

Gill Moon Photography Photo Club



April 2023 Challenge 4 Agricultural Landscapes

Hello

and welcome to my monthly photo club challenges.

Each month I will be setting a new challenge for club members to work with. The challenges are not designed to be competitive but they are designed to be fun and inspiring and help you grow as a photographer.

During these challenges we will be looking at the work of different photographers who are 'masters' in their chosen field of photography. We will examine how they make their images and discuss how you can use their techniques in your own work. I hope these will be inspiring sessions.

Every monthly challenge will be followed by a 1.5 hour Zoom session (which is entirely optional) on the last Wednesday of every month where we will discuss some of the submitted images and talk about what worked and what didn't. I hope this feedback will be useful.

Thank you very much for being part of the Photo Club and I hope you will find it a fun and rewarding challenge.

Gill.

Field Work - Agricultural landscapes

This months challenge is all about agricultural landscapes. Here in Suffolk we are surrounded by arable farmland consisting mainly of potatoes, sugar beet, rape seed and in the east of the county crops like carrots and lettuce. In between these mono cultures we have fields of pigs with their rows of dome shaped huts.

These landscapes might not sound the most inspiring for landscape photography but they can yield some great images if you look hard enough.

This months challenge has also been inspired by two other photographers Amy Bateman and Finn Hopson. Both these photographers have tackled the subject in different ways - Amy's work is more documentary and Finns is much more about aesthetics. I will talk a little about each of these photographers at the end of these notes and why I found their work so inspiring.

For the purpose of this challenge we are going to break down the concept of agricultural landscapes into three different groups and you are welcome to pick any of these for your challenge images. The groups I am going to cover include:

Aesthetic landscapes - agricultural landscapes that are visually appealing - not documentary in style.

Documentary images which tell a story about farming and agricultural landscapes.

Details in agricultural landscapes - this group can include portraits of farm animals or people, farm buildings or machinery as a whole or in close up.

Aesthetic Landscapes

Aesthetic landscapes are images that are visually appealing for their subject matter and their lighting. They are much like any other landscape images and work best if they are simple in nature and well constructed compositionally.

Lead the eye

The first two examples are images which are constructed using lines within fields. Both images show potato fields and both are very graphical in nature. There are no other elements in either shot apart from the lines and the undulations in the ground which help give the lines some of their 'motion'.



Lines in the landscape - 1/80 second at F11 with a focal length of 70mm. This shot shows a potatoe field covered in fleece on a frosty and misty morning. It is asthetically appealing beacuse of its simplicity and the repetition of the pattern across the frame. The muted colour pallet also helps simplify the image.

Simple compositions which are all about the shape and lines within a landscape work really well in black and white. This simplifies the image even more and distills the shot down to its compositional elements.



Lines in the landscape 2 - 1/320 second at F11, ISO 400 with a focal length of 100mm. Again this image is all about the lines in the landscape although this time because the ground is more undulating the lines in the foreground appear wider than those in the distance. This creates a more complex scene with lines of different widths running in different directions. By converting the image to black and white I have tried to simplify the scene and make the lines more prominent.

Paths also work really well as lines in the landscape and can be used to lead the eye through a uniform block of colour.



Pin Mill Path - 1/160 second at F14, ISO 400 at a focal length of 24mm.

Look for a focal point

Agricultural landscapes tend to be dominated by mono cultures - fields with one crop and a uniform colour. This is great for creating a simple image but you will need to look for a focal point to give your shot some interest. Trees make excellent subjects and work really well as a single focal point in an agricultural landscape.



The Wantisden Oak - 1/10 second at F13, with a focal length of 26mm. This tree stands as the focal point in a field of flowers. The shot is all about the colour combinations surrounding the tree.



Spring Greens - 1/25 second at F11, ISO 200 at a focal length of 62mm. In this shot I have used the field of barley to provide some texture at the bottom of the frame and the tree on the right hand side as the focal point. I also like the way the clouds in the sky form a diagonal line from the top left corner of the frame to the tree.

