



The Makings of a Great Composition

by Chris Martin

Whenever I'm out photographing in the Bragg Creek area, I always get excited thinking about what I might come across. As soon as I find something interesting, I start looking around the scene, trying to find a great new way to photograph it. While I'm shooting, I work on improving the composition: using the light; emphasizing a specific element; trying different angles; trying to simplify the scene. Often the fun of being out, camera in hand, blurs these individual ideas into a steady dialogue. However, each one can be separated and experimented with independently.

The techniques employed for creating great photography compositions are truly endless and have filled many books. In the following pages, I've outlined a few of these techniques that I regularly favour. As for the rest of them ... well, that's for another article.

Taken from above Elbow Falls, this image leads the eye from the flowing water in the foreground, along the river, to the brilliant magenta clouds lit by the rising sun. The river serves as a link to the two dominant elements: the waterfall and the clouds.



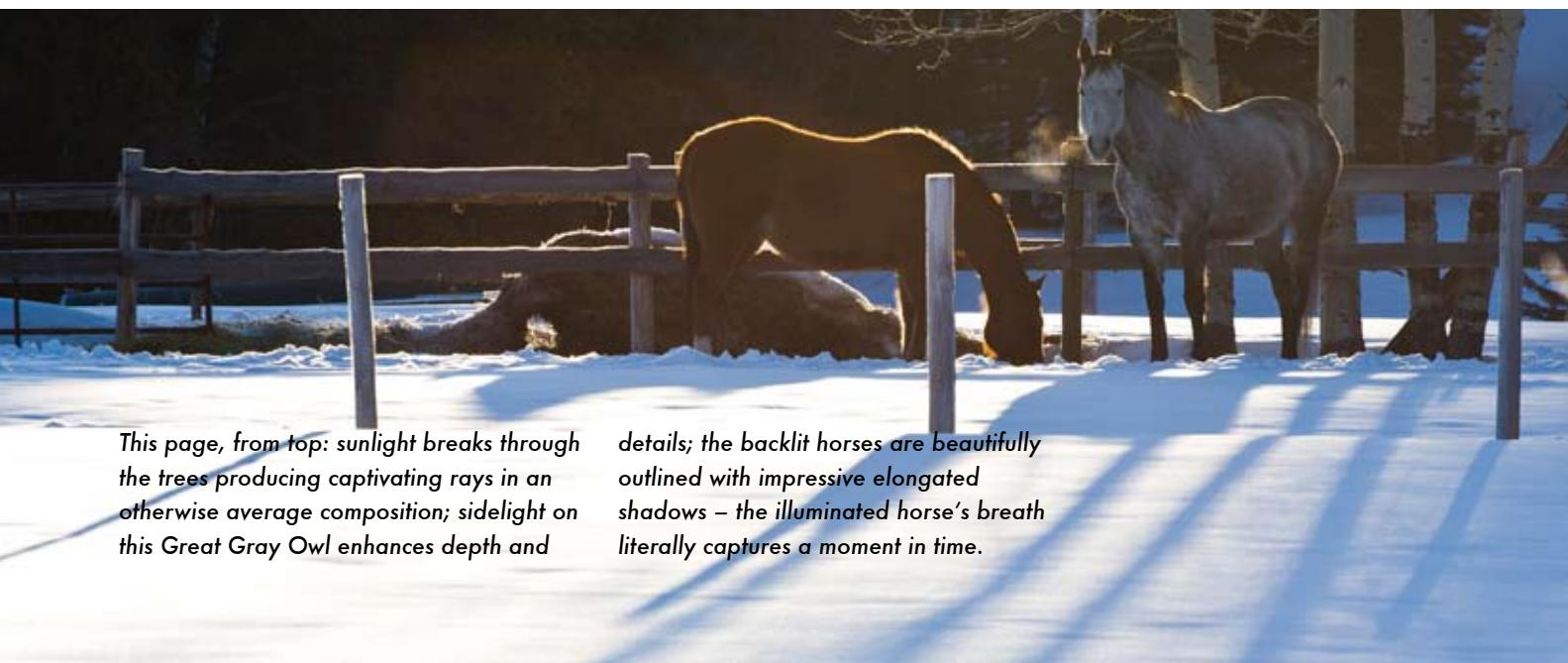
See the light

Sunlight can dramatically impact how an image appears, ultimately creating highly contrasting effects for the same subject matter. It can also have an overwhelming effect on the underlying mood of the finished image.

