

# documentary

true stories through photography

Seng Mah  
Venture Photography Workshops & Tours

[www.venturephotography.com.au](http://www.venturephotography.com.au)

# who am i?



Photography educator

Photography tour leader

Professional photographer

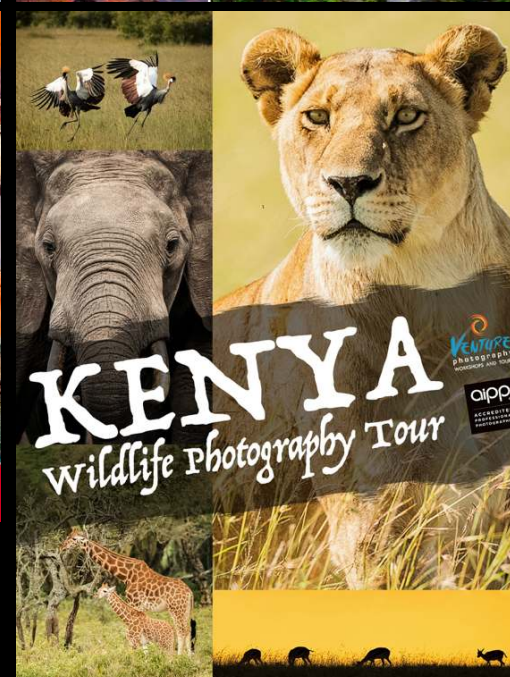
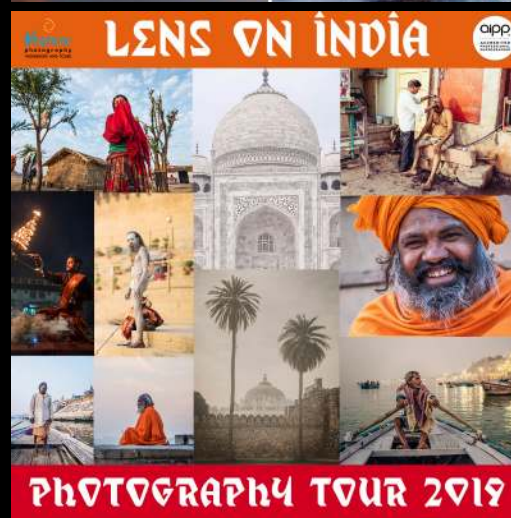
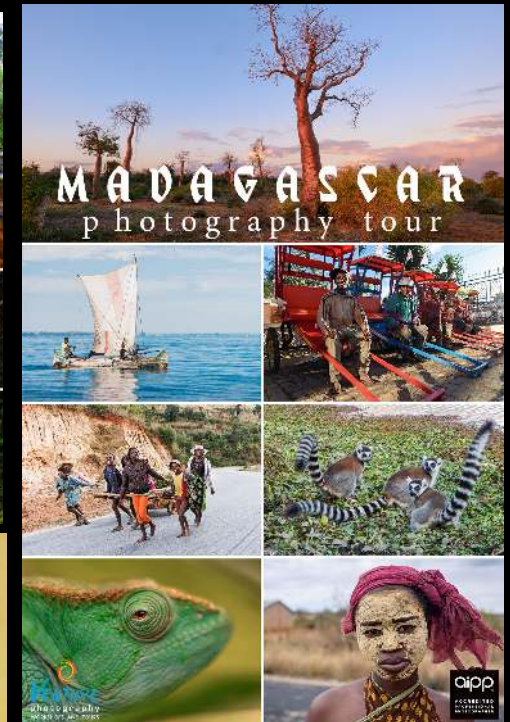
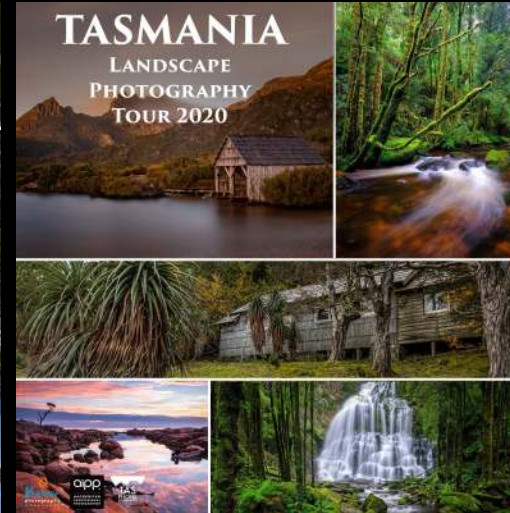
Photographic judge (WAPJA)

