

SBCC B&W Presentation – 1/28/2010

By Tony Mistretta

Introduction:

Why Black & White photography?

Color photography has been available for 75 years. Yet B&W remains popular. Absence of color allows us to concentrate on other things:

Lines, shapes, texture, overall message in the photo.

Photography is an abstraction, B&W is a further abstraction

Subtlety of gray tones are beautiful

They can be elegant or gritty, strong & powerful (high contrast) or soft & gentle (low contrast), moody, artistic, shine like silver

Versatile – good for any type of photography – portraits, landscapes, especially suitable for photojournalism

Adapts to almost any lighting situation – color often needs a sunny day,

monochrome can be better on a cloudy day or in a low light situation

Whether you choose color or black & white is a personal decision, but black & white has a lot to offer.

This session will include:

Ansel Adams approach to photography – emotional and technical

Zone system

Show some beautiful photographs by masters of photography

Stories behind them

Show how Zone system applies to digital photography

The works that I show are from the www.masters-of-photography.com

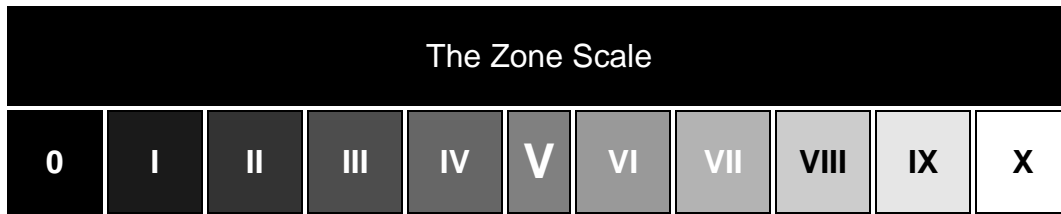
These include works by Ansel Adams, Imogene Cunningham, Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Minor White, Eugene Smith and Harry Callahan. (Many more are on the website).

Ansel Adams Zone System is made up of three main components:

- Visualization (takes place in the mind)
- Exposure Control (takes place in the camera)
- Contrast Control (takes place in the darkroom)

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Adams described the zone scale and its relationship to typical scene elements

Zone	Description
0	Pure black
I	Near black, with slight tonality but no texture
II	Textured black; the darkest part of the image in which slight detail is recorded
III	Average dark materials and low values showing adequate texture
IV	Average dark foliage, dark stone, or landscape shadows
V	Middle gray: clear north sky; dark skin, average weathered wood
VI	Average Caucasian skin; light stone; shadows on snow in sunlit landscapes
VII	Very light skin; shadows in snow with acute side lighting
VIII	Lightest tone with texture: textured snow
IX	Slight tone without texture; glaring snow
X	Pure white: light sources and specular reflections

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Notes on Masters and Images:

Adams – Monolith, The Face of Half Dome:

Yosemite National Park, 1927

Chilly day in April – snow all around

6 ½ x 8 ½ Korona View Camera

Young Ansel, his fiancée Virginia and two friends hiked and climbed 4000 feet

Ansel was 25 yrs old and weighed 125 lbs

Took several pictures of other sights along the way

Used more film than usual because several pictures were ruined by wind movement during long exposures

By the time he got to this vantage point, he had used 10 film plates and only had two left!

It was around Noon and the Half Dome was in full shadow

In early afternoon he made an exposure with a yellow filter, but then immediately realized that it was the wrong filter to use. His pre-visualization told him to use a deep red filter now, but he only had one film plate remaining.

5 second exposure on f/22 – lens barely covered the plate, so the small aperture was necessary. Fortunately no wind during the exposure.

“I can still recall the excitement of seeing the visualization come true when I removed the plate from the fixing bath for examination. The desired values were all there in their beautiful negative interpretation. This was one of the most exciting moments of my photographic career”

Adams – Clearing Winter Storm:

Yosemite National Park, 1940

Early December

Storm was first of heavy rain, then snow, then cleared at about Noon

Drove to this particular vantage point where he had been many times before.

Waited for the right moment to come along as the clouds moved about.

In 1975, President Gerald Ford requested a print of this image.

Ansel, a long-time advocate of preserving and protecting national parks saw this as an opportunity and said “Mr. President, every time you lean back in your chair, that picture is going to remind you of your responsibility to do something for national parks”

Adams – Moonrise:

Hernandez, New Mexico, 1941

Most popular of all Adams’ images

Driving along and saw the scene and knew it had to be photographed

8x10 view camera

Yellow filter on lens

Setting up a view camera takes several minutes.

Had to hurry before the scene changed

Could not find his exposure meter!

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Was thinking he would bracket exposures, then remembered the luminance value of the moon. Calculated the exposure to place the moon in Zone VII Had no idea of what the foreground value was, but hoped it would fall within the exposure scale. He decided to develop with a water bath so as not to take chances.

