

# Bryan F Peterson

**Ansel Magazine exclusive interview with the introducer of the  
"Photographic Triangle" to the world of visual art**



**"Great light can at times salvage a poor composition, but a great composition will always salvage poor light!"**

**Bryan Peterson**

In the summer of 2021, in the heat of the COVID-19 epidemic, I attended his lecture at a valuable photography gathering. The speech was about "creative photography." This event was an opportunity for me to know Bryan Peterson more, and I have been following his creative world and contacting him since then. Although he is a masterful, talented, and very productive artist, he is also an extremely humble and affable person. Bryan is a teacher, and his lessons in photography have been spread all over the world through his books and workshops. His writings have been translated into more than eleven languages. The book "Understanding Exposure," which for the first time was talking about a new formula called "The Photographic Triangle," is considered one of the best-selling educational books in the world.



I had planned to have an interview with him for Ansel Magazine, which fortunately finally came in the 15th issue of the magazine.

I would like to draw your attention to this conversation below:

**You started photography in the 1970s, when you were very young. I guess at that time, it wasn't as common to have a camera and engage in the art aspect of photography as it is today. What camera did you start with, and what challenges did you face in photography at that time?**

From 1965 to the summer of 1970, I had been doing acrylic and oil paintings, as well as charcoal and pen and ink. I was a self-taught 'artist'. It was my intention to be a full-time artist, using paint and canvas as my medium of choice.

It was in June of 1970 that my oldest brother, an amateur photographer, returned from college, where he had been getting his PHD in Oceanography, and he suggested that I take up photography as another form of artistic expression. I remember distinctly rejecting this idea since I felt photography was NOT art, but he vehemently disagreed, and he kept pushing me to just try it, and then he suggested that it would be a good idea to take photos of the very landscapes, cityscapes that I was painting or drawing, and rather than hanging out at these locations for several days to create my paintings, I could take the black and white photo, develop the photo in his darkroom, and stay at home and use the photograph as my guide for creating my painting. I liked that idea, so he and I went out one weekend in July of 1970, and he told me how to use his Nikon Photonic F camera and 50mm F/1.4 lens. By Sunday night, I was making black and white prints in his darkroom, and within 24-hours, I was hooked by the immediacy of the photograph versus the days or weeks it might take me to finish a painting or drawing, and I have NOT painted since that fateful Monday in July of 1970. It's been all photography ever since! Although I continued to shoot black and white and make prints in my brother's darkroom, it was about six months later that I felt the strong need to start shooting color slide film, and thus began my long and storied career with seeing and creating in COLOR.



## I would like to know what challenges you faced in photography at that time.

As far as challenges, the only real challenge was to keep learning, keep shooting, keep making notes on my settings, (f/stop and shutter speeds), and learn the effect various f/stops and shutter speeds had on the overall image. Working on composition, including point of view and lens choice, was also a daily endeavor. I would read and study the photographs that were found in the photography books at the library, and it was about a year or two late that I purchased the Time-Life Library of Photography, and that made a great difference in my understanding of photography as ART.



**Traveling is a part of your life, and you also take photos during the trip. The question is: how can we find subjects for photography during a trip that have more contemplation depth and at least have something special to say? As you know, when we face a new environment and deal with the excitement that arises during travel, our photography will have the potential to turn into a tourist style. How can we avoid that?**

Whenever I traveled in the beginning, I was always more comfortable going down 'unfamiliar roads' which often meant avoiding big cities and choosing small country towns and villages. I found it was much easier to meet people and thus find people subjects as they were more trusting, plus it promised me that I would be shooting potentially NEW material that had not seen before versus going to the more familiar locations such as New York and spending my time shooting subjects like the FAMILIAR skyline or the Empire State Building or Times Square plus the people in the bigger cities were far less trusting of my approaching them to take their photo. Since that time back then I have matured a great deal and traveled extensively to 89 countries and I still look forward to going down those unfamiliar roads and visiting the not so common cities, towns and out of the way villages.



Nikon D850 and 14-24mm, F/8@1/2000 sec. 320 ISO





**What is your definition of creative photography?**  
 A friend photographer believes that the term creative photography has no meaning. Because creativity is something that is intertwined with the essence of photography, for example, the fact that a photographer decides to set the camera settings to a certain aperture number and shutter speed, this is considered a kind of creativity in visual expression. So, it cannot be said that this photo is creative, but the others are not. What do