2018 WA Professional Documentary

Photographer of the Year



# who am i?





# what i use



Fujifilm X-T3 & X-T2

Fujifilm GFX 50R medium format

Nikon D850 & Nikon D500

Adobe Lightroom

Adobe Photoshop





# what i use

## LENSES

16-55mm (24-70mm on crop)

50-140 (70-200mm on crop)

100-400 (150-600mm on crop)

50mm (75mm on crop)

14mm (21mm on crop)



# the genre of 'documentary'



*“Using pictures or interviews with people involved in real events to provide a factual report on a particular subject.”*

# 'documentary' photography



*“Using photography to provide a factual report on a particular subject.”*



# 'documentary' photography



*Reportage*  
*Photojournalism*  
*Editorial*

*WHAT MAKES DOCUMENTARY  
DIFFERENT FROM:*

*STREET PHOTOGRAPHY*  
*TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY*  
*EVENT PHOTOGRAPHY*  
*HAPPY SNAPS AT A PARTY*  
*SELFIES?*

# 'documentary' photography

## *STREET PHOTOGRAPHY*

*Takes us to a particular moment in time - the "decisive moment". The moment can be interpreted outside of context,*

*or it can be interpreted within the socio-historical context of the scene/subject captured.*



Cartier-Bresson, 1932, Behind the Gare St Lazare

# 'documentary' photography

## TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY

*Communicates the essence or spirit of a place, setting, people or culture. It aims to “take the viewer there”.*

*May have a commercial imperative, or may be personal.*





# 'documentary' photography

## EVENT PHOTOGRAPHY

*Communicates the different facets of an event (or occasion) through a series of pictures.*



# 'documentary' photography



## *HAPPY SNAPS AND SELFIES*

*Often do not cover a broad range of angles  
or facets in order to report on the subject  
or story.*

# 'documentary' photography

*Portrays the scene “as seen” ie. no additions or subtractions of elements.*

*Scenes and subjects are captured without direction from the author/photographer (debatable).*

*Very little to no image manipulation (except for tone, exposure, contrast, conversion to black and white)*

*Usually tells the story across a series of images, instead of relying on one single frame to communicate its message (eg. photo essay).*



# 'documentary' photography



*D-Day Landing at Omaha Beach, Normandy  
6 June 1944  
Robert Capa*

# 'documentary' photography





# 'documentary' photography





# 'documentary' photography

Capa told how he was forced to hide behind a "half-burnt" tank, wading between floating bodies for a few more pictures before his final "jump" to shore.

*"I finished my pictures, and the sea was cold in my trousers. Reluctantly, I tried to move away from my steel pole, but the bullets chased me back every time."*


– ROBERT CAPA

Capa took 106 frames in 1.5 hours.

An army courier sent the film to London to be developed.

A dark room accident destroyed 95 frames of negatives, leaving only 11 frames available for publication.

