



Photography as Conversation

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Trigger Warning

Some images in this presentation depict people, content and situations that may be considered distressing. Viewer discretion is advised.

How cultivating your photography as conversation can help you create stronger, more engaging and meaningful images.

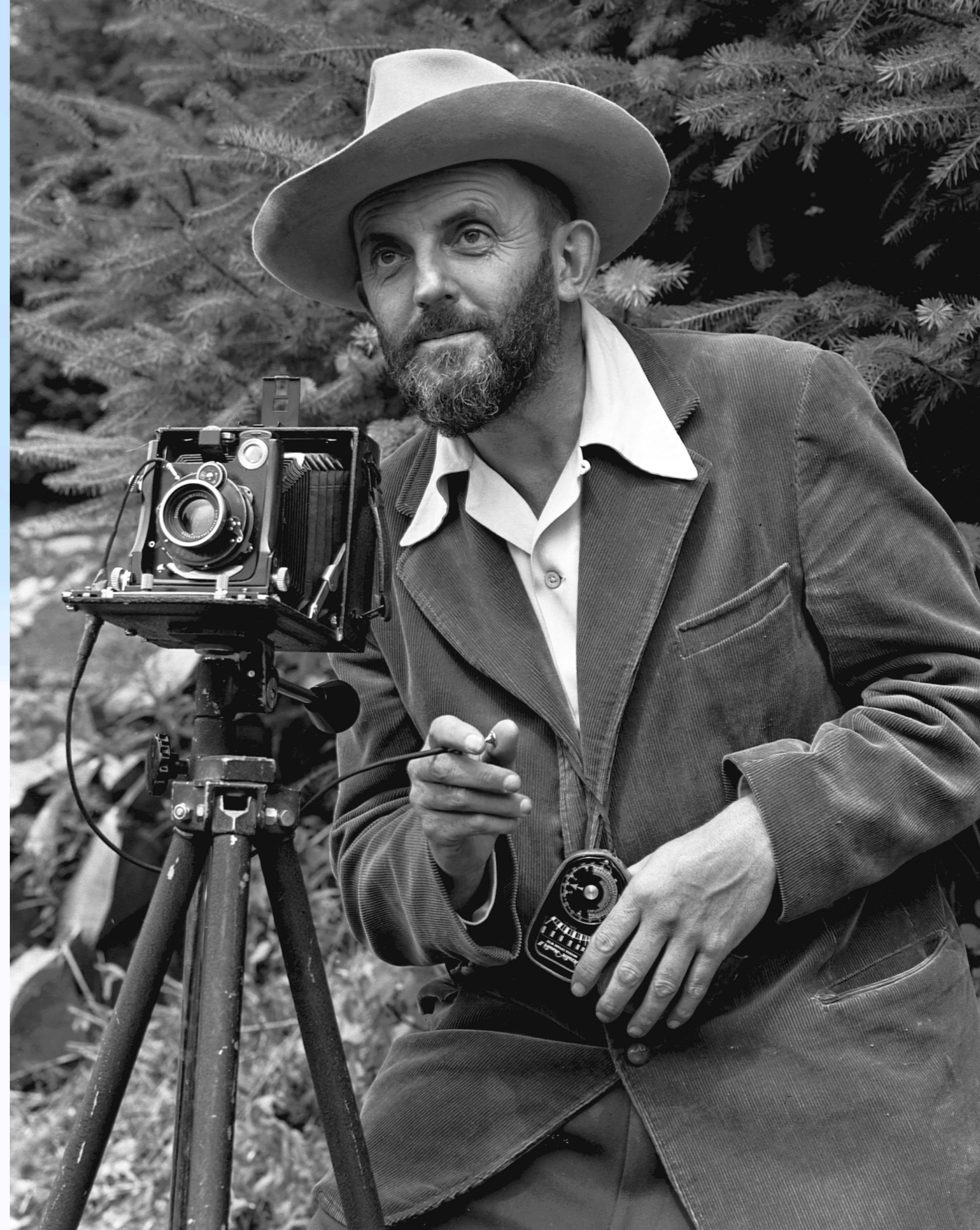
We want viewers of an image to:

- look deeper into the image
- engage with its elements and themes
- respond, react or reflect.