Shooting with the sun behind you is typically considered the easiest way to capture an appealing image, and it generally delivers satisfying colour and an evenly-lit scene. But by changing your position relative to the sun, you can explore other lighting effects, creating images that will often be far more interesting.

Backlighting (when the sun or any other light source is behind the subject) can create a haunting outline around a subject, while sidelighting creates striking contrasts between areas of light and shadow. Sidelighting can beautifully reveal textures, shapes and dimensions within a scene containing uniform pattern or colour, such as trees, a field of flowers, or a rocky creek bed.

As a side-note, it's always worth anticipating how a scene will change throughout the day due to the sun's movement, and then using your camera to create what's in your mind's eye.



This page, from top: sunlight breaks through the trees producing captivating rays in an otherwise average composition; sidelight on this Great Gray Owl enhances depth and

details; the backlit horses are beautifully outlined with impressive elongated shadows – the illuminated horse's breath literally captures a moment in time.

Move around the Scene

When you come across an interesting scene, take a quick shot before thinking too much about it. Afterwards, take your time and walk around the area. Look at the individual elements of the scene and think about unique ways of photographing them: crouch down; switch from portrait to landscape; focus on a specific subject; work with the lighting; look at the scene from the other side.

As you move around the scene, keep your mind open to the numerous possibilities. When reviewing your images later, you may be surprised by which ones you ultimately prefer.

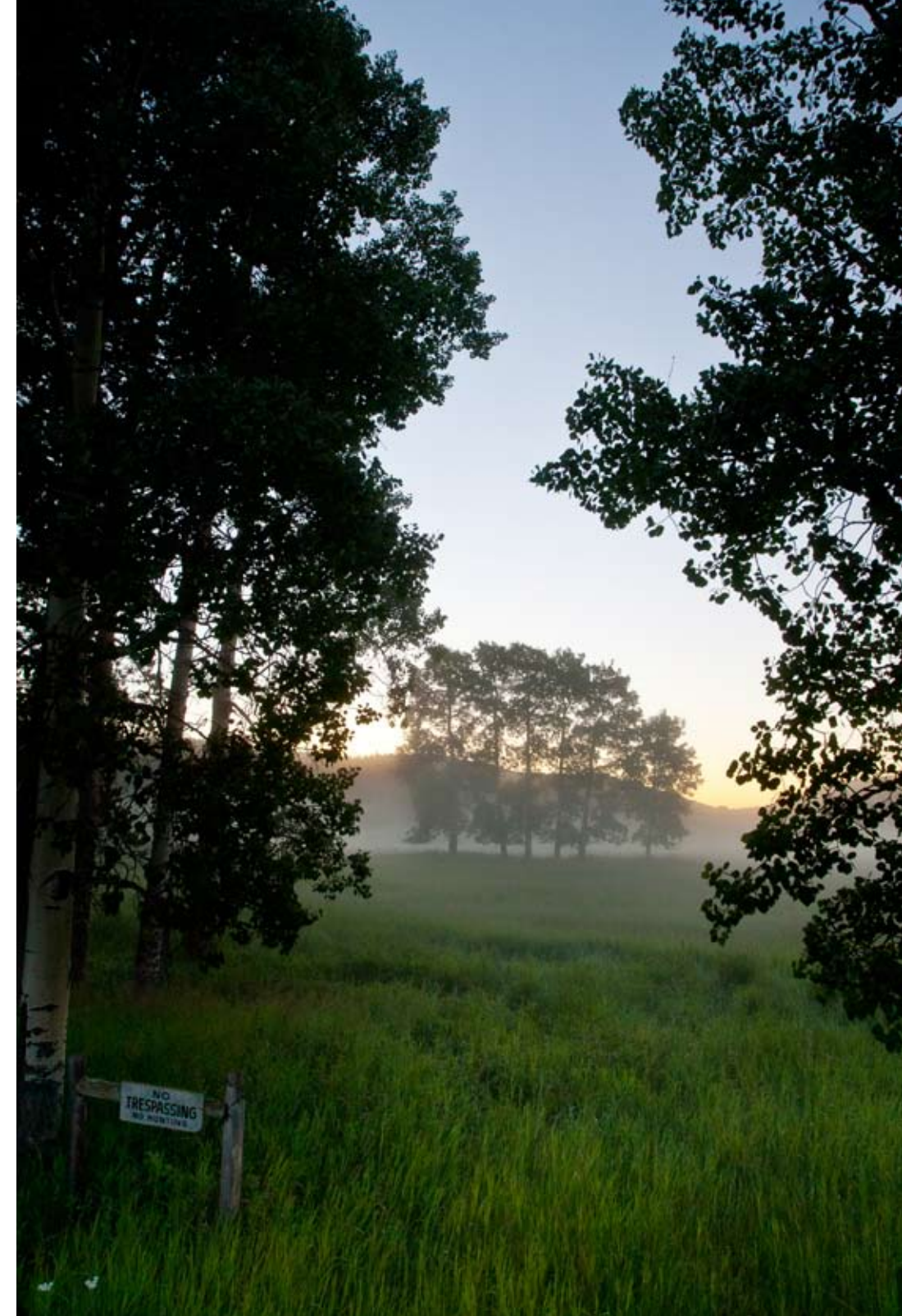
This page: after photographing different parts of a field near Bragg Creek, (bottom images) I backed away from the main stand of trees and found this interlocking gap between the foreground trees, (top image) which created a compelling border around the final composition.

