

The Basic Photo Book

Phil Davis



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The photographic image is such a common feature of our cultural environment that it's hard to imagine how we could get along without it. It would be a drab world indeed without photographic illustrations in books, magazines, and newspapers, and without cinema and television; but if we also had to do without scientific and industrial photography the result would be devastating! Industry would slow to a crawl; hospitals would lose many of their diagnostic tools, and scientific research would be crippled. Photography is simply indispensable!

Photography is also an important force in the fine art world and an enormously popular hobby activity that generates literally billions of prints annually and entertains millions of casual "snapshotters." In short, photography touches virtually every aspect of our lives in some way.

If you're a beginner in photography you'll soon discover that unlike the other two-dimensional arts, such as painting, drawing, and

printmaking, photography straddles the fence between art and science. Although you are free to choose your subject matter and decide when and how you want to photograph it, your control over the actual process of image formation is significantly limited by the laws of physics and chemistry. Although this makes free expression difficult, it's not impossible; and I think you'll find that the better you understand the fundamental workings of the photographic process the more effectively you'll be able to control it to produce expressive, personally satisfying images. In other words—although it may sound contradictory—becoming a competent technician can help you become a more versatile artist.

In recent years cameras have become so sophisticated that some of them can handle all of the technical details of focus and exposure completely automatically. The simpler, less-expensive cameras of this sort are ideal for casual snapshotters who are interested only in the print results and prefer not to have to bother with the mechanical details.

The more feature-laden and expensive models are popular with professional photographers who often use the automatic functions when they are appropriate, but override them when manual control is preferable.

Although "auto-everything" cameras are convenient to use, and capable enough to handle most ordinary photographic situations, I don't recommend them for beginners. I believe that manual or semi-automatic operation is preferable for school use because these operating modes allow the photographer to decide where to focus and how to set the lens and shutter for best effect. Although automatic cameras can make these decisions for you if you want them to, they reduce the physical act of photographing to an impersonal, mechanical routine.

Of course the selection of subject matter, view point, and light condition allow you some options for creative choice, even with an automatic camera; but manual control of the camera settings offers you additional opportunities to

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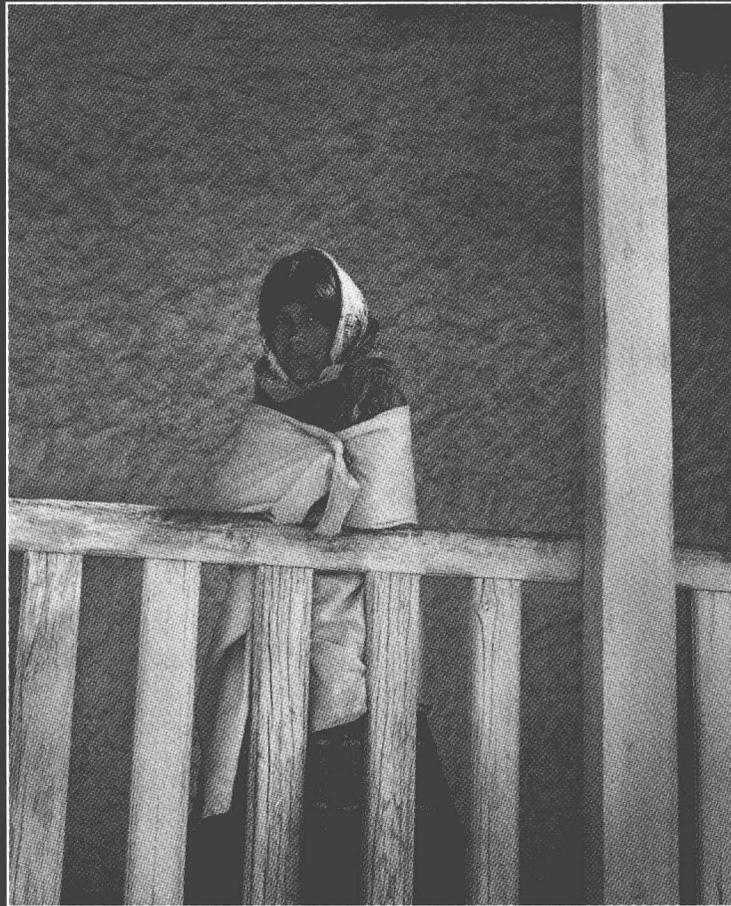
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1

