



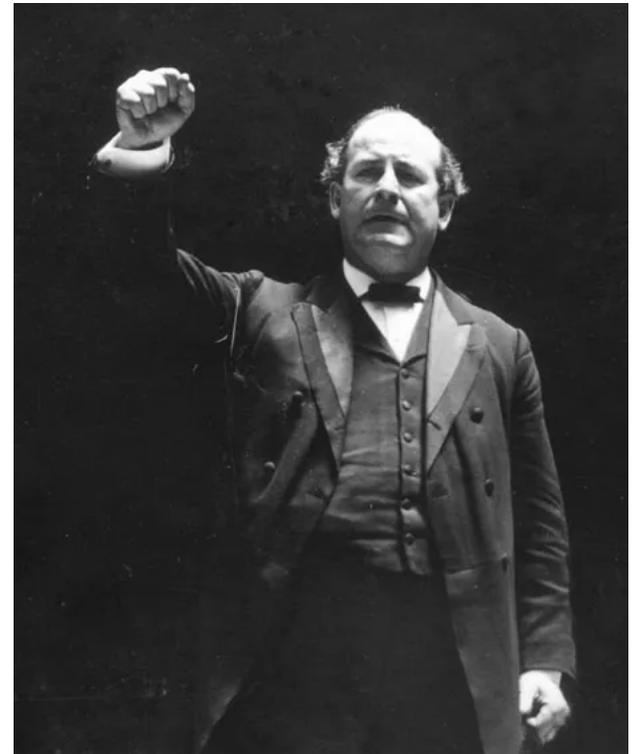
How to prepare for and understand club and N4C judging processes

# Competing in the N4C Arena

Jeff Dunn, Ph.D., PPSA  
N4C and PSA Judge  
September 13, 2022

# What I'll talk about tonight

- What is the "N4C Arena"?
- What is "competition"?
- Why "compete"?
- How N4C judging works
- How club judging works
- How you can maximize results per category
- Other "Arenas"



# What is N4C & its Mission?

- N4C is the N.Calif COUNCIL of 17 camera clubs
- It is run by volunteer club members to ...
- ... provide services of interest to club members:
  - Educational & social programs
  - Provide solutions for “individual and collective” problems
  - Promote a spirit of voluntary cooperation
  - Promote the art and science of photography
- Where do “competitions” fit in here?



# The N4C "Arena"



- A locale where *collections* of images from N4C member clubs are reviewed by an appointed evaluator or "judge."
  - May be a judge's computer (projectable images)
  - Or a designated, rotating club location (prints)
  - The judge awards places and HMs for outstanding images
- The collections consist of sets of images per category ("Division") contributed by member clubs
- The review is part of a major educational service performed by clubs and N4C that awards distinctions among monthly, organized sets of images.

# What is a Set of N4C images?

- Two types: Projected and Prints
- Subdivided by Divisions (categories) and Levels



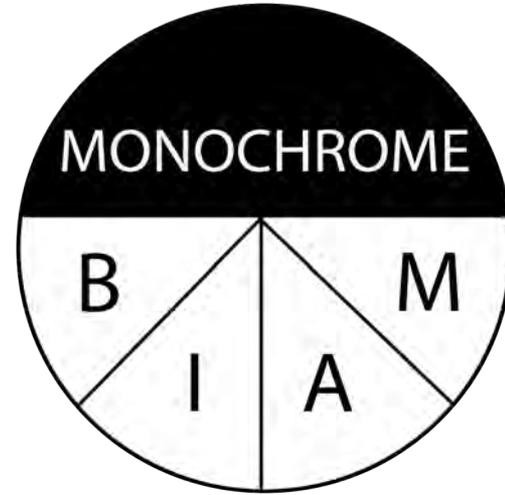
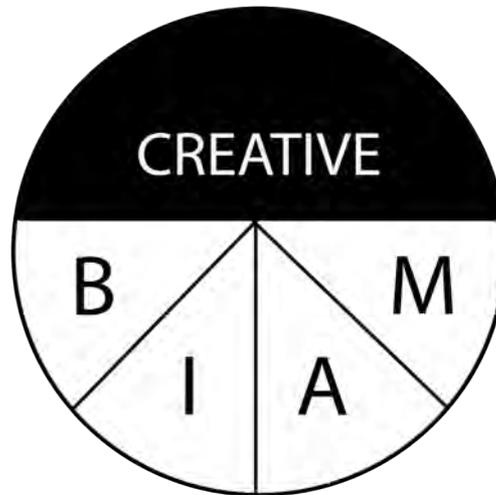
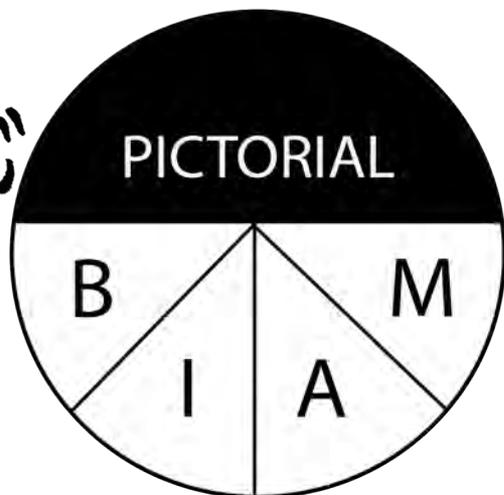
PROJECTED IMAGES



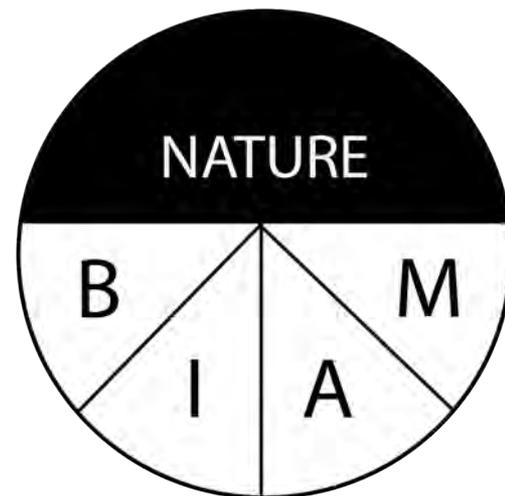
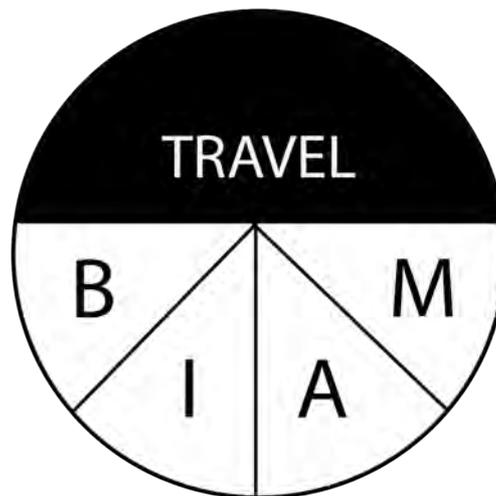
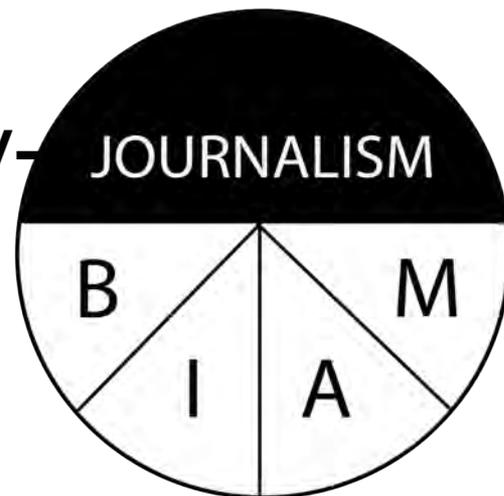
PRINTED IMAGES

