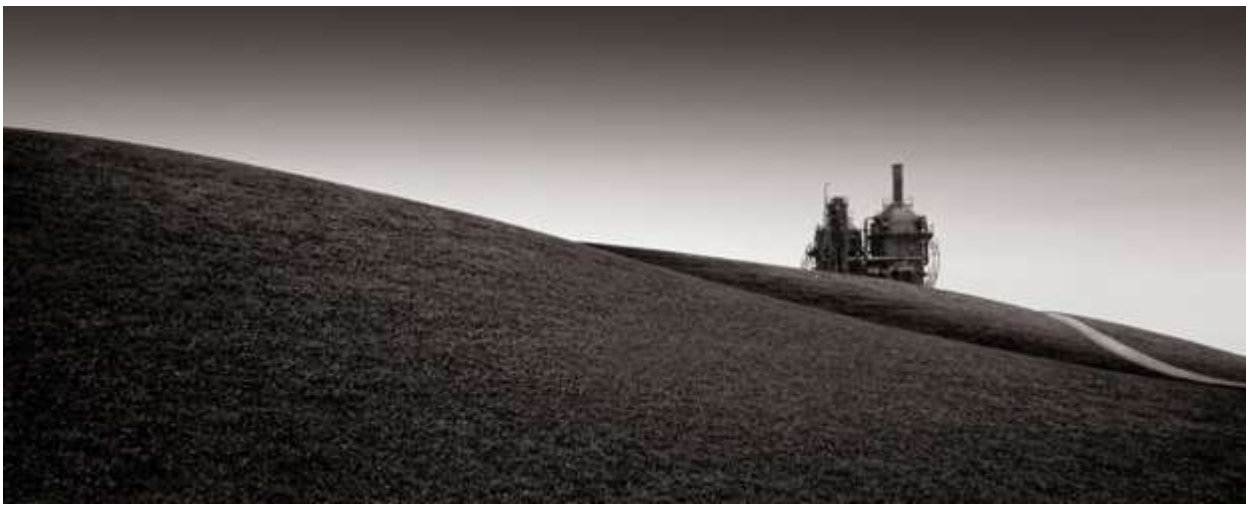
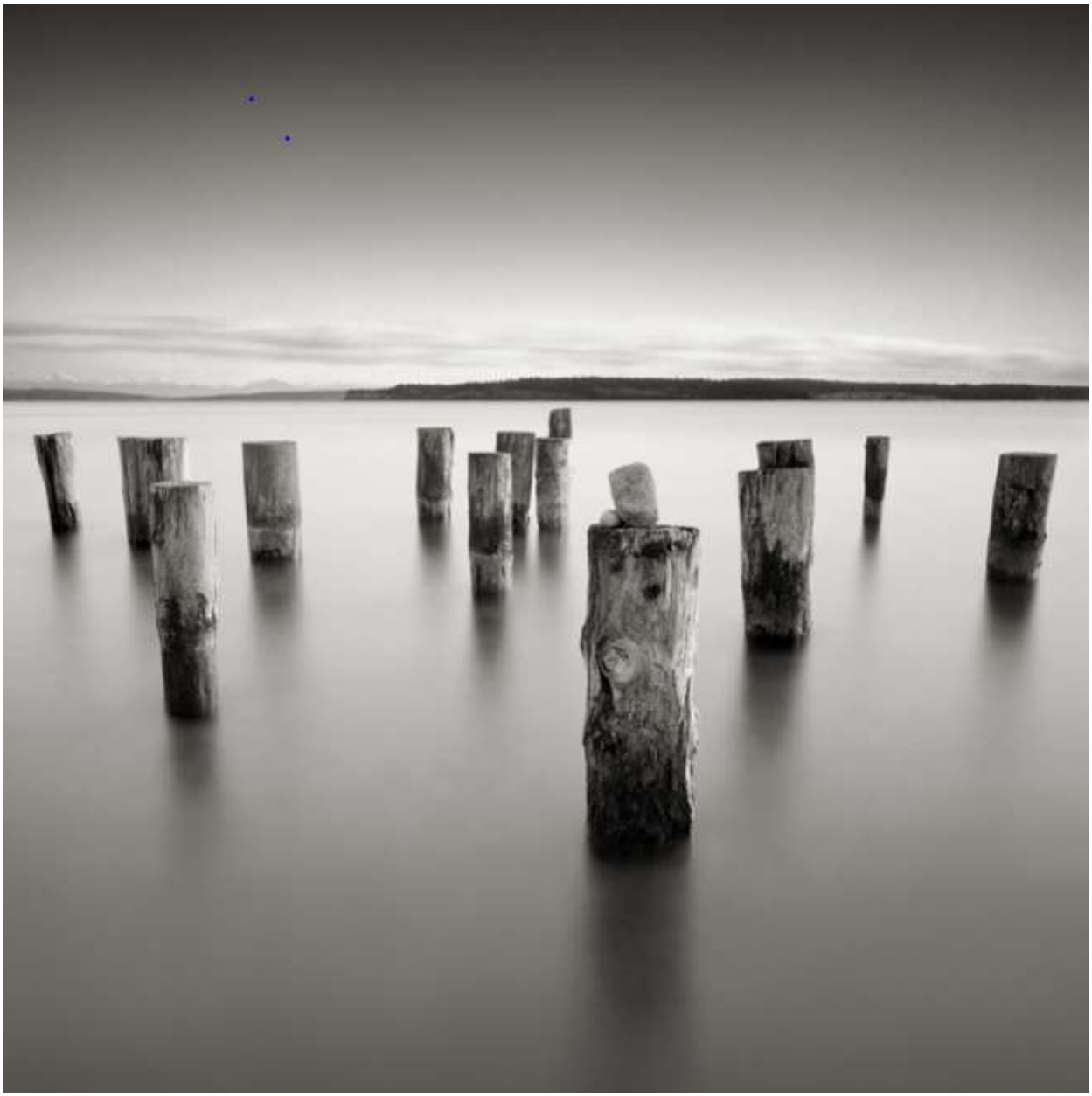
Interview with David Fokos