Introduction



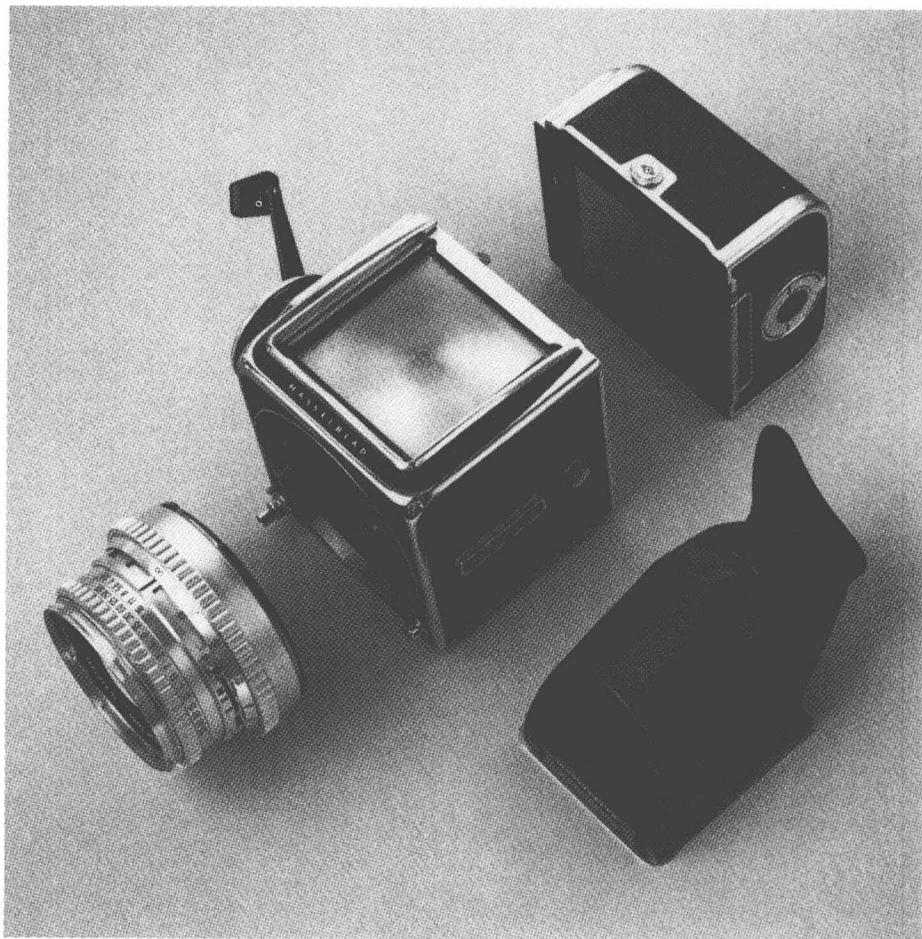
Untitled.

Photograph by Kathleen Barrows

This simple, beautifully printed photograph demonstrates the fine sense of composition and awareness of light quality that are typical of Barrows' work.

Figure 1.1

This expensive camera is admired by many professionals, partly because of its modular design which makes it one of the most versatile but also one of the simplest cameras available. The camera body is a metal box to which various interchangeable lenses, film backs, and viewfinders can be attached.



Regardless of its size or complexity, a camera is fundamentally a light-tight box—designed to hold film, equipped with a lens to form the image, and provided with some sort of *viewfinder* to allow the photographer to select and compose the subject area to be photographed, figure 1.1. All but a few small, inexpensive cameras provide some means of *focusing* the lens to form a *sharp* (not blurred) image; and most also allow adjustment of the lens *aperture* and the *shutter speed* so that the film *exposure* (the amount of light that the film receives) can be controlled. Many cameras offer extra adjustments to refine these basic features, and may automate some or all of them, figure 1.2

Photographic films and papers are coated with a light-sensitive *emulsion* of certain silver compounds (*halides*) suspended in a thin layer of gelatin. Suitable exposure to light alters these silver halides to form a *latent* (invisible) image. If the film or paper is then treated in a chemical *developer* solution the latent image becomes visible as the developer gradually reduces the exposed silver halides to minute particles of metallic silver, figure 1.3.



Figure 1.2
This sophisticated camera permits manual control of focus and exposure when that's desired, but it can also be set to operate automatically for "point and shoot" convenience.