# Six Projected Image Sets

*"Artistic"*



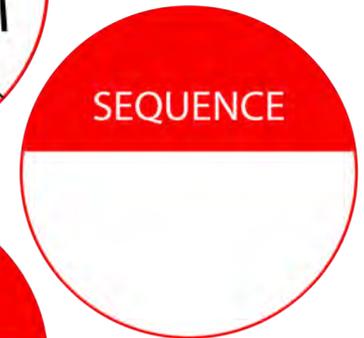
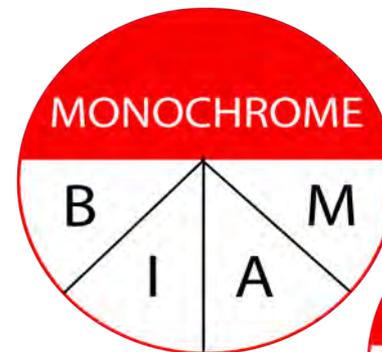
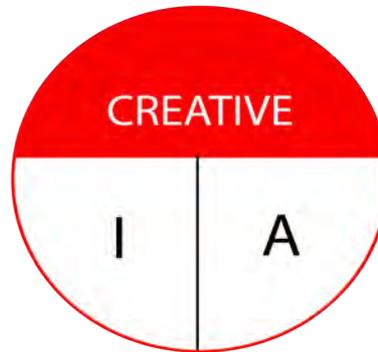
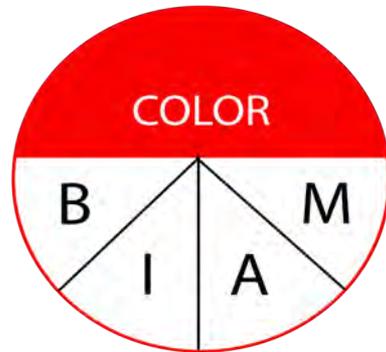
Reality-  
Based



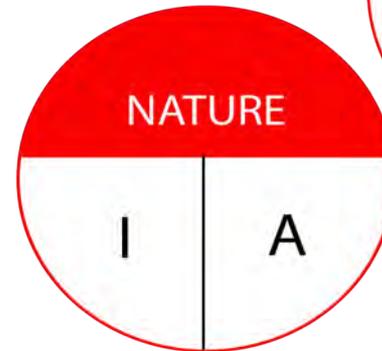
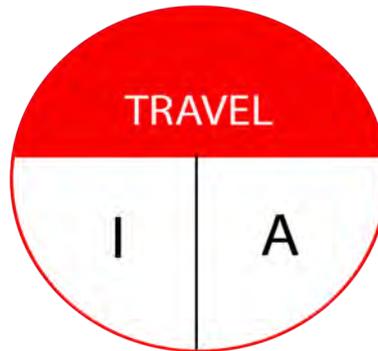
# Seven Print Sets

