

PEOPLE PICTURES

30 EXERCISES FOR CREATING AUTHENTIC PHOTOGRAPHS

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Foreword

Chris Orwig photographed me in Las Vegas a few years ago, and it was a humbling experience as a photographer, particularly for one making his living on assignment for the international NGO and humanitarian community. Chris is a gentle person in the truest sense of the word. He is kind, and if this makes any sense at all, he listens with his eyes. When Chris photographs he slows down. Given his already calm, Zen-like personality, this is an accomplishment. He didn't ask me to grin, to mug at the camera (I did anyway). He just slowed down, looked through the camera, and photographed me. If I hadn't seen the photographs afterwards, I'd have sworn that he never pressed the shutter. He used a couple different cameras, changing them without much thought, keeping his entire attention focused on his subject. I got the sense, being photographed by Chris, that the portrait—not just my portrait, but portraiture as a discipline—mattered a great deal.

The photography of people matters, because it allows us to look at a moment in the life of another person and see the differences and the similarities we share. Acting as both a window and a mirror, the portrait has the power of revelation, showing us something about both the photographer and the subject. This matters because the act of creating it is a relational act and a chance to connect with another person.

The portrait matters because life is fleeting, and we will not be here forever. When I was a teenager I spent hours looking at the work of Yousuf Karsh, poring over portraits of the artists and elite of his time, many of whom are now gone. But lose a loved one, as I have in the last 24 hours, and the value of a photograph becomes all the more evident. We are passing through time, all of us, unstoppably. We will change our times and be changed by them. The person I am now is not the person I will become, and when I get to the end of the time allotted to me, it will feel to me, and my loved ones, I hope, to have been far too short. The portrait cannot undo this, nor slow it down. But it creates milestones for us, way markers that say, "This is who I am, and who I have been."

All we have in life, really, are people and moments. The portrait captures both simultaneously, and tells a story about the characters in our lives. It shows a person in a place and a time in which they will never be again; it stops the clock and says, "Look at this person; she matters. This moment matters." And whether that portrait is serious or the brief result of a cheesecake grin, we're a little closer to seeing the soul.

Portraiture, formal or otherwise, is not a technical pursuit. It's a relational and aesthetic pursuit achieved through technical means. What Chris teaches is what all great portraitists have always known; that it is assumed you will be growing in excellence in your craft, but that the art is accomplished in the moment you connect with a subject and make a photograph that is honest and revealing, not merely representative of the shape of their face and the line of their smile.

Steve McCurry calls it the moment the soul comes into view. That moment doesn't happen when the photographer himself is guarded and impenetrable; we open ourselves to those who are open to us. And so the great challenge of making photographs of people is not which aperture to choose or which lens to use; those are small matters easily learned. The great challenge is a relational one; to create a connection in which the subject feels comfortable enough to drop their guard.

Transparency doesn't come easily to us. We spend a great deal of effort building walls to feel safe. We learn to mug for the camera at an early age, knowing, as the most remote tribes seem to know, that the camera is capable of seeing your soul if not stealing it. It's a gift to be able to sit in front of another human being and photograph them. Even more so when you convince them to drop their guard and be ready for that moment, that rare, beautiful moment when the soul comes into view.

Finding, or waiting for these moments, and making something of beauty and revelation, doesn't happen accidentally. It comes as we study our subject and our craft with discipline and practice. We're lucky if we have a teacher, as we do here with Chris, who is both so capable in his craft, and so open to these beautiful instances when the moment and the soul collide.

—David duChemin

Ottawa, Canada, 2011





SECTION IV PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT



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LIGHT AND AUTHENTICITY

PEOPLE PHOTOGRAPHERS tell stories with light. Sometimes these stories stay on the surface and reflect what's on the outside. Other times the light reveals what the human eye cannot see. The light becomes a soft beam that shines into the darkness, exposing inner truths that are buried deep within.

Light is valuable, and we pay attention to it in so many different ways. In photographs, the eye first looks at areas of brightness and then to focus, contrast, and color. Creating effective photographs calls for deepening our understanding of this and developing a special sensibility to the moods of light, ranging from delicate and fragile to unforgiving and harsh.

When it comes to creating pictures of people, I've found that natural and available light gives pictures a more authentic voice. There is something unique that happens when working with the natural elements. Whether inside or out, it adds a reality to the pictures that is inviting and true. And isn't authenticity what we really value and want?

I was assigned to shoot a professional athlete for the cover of a major magazine. The photo editor explained that he didn't want the typical athlete plastered with logos and lit with artificial light. He wanted a more natural and authentic mood. This window light picture was the one he selected for the cover.

