

SCHOLASTIC

ART

FEBRUARY 2007 Vol. 37 No. 4 ISSN 1060-832X
www.scholastic.com

Annie Leibovitz

Working With Composition





"Sometimes the subjects feel more comfortable if they play the role than if they have to be themselves."

—Annie Leibovitz

COVER: Annie Leibovitz (b. 1949), Meryl Streep, New York City, 1981.
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POSTAL INFORMATION

Scholastic Art® (ISSN 1060-832X; in Canada, 2-c no. 55867) is published six times during the school year, Sept./Oct., Nov., Dec./Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr./May, by Scholastic Inc. Office of Publication: 2931 E. McCarty Street, P.O. Box 3710, Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710. Periodical postage paid at Jefferson City, MO 65101 and at additional offices. Postmasters: Send notice of address changes to SCHOLASTIC ART, 2931 East McCarty St., P.O. Box 3710, Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710.

PUBLISHING INFORMATION

U.S. prices: \$8.95 each per school year, for 10 or more subscriptions to the same address. 1-9 subscriptions, each: \$19.95 student, \$34.95 Teacher's Edition, per school year. Single copy: \$5.50 student, \$6.50 Teacher's. (For Canadian pricing, write our Canadian office, address below.) Subscription communications should be addressed to SCHOLASTIC ART, Scholastic Inc., 333 Randall Rd. Suite 130, St. Charles, IL 60174 or by calling 1-800-387-1437 ext. 99. Communications relating to editorial matter should be addressed to Margaret Howlett, SCHOLASTIC ART, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012-3999. Art@Scholastic.com. Canadian address: Scholastic Canada Ltd., 175 Hillmount Rd., Markham, Ontario L6C 1Z7. Canada Customer Service: 1-888-752-4690. Available on microfilm through Xerox University Microfilms, Inc., 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Also available on microfiche through Bell & Howell Micro Photo Division, Old Mansfield Rd., Wooster, OH 44691. Copyright © 2007 by Scholastic Inc. All Rights Reserved. Material in this issue may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any form or format without special permission from the publisher. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC ART, and associated designs are trademarks/registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

Printed in U.S.A.

Revealing Images

"I call myself a 'portrait photographer.' In a portrait, you have room to have a point of view and to be conceptual with a picture." —Annie Leibovitz



▲ Annie Leibovitz on the roof of her studio in New York City.

© Tomas Muscicono/Contact Press Images.



▲ "When you involve people, they come out, you see them, you get to see their sense of humor."
—Annie Leibovitz

Bob Dylan, Los Angeles, 1977. © Annie Leibovitz/Contact Press Images.

One sunny day in 1970, a young art student walked into the San Francisco office of a popular and influential magazine. She was 3,000 miles from home, had no contacts in the worlds of art and photography, and was barely out of her teens. Somehow she got the magazine's art director to look at her photos, and in a few months Annie Leibovitz (LEEB-o-vits) was in New York taking pictures of famous musician John Lennon.

Today, Leibovitz is regarded as one of the most important contemporary photographers in the world. She is best known for her portraits of celebrities—musicians, film stars, artists, and athletes. Through

her use of setting, body language, and composition, the artist is able to reveal what she feels is the subject's essential quality. Although most of her portraits have an informal, spontaneous look, it is the way in which Leibovitz carefully arranges all the various elements that gives each image its expressive power.

One of the photographer's first assignments was to go on tour with the already well-known musical group the Rolling Stones. Working on-site and using black-and-white film, Leibovitz captured the group's driving beat and movement in asymmetrical (different on each side but visually balanced) compositions such as the one on the opposite page, bottom. The distorted figures are seen from a low point of view, which intensifies the feeling of action. The harsh spotlighting, grainy texture, and sense of deep space visually



◀ "I like to think that I let the subject be whoever they want to be."
—Annie Leibovitz

Muhammad Ali, Chicago, 1978. © Annie Leibovitz/Contact Press Images.

re-create the percussive sounds and dramatic gestures of the performance. The **intersecting diagonals** of the lights and figures set up a visual tension within the **horizontal format** of this dynamic image.

A few years later, Leibovitz was sent to make a portrait of songwriter-folksinger Bob Dylan (opposite page, bottom). At the height of his popularity in the mid-1970s, Dylan was known for his dislike of publicity and his hermitlike behavior off-stage. Having misplaced the large sunglasses he always wore to hide his identity, Leibovitz's subject covers his eyes with his hands. The photographer has chosen to create an **extreme close-up** of this very private person, using his hands to **frame** his face. **Sharp focus** and **tight cropping** reveal the singer's wild hair, unshaven chin, and long, thick fingernails.