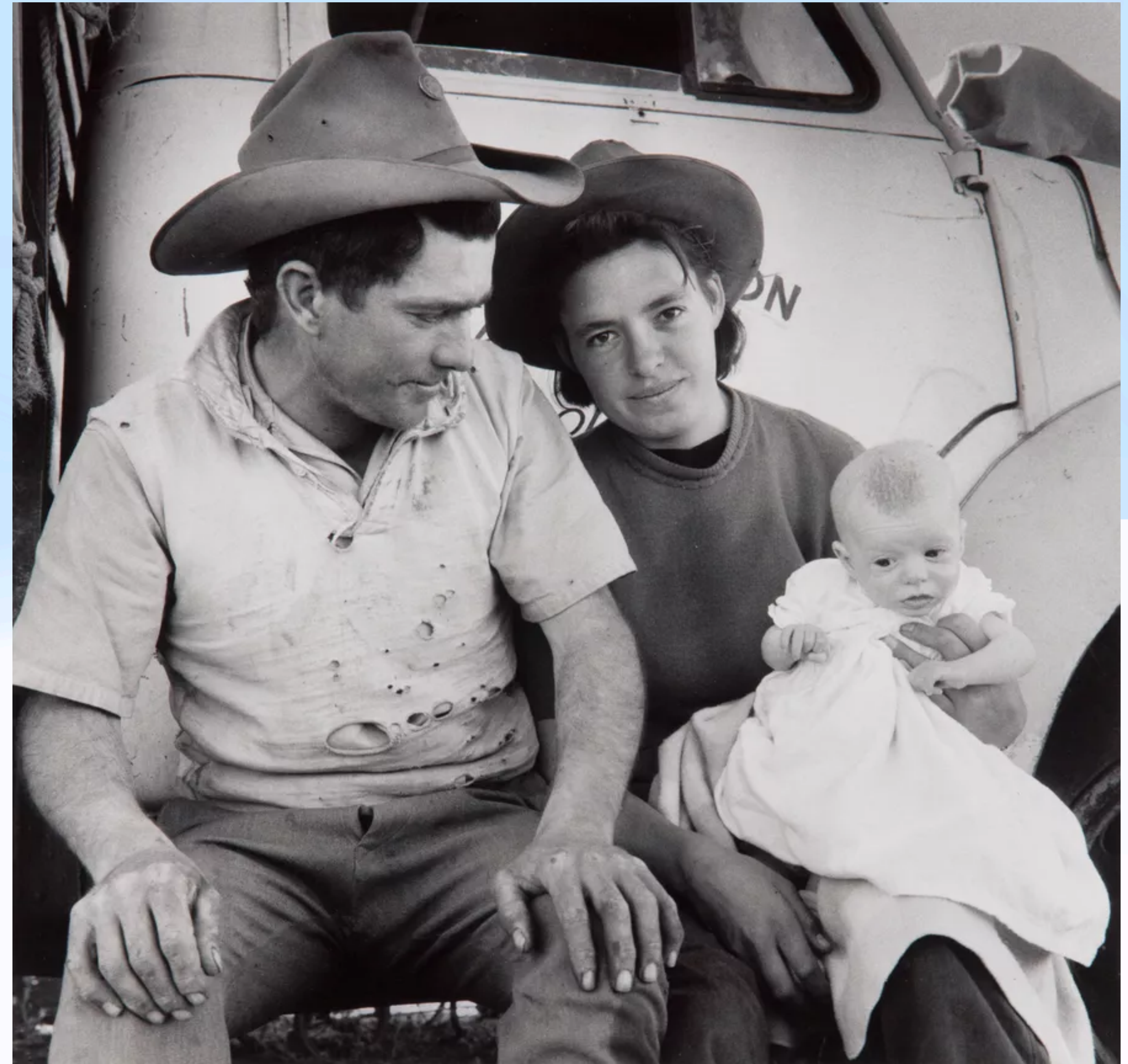


*“There are two people in every photograph:
the photographer and the viewer.”*

Ansel Adams

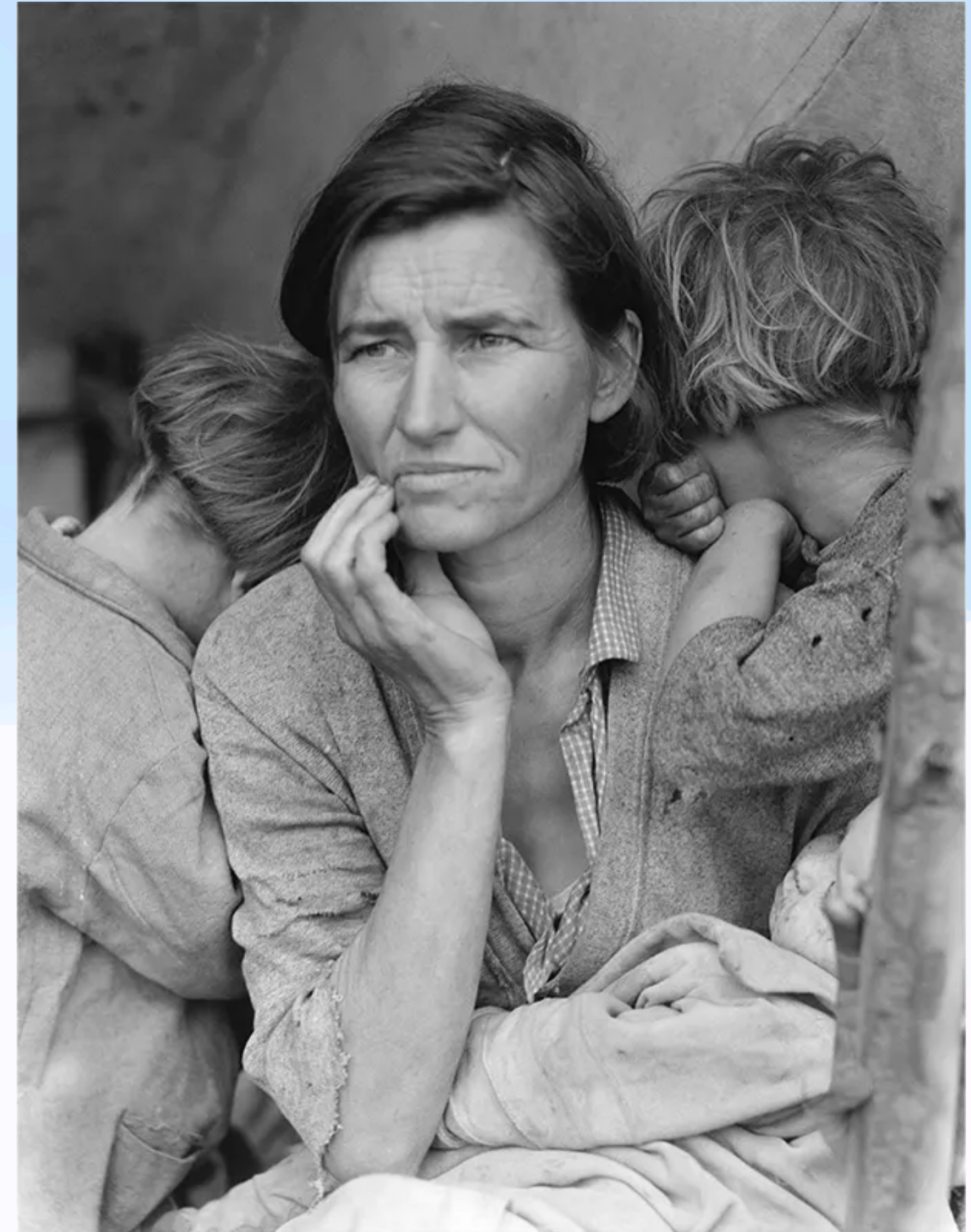


- We all love a good photo.
- One that makes us stop, look, think, reflect.
- Photographs are sites of human engagement and interaction.
- They have meaning beyond just being objects.
- They engender conversations.