#1 Please introduce yourself.
Hello, my name is David Fokos. I am a full-time photographic artist living in San Diego, California. I have been photographing with my 8×10 view camera for over 30 years, much of that time on Martha's Vineyard, an island off the southeastern coast of Massachusetts.
My work, which is represented by 15 galleries on three continents, has been featured in over 40 solo exhibitions and can be found in the collections of many museums, corporations and private collectors.

#2 How did you get interested in photography?
My grandfather gave me my first camera — a Kodak Brownie — when I was 11 years old. Interestingly, rather than the usual sort of family holiday snapshots one might expect of an 11 year old, I was already showing an affinity for the landscape and a certain type of composition — taking pictures of the patterns found in the cobblestone streets, looming church spires, and zoomy perspectives along building facades.

#3 Do you have an artistic/photographic background?
In college I studied engineering and Japanese art history. Other than that it's just been the self-education that comes from 30 years of making images.



Balanced Stones, Port
Townsend, Washington 2002

#4 Which artist/photographer inspired your art?

As a high school student, the work of Ansel Adams inspired me to photograph the landscape with a view camera. I spent the next 15 years working in isolation on Martha's Vineyard with the goal of creating images that would express to the viewer the essence of my emotional experiences — evoking within them the same emotions I felt when making the images. With my work, I'm not trying to show the viewer what these places look like, but rather what they feel like.

