



# WHAT CONTEST JUDGES LOOK FOR

*Suggestions For Better Outcomes  
in Club Competitions (Updated For 2026)*

**LARRY PETTERBORG**

# PRESENTATION OBJECTIVES:

*BY THE END OF THIS SESSION, PARTICIPANTS WILL*

1. HAVE A MORE POSITIVE CLUB CONTEST EXPERIENCE
2. HAVE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE JUDGING PROCESS
3. BE ABLE TO IDENTIFY THE ELEMENTS OF A WINNING IMAGE
4. BE ABLE TO SET REALISTIC GOALS FOR CLUB CONTESTS
5. BE INTRINSICALLY MOTIVATED TO MAKE MEANINGFUL PHOTOGRAPHS

# THERE ARE MANY REASONS WE TAKE PICTURES

1. To document an occasion, object, subject, or event.
2. To save a memory or moment.
3. Travel or exploration.
4. To market something/get paid.
5. To tell stories/communicate.
6. Creative expression.
7. Enter contests/gain recognition.\*



\* Never worry about what a “judge” might think about a photograph until you specifically **ASK!**



WHY COMPETE?

# WHY I COMPETE?

1. *It's fun!*
2. *I like the challenge*
3. *Provides a push to go out and shoot*
4. *It's a good way to learn*
5. *It's a way for others to see my work*



# WHY SHOULD YOU LISTEN TO ME?

- ❖ I've given this a lot of thought based on having:
  - ❖ *been judged for more than 40 years*
  - ❖ *completed PSA courses*
  - ❖ *observed contest judges at work*
  - ❖ *judged for many different clubs*
  - ❖ *mentored others*





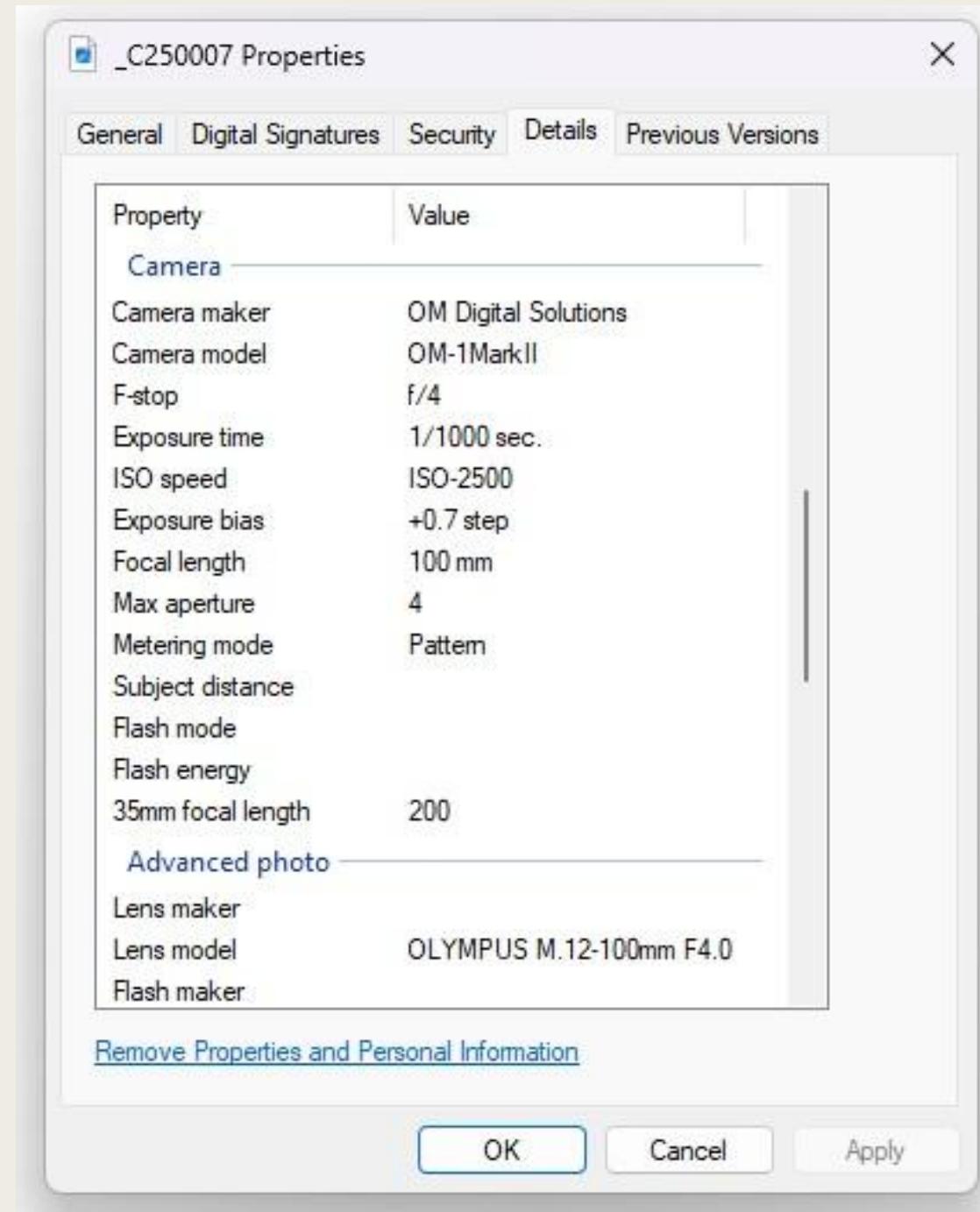
# I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE THINKING!

**“IF YOU KNOW SO MUCH, WHY DON’T  
YOU WIN ALL THE TIME?”**

**THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF “METADATA”**

**“OBJECTIVE”**

**“SUBJECTIVE”**



## OBJECTIVE METADATA



# SUBJECTIVE METADATA



The camera records a two-dimensional representation of a multidimensional experience. Our memory contains many orders of magnitude more information than does our camera's card.

# SO, HOW DO YOU WIN A PHOTO CONTEST?

1. IDENTIFY A CONTEST AND UNDERSTAND  
WHAT IS EXPECTED.
2. MAKE A TECHNICALLY PERFECT  
PHOTOGRAPH OF AN INTERESTING  
SUBJECT IN GREAT LIGHT THAT MEETS THE  
CONTEST CRITERIA.
3. ENTER THE CONTEST
4. HOPE THAT YOUR MOTHER IS THE JUDGE!

# THE MOST IMPORTANT POINT!

THE OPINION OF A CONTEST JUDGE (OR SOCIAL MEDIA, FOR THAT MATTER)

DOES NOT

DEFINE WHO YOU ARE AS A

PERSON, A PHOTOGRAPHER,

OR AN ARTIST!!!

YOU WIN SOME AND YOU LOSE SOME

IT'S JUST A SINGLE OPINION

YOU CAN LEARN MORE WHEN YOU LOSE!