Use a frame to draw the eye

Look for tree branches or other foliage that can be used to create a frame around part of an image. This will help create depth and guide the eye deeper into the image.



Wantisden Oaks - 0.5 second at F16, ISO 100, at a focal length of 82mm. For this image I have used the branches of the foreground oak to frame the two trees in the background. This adds depth to the shot and guides the viewers eye into the centre of the image.

Vary your depth of field

When you are shooting mono cultures and large fields with little variation it can be a good idea to experiment with your depth of field and pick out certain parts of the landscape to focus on. This creates depth within your image.

As an example the following image was taken in a field of cabbages which was scattered with poppies. I used a shallow depth of field and a telephoto lens to create this image. I focused on the poppies and used the blurred foreground as a colour frame for the front of the image. The tree in the background is also out of focus so it doesn't command as much attention leaving the eye to linger in the centre of the frame.



Poppies and cabbages - 1/1600 second at F5.6, ISO 400 with a focal length of 200mm focused on the poppies in the centre of the frame.

Shooting aesthetic looking agricultural landscapes is much the same as shooting any other landscape. Look for:

A strong subject

An interesting focal point

Use repeating patterns

Look for lines to guide the eye through the image

Experiment with depth of field

Use other elements in your scene to frame your subject and guide the eye

Look for interesting light.



Out in the fields - 1/500 second at F11, ISO 400 and a focal length of 122mm. For this shot I was drawn to the relationship between the vehicles and the light that was shining over the sea.

Documentary Photography

Shooting documentary images is completely different to shooting a landscape for its visual qualities. Here you are more focused on trying to tell a story with your image.

Subjects are all around us, we just need to be observant and find something interesting to focus on. As Elliot Erwitt said this 'has little to do with the things that you see and everything to do with the way that you see them'.

Stories in documentary photography must be about something - they need to have a theme. This will encourage the viewer to care about your image. It will provide a means to connect to the photograph and will hopefully stir an emotion in the viewer.

A story succeeds on empathy and fails on lack of it. The more deeply you care about something the stronger your story is likely to be.

Build up your story in visual layers. Choose the elements to include in your frame carefully. The more you include the less impact each one has. The inclusion of every element should be intentional and relevant, so be selective. Build up visual layers - foreground, middle ground and background.

Conflict lies at the heart of every great story. This might be true for a film and easy to see in the story line but how does it apply to a still image in landscape photography?

In still photography conflict is represented by contrasts, not just visual contrasts between the light and dark tones in a scene but also

conceptual contrasts such as large and small, man made and natural, rough and smooth, hard and soft. These create tension in the image and help tell the story. Contrasts are everywhere if you look for them. Even a sunset shot has an element of contrast between the sky and the land or in a coastal shot you will find contrasts between the earth and the water or the sky and the sea.

Think about the action you are trying to portray then work out how best to do that. Consider your viewpoint, the angle you are going to shoot at and the shutter speed you are going to use.

The last key component of visual storytelling is how the elements within the frame relate to each other and what their relationship says to the viewer.

Getting close to one element in the foreground and having another in the background will make one element more dominant than the other. Does this make it more important? Does the space between elements contribute to the story?

Changing your lens and your viewpoint will affect the relationship between elements in the frame. Using a wide angle lens will help evoke isolation as the background will be distant compared to the foreground. Using a telephoto lens can bring elements closer together and make their connection seem closer.

Putting it all together

Before composing a visual story think about these two questions

What is my story?

to answer this you need to find a subject.

Ask yourself.....

What is my subject?

Where is it? Why is it interesting?

The answers to these questions will give you your story.

Now provide some context for your subject - time and place

Include small details that convey a message about the subject but don't overwhelm it or compete for visual dominance.

How can I tell my story?

Now think about the following ways to make your story come alive:

How are you going to shoot?

Will your image be in colour or black & white?

What lens will you use?

wide angle / zoom / macro will all give a different perspective and tell a different story.

What mood do you want to convey?

Use the light. Mysterious moods can be conveyed by darker images, cooler tones, deeper shadows. Happy joyful moods can be conveyed with bright images and warm colours.