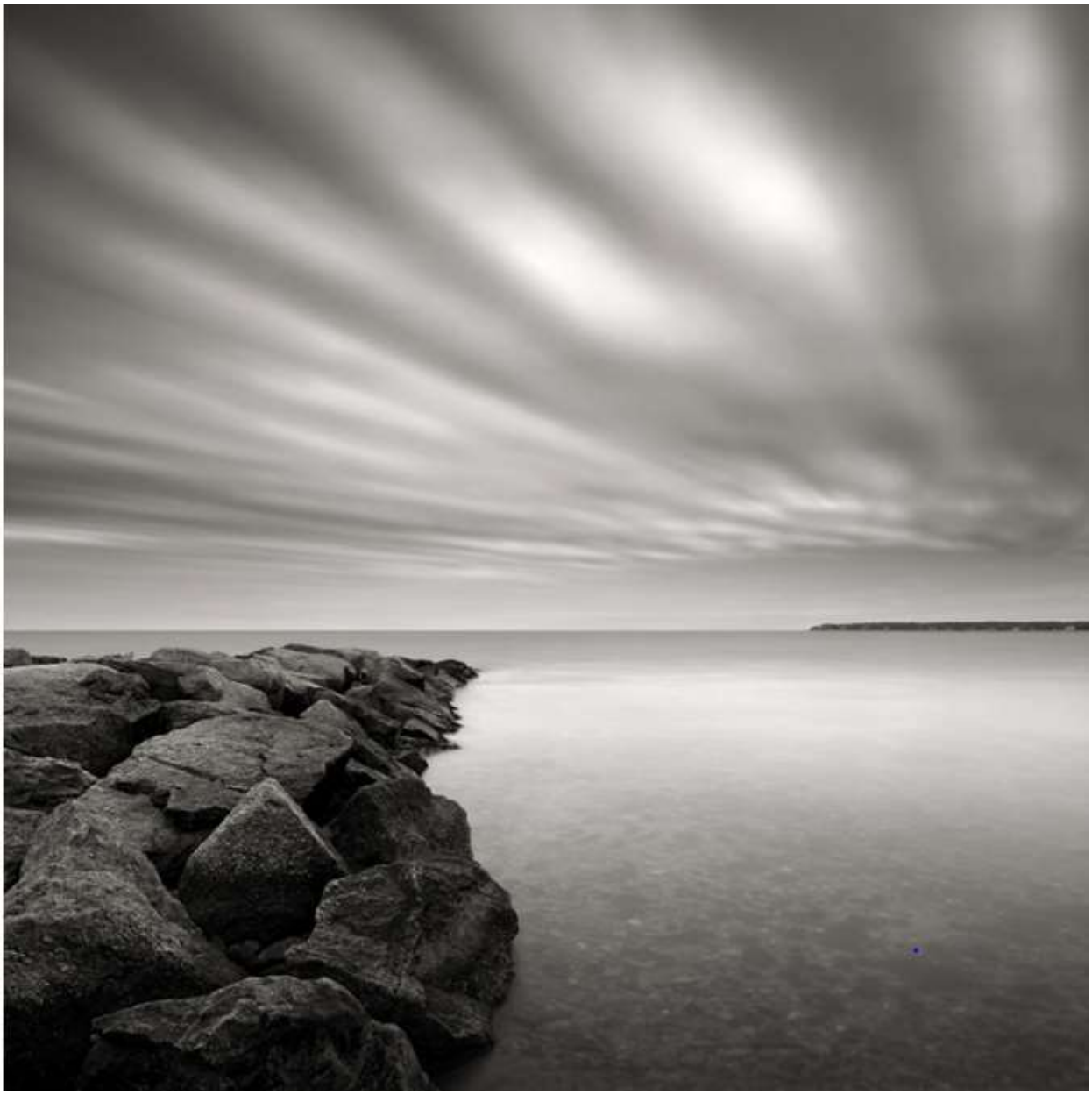
Drawing upon my technical background in engineering, my decades-long interest in Japanese aesthetics, and the work of artists Andy Goldsworthy, David Hockney, and Hiroshi Sugimoto, I began to

develop a personal theory of how we perceive the world and a method for expressing that through my art.

#5 How much preparation do you put into taking a photograph? Are you planning every step or is it always spontaneous?
It varies depending upon the image. Sometimes, I know the shot I want and how the finished image will look, but it may take years for the right moment to present itself. My “Jetty” image took me 3 years of checking tide charts, sunrise times and weather reports to get just the conditions I wanted. Other times, I can be out with my camera and just be inspired by something I happen upon. “Balanced Stones” is a good example of this.

#6 What fascinates you in places that you shoot?
The places where I find myself making images are those to which I have a strong, positive, emotional reaction. More often than not, these are places that through their stillness, expansiveness, stark simplicity, or the juxtaposition of man-made objects with nature, evoke within me a sense of quiet contemplation.

#7 We can see your photographs only in black and white, why have you chosen to present them in this form?
Color is such a powerful element in an image. The emotions I try to evoke in my images are not rooted in color but rather in line, light and form so I think that color would only be a distraction in my work.



