

Pictures vs Words

A Photographer's Guide to
Titles and Other Useful Text

Kas Stone



Cover photograph: ***First Snow***
Guysborough County, Nova Scotia, October 2018

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Kas Stone Photographic Art

Nova Scotia, Canada, www.kasstone.ca

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Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1 - Background	3
Chapter 2 - The case against words	5
Chapter 3 - The case for words	9
Chapter 4 - How to title a picture	13
Chapter 5 - Longer image-related text: captions, etc.	21
Chapter 6 - Text inside pictures	27
Some final words	33
Author bio & dedication	43

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We all know that “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Yet somewhere along the way this simple piece of wisdom became, for many photographers, an excuse to reject words altogether and to insist that pictures “speak for themselves.” In adopting such a view, I believe we miss a golden opportunity. Words, when used *well*, can be powerful allies in our quest to make more meaningful pictures.

In this book we will explore the pictures-versus-words debate from both sides. I admit at the outset to favouring a pictures-*and*-words conclusion. However, I am delighted to concede there is a strong case for the opposing point of view – which sets the stage for a lively debate.

How this book is organized

After a brief history lesson (Chapter 1), we kick off the debate, exploring the cons (Chapter 2) and the pros (Chapter 3) of pairing words with pictures. Having reached our conclusions, we then address the challenge of creating effective titles (Chapter 4) and longer forms of text (Chapter 5) to accompany our images. We finish with a discussion of the expressive power of words *inside* the image space (Chapter 6).

Let's begin by clarifying some terminology about words as they relate to our pictures:

Word, a meaningful element of communication formed by a combination of written characters or sounds;

Text, used synonymously with “Words”, sometimes referring to a particular system of symbols that makes up the written language, or to a large body of words (e.g. the text of a play);

Title, a single word or several words that encapsulate the content or meaning of an image;

Caption, a few sentences that contribute a longer commentary about an image;

Statement, several paragraphs or pages that introduce a collection of images in a gallery exhibition or photo book.

Titles are this book's primary focus because they are a source of frustration for so many photographers, and often are responsible for triggering the pictures-versus-words debate.

Every picture used in this book for illustration is accompanied by a caption with an explanatory backstory or rationale for the picture's title, or even alternative titles to consider. Most of these pictures are landscape photographs (because that is what I do), but the arguments and conclusions apply equally to other photographic genres – as they do, indeed, to *all* the visual arts.



Frosted Aurora

This composite image was created from two photographs taken one dreary November day: a silhouette of some shapely trees along a local beach, and some patterns in the surface of a nearby frozen puddle. I coloured the ice and slipped it

behind the trees to replace the dull grey sky originally in the scene. The result reminded me of the northern lights, for which the title ***Frosted Aurora*** seemed an appropriate choice.

Chapter 1 - Background

Words and pictures have been uneasy bedfellows for more than a hundred years, so it may be helpful to begin by reviewing the evolving relationship between them which lends some historical context to the pictures-versus-words debate.*

Five hundred years ago, when the general populace was illiterate and art was the exclusive domain of the ecclesiastical and social elite, artworks were rarely titled because there was no need. They were permanently housed either in private collections in manor houses, where the owners were familiar with them – indeed, had usually commissioned them – or within the precincts of churches, where they served to inspire a congregation who, because they couldn't read, would have no use for titles anyway.

Then, technological advances during the 18th and 19th centuries, accompanied by shifts in the social and educational climate, led to increasing “democratization” in the art world too. Artworks became more mobile and widely accessible: displayed in public art museums and travelling exhibitions, reproduced in catalogues, and sold at auction houses. So it became necessary to *identify* them. In effect, titles were introduced as a practical means of referring to works of art for the purpose of marketing and inventory control. Often this was done, not by the artists themselves, but by the curators, publishers and dealers who handled the

art. Gradually these titles, supplemented by longer captions and exhibition statements, came to satisfy the demand of an increasingly literate and diverse public for information about an artwork's origin, and even for guidance with its interpretation.

By the late 1800s, titles had become commonplace in galleries and most artists had taken on the role of titling their own artwork – although some chose to exercise the **Untitled** option in defiance of this new convention, thereby creating a de facto “negative title” that came to have a meaning of its own.

By then photography had also entered the scene. Indeed, it was in response to photographs that the expression “a picture is worth a thousand words” became popular. In 1920s America, the newly invented 35mm camera, together with developments in printing press technology, enabled widespread publication of photographs in newspapers and magazines. Shrewd editors (and advertisers!) quickly realized that a single picture could convey far more information, and with greater clarity and impact, than a wordy description. So a new style of *photojournalism* emerged that relied on photographs to tell the stories of the day. It was this image-centric view that ultimately led to the dismissive, even hostile, attitude toward words that so many photographers have today.

Which brings us back to our pictures-versus-words debate.

*For an excellent scholarly account I recommend Ruth Bernard Yeazell's book, *Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names*, Princeton University Press, 2015.



This semi-abstract picture of an old shed door in winter is intended as a study of rectangles, textures and colour. A title isn't necessary, and might diminish a viewer's experience of the picture. Consider how differently you interpret it with each of these titles:

Winter Shed
Patchwork Portal
The Cows Are Gone
Red, White & Blue
Rectangle Study

Can you think of any title that might work?

Chapter 2 - The case *against* words

Master landscape photographer Ansel Adams eloquently voiced one side of this debate: “A true photograph need not be explained, nor can it be contained in words.” There may be some question about precisely what he meant by a “true” photograph, but the general tenor of his message is that if a photograph is any good, it can stand on its own and requires no supplementary text in order to be understood or appreciated. What’s more, his statement suggests that an image’s expressive power surpasses that of words, and runs the risk of being constrained by them. Much food for thought in one short sentence! Let’s dig a little deeper.

Pictures shouldn’t need words

First, I think we can all agree that a “bad” photograph cannot be rescued by words, any more than it can by Photoshop®. So we will assume throughout the following discussion that we are talking about “good” photographs – ones that are not only technically and compositionally well executed, but also express the photographer’s emotional, intellectual and/or aesthetic response to a subject, rather than merely documenting the subject.

The kind of photograph that can “speak for itself” is as competently crafted from visual elements as an equivalent piece of writing is from verbal elements. Where the writer speaks to his readers using vocabulary and grammar to select and arrange words on a page, the photographer speaks to her viewers with visual elements that she frames and arranges using composition and camera/computer technique. Their tools are different, but the objective is the same: to convey ideas, evoke emotions, create moods, tell stories, elicit aesthetic pleasure, and so on. That is, they both aim to *communicate effectively*. So, it can be argued, if a photograph communicates effectively, it has no need for words. And a photographer can rightly claim that her skill as a visual artist absolves her from any need for wordsmithing.

Differences of interpretation

The success of this communication depends as much on the visual literacy of the viewer as it does on the craftsmanship of the photographer. The viewer must be able to interpret the visual content of a picture and construct *meaning* from it. To do this, he must abstract from the specific physical elements in the picture (what the picture is *of*) to the more universal concepts they represent (what the picture is *about*) – from a single tree standing in a snowy field, for instance, to the concept of solitude, or loneliness, or strength. The picture becomes metaphorical: the World represented by the snowy field, and the Tree personifying whoever or whatever the photographer or viewer wishes it to.