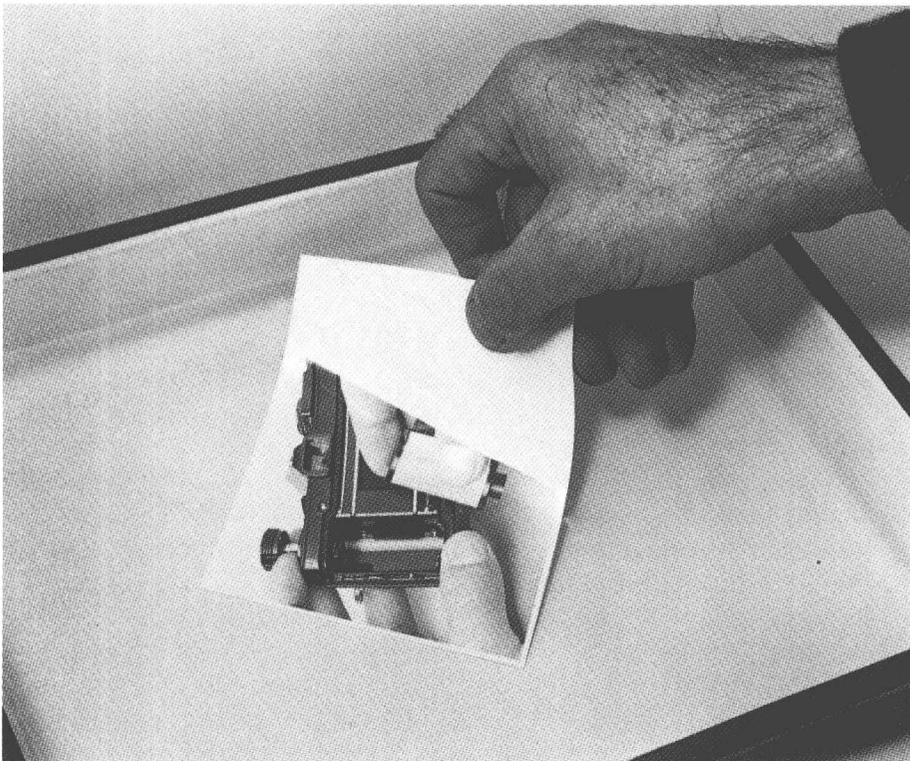


Figure 1.3
This print was exposed normally but only that portion of it that's immersed in the developer solution has produced a visible image.