- Each level contains 0-3 judged images

*"Artistic"*

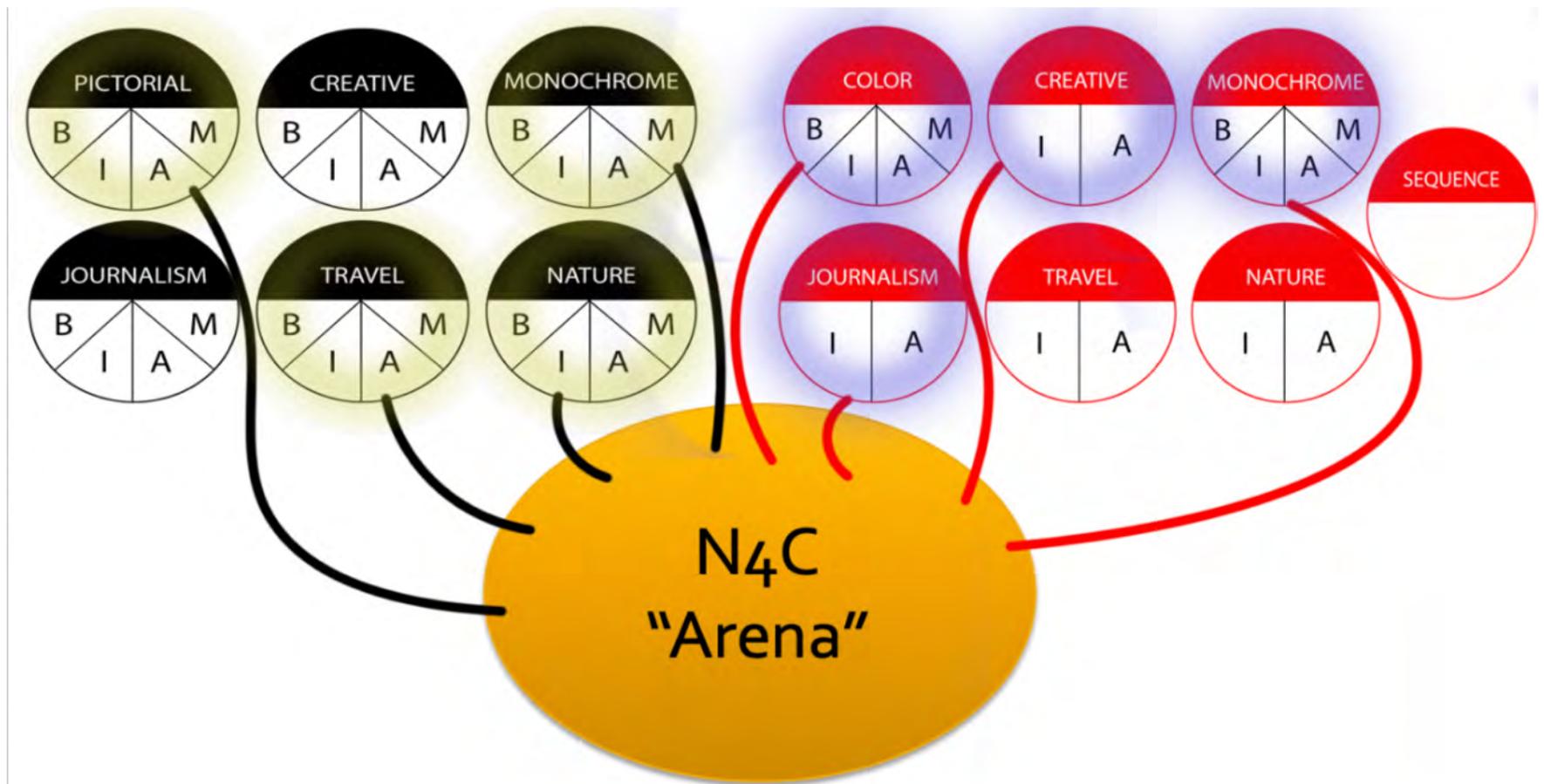


Reality-  
Based



# N4C designates 7-8 sets to be judged every month except December

OCTOBER 2022

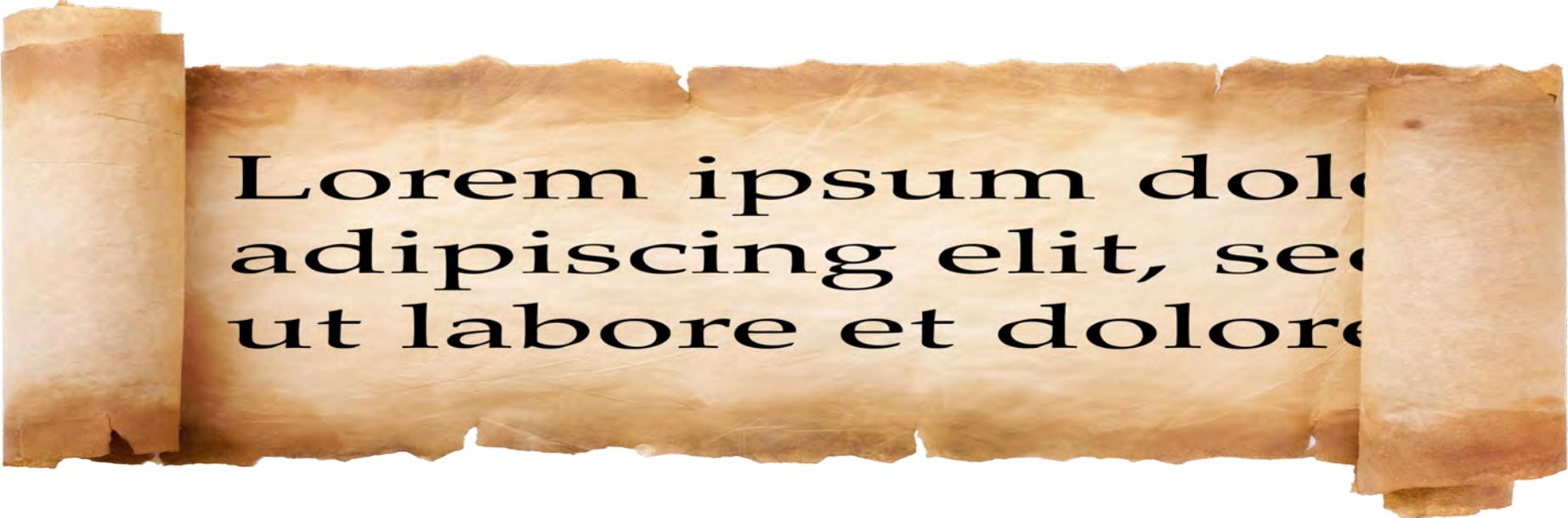


# Club Participation in the Arena

- Most of the 17 N<sub>4</sub>C clubs hold “contests” to select images for the Arena.
  - Some don't participate in some or all Divisions
- Contests must be completed prior to a N<sub>4</sub>C deadline.
- Clubs determine which Division sets and Levels to contribute to.
  - Clubs hire judges for their contests
  - Judges may or may not be N<sub>4</sub>C listed
  - No more than three images per level allowed

# What does “Compete” mean?

- Is it scary? Word from Latin:
- *Com* to come together
- *Petere*, to seek—same root as in “appetite”
- Which leads to the big question, **“What are competitors seeking?”**



Lorem ipsum dolor  
adipiscing elit, sed  
ut labore et dolore

# Why do Competitions??

- To learn from judges' commentary
- To learn from others' work
- To gain recognition for excellence
- To see how you can affect others
- To raise your level



# The best way to “Seek Together”

## Competitions should not be a zero-sum game: no “losers”

- Everyone should “win” in some way or another
- Chosen makers are better considered to have achieved “**distinction**” rather than being “winners.”
- “Judges” are misnamed. There are no “defendants,” just a crowd of photophiles to interact with.
- Judges are best considered to be:
  - Evaluators
  - Educators
  - Aestheticians
  - Entertainers
  - Ordinary photophiles with their own preferences and issues



# Competition Facts

- Images must fit software requirements
- Images are submitted by Division
- Images are evaluated by Evaluators/"Judges"
- N4C Division "rules" are a basis for evaluation
- Judges *interpret* the effectiveness of images based on:
  - Their **experience**
  - Their conceptions regarding the **aesthetics** and **axiology** associated with **Division definitions**
  - Their ability to understand subjectivity and mitigate their own **biases**
- Many images never go to the N4C Arena

# Judges (we hope)

- Provide helpful suggestions
- Inform audience
- Interpret the category rules consistently
- Recognize excellence
- Recognize **YOUR** excellence!



# Who are judges?

- People selected by your club
  - From an N4C-approved list
  - Or, by a choice from your Judge Chair or board based on suggestions or recommendations
  - NOTE: N4C Division definitions are not *universal*
- N4C periodically provides
  - Training for new judges
  - Judging conferences
- Your feedback can improve judging

# How do judges get on the List?

- Complete N4C training
  - Attend a training conference
  - Judging session with mentor(s)
  - Joint club judging with mentor(s)
  - Mentor recommendation(s)
- Be recommended by one or more clubs
  - Ideally requires prior educative, photographic experience
  - Obtain approval by the N4C Judge Chair
- Submit bio, contact info, and judging philosophy to N4C Judge Chair

# Judges' Challenges

- Mastering the mix of criticism, encouragement, and tact—being HELPFUL
- Understanding the KEY ELEMENTS of each Division definition
- Prioritizing the key elements when ranking images
- Speaking clearly, confidently, cogently, uninterruptedly
- Understanding common technical issues
- Recognizing quality in *multiple* tastes, not just their own!
- Performing online research as required
- Understanding history of photography
- Keeping up with current photographic trends

# What we want to hear from judges:

- “Here’s what’s good about your image ...”
- “Here’s what might be improved ...”
- “Your image fits the Division well”

# The least we want to hear:

“You’re  
Acceptable”

--Judge M. E.  
D'Ochre



# Even better:

“An image of  
Distinction!  
And here's  
why!”

--Judge U.  
Standout



**But never:**

“You are Dis-qualified!!”

--Judge U. R.  
Autadare



# Two Competition Hurdles

1. Meet the requirements of the Division (“**Acceptance**”)
2. Be among the top three entrants (Reach “**Distinction**” and advance to N<sub>4</sub>C judging)



# How best to Compete in N4C

- Enter images in Photoclubservices properly
  - 1920 x 1200 size limits
  - Maximize ***title*** effectiveness (read my PSA article)
  - Understand how to enter Sequences  
*Sequence Name [number in sequence] title*
- Avoid characteristics that could *disqualify* or negatively affect your entry in certain Divisions
- Know the key things judges are *supposed* to look for per Division
- Track what judges *actually* look for
- *Learn* from judges' comments
  - Revise and resubmit promising images
  - Correct images ASAP if selected for N4C Arena

# What Judges Look For

- Excellence in KEY CHARACTERISTICS per Division
- Negative Characteristics to be Avoided
- Disqualifying characteristics
- Judges balance the negatives and excellences and RANK images per level per Division



# What are the KEY characteristics?

- “Artistic” divisions (Pictorial, Mono, Creative)
  - INTEREST – IMPACT
  - CONCEPT – ORIGINALITY (esp. in Creative)
- “Reality” divisions (Journalism, Nature, Travel)
  - STORY
  - FEELING
  - INFORMATION conveyed by content and TITLES

# Negative Characteristics to Avoid

- Distractions
- Marginal items of attraction
- Personification in Nature
- “Hand of man” in Nature unless part of the ecosystem of species pictured
- Others' art *in itself* affecting viewers more than makers' *unique take* on that art
- Tilted horizons

# Disqualifying characteristics

- Unnaturalness: “MUST APPEAR NATURAL” in Journalism, Nature, and Travel divisions (JNT)
  - No excessive HDR or unrealistic post-processing
- Setups: No “setups” allowed (JNT)
- No “environment” visible in Travel closeups
- Seeming Monochrome that isn't
  - Up your saturation to max to check
- Feral animals, cultivated plants in Nature
  - Includes mustangs, non-Indian peacocks

# Acceptance → Distinction

How to reach  
Distinction?