Of course it is quite possible that the viewer’s interpretation may not be the one intended by the photographer; their interpretations may differ as a result of individual experiences, personalities and cultures. But does this matter? Some would argue that once a picture is out there in the world, the maker’s intent is irrelevant and the viewer should be permitted to interpret the picture and ascribe to it whatever meaning he chooses. If so, a title or explanatory text can be seen as distracting, restrictive, or even misleading. Hence the decision of some visual artists to use *Untitled* in an attempt to liberate their artwork – and their viewers – from the shackles and potential pitfalls of words.

Pictures are universal

Words face another significant handicap not shared by pictures: they are dependent on the language in which they are written. A non-English speaker, like the illiterate peasant, cannot grasp the subtleties of irony or grandeur in an English text, but will be at no such disadvantage when viewing Elliott Erwitt’s candid street photos or Ansel Adams’ grand landscapes. In short, the language of pictures is universal, at least within a broad cultural context, whereas the language of words is confined to speakers of that language.



Turbulence

This picture's dark hills and roiling clouds create a mood and tell a story without any need for words. A weather forecaster's interpretation will be very different from that of a backpacker, a drought-stricken farmer, a pilot, or a person who is angry or recently bereaved, yet all interpretations are valid. In this case, because I *do* customarily title my pictures, I used the classic title-composition technique of generalizing

from the specifics of a scene (dramatic storm clouds in Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Highlands) to the more universal concept of turbulence. The viewer is free to choose whether to interpret that turbulence from a meteorological perspective, or more personally, as turmoil during a troubled time in life.

Scientific evidence

Stepping away from the narrow sphere of photography to consider the issue from a broader perspective, we find that various branches of science support the primacy of pictures over words. Archaeologists have unearthed 40,000-year-old cave paintings (human hand stencils and figurative artwork depicting animals) in Western Europe and Indonesia. Yet the earliest evidence of text – that is, a system of symbols representing codified language – dates back only about 5,000 years to the Kish limestone tablet from Mesopotamia. Which means that we have 35,000 years more experience in communicating with pictures than we do with words.

Modern neurological research confirms that we perceive, comprehend and recall a significantly greater volume and complexity of information when we look at pictures than when we read text, and we do so with far greater speed and emotional response. Indeed, our brains are wired so that more

than 50% of neural tissue and 70% of sensory receptors are connected directly or indirectly with visual perception. We process the entire gamut of information from a picture simultaneously, coding and storing that information in two separate places in the brain for easy retrieval, compared with language processing that is done sequentially and cognitively, word by word, and stored in a single location. What's more, we are *born* with a basic ability for picture-processing, whereas language must be painstakingly learned.

Educators, marketers, journalists, social media users – and, of course, visual artists – know this first hand. People comprehend, engage and purchase many times more readily (one study reports 94% more readily) when a message is delivered with images, infographics or video than with words alone.

It seems clear, then, that visual content is king and words are, at best, unnecessary, and at worst, counterproductive.



The Road Not Taken

This title pairs my image with Robert Frost's famous 1916 poem – a wistful narrative about choices and regrets in life. The image was made one December day in New Brunswick's Sackville Waterfowl Park, the cold, drizzly weather entirely suited to the reflective nature of the poem. This park is across the road from Mount Allison University, where the latest

generation of young people is making similar life choices more than a hundred years later. The title's poetic allusion resonates strongly with the general public (if print sales are any indication), especially with people who recognize the location.

Chapter 3 - The case *for* words

As we have seen, the case for a pictures-only approach to visual art is compelling indeed. Therefore, photographers who can express in their images everything they wish to say, may not see any point in pairing them with words.

So, why bother? In a word: *enrichment*. When a photographer takes the trouble to thoughtfully combine an image with words, she enriches both the viewer's experience of that image and her own in making it.

How words enrich viewers

First, words can be used to clarify visual content and guide the interpretation of images whose subject matter is unknown or ambiguous to the viewer. This happens when the viewer's geographic, historical or cultural background differs from that of the photographer, so he perceives the subject matter differently or fails to understand it at all. An unusual rock formation, a clear-cut forest, or an abstract textural detail, are examples of potentially confusing landscape subjects that might benefit from clarification.

Even when clarity of content is not an issue, words can offer supplementary information that, while not strictly necessary, can contribute a valuable backstory to the image. This might be details about the broader context or purpose for which the picture was made, or clues about the photographer's ideological or emotional perspective when making it. Consider, for instance, a disturbing image that promotes environmental protection of a sensitive ecosystem. Or a minimalist snowscape that reflects a photographer's yearning for solitude and space during a time of grief. In both cases, while the image may convey the story admirably on its own, the background insight provided by a title or caption adds another layer of meaning that pulls a viewer deeper into that story and connects him more intimately with its message, even if the "message" is simply an appeal to stop and admire a beautiful curve.

Allusions to other artwork can be especially powerful in creating additional layers of meaning. A title that references a poem, a painting, a work of literature, a song lyric, a dance step, or a musical style can draw on the significance already associated with that artwork – assuming, that is, the photographer and viewer share a common culture so that the referenced artwork is known to them both.

Words, when paired imaginatively with pictures, can entertain or tease the viewer with a playful or ironic twist on image content. A church scene sparkling with ice after a winter storm might prompt a smile with the title *Frosted Sunday*, or a picture of miserably congested traffic with the title *Rush Hour*.

Words can also shape a viewer's experience of the photograph itself. Reading a title or explanatory text requires him to spend more time with the picture and offers both a visual and a verbal approach to its content. The result is a more immersive experience that is likely to leave a more enduring impression. (In a small way this is comparable to the photographer's experience when moving slowly in the field, allowing not only the sights, but also the sounds, smells and air quality to permeate her awareness.) Afterwards, the title gives the viewer a convenient "shorthand" for remembering and sharing his experience of the picture with others.

How words enrich photographers

So far we have considered the value of words primarily with respect to the *viewer's* experience of an image. But the crafting of words can greatly benefit us as photographers too. Composing a title that truly complements an image, or writing an exhibition statement that eloquently summarizes a body of work, challenges us to examine our motivation for making the images and our intent in showing them. It forces us to ask ourselves: What inspired me about this scene? Why *exactly* did I



Without a Backward Glance

This title uses a common expression to anthropomorphize the raven in this intimate landscape and evoke a very human theme. The picture's visual design places the raven close to the edge (creating tension), where he looks toward an unknown object outside the frame (suggesting a mysterious backstory). Ironically the bird's posture contradicts the title, but the

high-key treatment *and the title* make this an optimistic image ("perhaps just a quick glance over my shoulder before I make a fresh start"). At art shows the picture has been popular with middle-aged women who are making their own fresh starts in life, and their shared stories always confirm the power of the title in their appreciation of the image.

make this picture? What do I want to say? Who is my audience and why should they care? Answering these questions is never easy. Yet searching for the answers can help us to refine our vision and make better technical and visual design choices as a result. It even elicits the kind of serious introspection that can lead to a more profound understanding of ourselves as artists, and as human beings.

Of course it is not always practical or advisable to do this with camera in hand at the moment of capture. It never hurts to try, but often it's wiser simply to go with the flow so we don't become bogged down in self-analysis and miss a splendid photo opportunity. We can postpone the soul-

searching until later, when we are evaluating and processing our images back in our studio. In either case, the challenge is to think of a single word, or a brief phrase at most, that encapsulates the content or meaning of the scene before us.