Canon 5DMii, 85mm lens, f/1.6

PREVIOUS PAGE Improving in the arts, whether music, poetry, or pottery, requires passion, which fuels practice. Musician Timmy Curran knows this well; whether on the road or at home, his guitar is always close by.

Canon 5DMii, 16–35mm lens, f/2.8

Less Gear and More Agile

Windows are a wonderful source both for the quality of natural light and for the simple means of creating pictures that put the subject at ease.

LEFT Melissa stands by a window at work.

RIGHT Geivan sits next to his bedroom window.

Left: Canon 5DMii, 85mm lens, f/1.2

Right: Canon 5DMii, 50mm lens, f/2

Creating authentic photographs doesn't require using elaborate studios setups and excessive amounts of gear. In order to grow as a photographer, why not disregard all of the typical sales-driven marketing advice? Try something different and test the old adage that less is more. When you take a minimalist approach, choosing a simple location and using less gear, you become more agile as a photographer and you make less noise. With less of you, there is more potential for the subject to be at ease and for you to create lasting images.



EXERCISE > Windows and Garage Doors

Position someone next to a window or inside an open garage and they will most likely be at ease. People like to be on the inside looking out, gazing at the world and weather outside. For centuries artists have used the soft illuminated light that only a window can provide. This tradition is deep and wide; now it's your turn to contribute to this large genre of art.

Think of the following steps as a chance to follow this type of less-is-more approach. This is an opportunity to work with two similar types of available light and with just one camera and lens. The goal is to create ten good portraits in each place.

STEP 1 WINDOWS

Find a window without directional light—i.e., where the sun doesn't stream directly in. Look for indirect light that is exquisite and soft. Set up a photo shoot with a subject for a short duration of time, say 10 to 15 minutes. After a 5-minute meet and greet, start off the shoot by trying different ideas out: Change your subject's angle and position, and have him stand or sit. Really work the scenario and do this as a way to figure out what is possible. It's OK if you make mistakes; the point is to experiment within the setting.

Eventually, near the end of the shoot settle down into the position you think is working best. Inform the subject that you want to create a portrait that is present and engaged. Ask him to take a deep breath. Be patient and look for the moment that is best.

STEP 2 GARAGE DOORS

For those who prefer subtlety, one of the best and most underused locations is an ordinary garage. The simplicity of the garage makes it a bit easier to let loose as a photographer and your subject will feel at ease.

Open the garage door and position the subject in the shadow near the edge. You will discover the light is like nothing else you have seen. If necessary, hang a backdrop behind the subject to cover up all the clutter. The garage creates a box, which protects the subject from direct sun. The sky adds a sparkle to their eyes. In a sense a garage door opening is like a big window without glass. And if the driveway is a light-colored concrete, it can act as a reflector bouncing the fill light back in.

EXERCISE DETAILS

Goal: Capture 20 strong portraits. **Tools:** Camera; 85mm or similar length lens. **Light:** Soft, indirect light. **Locations:** Window and garage. **Theme:** Light. **Duration:** 10 to 15 minutes per person at each location.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Discover how to use natural lighting environments like windows and garages.
- Explore how simple locations can help put your subject at ease.
- Begin to understand how to make strong images without excessive amounts of gear.

> TIPS

Natural or available light photography can be challenging, but don't give up. Let Henri Cartier-Bresson's words inspire you: "Avoid making a commotion, just as you wouldn't stir up the water before fishing. Don't use a flash out of respect for the natural lighting, even when there isn't any."

Even the most ordinary window can create exquisite light.

When working with soft, indirect light, there's no need to rush. You will discover that because the light is subtle it requires a more calm approach. Take a deep breath and patiently capture what you see.



If you don't have a garage, any overhang will do. Experiment with positioning the subject closer and farther from the shadow's edge until you find the right combination. Try using a small stepladder or stool so that you can position the camera just above the subject's head. This will cause him to look up so that the light from the sky will brighten his eyes. Keep this session short, from 10 to 15 minutes. ■■

LEFT I found an old painter's drop cloth for a great back drop. I stood on the red cooler to elevate the position of the camera so the light from the sky would reflect in his eyes. The subject was on his own turf and surrounded by his stuff: surfboards, skateboards, climbing gear, and cycling shoes. This made for a more relaxed and comfortable shoot. (See end of Exercise 5 for another picture.)