Realizing that this was a photograph that would require unusual processing, he wanted to make a second insurance exposure in case something went wrong with developing the first, but it was too late, the sun rose to a point where the scene was totally changed, so he had to go with the one negative. Fortunately development went well, although the print required considerable dodging and burning, something that Adams would often do.

Adams – Winter Sunrise:

Sierra Nevada from Lone Pine, California, 1944

Mount Whitney group is particularly impressive in the Winter when snowy peaks rise above the bare and dark hills in front of them.

Notice the layers – the meadow with the horse, the trees, the hills, the mountains and the sky

Ansel tried unsuccessfully for four mornings of frustration when the mountains were blanketed with heavy clouds. Finally on this morning, the conditions were right – a bright glistening sunrise with light clouds moving swiftly and casting light shadows over the meadow.

The grazing horse was a problem at first because he was facing in the wrong direction – facing away from the camera with exasperating persistence, resembling a distant stump. Ansel couldn't just remove him with Photoshop! Finally the horse turned to show its profile, and Ansel made this exposure.

Adams – Tenaya Creek, Dogwood, Rain:

Yosemite National Park, 1948

Picture taken in the rain, camera protected with a focusing cloth

Almost gave up when the rain started, but saw this subject and reconsidered.

Many different gray tones from the various leaves and flowers.

A polarizing filter was used to minimize the reflections off the leaves.

“The photographer learns to seek the essential qualities of his environment, wherever he might be. By this I mean that he should be tuned in to respond to every situation. It is not enough to like or dislike; he must make an effort to understand what he is experiencing. To some this location on a rainy day might be merely damp and uncomfortable, and thoughts of returning to warmth and shelter would be enticing. To others, the cool calm rain and the forest light would be things to revel in, likely to initiate some creative reaction.”

Adams – Aspens:

Northern New Mexico, 1958

Made two photographs within an hour of each other.

Crisp autumn day

Diffused light shining through clouds

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Beautiful side lighting on tree trunks
8x10 view camera w telephoto lens
1 second exposure, f/32, Kodak Panatomic-X film (ISO 32)
Luckily no wind
Deep yellow filter to enhance contrast
Purposefully omitted sky
Deepest shadow exposed for Zone II
Printed on higher-than-normal contrast paper

Adams – Moon & Half Dome:

Yosemite National Park, 1960
Hasselblad medium format camera
Panatomic-X 120 film (ISO 32), ¼ sec, f/11
Exposed for the moon in Zone VII, shadow values in Zones II & III
Orange filter to darken the sky

“I have photographed the Half Dome innumerable times, but it is never the same Half-Dome, never the same light or the same mood... Half Dome is a great mountain with endless variations of lighting and sky situations and seasonal characteristics, the many images I made reflect my varied creative responses to this remarkable granite monolith.”

Adams – El Capitan, Winter Sunrise:

Yosemite National Park, 1968
“Getting up at dawn on a winter morning and driving around Yosemite in search of photographs is a chilly but wonderful experience. As the close of a snowstorm the trees are frosty white, but soon after the sunlight strikes them the snow falls in glittering cascades... On this particular morning the clouds persisted longer than usual. I felt that El Capitan might be beautifully revealed as the clouds and mist swirled around it, and I was not disappointed. An additional heavenly generosity was a high-altitude haze that kept the high contrast in abeyance.”
4x5 view camera
Adjusted to avoid convergence of pines in middle distance
Used Polaroid Type 55 P/N (print and negative) film
Took several exposures as the clouds moved and the scene changed rapidly
High dynamic range demanded precise exposures
Tried to process the film in hic car, but it was too cold for the chemistry to function properly, so he had to go back to his darkroom to finish the job
Darkness of foreground enhances the heavenly splendor of the majestic rise in the background. The more I look at it the more it amazes me.

Imogene Cunningham, 1883-1976:

One of the first women to make her living as a photographer, career spanning over seven decades from 1910 to 1976 when she was in her nineties.
Specialized in close up studies of plant life in the 1920s
Also specialized in portraiture
The Dream, 1910, printed from a glass negative

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Magnolia Blossom, 1925

Two Callas, 1929, an undeniably beautiful image, whites and darks handled perfectly

Portrait: Alfred Stieglitz, 1934

Portrait: Minor White, 1963

Portrait: Ansel Adams, 1975

Alfred Stieglitz, 1864-1946:

Instrumental over his fifty-year career in making photography an acceptable art form alongside painting and sculpture.

