



7 WAYS TO SHOOT THE MUNDANE

Quick Guide

Written by David Veldman



Photo by David Veldman

WHAT IS 'THE MUNDANE'?

When I first began to study photography, I read an article that talked about the three main elements that a photographer needs to create a stunning image: subject, light, and composition. The recipe stuck with me, and I often use it when I shoot. I quickly use those three elements as a checklist in my mind to ensure that I am considering all aspects of the shot.

We often talk about composition and light at Photzy. However, it can be all too easy to forget about selecting the most important part: the subject.

Note: If you want to learn more about using the key concepts of light & composition to improve your photography, take a look at two of Kent DuFault's best-selling guide, [Understanding Light: Book One](#) & [Understanding Composition](#)

Choosing a subject is the first step to making an image, and it's essentially what separates those with the 'photographic eye' from those without. Even in their everyday life, photographers keep that sense active, constantly watching for a viable subject, on the lookout for the next great shot. Sometimes we pre-visualize what we want to shoot, and in order to realize that

image in our heads we may go to great lengths (or distances). For example, I may visualize the sun setting in a forested valley and travel to such an area to photograph it. However, on many occasion this isn't possible, and our range of subjects becomes horribly limited. I find myself in this situation frequently, and at first, it drove me mad. I knew what I wanted to shoot—soaring architecture and Gothic buildings—but I live in a town of 15,000 people, with the most notable architecture being a post office. Over time I developed a different attitude towards this situation, and that is to embrace the 'mundane.'

The mundane refers to the small details of everyday life that we take for granted. We walk past them every day, and because of their ubiquity, we pay no attention. This could happen to anyone living anywhere, from suburban North America to what we consider an exotic locale, like Hawaii. While there is no denying that some locations are more interesting than others, it's also important to remember that people living on the other side of the world could quite possibly find your home exotic. The trickiest part of shooting the mundane is teaching yourself to spot opportunities where you previously saw nothing. This takes time to master.

WHY SHOOT THE MUNDANE?

There are a few very compelling reasons to shoot everyday objects around us. The first is that it prevents us from simply not shooting. When confronted with a lack of interesting subjects, it's all too easy to simply shelf the camera and surf the Internet, drooling over the leaked specs of the newest gear. Throwing up your hands and saying 'there's nothing to shoot' is a common response, but it won't help you develop as a photographer. Dust off that camera and start shooting again.

Secondly, shooting boring subjects will improve your overall photography. As I like to say: 'if you can take a good image of a boring subject, you can take a great picture of an interesting subject.' When shooting the mundane you need to consider your subject very carefully and inspect it for the most interesting composition and angle. This process will eventually become ingrained in you. Then, instead of snapping the obvious common shot at a great location, you will stop and think about how to maximize interest. Keep in mind that shooting the mundane will not always produce amazing images that win acclaim; however you may find yourself surprised at what can be created.

HOW TO SHOOT THE MUNDANE

Ahead, I am going to give you a collection of tips on how to shoot the everyday world around us. I won't be focusing on specific subjects, but as you read the tips, think of examples around you. I'm willing to bet that by the end of this tutorial you'll have a few shots in mind to try out.