If the lighting doesn't suit the story, come back another time or use post processing to alter / enhance the mood

Where is the conflict in my story?

Look for contrasts that you can incorporate - visual or metaphorical.

What energy does your story require?

Freezing motion using fast shutter speeds will give an energy to your shot.

More dramatic images require high contrasts and energetic compositions - using diagonals in composition works well for this.

Using slow shutter speeds and blurring motion will give a calmness to your image. This can be exacerbated by misty conditions, negative space, smaller areas of detail and a generally cooler feel to the processing.

The energy that you portray in your story will be affected by your choice of focal length,

your composition and the viewpoint that you choose. And just as importantly how you process the image afterwards.

This might all sound very complicated but thinking about some of these elements will help you compose a better image that tells a more interesting story.

Lets have a look again at the image that I started this section with.



This is one of my favourite agricultural images. It has a subject - potato planting
It has a setting which is a slope overlooking the coast.

It has some interesting light despite it being a grey day.

The two tractors create a visual journey across the frame and there is a nice contrast between the uniformity of the man made landscape and the nature reserve and the sea beyond. The rays of light also help to enhance the effect of the wild beyond the confines of the farmed field.

At its simplest level I think this shot tells a nice story about farming life on a March morning by the coast.

Documentary images don't have to feature man doing something. They can just as easily be about farm animals and the landscape that they inhabit.

The following image shows cattle on the grazing marsh at Boyton Marshes. The beauty

of this landscape is that the cows share their pasture with the wildlife and this is illustrated in my image with the swans in the middle of the shot.



Boyton Grazing Marsh - 1/2500 second at F5.6, ISO 400 with a focal length of 165mm focusing on the cow. Using a shallow depth of field has made the cow the most important part of the story but it allows the swans and the rest of the landscape to be the supporting elements in the story.



Hollesley Marshes - this shot is all about the grazing marsh at dawn and tells a story of a tranquil spring morning. I took this image into the sun which has given it its atmosphere. Shooting info: 1/400 second at F10, ISO 400 with a focal length of 70mm.

Shooting Detail

For the purpose of this challenge detail in agricultural landscapes can include:

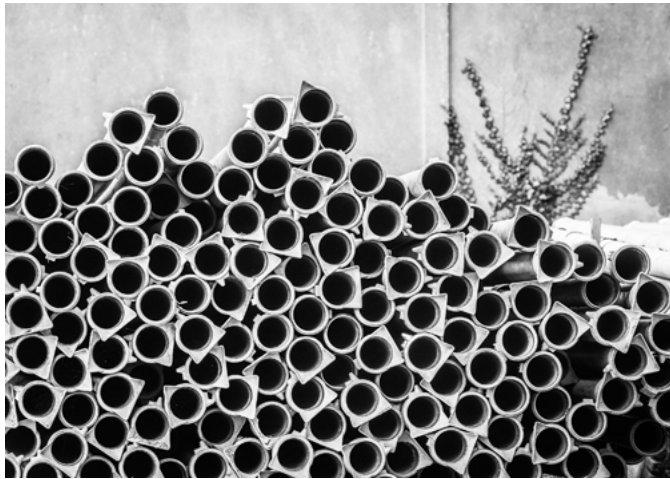
Farm buildings

Portraits of farm animals

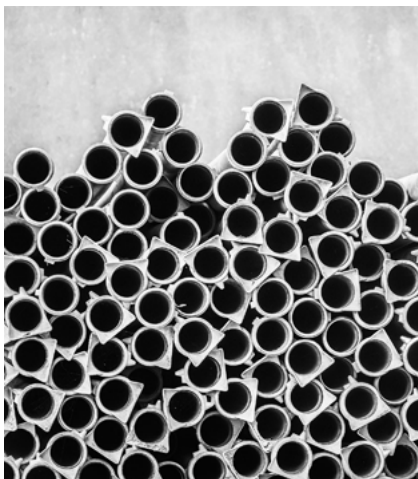
Details of farm machinery or equipment

Below are a few examples of items that have caught my eye.