Muhammad Ali, the heavyweight boxing champion of the 1960s and 1970s, is shown here (left) in a very uncharacteristic position: lying on his back. The staircase setting may represent the ups and downs in the life and career of this always-controversial figure. Leibovitz has chosen to photograph the full body of this outspoken and powerful sports hero, nicknamed "The Greatest," from a **high point of view**. He appears to lie harmlessly, almost



◀ "I wanted the photographs to show the amount of energy that's involved in a performance." —Annie Leibovitz

The Rolling Stones, Philadelphia, 1975. © Annie Leibovitz/Contact Press Images.

as though he had just been defeated. **Framed**, perhaps confined, by the bars of the railings on either side of this **vertical** composition, Ali stares confidently at the camera. The dynamic twist of his body suggests **implied movement**—the fighter's ability to spring into action in a split second. The royal red background may symbolize the boxer's complete domination of his sport.

Body Language

"There is definitely an attempt to be as straightforward as possible, but there are instances where to get the picture I want, I have to help it." —Annie Leibovitz

Annie Leibovitz may be one of contemporary photography's superstars, but her life began in a very conventional way. One of six children, the photographer was born in 1949 in the suburban town of Westbury, Connecticut. Her father was in the military, so the family moved often. During high school Leibovitz played guitar, wrote music, and headed the school folksinging club. She also developed an interest in art, continuing her studies at the San Francisco Art Institute in order to become a painting teacher. During a school vacation Leibovitz visited her family, then living in the Philippines. She and her mother traveled to Japan, where Leibovitz bought a camera and began taking pictures.

Back at school, she took her first photography class. "I was totally seduced," she later said. "To see something and have it materialize before your eyes that same day. From then on, I lived in the darkroom." While a student she spent a year working on a farm in Israel, taking photos the entire time. Back in California, a friend suggested she take her portfolio to *Rolling Stone*. This was a new magazine about rock music and the counterculture that had begun to emerge at the end of the 1960s. The art director was so impressed that he began giving her work while she was still in school (she received her B.A. in 1971). Leibovitz recalled, "I can never forget the sensation of being at a newsstand and seeing for the first time my photograph transformed into the *Rolling Stone* cover." She stayed with the magazine for 13 years, traveling around the world photographing music stars.

In the early 1980s, Leibovitz became chief photographer for *Vanity Fair*, a large general-interest magazine. This gave her the chance to extend her subjects to include writers, actors, athletes, and visual artists such as Christo. Christo is known for the huge installations he makes by wrapping cliffs, buildings, and islands, and most

► "The image may not be literally what's going on, but it's representative."
—Annie Leibovitz

Christo, New York City, 1981.
© Annie Leibovitz/Contact Press Images.



recently for constructing a series of gates running through New York City's Central Park. In her photo (above), Leibovitz has turned things around and wrapped the artist himself. Her composition is nearly **symmetrical** (the same on each side). Within the **square format**, the **central horizon line** and the **vertical figure intersect** to form a kind of cross shape. This serves to further emphasize the work's **focal point**. In this portrait, a wrapped Christo temporarily disrupts the natural setting in the same way his enormous installation pieces do. The shocking sight of his white, bandaged figure standing out against Central Park's green grass and blue sky **echoes** the sometimes controversial nature of Christo's art.

In some of Leibovitz's compositions, the setting is just as important as the figure. Folksinger Pete Seeger (opposite page, top) has always been famous for his protest



◀ “The studio felt so claustrophobic. I wanted to be somewhere where things could happen and the subject wasn’t just looking back at you.”
—Annie Leibovitz

Pete Seeger, *Clearwater Revival*, Croton-on-Hudson, New York, 2001. © Annie Leibovitz/Contact Press Images.

▼ “I draw from many different ways to take a picture. Sometimes I go back to reportage, to journalism.”
—Annie Leibovitz

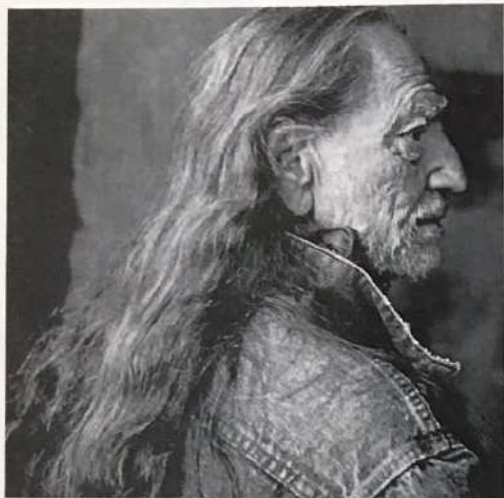
Serena and Venus Williams, West Palm Beach, Florida, 1999. © Annie Leibovitz/Contact Press Images.

songs. Seen at eye-level, Seeger shares the **horizontal** format of this **asymmetrical composition** with the Hudson River whose ecology he helped restore. The patterns and waves in the **background** are in the same **sharp focus** as the figure in the photo’s **foreground**. The soft light of the river mist **backlights** the singer’s head, creating an almost halo-like effect. The suspended figure of rock musician Bruce Springsteen in concert (pages 8-9) would be dramatic on its own. But the **vivid horizontals** of the almost **abstract pattern** behind him add another dimension to the picture. The viewer’s realization that the red stripes are actually a **tightly cropped** American flag offers a commentary on the singer’s often politically charged lyrics.



