

The World in Monochrome

We humans see in colour. Once light hits our eyes, the lens of our eye focuses it onto those light-sensitive cells, rods and cones, each of which picks up different wavelengths of energy. And, heh presto, those magical colours emerge. Funnily enough, as Victoria Finley writes, “colours don’t really exist”. She then adds, “or rather they do exist, but only because our minds create them as an interpretation of vibrations that are happening around us”.¹

When we look at a waratah flower, we see a burst of colour, even if some has been added to deter illegal harvesting of that flower!



But how does that happen? Notice all the colours in the flower? Well, light is made up of different wavelengths, or colours, and white light is a combination of all of them. When a ray of white sunlight hits a flower, the flower absorbs most of the wavelengths. It reflects the rest. For example, if the patch is red, it reflects the red wavelengths and absorbs all the others.

Now it gets tricky. That’s when our eyes go to work. At the back of our eye is a tissue called the retina. Special cells called rods and cones live in the retina. These cells are the eye’s lookouts. Their job is to spot light and let the brain know about it. Different rods and cones react to different wavelengths, or colours, of light. When light hits the rods and cones, they send electrical signals to

¹ Victoria Finley: Colour, London, 2009, p3

let the brain know. They do that through the optic nerve which then talks to the visual cortex in the brain and the brain then processes it and we then “see” the object, the shape and that “colour”! Perception is a wonderful thing.

Now we all know that some people are “colour blind”. What colour blind people see differs depending on the type and extent of colour blindness. People with red-green colour blindness naturally have more colour vision than those who have blue-yellow or complete colour blindness. People who have protanopia are red-blind and see more green than red. They find it hard to tell between red-related colours.

Apparently, some of us can see millions of colours (way more than there are names for them) but let’s not get too proud of our abilities. Spiders and many insects can see a type of light called ultraviolet that most humans cannot see. Other animals, like snakes, are able to see infrared light.

And so, I got to thinking about what if we can’t see any colour but shades in monochrome! That almost turns us into the babies we once were! Babies’ eyes are more likely to pick up on black, white, and shades of grey, rather than colours. Mind you, babies also don’t see very far ahead of their face. Sharks, by the way, are apparently colour-blind. All that blood does not appear red to them!

I have been attracted to monochrome photography for many years. Perhaps it was because all early photography was shot in monochrome but even when I carried cameras around in the days of film, I often carried one with monochrome film and another with colour film and I was an enthusiastic proponent of monochrome portraiture. One day I shall attempt to convert some of those early shots into JPEG images and share them with you

In more recent years, with digital cameras and more generous space, we can take many more images, can shoot in monochrome in-camera and can even convert our colour photography into monochrome (even into a variety of hues). I do believe that shooting a scene or subject in black and white is a sure-fire way to make your images appear more dramatic and emotive. I even suspect that people appreciate the sense of nostalgia in black and white photography, while others appreciate the minimalist beauty of these photos as it does away with the distraction of colour, leaving you to focus on the most important parts of the image. We observe the light! As some good photographers say, there are three rules in photography. Rule 1 is Light. Rule 2 is Light. And Rule 3 is Light!

So come along and see some photographs I have taken over recent years, without the distraction of colour. I have selected a variety of subjects and chose a variety of treatments to demonstrate the range of possibilities. You might all like different styles. I know I have favourites. But the purpose here is to show that range!



Self-portrait

Canon 400D, f5/6, 1/60sec, ISO400, Focal length 54mm

Flash, auto red-eye and treated with Adobe Elements, Nik Collection Silver Efex-Pro into Antique
Plate 11



This is an image of The Basin near Bonnie Vale. The effect created here is with a “wet rocks” pre-set.



The simple plug hole was taken in monochrome in-camera. It left a stark line for the eye.