Perhaps the best advice comes from master photographer, Minor White: "One should not only photograph things for what they are but for what else they are." It's that elusive "else" that elevates our photographs from mere pretty pictures to meaningful and evocative works of art. This, after all, is our goal as expressive photographers. I hope I have convinced you that words can be a valuable tool in achieving it.



Expressive pictures often suggest several choices of interpretation that can be offered to the viewer in the titles. If we want the viewer to treat this image as a study of colour and texture, we might title it **Woodland Tapestry**. Or we could focus attention on the straggly old tree, still upright and beautiful amid the tangled undergrowth, in which case an

anthropomorphic title like **The Veteran** might be suitable. Or we could add another layer of meaning with the title **A Tangled Web**, a literary reference to the famous stanza from Sir Walter Scott's poem about the complications that can follow from a simple lie: "Oh what a tangled web we weave When first we practise to deceive!" (*Marmion*, 1808).



Sea Change

Let's walk through the titling process for this simple seascape. First, I identify the What-When-Where elements in the picture: stormy weather, big waves, salty spray, noisy wind, dark sky, a gull, October, afternoon, White Point Beach, Nova Scotia. Then I consider my personal response to the scene: excited by the tumultuous wind and waves; awed by the power of the sea; happy to have this popular beach all to myself; happy to be here rather than in my studio that day; entertained by the gull fishing (or playing?) in the surf. Then, abstracting from the specifics of this

particular scene, I write down words relating to stormy seas in general, check my thesaurus for similar words, do a web search for expressions and idioms, and read more about the terminology used for storm classification (e.g. the Beaufort scale). This process leads to several possible titles: ***Angry Sea, Atlantic Mood, Storm Force, Wind Play*** (all titles I have used before). In the end I choose ***Sea Change*** because it is a metaphor for a profound change in life (usually for the better). I hope in this way to draw viewers personally into the image.

Chapter 4 - How to title a picture

Crafting image titles can seem a daunting task. Indeed, it can take as much skill and effort to write an expressive title or exhibition statement as to make the image(s) it accompanies. What follows are some guidelines to get you started.

Choose the appropriate style

Imagine an image-style continuum that ranges from strictly documentary at one end, to personally expressive in the middle, to purely abstract at the other end. Consider where your photograph lies on this continuum, because its position influences the style of title that is most appropriate.

If the image lies closer to the documentary end, its focus is on the physical content of the scene. In this case a suitable title might be informative or descriptive, naming the location or object in the scene (either specific or generic), perhaps with a date or time of year. ***Peggys Cove Lighthouse*** and ***Cape Breton Highlands, Autumn 2019*** are examples of this style – not very exciting, but a safe option until you feel comfortable with the titling process.

If your image is close to the continuum's abstract end, it celebrates the aesthetics of line, shape, texture, pattern or colour. Since viewers are typically curious about subject matter and scale in such an image, you have two choices: either satisfy their curiosity with a clue in the title about what they are looking at (e.g. ***Ripples in Sand***), or indicate that the picture is intended to be viewed purely as an abstract by referring in the title only to formal graphic elements or broad artistic terms (e.g. ***Tapestry in Gold*** for autumn leaf reflections rippling in a pond, or ***Curvaceous*** for a shapely shadow falling across the snow).

Most of our expressive photographs lie somewhere in the middle of the image-style continuum. Since expressive images emphasize meaning rather than content, their titles usually enhance, rather than merely identify or clarify, the visual elements in a

scene. There is ample scope for titling expressive images, but the best titles point in subtle and imaginative ways to the metaphorical, narrative, poetic or playful nature of the picture. An effective title becomes a gateway for the viewer – a lens through which he perceives the image and infers meaning from its content.

A practical strategy

To find appropriate words for an expressive image title, sit quietly in front of your photograph for a while (ideally a print, or at least full-screen on your computer). Look closely, examine all the details, notice how they fit into the overall visual design. Remember the excitement you felt when making the picture, the experience of being there, and all the other things going on in life that made that place and experience significant. Identify the single most important element or relationship in the picture and think about what it represents to you, and why.

Then, sit farther back and try to look at your picture more dispassionately, as if you were a stranger seeing it for the first time at a gallery. Imagine what this stranger might observe, think and feel about the picture. Will she understand its content and be drawn to the same important element that you are? Is she likely to appreciate its significance, or might she need some gentle guidance?

Then, squint at the picture, or even turn it upside down, so that all the recognizable details blur, leaving just an impression of structure and colour.

While you are looking at your photograph from all these perspectives, jot down, in a free-flowing way, any words that come to mind: names, locations, objects in the scene; the season, time of day, weather and quality of light; lines, shapes, spaces, patterns and colours; ideas, stories, moods and emotions; nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Consider the classic Five W's: Who, What, When, Where, and their challenging companion, Why.



In composing titles, I always consider the image's intended purpose, and choose words that create an appropriate mood and story to go with it. *Left Behind* or *Fallen* might suit this classic wide-angle landscape admirably, but the melancholy message may not be wise if my purpose is to sell prints. Marketed to tourists or local residents, the place-specific

title *Fox Island, Lunenburg County* would be a good choice, but it is too dull and documentary for my taste, and too geographically restrictive for a broader potential print-buying audience. So instead, a positive-sounding alternative like *Clearing Storm*, or *Reaching Out*, or *Grounded* works better.

Start simply, naming the physical elements shown in the picture, then broaden your frame of reference to include generic words, universal concepts, and metaphors.

Try spending some time with a thesaurus to check your words for inspiring synonyms. Do a web search for expressions, idioms and quotes about your words. Consult glossaries of artistic, musical, scientific, culinary, geographical, philosophical or other terms that might complement the picture.

Eventually, if you are diligent and patient – and lucky – there may be an Aha! moment when the words come together and the perfect title hits you like a thunderbolt. But if not, at least you will have generated a suitable lexicon to work with.

Common hazards

This is a process that requires time and practice, but also restraint. Too little effort will yield a hackneyed or blindingly obvious title (e.g. the

world probably doesn't need another *Abandoned* or *Golden Sunset*, or a seascape titled *Seascape*). On the other hand, too much word-play easily escalates into flowery alliteration (*Morning Majesty* and *Babbling Brook* come to mind), or pretentious and utterly incomprehensible MFA artspeak (there are plenty of silly online title generators to entertain you with possibilities).

Another peril is heavy-handed titling that explains too much or forces a specific interpretation on a viewer. Alas, this may betray a lack of clarity in *you*, rather than in the viewer, and it suggests you should revisit the image, or even the scene itself, to examine it – and your response to it – more deeply. As Albert Einstein famously observed: “If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.”

Ultimately, not every picture requires a brilliant title; but every title should be a *thoughtful* one.



The Tempest

The storm wasn't in the forecast, but on that September morning I woke before dawn to shrieking wind and rattling window panes, so I got up and took my camera to a nearby cove that was fully exposed to the incoming gale. I came home several hours later with this picture, a slow exposure (1/6th second) that captures what was for me the essence of the scene: the dynamic relationship between the waves and the leaning tree. The sea seemed determined to reach up and grab the tree, which seemed equally determined to resist, but which inevitably one day will surrender (although I am pleased to report that, more than five years and many storms

later, it is still hanging on). In search of a title, I rejected the documentary-style, place-specific option of ***Early Morning Storm in Green Bay*** (too dull and geographically and ideologically restrictive) and instead used my thesaurus to search for "storm" synonyms and the web to explore related expressions. I settled on ***The Tempest*** because it is an accurate general description of the scene *and* an allusion to Shakespeare's magnificent drama that explores profound themes of betrayal, revenge, forgiveness and love – a lofty accompaniment to my story about the sea and the tree.