# 'documentary' photography



**“If your  
pictures  
aren't good  
enough,  
you aren't  
close  
enough.”**

ROBERT CAPA

[www.faces.ch/quotes](http://www.faces.ch/quotes)

**FACES**®

# 'documentary' photography



*“Close enough” implies that:*

*You need to be in the thick of the action to do it justice.*

*You need to know the people and subjects that you’re photographing.*

*You need to be committed to “bearing witness” to events as they unfold.*

# 'documentary' photography

*Gerda Taro*



# 'documentary' photography



*Something happening.*

*Says something.*

*Tells a story.*

*Takes us "there".*

*Gets us to "feel" something.*

*Warts and all (not "cleaned up").*

*Provides insight.*

*Leaves us with a bit more knowledge about  
the subject.*

# find a 'project' to document



*Find a subject/topic that connects deeply with you,  
or which you find interesting/exciting.*

*Add some research to get “closer” to the subject.*



# find a 'project' to document



*How can you “embed” yourself in the context of the subject? Friends? Network? Fixers?*

*How do you gain the “trust” of people who are involved in the subject?*

# find a 'project' to document



*What are the different “angles” (stories) you can cover?*

*How will you photograph in order to be able to document the different angles/stories?*

*What barriers/challenges will you face when photographically documenting the subject?*