East Meets West, Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts 2009

#8 Could you please tell us something about your technique and creating process? (post-processing, equipment (digital/traditional), printing, favourite paper, etc…)

When I take a picture, I already have a pre-visualized, final image in my head – making the exposure is just the process of gathering raw material for the final image. After developing the negative, I may spend a hundred hours or more working to accomplish the image I pre-visualized.

The difference between documentary work/photojournalism and fine art photography is that in the former, one wants to present photographs with the least amount of manipulation possible (other than the framing of the image, choice of lens, etc.), whereas a fine art photographer is an artist seeking to express an idea, evoke an emotion, or convey a message. For the photographic artist, the taking of the picture is just the first step.

My subject matter is the feeling I am trying to convey. The objects in my images are simply supporting characters. But the problem with photography is that the camera doesn't record emotion.
How many times have you taken a snapshot of some amazing vista like the Grand Canyon, or an incredible sunset only to be disappointed when you got your prints back? You remembered the experience as having been so much more dramatic than the prints convey. One of the reasons for this discrepancy is that a large part of the experience you had while taking the picture was the emotion you felt while standing there. As I mentioned before, the camera does not record emotion. It cannot convey how you felt that morning when you woke up, what kind of mood you were in, the humidity, the smell of the air, the temperature, the feel of breeze, or the sun on your face. All of these things contribute to the emotional response you have to a place. The job of a photographic artist is to work with the camera's image, to create the drama and add back the emotion.

When I make an image I know exactly on what I want the viewer to focus and what I want them to see and feel. By reducing my images to austere minimalist compositions I force the viewer to more closely examine what I have left in the frame.

In this regard, my study of Japanese aesthetic traditions has had a profound influence on my work. For example, the ability of Japanese haiku poetry to convey deeply felt sentiment through a minimal number of words has been greatly inspiring.

I wouldn't say that I consciously set out to make "photographic haiku," or try to illustrate traditional Japanese aesthetic concepts such as seijaku (tranquility), sabi (patina and an appreciation of the ephemeral nature of things), yūgen (an unobvious, subtle, profound grace), shizen (without pretense), and wabi (rustic simplicity, freshness, quietness, an appreciation of imperfection). Yet, I feel that the spirit expressed in these concepts resonates within my images.

I mostly shoot 8×10 Kodak Tri-X Professional film with my 82-year old Korona View camera. I use just one lens – a 210mm Rodenstock Sironar-S. This lens is a wide-angle lens on my camera (the equivalent of a 29mm lens on a 35mm camera.

After developing my negative, I wet-mount the film to my Epson V750 Pro scanner and scan it at a very high resolution (16-bits @ 2400 ppi). This results in an 800MB grayscale image file (which is equivalent to the resolution of a 2.4GB color file).

After I have the high-resolution image file in my computer, the real work begins. I often spend 100 hours or more, fine-tuning the image – dodging and burning (making certain areas lighter or darker), adjusting local contrast, etc. This is the part of the process that adds the emotion back into the image my camera recorded.

I am satisfied with an image, I make a print on my Epson 11880 printer.
Finally, there still remains one thing to do and that is to have the print framed for presentation. The frame plays a significant role in the finished work and its importance should not be taken lightly. The style and weight of the frame becomes a part of the composition. Over the years I have tried a number of different styles of framing until I found one that I think is ideal.

I send my prints to Los Angeles to be framed by one of only two framers in the country that I feel is capable of the quality of framing I require.

My prints are “face-mounted”. This is a special process that was developed in Germany whereby the print is bonded to a special, premium-quality brand of UV protected, anti-reflective plexiglas, (note: before mounting, the edges of the plexiglas are polished for a finer finish) The print is then bonded using an optically-clear sheet of adhesive.

