

JAY MAISEL

LIGHT

GESTURE

& COLOR

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Light, Gesture & Color
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This book is dedicated to Leon Friend, my art teacher
at Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn, NY.

The few of you out there who studied with him will know why I'm dedicating
this book to him. Those of you who never had the privilege will soon learn why.

In a postwar public high school near Coney Island, with no funding and no help,
Mr. Friend (he was always *Mr.* Friend) formed a community of art students.

He started the "Art Squad." It was, in the best sense of the word, an elite group.
If you were hard-working and stood out in your art classes, you might be lucky enough
to be asked to join. That gave you further impetus to climb over an eight-foot-high
spiked steel fence in order to get into the school at 7:00 a.m., and do it again at 7:00 p.m.

What motivated all this? Mr. Friend taught by stretching not just your knowledge,
but your expectations, your standards of excellence, and you.

He changed my life more than anyone I've known. He opened my eyes.
He made me understand that work could be joy. He demanded your best.
He respected you. He called everyone Mr. or Miss.

I know I speak for all of us who knew him when I say: Thank you, Mr. Friend.

This book is for you.

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About the Author

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1931, photographer Jay Maisel's career spans 61 years. He studied graphic design with Leon Friend at Abraham Lincoln High School, and painting with Joseph Hirsch in 1949 and Josef Albers in 1953. He informally studied with photographer and graphic designer Herbert Matter in 1952, and had a class with photographer and designer Alexey Brodovitch in 1955. He began working as a freelance photographer in 1954.

Jay's name has become synonymous with vibrant color photography that uses light and gesture to create countless unforgettable images for advertising, editorial, and corporate communications. In addition, his pictures appear in books and private, corporate, and museum collections. Some of his commercial accomplishments include five *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issue covers, the first two covers of *New York* magazine, and the cover of Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*. Included among his many awards for excellence are the Art Directors Club Hall of Fame, American Society of Media Photographers' Photographer of the Year Award, and the International Center of Photography's Infinity Award.

Since he stopped taking on commercial work in the late 1990s, Jay has continued to focus on his personal work. A graduate of Cooper Union and Yale University, he continues his education by teaching younger photographers at workshops, seminars, and lectures around the world, and has developed a reputation as a giving and inspiring teacher.

Jay married his wife, Linda Adam, in 1989. Their daughter, Amanda, was born in 1993.

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Acknowledgments

The word invaluable applies to Matt Dean, who sweated out this book even more than I did. Matt did everything technical that needed to be done, since I'm so inept in that area. Thanks to his empathy and opinions when I was depressed and indecisive, this book actually happened.

Jamie Smith has worked with me at The Bank on the workshop Light, Gesture & Color for the last eight years. Without him, the workshop would have been a lesser experience for everybody. With him, the workshop has evolved over the years into this book you hold in your hands.

The people at KelbyOne have been essential to making this book happen: Scott, who of course is not really a person but a series of identical clones—how else can you explain the amount of work he gets done; Dave Moser, or as I call him the “Silver Fox”; Felix Nelson and Kathy Siler, who I am proud to call friends; Cindy Snyder, Kim Doty, and Jessica Maldonado, who do all the actual work; plus a whole list of KelbyOne crew who make it a pleasure to deal with them on any project.

Lastly, my wife, L.A., and my daughter, Amanda, for being there for me.

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LIGHT

It's difficult to arbitrarily separate light from gesture or gesture from color. I want to speak of each separately but they are all intertwined.

Light *is*.

Gesture *is*.

Color *is*.

Since all three are always there, how do you “get” them? Let them find you. The aggressive search for them is counterproductive. It makes it less likely that you will perceive them.

The most important thing for a photographer to learn is to be self-critical. Here's a new mantra: If you're not your own severest critic, you are your own worst enemy.

There is one thing that can help you to be self-critical or objective about your work. That is the ability to look at your work and see, literally, what is in your image. This is not as easy as it sounds. You also have to take a step back and try to see, literally, what is in your field of view as you shoot. To do this, you must be open to the world in front of you.

You must learn to leave yourself open to accept things rather than anxiously searching for them. You cannot say, “Today, light; tomorrow, gesture; the next day, color! And I'll do all three by Sunday!” It just doesn't work that way.

Ernst Haas said that we do not take pictures, we are taken by pictures. Try to be as open as possible to what is around you. Who knows what you'll be taken by.

The whole world is there for you. Gifts will happen, but only if you are patient with life itself, the shooting process, and your own limitations.