Leibovitz’s portrait of tennis stars Serena and Venus Williams (above) is all about body language. Taken from a slightly **low angle**, and **cropped** so the figures fill the frame, this composition visually expresses the way in which these two young women have dominated their

sport. The **soft lighting** and **neutral background** suggest a single unit standing against the world. **Negative space** surrounds but also comes between them. Their poses reflect their dual roles—sisters, but competitors; joined, but separate. Their defiant expressions and the **intersecting diagonals** formed by their arms and bodies express the dynamism and tension of their complex relationship.



▲ To Leibovitz, many of her subjects' faces—like that of singer Willie Nelson—resemble “road maps” of their lives.

Willie Nelson, Luck Ranch, Spicewood, Texas, 2001. © Annie Leibovitz/Contact Press Images.

Behind the Mask

“There’s no such thing as objectivity. Everyone has a point of view. . . . When you trust your point of view, that’s when you start taking pictures.” —Annie Leibovitz

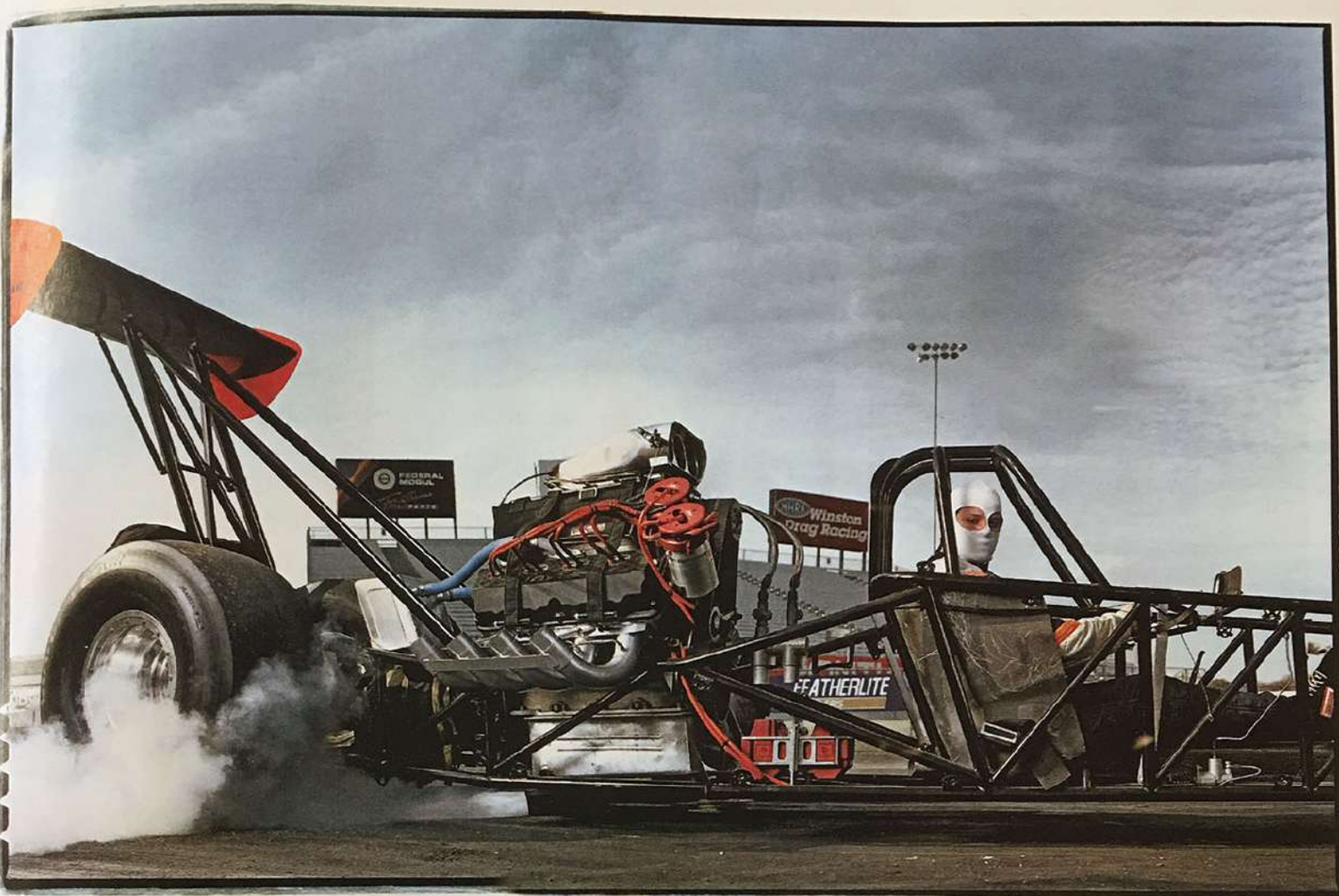


Annie Leibovitz has taken hundreds of portraits during her long career, many of them world famous. And, as she has stated many times, she almost always begins with her own definite point of view. Her photos are carefully constructed around ideas chosen to fit the image of the sitter. Over the years, the photographer has developed a way of working with her famous subjects in order to obtain her dramatic results.

Leibovitz regards her photographic sessions as a collaboration. She researches her subjects before she meets them. She listens to their music, sees their performances, reads their books. She then spends a couple of days observing their lives. By the time she finally lifts her camera, her subjects usually feel at ease. Sometimes she encourages them to do silly things while she is photographing. These poses often reveal their personalities more successfully than a conventional portrait would. The photographer describes working with actress Meryl Streep (cover): “She was just becoming a big star... they were photographing her all the time and she couldn’t deal with it... When she came to my studio, she said she didn’t want to be

◀ ***“What I end up shooting is the situation. I shoot the composition and my subject is going to help the composition or not.” —Annie Leibovitz***