Established a group called the Photo Secession which had a gallery on 5th Avenue in NYC and promoted photography that resembled pictorial style painting

The Terminal, New York, 1892, resembled a pictorial style painting

Steam rising from horses creates moody atmosphere and mystery

Tones are kept low and contrast held to a minimum to emphasize atmosphere and keep reality soft and emotional

Pictorialists saw atmosphere as a device that mimicked a painter's brushstrokes

Main figures are grounded and quiet creating a scene of contentment and serenity

Pictorialists avoided chaos and controversy in their pictures

Deep dark areas add mystery and melancholy

Figure with back to the camera keeps subject general and not about him

Spring Showers, 1902

Alfred Stieglitz subscribed to a theory that the principal subject of a photo should be in sharp focus while secondary elements should be left out of focus. The theory was called "naturalism" because it was thought that these types of photographs most closely resembled the way the human eye naturally sees things, focusing on one area while surrounding details fall away.

The Steerage, 1907

Later he changed his thinking and said that photography ought to stand on its own and not try to imitate other forms of art.

Also known for his photographs of Georgia O'Keefe, a painter whom he married.

Paul Strand, 1890-1976:

Was a student in photography and began to take photography more seriously when he visited Stieglitz' gallery in NYC.

Known for early abstractions

White Fence, 1916

Blind, 1916

It is one thing to photograph people. It is another to make others care about them by revealing the core of their humanness. - [Paul Strand](#)

"I like to photograph people who have strength and dignity in their faces; whatever life has done to them, it hasn't destroyed them. I gravitate towards people like that." - [Paul Strand](#)

The Family, 1953

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Minor White, 1908-1976:

White was a deeply religious man whose whole life was a spiritual journey.

Hung around with Adams, Steiglitz & Weston

Photographed mundane objects like peeling paint and made them beautiful.

Photographs capture a sentiment or emotionally symbolic idea using formal and structural elements that carry a feeling or sense of "recognition": a mirroring of something inside the viewer

Also beautiful pictures of barns.

"...innocence of eye has a quality of its own. It means to see as a child sees, with freshness and acknowledgment of the wonder; it also means to see as an adult sees who has gone full circle and once again sees as a child - with freshness and an even deeper sense of wonder." - [Minor White](#)

Eugene Smith, 1918-1978:

American Photojournalist during WWII

Worked for Newsweek & Life magazines

Smith realized that photography had the power to raise social consciousness and affect change. Pictures are very powerful, some containing shockingly graphic details.

In 1945, while documenting the invasion of Okinawa, Smith was hit by shrapnel and was unable to work for almost two years while he recovered from his wounds. After such a long break from making photographs, he wanted his next image to be significant. The result was a photograph of his two children walking out of the woods into the light called "Walk in Paradise Garden".

"Three Generations of Welsh Miners", 1950

Also known for his photo essays, one on a "Country Doctor" who made house calls.

"Tomoko in the Bath" Minimata, Japan, 1972, disease caused by mercury poisoning, common in Japan.

Harry Callahan, 1912-1999:

Photographed his wife, Eleanor, and daughter, Barbara, and the streets, scenes and buildings of cities where he lived, showing a strong sense of line and form, and light and darkness.

Eleanor: Through his graceful, elegant presentations - the way he allows her to close her eyes, avert her gaze, or even turn her back to the camera, the way her body and face are always composed and comfortable, never disturbed or surprised - he reveals a relationship of profound trust, care, intimacy, and, most significantly, respect.

Callahan's work was a deeply personal response to his own life. He was well known to encourage his students to turn their cameras on their lives, and he led by example.

His technical photographic method was to go out almost every morning, walk the city he lived in and take numerous pictures. He then spent almost every afternoon making proof prints of that day's best negatives.

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The Zone System of Photography in the Digital World:

Zone	RGB Value
0	0
I	25
II	51
III	76
IV	102
V	128
VI	153
VII	178
VIII	204
IX	229
X	255

Tips for Making Great Black & White Photographs with Digital Technology:

- Shoot in Raw mode
- Shoot in color
- Pay careful attention to lighting and composition
- There are no rules for good photographs, there are only good photographs.
– *Ansel Adams*

Photoshop: There are many ways to convert a color image to black & white, but in my opinion, the best way is to use the black & white adjustment layer.

- The default b&w preset will immediately appear
- Try all of the different presets from the drop-down box
- Also try the “Auto” customization button
- Tweak the tones by moving the sliders for each color channel
- Or, move your cursor over to select a particular tone in the image and drag to the right or left to lighten or darken the tone.
- Watch your histogram to make sure that you don’t clip any significant highlight or shadow areas.
- Use other adjustment layers (levels, curves, brightness & contrast) to accomplish selective dodging and burning.

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Resources:

- Black & White Photography Techniques with Adobe Photoshop, Maurice Hamilton, Amherst Media, 2006
- Examples, The Making of 40 Photographs, Ansel Adams, Little, Brown & Company, 1983
- Masters of Photography,
www.masters-of-photography.com
- Wikipedia – Zone System