FETY FILM 5062

KODAK

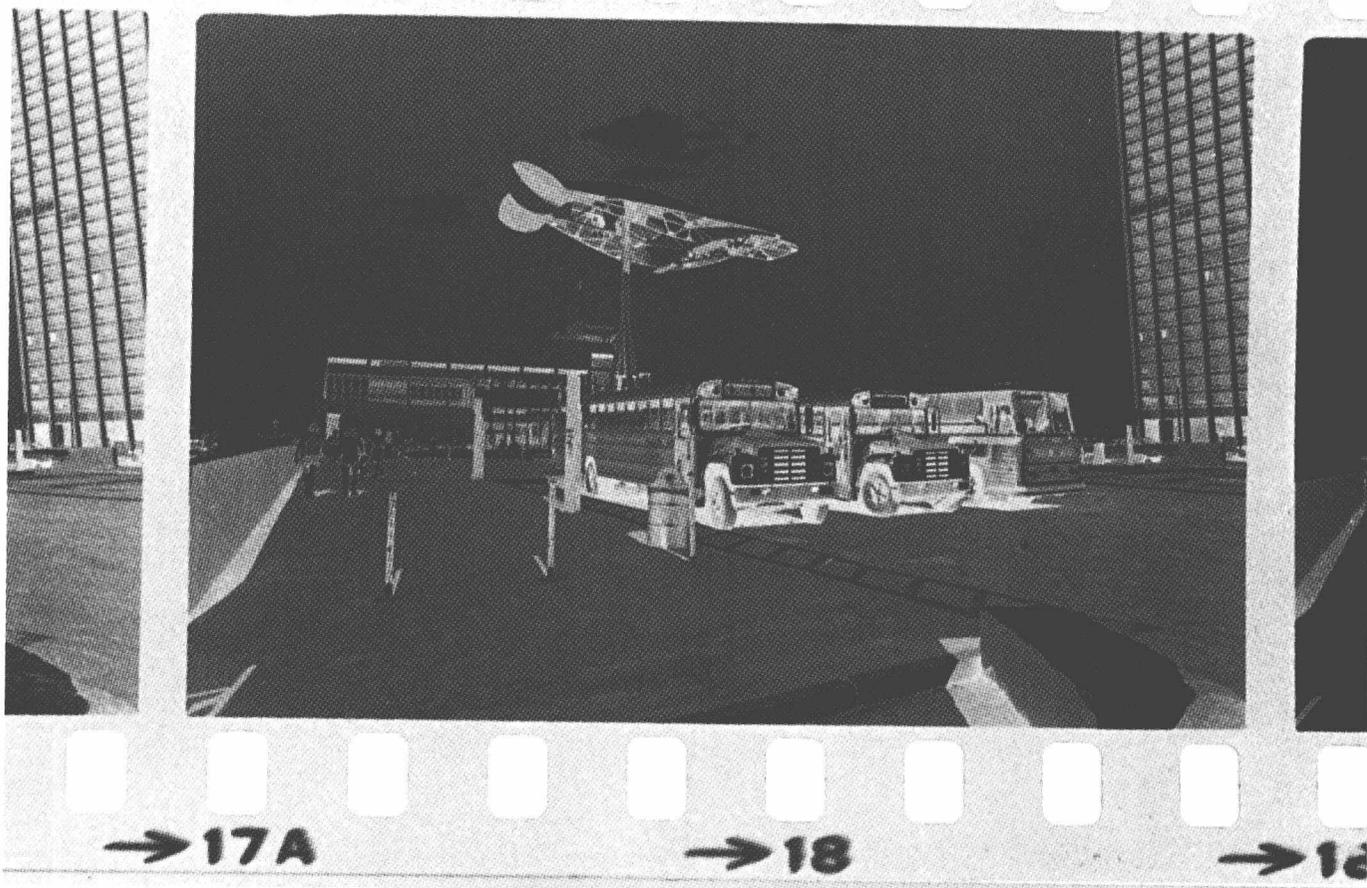


Figure 1.4

This negative is seen from the back so the image is correctly oriented. The edge perforations indicate that this is 35mm film, the number 18 identifies this frame as the 18th exposure on the film roll, and "5062" identifies the film as Kodak Plus-X.

Because these silver particles are much too small to be seen individually without magnification, they mass together to form the various gray tones of the familiar photographic image. These tones are reversed; that is, the image is dark where it was affected by the light, and remains light in the unexposed areas, so we call the developed film image a *negative*, figure 1.4.

Negatives can be *printed* either by *contact* or by *projection*. When contact printing, or *proofing*, the negatives are pressed firmly against the paper's emulsion-coated surface in a *printing frame* (figure 1.5) or *proofing frame* so the exposing light must pass through the negative silver image to reach the paper. Contact prints are therefore the same size as the negatives from which they were printed.

An *enlarger* is used to produce prints of other sizes by projecting the negative image onto the printing paper, figure 1.6. Prints made this way are generally called *enlargements* but the term *projection prints* is really more appropriate because the print image can be made either larger or smaller than the negative image. Printing a negative by either contact or projection methods produces a *positive* which is really a "negative of the negative," so the tones of the print image resemble the tones of the original subject.