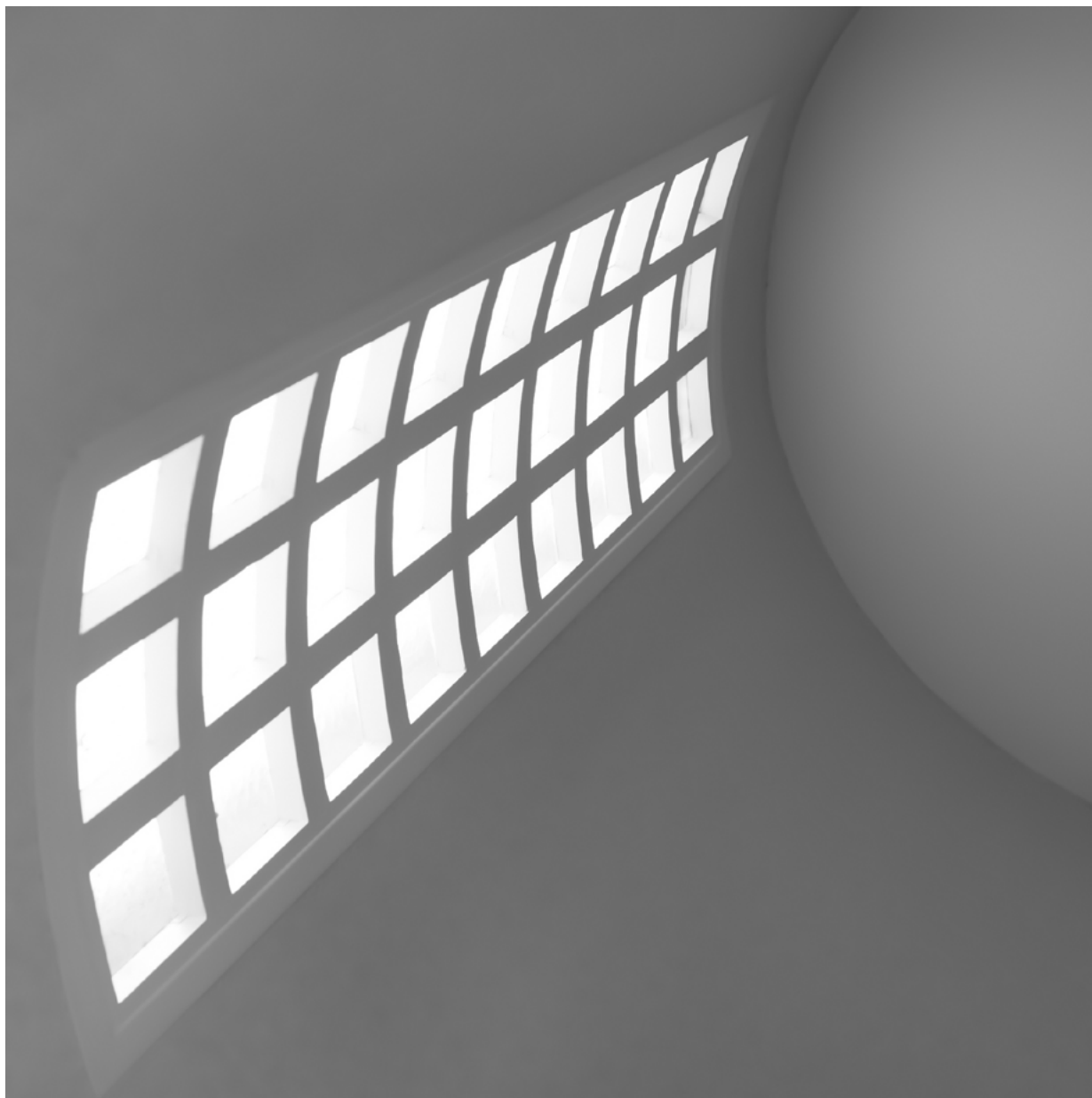


Photo by Thomas Leth-Olsen
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/thomasletholsen/6993904230/>

SHAPE

Shapes are a critical element of composition, whether you are shooting the mundane or a stunning architectural wonder. Shapes are one of the first things humans learn to differentiate, and can even create a sort of mood in an image. 'Soft' shapes like circles and ovals feel peaceful and pastoral as they can be found in nature. 'Hard' shapes like squares and polygons can create tension and are associated with man-made objects. Regular shapes like squares and triangles are mentally associated with order, while unusual ones may evoke a sense of chaos.

You can also use shapes to enhance one another. I love to shoot square photos with repeating circles in the frame, as the two shapes provide an intriguing contrast.

Utilize shapes when shooting the mundane, and you will begin to recognize them more readily in your regular photography.