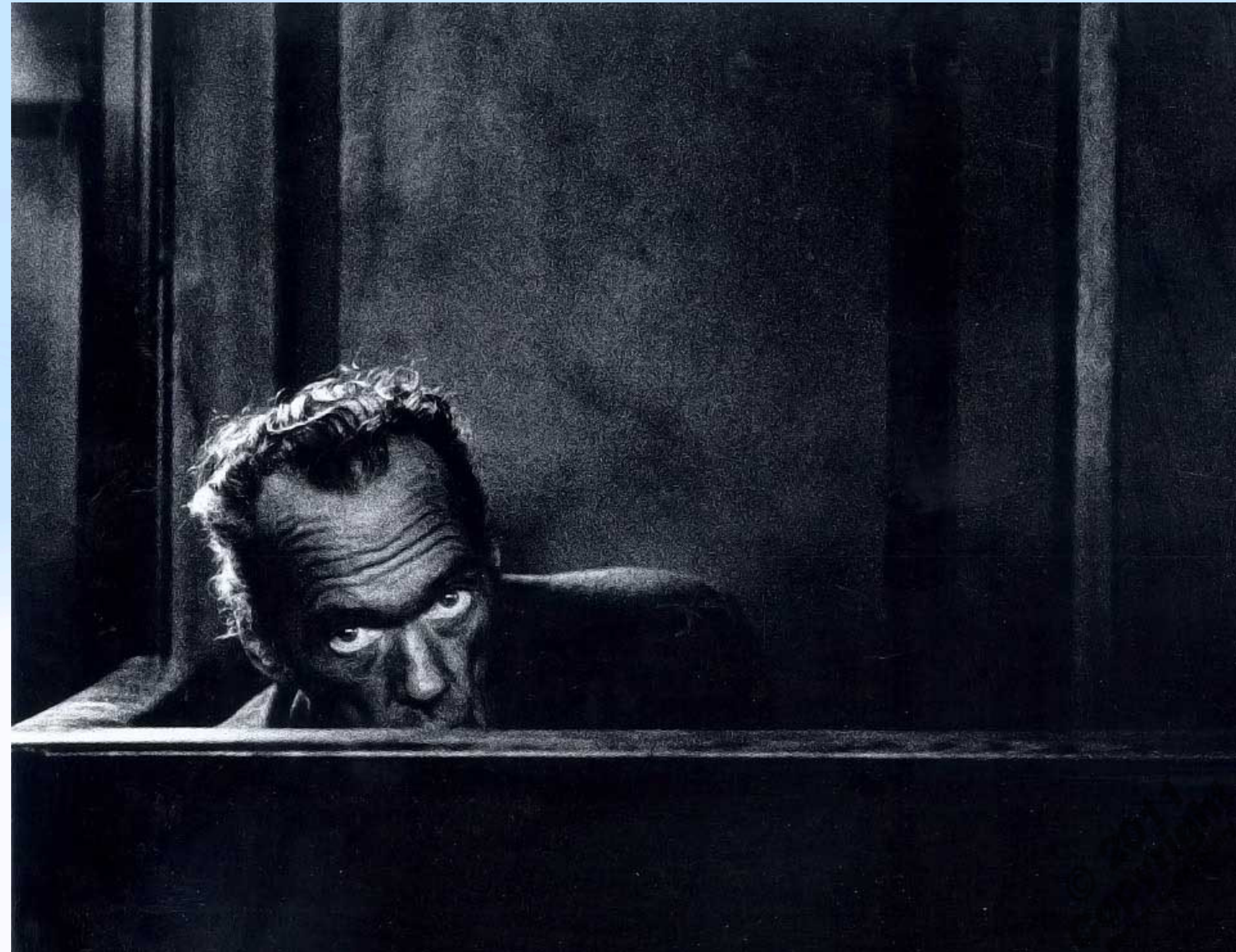
Jeff Carter, *The Drover's Wife*, 1958

- We don't just look at photographs.
- We feel them, interpret them, connect with others through them.



Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936

- There is an expectation that a photograph indexes a particular moment in time.
- An imprint of the moment when light strikes a palpable surface (film, sensor etc).
- Photographs have a real-world immediacy. A “that-has-been” moment (Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*).
- This creates a pre-existing level of “trust” between viewer and photograph.



Merv Fitzhenry

- “Digital manipulation” and “AI generated imaging” has raised questions about the veracity (perceived truth) of photographs.
- But there is still the lingering belief that a photograph is an expression of a moment that was.
- This is what empowers photographs.



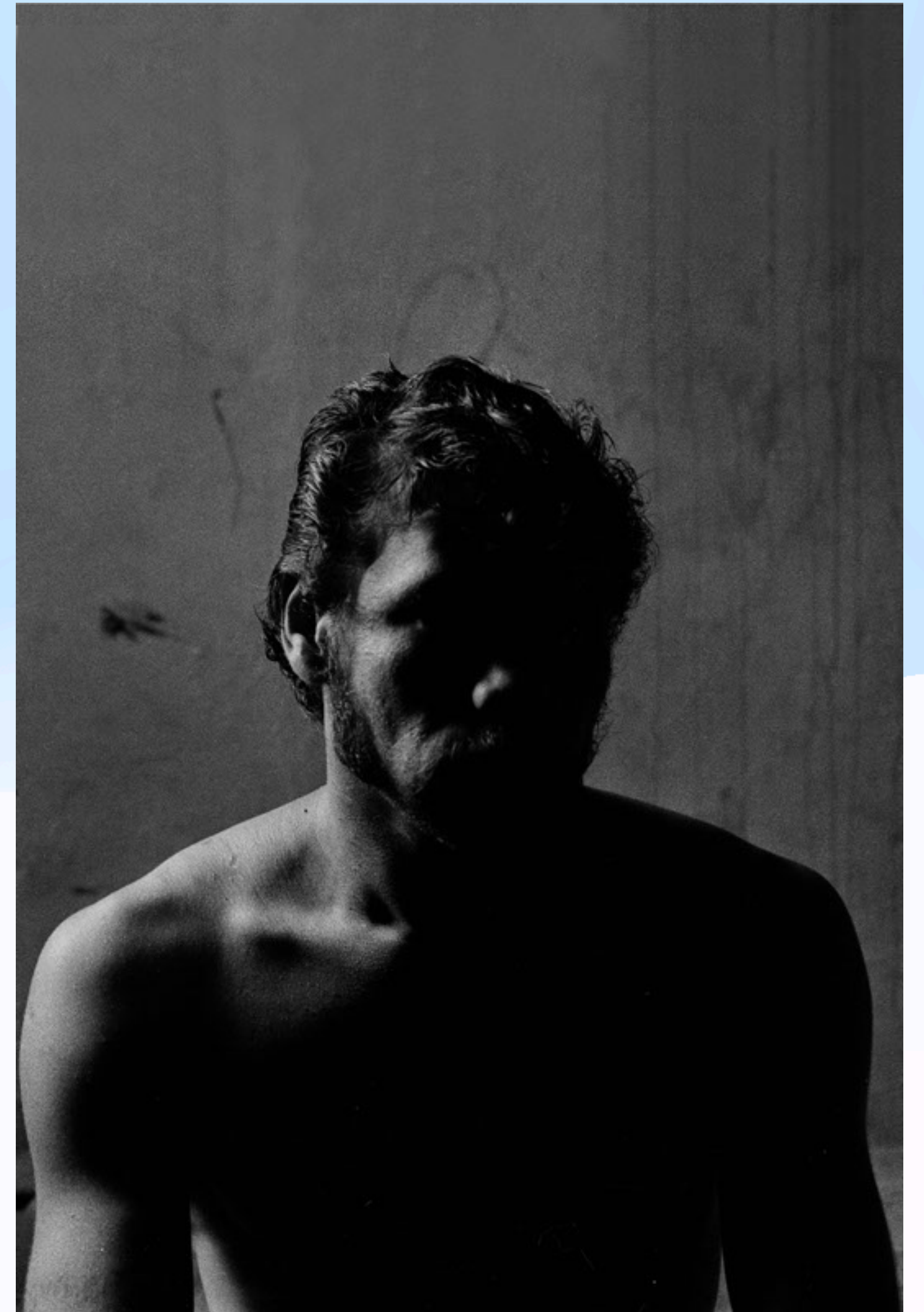
Merv Fitzhenry

- We talk about photographers as “authors”.
- That there is a kind of “authorial intent” in the creation of a photographic image.
- A range of decision-making factors from camera settings to print-making (darkroom / digital darkroom)



Josef Koudelka

- Intent doesn't always mean that the photograph will be "read" in the same way by viewers.
- The photograph becomes a site in which meaning is negotiated between author and viewer.
- Viewers bring their own assumptions, values and lived experiences into the way they respond and connect with a photograph.



Syd Shelton

A story of
Intent and Reading



- A photographer can “steer” the conversation by activating common and shared *codes* and *tropes*.
- In photography, these codes are visual.



Raghu Rai

- Consider photography as a language.
- In language, we fix meaning to words and expressions because groups of people agree on these meanings.
- Because a photographer is an author, they use these shared codes in their image making.
- Viewers pick up these codes, which guide their “reading” of the photograph.



Robert McCabe



Yousuf Karsh
The Roaring Lion
1941

Body language
Expression
Lighting (sculptural)
Background (formal)
Attire



Yousuf Karsh
The Roaring Lion
1941



W. Eugene Smith, *Tomoko and her Mother in the Bath*, 1971

Lighting (Chiaroscuro)
Expressions and Gaze
Pose is reminiscent of The Pieta
(Michelangelo)
Nudity = Vulnerability
Depicts the effects of Minamata
Disease (mercury poisoning)
Familial relationship



W. Eugene Smith, *Tomoko and her Mother in the Bath*, 1971

- A photograph may be “encoded” by the author, but it is also “decoded” by the viewer.
- A photograph meets the viewer at a point in their life.
- Viewer reactions are influenced by cultural background, emotional state, personal taste and so on. They may read the image differently than intended by the photographer.
- How the photograph is then received is just as interesting as how it was authored.
- A photograph is an asynchronous “conversation” between author and viewer.



