, and to **focus on the essence** of the scene.

One of the best ways to make a better street photograph is to **remove the superfluous from a frame**. That means to get a clean background, to not have things sticking out of the head of your subject, as well as to not have unnecessary subjects in your photographs.

I also feel that monochrome better helps you focus on emotions. To capture better emotions in your photographs, capture gestures, body language, and facial expressions. Let's start from the basics.
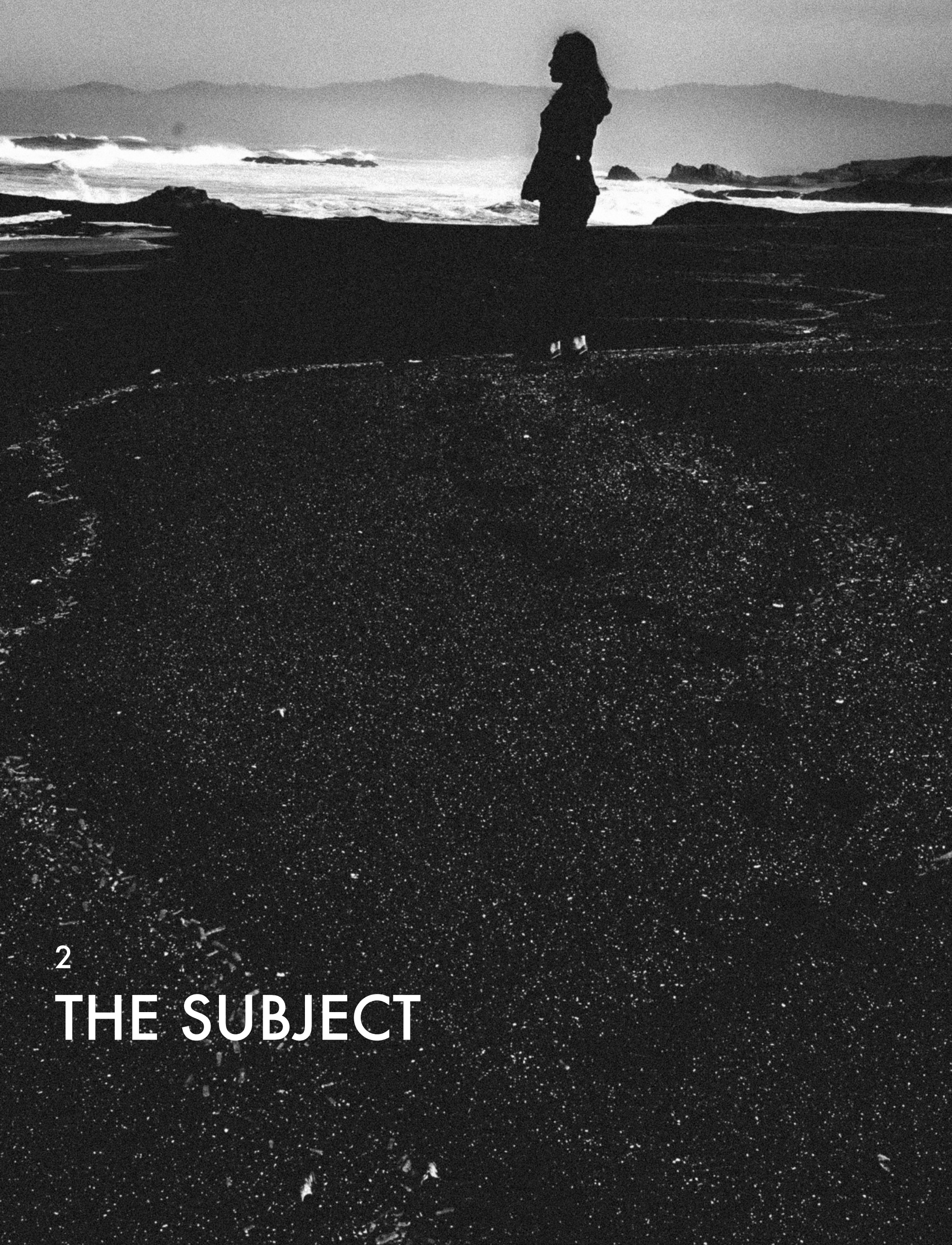
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THE SUBJECT

If you are new to photography or monochromatic photography, I recommend you to start with the basics-- **a single subject**.