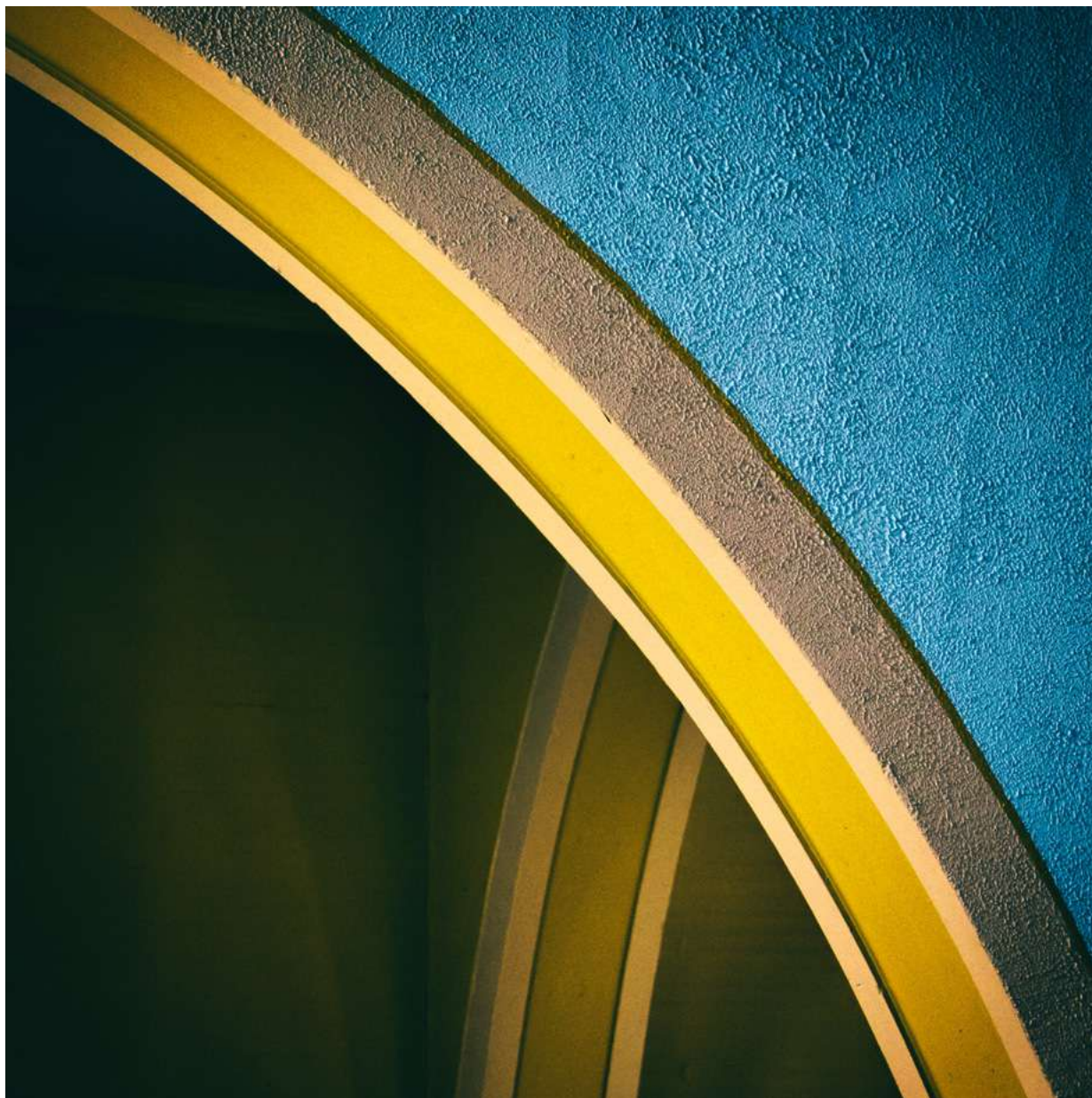


Photo by David Veldman
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/themercurist/26140267295/>

COLOR

If you don't already look for colors when you shoot, then you're missing out. Although I am more than partial to black and white photography, some pictures require being rendered in vivid hues. In these cases, the colors are more than complementary—they are the subject.

Learn to see colors, and they will reward you with striking, simple images. Even more so than shapes, colors are associated with emotions and ideas on a deep, unconscious level. Red is the color of passion, anger and love. Pink is considered feminine, and blue is considered masculine. Green soothes and heals; orange demands our attention. Research the mental implications of the colors and understand when and how to use them. Learn which are complementary, but don't be afraid to break those rules as well.

Colors lend themselves very well to abstract and minimalist images, which coincidentally are a very compelling way to photograph the mundane.

As a primarily black and white photographer, it can be challenging to see images in color, but it's important to remember that as humans we do perceive the world in millions of hues every day. Capture just a fragment of that, and you're well on your way to producing stunning images of the mundane.



Photo by Nick Kenrick
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/zedzap/8245608750/>

SHADOW AND LIGHT

I've written before about the importance of shadows in photography ([you can check it out by accessing this link](#)), and of course, without light photography wouldn't exist. When shooting the mundane, shadows and highlights become a primary part of the image. In most cases, photographers choose a subject and then wait for or create ideal light. In this case, you can wait for the light and shoot whatever you have around you. As I mentioned earlier, this practice will benefit your photography as a whole. You may begin to study light more carefully. You may also begin to consider the placement and type of shadows. Beautiful light or dramatic shadows can transform even the most boring subject into a stunning image.