Focus on what matters

Certain subjects lend themselves to being the star of an image: birds, leaves, rocks, flowers, etc. An easy way to provide added prominence to a specific part of your image is to focus your camera solely on it. This will throw the background – or foreground – out of focus and into an abstract blur, crisply separating your “hero” element from the surroundings. This effect is naturally achieved when using your camera's macro mode to shoot flowers close-up.

Although this technique can be achieved in either auto or manual mode, I'd recommend perfecting it in the manual mode, as it will provide you with far greater control.

Front cover: heavily blurred foliage provides a distraction-free background to the perfectly focused Mule Deer.





Go with the Flow

When photographing water, it's always a good idea to think of it as a living thing, rather than an inanimate object.

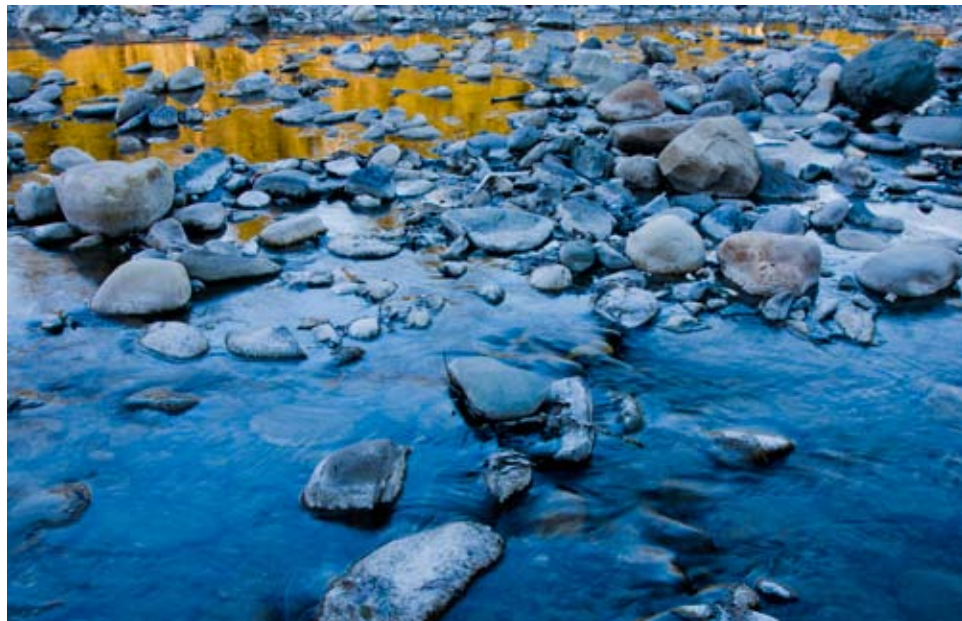
Start with the surface. If it is calm, then the opportunities for mirroring are obvious. But for rough, fast-moving water, try experimenting with various techniques: a quick shutter speed to capture spraying water; or a longer exposure to soften the water and blur out the action. This latter technique can beautifully wrap the "velvet" texture of the water around static subjects, as with the image above.