**THE LEAST IMPORTANT THING YOU WILL  
EVER GET OUT OF A CONTEST IS**

A SCORE

**FOR EXAMPLE**



1. DCC: 82 pts.
2. Thin Line Festival: \$400
3. Flickr: Appx 69K views

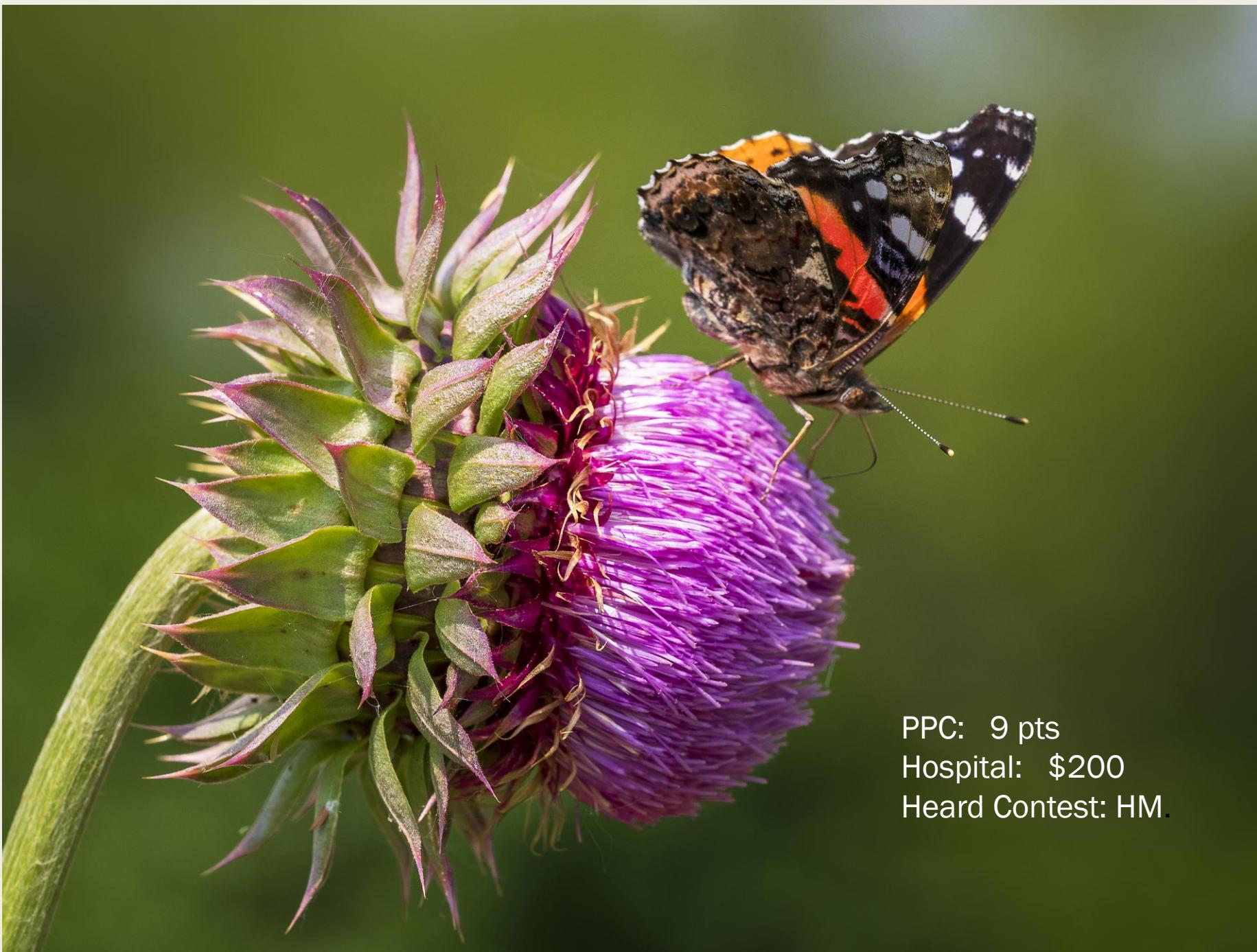
DCC print: 65 pts. Tied for last

DCC projected: 95 pts. First

GSCCC nature: HM

GSCCC EOY 2024-25 nature: First





PPC: 9 pts  
Hospital: \$200  
Heard Contest: HM.



DCC 2018-2019 EOY PJ:0 2024 ALPINE TX PHOTO CONTEST: FIRST PLACE \$500



DCC Print-70 pts. Last Place Masters



# CREATE REASONABLE GOALS!

I HAVE **FIVE** SIMPLE AIMS FOR CLUB CONTESTS:

1. ENTER EVERY CONTEST
2. ACTIVLEY SEARCH OUT THEMES
3. SUBMIT INTERESTING IMAGES
4. DON'T BE THE FIRST NAMED IN RESULTS
5. FINISH YEAR IN THE TOP HALF OF GROUP

# JUDGING

- *It's a **BIG JOB**.*
- *There are often time constraints.*
- *The pool of judges is extremely heterogeneous.*
- *A given judge may not understand the specific context.*
- *A given judge may not be qualified for the specific task.*
- ***Judges are required to RANK ORDER entries!***

# PPC

**Judge's Points (also called Image Points) are awarded by the judge based solely on the merits of the image and not in competition with other images. The judge considers impact, composition, and the technical aspects of the image in determining the point value. No image scores less than 6 points, and the maximum number of points is 15.**

# DCC

**The judges are asked to evaluate images based on impact, composition and technical merit. Competition scores may range from 65 – 100 based on the general criteria below. A score of 75 is considered to be a good image.**

**95 - 100: Exceptional**

**90 - 94: Superior**

**85 - 89: Excellent**

**80 - 84: Commendable**

**75 - 79: Above Average**

**70 - 74: Average**

**65 - 69: Below Standard**

**Judges are asked to consider the following when scoring an image.**

**Impact – the sense one gets upon viewing an image for the first time. Compelling images evoke laughter, sadness, anger, pride, wonder or another intense emotion.**

**Composition – important to the design of an image, bringing all the visual elements together in concert to express the purpose of the image.**

**Technique – the approach used to create the image. Printing, lighting, posing, capture, presentation media, and more are part of the technique applied to the image.**

# HOW JUDGES JUDGE

- Club Contests
  - *Solo Judge*
  - *Public and Non-Public*
    - Public Judging is Structured and Generally Done Quickly
    - Private Judging May Allow for a More Studied Evaluation
  - *Projected, Prints, or Both*
  - *May Provide Feedback as Well as Placement of Entries*

# HOW JUDGES JUDGE

## ■ Salon Style Judging

- *Public*
- *Generally Anonymous*
- *Fast*
- *No Feedback*





HOW DO JUDGES JUDGE?

**SUBJECTIVELY!!!**

# FIVE TIPS

## FOR BETTER OUTCOMES

1. Make more photographs:  
**THOUGHTSHOTS vs SNAPSHOT**
2. Look for contest shots
3. Save your best to a contest folder
4. Study winning images
5. Seek out feedback: **do not let a contest judge be the first person to comment on your photos!**

# TIP # 1

Make more photographs:  
**THOUGHTSHOTS vs  
SNAPSHOTS**

# PHOTOGRAPH WITH “INTENTION”

In general, when a judge looks at your image, they should be able to identify what you photographed and why you photographed it. In other words, the image should communicate your intentions.