If you see the light is perfect but can't go far or reach an ideal subject in time, don't fret. Look around and shoot what you can.

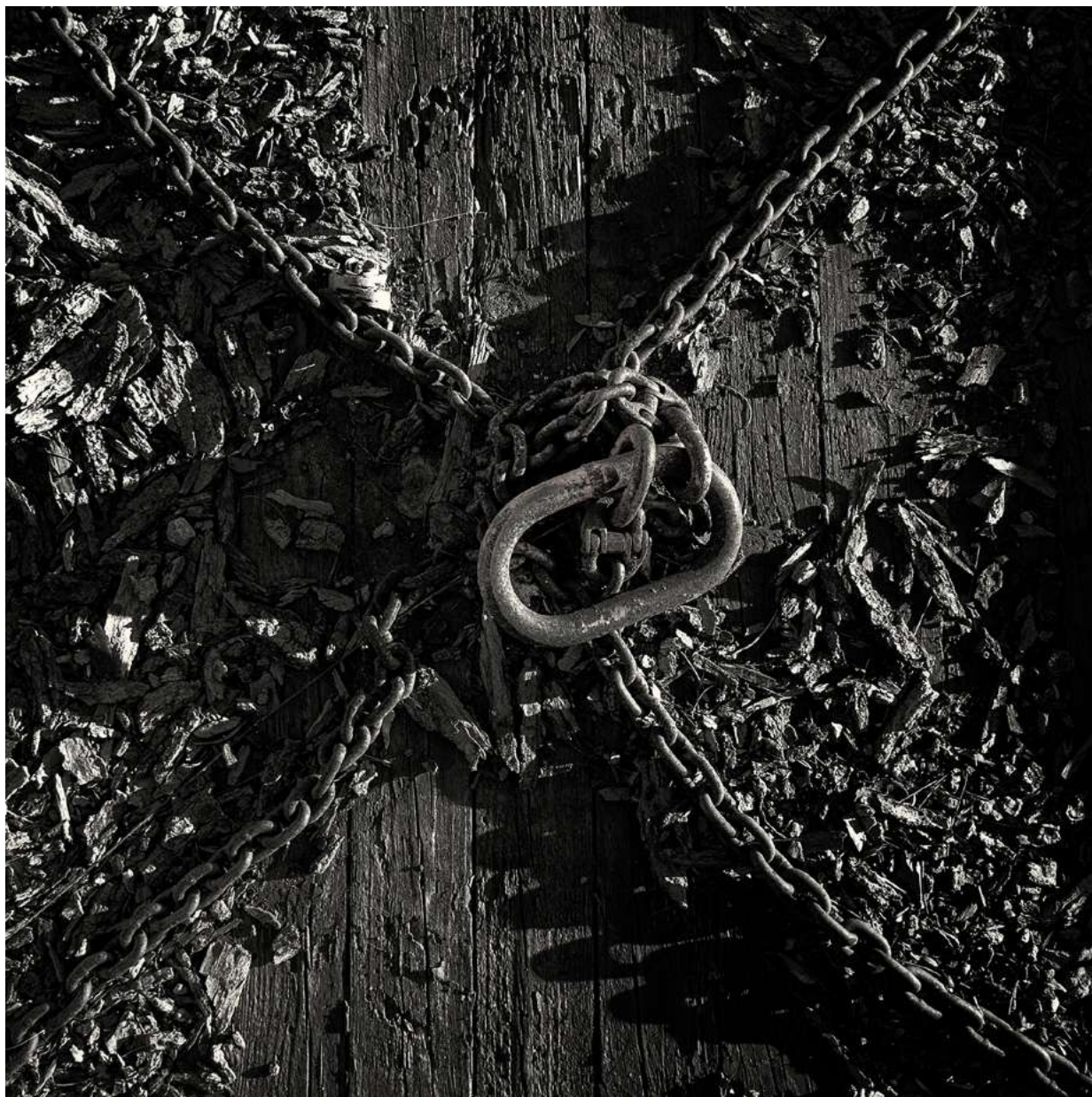


Photo by David Veldman
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/themercurist/25677741693/>

TEXTURE

Textures exist around us in many different forms. We tend to overlook many of them because they are so commonplace, but this doesn't mean they don't have value.

Textures are particularly effective at conveying a feeling of age. As materials age, they weather, crack, and scar, acquiring a unique personality.