The purpose of a photograph is to focus your attention to the primary subject of your photograph. By focusing on this one subject, you are able to communicate a certain message or a feeling to your viewer.

The fewer distractions you have in a frame, the more *focus* you can have to your subject.

Regardless of what type of photography you shoot, try to think: *"Who is my subject?"*

If you shoot street photography, that means focusing on a single subject that you find interesting on the streets. If you are shooting candidly, try to eliminate other elements or subjects from the frame. If you ask for permission, try to isolate one subject you find interesting, and photograph them.

If you shoot landscapes, perhaps your single-subject is a solitary tree, a solitary rock, or a starfish on the beach.

If you shoot architecture, try to find a singular point in a photograph that catches your attention.

By focusing on a single-subject; that element is your "**anchor**." To be more specific, your subject is a *visual anchor.*

Also by incorporating other compositional techniques (leading lines, diagonal lines, and strong contrast) you are able to isolate your viewer's attention on that single subject.

So start off by capturing your single-subject.

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THE GESTURE

When you have identified your subject, one of the keys to capture a powerful monochromatic image is to **focus on a gesture**.

A gesture can be having someone's hand on their head, pointing a certain direction, or having their hands on their hips.

Why are gestures important?

Well, with gestures you can capture emotions in your photographs. So rather than just photographing your subject mindlessly walking in the streets or looking like a scarecrow, try to **engage your subject**. Take photos while your subject is talking or ask them questions to provoke hand-movement.

The stronger the gesture of your subject, the stronger the emotion in the photograph.

FIGURE-TO-GROUND

One of the secrets to making a stronger photograph is to have strong "figure-to-ground" (contrast) in a scene.

The "*figure*" is your subject. The "*ground*" is your background.

So for example, if your subject is white, you want them against a black background. Or if you have a black subject, you want them against a white background.

The biggest mistakes a lot of photographers make is that there is not enough separation and contrast between their subject and the background. You can see this when you see street photographs of people with trees, tree poles, or other distracting elements overlapping with the subject.

A good way to make stronger images is to start off with a simple and minimalist background. Start off with a white or black background, and simply add your subjects into the frame.

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NEGATIVE SPACE

Another way to make a maximum statement with less is to embrace "*negative space.*"

Negative space shouldn't be decorative. Negative space allows you to focus the viewer's attention onto your subject. Not only that, but having negative space allows the subject in your photograph to "breathe."

For example, in the photograph above, I have Cindy lit with a single light. The pitch black envelops her-- and having just her face lit gives her a "spotlight" effect (like an actor on a stage). The black also helps give *focus* to the expression of her face-- a bit lost, unsure, and looking to the future.

The secret to making strong images with negative space is to intentionally take a step back, and make your subjects smaller than you think they "should" be. Also by lowering your "exposure compensation" -- you can make the blacks envelop the entire frame.

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EMBRACE THE LIGHT

One of the good things about monochromatic photography is that even if your light is flat, the photos tend up looking "okay." With color photography, having flat light ruins a photograph.

However if you want to make a truly stellar black-and-white photograph, you need to embrace the light. The ideal light to have is during "golden hour"; either sunrise, or sunset.

Having beautiful light will truly bring your monochromatic images to life. They will make the blacks of your photos darker than ink, and they will make the highlights of your photographs glisten with life. And no amount of post-processing or darkroom magic can "fix" a photograph with poor light.

In this photograph, I made some portraits of a man in Downtown LA during sunset. I made many photos of him, and I got lucky with this moment. A combination of the strong black horizontal lines, the soft expression in his face, and the mysterious hand coming out of the shadows.

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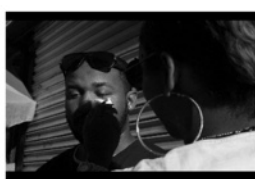
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THE EYE

"Eyes are the windows to the soul." There are no truer words.