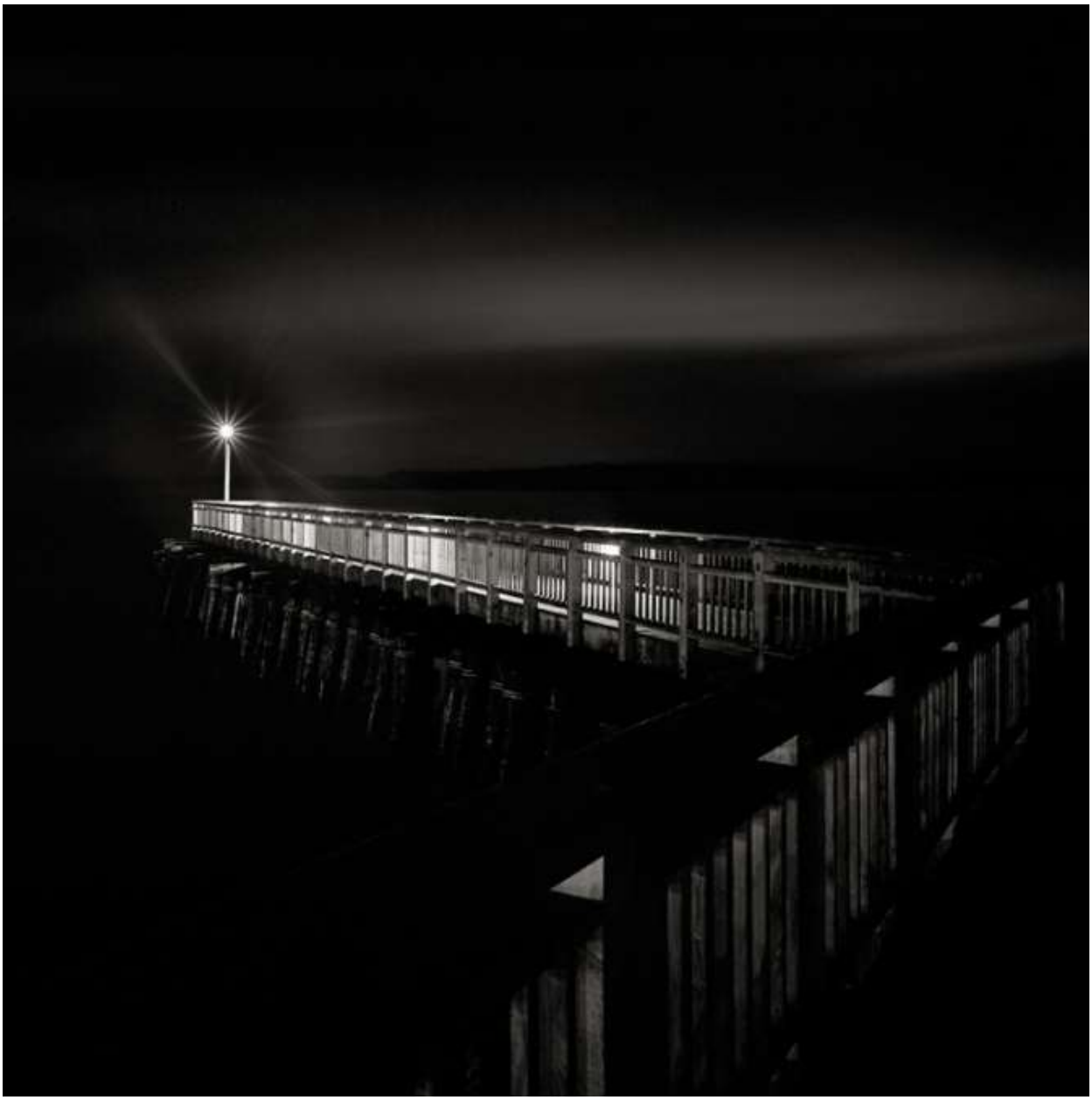
The process requires passing the print and plexi through a special machine with heated rollers, multiple times, with rest periods. The result is an amazing immediacy as, unlike traditional framing, the print sits just 1/8” from the front surface.

Next, a piece of 6mm thick black sintra (a type of rigid plastic) is bonded to the back of the print. At this point, the print is hermetically sealed between these two sheets of plastic. A wood frame is then bonded to the sintra.

Next, a decorative outer wooden frame is custom-milled by my framer from rock maple, to which he applies 3 coats of a proprietary color of lacquer. Though my frames may look black, they are not. I worked with my framer to develop a special “off-black” hue that would not contrast too starkly with the image. This is yet another way I work to minimize even the smallest of distractions.

Finally, with screws passing through the back side of the decorative frame and into the wooden frame bonded to the sintra, the print is made to “float” within the decorative frame with a small gap between the edge of the print and the frame.