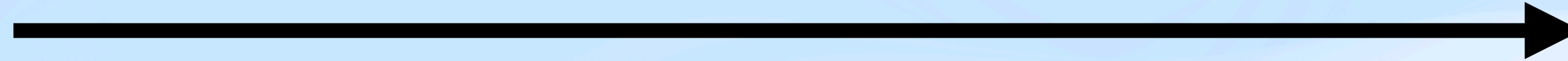
Trent Parke, *Minutes to Midnight*

The Photographer

The Viewer

The Conversation

Encoding



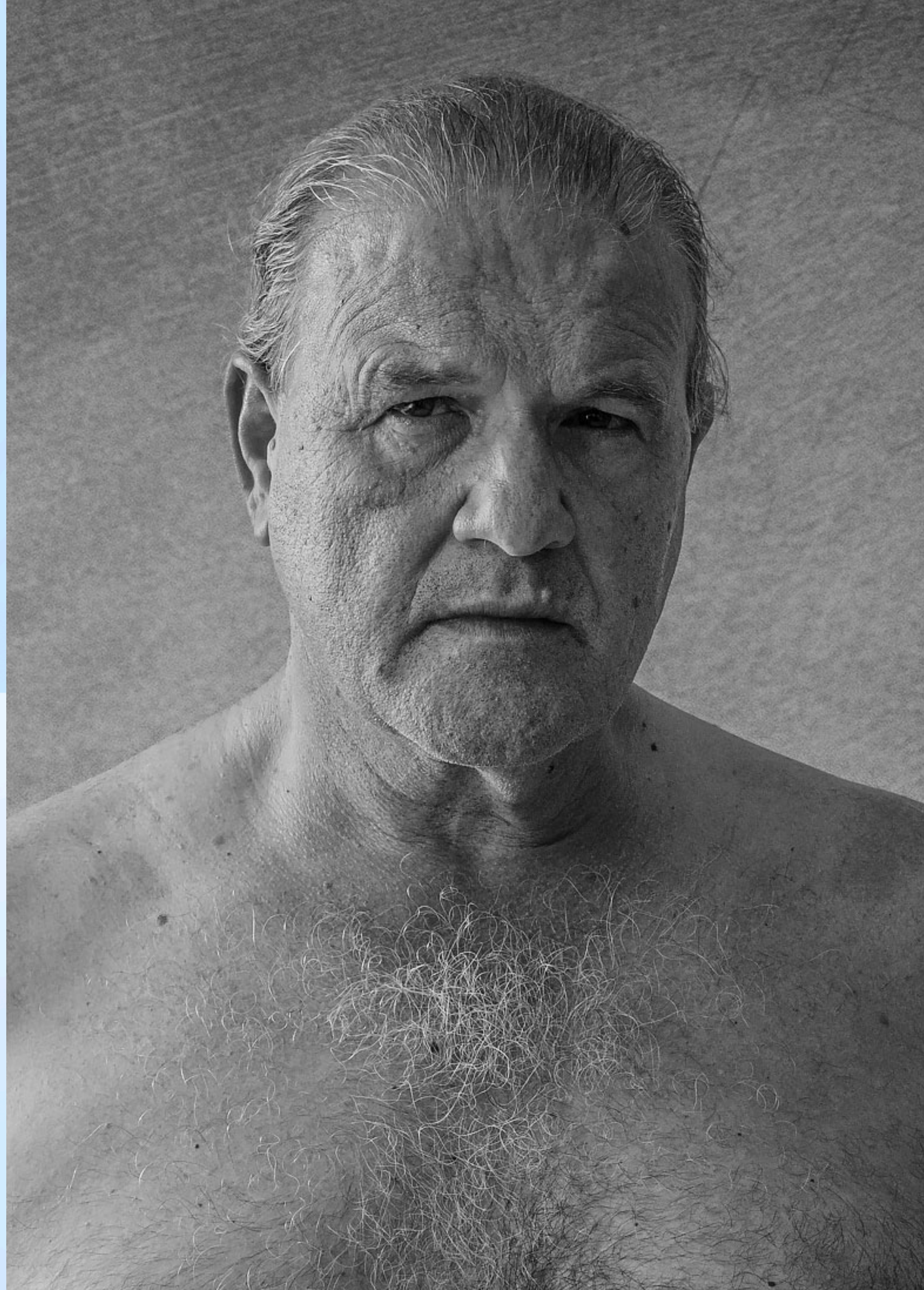
Decoding

Using:

- Symbols and signs
- Light, colour, treatment
- Framing, composition

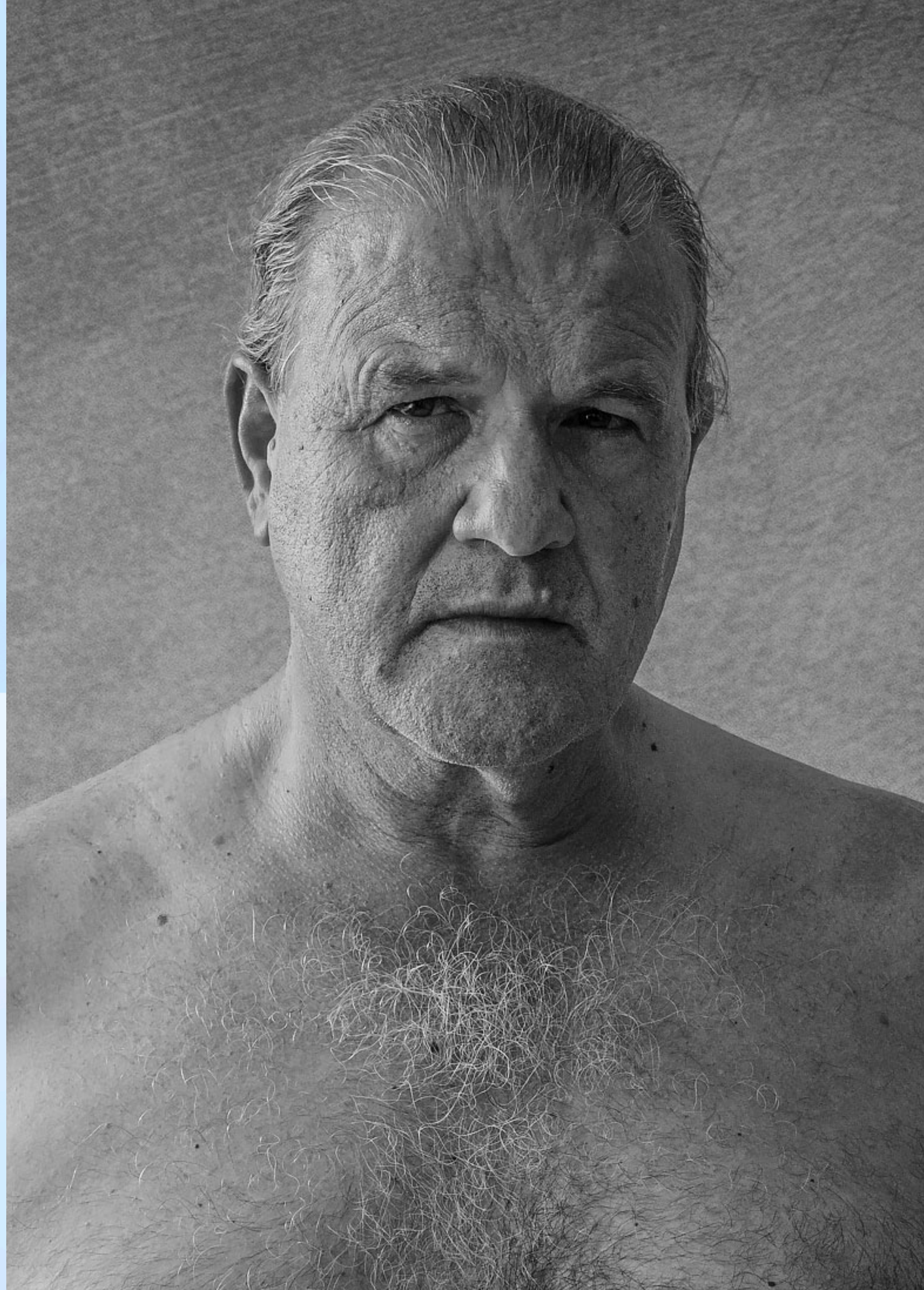
Influenced by:

- Lived experiences
- Culture and values
- Identity



A portrait to consider.

Consider how the viewer's present circumstances may affect the way they read this portrait.



Age and ageing.

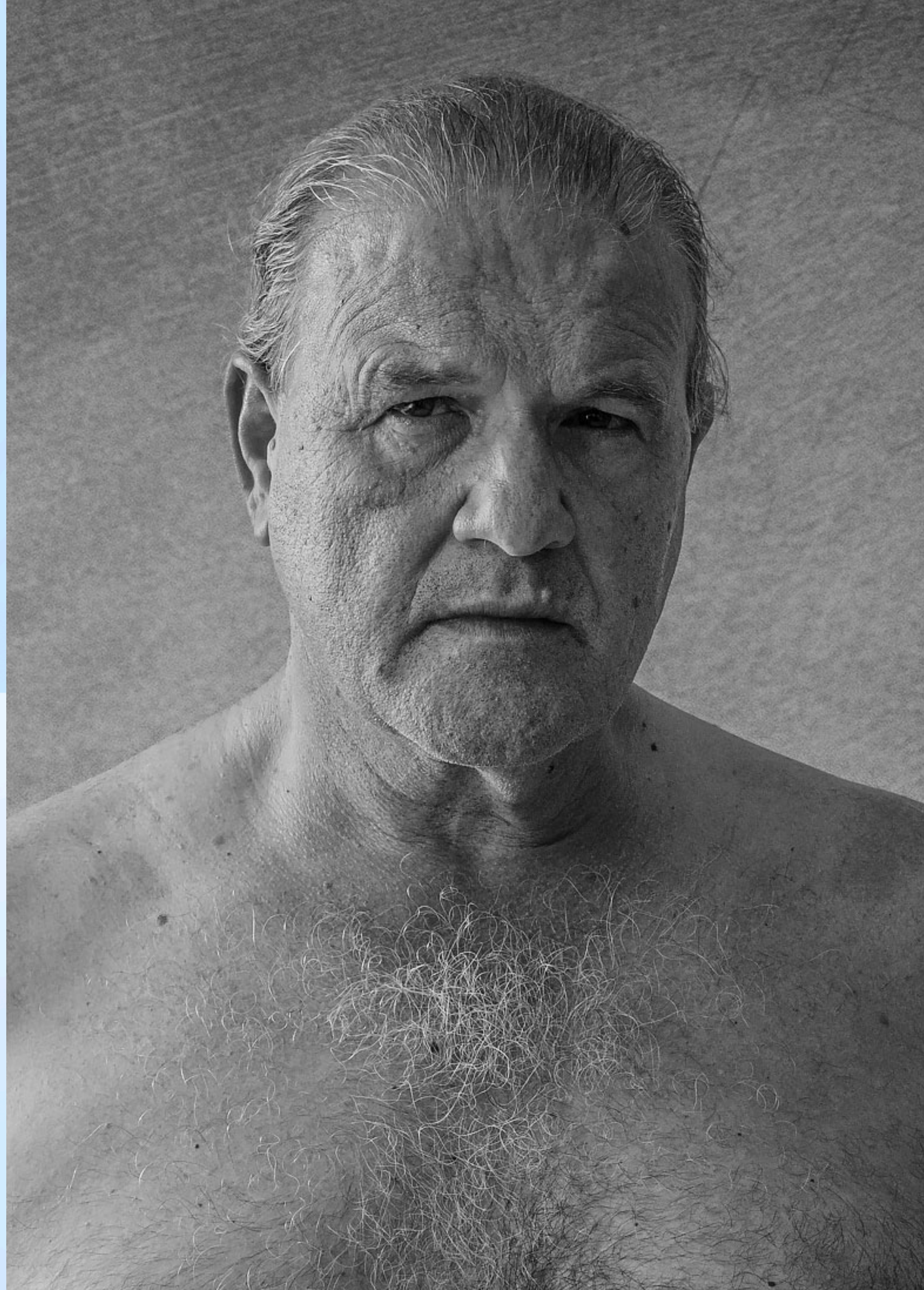
Vulnerability, fragility.

Old man.

Mortality?

Not a “pretty” portrait.

Not a flattering subject.



Stoicism.

Tired fortitude in the gaze.

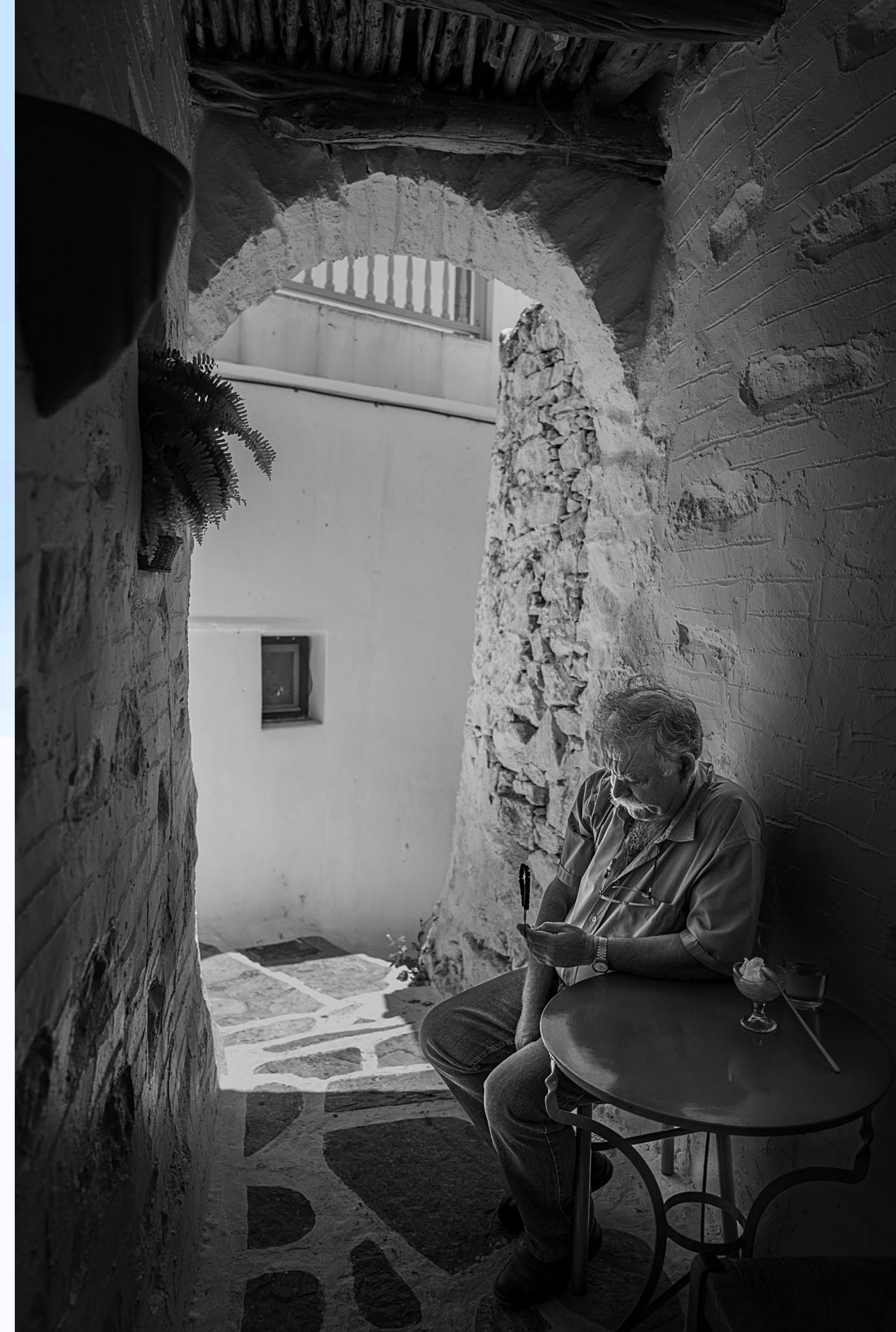
Durability and endurance.