# PRACTICE!!!



EVEN A GENIUS LIKE YOUNG MOZART HAD TO PRACTICE

1. PHOTOGRAPH SOMETHING EVERY WEEK
2. WORK ON PROJECTS
3. THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT YOUR IMAGES TO LOOK LIKE BEFORE YOUR PRESS THE BUTTON
4. REVIEW AND ANALYZE YOUR WORK
5. PARTICIPATE IN CLUB ACTIVITIES
6. GET A *FOTO FRIEND* AND SHOOT TOGETHER

**7. PLAY AND HAVE PHUN!!!**

# **TIP # 2**

**Look for contest  
shots!!!**

# CONTEST SHOTS

1. KEEP A COPY OF CONTEST THEMES/SUBJECTS WITH YOU
2. AVOID “ONE AND DONE” CAPTURES
3. *BE AWARE OF SPECIAL OPPORTUNITIES AND TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THEM*

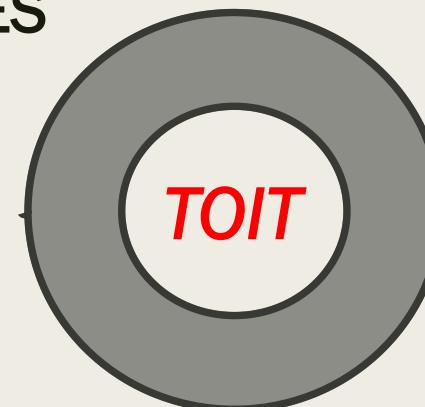


# **TIP #3**

**Save your best to  
a contest folder!**

# CASHE PHOTOS

1. COLLECT AND CURATE YOUR BEST CONTEST IMAGES
2. DON'T WAIT



# TIP #4

## Study Winning Images:

Club Contests

PSA INTERCLUB CONTESTS [Competition Results](#)

[Gulf States Camera Club Council - Competition Results](#)

# 10 STEP ANALYSIS\*

1. What is the main subject in the image, and how has the maker made this obvious?
2. What do you think was the maker's intent with this image?
3. What gives this image impact, and why?
4. How has the maker used light to strengthen this image?
5. How has the maker used color to strengthen this image?
6. Describe how you feel the maker's camera settings impacted the image and why you believe the maker may have chosen that approach. (e.g., If the maker used selective focus, why did they do so? If the maker used a slow shutter speed, why did they do so?)
7. Describe how you feel the maker has chosen to apply certain techniques in post-processing to create the final image. (For example, if dodging or burning was used, why did they do so?)
8. What are the main features of this image's composition?
9. What different composition choices would you have made when capturing and processing this image?
10. Which of the following art elements are present in the image, and how are they influencing the impact of this image? [line, shape, texture, pattern, tone, color, space]

*\*Adapted from PSA course on  
creating images for competition*

# TIP #5

**Seek Feedback:** Ask someone knowledgeable for ADVICE before you submit an image.

1. Do not let a contest judge be the first person to comment on your photos!
2. Do not give the judge anything to dislike.

# DO NOT GIVE A JUDGE ANYTHING TO DISLIKE!!!

- Know and follow ALL contest rules.
  - Nature and Photojournalism are very strict! (see <http://www.gulfstatesccc.org/new-page-1>)
- Make a REAL effort to capture contest specific images.
- Eliminate OBVIOUS flaws in your submissions. **JUDGES WILL EXPECT YOU TO BE PROFICIENT IN BASIC POST PROCESSING TECHNEQUES!**
  - Noise, Dust Spots, Horizon, Background Distractions, Edges, Focus, Sharpness, Print Quality, Mats & Matting ([Best photo editing software in 2025 | Amateur Photographer](#))
- Keep your entries as SIMPLE as possible. An obvious main subject that is supported by the other elements in the frame works best. **Remember that contest photography is only one of many reasons to use your camera.**

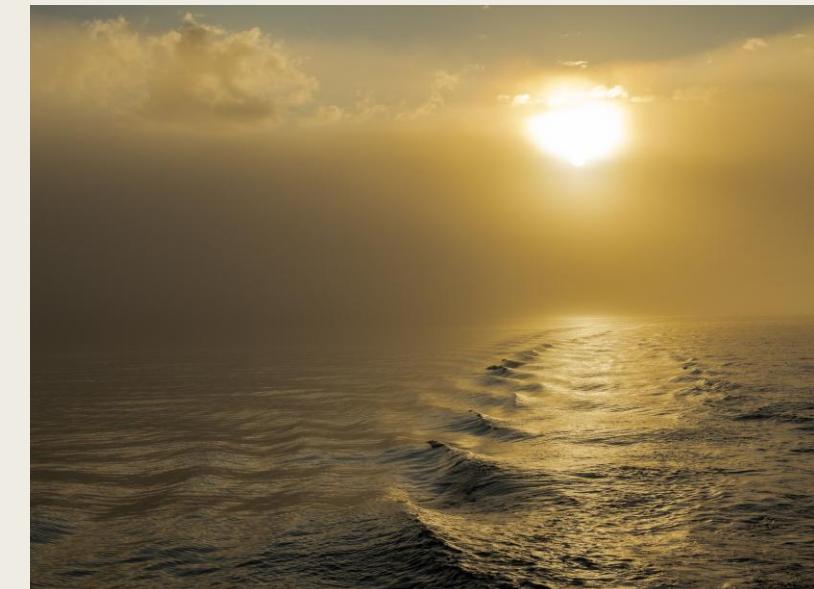
# EXAMPLES

(Contest Topic: Shadows)



# EXAMPLES

(Contest Topic:Minimalism)