# find a 'project'

*KOLKATA WRESTLERS*  
*February 2019*





















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नवान

























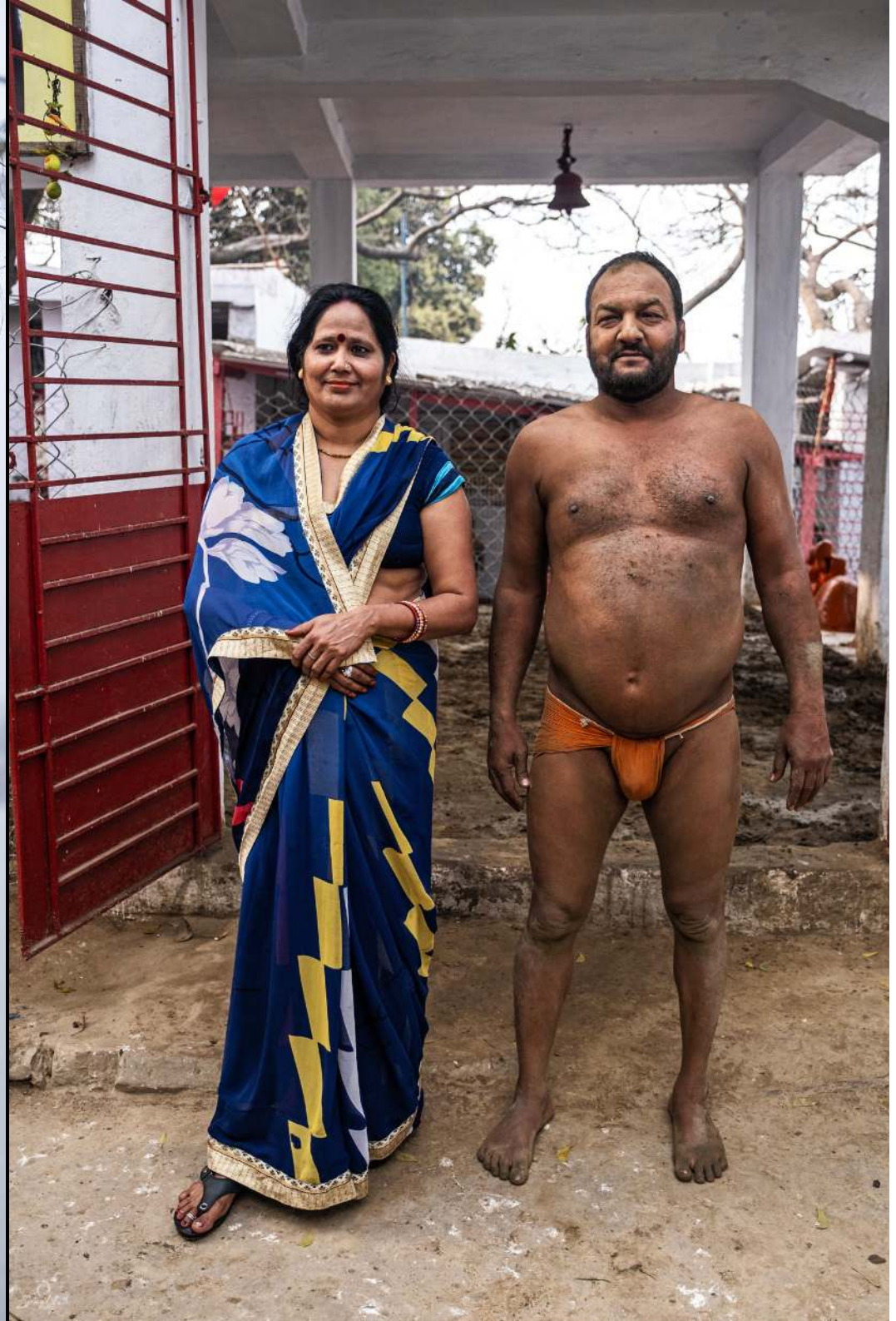




































































































# The photo essay



*Think of it as a “feature article” but with photographs instead of words.*

*Work out the story you’d like to tell and identify key “elements” in the story that you need to represent in the “essay”.*

*Don’t forget to capture human elements: emotion, relationships, conflict.*

*Curate and sequence your images in the “essay” to tell the story.*

*Caption images to help your viewer contextualise what’s depicted.*



# The single photograph

*Distil the story into one image.*

*WWWWH - Who, What, Where, When, How.*

*Try to include as many of the above in one image.*

*Don't forget to use "detail" to foreground setting, character, situation. Eg. textures, artwork etc.*

*Key photographic elements (light, composition) are still very important (even more important than in a photo essay).*





# The single photograph

**VENTURE**  
photography  
WORKSHOPS

**aipp**  
ACCREDITED  
PROFESSIONAL  
PHOTOGRAPHER





# The single photograph

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# The single photograph

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# Finding the shot



*A good documentary shot doesn't happen randomly.*

*You need to be there and be in the moment and the "zone".*

*First contact and immersion is important.*

*Before you start capturing: Observe. Listen. Understand.*

*Stay as long as you can.*

*You can either talk, or you can shoot. If you talk, you can't shoot.*

*Go with the flow - be open to possibilities.*





Perth Tattoo Carnival





# Getting shots

*Think of your camera as the “viewer’s eye”. Where do you want to position the viewer in relation to the subject or scene.*

*How can you bring the viewer’s “eye” into the thick of the action?*

*Keep shooting across moments as they unfold. You never know when the actual “story” event will happen.*







24mm (16mm on the Fuji X-T3), shooting at f4 - f8



# Getting started



*Think of a Documentary Project like a diary or journal.*

*Find something that you're already involved in and familiar with eg. a sport, a club, a festival, a trip etc. You can even do "A Day in the Life"... of someone, or of yourself.*

*Jot down a few thoughts or "hooks" that can help develop the story. It can be an idea (eg. "close up of hands doing..." or an activity (eg. "shots at the start of the race).*

*Use these thoughts/hooks to guide what and how you shoot.*

*Try and get "in the zone" when you're shooting — no distractions; just hone in on the storytelling through picture-taking.*