**you think about this, and are there standards and criteria for calling a photo creative?**

When I first started in photography I 'struggled' with what defines creativity for a number of years and although I do not claim to have found the DEFINITIVE answer, I have concluded that creativity is best defined as a combination of inventiveness, imagination, inspiration and perception and of course most of all the execution of that creativity so it is presented compositionally in a balanced and harmonious fashion so that it 'stops' the audience, it causes the audience to gasp, to feel to wonder, to spend more than a few seconds if not minutes gazing at the photo. As a side note: Anytime one of my students starts explaining what the intent of their photograph is supposed to say, I am quick to say, "You have fallen short of your goal which is that the most every photograph should speak for itself. Mastering the 'intent' of the photograph is the goal and again the intent should be to cause one to laugh, to cry, to gasp, to be surprised, to be repulsed, again to make the viewer FEEL. And it is my strongest of convictions that the viewer will FEEL when the execution of the photograph places its greatest emphasis, most of the time, on achieving a harmonious and balanced composition which is often achieved by combining the write lens for the story you are trying to tell, (wide-angle, normal or tele) with the right point of view, (at eye-level, up close or from far away, from down low and shooting upwards or from above while shooting down). And to be clear I am strong believer in the use of the Rule of Thirds, yet I will be just as quick to admit that a few of the greatest photographers of note, rarely subscribe to the Rule of Thirds yet their images DO make us feel. So, there are obvious exceptions to what I just stated, but I know of far more photographers of not who subscribed to the need for balance and harmony by employing the Rule of Thirds versus those who don't. Furthermore, I have always believed that many beginning photographers struggle with developing a vision because they have yet to fully understanding the 'vision' of their various lenses and when these various 'visions' are combined with a multitude of changing points of view, the 'story', the 'creative approach' becomes vastly improved. With constant practice of simply placing the camera and lens to your eye and doing nothing more than walking around your house or a few streets nearby and notice what the angle of view can include or not include, look up, look down, get down low, climb some stairs and shoot down from above etc. In a matter of weeks in not months your brain has now formulated the many different visions of those various lenses in your camera bag and start to see the world with the eyes of your camera lenses and soon you are seeing potential photographs at most every turn.



**The photo, which is called creatively, is the output of a process that first takes place in the brain and then is implemented in the execution step. This implementation can be done by art techniques such as composition, angle of view, etc. during real photography, and it can also be done by software such as Photoshop. However, often, the photos that are the result of the software process are called created images, and they are categorized in the genre called "digital art." Can we include the output of both of these processes in one category and use the same term as creative photography?**

As far as the use of Photoshop, I have concluded that those who use Photoshop extensively and call the resulting image(s) ART are quick to remind us that Ansel Adams used 'Photoshop' all the time, aka the darkroom where he would spend a great deal of time "dodging and burning" and in some cases "compositing" as well to achieve the result. Using this analogy seems to serve to justify for some that they are no different than Ansel and therefore they are simply doing the same thing but in the modern age the darkroom is now called Photoshop. I have never had an issue with anyone presenting images that owe their success far more to Photoshop than the actual process of creating the image in camera EXCEPT when that photographer suggests that the result was done for the most part in camera when in fact it was achieved in much larger measure via processing and in some cases compositing. I will tell my students to be truthful about their use of Photoshop. Own it and take responsibility for the outcome and be proud of your Photoshop skills but not present a photograph whose success is owed to the tools of Photoshop and state that it was done in camera with minor Photoshop use. And I do believe strongly that there are still many photographers, myself included, creating the vast majority of their work with a camera and lens and doing the necessary 'fine tuning' in Adobe Camera Raw or Lightroom and then there are those photographers who are the 'new' Ansel Adams whose work I call, without hesitation, "digital art" and I strongly believe that there is room for both in the overall art world, but again be forth coming about the "digital art" and do not say it is a photograph.



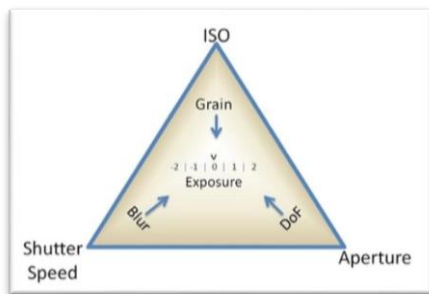
**Not long ago, when I was browsing and reviewing reference books for photography students in Iranian art universities, I came across educational materials that were quoted from you there. It seems that as much as you are keen on photography, you are also interested in teaching photography and transferring your experiences to others. I'm a follower of your Instagram page, and it's great for me that almost every post you make includes very useful tutorial tips that go along with the photos. When did you start educational activities, and what was your motivation for this work?**

I have always felt a compelling need to share my results with others and in particular other photographers and it was these other photographers who would ask me, "how did you do that?" and I never hesitated in telling them how I created a given photograph, i.e. "A given aperture or a given shutter speed that gave me that effect or a specific lens or a point of view or the time of day and in many cases telling them exactly where I stood or sat and the exact location of where the photograph was made. The first book I ever wrote, back in 1985, was entitled PHOTOGRAPHING OREGON WITH PROFESSIONAL RESULTS and that book, to the surprise of my publisher sold more than 10,000 copies in the first year. The entire book told the reader not only every bit of technical information for each of the photos in the book but also told the reader exactly where I was when I made the more than 80 images that were featured in this book.