A lifetime written on skin and flesh.

Dignity and resilience.

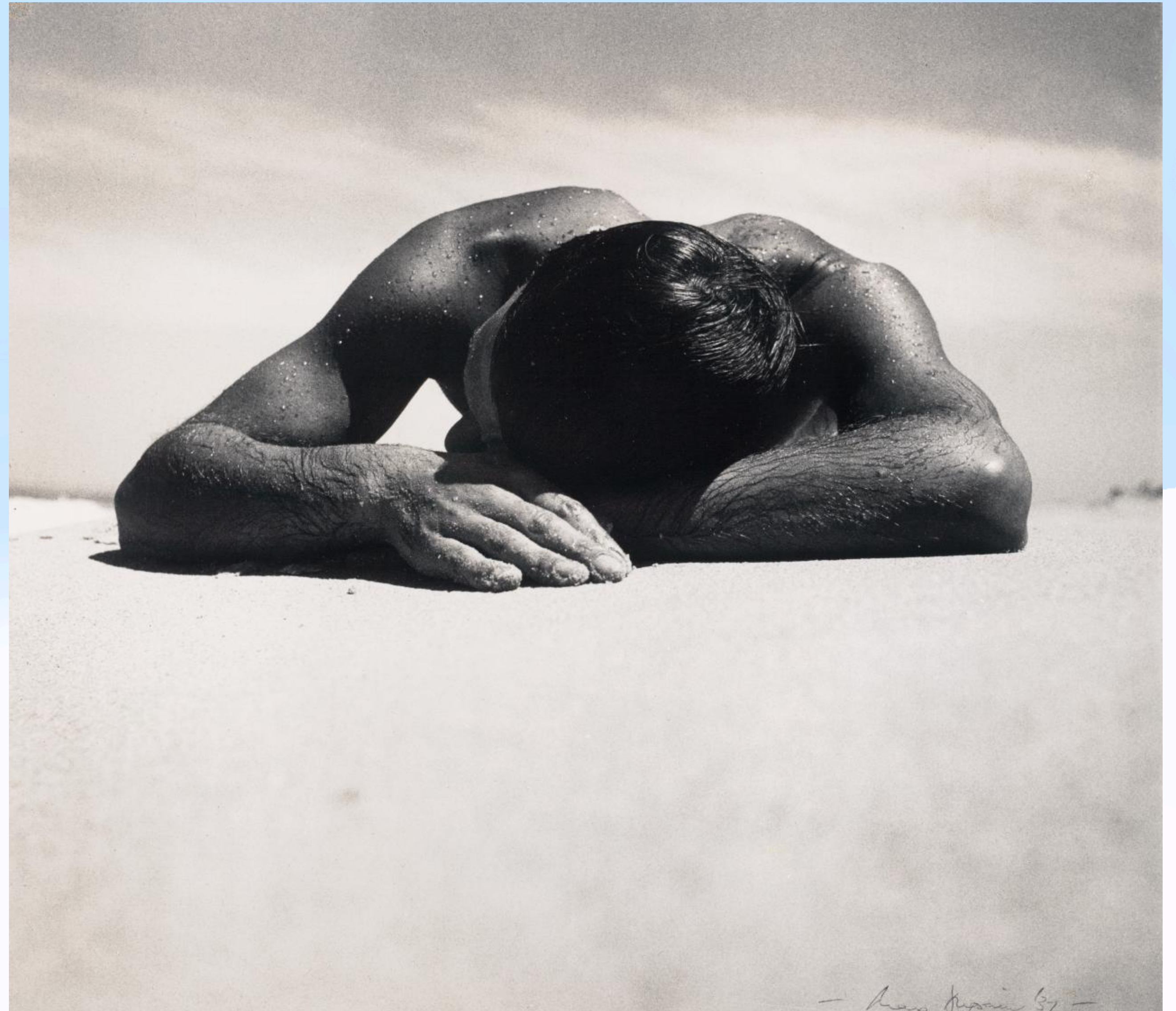
A Focus on the Author (aka You)

- You instigate conversations.
- What resonates with you?
- Your values, your concerns, your curiosities, your personal taste.
- How do these influence what or how you photograph?
- Two photographers in the same location can take completely different images. What differentiates you from the other photographer?
- What's your “voice” as a photographer?



When you make a photograph, consider:

- Your intent or meaning.
- What shared assumptions are you encoding into the photograph, in order to communicate meaning?
- Are you prompting viewers' reactions?
- What are you codifying in the picture?
- Pictorial elements, composition, framing.
- Lighting, treatment, colour (or lack of).



Max Dupain, *The Sunbaker*





Time of day - twilight/dusk - connotations

Colour palette: soft tones, subtle hues

*Symbolism of bare
twigs, a handful of
autumn leaves.
Conveys mood.*

*Long exposure to
create stillness, calm
the reflections.*

*The crafting of an
image is a combination
of technical and
thematic decisions.*



*An elegiacal,
romanticised mood.
Poetic.*

*Come, for the dusk is our own;
let us fare forth together,*


*With a quiet delight in our
hearts for the ripe, still autumn
weather,*

*Through the rustling valley and
wood and over the crisping
meadow,*

*Under a high sprung sky,
winnowed of mist and shadow.*

LM Montgomery





*Monochromatic
treatment: Evokes
something “classical”.*

*Background light;
moody.*

Negative space.

*Gaze and gesture -
prayer, introspection,
reflection.*

*Formal, vintage
clothing. Connotations.*

*Layer blend treatment.
Twigs, desiccated
leaves. Connotations.*



Piety and faith.

Isolation.

Remorse and regret.

Loss.

Memory.