A French Cleat system is used to hang the print on the wall so that the frame sits flush against the wall.



Nightwatch, Port Townsend, Washington 2002

#9 Could you tell our readers how to reach such excellent results in photography?
My number one suggestion is to just keep making images. The more you photograph, the better your images will be. In addition to that I also have 10 tips I often suggest:
1. Simplify your photo making process.

Photography is not about the equipment, so anything you can do to minimize the amount of time you spend thinking about it and fiddling with it, the better. For example, I use only one lens. If I had more than one lens I would have to stop to choose which one to use – I would be thinking about the equipment. When you have too many choices it's possible to be paralyzed by indecision. Ironically, giving up choice actually gives me more freedom.

My 8×10 camera is a “drop bed” style that is older and more rickety than modern view cameras, but I can set it up in 10 seconds. I hate having to fiddle with all the knobs — folding this down, raising this up, loosening this, and tightening that, etc. I don’t want to be distracted from why I wanted to make the picture.

2. Again, getting back to the paradoxical relationship between choice and freedom, I would recommend imposing some limitation on yourself. At one time, I told myself that I was only going to photograph scenes with water in them (though I have since moved beyond this). While this may seem limiting, it was, in fact, liberating. There are good images to be made everywhere, so, in essence, by limiting myself I gave myself permission to pass by many of those good photo opportunities without guilt. This made me focus my work on one subject and explore it in more depth. Which brings me to my next point….
3. Choose one subject and explore it deeply. I photographed the water for 15 years before I finally began to make images that I think successfully represented how I felt.

4. Don’t worry about trends. A lot of photographers, especially art students, get caught up in the whole “I’ve got to be hip and edgy, so I think I’ll make these pictures as shocking as I can.” I think that’s just an excuse from photographers who are insecure about their work.

Don’t get me wrong. If an artist has a valid reason for making shocking pictures, that’s fine, but don’t do without a good reason. Likewise, there is nothing wrong with “pretty” pictures. The main point is to know why you are making your photographs.

5. Show me something I haven’t seen before. You should be asking yourself this question every time you make a photograph – “Is this something I haven’t seen before?” I could go out and take pictures like Ansel Adams, but what’s the point? It doesn’t show me anything new about the world that I haven’t already seen.