When I'm out shooting on the streets, I try to get *eye-contact* in my images. I can get eye-contact in my photographs either by interacting with my subjects, or taking photos candidly of my subjects until they *notice* me, and then turn towards me, and make eye-contact with me and my camera.

To highlight the eye of your subject, try to find shafts of light, and set your **exposure-compensation to -2** or so. This will highlight the exposure of your subject's eye, and darken everything else.

If your subject is looking straight into the lens, the viewer will feel more captivated by the image. There is nothing more haunting, memorable, and soul-gripping than strong eye-contact in an image. One of the best ways to study eye-contact in images is to look at Renaissance paintings (some of the most memorable images have the subjects look straight into the eye of the viewer).

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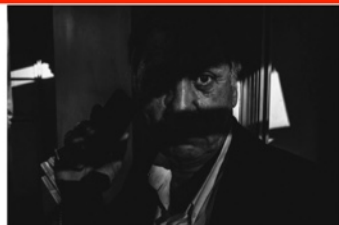
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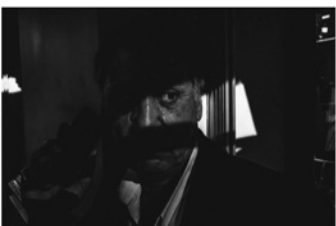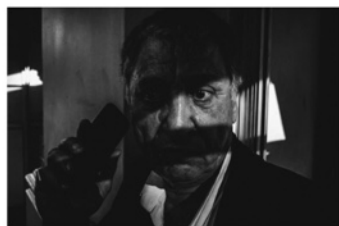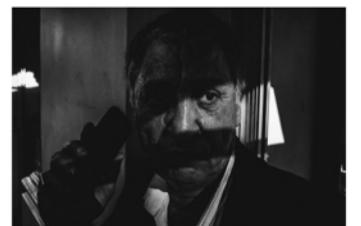11 / 26

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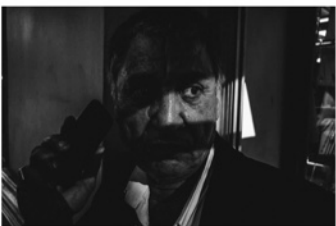
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HANDS

After the face, the *hands* of a person are the second most interesting part of a human.

Why? With hands you can communicate. Many psychologists say that 80% of communication is based on body-language and gestures; not words.

Not only that, but hands often have an interesting story of their own.

For example, in this image, I approached a woman in Downtown LA, and asked to take her portrait. At first she refused, and then I asked if I could take a photograph of her amazing nails instead. She assented (I've never met anyone who refused having a photo of their hands taken).

I feel the resulting image is much stronger. By just looking at the woman's hands, you can infer a lot about her personal style and it makes the viewer wonder, "What kind of woman would have those kind of hands and nails?" The more questions, the more engaging and memorable the image is.

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SHADOWS

One of the beautiful things about monochrome is that it highlights shadows.

By incorporating shadows into your photos, you incorporate more *mystery* and *drama* to your photos.

For example, in the photograph above, take a look at the shadow. What do you think is the hidden story behind this photograph? This is what makes the photograph interesting to look at; the viewer can make up his or her own story behind the photo.

If you want engaging shadows in a photograph, shoot during sunset. The lower the sun sets, the longer the shadows get.

A secret to getting (even) longer shadows-- try to get the shadow to curl around the edge of a wall (like it is above). Another tip: only photograph the shadow of a subject (don't include the subject).

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FLASH

To make a beautiful black and white photograph, you need strong "figure-to-ground" or strong contrast in a scene.

However when it is really dark, what is one of the best ways to illuminate your subjects? Easy-- use a flash.

By using a flash, you will draw your subject out of the shadows. You will make your subject illuminate with brilliance.

You don't need to shoot with a big external flash; just use the integrated flash in-camera (if you have one). If not, use the smallest and least-obtrusive flash. In terms of technical settings, I just recommend using "P" (program) mode; which will automatically meter your scene.

Using a flash works best when shooting against the sun, in the shade, indoors, or at night.