Lily Tomlin, Los Angeles, 1973. © Annie Leibovitz/Contact Press Images.



anybody, all she was was an actress. I had some clown's makeup, so I said, 'Be no one, let's try the whiteface.' That's when she started to pull her cheeks out. It's great when that stuff happens." The image Leibovitz has created visually expresses Streep's ability to mold her face while playing a character. The pose also suggests a Greek mask of tragedy, a traditional symbol for drama. Streep's **cropped** hands create **asymmetrical diagonals** pointing to the work's **focal point**, her startlingly white face.

While some of Leibovitz's images are spontaneous, most are planned to fit the image of the sitter. Since her first appearance on television, comedian Lily Tomlin (opposite page, bottom) has created many inventive and exaggerated characters. The photographer uses a TV monitor to **frame** Tomlin's **distorted, spotlighted** face. Playfully seeming to confuse reality with illusion, the comedian applies theatrical makeup not to her face, but to its image.

A **square format** (opposite page, top) emphasizes the distinctive **profile** of singer-songwriter Willie Nelson. Leibovitz's **triangular composition** balances his face with his long, flowing hair. The hard times mentioned in Nelson's songs are expressed visually by the **harsh contrasts** in this stark black-and-white image. The camera's **sharp focus**

▲ "I don't think there is anything wrong with white space. I don't think it's a problem to have a blank wall." —Annie Leibovitz

Cristen Powell, Indianapolis Speedway, Indiana, 1999. © Annie Leibovitz/Contact Press Images.

picks up every wrinkle in the folk icon's weathered face.

Can you find the **focal point** in the photo above? Look at the smoke coming from the rear wheels of the drag-racing car. Follow the car's shape to the masked head **framed** by the driver's box on the right. The subject of this unusual composition is then-17-year-old Cristen Powell, one of only six women to have won an event title on the National Hot Rod Association's racing circuit. Leibovitz took this picture for a magazine series featuring outstanding female athletes. Powell describes the photo shoot this way: "Once her team had me ready to go, Annie shows up. First thing she says is 'Take all those panels off the car.' By the time she set up everything and started taking pictures it was perfect. For someone who knew nothing about drag racing, she made it all look so convincing."