Lucille Clifton said, “If you are open to it, mystery will come. If you're not, why should it, actually?”

One of the first things in Genesis is: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. God saw that the light was good....” Ever since then, photographers have been complaining about “bad light.”

“The light sucked, so I went home.”

“It rained all day; there was no light.”

“I only shoot at the golden time.”

“The sun went in; there was no light.”

There is no bad light. There is spectacular light and difficult light. It's up to you to use the light you have. It won't always be spectacular and sometimes you may not get much light at all. Use whatever light you find. It may not be inspiring or wonderful. You work with the hand you're dealt.

Stop complaining about the light. Without it, we keep bumping into things and can't see the gesture or color.

The drama in light exists not only in what is in the light, but also in what is left dark. If the light is everywhere, the drama is gone.

When I see light that moves me, that I cannot explain, I won't leave until I figure it out. Where is it coming from? How did it happen? If you cultivate this curiosity about light, it will be the beginning of the self-education process.

Light inevitably has a massive effect on color. It can enhance or destroy color.

The effect of light on gesture is different. Gesture holds its own no matter what the light is. The light can enhance it, but it cannot destroy it. Why? Gesture has identity and it is less vulnerable than color, which can lose its identity to light. Gesture will survive whatever kind of light you have. Gesture can triumph over anything because of its narrative content.

Light can be thrilling and emotionally moving. So can color. Gesture, though, incorporates narrative and can convey all sorts of emotional and intellectual content.

Light and color are about form. Gesture has content, as well as form.

GESTURE

“Just what the hell is gesture?” This question has been put to me often. Of course, I have less often been asked about light or color.

I wondered if I could find a word less esoteric, more to the point. So, I went to the dictionary and I confirmed my daughter’s analysis of me as having egomaniacal tendencies by concluding that the dictionary was wrong.

One dictionary has 42 definitions of light, 30 definitions of color, but for gesture only four that concern us, and of that four, there is not one mention of gesture in the context I am interested in showing you.

Then, I turned to a thesaurus and tried to look up gesture. It led me to some alternate words, which might make it easier to understand gesture. I was led down the tortuous path that thesauruses employ to drive you nuts and, after eliminating the weird things, I’ve got a few good words that make it all a little more transparent.

Here it goes: essence (probably the best), characteristic (also good), and others like descriptive, revealing, signature, and off we go with calligraphy, indication, ad nauseam.

Gesture is the expression that is at the very heart of everything we shoot. It’s not just the determined look on a face; it’s not just the grace of a dancer or athlete. It is not only the brutalized visage of the bloodied boxer. Neither is it only limited to age, or youth, or people, or animals. It exists in a leaf, a tree, and a forest. It reveals the complicated veins of the leaf, the delta-like branches of the tree, and when seen from the air, the beautiful texture of the forest.

It reveals the essence of each thing we look at: human, mineral, or animal, or brick, stone, or metal. It doesn’t stop there. We see it in clouds, crowds, magnificent mansions, and humble huts.

We have been shooting gesture all our lives but we didn’t have the nomenclature or the compulsion to categorize it.

We have always wanted to find the “it-ness” of anything we shoot. We want to get as deep into the subject as we can.

I call it gesture. You can call it anything you like, but it involves identifying and working to get to the heart of everything you see. I said, see, not shoot, because as you become aware of it, your “seeing” will intensify your “looking” and deepen your shooting.

You will, in time, see and show others not just the superficial, but the details, the meanings, and the implications of all that you look at: the wetness, reflectivity, and power of water; the subtlety of clouds; the texture of the bark of the tree; the delightful surface of a finished piece of wood; the smoothness of a baby; the rough, ragged face of the aged; or the aerial perspective of diminishing clarity in a series of mountains.

It’s obvious that it’s not just people who have gesture. It’s in *everything* we look at: chairs, tables, houses, cars. If we look...it’s there.

Choose the gesture you wish to show. It will make you infinitely more aware of the world around you. It will broaden your perception and awareness of everything.

Years ago, Marlon Brando used to sit in a drug store on the corner of 42nd Street and Broadway. The telephone faced 42nd Street. He would make believe he was using the phone. What he was actually doing, by his own admission, was studying people through the window. He talked about trying to be aware of how a speaker held his head when he spoke as opposed to when he was listening. Did they stand equally on both feet or was one foot taking all the weight? He was, in other words, trying to be aware of gesture.

He understood that the little eccentric things that people did gave them individuality and made them interesting. He delighted in the perception of intimate little details. When I see these things and I’m lucky enough to get them, I can’t stop grinning like an idiot.

