THE PRINT AND THE PROCESS

TAKING COMPELLING PHOTOGRAPHS FROM VISION TO EXPRESSION

David duChemin

FOREWORD BY ART WOLFE

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New Riders
VOICES THAT MATTER™

The Print and the Process:
Taking Compelling Photographs from Vision to Expression
David duChemin

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To my father, Richard, from whom I got my wanderlust and my love of the camera's frame.

Acknowledgments

I am profoundly grateful for everyone who plays a part in the making of these books. To all of these people, I am so grateful.

My editor, and friend, Ted Waitt, who has now edited five of my books. Ted gets me, and he gets what I'm trying to do, and his friendship and editorial guidance have made writing these books not only a learning experience but a pleasure. If this book sounds at all like I know what I'm talking about, it's because Ted has gently encouraged me to include both verbs and nouns in each sentence, and has done his level best to untangle some of my more spontaneous metaphors.

My publisher, Nancy Aldrich-Ruenzel, has bet on this dark horse five times now and given me the freedom to not just make a book that sells, but make one that's truly mine. Not once has she, or her team, asked me to change something I thought was important, and her willingness to let her authors have their voice is why she keeps publishing great books and why I'm so happily part of the Peachpit family.

Charlene Charles-Will has done the design on this book, as well as the last four. She's got a great eye and a graceful sense of design that makes these books so beautiful to look at.

Lisa Brazieal (and Hilal Sala before her), my production editors, have made sure this all comes together, and on time. Scott Cowlin and Sara Jane Todd, who make sure this book gets into the marketplace and finds its way to you.

My manager and best friend, Corwin Hiebert, who quite literally holds my world together, and whose own book, *Living the Dream*, came out just weeks before this one. Every day I get to do what I love and don't take a moment of it for granted—but I get to do so because he makes it possible. My life would be poorer without his friendship.

My friends, particularly those who keep me sane, either at home or abroad—Jeffrey Chapman, Dave Delnea, Daniel Brown, Al Smith, Troy Cunningham, Kevin Clark, and my girl Cynthia, who splits her time between cheerleading my efforts and kicking my ass. And my family, to whom I owe everything, particularly my mother, who has been my lifelong best friend and inspiration, and my father, to whom I have grown close far too late in life, but for whom I have deep love and renewed respect.

My readers and the photographic community at large. Everyone who has ever purchased a book, downloaded an eBook, or read my blog. Thank you for giving me the best gift a man can have—the freedom to do what he loves best. I am so grateful.

And finally God, from whom this passion comes. Be Thou my Vision, oh Lord of my heart.

(Way Too Much) About the Author

David duChemin is a humanitarian and world photographer, sometimes based in Vancouver, Canada. He is a nomad, explorer, writer, and publisher.

David is a formally trained photographer, though that formal training was not actually in photography but in theology, in which he graduated with a four-year degree (that took five years) in order to pursue a twelve-year career in comedy before stepping off the stage, to the relief of his audiences, to return to his cameras and begin photographing, and leaving pieces of his heart, on seven continents.

Photo Credit: Cynthia Haynes

David likes single malt whisky from Islay, hammocks, and long walks on the beach. He is also a best-selling author, which means he will one day inherit the basement full of his books that his mother has been furiously ordering from Amazon.com. The four books preceding this one are *Within the Frame: The Journey of Photographic Vision*; *VisionMongers: Making a Life and a Living in Photography*; *Vision & Voice: Refining Your Vision in Adobe Photoshop Lightroom*; and *Photographically Speaking: A Deeper Look at Creating Stronger Images*. He's also the author and publisher of a growing library of eBooks, which can be found at CraftAndVision.com.

David's work can be found at DavidDuChemin.com, as can his blog and the growing community of kind and talented people who read it.

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FOREWORD

By Art Wolfe

There are places in this world that I have traveled to many times over. Africa, Antarctica, and Asia are destinations that return to my mind year after year. The last time I counted, I had close to two dozen visits to Africa alone. It is by no coincidence that I have been to these locations with such regularity. They are areas of this planet that possess unlimited photographic opportunity. What could be more impressive than seeing a pride of lions taking down a massive buffalo, or visiting a land of ice and snow where the only souls there have arrived via a four-day boat ride, and are allowed only a day's worth of time off of their vessel before having to move on? We are all on this planet for such a short period of time; witnessing how nature and culture both define and unite us while we are here has been a gift.