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BURN IT IN

If you have never been in a film darkroom; there is a technique called "dodging" (brightening) and "burning" (darkening). Fortunately for us, we can also do this digitally.

For me, I love dark blacks. To me, dark blacks are more mysterious, more sinister, and have more drama.

In this photograph, I took a photograph of a suited man walking by a diagonal wall. I crouched down, and took a quick photograph. I noticed in my LCD screen that his face was (mostly) black. But to make this image even more dramatic, I darkened in his face completely using the "adjustment brush" tool in Lightroom, and totally "burning" (darkening) his face.

But isn't this "cheating?" No -- black-and-white isn't about capturing reality; it is about *creating your own version of reality*. After all, do you really see the world in black-and-white?

AMBIENT LIGHT

One of my favorite situations to shoot monochrome in is when there is a faint light source-- a little bit of ambient light to light up my subject.

For example, in this image I was at a dive-bar in Provincetown, and I had an engaging chat with the man above. He excused himself for a bit, in order to pick a song on the jukebox. When he was thumbing through the catalogue of songs, I saw a great photo opportunity. I set the camera to **-3 exposure-compensation** (shooting in "P" mode) and took probably 70-80 photos of this scene.

I love the resulting image. There is a great deal of drama in the photograph, because the soft glow of the jukebox barely illuminates the hollow-looking face of the subject.

If you want to capture more subtle ambient light, try to shoot in the evening-- in really dark situations. Try to use just a single light bulb, or even the light of a smartphone. Use *ISO 3200+* and *-3 exposure*.

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HARSH LIGHT

If you want to make strong and gritty images, embrace "*harsh light*."

You will find harsh light when you are shooting in the middle of the day, anytime between 11am-2pm (depending on the time of the year). During these times of the day, the light isn't soft and graduated-- it stops in jagged edges.

If you are shooting in harsh light, put your subject in the light, and experiment setting the exposure-compensation of your camera anywhere between -2 and -3. What this will do is have your subject well-illuminated in the light, and have the background be pitch-black.

For example in this photograph I saw this badass guy with these fantastic tattoos. I stopped him, and I complimented him on his tattoos and asked to make a few photographs of him. He assented-- and I asked him to stand directly in the light-- where his tattoos and eyes would be illuminated. If you take a look at my contact sheet, you can see how I asked him to move forwards and backwards (to have the light properly exposed on his face).