This image of the lock and chains is a virtual feast of texture, with the cracked, aging wood and rusted steel. I took this a mere block from my house in an abandoned lot. Once again, you don't have to go far to practice your photography.

Textures are everywhere, and provide limitless opportunities for those shooting the mundane. If you really want to highlight a texture, consider processing in black and white as it removes distracting colors.



Photo by David Veldman
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/themercurist/26013520305/>

In this image it was the rough texture of the concrete wall that caught my eye. I chose to juxtapose the rugged, mossy wall with the smooth, fast moving stream. This created a pleasing contrast, heightened by the sparkling highlights of the water and the dark water near the wall.

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is the use of two contrasting elements to create a dynamic image, and it is sadly underutilized. This technique is very flexible, but it does require a watchful eye and a bit of luck. Fortunately, as the photographer you can choose to contrast whatever you'd like: old and new, light and dark, smooth and rough. The possibilities are endless.

The strength of juxtaposition lies primarily in the way that two opposing elements compete with each other. For a simple example, consider an old, weathered cathedral. By itself, the cathedral will certainly appear old. However, if you were to place the cathedral beside a gleaming modern skyscraper, its apparent age would seem to double. The human mind requires a reference point for judgment, and using juxtaposition provides it.

You won't always find the two elements you need to create this kind of image, but it pays to keep watch for them regardless.

Note: If you want to learn more about using advanced composition techniques (like the power of shape, color and juxtaposition) to improve your photography, take a look at Kent DuFault's best-selling guide, [Advanced Composition](#)