I remember when I began the journey to these great places, mere moments after I graduated from the University of Washington's School of Art. Cameras and tripods were big, bulky, and heavy. Though security logistics weren't as strict as they are today, there was one logistic that was never easy. Imagine what would be needed during a month-long trip to Africa? There were no digital cameras, no 32 gigabyte Compact Flash cards. The cameras took film, and ISO needed to be set. They needed to be manually advanced or advanced via an additional, external motor drive. And worst of all, there wasn't any instant feedback—we had to wait until we returned a month later to see if even one image made it. We took two hundred, four hundred, six hundred rolls of film at a time, packed sardine-like into ziplocs and lead bags, and autofocus was something we only dreamt about. Times have changed. Drastically.

Fast forward forty years. Now I can create a publishable photo using the phone in my pocket. On a recent layover in London, I went out around the city one evening creating with nothing but my iPhone. I am astonished at the rate that information now travels around the world. Mere minutes after I create a photograph, it can be downloaded, mastered, and published to a whole host of marketplaces around the globe. We are now even publishing books in electronic formats, something that we thought would never happen. Even though my opinion regarding the technologies that are in full force now is extremely favorable, I feel there is a definite drop-off in the quality of work I see. I think that digital has allowed for imagery to be created with such freedom that most are failing to follow any creative process to do so. In other words, there is a huge quantity, but not a huge quality of work in the marketplace.

Enter David duChemin. I met David when he was using technology to further promote his message of photography in regards to craft and process. This workshop was a live broadcast that was being conducted from my gallery in Seattle, Washington. During one of

his breaks, David asked if I would like to join him for dinner. I happily accepted. It was as we sat down to dinner when David ordered a round of margaritas for the whole table that I knew we were going to get along just fine. As we had our dinner and discussed more about the craft of photography, I came to realize that David and I shared many commonalities in the way we thought about creating a photograph. What's equally amazing still are the ways in which our work differs.

David and I are both inspired by some of the same legendary masters of photography—Ernst Haas, Ansel Adams, and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

David's work reminds me of the type of moment photography that Bresson was known for, especially what he worked through with his portfolio of imagery from Venice. The striking simplicity of moment, balanced by consistent mood and color (or lack thereof) left me wanting more. David's images come from locations that I have traveled to time and again over my career. They are the places that inspire me most, and to see a new and different perspective of these locations has me celebrating the fresh look that new technologies and points of view can bring.

I often advocate to anyone who will listen that the art of photography really isn't about the equipment. Hence my reasoning for creating more often with the simplicity of the camera that is part of my iPhone. Strip away all of the bells and whistles of a professional DSLR and focus attention on what matters most—the creative composition of the photographer. Your work will progress dramatically if the only thing you need to worry about is what you are looking at in your frame. This is how David approaches his work, and it is how I approach mine. Our focus is to highlight for you, our viewer, a different perspective, different light, different mood, even a different world. It is ingrained in us. It is part of our personalities and lifestyles. The tools we use to create those images are secondary to our ability to share our vision with you. It is the way that it should be for any photographer—any artist of any discipline, actually.

I celebrate the fact that David duChemin's perspective of our world is different from mine. He has a vision that I can appreciate and value. My hope is that you will find value in it as well, and that it inspires you to create, to craft, and to process your photography with the same conscious thought and emotion.

Antarctica, 2011.

INTRODUCTION

There comes a moment for most photographers when the desire to create a decent photograph gets overtaken by the desire to create a personal photograph. The two are not necessarily, nor even remotely, the same. A lot of technically perfect photographs are out there that will never move the heart or mind of another. And, frankly, there are a lot of very personal photographs, devoid of much craft at all, that won't move anyone either. But combine the two and I think we come close to a working definition of a "good" photograph. If art has something of the artist within it, then both the intent of the artist and the ability of his craft to express that work together to create something our audiences will experience as art. I'll leave you to define those terms as you choose, because I don't think it's art per se that matters—what matters is our experience of creating it (our process) and the experience of those who will read that photograph (the print).

This book might easily have been named *The Photographs We (I) Make and How We (I) Make Them*, but it doesn't roll off the tongue the same way *The Print and the Process* does. I use the word "print" here in the broadest sense, in the sense that Adobe Lightroom, for example, allows us to "print" to JPG or PDF. I don't mean the final 13x19 on fine art paper, so I won't be talking about the craft of printing, which is so fraught with technicalities that it demands its own book. The print, or photograph—whether it is presented on your wall or on your website—is our art. Ansel Adams called the print the final symphony, though he was referring to actual prints. How we get to that symphony is a process and we all have our own ways of getting there.

I believe that the process of any artist is more than just a footnote, more than something scribbled in the margins. For artists, it's the work, it's the struggle, and this—more than the finished print, or book, or sculpture—gives meaning to our lives and to the work itself. I know that at some point my work will, and must, exist on its own without reference to my struggle to create it. But if it is that struggle that makes the final print this and not that, then at least as we learn our craft, we must give attention to our process.