Canon 5DMii, 85mm lens, f/3.2

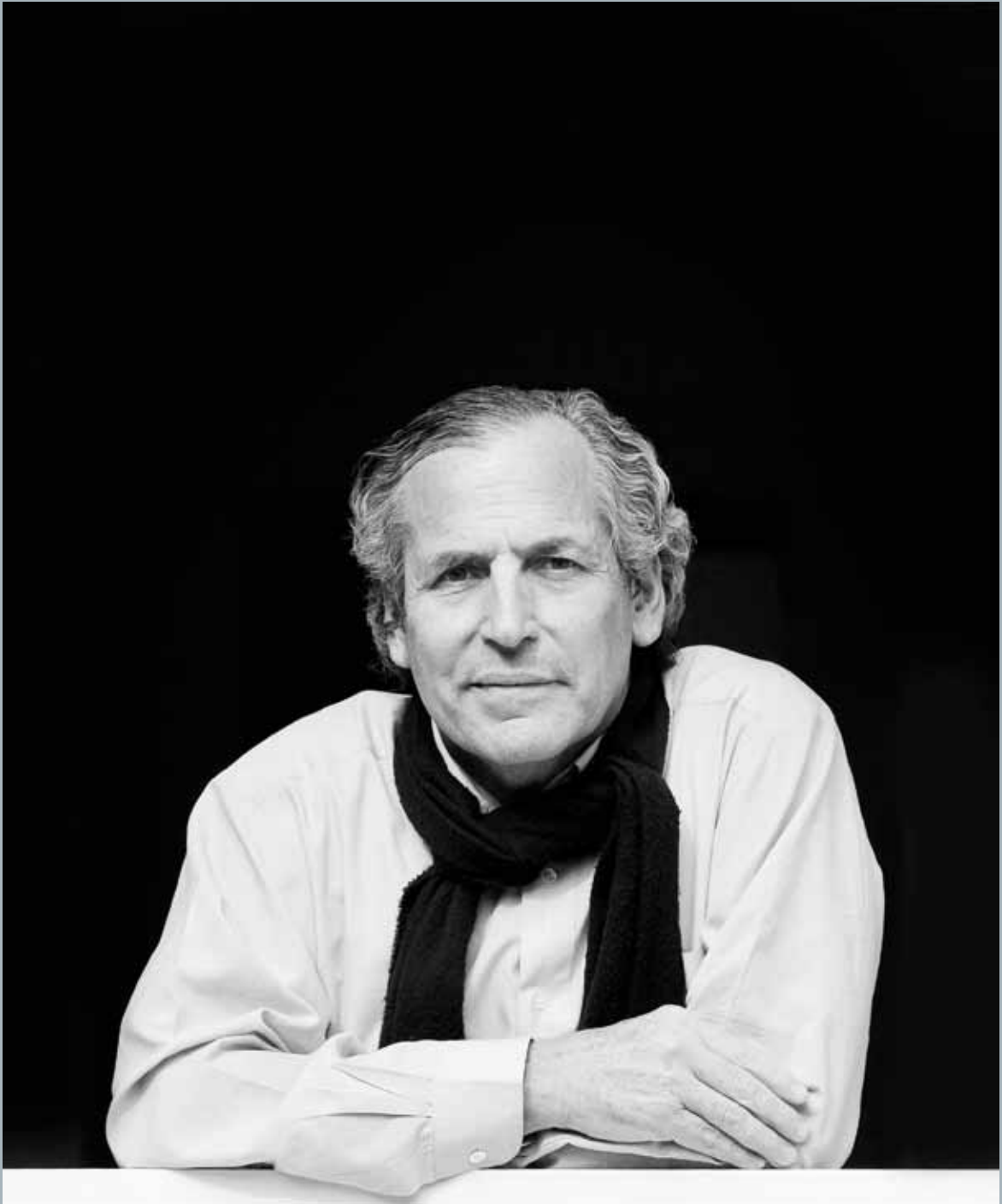
OPPOSITE Photographer Rodney Smith standing at a Dutch door at his home in New York. This setting provides the combination of a door and window together. He stands on the inside looking out as the diffused light illuminates the scene.

Canon 5DMii, 85mm lens, f/4

Rodney Smith > Further Inspiration

Rodney Smith approaches the world with wonder and doesn't impose his ideas, asking deep, meaningful, and sometimes humorous questions. His photographs have a poetic cadence that is magnetic and timeless. The simplicity, geometry, proportion, and elegance draw you in. And he does all of this without the use

of artificial light. Take some time to study his work and maybe even pick up one of his books. One of my favorites, which shows some of his early work, is entitled *In the Land of Light*. Visit rodneysmith.com to view his work.



“Light—with all its glorious variation from day to day, city to city, latitude to latitude—is my source of inspiration. I almost exclusively use natural light and I like to see the subject as our eyes view it but with more focus and more intent.”

—Rodney Smith