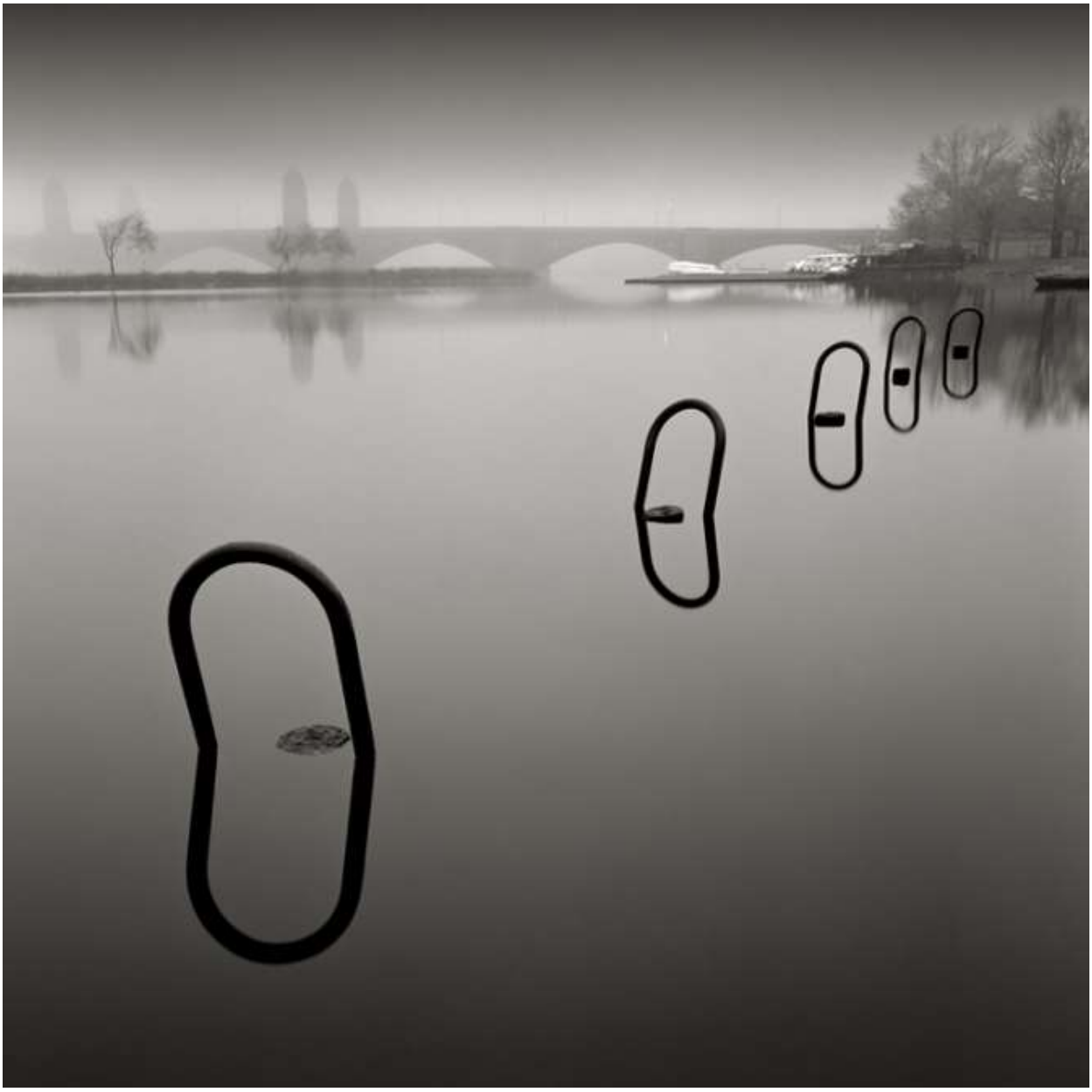
6. Don’t use gimmicks. Printing so I can see the edges of the negative, using a Holga, distressing the image, selective focus, or anything when done for any reason other than it somehow serves the image and helps to better communicate your message to the viewer more clearly should be avoided. This is just a crutch used by insecure photographers who don’t think their images are strong enough to stand on their own merit. I’m not suggesting that these are inherently bad techniques, or that they should be avoided, only that you shouldn’t do it unless you have a valid reason.

7. Use whatever tools are available to make your image stronger. Being an artist is about using some media, in this case photography, to communicate some thought, idea or emotion. So long as you are not a documentary photographer, you should do anything you can to strengthen your image. This means cropping, masking, using Photoshop, making platinum prints, adding other materials – Plexiglas, metal, paint, whatever — these are all just tools. Whatever it is, if it makes your art better, use it and don’t be an apologist.

8. Be your harshest critic. Edit your work ruthlessly. Show nothing but your best. Others will judge you only by what you show, not what is stashed away in your boxes of negatives.

9. Present your work professionally, and consistently. A body of work should look like a coherent body of work. All the images should be of the same subject, presented in a similar (and professional) manner. Unless there is some compelling reason, do not mix black & white with color photos. Do not have landscapes, portraits, still-lifes, and abstracts all together.

10. Don't get overly attached to your process. For 15 years all my prints were platinum prints. I invested many years of research and work perfecting my process. Then one day, I realized that my images would look better on modern materials, so I switched. It wasn't easy, but it was necessary. Everything about your process must serve the image.



Mooring Rings, Study #1, Boston, Massachusetts 1997

#10 What do you do in your life besides photography? (hobby, other job, etc…)
I make my living from my art, so that keeps me pretty busy. However, I like to travel, cook, and I also do some filming for my wife who has a weekly segment on NBC.
#11 What future plans do you have? What projects would you like to accomplish?
I would love to go back to Japan for a month or two to make a series of images there. Specifically, since so much of my existing work is from the island of Martha's Vineyard, I think it would be very interesting to explore an island in Japan. I think an exhibition of images drawing from both bodies of work would make for a very interesting cross-cultural project.

In the meantime, I am working on several projects. I continue to add to my portfolio of landscapes and to exhibit those images – this is the work with which most people are familiar. I have several shows of that work coming up this year. In addition to that, I am also working on some side projects – portfolios, possibly a book, as well as some other photo projects and collaborations with other photographers.