Fiddler's Green

Fiddler's Green alludes to an Irish legend (and, by extension, several popular songs and literary works) about a mythical afterlife for mariners, where, following a lifetime of hardship on the sea, they can come ashore and enjoy limitless sunshine, gaiety, food, drink, and dancing to fiddle music. Although the title now seems an obvious match for this

moody scene, photographed at high tide in the fog at my local salt marsh, it took six months of thinking, researching, staring at the image and juggling word combinations before I finally hit on the "right" one – which, admittedly, may say more about my sluggish brain than about the title!



The Crack

This image comes from an excursion to the Bay of Fundy, famous for its extreme tides and frequent fog. When I arrived mid-morning (the only time that day when low tide made the shore accessible), the fog was predictably pea-soup thick, and at this location a waterfall tumbling over the coastal cliff added its spray to the already-saturated air. At first, visibility was little more than arm's length, but as the morning wore on, the sun gradually began to burn holes through the fog. I turned to see a shaft of light suddenly silhouette a small tree on the cliff edge, so I grabbed the fleeting opportunity to make this picture.

Back home at my computer, I found myself processing the image in an uncharacteristic (for me) low-key style because that's what best suited the subject and mood of that foggy Fundy morning. Then I began my search for a title. I soon found it in the lyrics of Leonard Cohen's 1992 *Anthem* with its uncharacteristic (for him) optimistic message of hope in a dark, imperfect world:

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.*



Three Solitudes

Three solitudes is an oblique reference to Hugh MacLennan's 1945 novel, ***Two Solitudes***, that explores the separateness and tension between English and French Canadians. At the time the novel was published, the country's official political and cultural identity included only these two "founding nations". However in subsequent decades, activism amongst Indigenous peoples – the true First Nations of Canada – has led to their recognition as an essential third identity in the federation.

The reason these thoughts came to mind with respect to titling this picture was the story of its capture. I was driving the backroads of Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley one early

spring day in nasty weather with fog obscuring visibility and an icy rain falling. When I spotted these two shapely old apple trees beside a venerable barn, I wanted to stop and photograph them but was reluctant to get out of my car in such miserable conditions. So (a pitiful admission!) I rolled my window down just far enough to stick my lens out and, with much inching of the car back and forth and fidgeting with camera angles, I finally managed to compose a picture with a critical sliver of sky separating the three visual elements. Clearly my struggles were in no way comparable to those of Canada's three nations (!), but they led nonetheless to my ***Three Solitudes***.



Border Lines

Border Lines was created for an exhibition to celebrate Canada's sesquicentennial anniversary in 2017 on the theme of Canadian identity. The short text I wrote to accompany my image touched on the differences between Canadians and our neighbours to the south, especially relevant following the American presidential election the previous year and the protectionist, wall-building rhetoric that ensued. In response, I offered this rickety snow fence as our nation's "wall". The

image generated a lively exchange with some New York visitors to the gallery one day, when a woman misinterpreted my text as an insult to Americans and stomped off in indignation, prompting other visitors to read it and chat with me about the image. If the purpose of expressive art is to spark communication, I should consider this unnerving incident a triumph!

Chapter 5 - Longer image-related text

From a photographic perspective, captions, exhibition statements and other long texts are essentially an extension of titles, serving to clarify and illuminate a picture (or collection of pictures), and differing only in the amount of detail they provide.

Captions

An image caption usually contains the title plus a sentence or two of commentary. Captions are most commonly associated with pictures in books, magazines and newspapers, where photojournalists refer to them as cutlines. Similar caption-style commentaries often appear in the picture labels on a gallery wall or in an exhibition catalogue.

Traditionally captions are positioned beneath or to the right of the picture (following the Western top-left-to-bottom-right visual flow). In the context of publications, a viewer flipping through a book or magazine pauses when a picture catches her attention, then looks to the adjacent caption for more information before deciding whether to read the whole article or buy the book. In a gallery setting, when attracted to a picture, she routinely goes to the wall label *first*, and then steps back to contemplate the picture. The importance of captions, therefore, should not be underestimated.

When submitting images for publication or exhibition, however, photographers tend to view the writing of captions a chore and are inclined either to omit them or to scribble a few hasty words at the eleventh hour. Worse still, many photo captions merely list the camera settings, gear and techniques used to produce the image – a big mistake and a precious opportunity wasted!

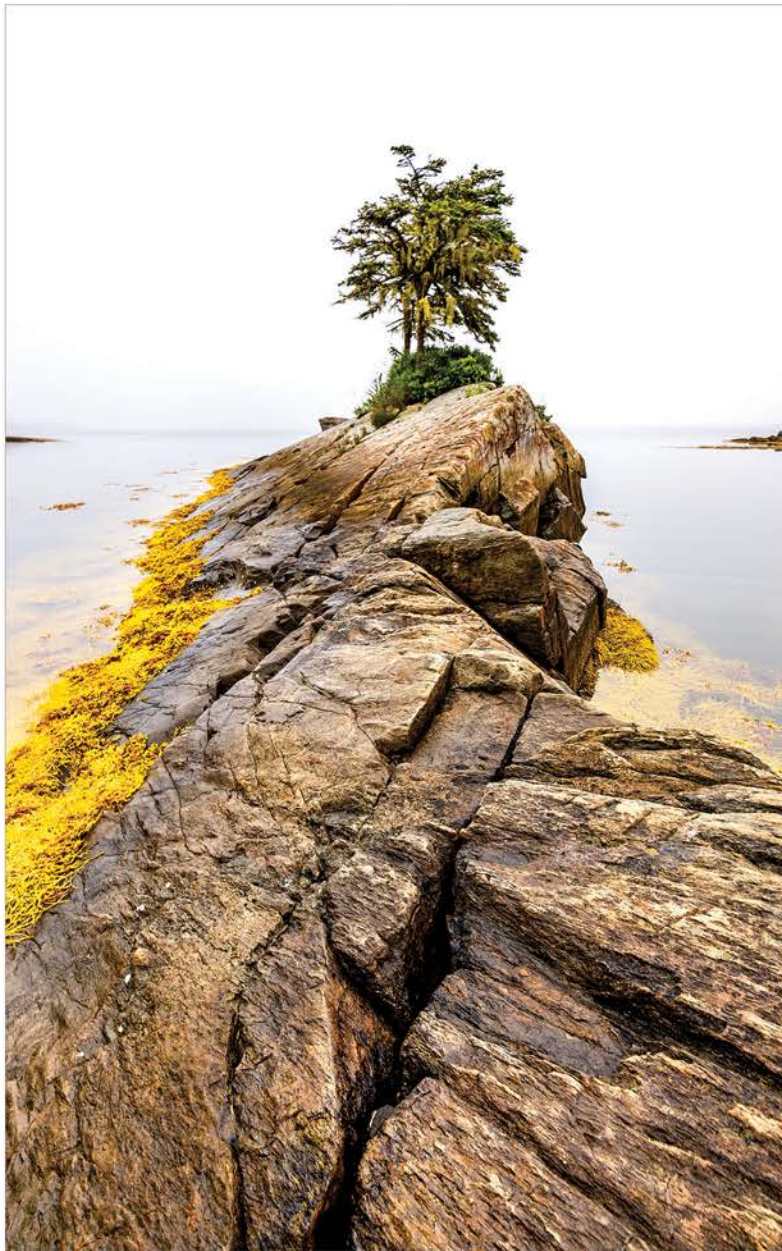
While it may be our beautiful pictures that initially hook a viewer's attention, it is a well written caption that can induce her to spend time with our work and appreciate it more fully – perhaps even to buy it. As someone who makes a living selling my photographic prints, I can attest to this first-hand. The general art-consuming public doesn't care what camera/lens combination I used, or whether I

stopped my lens down to *f*-8 or *f*-16. Indeed this information should be irrelevant to other photographers too (although ironically it is the question they most frequently ask!), unless, that is, they plan to go to the same location in identical lighting and environmental conditions, in the same frame of mind and with the same expressive purpose I had when I made the picture. How silly! In truth, photographers retreat to technical talk because it is so much easier than crafting a few compelling lines of text about an image. Yet, without fail, it is this very backstory that "sells" the image, both figuratively and financially.