Remember that the colours and tones of the surrounding landscape are often absorbed by, and reflected in, the water. This can add a distinctive mood and feeling to your photographs. A sunlit forest may illuminate the water's surface in emerald greens, suggesting a nice summer's day, whereas an ominous, cloudy sky may create ripples of dark blues and blacks, evoking a more sinister feeling throughout the image.

Next time, before you photograph the creek, the lake or even a puddle, pause to see what it is trying to show you.



Clockwise from bottom left: Iron Creek reflects a mirror image of a Great Blue Heron; an increased exposure time creates soft ribbons from the flowing water, creating additional visual contrast between it and the stationary elements; Elbow River's dark blues and rough, rushing water portray a cold morning, while the sunlit peaks hint at better weather to come.

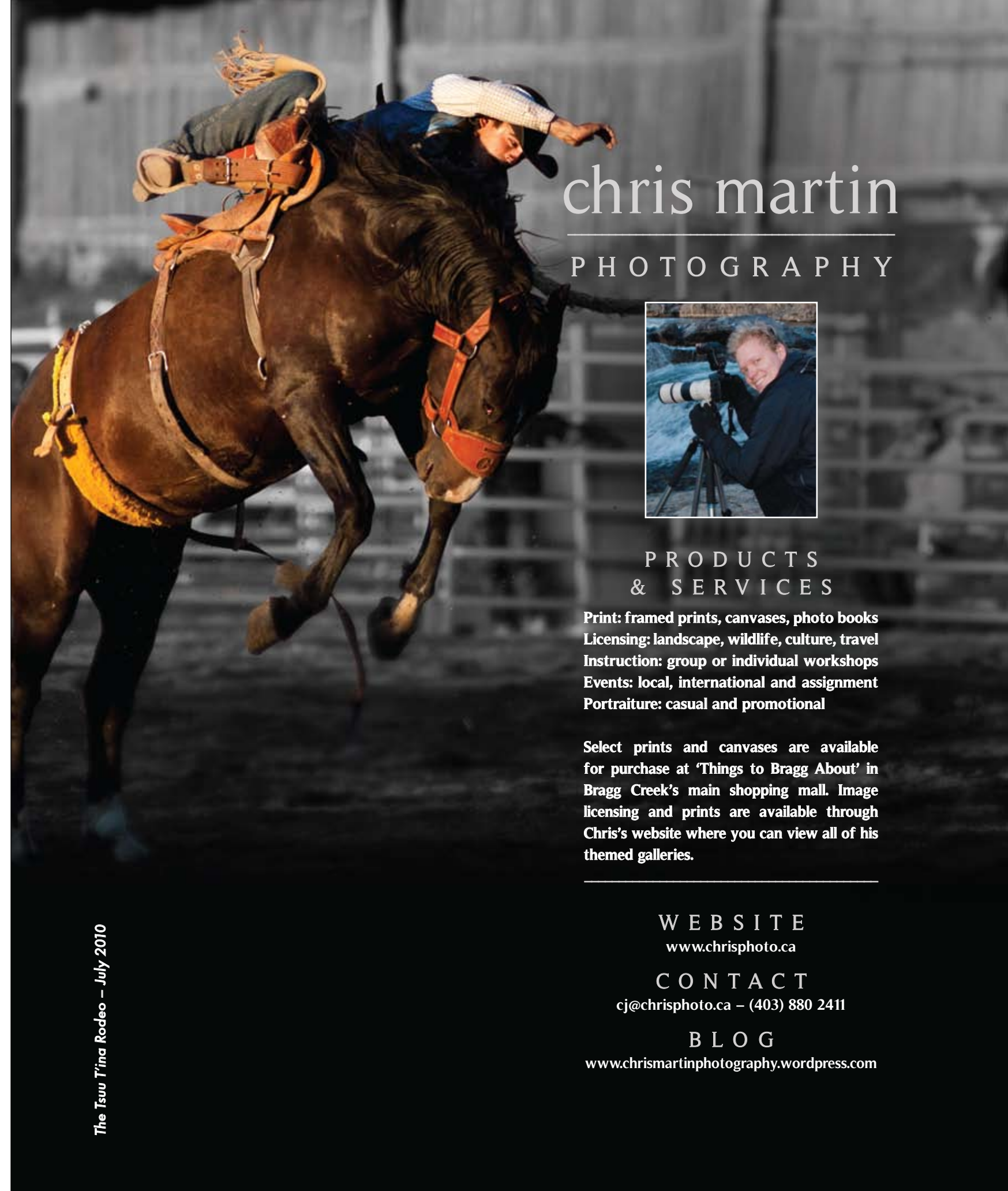


Order the Chaos

Many scenes are a mix of shapes, textures and colours. Search for a pattern in one of the dominant features and build the image from that. If it is a colour that is drawing your eye, try contrasting it with a complementary colour.

With a riverbed of rocks or a stand of trees, look for a repeating pattern or a shape created in the negative space. Frame the image so that there is some sort of form, order or repetition that creates additional interest in the image. ■

This page: the initial thumbnail shots (left) show little organization. In the final photograph (top left) the diagonal line formed by the rocks in the lower right corner leads to the warm reflection at the top of the composition.



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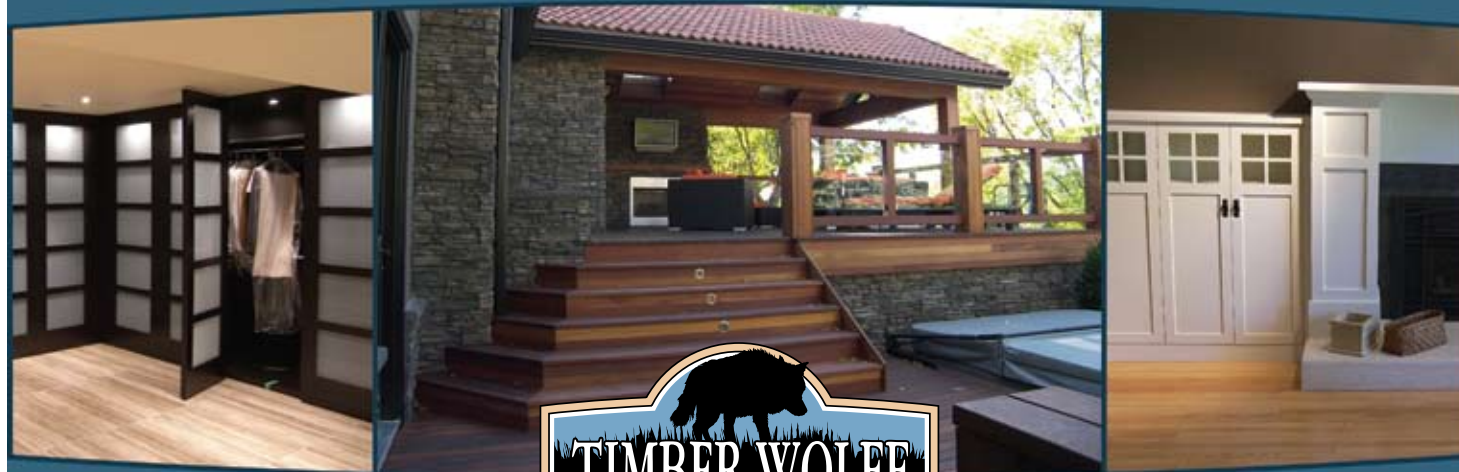
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