When you get to the point that you start smiling to yourself or just bust out laughing with delight at seeing wonderful light, gesture, and color, you’re on your way.

COLOR

Talking about color presents specific problems.

If I say square, or circle, or black, or white, you know precisely what I'm talking about.

If I say gray, or red, or blue, we're all not necessarily on the same page. How gray? 30%? 50%? How blue? Cerulean? Prussian? Ultra-marine? How red? Carmine? Cadmium? Crimson?

We begin to see the subtleties inherent in color. I don't mean just the nomenclature. I'm referring to the fact that each of us perceives color in their own specific way.

One color alone means nothing. It acts as in a vacuum, with no other colors to relate to. It is only when colors relate to other colors that the fun begins.

The impressionists were quite exceptional in using additive color. They would put a blue next to a yellow and the observer would see unmuddied pure green.

We are concerned with a totally opposite aspect of color. While the impressionists were using additive color, we have to be aware of subtractive color. For instance, if I wished to make a neutral gray look warmer, I could put it next to a very cool green. If I wanted to turn a brown cooler, I would juxtapose it with a warm red. In each case, the association with the second color changes the first color.

I wouldn't let any of this talk about color throw you off, if I were you. I would just use it to look at colors and become aware of how they affect each other.

Color is seductive. It changes as it interacts with other colors, it changes because of the light falling upon it, and it changes as it becomes larger in size. This last aspect can be seen in the tears and rage of anyone who has chosen a color based on a two-inch sample and painted an entire room in it.

You cannot accurately remember color because of the previously mentioned factors. I'm so sure of that, I have a sucker bet I'll make you. I'll put down a piece of colored paper, you look at it and go off and find the color that matches it. If you do, I'll give you one thousand bucks. If you lose, you give me a dollar.

"Color" is quite different from "colors." In an image with many colors, we find that all the colors compete with each other rather than interacting with each other. The result: colors.

When you are working with limited colors, they have the capacity to interact. The result: color.

There really isn't anything that you could call a "bad" color. It all has to do with the amount of color you use and in what context it appears.

The way to find color begins long before you go out shooting. It has to do with all the input and stimuli you've gotten from your environment. That includes movies, music, posters, books, your personal environment, and possibly most important, your perception of the arts.

It most certainly does not include, as necessary, the work of other photographers.

The art world has existed for more than 50,000 years. Picasso has suggested that the most incredible drawings he ever saw were the cave drawings at Lascaux, which were made about 17,000 years ago. The photography world has existed for roughly 200 years. Which do you think would be more fruitful to study?

The ability to be sensitive to what is around you is not something that turns on only when you're out shooting. It should be on at all times. You will be amazed at how rich your visual experiences will be, even when you are not photographing.

This business of enjoying color (and gesture and light) will only come after some time. It will not be immediate, and when it happens and you excitedly reveal all this to your friends, you will be surprised at how many have no idea what you are talking about.

Some have said that if you take a great picture in color and take away the color, you'll have a great black-and-white picture. But if you're shooting something about color and you take away the color, you'll have nothing.

And that's the way it should be.

To review: Color *is*. That's it. It's all out there. What's important is to stay open to it.

Don't make plans to photograph color. Don't look for one kind of color. You'll walk past great color while you're trying to complete your plans.

Finding light, gesture, and color is a little bit like trying to hold water in the palm of your hand. If you squeeze, it's gone. If you're patient, it will stay. This is part of trying to stay empty so that you can be filled with the things you love.

Don't look for reds, or blues, or pastels, or saturated color, or no-color color, or vibrations. If you're open to them, all these things will come to you. If you go after them, they will elude you.

If you have perceived and executed something wonderful in color, it can be the content of the image, and now it becomes your function to be your severest critic and figure out whether it's really that good. If it is, congratulations.

Keep at it.

I Really Have to Get This

When we got above the clouds and I saw this, I turned to the helicopter pilot and said, “Let’s do a 360° around this and then come in tighter a little bit at a time.”

“What the hell are you doing?”

I had forgotten there was an art director in the back seat and that I was on my way to a shoot. “I really have to get this shot.” “Why? It has nothing to do with the shot we have to do.” “On the contrary, it has everything to do with that shot.” “How so?”

“Well, you’ve got a choice of doing that shot with a happy photographer or a pissed off photographer. Which would you rather have?”

He let me get my shots. I wouldn’t have let it happen any other way.