# PID Monochrome Competition

2022-2023

Round One, Group F

**"Sailing Away"  
Larry Petterborg**

*Plano Photography Club*



**Honorable Mention**

Nancy Speaker, APSA, PPSA  
PSA Interclub Director

Christine Pence, QPSA  
PID Monochrome Director

# EXAMPLES



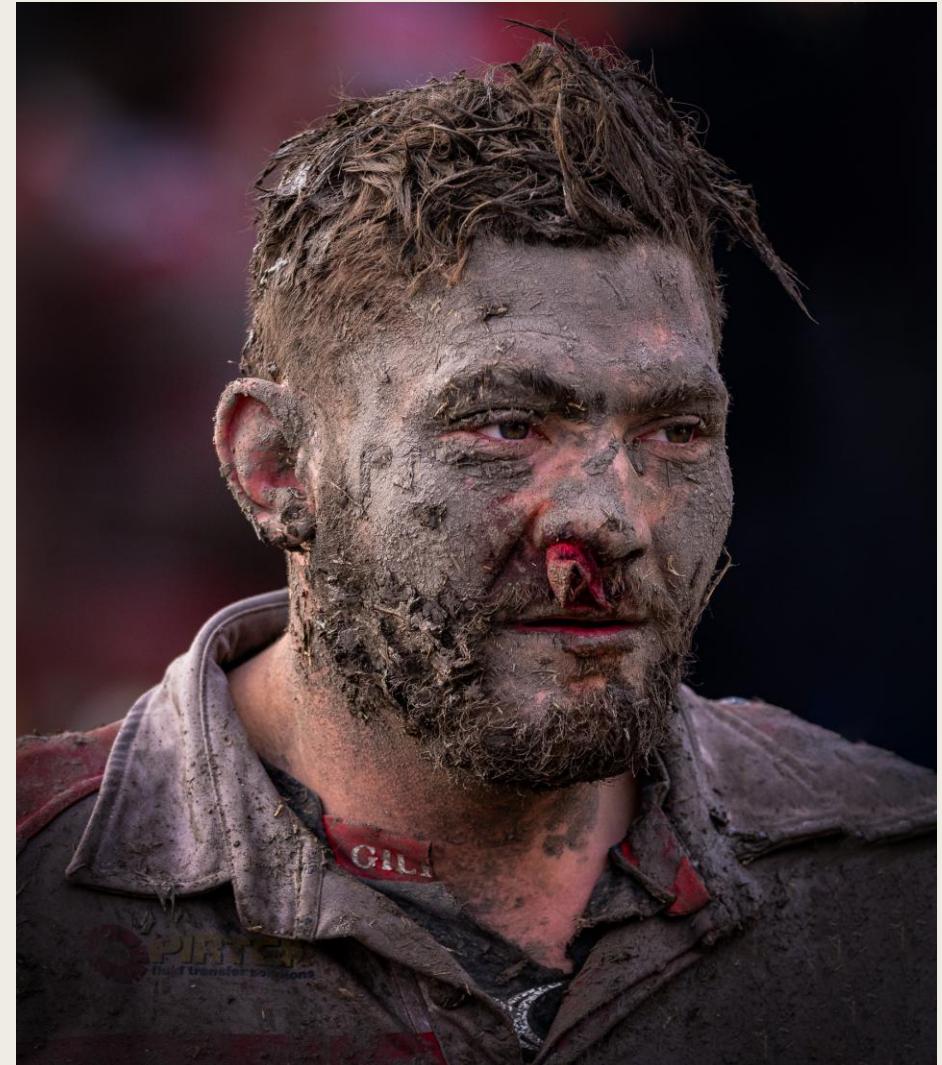
# EXAMPLES



# EXAMPLES



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# SOMETIMES YOU JUST CAN'T WIN

“Nice composition. I would have preferred eye contact.”



# WHAT DO WINNING IMAGES HAVE?

## ■ THE MOST ORIGINAL AND IMPACTFUL IMAGES DO THE BEST.

- *If you can't do it better, do it DIFFERENTLY.*
- *Make it EASY on the judge.*
- *Use the TOOLS available to you.*
  - Shoot **RAW** and Process Files
- *LEARN from your mistakes.*



# A PRETTY PICTURE IS NOT ENOUGH





# CREATING IMAGES WITH IMPACT

## ■ What is **IMPACT**?

- *It is **SUBJECTIVE!***
- *Make Photographs About Things Rather Than Of Things*
- *Emotion, Mood, Contrast, Color, Subject, Action, Humor, Exotic, Scale, Connection*
- *Tells a Story*

## ■ Why does it matter?

- *Time*
- *Numbers*



EXAMPLE: CONTEST SUBJECT IS PORTAL(S)



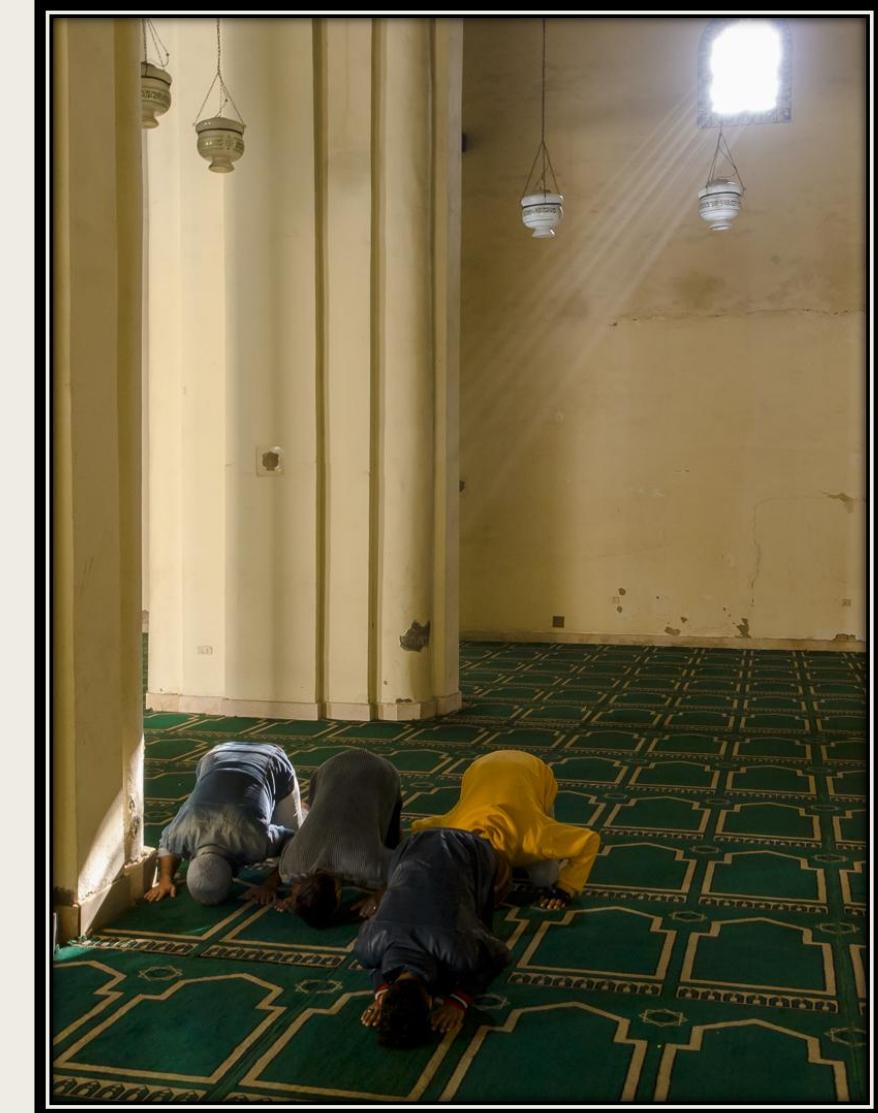
ONE IS A DOCUMENT THE OTHER A STORY!



