



# SHIFTING INTO C-MODE

PRACTICAL WAYS TO SHARPEN YOUR CREATIVE VISION



# INTRODUCTION

The following pages contain some of my favorite tips and suggestions for making the shift to Creative Mode (C-mode or See-mode) happen more easily and frequently. I hope you find them useful or at least thought provoking. A couple of things to keep in mind:

## **Creativity is a State of Mind**

Science now confirms what artists have long intuited, that creativity is a human birthright - we are created creative. The trick is using the right mindset for the task at hand. L-mode (logic/language based) thinking absolutely has its place in photography, but when it comes to composing and recognizing good photographs, C-mode is the right tool for the job.

## **No Instant Gratification**

Just like reading a book about a far off land doesn't actually get you closer to your destination, pondering the nature of creativity doesn't make you more creative. This stuff is hard and takes real work. Your journey may take many steps, but having a map is never a bad idea.

I hope this will help you navigate a part of our common journey to become better image makers.

Happy shooting,

Ken Lee



A group of people, mostly seen from the back or side, are gathered on a mountain peak. They are wearing winter clothing like hoodies and hats. Many are holding cameras or smartphones up to take pictures of the sunset. The sky is filled with soft, colorful clouds in shades of orange, pink, and blue. The mountain landscape is dark and silhouetted against the bright sky.

# STOP TAKING PICTURES!

*"Photographs are made, not taken" - Ansel Adams*

Photography is not about recording what was there. At least not if you're trying to make expressive photographs, images with impact.

*"It's not about how I saw it, it's about how I felt it" - David DuChemin*

Instead of focusing on getting this or that object in your frame, try thinking of yourself as the painter and your camera, lenses, filters and the lights, shadows and colors of the scene as your paints and brushes. Use your palette to create an image that communicates the essence of what made you want to create that photograph in the first place.



A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue and white checkered shirt, is seated on the floor of a traditional textile workshop. He is working on a large loom, weaving a vibrant red fabric. The workshop has a rustic, stone-walled interior with a high ceiling. A bright light source, possibly a window, is visible on the left, casting a strong glow. A single light bulb hangs from the ceiling, illuminating the work area. The overall atmosphere is one of focused craftsmanship.

# PRACTICE YOUR CRAFT

*"Creativity is a muscle" -unknown*

Ironically, one of the best ways to develop your artistic vision is to master the craft aspects of photography. Let's face it, it's hard to be creative when you're struggling with f-stops and camera settings. So learn the mechanics of image making and then get out and shoot! Then shoot some more.

## **Look. See. Shoot.**

Stop waiting for inspiration, or the right time or the right location. Amazing images are everywhere. In your neighborhood, in your backyard, in your kitchen. Pay attention and you will find them.