When I saw this image, I knew I had to shoot it. It was a visceral thing, totally beautiful and real. It was unplanned and, as we came up through the clouds, I was stunned—literally.

The fog was, of course, the base of the image. The mountains, the bridge, the Transamerica Pyramid, the Bank of America building, all these few interruptions, all meaningful and identifying San Francisco.

Of course, we also got the art director his shot.



San Francisco

Inanimate Gesture

I shot this from a Cessna high-wing plane on my way to shoot an assignment somewhere else.

It's not far from Tampa and, at this point, it's probably a community of houses.

That's another reason to shoot things: a matter of recording history.

If you ever doubt that inanimate objects have gesture, this shows that they do.

I have been shooting aerals all over the world for many years.

The only things that consistently look organic and unscathed are the forests, the deserts, and the oceans, and within each are many powerful gestures.



Florida Forest

Different Universes

Many years ago, I was honored to be visited by Vilmos Zsigmond, one of the leading cinematographers in the world. He shot *The Deer Hunter* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, among others.

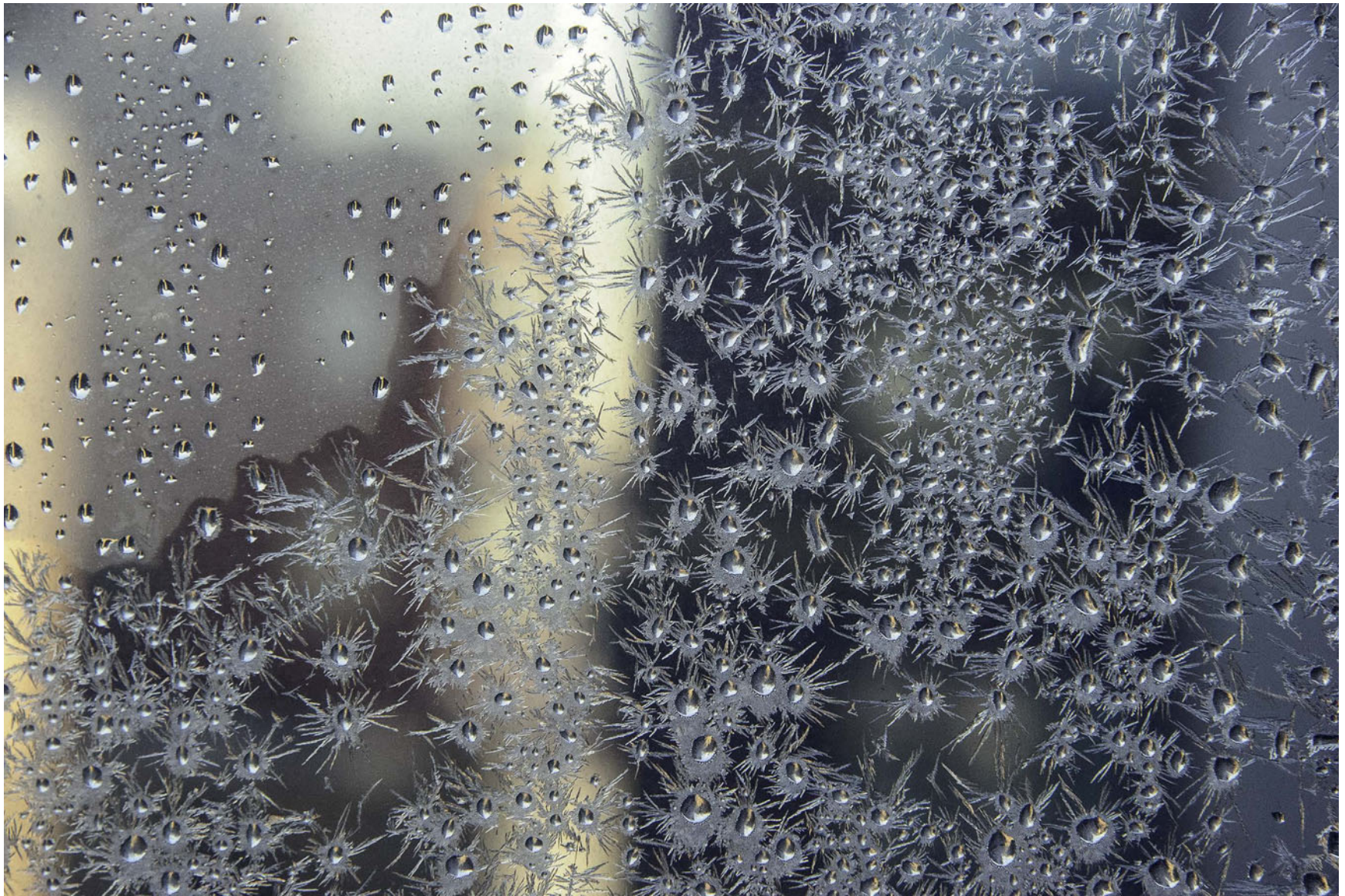
I was showing him my work. He looked at some images of ice crystals on windows and said, “They’re very good.” “Thanks.” “When do you shoot them?” “Usually, just after dawn, past sunrise, till they melt.”