Shooting into sunlight often demands it be monochrome. This is of Fremantle Wharf



Compare the Keepers Cottage at Green Cape under moody skies



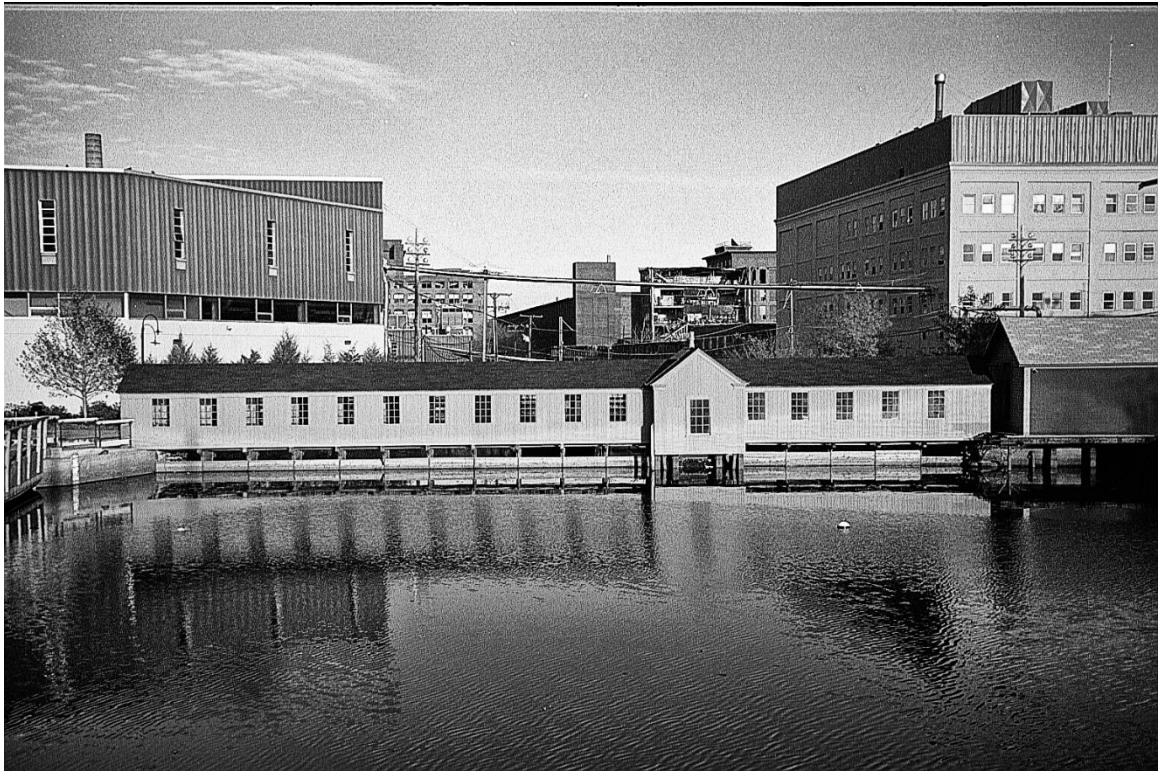
Moody skies can even be made moodier by removing the colour. Indeed, they can become quite dramatic



Looking towards the storms at Carwoola



Buildings also come up well, letting their lines look clean. This is the National Library in Canberra



And the old cotton mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts



Ruins love the treatment – Thirroul



Windang Wheels



Or the sinister!



The Death Camp at Dachau



Equally it can work for scenery. Here I am reprising Ansel Adams at the Grand Tetons, from the very spot where he took a series of images in 1942. The river is The Snake River in Wyoming USA





Wildlife can also be shot in monochrome.



Even feral animals; here taken on the Long Plain in Kosciuszko in deep fog



And do not forget that I fell in love with monochrome for portraiture! But be nice to your subject,
Brides like a soft finish





And water delights in the effect. This is the El Alamein Fountain in Kings Cross



And water spurting outside the library in Canberra



Let's celebrate the colour our eyes see but sometimes, let's return to infancy, forget the colours and strip it back to the bare essentials.

Brian Everingham