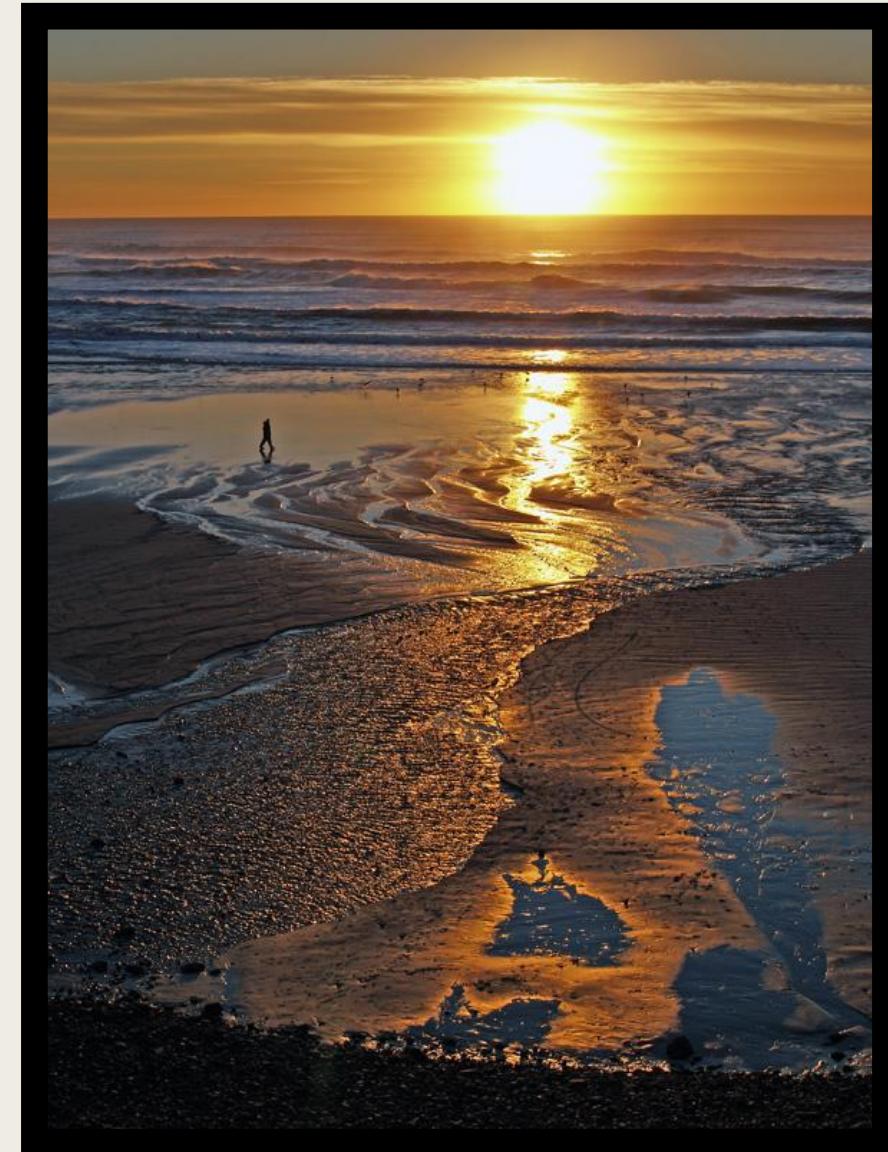
# IMPACT EMOTION



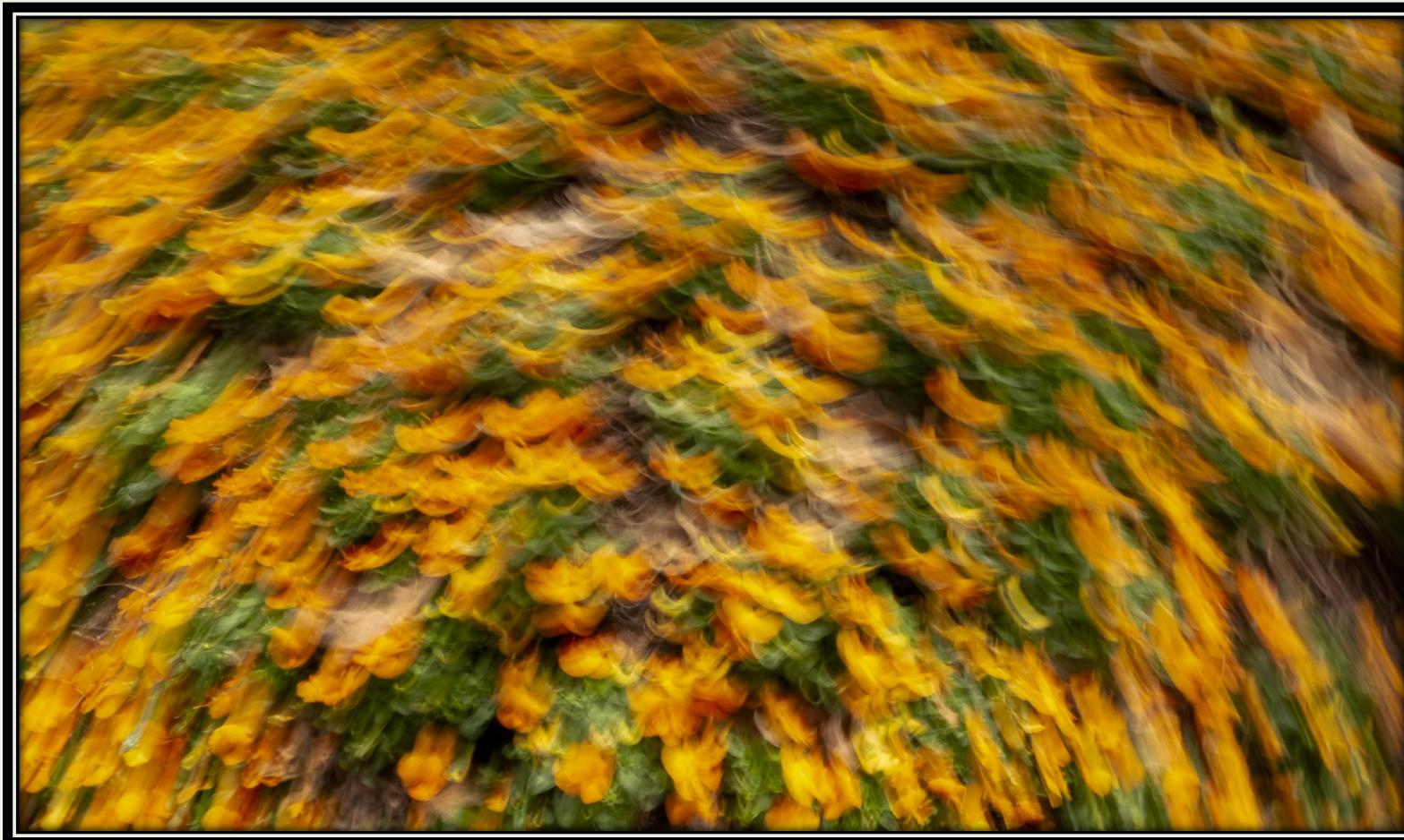
# IMPACT MOOD



# IMPACT CONTRAST



# IMPACT COLOR







# IMPACT SUBJECT