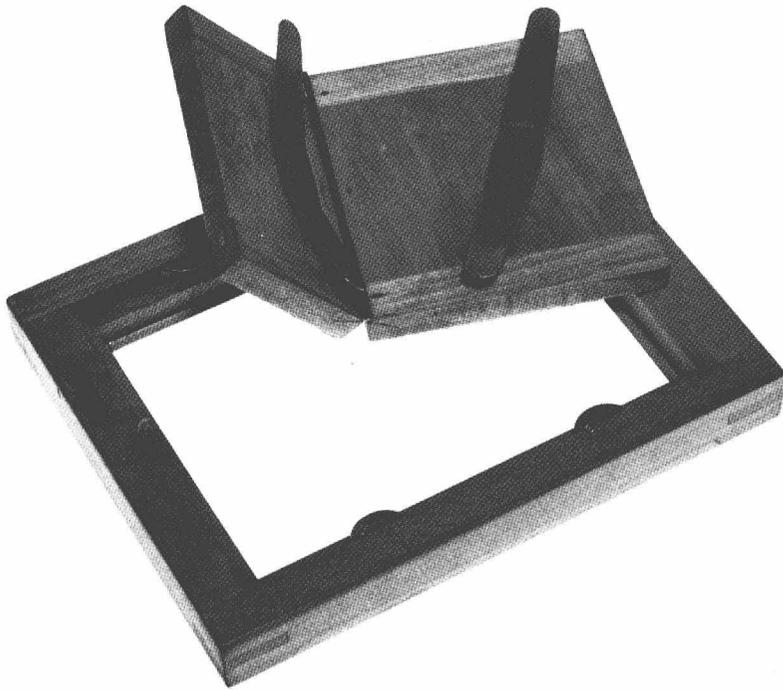


Figure 1.5

This antique printing frame is shown on a light box. In use a negative is placed on the glass, emulsion side up, and covered with a sheet of printing paper, emulsion side down. Then the hinged back is clamped down to press the film and paper tightly together and the exposure is made through the glass.



Figure 1.6

This is a typical enlarger for small roll film negatives. The main unit comprises a lamp housing, a negative carrier, a flexible bellows, and a lens. This assembly can be raised or lowered on the vertical column to adjust the size of the projected image which is formed on the baseboard. Courtesy of the Charles Beseler Company.

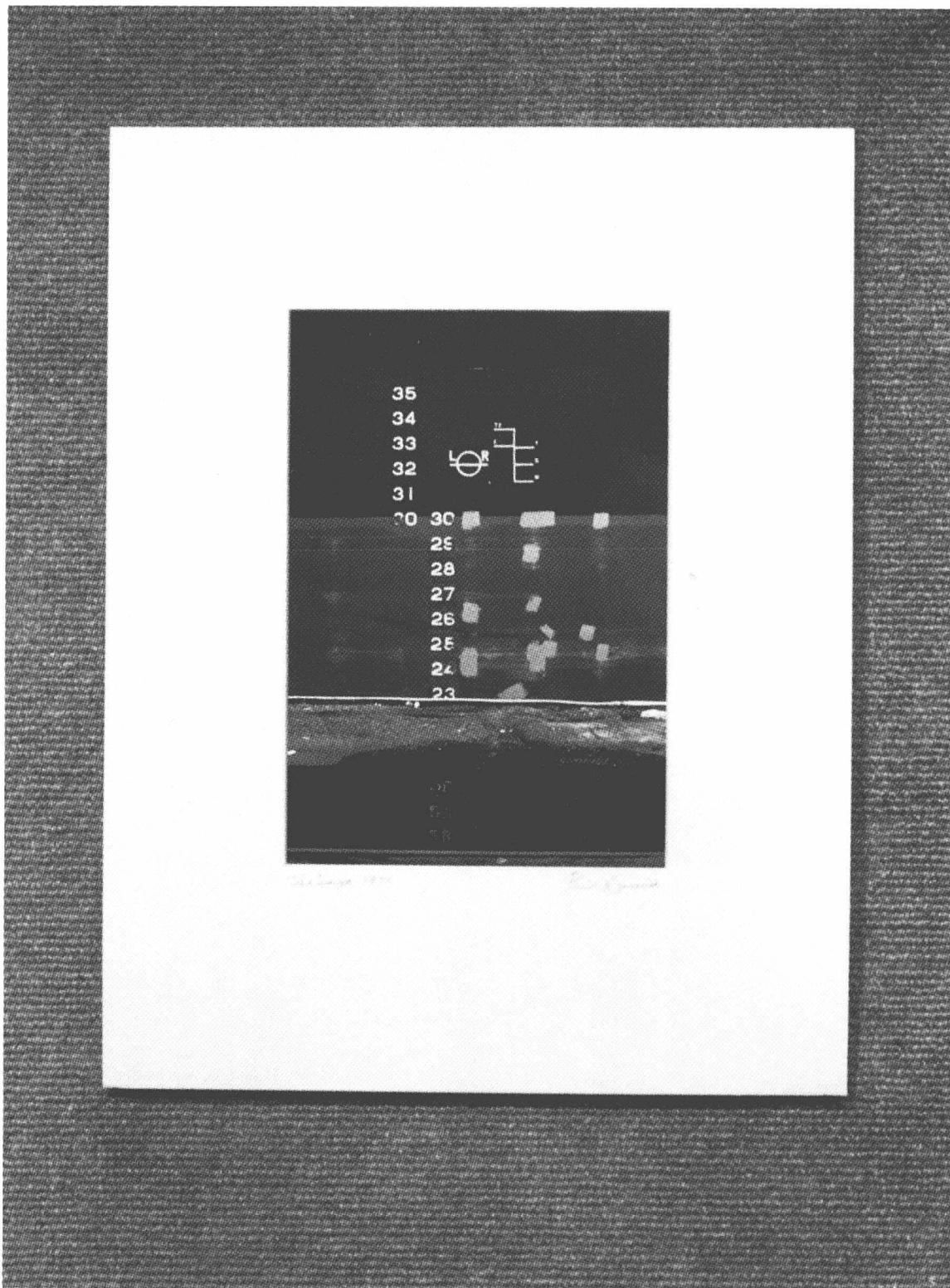


Figure 1.7
A mounted print on display.