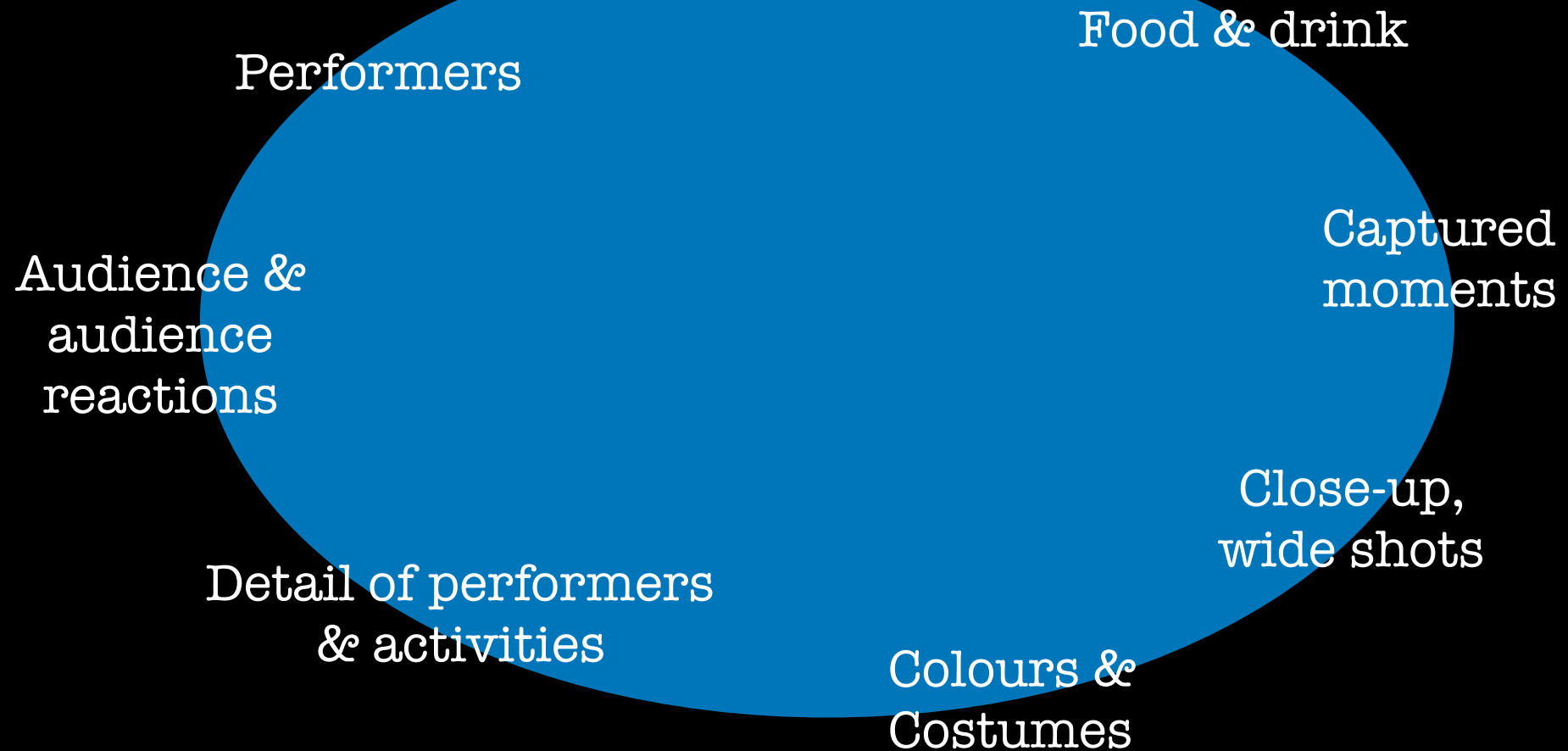


## Surf Rowing in WA



# An example

## Street Festival





# Publication



*A book.*

*A slideshow (upload on YouTube;  
share on social media).*

*A web blog.*

*An exhibition.*



# “GULULU BUKMAK”

East Arnhem Land  
Cultural Photography

Seng Mah  
www.sengmah.com.au



# Kit



*Gear is secondary to mindset, attitude, vision and courage.*

*Use gear that allows you to shoot responsively, intuitively. Less struggle with interface and “settings”.*

