

## About This Document

Spending time on composition and artistic aspects gets lost quickly if the mechanical skills are lacking or unsound. We start with dealing efficiently with equipment, materials, and processes. These are mechanical skills that can be learned and practiced until they occupy very little attention. Then we move on to more creative aspects – how to sharpen seeing and compose better photographs. I find that it's a progression, however.

Remember, Ansel Adams had about five minutes to get his 8x10 camera set up, composed, focused and set aperture and shutter speed for "Moonrise: Hernandez, New Mexico." He had to be fast. Similarly, good portraiture requires an intimate relationship between the photographer and subject. At a recent figure workshop (it was attached to the landscape workshop I was teaching), I admonished the students to be practiced, smooth, and professional with their equipment. A very pretty young lady has taken her clothes off just for you, I told the guys. The last thing you want is to look like a bumbling fool. She'll see your unease, and any chance at a photographic relationship will be gone.

Years ago, I worked with a training designer, who said that the best training trains skills, and skills require practice. Therefore, I have included a lot of exercises. They will help you practice skills. If you do them, your photography will improve.

Other sources will give you much more technical detail. I believe in simplicity. I believe photography is about photographs, not detailed procedures about exposure and development that, in my experience, add nothing to the final product. This book will get you to a usable level of technical knowledge with the least effort. Follow what's here, and you'll have easy to print negatives, and you will print them well.

This book is organized in sections: **Introduction** (this section), tells you what this effort is all about, and sets a "philosophical tone." **Equipment** describes equipment for large format photography. **Materials** discusses film and the like. **Processes** talks about developing film, making prints, and the Simplified Zone System. **Making Pictures** is my best shot at conveying working methods and techniques for making better pictures. **Exercises** is where I've tucked all the things you can do where they're easy to find and print as a group. They are referenced in the text. **Musings** has what I hope are entertaining and useful writings. **Resources** presents books, periodicals, and good places to get stuff.

## How to Use This CD-ROM

A CD-ROM or download gives you flexibility in how you make it part of your photographic life. It is a well-known natural law that the thing you need is never where you need it. My personal experience has proven that this is true of tools, photographic equipment, and books. Therefore, we need a different strategy.

For instance, you can print it all, three-hole punch it, put it in a binder and read it from your armchair. Good enough, but not very inspiring, and it will be at your armchair when you want it in the darkroom. Rather, here's what I'd do. First, I would decide where, or if, I would use different parts of the book. "Musings" are good bedtime reading. I'd print those pages, clip them, and put them by the bedside, where I want to use them. I'd print the darkroom exercises, clip them, and pin them to the bulletin board in my darkroom. Field exercises I'd put in a thin binder kept with my camera bag, ready to go when I am. Longer, non-exercise sections I'd binder-ize, and keep by the armchair, or carry in my briefcase as commuter-train, airplane, or lunchtime reading. Or not print.

If I spill chemicals on the darkroom pages, I can reprint only what I need. If I lose the camera exercise binder in the beaver pond, I'm out a little paper and a binder rather than a whole book. Mustard? Reprint. I can scribble notes in margins with impunity. In a rage, I can tear up pages that I don't agree with. In short, I have a flexible document that I can renew, or not, at need.

## Origins and Acknowledgements

Much of this material has its origins in Fred Picker's Zone VI Workshops. Not the book, but rather the experience of being at the Putney School and immersing one's self in photography for ten days, as I did in 1984. Fred was many things, but above all, I choose to remember him as a fine teacher.

I first put much of this together to teach a group of high school freshmen a number of years ago. They included Hillary Foxweldon and Anna Stockwell, both of whom have pursued photography seriously. I love both of these wonderful young women, and would be proud to have either, or both, as daughters.

This material has been refined and used in handouts at our Fine Focus Workshops, and so I owe a debt of gratitude to partners and good friends Richard Ritter and Ted Harris. Thanks also to students who have enriched these workshops, including John Bowen, Peter Schrager, Hany Aziz, and John Weinland, just to name a few of many favorites and friends.

Thanks also to several Zone VI Workshop instructors who were helpful in my early years: Dave Usher, Tim Frazier, Susan Barron, Claire Brett Smith, and Lil Farber.

Finally, special thanks to my wife Victoria and son Evan, who have tolerated this passion of mine, opening their home to strangers for our workshops.

## The Short Course

If you feel that your time is limited, do three activities:

*Do the One-A-Day Exercise.* The one-a-day habit will do more to improve your photography than any other exercise.

*Do the Three-for-One Exercise.* The Three-for-One activity will lead to substantial improvements in your ability to compose.

*Define and Use Projects.* Defining and keeping to the discipline of projects will yield more completed work than just “going with the flow.”

Working through all the exercises, however, will give you a depth of knowledge and experience few photographers ever gain. Maybe you’ll define a project to do all the exercises?

## Mantras

I have a few key themes. Please pay attention. These work.

### **Simple, Reliable, Repeatable**

Large format traditional photography should be **Simple**. Many try to overcomplicate view cameras, lenses, exposure, and everything else. I won’t let you get sucked into that. Keep it simple. If it starts to seem complicated, find ways to simplify your equipment and methods.

What you do should be **Reliable**; it should work, and work well. I’ll discuss ways that are reliable. They work.

You should do things that are **Repeatable**. You should do them every time. If they are **Simple** and **Reliable**, then this should be easy. I’ll advocate that you develop habits that make sure you do things the same way every time.

### **Mechanics vs. Creativity**

Don't be **Creative** when you should be **Mechanical**, and don't be **Mechanical** when you should be **Creative**. Handling equipment and performing most of the processes are Mechanical. They can be performed automatically, without thought, if one learns good habits. That leaves your brain open to the Creative aspects of photography: where to aim the camera, how to frame it, how to print it to convey the emotion that compelled you to make that image.

### **The Comfort Zone**

At a recent workshop, a student asked to do "urban photography." In Vermont? Reluctantly, we agreed to go to a location in downtown Brattleboro where we had never taken students. It worked out fabulously: a rich place with many images to be made, including Brattleboro's always-interesting portrait fodder. Lesson for me: I was comfortable with roots and rocks, uncomfortable with something new. But I learned that I only grow when out of my comfort zone. I will try to push you out of yours. That's how you'll grow the fastest.

### **Simplicity**

Keep things as simple as possible. Resist the temptation to solve your photographic problems with new cameras, lenses and gadgets (you won't). Make as many decisions as you can before you go photographing, such as taking only one, or at most two lenses. Use one film and developer. Use one camera. Decide on print size before going into the field.

When you make these decisions beforehand, you strip away distractions from the hard work of *seeing*. It is actually a very liberating thing to do!

After 24 years, I still own only two lenses for my 4x5. I use one of them 95% of the time. I think it's helped my pictures.

## **Finished Work**

You will learn fastest if you set a goal of finishing work. By that, I mean making, developing, proofing, selecting, enlarging, toning, spotting, mounting, matting and sequencing photographs. That's one reason why projects are so good. That's one reason why setting a goal of a show is good.

You will learn enormous amounts by following things through to completion, and by doing your very best in all aspects. We have workshop alumni who keep coming back. Why? Because we ask them to bring new work for us to review. They work like crazy to produce new work and have it ready for us to see. Duke Ellington said "Nothing aids creativity like a deadline," and he was right.

Finishing helps keep you focused (no pun intended), and helps avoid that willy-nilly approach to photography that dilettantes practice. This book should have no audience with them. This book is for workers.