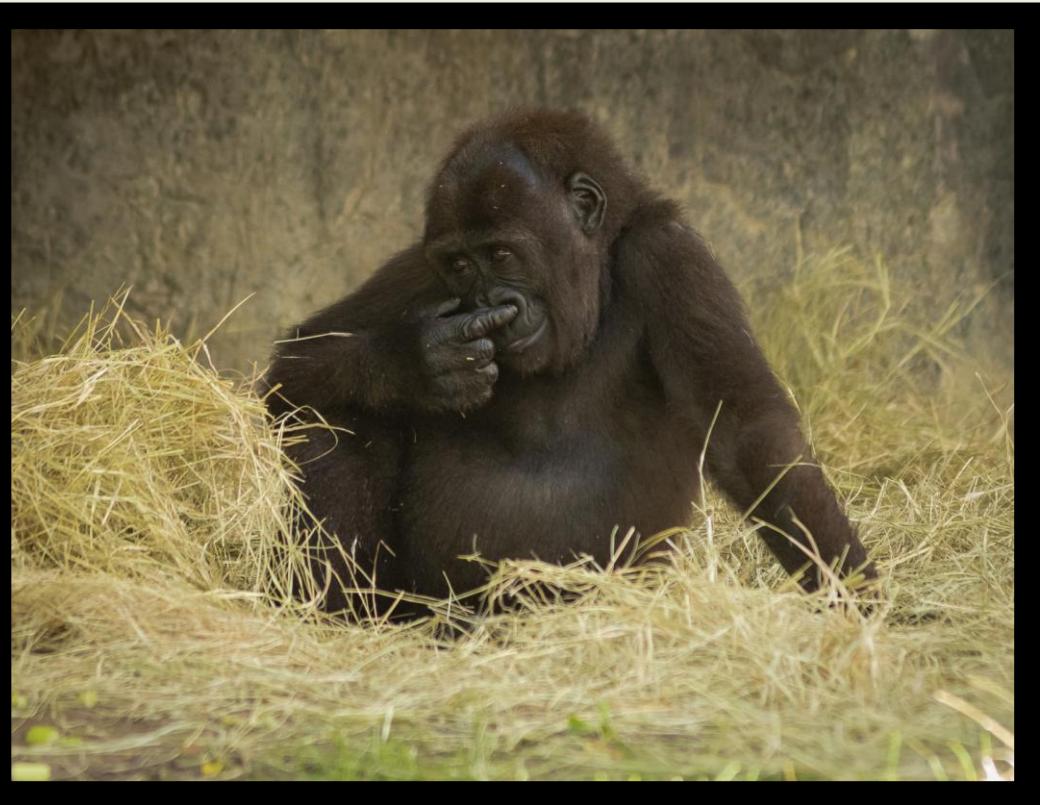


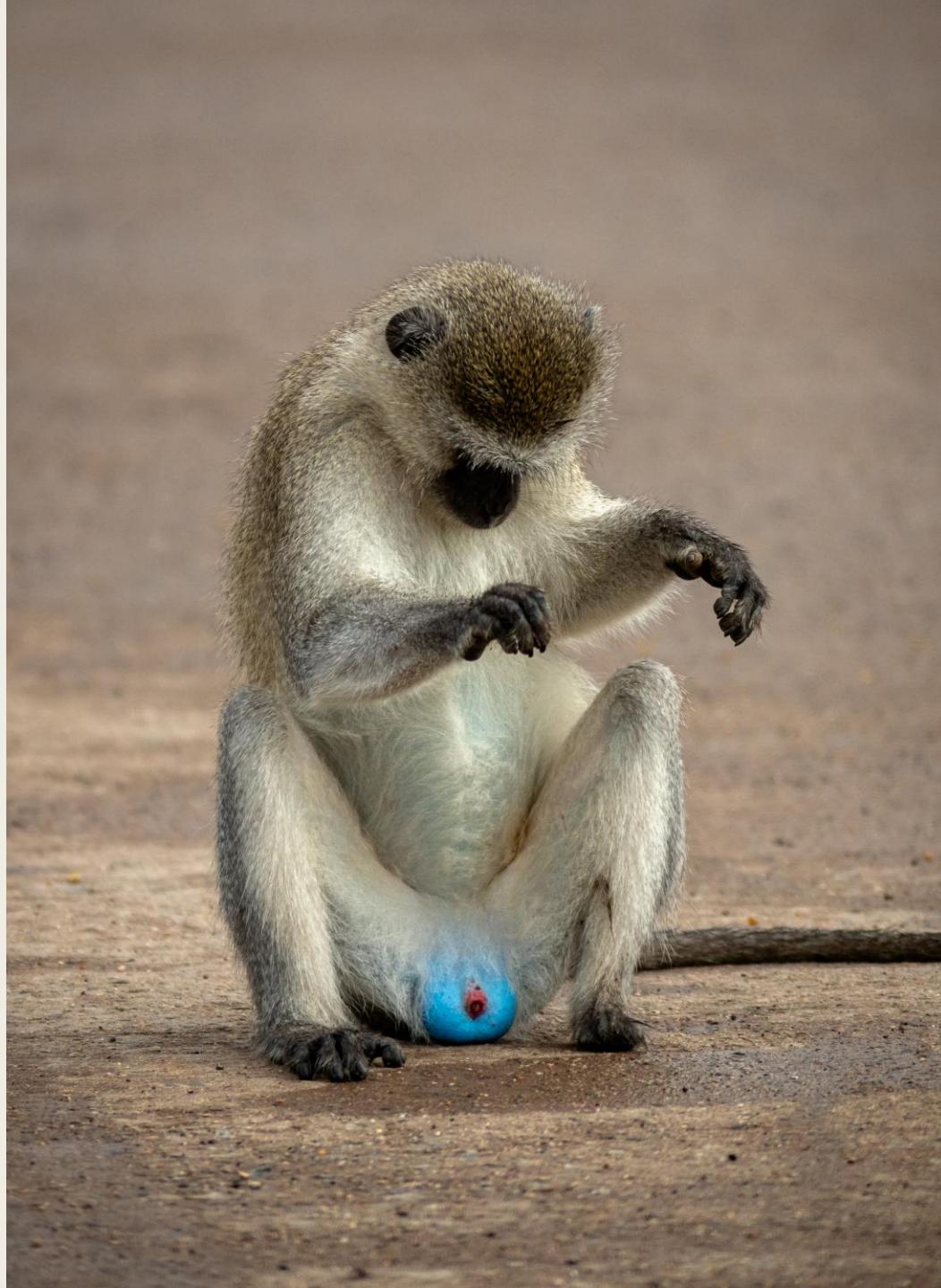


# IMPACT ACTION

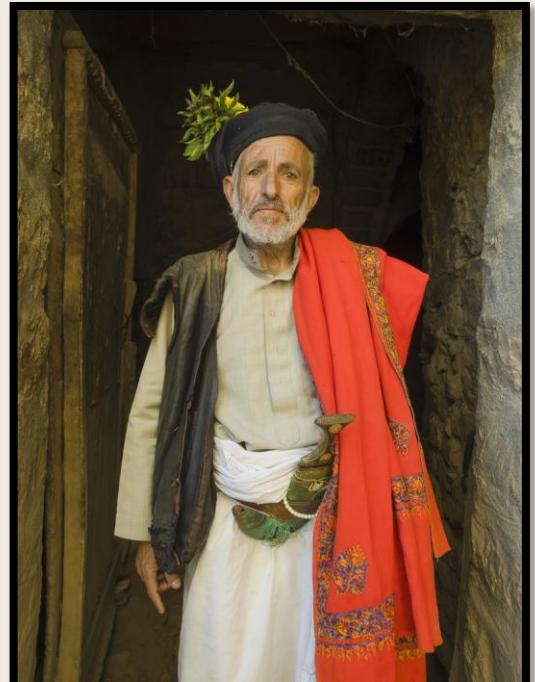
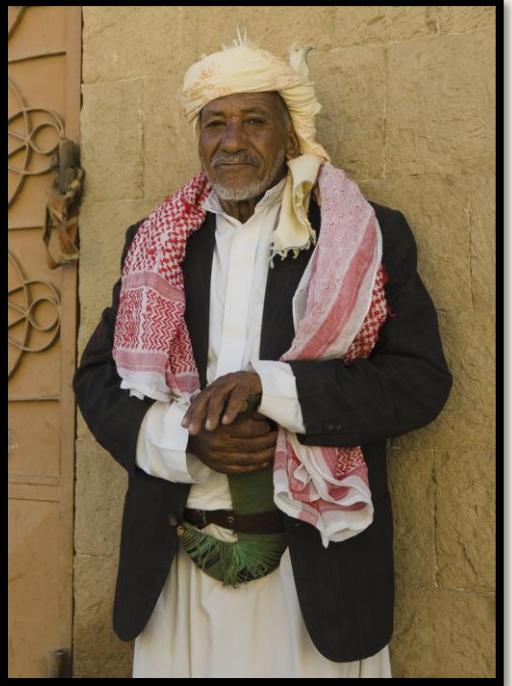


