Photographer's FOCUS

The Creative Image

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Creative photography places control of the camera in the hands of the photographer instead of the camera's firmware. It is about intent and processes that usually result in engaging and aesthetically pleasing images. At a minimum, creative photography requires a good working knowledge of the exposure triangle and depth of field on the technical side, and composition and the ability to see a subject as design elements such as lines, shapes, forms, textures, and patterns, on the creative side. Creatively captured images are often used to illustrate glossy magazines, calendars, and coffee table books. They also hang as photographs on the walls of homes, workplaces, and natural history museums.

Applied to mushrooms, creative photography begins long before the shutter is released, starting with time

Figure 1. Photographed in landscape orientation, this image captures a pair of *Galerina* mushrooms growing in a forest floor hollow covered in sphagnum moss. Familiar objects like moss are often used as scales in creative photography. In this image, the frame captures an inch-tall mushroom in a three-inch swath of a boreal forest floor. Jim Cornish photo.

spent finding pristine specimens followed by an *in situ* study of the subject and its surroundings from different points of view. This is followed by decisions on camera orientation and composition and then how to use light, color, and background blur to create atmospheres and moods that elicit an emotional response from the viewer. Creative photographs can only be achieved by experimenting with various exposures and perspectives and by capturing the design elements your subjects display in eye-catching compositions that tell interesting stories.

This article focuses on the creative mushroom image and is illustrated with the photography of three Canadian photographers and mycophiles. As you read the article and view their photographs, you will likely discover their intentions, the stories they want to tell, and how their creative choices in exposure and composition influenced the final image.

Camera Orientation

Whether to hold the camera horizontally (landscape orientation) or vertically (portrait orientation) is one of the first decisions photographers make when viewing a scene, even at the macro level. Applied to mushroom photography, both orientations keep their visual characteristics but on a much smaller scale. Landscape orientation, for example, still includes the larger picture, but one measured in inches rather than feet or miles. Portrait orientation still captures a personal connection between photographer and subject, even one that is just a few inches tall.

There is no right or wrong way to orient a camera. Sometimes even a tilted orientation works. The "correct" or "creatively correct" orientation is often dictated by the subject or the story the photographer wants to tell. Figure 1, for example, captures a pair of beautiful *Galerina* mushrooms lit by the diffused natural light that reaches the forest floor. The landscape orientation includes enough foreground, middle ground, and background to tell the story that mushrooms can be lamps that light the forest floor. This illusion would not be possible with a vertical orientation that eliminates most of the forest floor on which the illusion depends.

Figure 2. A few *Atheniella adonis* with nothing appreciable in the background is ideal for a portrait shot of a beloved mushroom. Jim Cornish photo.

The portrait orientation used in Figure 2 tells a different story. The stem, pointed cap and the slightly tilted larger mushroom create the illusion of reaching upward, something the mushroom naturally does as it goes through its young and juvenile developmental stages. The portrait orientation also minimizes the empty negative space in the image's background. The photograph also suggests a close connection between the photographer and the mushroom. Indeed, it is one of the photographer's favorite fungi. Novice photographers might think it odd to suggest any emotional connection can exist, after all, mushrooms aren't cute animals, beautiful models, or loving family

members. But for readers who have dedicated hours to locating photogenic mushrooms in unique environments and have spent considerable time lying on the damp forest floor adjusting camera settings to capture the mushrooms creatively, the connection is evident.

Since most mushrooms are fleeting and food for a wide variety of insects, mammals, and gastropods, it is good practice to photograph the pristine ones multiple times from different perspectives when the opportunity arises. Figures 1 and 2, for example, are just two of dozens of photographs shot using both camera orientations, a technique commonly practiced by all macro photographers, especially with cooperative subjects like mushrooms that do not take flight or sway in the wind just as the shutter is released. Since it costs only a little wear and tear on the shutter release mechanism to take multiple shots, it is best practice to capture these extras while you can and decide on the "keepers" later.

Subject Placement

Unlike painters who start with a clean canvas and have complete control over their compositions, photographers must use existing subjects and surroundings to create their works of art. To photograph creatively, they must also find the best perspective and use the available design elements to grab the viewer's attention, step into the mushroomscape, and tell their story versions.

In Figure 3, mycologist Renée Lebeuf used the "rule of thirds" to place the largest mushroom in an off-center location within the landscape-oriented frame. Because viewers instinctively look at the center of an image first, an off-center placement pulls the eye through the image, helping us to see other elements of interest, in this case, the repeated pattern created by the smaller mushrooms of the same form that dot the substrate. The uniform blackness of the background and the dark substrate combine to dominate the negative space and create a dynamic contrast to the bright yellow subject. Using a narrow aperture (f/25) resulted in a deep depth of field that rendered all of the mushrooms in sharp focus.

Filling the frame is a compositional technique often used in macro photography and works well in both camera orientations. Figure 4 captures the beautiful *Atheniella adonis* with its cap margins located close to the frame's edges. This placement eliminates some negative space and any distractions that might draw the eye away from the subject. Images that fill the frame are bold and visually engaging. They create a sense of closeness, something that could lead viewers who are indifferent to mushrooms to have a newfound appreciation of this oftentimes picturesque form of life. Filling the frame is also a way to highlight certain features, which in mushrooms often go unnoticed, especially when they are viewed from afar. This tight shot of

Figure 3. *Favolaschia calocera*, commonly called the orange pore fungus, is a beautiful wood-inhabiting saprotrophic mushroom. Renée Lebeuf photo.