**Many other photographers are trying to keep their tips secret, but you aren't.**

I have never felt threatened by sharing my location of the technical information about any of my photos since I strongly believe that 10 photographers can go to the same place and will come back with 10 different photographs.

**Please tell us about the "photographic triangle." We know that you are the one who coined this term in photography and taught how to master it extensively and thoroughly.**



In my early years, and after I switched to shooting color slide film, I would write down every exposure, i.e. f/stop, shutter speed, ISO and lens choice and then when I would place these images atop my light table and begin the editing process I was able to see the clear differences in depth field for example when looking at a portrait or a flower taken at six or seven different apertures and the corresponding shutter speeds. This taught me so much and it was from these early experiences that I devised a 'formula' of determining

the most creatively correct exposure versus simply taking the correct exposure and although I had been teaching this formula to small groups as well introducing the formula in my first book PHOTOGRAPHING OREGON WITH PROFESSIONAL RESULTS, it was not until 1990 when the first edition of Understanding Exposure was published that a much larger would now learn about my formula that I called THE PHOTOGRAPHIC TRIANGLE. Today THE PHOTOGRAPHIC TRIANGLE has been taught by hundreds if not thousands of other photography instructors and my book Understanding Exposure has since been published in 11 foreign languages and it has sold more than one million copies, world-wide, and is currently in its FOURTH EDITION. It is extremely flattering to know just how successful THE PHOTOGRAPHIC TRIANGLE has become as a learning tool around the world. It is humbling to have made such a contribution to the world photographic community.

**Like the titles of your educational books, are your workshops focused on specific topics and techniques in photography (composition, exposure, etc.) or do they include a wide range of topics related to photography in general? Could you tell us more about your workshop features?**

All my photography workshops are geared towards understanding creative exposure and of course expanded the student's vision and depending on the workshop's location determines which subject matter is being emphasized as I teach the principles of exposure, vision, and composition. I will emphasize many tips and idea for the landscape photographer when doing a workshop in the sunflower and lavender fields of Provence for example and then turn my suggested tips and ideas to the street photographer when doing workshops in major cities around the world such as London, Paris, New York or San Francisco.



**Many photography educators say that it is very difficult to find among the trainees who follow this art with fascination, and often from the very beginning, they seek to earn money and compete commercially in the field of photography. Has it also been true in your educational environment?**

It is rare for me personally to have students attending my workshops who are looking for a way to make a living without first recognizing the need to KNOW and understanding fully the "ART" of image making. If I come across a student who is more enthusiastic about making money with their camera than actually learning the camera, I politely tell them that I cannot help them and wish them good luck.

**You had a book under preparation titled "Nude Project," which was supposed to be published in December ۲۰۲۳. At what step is the publication of this book?**

My NUDE BOOK was published in November of 2023 by a publisher in Prague, Czech Republic, ZONAR PRESS and this is the same publisher that has published NINE of my other titles, all in the Czech language. Zonar knew that I had been shooting nudes for many years 'privately' and they asked if I would like to grant them permission to publish many of these nudes and I enthusiastically agreed but spent another year shooting additional images for the book.





### **What made you think of such a project?**

I have often felt that many of my compositions would benefit by including a nude in the shot, a 'surprise' kind of composition and thus began, initially my interest in shooting nudes. IN the beginning and even still today, many of my 'nude' photographs are not at first about the nude but rather the landscape or cityscape and only a few seconds later does the viewer express surprise and state, "Oh my God there is a nude in the photograph".

Other approaching to shooting nudes may be done if a very graphic compositional style, emphasizing a body part but photographed or lit in a way that again, you may not at first see the 'nude' and of course there are simply other images of nudes that are obvious nudes, but they are presented in a very artful and colorful way.

### **In the end, I hope that one day, in a good future, it will be possible to hold your workshops in Farsi-speaking countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. How familiar are you with these countries, and are there any photos among your works that are somehow related to these lands or their people?**

It has been my DREAM to come to IRAN for many, many years! IF not for the damn politicians on both sides, I would have come to IRAN a long time ago but unfortunately the USA has barred 'tourists' from going to IRAN and I am not so sure the IRANIAN govt would grant me a VISA anyway, but I still dream and for sure I would hope to one day get to Afghanistan as well as the other 'STANS', such as Tajikistan!

Thank you for your time for this interview.

Thanks so much for this opportunity to share my 'story' with you readers!

Reza Tajvidi April 2024

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Ansel Photography Magazine