Prints are usually *mounted* (fastened to a backing board of some sort) or *matted* (positioned in the cut-out opening of an overlaid paper board) for presentation, figure 1.7. If there are visible flaws in the print image they should be *spotted* (painted or bleached out) before the print is displayed.

2

Hints for Photographing Effectively



Watching the Parade, Chicago.

Photograph by David Alan Jay

Jay's informal "street photograph" invites the viewer to answer the question "Who are these people and what's going on here?"

You don't have to be an art critic to know that some photographs are more interesting than others. The question is, "why?" Subject matter is obviously part of a photograph's appeal but there's more to it than that. As you gain experience I think you'll discover that *what* you photograph isn't critically important—it's *how* you do it that counts.

If there were a "best" way to photograph things, making good pictures would simply be a matter of following the rules. Fortunately, that isn't the case. Artistically, at least, you're free to photograph anything that interests you in any way you like—but even deciding what's worth photographing can be a problem.

It may help to consider why you're interested in photography at all. Do you especially enjoy the *activity* of photography (looking for subject matter, using the camera, working in the darkroom), or are you mainly interested in the resulting photographs as *objects* to be shared with friends, exhibited, or sold? Are you attracted to photographs that depict things accurately and objectively, or do you prefer images that are more abstract or ambiguous? Do you favor pictures of people, or pictures of things or places? Does the spontaneous, informal quality of snapshots appeal to you, or would you rather look at more finely crafted, more formally composed images?

There isn't any best answer to questions such as these, but they should prompt answers of some sort. It's important for you to have opinions or convictions because photography is an essentially neutral medium that doesn't have any opinions of its own. If your photographs are going to "say" anything, you'll have to supply the ideas and make sure they're properly expressed.

Of course, photography is not verbal so photographs don't ever "say" anything in the same way that words do. At best they can only present visual symbols or metaphors that sensitive viewers may be able to interpret.

How can you make interesting photographs? Rules have no place in art but there are a few guidelines that are generally worth considering. First, photograph what genuinely interests you, and try to express your interest in visual terms because the camera can record only what it can "see." It can't respond to other sensations (sounds, odors, tactile qualities) that may be part of your perception, so you'll have to translate these nonvisual perceptions into visual metaphors if you want them included in your work. Don't rely entirely on subject content, either; photographs of interesting situations or objects are not *necessarily* interesting pictures!

Simplify and clarify your concepts. Try to place the camera so that the important elements of your picture are emphasized, and nonessentials or distracting elements—especially in the background—are subdued or eliminated, figures 2.1-4. In general, it should be fairly apparent what a photograph is supposed to show or "say," but remember, a photograph is more than just a description of the



Figure 2.1

The point of this appealing snapshot--a little girl teasing her mother--is weakened by the background foot that appears to be attached to her head. The glaring white of the sock emphasizes the problem. Background interference of this sort is common in these informal situations and you'll have to be very alert and quick to avoid it.



Figure 2.2

This soaring figure is cleanly outlined against a clear sky and a high shutter speed has frozen the action so that the visual structure of the photograph is clear. What is the boy doing, and why? That's for each viewer to decide. Photograph by Phil Auzas.