*Muted, pastel colours,
activate particular
emotional responses.*

*Single Orthodox church
located bright against
dark hills; separated
from the rest of the
scene.*

*Negative space pushes
the view towards
positive elements.*

*Diagonal line combines
with negative spaces to
push the eye towards
the isolated church.*

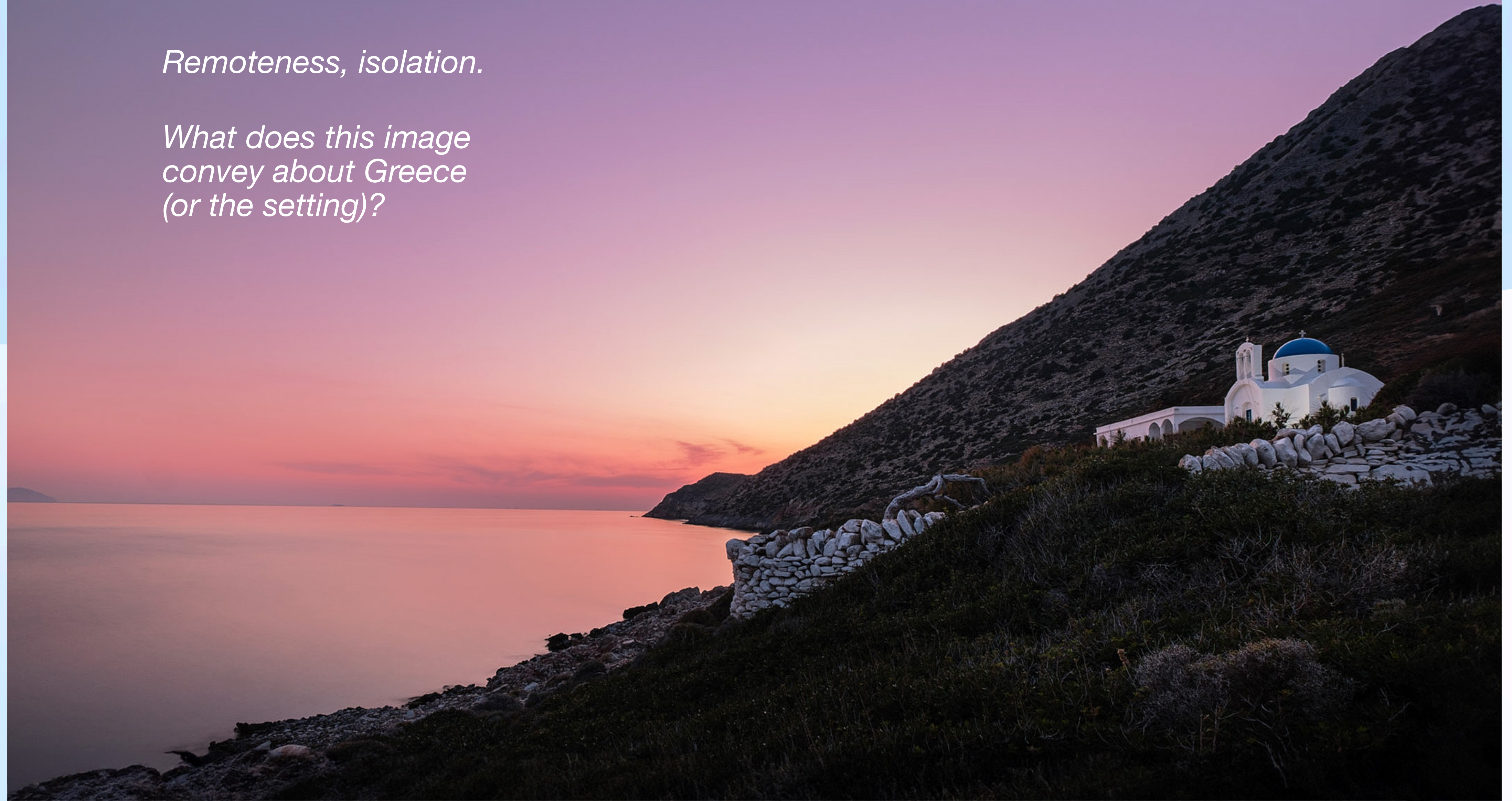


A sense of calm.

Timelessness.

Remoteness, isolation.

*What does this image
convey about Greece
(or the setting)?*



What can we learn as photographers, from an understanding of photographs as conversations?

- When your image is assessed (eg. when it is being “judged” at a competition or award), you are having a conversation with the assessor. Your image is the conversation piece.
- If you plan on selling your images — as art prints or stock — you need to make sure they “speak” to the person deciding whether to invest.
- The conversation must be interesting, engaging.



- Accept that there will always be a subjective angle in which your image will be read and received.
- Make your image stand out by making sure that it triggers the conversation.
- Understanding and using the “language” of photography helps.



- Conversations are sparked when a viewer looks more deeply into the photograph.
- “Deadly boring photographs” rarely prompt conversations.
- A photograph can depict a beautiful subject or scene. But what more can you do to invite a deeper, more studied gaze?
- Let’s look at how you can include “conversation starters” in the way you shoot.



Prompt curiosity.
Make the viewer look!



Keep the “story” short.

Don’t overload the frame - only a handful of elements, with a singular “storytelling” element to anchor the image.





Make use of elements which have symbolic or emotional value within your own culture or milieu to connect with viewers.

Be open to (and even invite) different interpretations by incorporating elements that may trigger different readings.



Consider crafting an image that challenges the values and assumptions of viewers.

Mature-minded viewers are drawn to images that ask questions (and which don't necessarily provide answers).



Who are you having the conversation with?