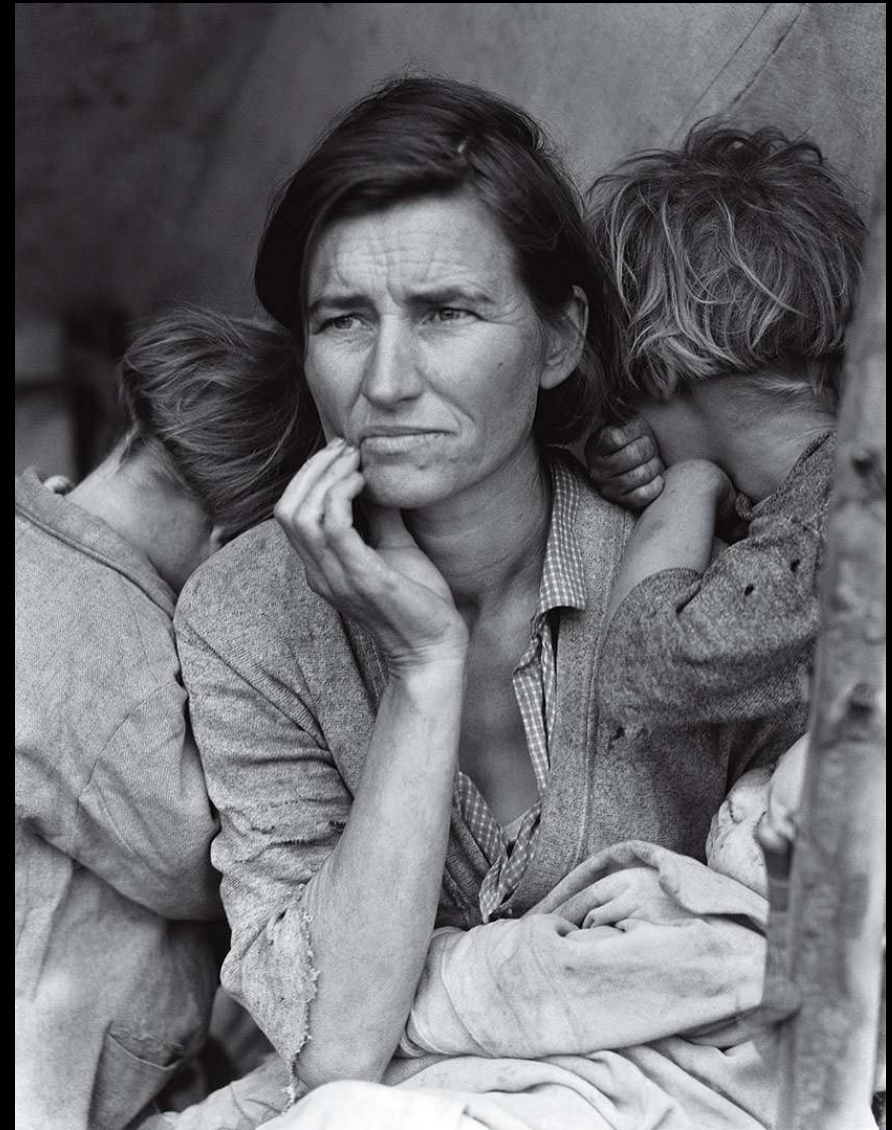
*What’s important is story and emotion. Don’t stress about focus. Better to get a strong story with a slightly blurry image, instead of a sharp but boring image.*

*Don’t underestimate what you can do with a smartphone camera.*

# Inspiration

*Robert Capa*  
*Gerda Taro*  
*Sebastiao Salgado*  
*Diane Arbus*  
*Stephen du Pont*  
*Dorothea Lange*  
*David Dare Parker*  
*Claire Martin*  
*Brian Cassey*  
*Lynsey Addario*  
*Ed Kashi*  
*Susan Meiselas*

*Magnum Photos*  
*VII Photo*  
*World Press Photos*



Migrant Mother, Dorothea Lange 1936



*Steve Marijanich Fundraiser*



Sunday 11 August, 4.30pm - 6.00pm, Riverside Road, East Fremantle

[www.bit.ly/freosunset](http://www.bit.ly/freosunset)



Q & A