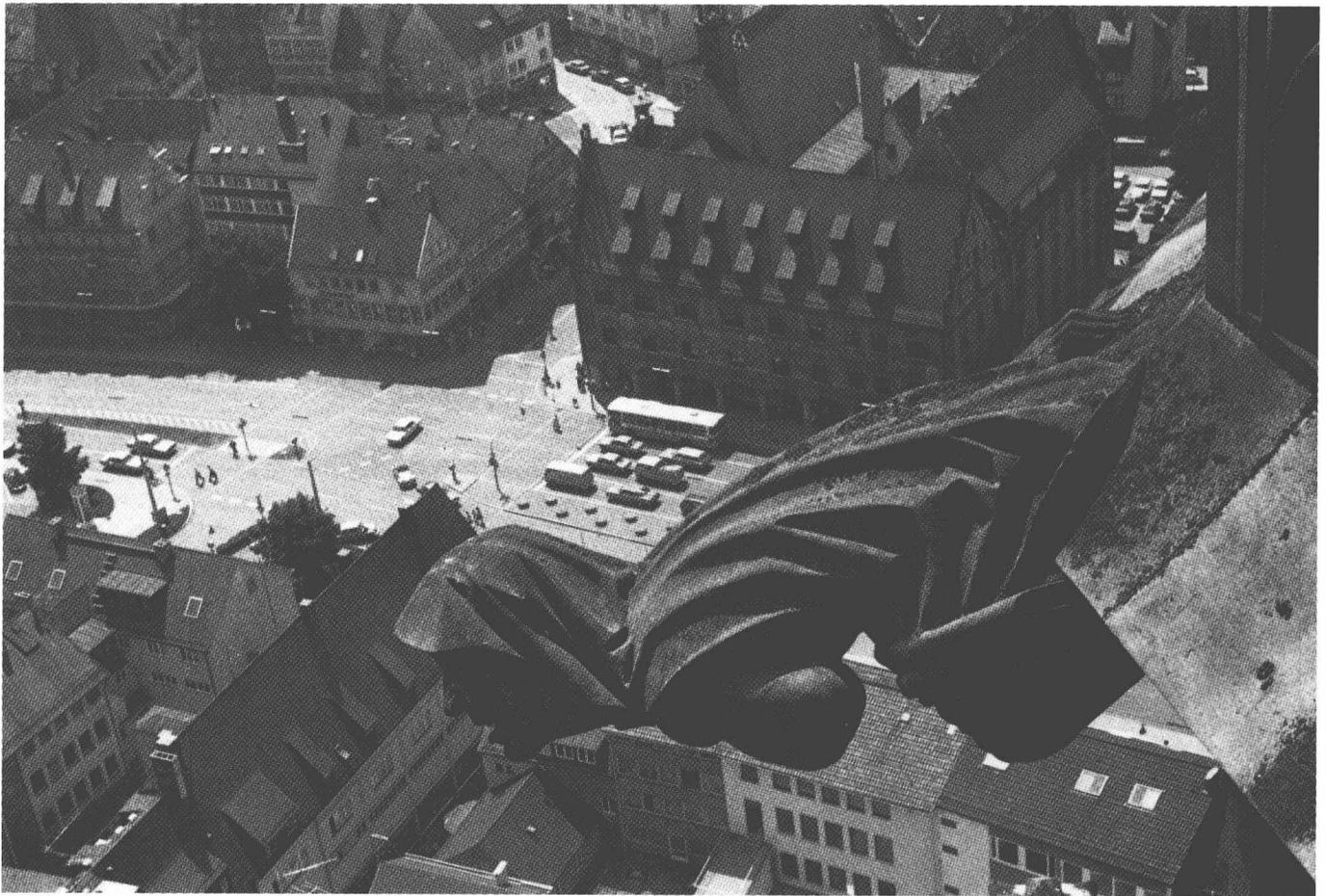


Figure 2.3

This view of a carved stone figure illustrates its relationship to the town below but is visually confusing because the tone and textures of object and background are fairly similar.



Figure 2.4

The same figure seen from a lower viewpoint is now silhouetted against a pure white sky, and can be examined without background interference. The relatively great exposure that was required to preserve detail in the shadowed areas of the figure has “burnt out” the details of the buildings below. Although the faint images of the buildings continue to establish the relationship between the figure and the town, the emphasis is now clearly on the figure.