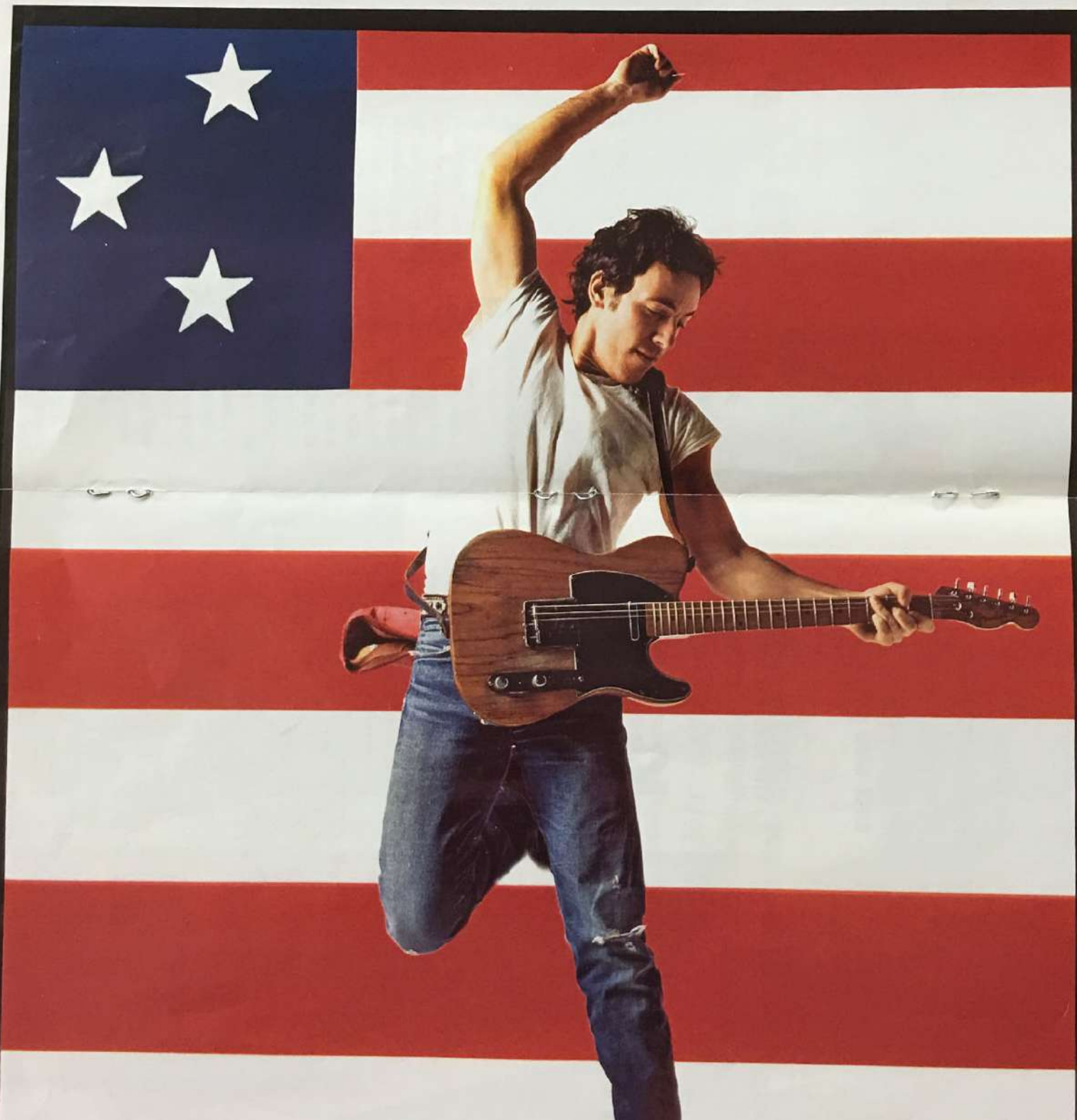
The **tight cropping**, **low horizon line**, and **dominant area of negative space** at the top of the composition communicate the speed, danger, and unlimited future of a talented young woman at the beginning of her career.

SCHOLASTIC
ART
MASTERPIECE
OF THE MONTH #4

Bruce Springsteen

BY ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

*"I often get something other than what I had anticipated . . .
something else. Something that moves me unexpectedly." —Annie Leibovitz*



Expressive Portraits

***In these
photographic
portraits,
composition helps
tell the story***



**"I DON'T WANT TO OFFER
THE WHOLE STORY TO THE
AUDIENCE." —NIKKI S. LEE**

CLEVER CROPPING

Korean artist Nikki S. Lee slips in and out of identities in her snapshot-like self-portraits.

Paris #206 comes from a series titled "Parts," in which Lee photographed herself and male friends or hired actors in carefully staged scenes.

The repetition of elaborate spiral patterns in the carpet, railings, and winding staircase ties the image together visually. The balanced, asymmetrical composition contrasts the figures in the foreground on the left with the deep space of the background on the right.

Seen from a high point of view, the radial symmetry of the stripes on Lee's dress makes her the focal point of this composition. The man she is with has been literally sliced out of the photo. (The artist emphasizes this by framing three sides of the image with a white border and cropping the fourth.) His absence suggests that this photo is just one "part" of a larger and somewhat mysterious narrative. Rather than cropping an image to make us focus on what's inside the frame, Lee's cropped composition makes us wonder about what is missing from this story.

◀ Nikki S. Lee (b.1970), *Paris #206*, 2004. Lambda print mounted on aluminum, 60 x 45 in. Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York.