- Do great work
- Cater to the purpose of the Division  
(Category)



# General Purpose of the “Reality” Divisions

## Journalism -- Nature -- Travel

- Photography as a capturing of **REALITY**
  - Like what we would “reasonably see”
  - Camera NOT an eye, however
    - Don’t use fish-eye lenses in these divisions
  - Monochrome and cropping OK
- Gathering, assessing and presenting news and information from reality.
  - = Journalism
  - Nature and Travel are types of Journalism

# General Purpose of the “Artistic” Divisions

Pictorial (Projected images), Color (Prints), Monochrome, Creative

- To communicate an artistic vision
  - **“Photography as an art form”**
  - To create a sense of beauty via aesthetics
  - To convey an artistic concept
    - E.g., To explore the nature of perception
  - **Interest, Impact**
    - A relatively objective measure of “beauty”
    - Generated by Composition, Technique
  - Vision of the artist: Concept, Originality

# Purpose of Journalism

- “To provide people with verified information they can use to make better decisions ...”
- Practicing “... a discipline of verification that journalists use to find not just the facts, but also the *truth about the facts.*”  
--*American Press Institute*
- *INFORMATION* and “*THE STORY*”

# *Distinctive Journalism photos*

- Tell a *story*
- Provide *informative content*
- Include a *wide range* of stories you find in media (*not* just newspapers and magazines):
  - Spot news
  - Documentaries
    - Investigative reporting, current and past *issues*
  - Human interest
    - Examples: personal profiles, family occasions

# *Distinctive Journalism photos*

## **Titles:**

- Are essential
- Provide details and background
- Convey the “discipline of verification”
  - Dates
  - Locations
  - Names, ages of individuals
- Should not be more important than the photo itself—be succinct!

# *Distinctive Journalism photos*

## Address the N4C definition:

- “Pictures with [a] *emotional impact* ...
- ... and [b] *informative content*.”
- Images with [a] and [b] will do better than images with just [b]
- [a] is the #1 criterion of many international press photo awards
- [a] blew away PSA judges (next slide)
- [a] is rare; excellent [b] can still win alone

# Emotional Impact & Issues



*Earthquake Disaster* © Danny Wong, MPSA

# Importance of Titles



# Importance of Titles

“The night before the burial of her husband’s body, Katherine Cathey refused to leave the casket, asking to sleep next to his body for the last time. The Marines made a bed for her.”

One of a series by  
Bob Heisler  
*Rocky Mountain News*  
Best Published Picture Story  
(large markets)  
Pulitzer Prize and other awards  
2006



# Distinctive Journalism Photos

- Convey a *story* with emotional resonance
- Provide researched background
- Provide details in titles
  - Names, places, dates
- Have edited and condensed titles
  - Ten seconds reading time or less
- Should be judged such that “journalistic *value* shall be considered over pictorial quality” [N4C]
- Don't have to be Pulitzer winners
  - A little emotion *may* be all you need
  - A *story*, however, is essential

# Jeff's Club-Level Distinction in Journalism



[1 of 3] Oregonians pride themselves in turning raw materials such as forests into useful products such as logs.

# Jeff's Club-Level Distinction in Journalism



[2 of 3] Why not, then, turn the 1930 "Zigzag Moderne" Art Deco First National Bank of Klamath Falls ...

# Jeff's Club-Level Distinction in Journalism



[3 of 3] . . . into a Mexican Restaurant?  
Makes perfect sense!

# Travel & Nature = Journalism

- Travel photos
  - Help travelers make *informed decisions* about where to go.
  - Provide *stories* about physical and cultural conditions in the world
- Nature photos
  - Help with wildlife identification
  - Provide *stories* about natural history ...
  - "... in such a fashion that a well-informed person will be able to identify the subject material and **certify** its honest presentation."
  - The "discipline of verification" is important here

# N4C TRAVEL DEFINITION

- A Photo Travel image expresses the **characteristic features**, **culture**, or **feeling** of a land as they are found **naturally**. There are no geographic limitations. Images from events or activities arranged specifically for photography, or of subjects directed or hired for photography, are not permitted. Close up pictures of people or objects must include features that provide information about the location.



# Distinctive Travel Images

- “Express the *feeling* of [a time] and place
- “Portray a land, its distinctive features or culture
- ...
- ... in its natural state”
- Have titles that “give the location and complement the travel *story*.”
- Note the elements of journalism here
  - Emotion, story, details
- Pictorial qualities more important in this category than in Journalism or Nature
- Deal with *repeatable* experiences, not one-time or rare occurrences

# What is that Travel “Feeling”?

- I submit: **not** a look that makes a place instantly familiar/identifiable to the viewer
  - “Uniqueness” A former travel criterion?
- It’s **any** feeling, like
  - Wow! (impact)
  - Gosh, I’d love to go *there!*
  - Something’s special about *that* place!
  - Wanderlust!
  - Scary! Nice to learn about a place I *wouldn’t* visit!

# Outstanding Travel “feeling”

Lava  
boat  
tour,  
Hawai'i



# Jeff's Club-Level Distinction in Travel



Sorrento  
Italians  
relax in  
their  
downtown  
Men's Club

# 2017 Travel Photographer of the Year, Nat'l Geographic (cities): Norbert Fritz



Natural light floods through ceiling windows at the City Library of Stuttgart, Germany. It's a unique atmosphere where you can broaden your knowledge.

# Acceptance: Nature

- No anthropology or archeology
- No human-created hybrid plants
- No cultivated plants
- No “domestic” animals
  - This excludes domesticated camels and elephants, etc.
- No “mounted specimens:
  - Bacteria on a microscope slide
- No “feral” animals (mustangs, camels)

# Distinctive Nature Images (1)

Have high *informative* and nature *story-telling* value, which "must be weighed more than the pictorial quality"

- **Identification** stories help "decision-making," as do
- **Ecological** stories
- **Behavior** stories are more interesting from the journalistic perspective
  - Movement behaviors
  - Eating behaviors
  - Species interactive behaviors
- **Unusual** stories and subjects are more interesting than common ones

# Distinctive Nature Images (2)

“Depict natural history such that a *well-informed person* will...

- Be able to identify the subject material and
- Certify its honest presentation”
- Do not attribute human qualities to animals!
- Do **research** on your images to be “well informed” yourself and provide material for the *story* of your image.

# Distinctive Nature Images (3)

- “Maintain” high technical quality.
- Have titles that “should be factual and descriptive”
  - Detailed
  - Concise
  - Objective, not emotive
  - Scientific names are “encouraged”
    - Indicates you researched your subject
    - Unnecessary for well-known animals
    - Generic names are sufficient
  - Carefully crafted titles add novelty to standard Identification stories

# Which image is best for the Nature Division?



Our National Bird



The acorn woodpecker stores 1000s of acorns in trees called “graneries” by scientists. Lassen NP 8/16/18

# Award-winning Nature Photographer



Elephant dusting in Amboseli National Park,  
Kenya © Marina Cano

# Aesthetics-Based Categories

- Pictorial, Creative and Monochrome
- Purpose of Art: To communicate an artistic vision
  - To create a sense of beauty via aesthetics
  - To convey an artistic concept
- How are aesthetics evaluated in N<sub>4</sub>C?
  - Interpretative, subjective, influenced by judges' *taste*
  - But—to be fair—judging evaluations should be *based on* and ***explainable*** by 4 published criteria, in order of their importance

# The 4 Major Aesthetics

1. **Interest**: Reliably, how much time a viewer might spend looking at an image in a gallery.
2. **Impact**: How quickly and intensely attention to an image is initiated
  - Both Interest and Impact are related to how long a viewer *remembers* an image
  - A high Impact image may turn out to have low Interest
  - A high Interest image may have low Impact. Initiating the viewer experience can be an issue here
3. **Composition**: The arrangement of elements in an image
4. **Technical Excellence**