The power of stories

Humans famously are story-telling animals. For millennia we have used a combination of pictures and words to communicate our stories and their meaning to other members of our species. A picture's backstory – suggested by the picture itself, summarized by its title, and amplified by its caption – resonates with a viewer and connects her with the picture and its maker. A sad or funny tale about the subject matter elicits her empathy or amusement. A story about its location reminds her of her own experience in a similar place. A narrative about an event makes her aware of action-in-progress before and after the picture was made, providing helpful temporal context for a still image. Or she may respond to some aspect of the photographer's story: his love for the subject; his travel woes or a gruelling hike to get to the site; a personal triumph or tragedy that inspired his – and the picture's – mood. An interesting story can even help a viewer connect with an abstract image.

Making the effort to write compelling captions that complement our photographs – ones that identify the image's Who-What-When-Where, and point to its Why with an illustrative backstory – is rewarded, not only with enhanced viewer appreciation, but also with a clearer sense of our own vision for the image.



Life on the Edge

Six years ago I found this plucky little spruce tree clinging to a rock near my home, just above the high-tide line. I marvelled that it had managed to survive the regular pummelling of the sea and find enough nourishment in such an impossible place. The title seemed an obvious choice, not only for the tree (living on the edge of the rock on the edge of the sea on the edge of annihilation), but also for the slivers of rock jutting into the edges of the picture on both sides.

I have photographed the tree many times over the years, but this photograph was the last. In September 2019 Hurricane Dorian ravaged the Nova Scotia coast. When I visited the site several days afterwards, the rock was completely bare and the tree was reduced to a tangle of broken sticks on the nearby shore. This picture is my tribute to the tree, and the background outlined in this caption surely adds some poignancy to its story.

Many of the captions in this book serve as image-identifiers and story-tellers. For an edifying experiment, try flipping randomly to a page in the book and looking twice at the image, first with the caption covered, then after reading the caption, to see what impact it has on your connection with the image.

Longer statements

Exhibition statements, book prefaces, and longer image-related text are similar in purpose to captions but they apply to multi-image projects or bodies of work rather than to single pictures. As such, they present a unifying theme for the entire collection, and typically outline its background, inspiration, purpose, techniques used in producing

the pictures, and often the artist's bio and image-making philosophy.

Statements may range in length from a single paragraph that succinctly states the project's theme, to several paragraphs, pages or even whole chapters in a publication that elaborate on various aspects of the project.

The intricacies of crafting longer statements are beyond the scope of this book – except that the book itself exemplifies a 6,000-word statement whose theme is the relationship between pictures and words. Whole volumes exist with advice for writing exhibition and artist statements, and a web search will yield many helpful examples for readers who are interested.



Song for a November Afternoon

By their very nature, expressive images can be inspired as strongly by non-visual stimuli as by visual ones. On this cold, drizzly November afternoon I was walking on the Dartmouth Commons when large flocks of starlings began to congregate in the trees to roost for the night. Their whistling and chattering cheered my walk and reminded me of all the other

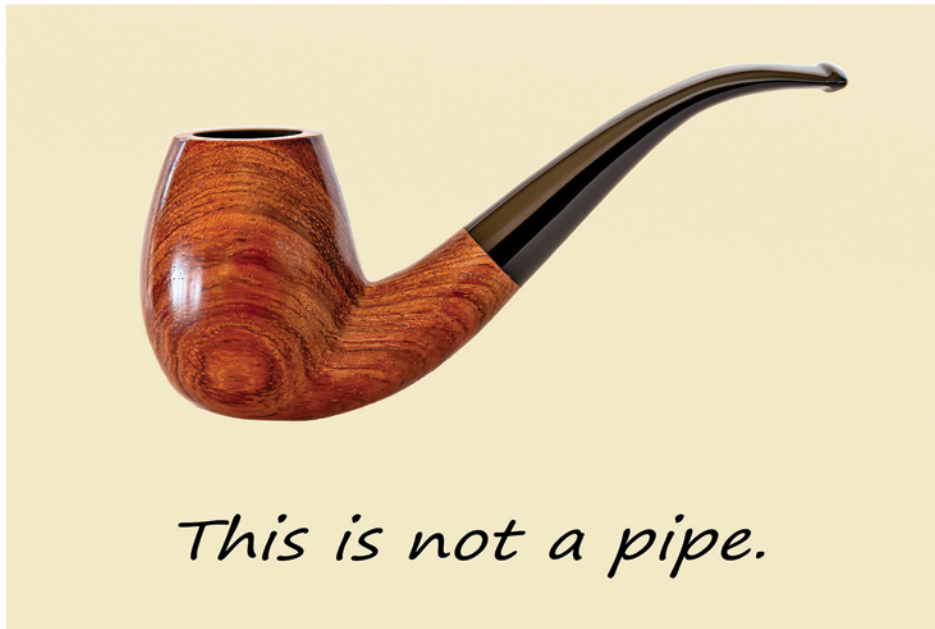
Novembers in other years and places where I had witnessed – and heard – the same gregarious starling ritual. Looking at the photograph later as I processed it, this soundtrack echoed in my head, making ***Song for a November Afternoon***, the clear choice for its title.



Rhythm and Counterpoint

Another image inspired by non-visual stimuli, in this case musical. Viewed from the lookoff above Canning, Nova Scotia, what struck me most about the winter fields and orchards was the intricate pattern in their rows: some horizontal, some oblique, and a few (rebellious ones?) curved. It reminded me of the complex structure of a Bach

fugue, which weaves together independent melodic lines (counterpoint) in many permutations, sometimes turning the melody upside down, changing its rhythm, or adding syncopation to disrupt the expected rhythm. With this comparison in mind, the image title seemed self-evident.



À la Magritte

This image replicates René Magritte's famous painting *La trahison des images* (*The Treachery of Images*) discussed on the facing page. Magritte intended the text as a vital component of the picture, and many scholarly treatises have been written about its interpretation.

The original painting now hangs in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Although it can readily be viewed with a quick web search, the process of obtaining permission to use it in this book became so convoluted – and expensive! – that I opted to re-create the picture myself, which cost only \$29.95 for a pipe and an hour of my time with my camera and Photoshop®. While this caption is utterly incidental to the picture, it does contribute an interesting personal explanation for the not-quite-right appearance of the image, and its English text (Magritte's was *en Français*).