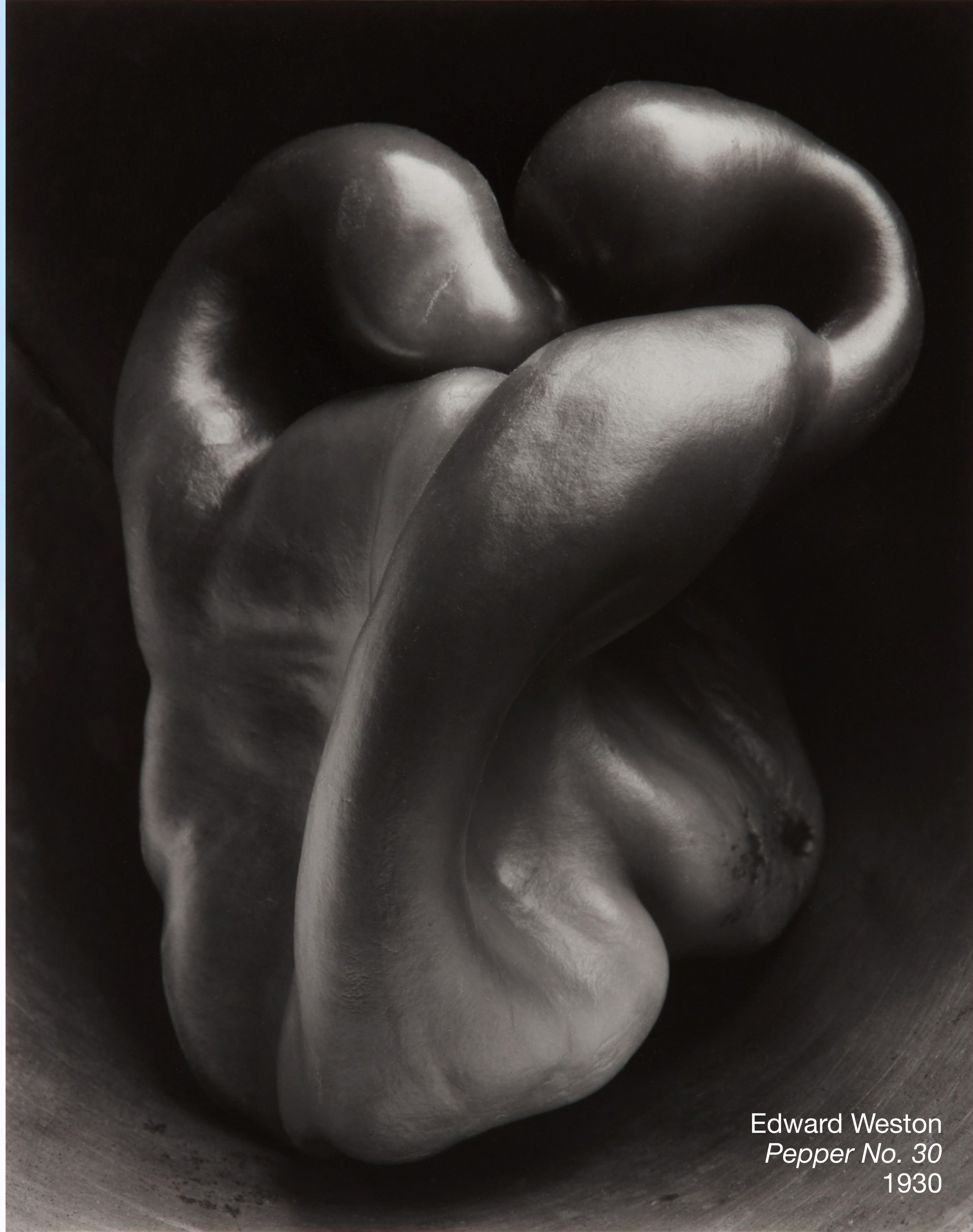
This is especially important if you are targeting a particular audience or demographic with the image, eg. entering awards, shooting commercially, fine art photography.

- What are the key concerns within your target audience? For example: in Wildlife Photography, what are the topical “conversation starters”?
- What codes or prompts will trigger these conversations?
- “Clickbait images”



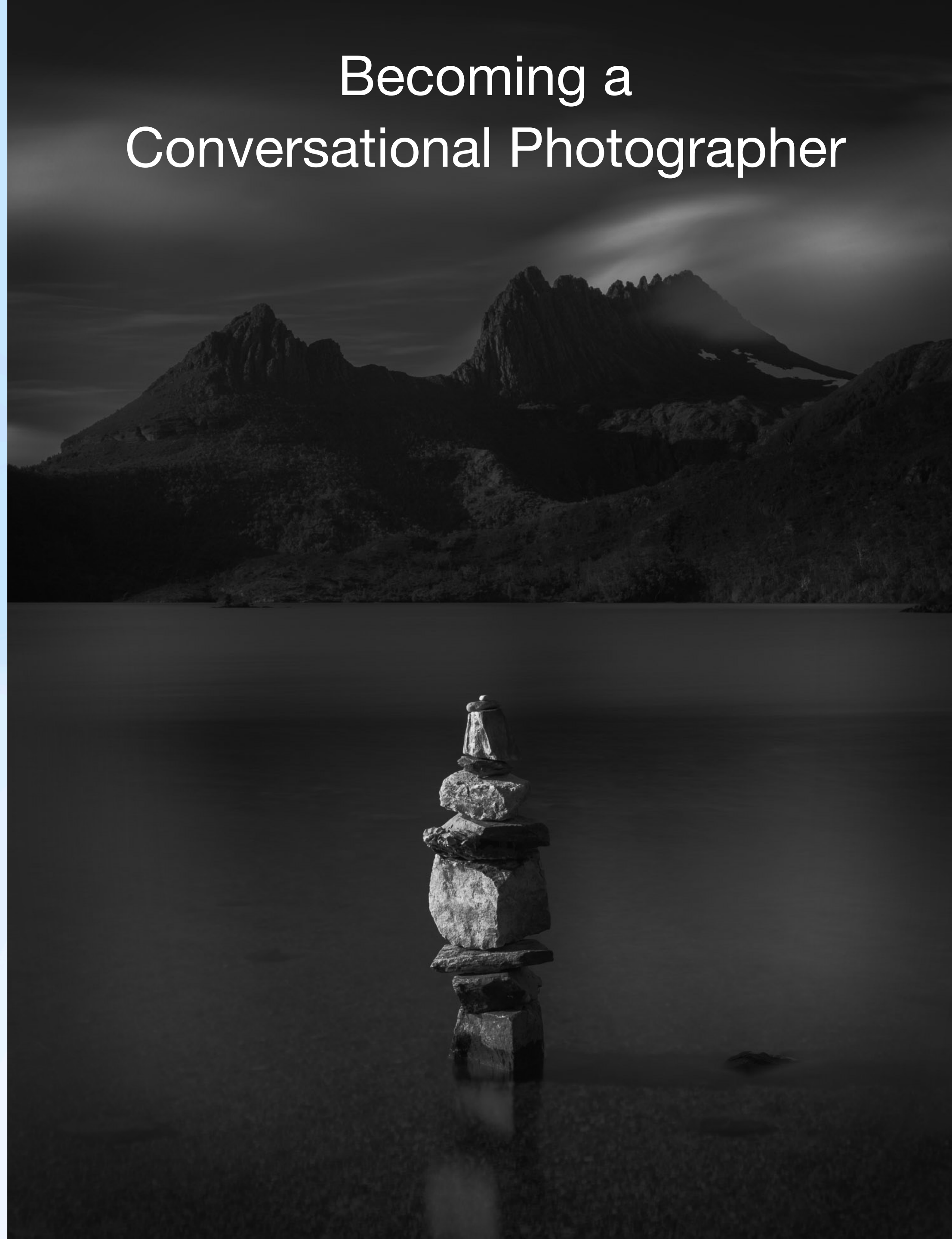


Robert Mapplethorpe
Ken and Tyler
1985



Edward Weston
Pepper No. 30
1930

Becoming a Conversational Photographer



Incorporate the practice of “reading” photographs into your overall photographic practice.

Cultivate an awareness of the way you interpret images: how you are decoding images, the emotions/mood activated by images you view. Try and articulate your responses.

Consider how the
next portrait asks to
be viewed and
interpreted.

Then think about your
own response and
interpretation of the
portrait.



- Key element/s.
- Dominant symbol/s.
- Use of light.
- Framing

The next slide shows two portraits
of the same subjects.

Think about the elements in each
that shape the way you interpret
the image, including how you
respond to the people in the
portraits.



The next two photographs are
what would fall into the
“documentary” genre.

See if you can articulate a response to each photograph in
regards to subject and situation.





The final two photographs are
what would fall into the
“landscape” genre.

See if you can articulate a response to each photograph in
regards to subject and situation.



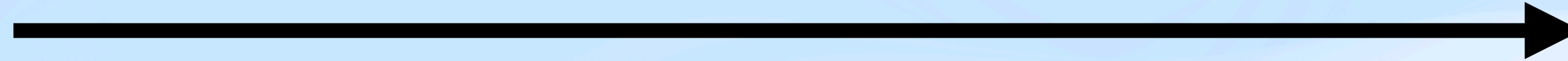


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The Viewer

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Decoding

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Q & A



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