# Originality: The “Hidden” Aesthetic

- Originality is an explicit criterion of Creative-category images
- But it also can affect Pictorial/Monochrome judgments, why?
  - Judges will experience higher INTEREST and/or IMPACT in unusual images—they have extensive exposure to the population of images out there.
  - Judges may choose the more original image if two images are equivalent in the other aesthetics.
- LESSON: Consider avoiding stereotypic subjects from stereotypic points of view

# Distinctive Pictorial Images

- Will have strengths in most/all aesthetics
- Will offer high-quality and/or unusual techniques
- Will more likely appeal to standard vs. eccentric tastes
  - Abstract pictorials can be risky
  - Complex images may appeal less to some Impact-biased judges
- TEST your images on OTHERS

# Interest-focused Strategies (1)

Keep viewers' eyes in the image by managing the  
**Composition**

- Avoid exit points (lines/bright areas at margins)
- Offer a primary "center of interest" (CI) component to "hook" the eye; then offer some (but usually not too many) secondary centers
  - Consider "leading lines" to connect them
  - Center-focused images may have Impact, but can lose Interest quickly
  - Consider foreground-middleground-background *areas* of interest
- Utilize *relative brightness* or color attractiveness to control eye movement and add secondary centers

# Interest-focused Strategies (2)

Keep viewers' eyes in the image by managing the Composition psychologically with the fake "Rule of Thirds."

- A better moniker is the **Off-Center Rule**
- The OC rule deals with secondary centers of interest (SCIs)
  - If the primary center is IN the center, the eye is more likely to leave the image altogether unless there are strong SCIs
  - If the CI is OC, the beholder has a higher probability of exploring the rest of the images to find SCIs
  - Be careful not to put CIs and SCIs too close to the margins of an image—again the eye may leave the image
- Remove unwanted CIs: dustmarks and Distractions
- TEST eye journeys on your friends

# Impact-focused Strategies

- Intensify the Center of Interest (CI)
- Consider increasing the overall simplicity of an image
- Increase the emotionality of your CIs
  - Add animals, people
- Contrast of brightness and color
- Crop out or distort away less impactful areas to increase impactfulness

# Technical Excellence

- The more you master editing software packages and filters (Lightroom, Photoshop, Aurora, Topaz, NIK, etc.), the better.
  - ALTERING images is ALLOWED in art-form categories!
- Manage focus, exposure, lenses.
- Master *cropping, cloning, vignetting, layering, selecting, feathering, dodging, burning, masking, blurring, gradients, HDR, stacking, etc., etc.*
- Don't OVERDO things like HDR, saturation, stereotypic filter use
- Advanced/unusual techniques may impress in terms of originality

# Art-form Titles (1)

- Guide viewers' *minds* like compositions guide viewers' *eyes*. *COMMUNICATION*
- Titles should guide viewers toward the *purpose* of your image—you should think of one!
- Avoid re-stating in titles what your image obviously already shows
- Use titles to show your emphases, especially those important to you that may not be readily apparent to viewers. E.g., *SYMBOLIC* attributes.

# Art-form Titles (2)

- Imagine your image in a gallery, in terms of titles.
- Titles are irrelevant in themselves in terms of judging, but the state of the viewer's mind IS relevant: titles set it up.
- In club situations, titles can be entertaining. Club competitions are *not* SAT exams. Why not have fun and get a laugh out of your audience!

# Pictorial Image Example (1)



Original Photograph

## Pictorial Image Example (2)



Left half squeezed to center the rock

## Pictorial Image Example (4)



Image cropped, then stretched vertically

# Pictorial Image Example (5)



Bare area on L filled in with cloned bushes;  
Leading lines set up on L with shadows

# Pictorial Image Example (6)



Aurora HDR Structure Enhancement Filter

# Pictorial Image Example (7)



Aurora HDR Creative Drama and  
Topaz Noise Reduction Filters on sky;  
Dust spot cloned away. Back side of rock dodged.

# Pictorial Image Example (8)



Additional vertical stretch added.  
Titled "Deserted Symmetry"

# Reality



Original Photograph

# Altered Reality



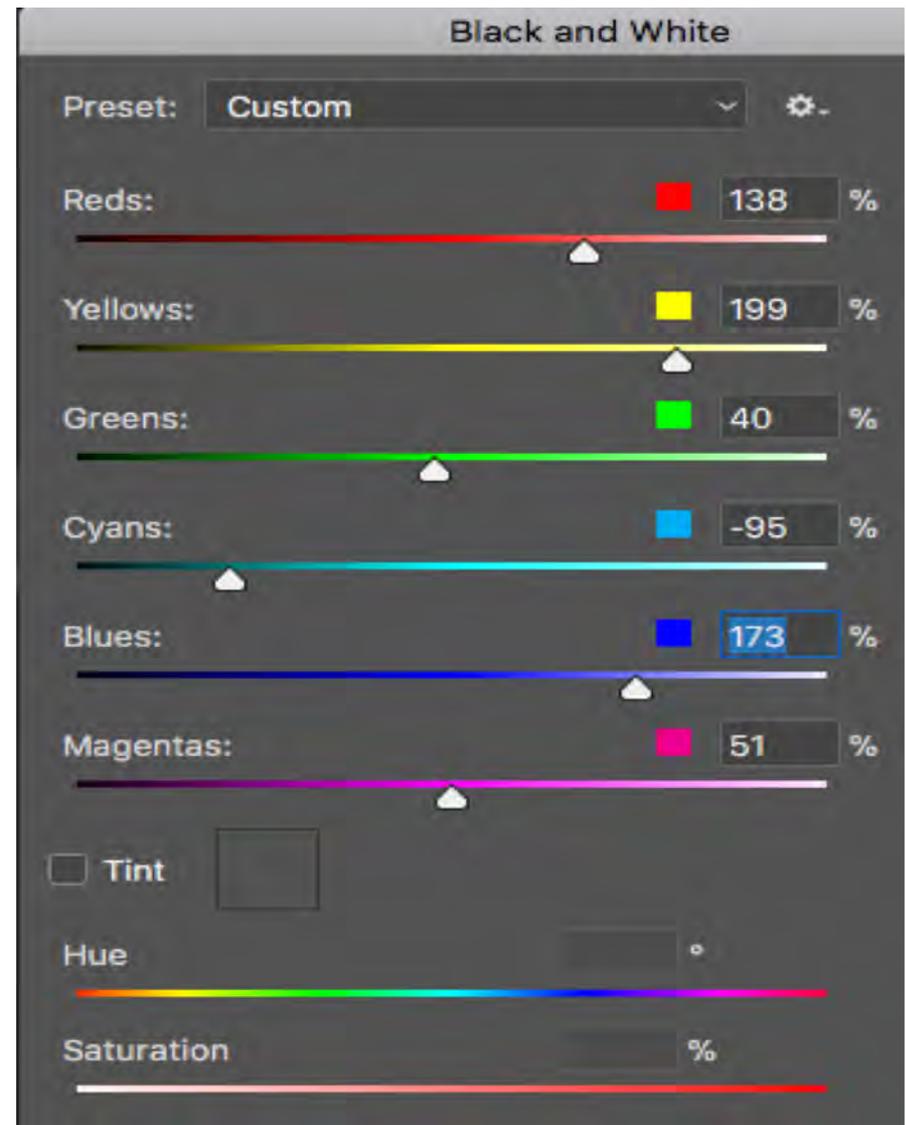
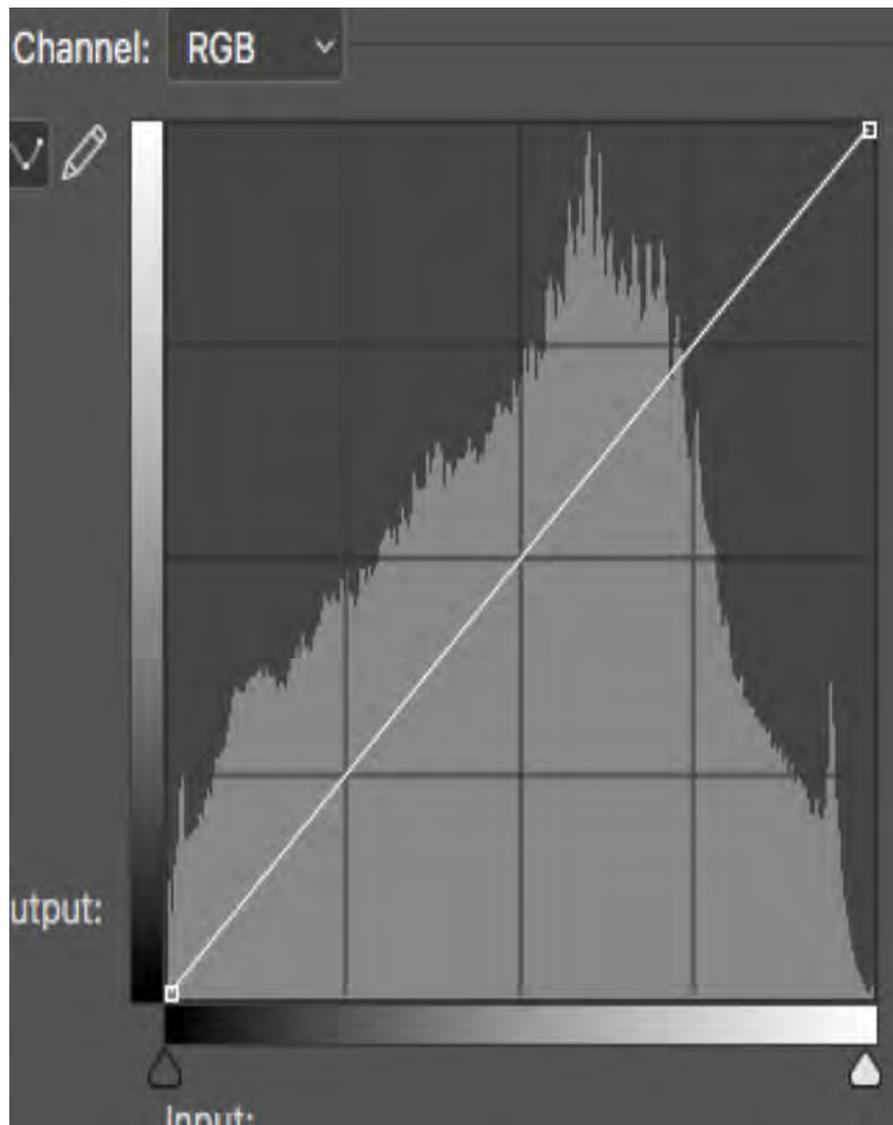
But is it Creative?