The first image show a pile of irrigation pipes stacked outside an old barn. I loved the uniformity of the pattern that has been created by the openings of each pipe. This was an image I chose to shoot in black and white because it simplified the scene and made the shot all about the pattern.



There are various ways I could have cropped this image. Initially I wanted to give the pipes some context but I could equally have just focused on the pattern and made the image more abstract but more simple.



Farm buildings can make interesting shots although they are not always the easiest places to access. The following images were taken from a footpath and show some old barns in the snow. Again I have used a black and white conversion to simplify the shots and make the shapes and textures stand out.



Farm animals are another subject that could provide some interesting shots. For the detail section you would need to shoot a portrait

rather than an image of the animal as a small part of its landscape. I have added two examples below of the sort of images I am suggesting. Hopefully you can see how these differ from the shot of the cow at Boyton Marshes.



The Three Ragamuffins - 1/400 second at F5.6, ISO 1250 at a focal length of 200mm. This was taken on a misty morning when the light was really dull. The high ISO has given this shot a really grainy appearance which I think adds to the atmosphere of the black and white conversion.



Pigletts - 1/500 second at F8, ISO 400 at a focal length of 70mm. This is a straightforward shot of some piglets which were too curious for their own good. I tried to frame the piglets with some of the vegetation that surrounded the field they had escaped from.

Inspiration

This month's club challenge has been inspired by two photographers that I follow on social media. They have both made beautiful bodies of work from agricultural landscapes.

Finn Hopson

Finn Hopson is a photographer from Brighton. Having spent many years cycling and walking on the South Downs he now spends his time photographing them, trying to capture the unique places, shapes, patterns and textures of the UK's newest national park. He has just produced a book of his images entitled 'Fieldwork' This is how he describes it

"Fieldwork is the result of twelve years spent collecting different versions of the same thing. It's a scrapbook of shapes, patterns, colours and light which define the South Downs."

Finn's images are all taken in the agricultural landscapes of the South Downs. They are all very minimal in structure and composition but are striking for their simplicity.

In the South Downs you have the advantage of a rolling landscape where you can climb a hill to get some height into your images. Many of Finn's shots are taken looking down onto the landscape.

I would urge you to look at the way the images are constructed and how simple many of them are. They work by making use of the contours of the landscape and the light and shadow that is present.

His fieldwork images can be viewed at: www.finnhopson.com/fieldwork

Amy Bateman

Amy is a creative photographer who specialises in capturing people, places and artisan products on camera.

In 2020, she set out on a 12-month project to tell the story of Forty Farms, each one located somewhere in Cumbria. From Lake District hill farms to the Solway marshes, from commons sheep grazers to dairy ice cream makers, from sixth generation farming families to eager newcomers, each aspect of Cumbrian farming is portrayed in the project.

Over the course of a year, Amy conducted frank conversations about the financial challenge of farming in post-Brexit Britain; the

tightrope balance of producing quality food in nature-rich landscapes; and the highs and lows of working in an area internationally famed for its beauty. Images from the project are now available as a book - Forty Farms.

amybatemanphotography.com/forty-farms

Amy's style is very much documentary in nature and the project tells a very definite story. It is worth having a look at some of the images to see how documentary images differ from the more visual landscape shots.

Unfortunately I can't find a gallery page for Amy's images but hopefully the book page and her website will give you an idea for the type of shots she makes.



April's Photo Challenge

This month's photo challenge is to produce one or two photos of an agricultural landscape. These can be:

An aesthetic landscape image

A documentary image about some aspect of farming / agriculture

A detail image showing any of the following:

Farm buildings

Farm machinery or equipment

Farm animals

You can enter a maximum of two images for conversation in the Zoom session.

The Zoom session for this challenge will take place on Wednesday 26th April between 7pm - 8.30pm.

The final image in these notes shows a shot across the fields at Orford. The yellow oil seed rape, the stormy sky and the light on the church are the elements that give this image its impact.

Shooting information: 1/100 second at F13, ISO 200 at a focal length of 110mm