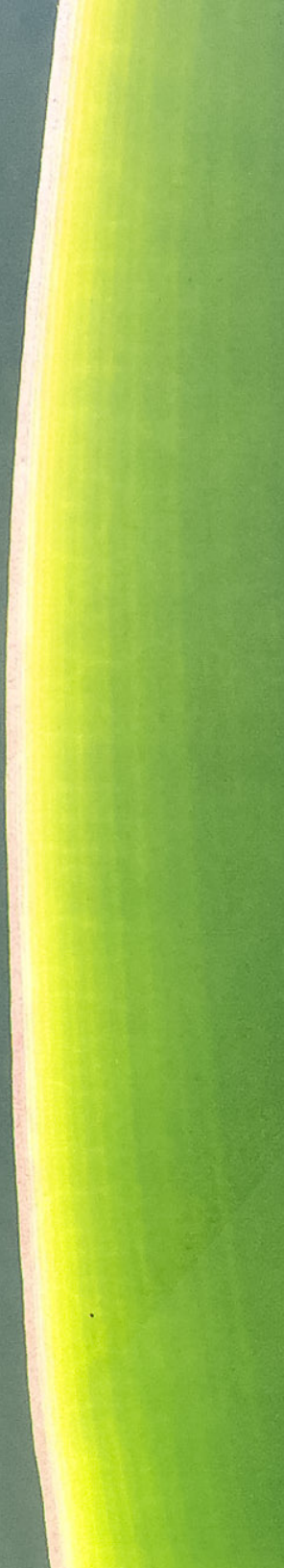
## **Doing Primes the Pump**

Action is powerful. Action gets the creative juices flowing. Start shooting and one thing usually leads to another. Go with the flow. Later, you might look back and realize at some point you stopped thinking and were simply Seeing. That's C-mode.

*"Inspiration is for amateurs.  
The rest of us just show up  
and get to work"*

*- Chuck Close*





*“You learn to see by practice. It's just like playing tennis; you get better the more you play. The more you look around at things, the more you see. The more you photograph, the more you realize what can be photographed and what can't be photographed. You just have to keep doing it.”*

*— Eliot Porter*





# USE FUZZY LOGIC

Try composing before focusing. I'm serious.

When you compose an image that's out of focus, you make it much harder for the L-Mode 'left brain' to do its thing: naming, labeling, categorizing and making up stories about what you're looking at. Eventually, it gives up and hands the job over to the C-Mode 'right brain', which is exactly what you want.

That's because the left brain is a lousy designer, but the right brain is a specialist in designing, composing and speaking the visual language. The fuzzy scene in front of you makes no sense to the left brain but the right brain is happy to play with the blobs of lights, darks, colors and shadows. And isn't the arrangement of these things the essence of composition?

See if you can turn down the volume on the words in your head and just pay attention to the image. Make small adjustments, zoom in or out until the picture *feels* right. This works best using a tripod and Live View.



# LOOK AT SMALL IMAGES TO SEE THE BIG PICTURE

I love the big beautiful screen on my current camera. But in a way, I miss the postage stamp size display on the bodies I had in the past. That's because looking at a small image often makes it easier to evaluate the overall composition of a photo. Since you can't see much detail, what you're left with is the overall 'shape' of the image. The pattern of highlights and shadows, dominant colors and shapes becomes much more obvious when looking at smaller versions of images.



You can use this fact to your advantage both when shooting and editing. In the field, try stepping away from the camera (when using a tripod) or shrinking the image size by bringing up the histogram. Evaluate the composition from a global perspective. Does it feel 'balanced' or dynamic (good). Does the subject blend into the background (not good)? At home, scan the thumbnails from your shoot to make your selects. The ones that jump out at you even at that size will almost always be your strongest compositions. Trust your first impressions. When cropping, pay attention to the small Navigator window (Lightroom) as you adjust the crop rectangle boundaries. Looking at the smaller image helps you see the forest rather than getting lost in the trees. Take a look at this [blog post](#) from a while back for more info.





*“The question is not what you look at, but what you See”*

*– Henry David Thoreau*



## DRAW SOMETHING

### **Drawing Practice is Seeing Practice**

Drawing is the best practice for seeing because it forces you to slow down and pay attention. I highly recommend reading Betty Edward's, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* and more importantly, **DOING** the exercises. It's the quickest way I know to really grok the difference between L-mode (naming, categorizing) looking and R-mode Seeing.







# LEARN ABOUT LIGHT

## **The Language of Light**

Diffuse, specular, contrasty, flat, color temperature and saturation. To be a writer of light (i.e. *photo grapher*), it certainly helps to learn its vocabulary. Just as an experienced bird watcher can spot the differences in birds that all appear identical to the untrained eye or how a dentist notices the color and condition of everyone's teeth she meets, a photographer should be a connoisseur of the subtleties of light

## **Practice Photography Without a Camera**

Moments of visual poetry happen everywhere and everywhen. Whether you capture them with with your camera or just with your eyes, you are exercising your creative muscles.