# Distinction in Monochrome

The same as with Pictorial, PLUS

- Test the dynamic range with a histogram (e.g., Photoshop Curves)—usually a complete range works best
- Check histogram for overexposed and underexposed regions; correct if possible
- Experiment with color sliders when converting from color
- Ensure image is monochrome by maximizing saturation temporarily

# Histogram & Color Slider



# Monochrome Version



# Definition of Creative Division

Creative photography is producing an image through the use of **imaginative skill or originality of thought** including the altering of reality. **No image should be eliminated from competition simply because it looks realistic, provided it shows originality of concept.**

- In other words, images **must** be **UNREALISTIC**, **unless** they show originality of **CONCEPT**

# Acceptance: Creative

- Chances for disqualification are low at N4C
- At PSA Creative MUST be “Altered Reality”
  - The original image(s) must be identifiable as such.
  - They must be significantly altered. HDR-only excluded.
- N4C accepts both Concept and Altered

# Distinction in Creative

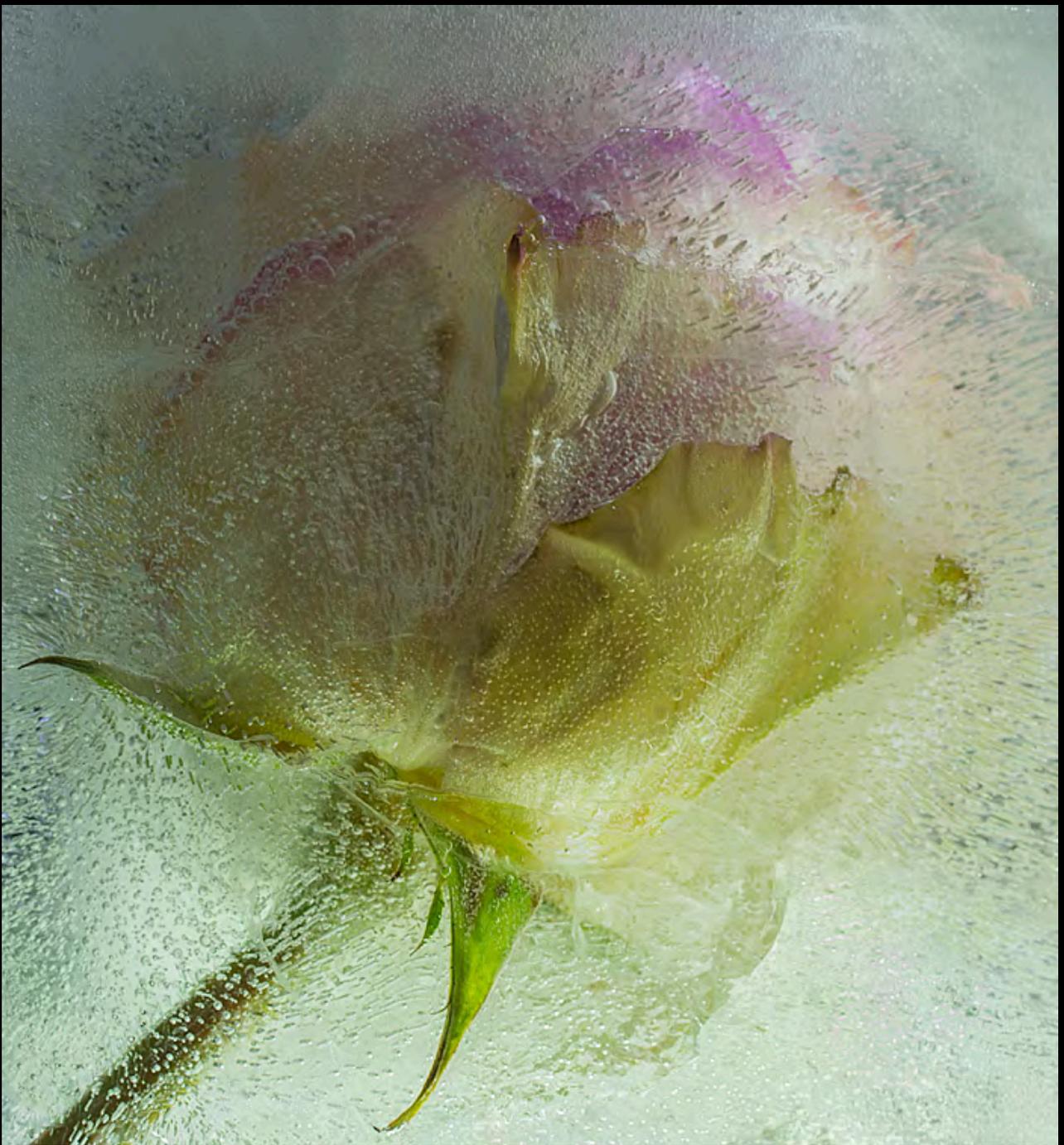
The same as with Pictorial, PLUS

- A Creative image displays
  - “IMAGINATIVE SKILL” or
  - “ORIGINALITY OF THOUGHT”
- Originality/Imagination vital here
- Depicting a CONCEPT can be effective and is *required* for “realistic” images in this Division
- Abstracts viewed more favorably here than in Pictorial
- Avoid stereotypes, “slide-a-slider” filters
  - Use filters on parts of image, other filters on other parts
  - Combine filters