He sighed, and said, “I have to do them at 3:00 in the afternoon, or whenever they want them.” I never found out how he did that.

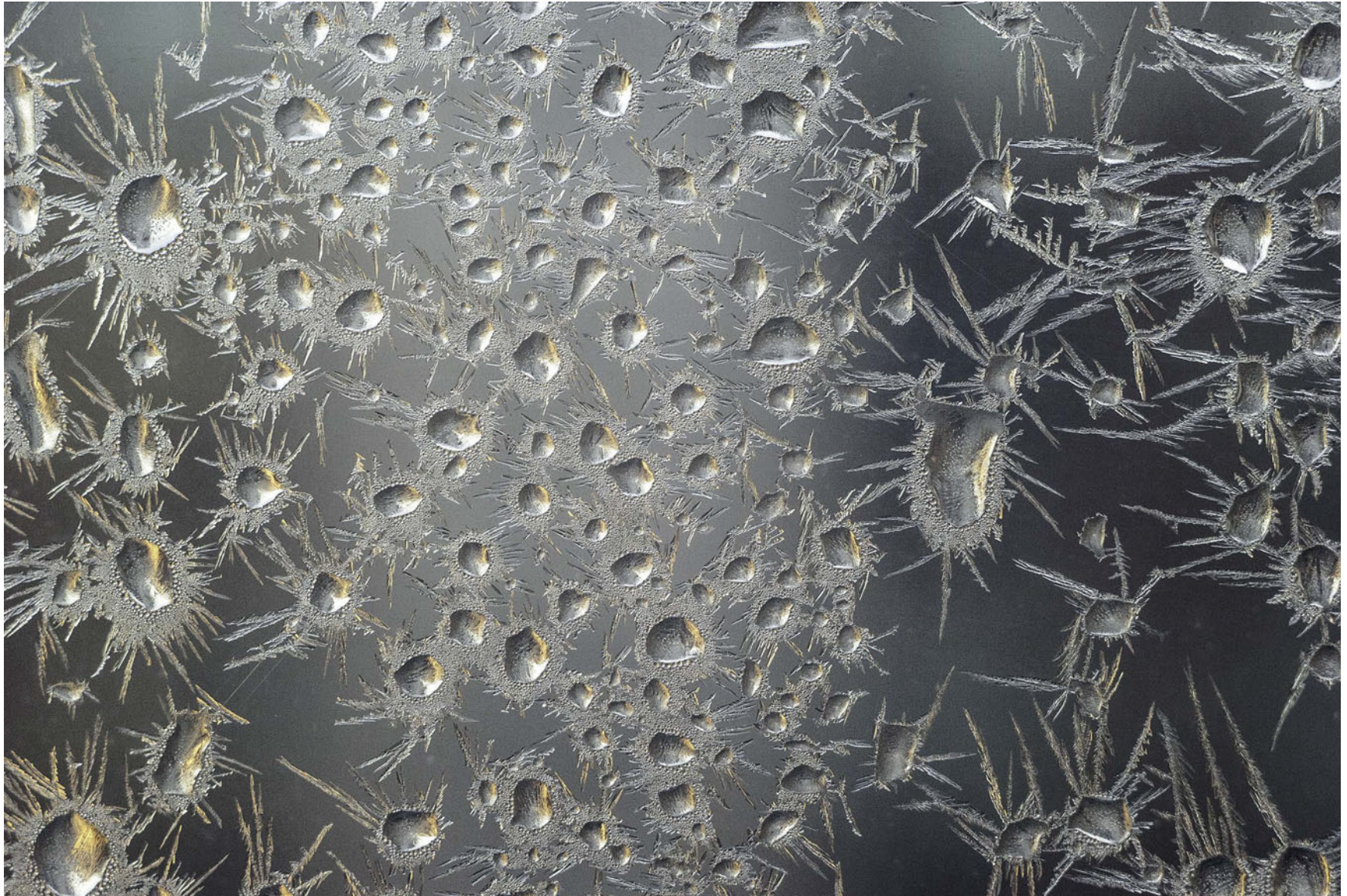
I thought of this exchange last week. It was bitter cold in New York and I was freezing, but delighted to be shooting ice crystals for the first time in more than 15 years. I know it has been at least that long because the last time I shot them was with film and I started shooting digital in 2000.

