



# Viewpoint Mike Smith

Working solely in black & white can make you more adept at perceiving contrast, tone, shape and texture

I knew it was a dream, but my mind decided to let the id indulge itself – it was a long panning shot across a remote Colorado plateau. There was a late afternoon sun, and bands of boulders and sparse vegetation pockmarked the landscape creating a visually compelling monochromatic vision of the vastness of the US mountain region. The shot slowly moved in, allowing me to pick out the shapes of a small cluster of buildings. The buildings cast unnaturally deformed shapes across the dusty tracks, overlapping and interweaving. Spindrift occasionally bounced across the frame drawing the eye down the line of buildings, with the overlap pine cladding blistered in parts. The wood grain was intensely weathered, forming grooves in the wooden planks.

At the end of the street stood a solitary person. Feet splayed slightly outward, and scuffed and cracked leather boots with spurs heavily scratched, dulled by a lifetime of use. The shot slowly panned up – jeans, leather belt with a holstered Colt Peacemaker. Alternating light/dark greytone formed a checked pattern on the shirt, over which there was a light coloured (tan?) leather waistcoat. The shot stopped at the Stetson-topped face: eyebrows were knotted, squinting in the sun; crow's feet under the eyes betrayed the weather beaten skin; and his short stubble was flecked with grey. This was an aged face, an experienced face; a face that had witnessed many things. The whole comprised individual elements rendered in exquisite detail.

## The power of black & white

In black & white, colour is unnatural. To quote Walker Evans: 'Color tends to corrupt photography and absolute color corrupts it absolutely. Consider the way color film usually renders blue sky, green foliage, lipstick red, and the kiddies' playsuit. These are four simple words which must be whispered: color photography is vulgar.'

Let me qualify this with some reasoning.



Mono provides strong emphasis on contrast, tone, shape and texture

The eye uses the cornea and lens to focus light on the retina, using the iris to control the amount of light. The retina is formed of rods and cones. Rods are highly light sensitive but monochromatic, while there are three types of cones with sensitivity to either short, medium and long wavelengths of visible light. They remain monochromatic. After these electrical stimuli are fed via the optic nerve to the brain, the magic happens whereby we perceive colour. I imagine this is an evolutionary response, but how do we visualize in one (rather than three) images.

Our brain has become attuned to vision and particularly to colour. Once you remove colour, you are able to more adeptly perceive contrast, tone, shape and texture. Beauty lies in simplicity, and Adams, Weston, Sudek, Strand, Kertész were all masters of this. Now I'm not arguing that mono is 'better' than colour, but for me it is more expressive. We have become saturated with colour, and as a portrait photographer, clients see mono as both novel and beautiful.

If you haven't shot in black & white for a while take the Mono Challenge – set your camera's picture mode to mono and expressly focus on recording texture and shape. It can often help to truncate features and focus on detail rather than the whole. And just as with any of my photography, shooting is only half the story, with the digital darkroom giving flexibility in interpretation. My go-to choice is Google's Silver Efex Pro – and there's no excuse now that it's free!

Mike Smith is a London-based wedding and portrait photographer. Visit [www.focali.co.uk](http://www.focali.co.uk)

**Do you have something you'd like to get off your chest?** Send us your thoughts in around 500 words to the address on page 23 and win a year's digital subscription to AP, worth £79.99

## Social life

Here are some of our favourite images from the world of social media this week



### Levon Biss @LevonBissPhoto

Levon Biss showed us his stunning macro insect portraits in AP 23 July. Here we see another dimension of his work with his beautiful portrait of gymnast Beck Downie, as she reveals a secret technique to aid palm grip.

Join the conversation @AP\_Magazine



### Keith Ladzinski @ladzinski



Despite the prevalence of landscape photography, some areas of the world still reveal genuine natural wonder. Here we see a golden shaft of autumn sunrise pouring through the Great Arch of Getu in China. It's the kind of astonishing image you can gaze at for ages.

Follow us at @amateurphotographer magazine



### FadeToBlackLP

There's something about the innocence of children that rubs off on an image, leading to lovely results. This is a perfect portrait, and one that makes good use of the tall grass around the child.

Submit your photos [apmag.co/flickr](http://apmag.co/flickr)