It is for this reason I've written thousands and thousands of words, in this and other books, to talk about the how and the why of our work as photographers, and specifically, of my work, because it's all I know with any authority. Why we do this matters. How we do

it matters, too. They are two sides of the same coin. I have a small digital publishing company called Craft & Vision; that name came out of the notion that great photography happens where our craft and our vision, or intent, meet. It's the same idea behind this book.

The Print and the Process began as a small series of digital books under the Craft & Vision banner, and both the Venice and Iceland monographs appeared there first. To those, I'm adding the work from my first trip to Antarctica, and a series I made for The BOMA Project while on assignment with them among the Rendille, Samburu, and Turkana tribes of Northern Kenya in the winter of 2011. Together these four smaller bodies of work form the platform from which I hope to discuss the whys and hows of my own process, and what I suspect are the commonalities with others' process. That process changes, and is, like the photographer himself, flawed. But I think those flaws are the cracks that let the light in. Perfect photographs are not my goal; my goal is to create photographs that move people, and people are nothing if not imperfect.

The work from Northern Kenya is shared here with the permission of my friends at The BOMA Project, people for whom I have an immense love and respect. I'll tell the story later, but I was adopted into a Rendille village in Kenya, given a Rendille name (Akeno), and fawned over by an adopted mother for a week. When I fell from a 30-foot wall in Italy over a year later, my village held meetings under the thorn tree to talk about me and, I suppose, offer prayers in their own fashion. That these nomads a world away should care this much for me, let alone remember me, still moves me to tears. When in my hospital room I unboxed a gift from my village—a hand-carved war club called a rungu—it was one of the most beautiful gifts I'd ever received. "Keep fighting," it seemed to say, and still does. It now sits on my dresser, one of the first things I see when I walk in the door of my Vancouver loft. I tell you all that to give you the context for why and how that work got included. Ten percent of my royalties from this book will go to support the ongoing work of The BOMA Project. You can learn more about them online at BomaProject.org.

I hope this book reads the way I intend it. If you read it through, and close the back cover feeling you've sat with me in my Vancouver loft and looked at some photographs and heard some stories, and that those hours left you inspired to pursue your own process in new, more intentional, ways with some new ideas and techniques, then I'll consider this project a success. If you close it feeling you've learned no new revolutionary techniques, and that your photography isn't going to improve overnight, you're right on both counts. This is not a get-good-quick book. This is a pragmatic book, and if it reads a little too philosophical for your tastes, try to dig past that because the way we create our photographs determines what they look like and what they say, and that, if I'm not mistaken, is the point of it all. I know I use a lot of words. I know someone is going to jump on Amazon.com after reading this and complain about how flowery and repetitive my writing is. So be it. That's who I am, and if we create our art—writing, photographs, or otherwise—first for other people, then our critics will level a worse charge against us—insincerity and disingenuousness. This is not a book of templates and recipes to follow so you can make photographs like me. It's a book of ideas and thoughts and techniques so you can marinate in them all and then make photographs that are like you. I hope too that a certain amount of humility comes through in this. This is only

the way I make my photographs; it is not the only way, and it may not be the way you make yours. I hope you *adapt* what you learn here, not merely *adopt* it.

Photography, like any art, is hard. It is not learned overnight, and for all the talk about it being a democratic art form, it is as hard as painting or music or poetry to move from being a craftsman to being an artist. It's even harder to become a good artist, though I think I'd rather aim to be an honest artist and let the critics and fans argue about what's "good." We wrestle with this stuff—fighting with buttons and lenses and all the constraints of technology and passing light and bad weather and grumpy subjects and, at times, clients who bring to the process all manner of complications—in order to create something. It's a long process, and it changes as we grow and change. My sincerest hope is that these reflections on my own process will give you something you need to move further with your own journey of vision and expression: some new information, a little inspiration, courage, or just the knowledge that you are feeling a little lost but forging your own path. Whether or not you see it, you're on exactly the right path. The path of the artist has always been one that they cut themselves, the bushes growing over behind them, so others too will find their own way.

About Process

We all make our art differently. Some approach it cerebrally, whereas others are much more emotional. Some work better in chaos; others are more fruitful working with order. The differences are many, but commonalities exist as well. We share many of the same frustrations, creative roadblocks, and technical limitations, and nearly all of us share the same desire to create something beautiful, something that is unique to us.