Each time you shoot ice crystals they’re different. They change from one window to the next. Each is a different universe based on light, the ice crystals themselves, the background, whether or not they’re melting, and many other possibilities.

Here are three, all quite different in gesture, all difficult and transient, all great challenges. But what a kick when it works.



Ice Crystal 1



Ice Crystal 2



Ice Crystal 3

Visual Contract

I do not speak many languages—barely get by in English—but I can pantomime like gangbusters.

I saw this guy and indicated me, him, camera, okay?

He nodded yes, smiled, and I started to shoot. He then raised the brush in that wonderful gesture.

Two things went on in my mind: first, he's going to shake the brush and I'm going to get a face full of yellow; second thing, I've got to get that gesture no matter what.

Mission accomplished.

He didn't shake it, just smiled and walked away.

These are the gifts, the momentary elusive moves that people make.

You have to be ready to shoot at all times.



Man with Brush, Sudan

Two's Tougher Than One

When I teach, we're always talking about the difficulties of photographing people. Most of the people in the class have gotten the hang of it by day two or three.

That's the point at which I tell them, "Okay, you can do it now. That was not your comfort zone, but now it is. From here on, you've got to do two people. That's about 10 times tougher than doing one person."

Sometimes my instructions are not so clear to everyone. For instance, there was one guy who was doing wonderful formal portraits with one subject looking at the camera.

To give me what he thought I wanted, or possibly just to pull my chain, he brought in images with two people looking formally at the camera.

I quietly said, "I didn't ask you to add a person. I thought you'd understand that I meant two people relating to each other."

That's the ultimate gesture, the revelation, and counterpoint when you get two people relating to each other.

When they get good with two, I tell them to try three. It always gets tougher. Don't stop at easy.



Couple at Alan's

Train Station, Rome

This is part of a series I have been shooting since 1970. I call it “Faces in a Train Station.”

I love the fact that I am able to shoot a frame-within-a-frame of people in windows.

Train stations are one of those places that people kind of understand that it’s okay to take pictures.

Sometimes they pose for you without being asked. Other times you can photograph them without being seen. Both can be wonderful.

Try it. You’ll love it. But you really have to put time in, dig deep, and don’t skim.



Man in Train Window

The All-Important Gesture

This was a commercial job for an insurance company. It was supposed to be shot indoors. I worked on it for hours. I turned to the art director and said, “It’s not getting better, it’s getting worse. We have to move it outdoors. We’ll do better.” He agreed. We went outside.

I found a white picket fence. “Is that cliché enough for you?” I asked him. He said, “Great! It’s a Middle America prop.”

We worked for about an hour trying to make it look *not* like some schmuck photographer set it up.

The light was fine. I had put a red t-shirt on the man that would act as a reflector on the others to avoid having them in silhouette. The color was okay, but nothing was happening. I shot about 200 shots when suddenly the little boy pulled his sister’s hair. I instantly knew I had it and that the entire day’s shoot was completely irrelevant.

That gesture made the shot. It was pure dumb luck working in my favor.

The gesture was a gift.

When we are given gifts, we must be quick and able to accept them.

They rarely get repeated spontaneously.



Boy Pulling Hair

Let the Subject Show

This is a portrait of George Ancona. I've known George for 70 years. We were in the Art Squad together at Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn, NY.

We lost contact with each other for a while. When I started teaching at the Santa Fe Workshops, he called me and said, "Hey Jay, this is George. I live here. Let's get together."

Since then, I have been photographing him every year. Most of the pictures have been about me and color, some extreme close-ups, some wonderful playing with light.

This picture, which took about 10 seconds to do, is all about George. It has his gesture in his environment.

I am minimally present, minimally invasive.

It's good to forget about yourself once in a while.



George Ancona in His Studio

Waiting 35 Years

Walking on the streets of Chicago, shooting whatever I could find, run into, or get lucky shooting. I saw this woman rearranging her clothing. I couldn't see specifically what she was doing. Her back was to me.

I did know that the man, patiently waiting for her to finish whatever she was doing by the gesture of his body and the look on his face, had been waiting for her like this for 35 years.



Man and Woman, Chicago

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