There is no such thing as "good" or "bad" light in photography-- but there is "harsh" and "soft" light. Experiment with all different lighting situations (shooting without a flash, and with a flash), and you will be able to create monochromatic images with different "looks" and emotion.
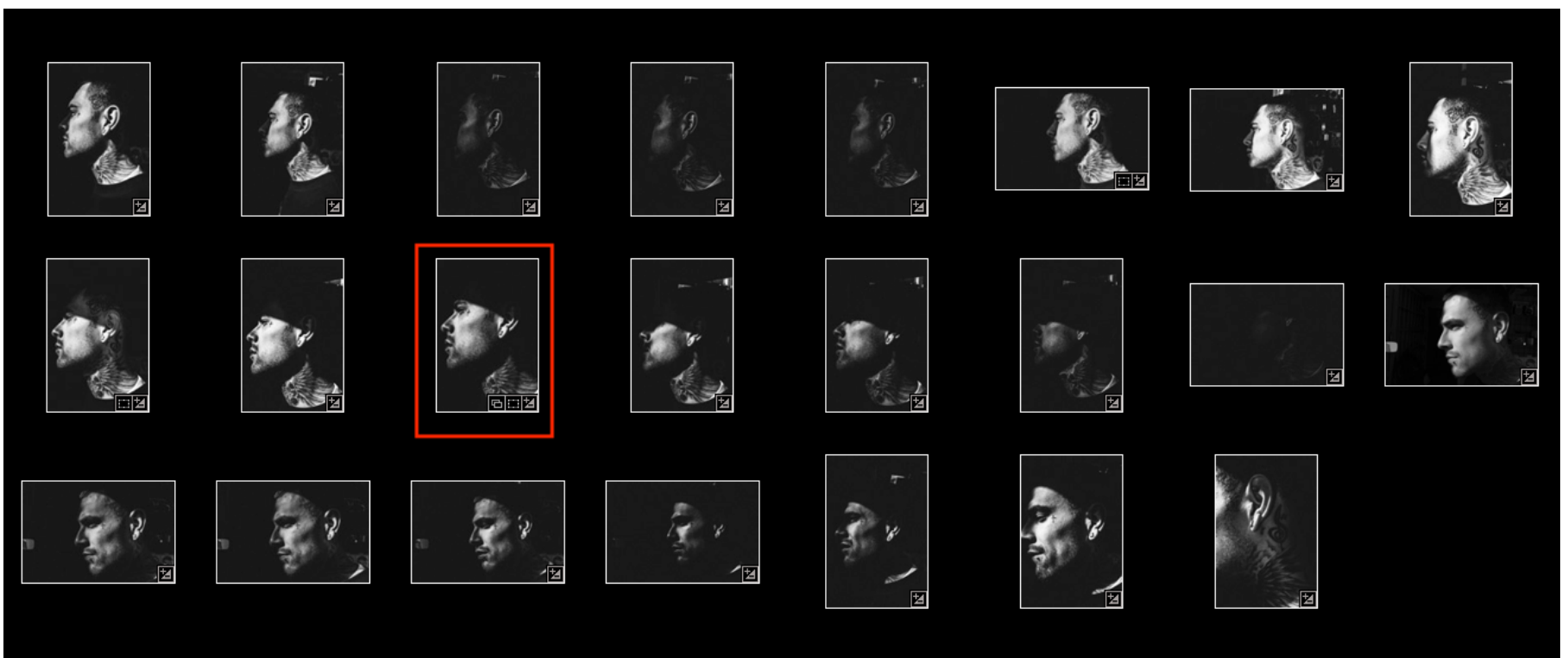
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OUT-OF-FOCUS

The more mysterious a black-and-white photograph is, the more engaging it will be to the viewer. When a photograph of out-of-focus, it forces the viewer to put in extra effort to try to make out what is happening in a photograph.

In photography, we are always told to have the subject perfectly in-focus. But try the opposite-- make photos where your subjects are intentionally out-of-focus.

For me, most of my out-of-focus photos that I like are accidents, or "beautiful mistakes." Or what I do sometimes is take several photos-- some photos in-focus, and some photos out-of-focus, and end up choosing the photos I like best.

I also have found that photos that are out-of-focus in monochrome tend to look aesthetically more appealing than color photographs. Why? Because they look even more haunting and gripping.
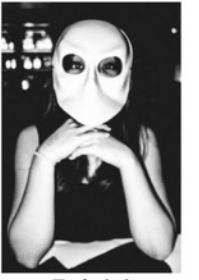
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REFLECTIONS

To make more interesting monochromatic images-- add an extra "*dimension*" to your photos. One way to add another dimension to your photographs is to integrate more *reflections*.

You can add reflections to your photos by finding a spot where you see potential-- this can be mirrors, windows, or even in puddles of water.

For this photograph, I was on my lunch break and walking around a local mall. I rode the escalator up, and saw the sides of the escalator make a nice curved leading-lines. I then held up my camera, and waited for a subject to enter the middle of the frame. I then saw a man coming from the right side, and took a photograph the second he was in the middle of the frame. Half a second before I shot the photograph, I noticed his reflection on the left of the frame. However it wasn't until I went home that I saw the third reflection on the right of the frame. The reflections make this photo.

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VIGNETTE

If you are new to black-and-white street photography, you might have gone a bit crazy with the "vignette" tool. I have to admit, when I started shooting monochromatic street photos, I would add a strong vignette to all of my images.

I liked the vignette because it added more *focus* to the middle of the frame, by darkening the edges of the frame. However what I have learned in my personal photographic journey is that adding too much vignette to an image makes it look more artificial, forced, and unnatural. You never want to add so much vignette that your subject will think, "Wow, this photographer added too much vignette to the image." You want the viewer to just enjoy the image.