“THERE IS SOMETHING INFINITELY INTERESTING ABOUT THE HUMAN SUBJECT.” —DAWOUD BEY

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

African-American photographer Dawoud Bey’s (DAH-ood bay) multiple-image portraits capture slight changes in a sitter’s expression from moment to moment. In this Polaroid **triptych** (three-panel picture), *Sharmaine, Vincente, Joseph, Andre, and Charlie*, Bey records the fleeting gestures and subtle expressions of personality of a group of high-school students in Chicago.

Taken from an **eye-level point of view** and **tightly cropped** so that the figures fill each frame, this **horizontal**

composition visually expresses the relationship between the subjects. Their bodies touch and overlap. The contrasting **negative space** of the **flat background** emphasizes their solidarity. Yet they are all distinct individuals with their own personalities: Some are seen in **profile** while others look directly at the camera. The **changes in scale** between different panels add visual interest and capture the dynamic energy of the subjects’ body language.

▲ Dawoud Bey (b. 1953), *Sharmaine, Vincente, Joseph, Andre, and Charlie*, 1993. Collection of Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College Chicago. © 2006 Dawoud Bey.

“I SAW AND APPROACHED THE HUNGRY AND DESPERATE MOTHER, AS IF DRAWN BY A MAGNET.” —DOROTHEA LANGE



FRAMING A FOCAL POINT

This powerful image of a weary mother and her children has become a symbol of the poverty, unemployment, and homelessness that many people suffered during the Great Depression (1929–39). American photographer Dorothea Lange shot this photo at a camp for migrant pea-pickers in California in 1936.

In this **tightly cropped** image, the figures huddle together, filling the frame. The mother is the center of a **triangular composition** with a child on each side. This triangle is echoed by the **asymmetrical diagonals** formed by the bends in the figures’ elbows.

Lange knew that the mother’s facial expression was the key to a powerful photograph, and made it the **focal point** of her composition. The woman’s raised hand directs attention to her worried look. Against the **soft, blurred background**, the **harsh lighting** and **sharp focus** emphasize her worn and weather-beaten features. Nothing else in Lange’s composition competes with the mother’s face. She is **framed** by her children, who turn away from the camera as if shielding themselves with their mother’s body.

◀ Dorothea Lange (1895–1965), *Migrant Mother*, 1936. Farm Security Administration Collection, The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Frozen Moments

Max Berman is not interested in photographing the ordinary. "I don't try to do what everybody else is doing," Max says. "I strive to create my own style." With that goal in mind, Max, 15, has avoided photographing classic landscapes and portraits. He has instead taken a keen interest in capturing movement. He has applied what he knows about shutter speed, composition, and light to freeze objects in motion and create images like the award-winning photograph on the opposite page.

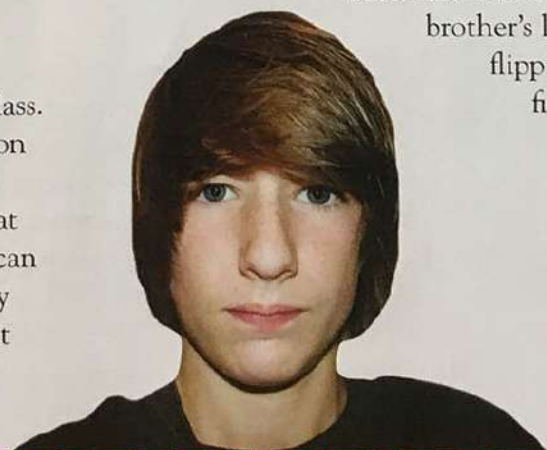
Currently a freshman at Park Tudor High School in Indianapolis, Indiana, Max is focusing his camera work on creating images in motion that are slightly blurred, not frozen and crystal clear. His favorite is one he took at an airport. It is a tight shot of a woman's bright-green Converse sneakers shuffling along the gray floor. "Because the shutter speed was so slow, it looked like she had eight shoes on," Max says. "That's what I love about photography. You can capture an emotion or movement in a way no other art form can."

How did you get started making art?

I've been creating art ever since I can remember. My dad has a darkroom in the basement. Art and photography have always been part of my life.

How did you come to take this award-winning photograph?

It was an assignment for science class. We had to capture energy in motion on film as part of a unit on energy transfer. You can take a picture that freezes an object's motion, or you can capture all the phases of motion by photographing the object so that it looks blurry. The choice is yours.



MAX BERMAN

Where did you get your idea?

I wanted to use the fastest setting on my digital camera, which can take a photo in 1/2,000th of a second. To use this setting, I knew I would need as much light as possible. Indianapolis in the fall is usually rainy and overcast, which is not great for stop-action photos. Thankfully, my family was headed on vacation to my grandparents' condo in Florida. I brought my camera with me and started rifling off pictures of my brother Carl horsing around in the condo's hot tub. I wanted to see

if I could capture something I liked. Eventually, I did.