Chapter 6 - Text *inside* pictures

In the context of a gallery or printed publication, it is customary to place titles and captions physically close to, but separate from, the pictures to which they refer. However, an interesting genre of visual art incorporates text *within* the picture space. This text may have been present in the original scene, or added to the image afterwards as an intentional, even an essential, part of the image.

Lessons from Magritte

Incorporating text into artwork (or vice versa) may have originated with the illuminated manuscripts of Roman and medieval times, but it had its modern genesis in the surrealist movement of the 1920s. Surrealism was a response by artists and writers to the social turmoil of the day (think Sigmund Freud, Marxism, the Second Industrial Revolution, and the horrors of World War I). Its practitioners espoused an unconventional approach to artistic expression derived from Freudian theories about the workings of the unconscious mind, and they championed ambiguity, incongruity and illusion in the resulting artwork.

Perhaps the surrealist movement's most celebrated member was Belgian painter René Magritte (1898-1967), whose work often contained text as a key component. His famous painting, popularly called ***Ceci n'est pas une pipe*** (***This is Not a Pipe***) but formally – and tellingly – titled ***La trahison des images*** (***The Treachery of Images***), 1929, depicts a pipe with the apparently self-negating text handwritten beneath it on the canvas. Similarly, in his series ***La clef des songes*** (***The Key to Dreams***), 1927-1935, window-like panels depict objects paired with the “wrong” names. These pictures and their paradoxical texts probe the very nature of reality, perception and language. His intent was to provoke us into re-thinking our automatic responses to pictures, and to acknowledge that (1) the represen-

tation of a thing is very different from the thing itself, (2) words are mere arbitrary labels, and (3) we are often too quick to name, categorize – and dismiss – the objects themselves.

Whole textbooks have been written about Magritte's innovative images and their lasting influence on the art world. Indeed, text-based art continued its evolution with the pop, graffiti and conceptual art movements of the 1960s and beyond. Photographic artists have contributed significantly to the genre – among them Duane Michals, Barbara Kruger, Martha Rosler and Lorna Simpson – with work that combines words and photographs in a variety of forms. Text-image pairings are pervasive in modern popular culture too, judging from the ubiquitous Hallmark cards and inspirational posters that litter our offices and social media posts.

Dominant visual elements

In our days as fledgling photographers attempting to unravel the mysteries of successful visual design, we learned that certain dominant elements will naturally attract a viewer's eye. Scientific studies of human attention have shown that our brains are adept at quickly scanning a scene and filtering out the barrage of extraneous stimuli so that we may focus on elements that are pertinent, if not to our survival, at least to our immediate interests. Not surprisingly, human faces, especially eyes and lips, are atop the list of dominant elements because our social species has always relied on facial cues as a subtle element of communication with its fellow members, whether friend or foe. However, man-made objects, animals and other creatures, the colour red, bright spots and sharply-focused objects also readily capture our attention.

And we are drawn irresistibly to **text**.



Lest We Forget

This image is a case study in dominant visual elements. Where do our eyes go when we look at it? Although everything happens so quickly we are usually not aware of it, it is likely that we first recognize the human form and look for his eyes. Since they are shielded under the brim of his helmet, we may then look at his mouth, at the red elements and at the text, searching for clues to aid in our interpretation. Our brains

will almost instantly process the visual information – the downcast eyes, the solemn mouth – and, assuming we have some knowledge of history, we will recognize the dates of World War II and the significance of the red poppy, and will interpret the picture as a memorial to fallen soldiers. The image title, a phrase traditionally linked with ceremonies of remembrance, reinforces this interpretation.

In two separate studies,* researchers at the California Institute of Technology and the University of Massachusetts demonstrated that “in terms of attracting gaze, text is almost as effective as faces.” Research participants were found to be 11.1 times more likely to look at text, and 16.6 times more likely to look at a face, than anywhere else in the surrounding visual field. Interestingly, although attention does depend “to some extent on the observer’s familiarity with the writing system and language of a given text,” it turns out that “the meaningfulness of texts does not add to their attentional capture.” In other words, the lure of words is strong even when we can’t understand them. It is enough that we recognize them as human communication, and our eyes are pulled toward the lettering’s sharp, contrasty edges.

Distraction or enhancement?

In composing a photograph, we must be alert to this natural bias towards text and respond with a suitable strategy that either eliminates or emphasizes the words present in a scene, possibly even adding text afterwards if it serves our expressive purposes for the picture.

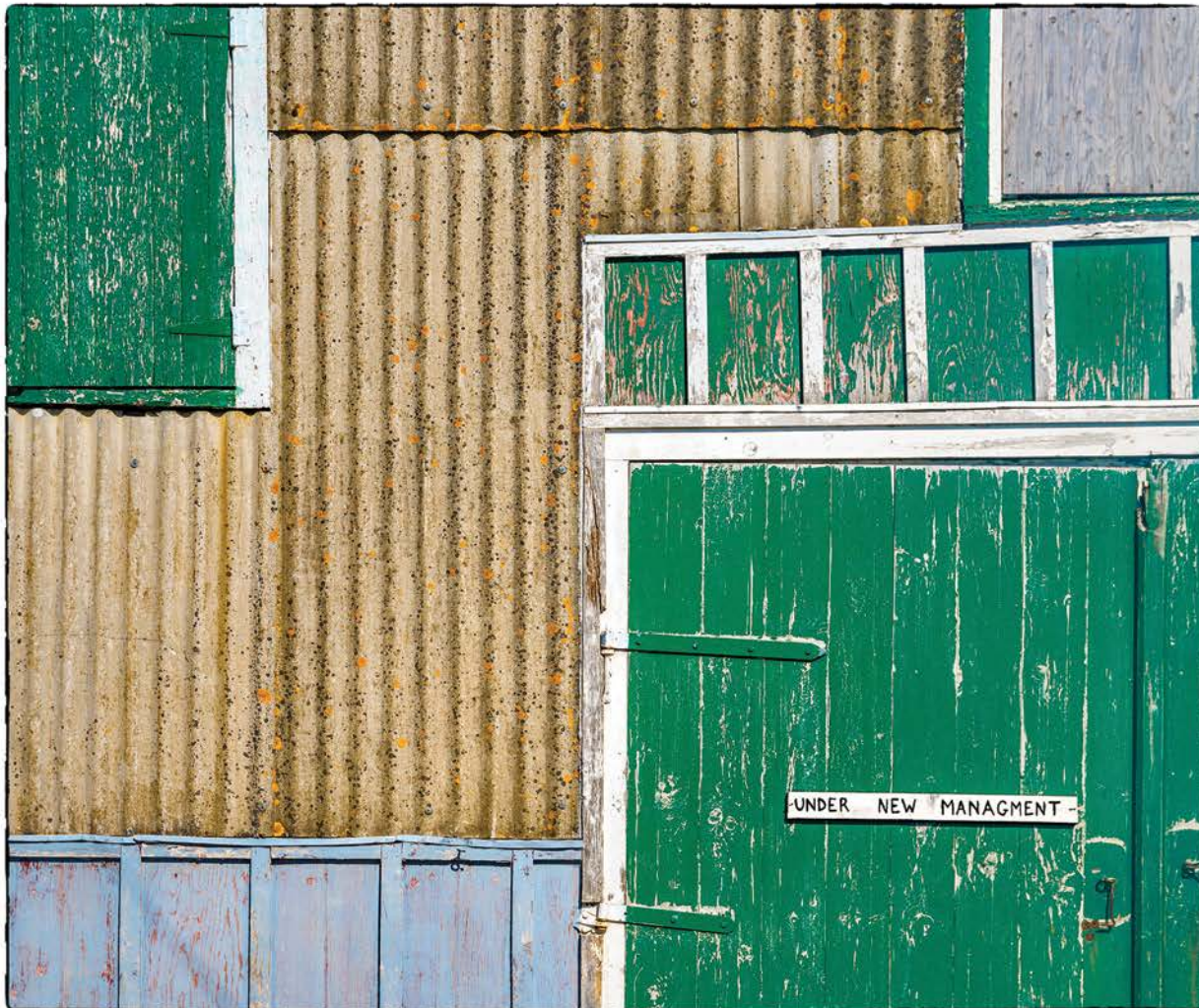
Knowing that even a tiny fragment of text will grab a viewer’s attention, the elimination strategy involves scanning a composition to check for text that might prove distracting and taking steps to

exclude it. You can sometimes do this by moving your camera and recomposing the picture, or by physically removing the text, either at the scene if the text is mobile, or later at your computer with the trusty clone tool.