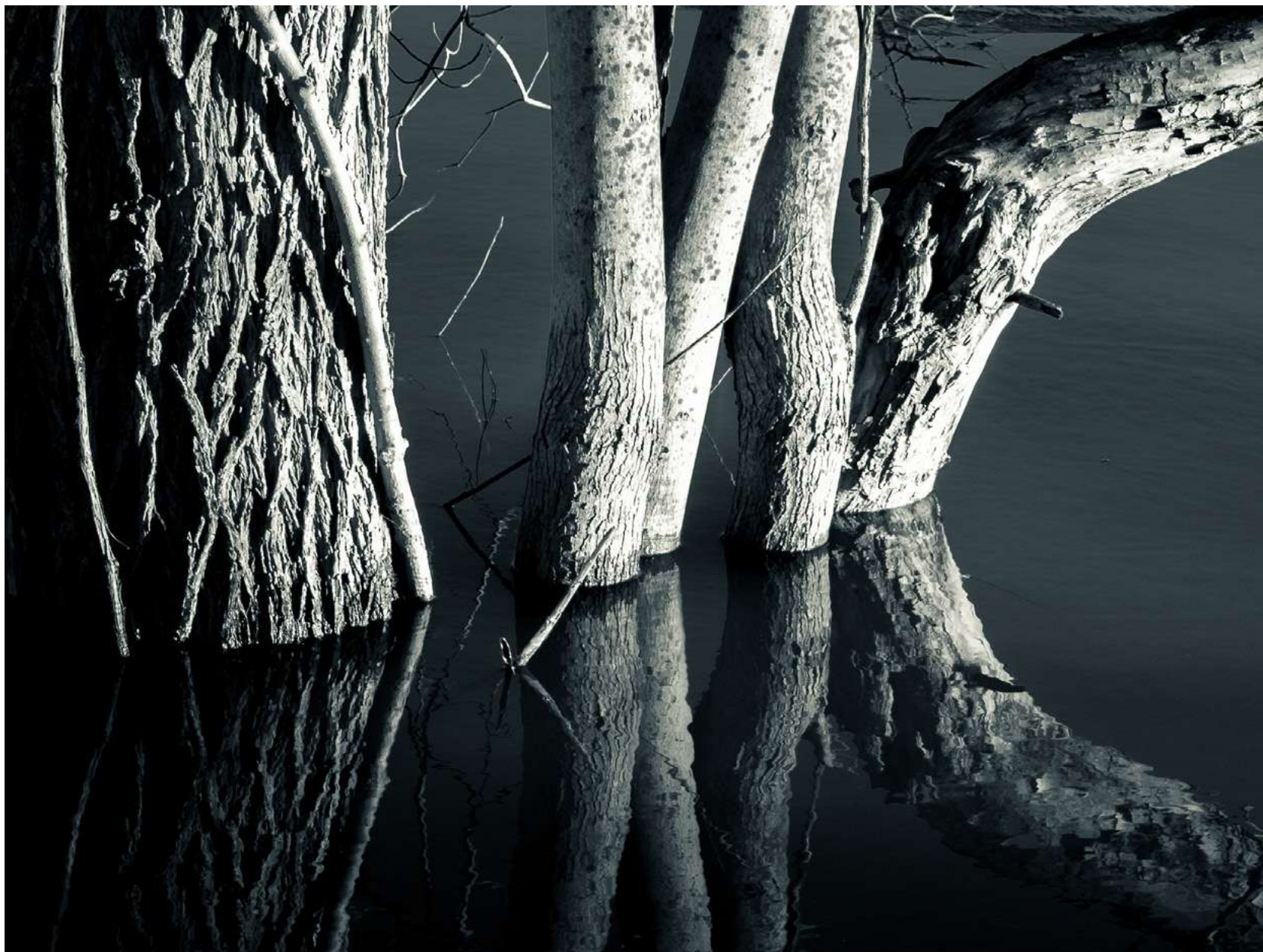


Photo by David Veldman
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/themercurist/25799091631/>

I captured this image of the tree trunks in a nearby town, where spring runoff had flooded the roadsides. A tight crop kept the attention focused on the trees, and the dark, still water did an excellent job of creating a window to the upside-down world.

REFLECTIONS

It goes without saying that reflections can create stunning images. Who hasn't enjoyed a shot of a mountain reflected in a placid lake? Fortunately, while you may not have access to a mountain, reflections can be found everywhere around us. Like most of the previous tips, it is simply a matter of learning to see the opportunities around us.

Look for puddles after rain, opaque windows, ponds, streams, or even fountains. Reflections can instantly create balance in an image and focus attention back towards the subject.

MACRO

Macro photography is a fantastic way to capture everyday life. Macro, or close-up photography, allows us to see our normal surroundings in a new, unusual light. While you might not find an ordinary photo of a lawn very appealing, an extremely close-up shot can transform blades of grass into a wild jungle. Tiny insects become monstrous, and details that we overlook on a daily basis can reveal themselves in unpredictable ways. The key word is 'details.' Shooting macro requires a consistent, patient observance of the tiniest details in our environment. The reward? Stunning photos, which in many cases do not require you to even leave your own home.

There are many ways to shoot macro. Certain compact cameras and even cell phones can focus up to an inch away. With a DSLR, you can avoid purchasing an expensive macro lens by using extension tubes or a reversing ring. Read about more techniques in our [Short Guide to Macro Photography](#).

Patience is key when taking close-up images. At certain magnifications, a tripod is required, and in some cases you may need to use image stacking to ensure the entire image is in focus.

The image on the next page almost appears to be a surreal aerial landscape. In fact, it is a close-up shot of two tiny protrusions on a rotting tree stump. When I first saw the stump, I knew something had captured my attention but I could not put my finger on it. After a few unsuccessful shots of the entire stump, I realized that the flowing lines and rough texture had caught my eye, and I chose to use a close-up shot to emphasize those elements.

Don't be afraid to get close. If you cannot think of anything to shoot, remember there is almost always a tiny detail hiding nearby that will make an excellent macro subject.



Photo by David Veldman
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/themercurist/17216092509/>



Photo by Maria Schaefer
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/themercurist/17216092509/>

CONCLUSION

Choosing to shoot the mundane was a turning point in my photography. I accepted that I would not always be able to find the most exciting subjects or travel to fantastic new places. Despite that, I resolved I would not stop practicing. The tips I wrote above are simply how I learned to cope with a limited range of subjects, and I hope they prove useful to you as well. Always keep shooting, regardless of a lack of thrilling subjects. Remember that the techniques you learn when capturing everyday life can be incorporated into your 'serious' photography and strengthen it.

Over time, you may even find that there is quiet charm in the mundane. After all, our lives are mostly lived in the ordinary moments, and as photographers, shouldn't we be able to find beauty in that?

Note: If you ever want an easy way to break the boredom and repetition in your photography, take a look at Kent DuFault's best-selling guide, [The Creativity Catalog](#). It will dramatically improve your creative output with multiple fun and challenging assignments

About the Author



David Veldman wants to be a better photographer, and he hopes you will join him on the journey of learning. Best of all, he's doing it on a budget! When not taking pictures David and his wife are hiking, snowshoeing, or discovering new culinary delights.

Blog: <http://themercurist.blogspot.ca/>.

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