How did you know this was just the right photo?

The first pictures I took were of my brother falling backward into the pool. Then, I thought about my brother's long hair. Why not take a picture of him flipping it up, soaking wet, in the air? The first picture I took was off-center. But I noticed that the curved streams of water falling off his hair matched the shape of the tree in the background. So I centered him under the tree, to emphasize the repetition of the curves. Once I did that, the composition felt right. My brother

"The curved shapes—of the water swirling in the hot tub, the pool wall, the tree, and the arc of water frozen in midair—give the picture its energy."

looked framed and the balance of shapes was perfect. I got this picture on the third or fourth try. It was love at first sight. I thought, "Wow, this is it! It's awesome!"

What is it about your composition that makes it visually interesting?

The curved shapes—of the water swirling in the hot tub, the pool wall, the tree, and the arc of water frozen in midair—give the picture its energy. The superfast shutter speed creates a crisp, sharp image and makes the water look interesting, almost like ice.

From what vantage point did you shoot your picture?

I shot my brother from above for two reasons. I didn't want to risk damaging my camera in the water, so I was forced to work from the tub's edge. I also wanted to get as much of the tree in there and the awesomeness of the water without losing Carl as the focus.

Why did you choose to work in a vertical format?

If I had taken this picture horizontally, it would have contained more useless negative space. The vertical composition tightly frames what I want you to see. There's less to distract you from the photo's focus.

How did you go about creating this photograph?

First, I chose a location for my shoot and made sure there was enough light. Next, I set my digital camera on the fastest shutter speed and set the film speed. I opened the aperture of my lens up to make sure the image had the correct contrast (not too dark or light). Then, I just started shooting away. I took about 100 pictures, and kept maybe 10. I downloaded the images onto my computer, and made 8 x 10 prints. It was exciting to see the image at that size because all the details really popped out.

Were you satisfied when you were done?

Definitely. The fact that I could use my camera to capture movement in this way really sparked my interest in



photography. I was hooked. I started taking my camera everywhere. I wanted to snap that next cool picture.

Do you have any advice for aspiring artists like yourself?

Patience is a virtue, especially when it comes to photography. You can't rush the process. You have to take the time to see if you've got the perfect composition, the perfect lighting, and the perfect shot. If you have patience, and the willingness to keep shooting pictures until you're satisfied, then you can create great things.

To find out more about The Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, ask your teacher to write to The Alliance for Young Artists & Writers, Inc., 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012-3999; phone 212-343-6892; or go to www.scholastic.com/artandwriting.



ERICA OLIVIA SANCHEZ

▲ In Erica's composition, Derek's body is aligned with the branch that runs parallel to the bottom edge of the photo. Seen from a low point of view, the horizontal branch in the foreground contrasts with the diagonal branches in the background.



DEREK STEVENS

▲ A piece of playground equipment is an important element in Derek's inventive composition. The circular form of the yellow plastic tube frames the work's focal point—Erica's head. And the effect of static electricity on her hair further emphasizes the photo's radial symmetry (elements arranged around a central axis).

ERICA OLIVIA SANCHEZ

▲ Erica's photo of Derek was taken at a distance from a high point of view. Diagonal lawnmower lines lead the viewer's gaze to the

SCHOLASTIC ART WORKSHOP

Creative Portrait Photography

*Work with composition
to capture your subject's
personality*

MATERIALS

- Camera with a flash*
- Film or memory card
- Batteries or camera charger
- Cables to download digital images, if necessary
- Photography consent/release form
- Spray adhesive (for photo mounting)
- Black construction paper
- Optional: Tripod

* Digital, disposable, or 35-mm cameras are all acceptable options.

As you've learned from this issue, capturing someone's personality in a photograph can be a challenging and complex process. Annie Leibovitz spends time getting to know her subjects before carefully planning the concept and composition of her images.

In this workshop, you will create a photographic portrait of someone in your community. By working with composition, location, and props, you will create a portrait that immediately tells the viewer something about the subject's personality.

STEP 1 Decide on a subject to photograph and a location for the shoot. Think about the personality of your subject: Is the person outgoing or shy; serious or funny; good at sports, music, or art? Does he or she have unique **body language** or mannerisms? What physical characteristics distinguish your subject? In what location will you shoot the photo: at work or at home, inside or outside? Does the figure need a prop to help tell the story?

Explain the assignment to the subject, and ask him or her to sign a release form. Before the shoot, familiarize yourself with how your camera works. Use a tripod, or learn how to hold the camera correctly to avoid shaking.