## SLOW DOWN AND USE A TRIPOD

*"Cameras should only be sold welded to tripods"*  
\_Ken Lee

The value of a good tripod in photography can't be overestimated and it has very little to do with holding the camera steady. A tripod frees you to work slowly, methodically and make small adjustments. Taking the time to carefully consider your composition usually pays off in a better picture. What's the hurry?

My best advice for choosing a tripod is to pick one that you're willing to carry everywhere and pay a bit more than you think is reasonable.



*“Nobody sees a flower, really, it is  
so small.*

*We haven't the time and to see  
takes time, like having a friend  
takes time”*

*– Georgia O'Keefe*





# CHIMP LIKE A MONKEY

## **Shoot. Review. Adjust. Repeat.**

I have no idea how it became passé to review your pictures while shooting (aka 'chimping') but I think it's one of the dumbest things I've ever heard. Immediate feedback is probably the single most valuable gift digital technology has delivered to photographers. I can't imagine why anyone would want to give up this benefit.





A common egret stands on a wooden pier that extends into a body of water. The egret is white with a long neck and a yellow beak. The water is calm, and the sky is a clear, pale blue. The pier is made of wooden planks and has a metal railing. The egret is facing right, and its reflection is visible in the water.

# PHONE IT IN. SERIOUSLY.

The camera we all carry in our pockets is an insanely effective creativity enhancing tool. Some complain about the lack of manual control over things like exposure settings but that's exactly what makes it so powerful. Phone photography frees you from the weight of technical decision making. There's nothing to consider but the image itself.

The trick is to be serious about your snaps. Not sour face serious...lighten up, but make conscious choices. Compose carefully, work the scene, wait for the decisive moment. Approach it just like big camera photography but focus all your attention on the image because, well... there's nothing else to focus on.

So ditch the dslr from time to time and do some serious photography with your little camera. I have more than one image in my portfolio to show for it and I bet you will too. And with the amazing quality of today's smartphones, if you don't tell anyone, nobody will know ;-).

Check out my [blog post](#) or [iPhoneography](#) gallery for more on this topic.





*“Use the Force, Luke”*

*– Obi Wan Kenobi*

## TRUST YOUR GUT

Pay attention to your first reaction when looking at pictures. That fraction of a second after the picture flashes up on the back of your camera. What does your gut say? How does the picture ‘feel’? Dynamic, balanced, harmonious or just, meh?

In post processing, its easy to get ‘lost’ while working on an image, so that you’re not sure if things are getting better or worse. When that happens, take a break and leave the room, but leave the monitor on. When you come back, quickly glance at the monitor and notice your first reaction. If the picture feels good, you’re on the right path. If it seems terribly flat, contrasty or over saturated, you know you took a wrong turn somewhere



# FORGET THE RULES

Pictures work (or not) because they work, and it has nothing to do with the rules of composition.

The so-called 'rules of composition...the rule of thirds, the golden mean, don't center your subject, always have one clear subject... are only useful in so far as they remind us to make conscious decisions about the arrangement of elements in the frame. In other words, there are no inherent 'power points' or zones in a frame. Why should there be? Wouldn't it depend on the subject, your position/perspective, chose of lens, the lighting and about a billion other variables?

We all instantly recognize good pictures when we see them. It's an innate ability and it happens in a flash without reference to any rule. You knew what a good picture was long before you learned the first thing about photography. C-mode thinking is all about accessing that part of us that already speaks the visual language fluently.

*"There are no rules for good photographs, only good photographs"*

*– Ansel Adams*



# LEARN TO BE STILL

Meditation or other mindfulness practices teach you to recognize the incessant chatter of L-mode thinking and provides techniques to focus your attention in the present moment which is where Seeing and Creativity live. If you hear words in your head, that's L-mode talking...naming, categorizing and making up its stories. C-mode doesn't understand verbal language, it only communicates in ideas, emotions and images...which is particularly helpful if you are trying create them.







THANK YOU