That desire to *create* is so strong in us that the frustration of not being able to do it without challenge, or at times, at all, is equally strong. We react in a couple of ways. We seek and buy new gear that holds the promise of *finally* getting out of our way and allowing us to make something amazing. It rarely lives up to that promise. We defer to the myth of talent, because if we simply aren't talented enough, at least we know why our work suffers; it's not our fault, it's a lack of genetics. Or we give up. Or drink too much. Or jump online, hang out on a photography forum and talk trash about our gear or about other photographers—anything to make us feel better. The alternative is unpleasant: work.

The creative process is just that: a process. It's work. It is not a magic button. It is not instant. There is no art fairy assigned to keep you inspired, nor is there a cloud of great ideas leading to great photographs that hangs in the ether around us, ready to be plucked with one hand while we steady our camera with the other. Making photographs isn't unlike writing. I've rewritten this paragraph three times already; I know what I want to say but I'm having a tough time doing it exactly the way I want. Eventually it comes out in a way I didn't plan, nor could I have perfectly predicted. We begin with intent, we start moving the pieces around, we create a few frames we know we'll later delete, but we know that those lousy frames are the price of admission to the better ones. We change lenses, perspectives, and framing. And if there is any magic at all, it's in the process itself because often we begin the work and we swear and

mutter to ourselves, and wonder how it is that anyone could be mistaken enough to think we *ever* know what the hell we're doing. But then we do something that surprises us and we work with it, tweak it, take it further. One idea leads to another, takes us somewhere we never planned, somewhere surprising and amazing. And later, when we look at the print we marvel at it, because it's *exactly* what we were trying to create, and yet we could never have visualized this exact image. That's where the magic is: the process. The work. Artists of all disciplines testify to this: no one knows where new ideas come from, but they come with suspicious frequency when we work. Don't wait for inspiration before you begin. It doesn't work that way.

Inspiration is an overused and underappreciated word. It means, literally, to breathe in. Waiting for inspiration to strike is like waiting to breathe. We don't wait. We do. It's our job. The best path I've discovered to "being inspired" is to increase my inputs. Creativity is about the mash-up of existing ideas and elements; those are your raw materials, so the more ideas you expose yourself to, the more materials you've got to work with. Study other photographers and visual artists, put their books on your coffee table, not your bookshelf, and study them, don't merely flip. Go to galleries, watch movies, anything to increase the inputs. And then let them incubate. Just let them alone. Now go to work. Put your camera in your hand and do what you do. Show up and make photographs. It's in the real-world mix of working hard and being exposed to thoughts, ideas, images, music, and experiences beyond ourselves that we find so-called inspiration. Even still, it doesn't often come as a preformed idea, a momentary and brilliant vision of a finished photograph.

I wish I could previsualize my final photographs, but I can't, and never have been able to. I read about people like Ansel Adams talking about visualizing (by which he seemed to mean previsualizing, because what is seeing if not visualizing?) the image and, between you and me, and depending on my mood, I either think he was full of crap or I believe that I'm the one photographer in the world who doesn't have a clue what he's talking about. Either way, it's depressing. I don't previsualize a scene. I *feel* it. And it's from that feeling that I begin working with the elements in front of me and the choices available to me, and I move them around, try them on, discard them, and try something else until I see something in my frame that feels the way I feel. My camera and I are collaborators on this and I can no more work this out without it in my hand than it can make a photograph without me. If you'd asked me to describe it before I put the camera to my eye, I'd use emotional words, or at best be able to talk in terms of sketch images and possibilities.

Sketch images are the crap, the dross, the author's lousy first draft. I make them unashamedly, knowing (hoping to God) that no one will ever see them, and I make as many of them as I have to. Why? Because I don't see the same way the camera does. I see in three dimensions; the camera flattens that to two. I see with peripheral vision and almost limitless focus; the camera allows me to frame out much of the world and focus only on what I want to. I see light in a way the camera doesn't. So I put the camera to my face and ask it to show me how it sees what I'm looking at, and I make frame after frame until the camera—with all its constraints—helps me see the world the way I am feeling it. Maybe that's just me. It's rare—very, very rare—that I see something, raise the camera, make one frame, and call it a day, returning home satisfied with my work.

Antarctica, 2011.

Art is work. Sometimes joyful, sometimes frustrating, but it's work. If there is a muse in charge of our inspiration, she comes out once we get to work. My muse seems to wait until I'm good and frustrated before she whispers, "Hey, have you tried this...? What if you moved to the left, got lower, shot wider?" I don't know where I found it, but there's wisdom in these words I read recently: It's called art-work, not art-screwing-around.