However of course there are cases where a strong vignette will add more power to an image-- like this photograph I shot in Seoul in 2009. I feel the vignette helps the woman in the white umbrella pop more, and illuminate her surroundings. The result is the photograph has an "ethereal" feel.

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SMOKE

If you've ever watched a film-noir film from the 50's, you will see a lot of crazy effects done with smoke and fog machines-- to add more drama, mystery, and confusion to a scene.

Personally I am not a smoker, but I love the aesthetic quality that smoke brings to an image.

You can shoot smoke in different ways-- you can shoot smoky pipes on a cold winter day, or the steam coming out of the sewer. You can shoot in misty situations, or you can ask your friend (or your subject) to blow their cigarette smoke towards you.

When it comes to smoke, it is unpredictable how it will render in a photograph. My practical situation: take photos of the smoke with a flash and without a flash. Sometimes the flash will illuminate the smoke and make it "pop." Other cases, *not* using a flash will give the image more drama and mystery. Regardless, smoke is a timeless tool that makes monochromatic images more compelling.

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BLUR

Life moves fast-- one second it is there, and one second it is gone. If you shoot street photography, you might want to capture the vigor and energy of the urban jungle in your images. One of the ways to do this is to add *blur* to your images. This will make your images more "*edgy*" and engaging.

There are many ways you can create more blurry images-- you can set your camera to "shutter-priority" mode and set your shutter-speed slow (anything slower than 1/10th of a second).

You can shoot with a slow shutter-speed while you are moving, or take the opposite approach and put your camera on a tripod (have a sharp background, but your subjects are like ghosts in your frame).

Another technique to add blur to your photos is to use a flash, but set your shutter-speed to slower than 1/10th second. This will cause your subject to be tack-sharp, but the background to be blurry.

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REPETITION

There is nothing more sublime than beautifully-composed monochromatic images. If you love geometrical elements in a frame, try to incorporate *repeating* elements into your frame.

For example, I was traveling with Cindy, her mom, and my mom in Portugal. We went to a small seaside down, and found this interesting area where there were all of these repeating windows against bleach-white walls.

In this image, you see the repeating patterns of the black windows (some of them are circular arches, and some of them are rectangles or squares). To continue the repeating pattern of the blacks in the photo (against the white background), I added my mom's head in the lower-right part of the frame.

A key to have strong repetition in black and white photos: make sure to have "*white-space*" between the dark elements in a photograph. Also make sure to "fill-the-frame" and make a balanced frame.

SELF-PORTRAIT

If you live in an area where you don't have a lot of people or interesting subjects, know that you can always photograph yourself-- your own shadow, your own reflection, or your own face.

One of the photographers I am greatly inspired by when it comes to self-portraits is Lee Friedlander-- he is able to integrate great humor into his self-portraits by putting his shadows and faces in the most unlikely places. In this photograph, I put my shadow over this road separator, and it almost looks like I have these alien-eyes floating above my shadow's head.