On those occasions when the inclusion of text benefits the picture, it should be treated like any other visual element and positioned appropriately in the frame to reinforce its compositional effectiveness, where it becomes a subject or counter-subject to attract and guide the viewer’s attention.

Text added to the picture afterwards is often in the form of a short poem, quotation or phrase. A sufficient area of negative space in the base image is needed to accommodate it. A clear blue sky, a blank wall, or soft-focus background is ideal for this purpose. However it may require some advance planning, since normally we take great pains during image capture to *avoid* such large, featureless areas in our compositions. An extra exposure with a wider field of view or a different orientation may provide the necessary blank canvas for the text. An alternative is to create this extra canvas in the digital darkroom. Either way, great care must be exercised in the choice of text and typeface (style, size, colour) in order to prevent the picture from resembling a cheesy greeting card.

**ARVO Journal of Vision*, “Faces and text attract gaze independent of the task: Experimental data and computer model” (Volume 9, Issue 12, November 2009), and “The attraction of visual attention to text in real-world scenes” (Volume 12, Issue 6, June 2012).



Under New Managment

Although the sign's text makes up only a small portion of the total area of this image, its impact is considerable because (1) our eyes are instantly attracted to text, and (2) the "NEW" contrasts humorously with the misspelled "MANAGMENT"

and the dilapidated condition of the building, and throws into question any likelihood of improvement under the new management. The image title, also misspelled, helps to draw attention to the joke.



The Wall

Another humorous example of text occurring within the scene and incorporated deliberately into the image. "WALL" is so delightfully incongruous and unnecessary: people don't need the word to tell them it's a wall, and the sea ignores it and smashes regularly over the wall during storms. This made me wonder what motivated the painter of the word, which in turn led me to consider possible allusions: perhaps

the comic character called Wall in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? or Pink Floyd's *Another Brick in The Wall*? or the legend about the Dutch boy who plugs a leaking dyke with his finger to save his country from flooding by the sea? Images (and titles) sustain interest longer when they provide a mystery for the viewer to ponder.

*Not the least hard thing to bear when they go from us, these quiet friends,
is that they carry away with them so many years of our own lives.*



Quiet Friends

Text can be added to an image afterwards, placed either within the frame (which requires negative space to accommodate it) or appended outside (usually below). In this example, a quotation from British novelist John Galsworthy (1867-1933) seemed the perfect tribute to my beloved canine companion, Skye (1999-2013), who accompanied me on all my wilderness and photographic adventures.

It was a simple matter to extend the original image's bald sky to make room for the text. I selected the Whitman (condensed, italic) typeface because its classic, elegant, serif style complements both the vintage and the solemnity of Galsworthy's words.

Some final words (and a few pictures)

As photographers, we may be visual artists, but surely we cannot deny the power of words. Indeed, photographers who treat words carelessly run the risk of doing their images a grave disservice. Words can help us to shape perception, clarify ambiguity, spark curiosity, raise awareness, augment experience, strengthen narrative and, best of all, point to that alluring something “else” that Minor White taught us is the heart and soul of all expressive photographs.

So, whether you are struggling to craft an appropriate title for a new photograph or eloquent statement for an upcoming exhibition, or mining your hard drives for the perfect image to accompany a meaningful quote, know that your efforts will be rewarded, not only with enhanced viewer appreciation, but also with a deeper understanding of your own creative process.

Now, where’s your thesaurus?



Quartet

If in doubt, keep it simple. This spartan image is suitably balanced by a single-word title that is both descriptive (a quartet as a grouping of four trees) and suggestive of

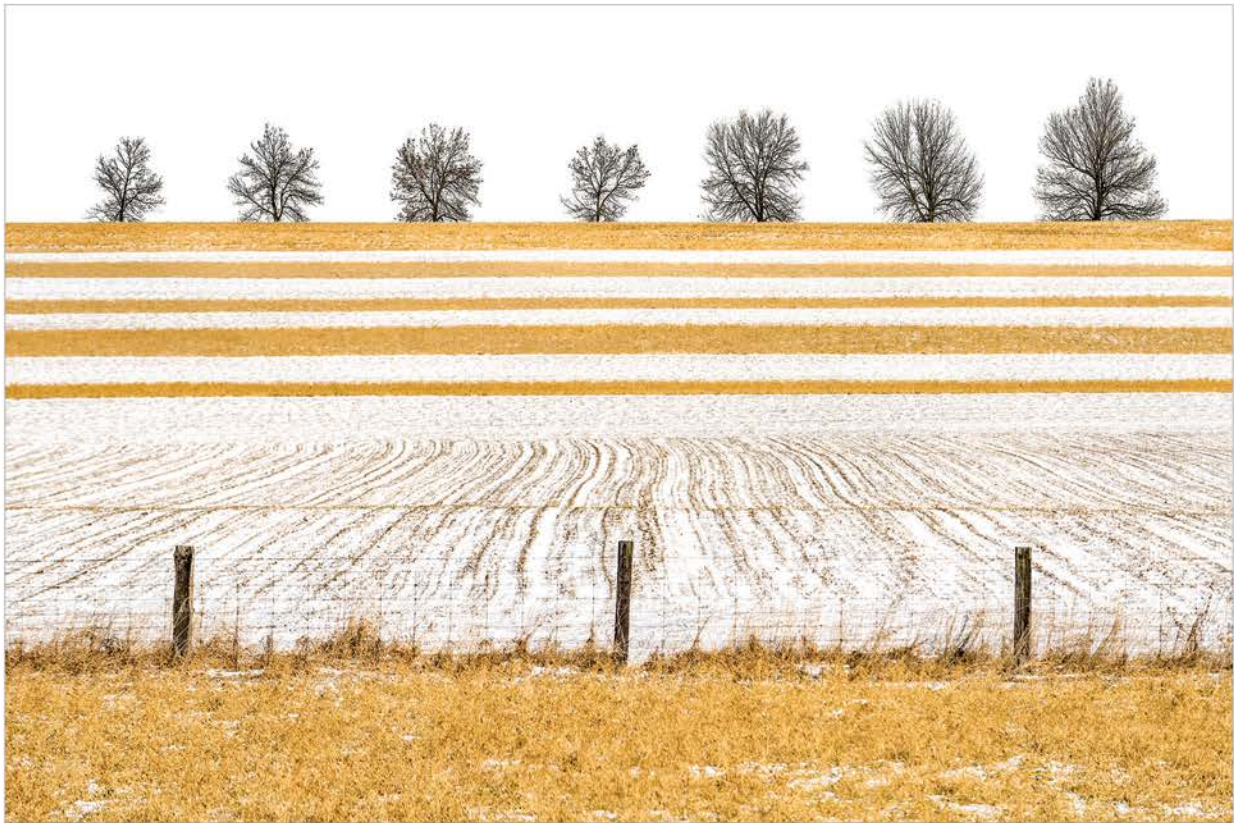
something more meaningful (a quartet as an ensemble of four performers who create an artistic work together).