When I talk about the creative process, I do not only mean the making of the image in the camera. I mean, too, the work you do in front of the computer (if digital is your medium) or in the darkroom (if you're one of the intrepid few who still love the smell of developer and fixer). Your work in Adobe Lightroom, or whichever tool you prefer, is subject to the same path of creative process as the making of the negative. You arrive armed with an unrefined image and the intent to make it say something, and at times it takes a few tries to get it right. It did in the darkroom under the dim red bulb, and it does now. Don't rush. I often do a first edit on an image, and then return in a day or two to view it with fresh eyes. It's common for me to have pushed too hard the first time. The saturation is too high, the contrast too punchy, the blacks too dark, the dust spots... well, I probably just missed some of those. Our art demands more than a mere "good enough" effort. I don't mean it demands perfection, just that we're so used to the immediacy of digital workflow and output that slowing down a little and giving our process some breathing room will only give our photographs a better chance at being all they can be. Part of that process is living with your work after you think you're done.

While I've already confessed to using the word "print" in the title of this book somewhat broadly, even metaphorically, I also believe strongly that if digital is your medium, you should consider printing your work. Digital gives us, on our displays, the gratification of seeing our work without printing, but the experience is much different. A display, even something as large as a 30-inch cinema display, hides flaws and weaknesses in an image in a way that a large print will not. When we limit our output and end our process by posting images online, we rob ourselves of the chance to print our work and live with it, to hold it in our hands and marvel at the details. If the print, and not the monitor, is the final arbiter, then not to print our best work also keeps us out of what would otherwise be a valuable feedback loop.

I won't discuss it in the following pages, but printing has always been, to greater or lesser degrees, a part of my process. As I said, large prints (for me that begins at 13x19) reveal the strengths and weaknesses of an image, though that also assumes you don't just print your work and file it away in a drawer. Right now I print my work on an Epson 3880, which allows me to make a 13x19 image on 17x22 paper. I hang it on a cable wire purchased at IKEA, or I frame it and let it sit in front of me. I have a large skylight in my loft and the bright, diffused daylight gives me an unflinching look at my work. Is it actually sharp? Did I miss any sensor dust? Do the lines work as well as I thought they would? How are my exposures? How's my choice of crop and aspect ratio? After looking at it for a week, or a month, do I still like it? Does it still move me? Does it have staying power or was I seduced merely by the novelty of it? The answers to these questions lead me to make changes in my craft, to be more attentive to things I failed to notice, or to pick up

the slack in areas where I've become lazy or sloppy. The purpose and benefit of printing is not only to share our work with others, but to disabuse ourselves of the illusion that our work is as good as we think it is on that small screen.

When you commit to printing your work, either in your home, studio, or through a commercial printer like Mpix.com, you get pickier. Anyone can post 500 images from this weekend's walk through the park onto Flickr or 500px. It's easy, it's free, and it doesn't require or encourage much discretion or discernment. Spending $20 on a print can pull the veil away from our eyes. After all, if it's not worth spending $20 on, is it as strong as we think it is? Perhaps it is, but it's a question that begs asking, and I've found this alone to be a powerful editor.

Learn to pay attention to your process. Learn to identify the ways you seem to work, and play, best. And learn to trust that process and silence the voices that tell you you're either brilliant and can therefore just wait for the magic to happen, or that you're not nearly as talented as some other uber-photographer, who was probably conceived behind a pile of boxed lenses in a Leica factory, and you might as well give up, or worse, settle for mediocrity. Learn to hone your own process, and then learn to trust it.

This book is a glimpse into my own struggle with process. What you see, of course, are the keepers, but for every one of those final images I've tried to describe the more useful aspects of what I'm conscious of on the way to making them. Sometimes they are technical considerations, and sometimes they're more cerebral. Sometimes I talk about vision or intent, sometimes about practical matters of craft. Both are needed. While I've preached my "vision is better than gear" mantra for a long time, I've also tried to remind people that our relationship to technology and technique is collaborative, that the better our handle on craft, the more we'll be able to go where our vision asks us to go. You can't discard technique. If you think the camera doesn't matter, get a pencil and start sketching. And if the camera matters, then learning how to use it matters. So I've included as much of the technical information as I could. Where I haven't, it's safe to assume that I still consider it important, and I've included my EXIF data for all images. You'll learn something from these, even if that's just the recognition that I routinely leave my ISO too high, or seem to choose it randomly while fighting with something else. I still underexpose my images by a stop or two. I'll learn. No process is perfect, because none of us is, and I suspect that a sterile, perfect process leads to perfect but sterile art. Hearts are not generally moved by perfection. What matters is not that your process, or your photographs, are perfect, but that they are uniquely you.

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