# Creative Techniques

- Montage
- Abstracts
- Out of focus
- Move camera
- Zoomshoot
- POV (Macro too)
- Overexposure
- Light painting
- High ISO
- Long exposures
- Storytelling, Props
- Warp, Liquify
- Textures
- Lenses, filters, apps
- Flat Graphic effects
- “Painterly” effects

# Creative Examples



Violet Wilson: *Frozen Beauty*

# Creative Examples



J.A. Garruchaga Garagarga: *Strange Forms*

# Creative Examples



# Creative Examples



Manel Puigcerver Olivan: *Death Valley*

# Creative Examples



Mical Masior: *Iwona*

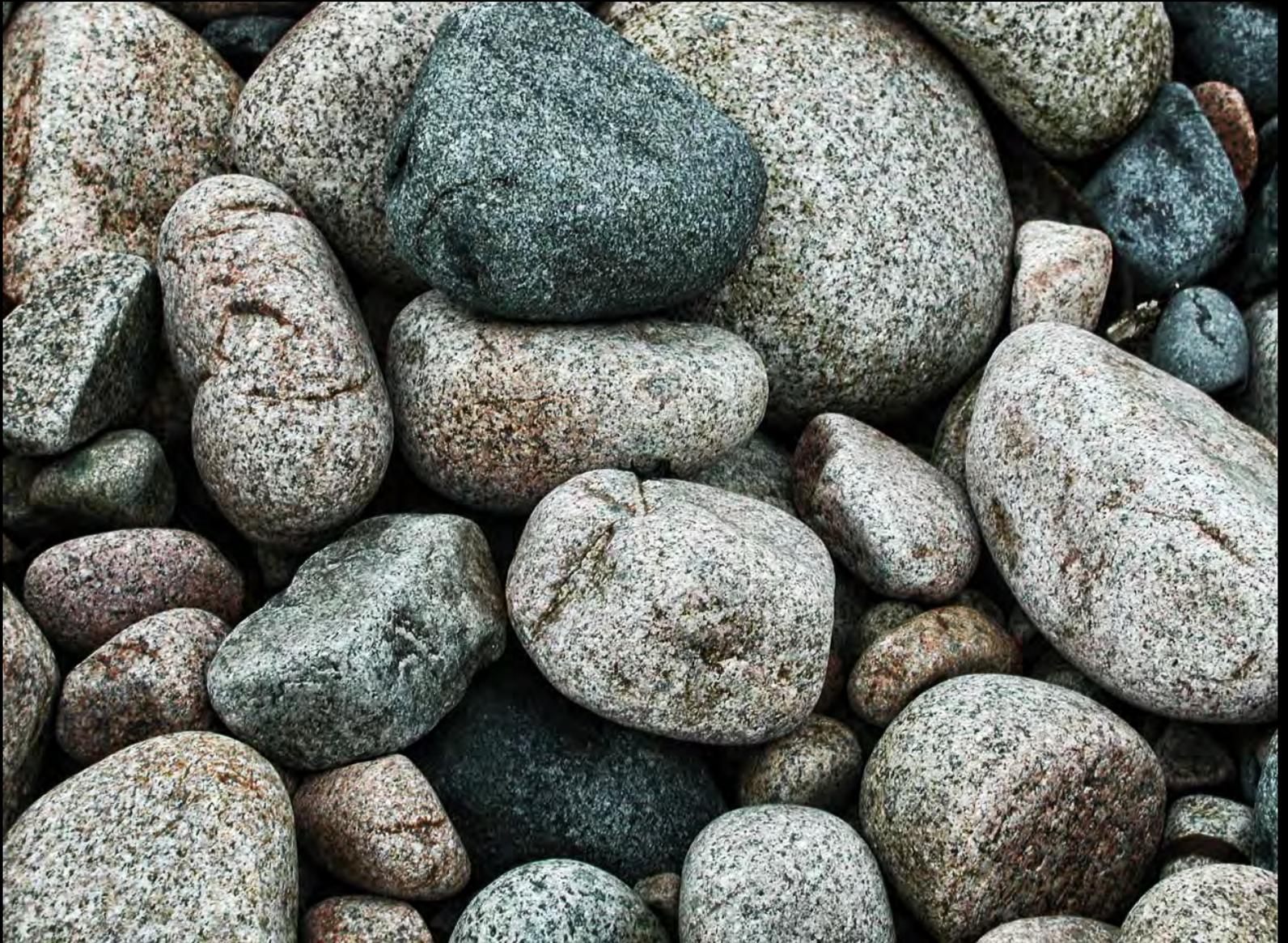
# Creative Process Example

A beach in Maine



# Add a little HDR

ColorEfex Detail Extractor



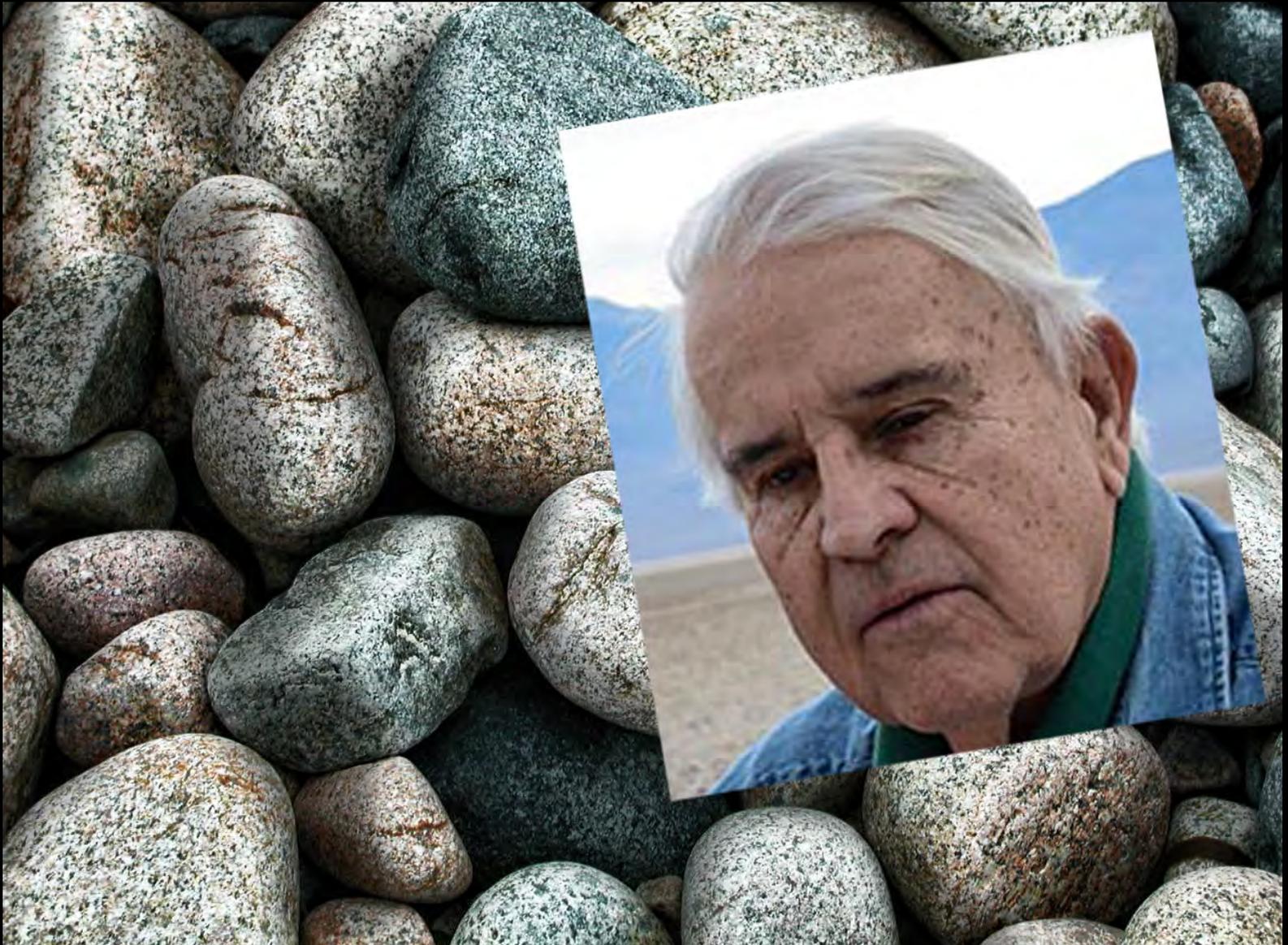
# Add dimensionality by ...