Prepared by Ned J. Nesti Jr., Art Instructor, Morrison Junior High School, Morrison, IL. Assisted by Nicholas R. Bonheur, Art Instructor, A. Vito Martinez Middle School, Romeoville, IL; Charlie Dubnick, Art Instructor, Brooks Middle School, Bolingbrook, IL; Andrew Holt, College of Fine & Applied Arts, School of Art, University of Illinois, Champaign, IL; Eitak Bunt, Illinois Valley Community College, Oglesby, IL; Angela Agnes-Agap Hermes, Carroll Community College, Westminster, MD. Photographed by Larry Gregory, Associate Professor, School of Art, Northern Illinois University, and Wade Duerkes, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL.



picture's focal point. What might this composition—a small, solitary figure in a vast outdoor setting—visually suggest about the personality of its subject?

JOHN BRAD BENSON

▲ John's balanced asymmetrical composition is divided into two parts. The contrast between the bright green foliage and the brick wall reflects the contrast between the outgoing and shy aspects of Spencer's personality. Both sides of the composition are equally in focus.

SPENCER HORN

▲ Natural light coming through the window illuminates Spencer's portrait of Mrs. Spangler. Visually trapped on the left side of the composition, she appears to be longing to escape the confines of her retirement home. Her raised hand directs the viewer's gaze to her facial expression.



REMEMBER: Use existing or natural light whenever possible.

ALSO: If the subject is too close to the camera, the photo may be blurry or out of focus.

STEP 2 Try to **frame** a visually interesting, balanced symmetrical or asymmetrical composition within the viewfinder. Will your composition be **vertical** or **horizontal**? How does the subject best fit into the space? Keep your composition simple and tight.

What will your **focal point** be? Avoid framing the subject in the very center of your picture. Will you focus on the subject's face, or is the full figure necessary to tell the story? Will the subject be seen from a **frontal view** or a **side profile**? Will he or she be looking at the camera or at something outside of the composition? What will the **point of view** be: low, high, or **eye level**? Don't be afraid to use sharp angles; diagonal elements will make your composition look dramatic.

Consider the **foreground** and **background** of your composition. Think of interesting ways to have the **negative space** frame the subject. **Focus** on the subject and **crop** out any visual distractions.



HELPFUL HINT: You may want to include a prop or visually interesting object from the environment that helps tell the story.

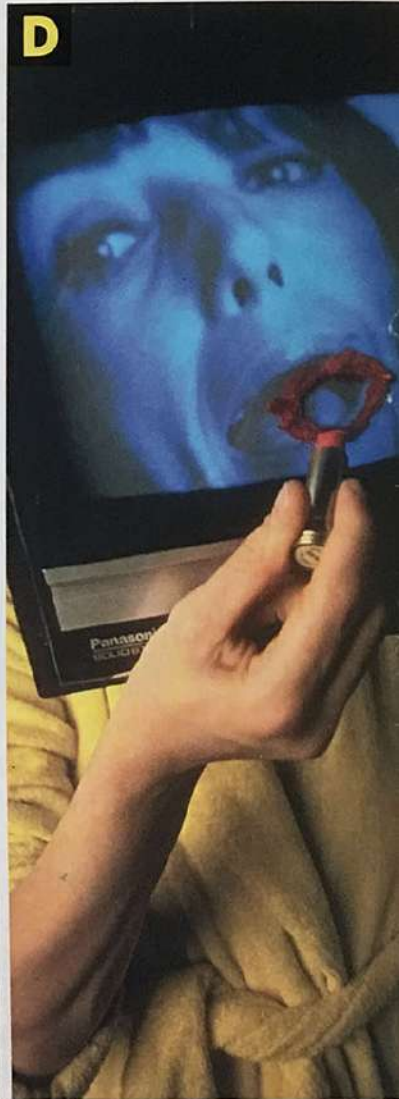
STEP 3 Plan ahead, but allow for spontaneity during the shoot. Remember that a good relationship with the subject is important. Make the subject feel comfortable and relaxed. Don't rush. Try taking the same photograph from several different angles.

STEP 4 Download digital photos to a computer, or have 35-mm photos developed and put on a disk. Select the most successful compositions for printing. Mount printed photos on black construction paper using spray adhesive, leaving room for a border. Display the mounted photographs in an exhibit at school.

Composed Figures

How is composition used in each of these portraits?

As you've seen in this issue, contemporary portrait photographers like Annie Leibovitz use composition, body language, and setting to communicate the personalities of their subjects. Below are details of some of the portraits featured in this issue as well as a list of related descriptions and compositional techniques. Next to each word or phrase, write the letter of the image (or images) you feel it most closely describes.



___ 1. distortion

___ 2. framing

___ 3. symmetrical composition

___ 4. central horizon line

___ 5. low point of view

___ 6. grainy texture

___ 7. spotlighting

___ 8. intersecting diagonals

___ 9. vertical figure

___ 10. flat background

___ 11. eye level

___ 12. negative space