# IMPACT HUMOR





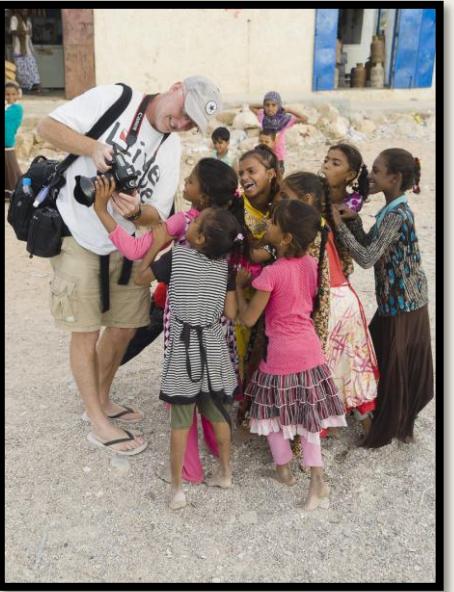
# IMPACT EXOTIC



# IMPACT SCALE







# IMPACT CONNECTION

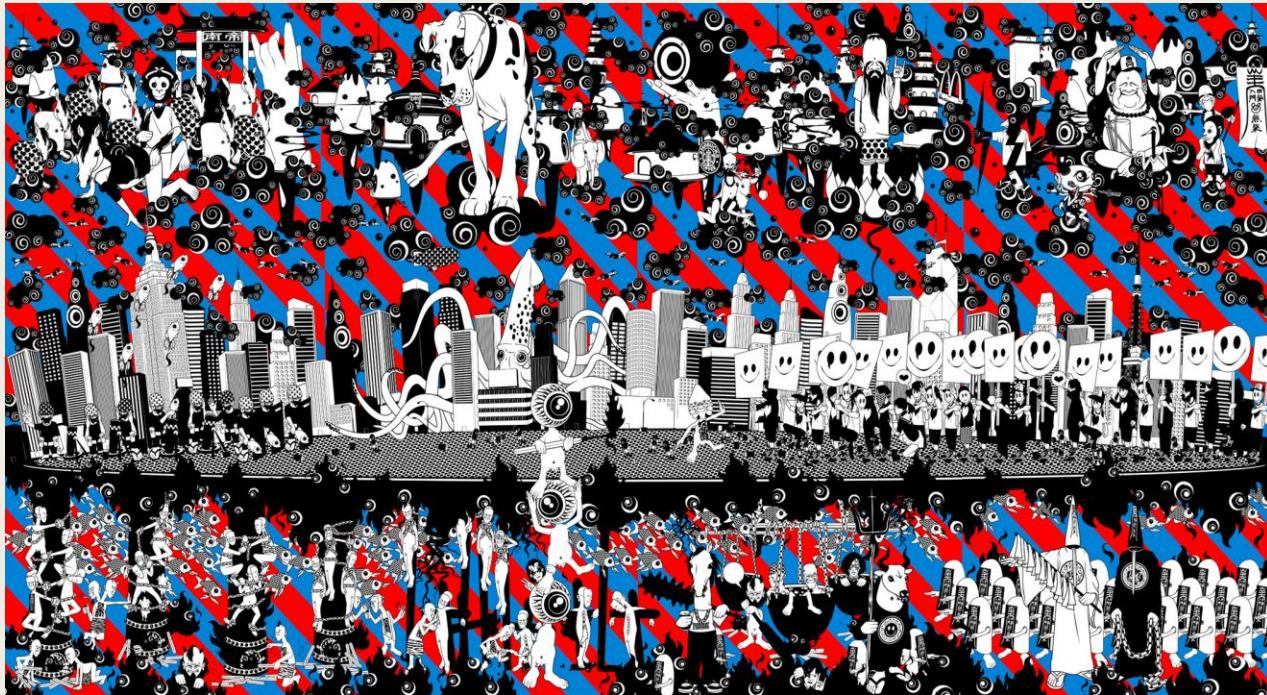




# IN ADDITION TO IMPACT, WINNING IMAGES HAVE:

- *Technical Perfection* (or as close as you can get).
- A *composition* that supports the photographer's intention.
  - *Composition is merely the arrangement of elements within the frame.*
  - *It is your responsibility to arrange things in the frame so that the viewer has a positive reaction to your image.*

# PAINTING vs PHOTOGRAPHY



# GENERAL ADVICE

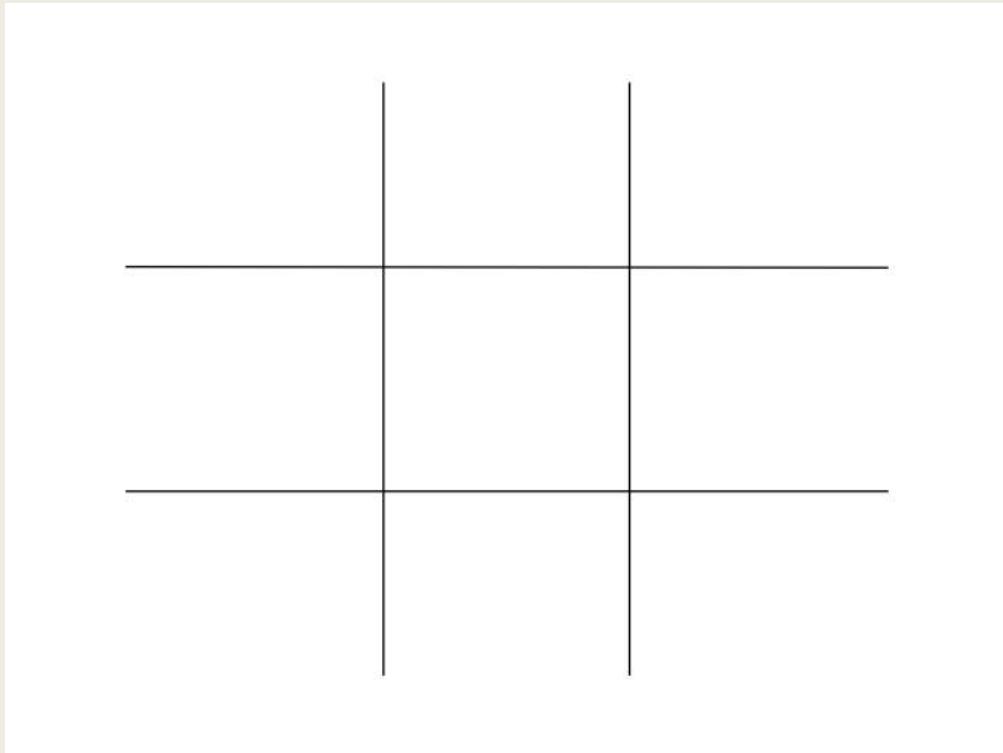
1. KNOW YOUR CAMERA
2. KNOW WHAT SETTINGS TO USE AND WHY
3. UNDERSTAND EFFECT OF LIGHT QUALITY AND QUANTITY
4. VARY YOUR PERSPECTIVE
5. AVOID ELEMENT OVERLAPS
6. PAY ATTENTION TO THE BACKGROUND