Feathered Selection



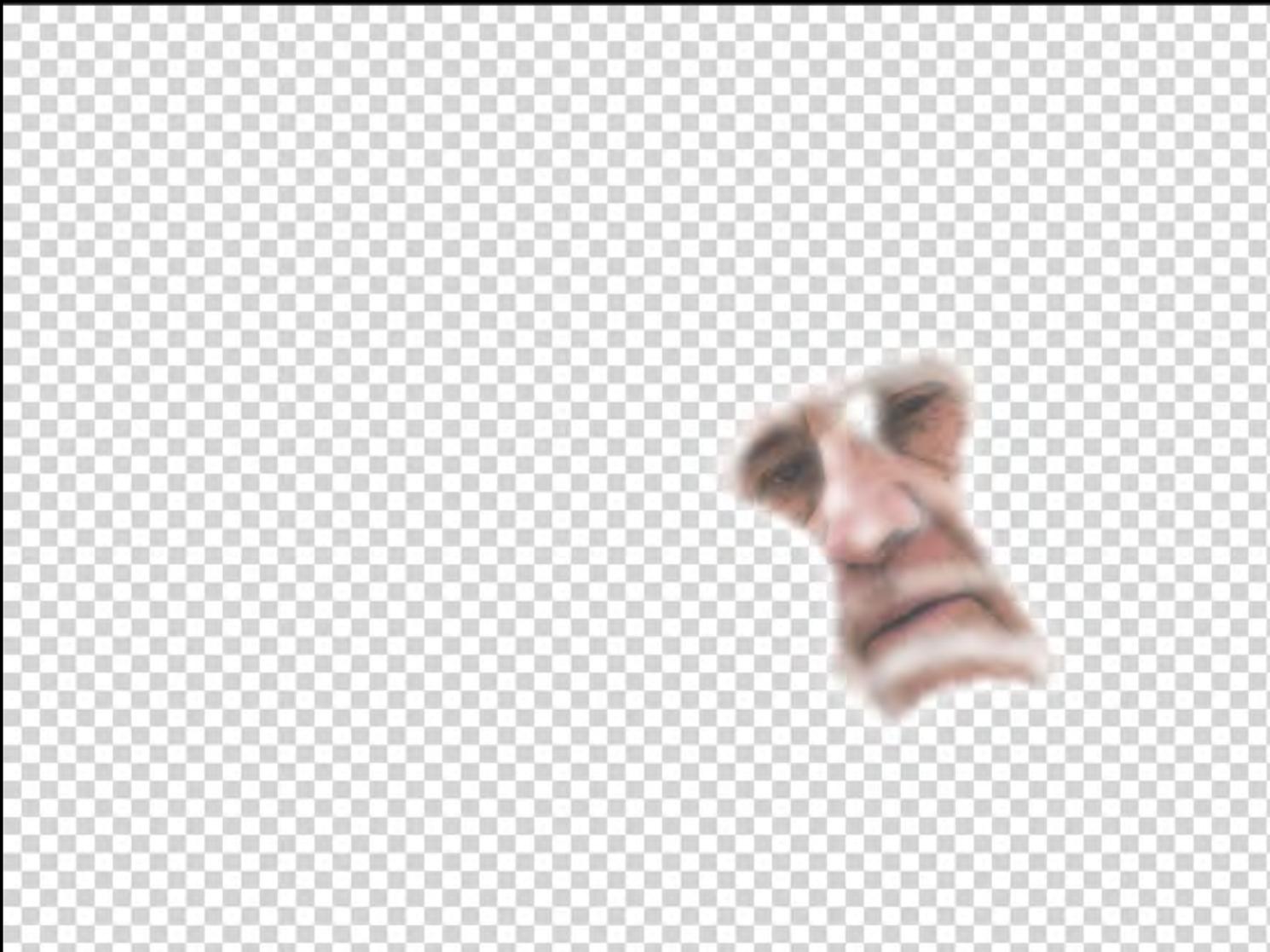
Paste in one of your photos

Crop/Paste/Rotate



**Mask off. Reduce to 72% Opacity**

**Layer Mask/Black brush**



**Title it "Boulder Ogre"**

**Combine Layers**



# Don't let the Arena scare you!

- Competitors are seeking distinction and learning *TOGETHER*. It's not a knife fight!
- N4C organizes the Arena as an educational activity derived from CLUB CONTESTS
- Even if you don't get to the Arena often right now, think how much MORE you're learning than the "masters"
- Understand the Division definitions and what kinds of submissions fit them best!!
- Evaluate your judges—do *they* know the definitions?

# Don't be satisfied with *just* the N4C Arena; there are *other* arenas where you can learn

- PSA Digital Study Groups
- PSA-approved international contests
- Gallery exhibitions
  - View them
  - Enter them
- Websites, e.g., [Lensculture.com](http://Lensculture.com)
- County fairs
- Art magazine calls for photos. Check out [submittable.com](http://submittable.com)
- If you're a master, try judging!

# Remember the KEY characteristics

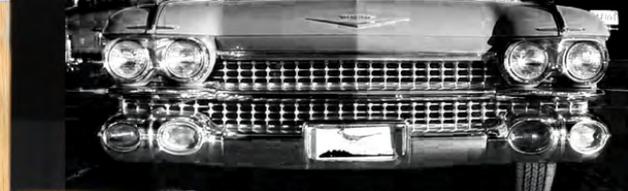
## ■ “Artistic” divisions (Pictorial, Mono, Creative)

- **INTEREST** – IMPACT
- **CONCEPT** – ORIGINALITY for realistic Creative

## ■ “Reality” divisions (Journalism, Nature, Travel)

- **STORY**
- **FEELING**
- **INFORMATION** conveyed by content and **TITLES**

# Questions?



TRAVEL

MONOCHROME



JOURNALISM

PICTORIAL



NATURE

CREATIVE