Resilience

On a windswept hill on a bleak February day, this lone tree caught my attention. What especially appealed to me was the buoyant character I saw in its upward-curving shape, and the story in its relationship with the rock – as if it had leaned on that rock while it gathered the strength to grow in a new direction. The original photograph, with its stark sky and an

icy cyan colour cast, didn't suit this cheerful story, so I incorporated a textured background and warmed the colour palette to make the image more compatible with my expressive intent. The title was a natural offshoot – a single encouraging word that encapsulated the optimism I felt in the scene.



Between the Lines

Between the Lines asks the viewer to consider this picture, not as a documentary image of a snowy farm landscape, but in more abstract terms, as a complex graphic scene composed

of lines and patterns. The title also implies *reading* between the lines to discover a deeper meaning, which gives the viewer something to ponder while exploring the picture.



Climate of Tension

A mid-winter blizzard in the port of Goderich on Lake Huron, set the stage for this picture. With dire warnings about global warming so often in the news and evidence of it all around us, I find myself feeling increasingly pessimistic for our species, although my natural optimism manages to find silver linings for the planet as a whole. What sparked my interest in

this scene was the sound of wind shrieking through the wires and the juxtaposition of the geometric, angular shapes of the human-built elements set against the swirling, snowy maelstrom being flung at them by Mother Nature. It was this man-versus-nature tension, represented by the specific elements in this scene, that inspired the picture's title.



Bedrock Mosaic

This title guides viewers into the image by providing information about the subject matter (bedrock), but suggesting that it should be interpreted artistically (as a mosaic) rather than geologically. Mosaics are artworks created from an

assembly of small pieces of coloured stone, glass or tile, which makes the title an appropriate choice for this colourful, fractured rock face.



A Heavenly Morning

A glowing sunrise, calm water, a picturesque church. These were the visual elements that greeted me one February morning as I drove through a neighbouring community on the LaHave River. The picture conveys the desired feeling of serenity without the aid of a title. A documentary-style title like *St. Mark's Church, Middle LaHave, February 2016* is

factually accurate but utterly soulless. Finding an *appropriate* title requires abstracting from the particular church, location and time to a more general word or phrase. From “church” it is a small step to “heavenly” – a word that has both sacred and secular connotations – and from there to ***A Heavenly Morning***, which captures my expressive intent perfectly.



Paint the Town

This picture began as a series of photographs along the waterfront of Mahone Bay, a popular tourist town on Nova Scotia's South Shore. Amid the colourful old buildings, however, lurk some ugly ones – a gas station, a supermarket, and some drab beige condos – so my image-processing began by cutting them out and arranging my favourite buildings into a cheerful grouping. Then, because I was already playing, I decided to change the colours of their reflections. The picture's title, ***Paint the Town***, was intended to alert viewers that all may not be what it seems, and to include them in the joke.

Be honest, did you notice the altered reflection colours before reading this caption? In the several years of displaying this picture at art shows, almost nobody (except the occasional small child) has spotted it. Instead, the most common question I am asked is "Where is this?" After I explain, people usually hoot with incredulity at their own (lack of) observation. It's an experience that demonstrates how strongly we are influenced by what we *expect* to see rather than what is actually there!



Sole Mates

Sole Mates ~ Two-Spirited ~ Vanishing Point

Words and phrases that have multiple meanings (polysemes, homonyms, homophones and homographs) are a rich source for picture titles. Fortunately the English language, with its roots in so many other languages, provides fertile ground for these multi-meaning expressions. Sometimes they offer a humorous twist on a picture's subject matter. Often they are suggestive of deeper meanings, alternative interpretations, or interesting ambiguities for the viewer to consider. The three pictures on these facing pages illustrate their use in the creation of titles.

Sole Mates is an obvious homophonic play on the expression "soul mates" – people who are ideally suited to each other – bringing the footwear in this picture to life with human personalities. One can almost imagine the flirtatious sandal sidling up to the country-bumpkin boot and flashing her buckle to suggest a spin on the dance floor.



Two-Spirited

"Two-spirited" is a modern Indigenous term used to describe their members who embody both male and female characteristics, or who perform "third-gender" ceremonial roles, although in popular usage it often refers more generally to the Native LGBTQ community. These thoughts were far from my mind when I created my **Two-Spirited** picture. It was intended as a simple expressive portrait of a tree whose trunk had split in two and grown up on either side of an old fence. I made the picture at the end of a bitterly cold winter walk, when light conditions were low and my (non-photographic) companions were impatient to be home. I had time only for a hand-held, in-camera, double-exposure image (one fast, one slow with slight intentional camera movement). I was pleased with the result and, when researching possible titles, felt that **Two-Spirited** captured the spirit of the split tree, the other-worldly atmosphere, and the double-exposure technique of the picture, while offering viewers the more serious topic of two-spiritedness to consider in its interpretation.

"Vanishing point" is a fundamental concept in the art and photography world that governs perspective used in creating a three-dimensional illusion of depth and distance on a two-dimensional image plane. There is a strong sense of perspective in my **Vanishing Point** picture, but also a physical sense that the point of land, and indeed the walker herself, are vanishing into the fog. On a more meditative level, "vanishing point" can refer to the point at which something becomes so small, remote or unimportant that it effectively ceases to exist or is no longer worthy of consideration – food for thought for a pensive viewer.



Vanishing Point



Abstract pictures are especially difficult to title. By their very nature they are intended to be non-representational, but *because* they are non-representational, a viewer's most natural question is "What am I looking at?" You can either force viewers to come up with their own interpretations (i.e. title the picture *Untitled*), or give them a clue about the subject matter or desired approach to the picture. For instance, you could title this picture *Boat Reflection* to make

the subject matter clear, or *Seaside Impressions* for a subtler suggestion. If you wish the viewer to see the picture in purely aesthetic terms, you might title it *Line Study with Orange*. Or you could celebrate the picture's abstractness with a title that tells a viewer, not what the subject *is*, but rather, what it *looks like*. This is the approach I chose for this picture, playing with viewers' perceptions (and evoking childhood memories) by titling it *Snakes and Ladders*.



Kas Stone is a professional photographic artist and writer based in Atlantic Canada, where she finds inspiration in the wild coastal scenery and moody weather right outside her door.

Her career began with words: articles in hiking and paddling magazines, and two wilderness travel guidebooks published by The Boston Mills Press. Needing pictures to illustrate her words, she bought her first serious camera about twenty years ago.

From these documentary roots her photography has evolved into more contemplative imagery that promotes environmental, outdoor adventure, and broader human themes.

Kas can't believe her good fortune in being able to make a living doing what she loves. Her work can be found at select galleries, fine art and craft shows, and in private collections worldwide. Learn more at www.kasstone.ca



Winter Walk

This book is dedicated to my mother, Patricia Stone, a lifelong book-lover who taught me to love words too.