# TOOLS NOT RULES!

## (USE COMPOSITION TO YOUR ADVANTAGE)

- What are the so-called COMPOSITIONAL RULES of Photography?
  - *The Rule (Tool) of Thirds*
  - *Leading Lines*
  - *Fill the Frame*
  - *Read Left to Right*
  - *Use Odd Numbers of Things*
  - *Leave Space for Subject*
  - *Create Depth*
  - *Triangles and Diagonals*
  - *Frames*
  - *Differential Focus and Depth of Focus*

# EXAMPLES THE TOOL OF THIRDS



# EXAMPLES THE TOOL OF THIRDS



Background

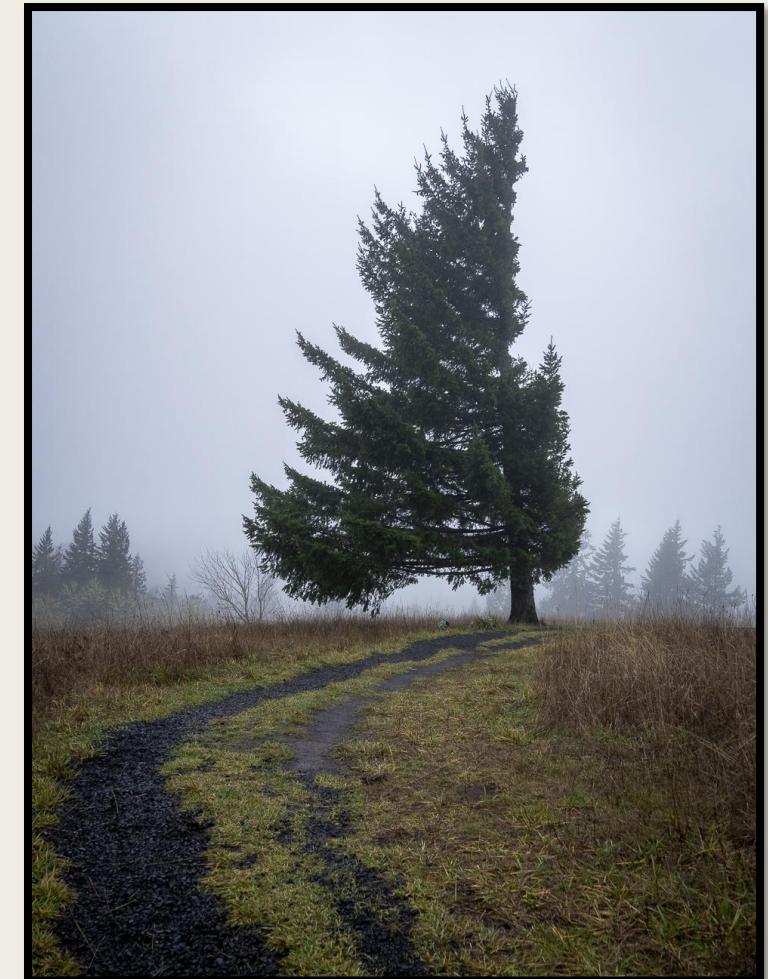
Mid

Foreground



# EXAMPLES HORIZONS

# EXAMPLES LEADING LINES



# EXAMPLES

## FILL THE FRAME





# EXAMPLES

## READ RIGHT TO LEFT



# EXAMPLES

## USE ODD NUMBERS OF THINGS



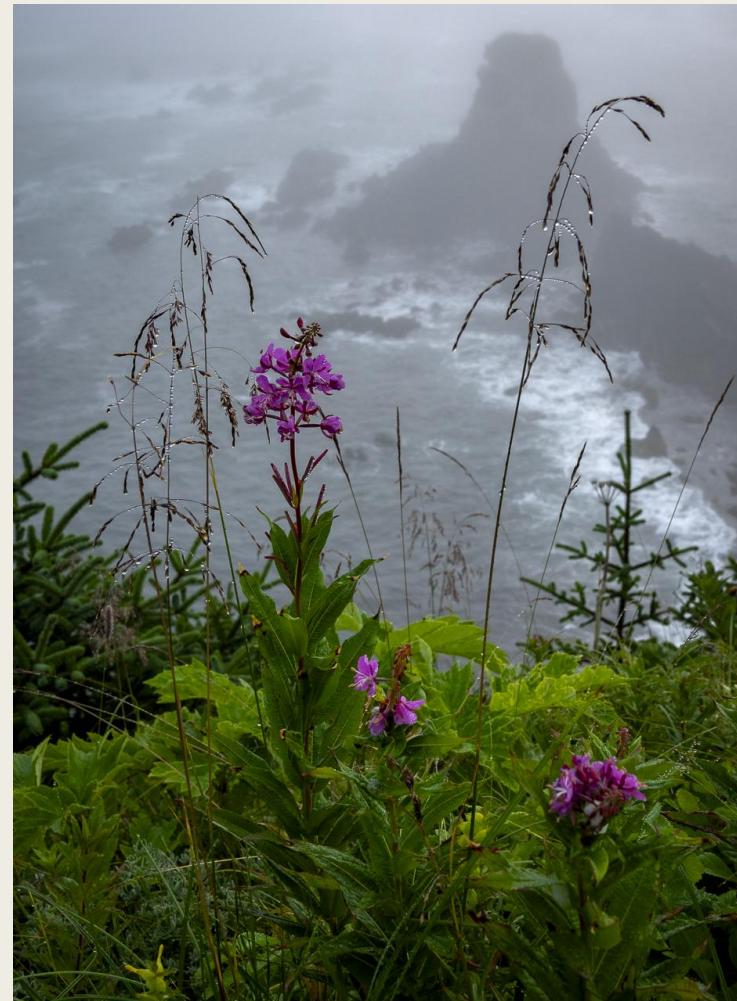
# EXAMPLES

## LEAVE A SPACE FOR SUBJECT





# EXAMPLES CREATE DEPTH





# EXAMPLES

## FOCUS



# FINAL POINT

LEARN TO LET  
-GO. THAT IS-  
THE KEY TO  
HAPPINESS.

# **TAKE HOME MESSAGE**

## **IF YOU WANT TO COMPETE MORE SUCCESSFULLY**

1. Capture an Interesting Subject With Intension
2. Take Advantage of the Best Light for your Subject
3. Use Compositional Tools to Enhance The Impact of Your Image
4. Avoid/Eliminate Distractions
5. Take Full Advantage of the Post-Processing Tools available to you
6. Follow the Contest Rules/Guidelines

**7. *TURN IT IN AND LET IT GO!!!!!***

**HAVE  
FUN!**