No matter how "boring" the city, town, or neighborhood you live in-- you always have yourself (the best subject to photograph). Another idea: do an entire monochromatic self-portrait project, and have fun with it.
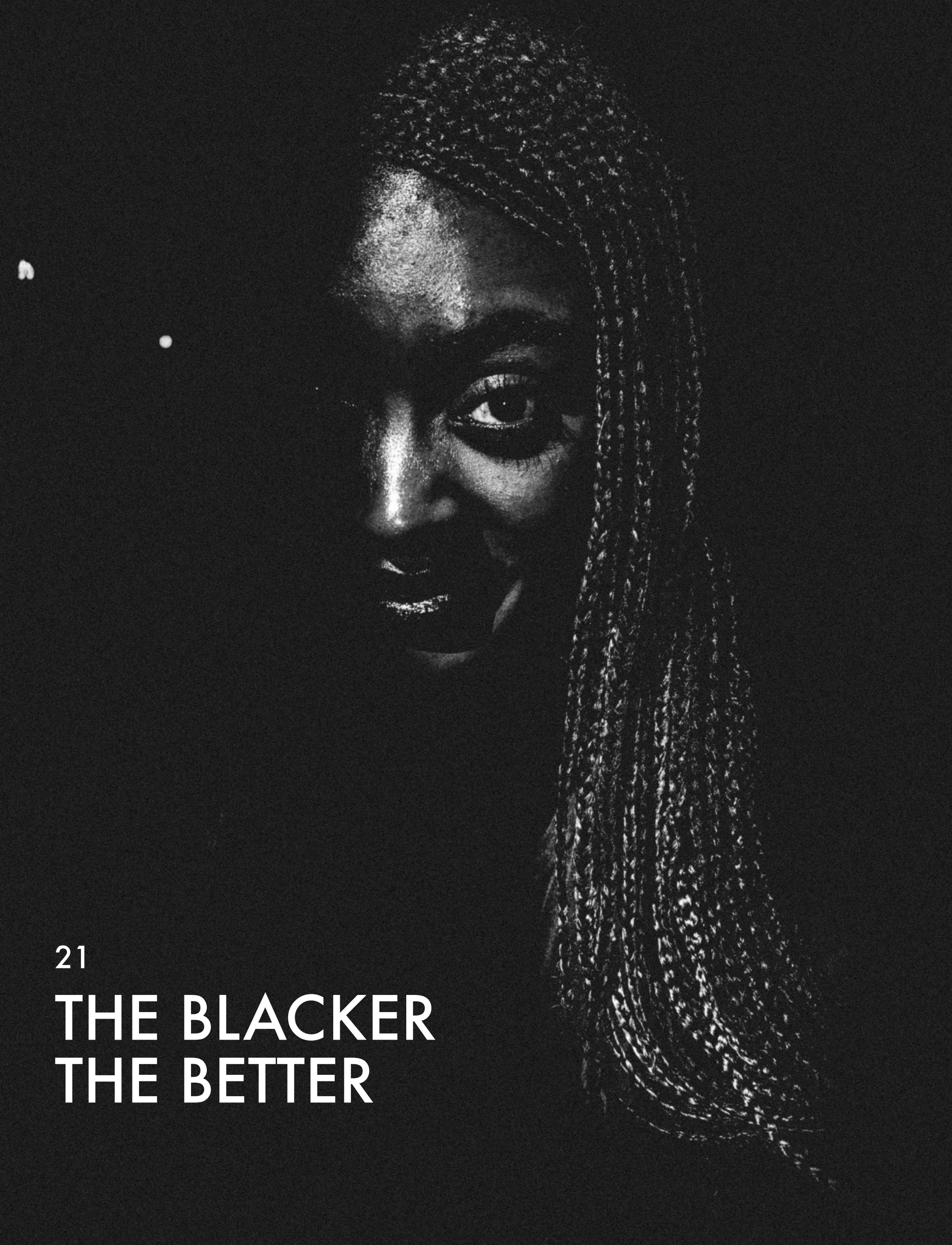
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THE BLACKER
THE BETTER

I recently read an essay about the color black by the world-famous designer, Paul Rand.

In his essay, he shares how in modern (Western) society we look down on the color black. We see the color black as evil, darkness, and danger. Unfortunately, this is where a lot of racists find their rationale to look down on black people, and other "colored" peoples.

For me, I think the blacker, the better. Black to me is beauty. Black is not pretentious, black is minimalism, black is elegance, and black is bliss.

If you want to see the world in a deeper way, try to see the world in black-and-white. See how many shades of white, grey, and black you can get in an image. Find your monochromatic bliss, and don't let color blind your eyes.

Focus on raw emotions, faces, eyes, shapes, lines, and the dance between the light and dark in a frame.

Some of the greatest photographers have spent their entire careers trying to "master" black-and-white; but many of them have died admitting that even they weren't able to master black-and-white before they passed.

I definitely don't plan on mastering black-and-white in this lifetime; but I do find it to be not only a beautiful aesthetic in photography, but a way to see the world in a more calm, elegant, and simple way.

Make monochromatic memories, and savor the brilliance it will bring your images.

Always, Eric

Thursday, March 31, 2016 / Oakland