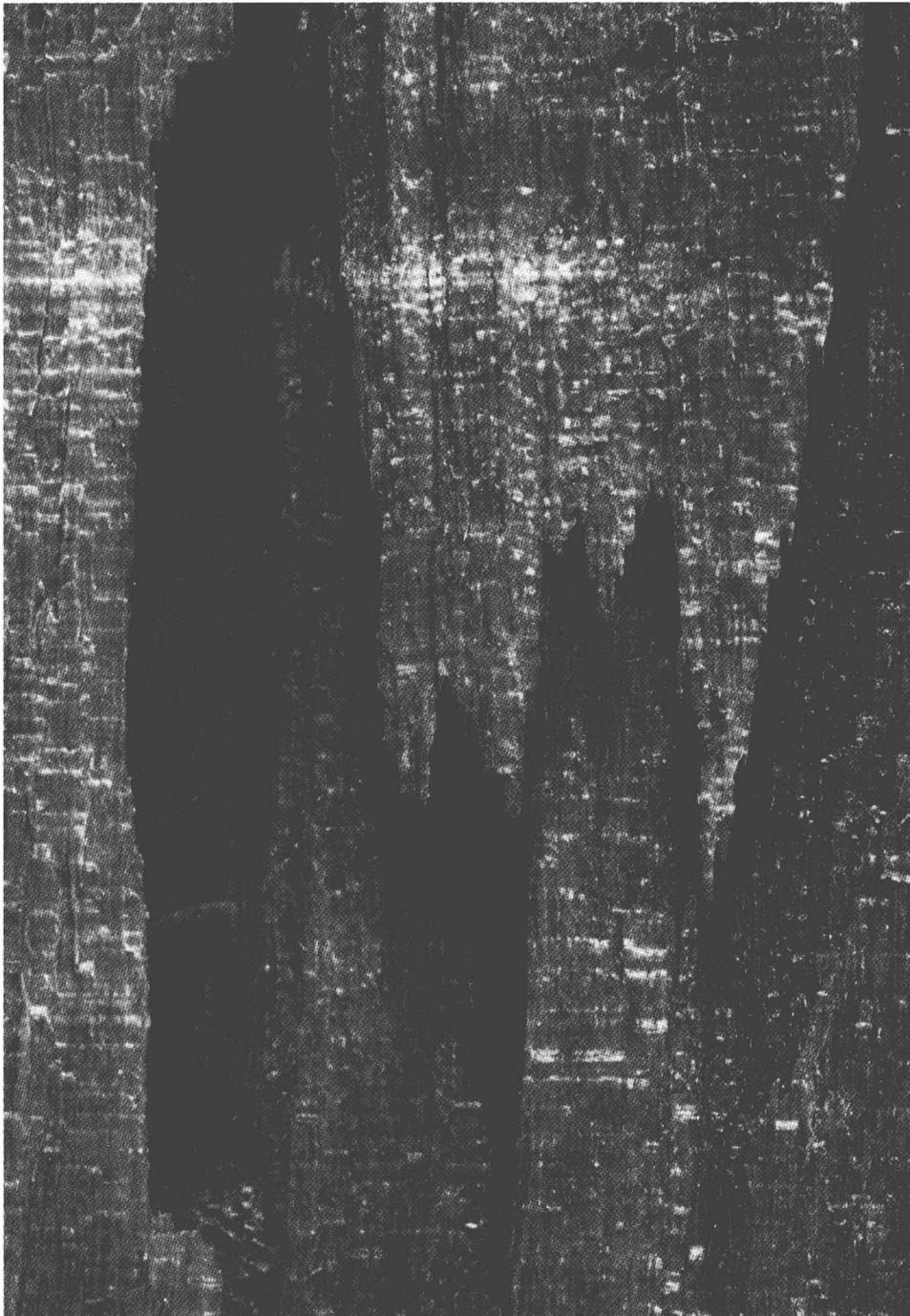


Figure 2.5

The subject of this photograph is not particularly important at first glance because of the extremely rich texture and elegant forms. In this case much of the charm of the image is due to its visual quality--what it represents is less important than what it looks like.

subject; it is also an abstract pattern of visual elements arranged in a well-defined space. That pattern arrangement—the composition of the image—can be just as important as the subject itself, figure 2.5. If the subject seems to be uncomfortably proportioned or awkwardly placed in the print format, viewers are likely to find the photograph irritating rather than attractive, even though they may not know why, figures 2.6,8.

Figure 2.6

How do you photograph a concept or feeling such as “swinging?” This attempt is obviously ineffective. Although it does describe the situation well enough, and a slow shutter speed has introduced some motion blur, the emphasis is wrong and the background is obtrusive.



Figure 2.7

A higher shutter speed has stopped the action and only the little girl's apprehensive expression and tightly clenched grip on the rope suggest that the swing is actually moving. The older girl's black-and-white striped costume competes for attention as does her stare at the camera.



It's not easy to *oversimplify* a photograph, but it is possible. Be sure that you don't eliminate so much that the image is pointless and sterile. Although good composition is certainly important, it's only the skeleton of a picture; most photographs need more than simple structure or pattern effects to be interesting for more than a few moments, figures 2.9,11.