Figure 4. This is a "fill-the-frame" shot of a small cluster of *Atheniella adonis*. This type of framing creates a very bold larger-than-life image that stands out in any setting and when seen from any distance. Jim Cornish photo.

Atheniella adonis reveals its pristine translucent stem, white gills, and gorgeous scarlet coloration, hence its common name the scarlet bonnet.

Color

Color is a basic element of art and photography and one of several elements that create atmospheres and moods that draw an emotional response from the viewer. Mushrooms are described as colorful fungi, but where plant species are less diverse, it might not seem that way. Mushroom colors can be striking on their own and when paired with a specifically colored background. In Figure 5, Pieter van Heerden captures the red caps of the *Suillus paluster*, a bolete that associates with larch trees and prefers to grow among the rosettes of green sphagnum moss. In working with color, photographers must know something about the color wheel. Red and green, for example, which appear opposite on the color wheel are complementary colors that create energic and great-looking contrasts that catch the viewer's attention when paired (Figure 5).

Van Heerden's placement of the *Suillus paluster* mushrooms within the frame creates a repeating pattern and a sense of rhythm in the image. Because the eye naturally connects the individual mushroom caps, repeating patterns also act as leading lines, moving the eye through the frame and leaving nothing important overlooked. Since some *Suillus* caps touch the sides of the frame, it suggests the repetition continues, making it easy to imagine the forest floor covered with this species, even if this is not the case.

The mood suggested by bright colors is one of energy and passion. But with mushrooms living on a dimly lit forest floor, darker hues in the right framing can suggest sadness, fear, or repulsion. Mood can also be created by the tone or brightness of these colors and the image's composition. While Figure 5 is bright and cheerful, the mood in Figure 6 is one of solitude and sadness created by the blurred green tones, dim light, and the fragile solitary subject placed off-center in the frame.

The mood in Figure 5 was intentionally created by the photographer. No one but another mushroom photographer understands why it takes hours to walk a few hundred feet of a forest trail or how much time is spent taking multiple shots of the same mushroom. For me, photographing mushrooms among the trees in a dimly lit forest is a solitary pursuit, sometimes in quiet settings that are melancholic and lonely. To impart these feelings to the viewer, I had to find a way to elicit the same response with the limited elements available. People who love mushroom photography get

Figure 5. *Suillus paluster* is commonly called the red bog bolete. It is mycorrhizal with larch and prefers wet mossy habitats. Be sure to carry a waterproof tarp to avoid getting you and your camera wet when photographing these beauties. Pieter van Heerden photo.

Figure 6. *Mycena pura* has a cap less than half an inch in diameter. Found alone and growing from a mossy coniferous forest substrate, the dim light has created muted colors that capture the mood of this gloomy day. Jim Cornish photo.

these moods. The challenge for the photographer is to arouse them in others, particularly viewers indifferent to fungi.

Textures

Texture refers to the feel, appearance, and consistency of a surface experienced by our senses of touch and sight. In photography, texture refers to the visual quality of a surface created by differences in shape, tone, contrast, and color depth. Texture details visually how something physically feels, so it helps give an image a three-dimensional look. We make sense of illusionary textures via our experiences with similar textures in the world around us. While textures don't usually play a leading role in a visual narrative, they can add interest by bringing life, vibrance, and mood to an image.

Mushroom macrofeatures such as warts, scales, spikes, and fibrils that can pepper the surfaces of caps and stems of many mushrooms create the textures of interest in mushroom photography. In Figure 7, Lisa Pedscalny creatively captures the spiked scaly cuticle of *Pholiota squarrosa*, commonly known as the shaggy scaly cap. Rather than capture all four mushrooms sharply, Pedscalny selected a narrow aperture (f 2.8) to create a shallow depth of field that enabled her to focus on one mushroom selectively. The result was a simplified image that draws the viewer's attention to the first mushroom. Since there are enough similarities between the foreground and background mushrooms visible, our brains can easily figure out that the remaining but blurred mushrooms are the same.

Timing is critical in mushroom photography. Many species are seasonal and depending on environmental conditions, can appear early, late, or not at all. When they do flush, mushrooms can change from hour to hour and day to day, and within a week or two, they naturally disappear, if the slugs and small forest creatures don't get to them first. In Figure 8, Pedscalny perfectly timed her capture of the powdery universal veil of *Amanita smithiana*, another of the poison varieties in the genus. Equating this veil remnant with cotton creates a very different sense of texture from the spikes on *P. squarrosa* as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 7. As the mushroom's specific name suggests, *Pholiota squarrosa* has a scruffy texture. Lisa Pedscalny photo.

Point of View

Point of view (POV) refers to the camera's position relative to the subject. Because it reflects reality as we often experience it, the eye-to-eye or straight-on POV is used in photography more than any other. While it is common, it is also the least expressive and emotional option. In creative photography, other POVs are used. One is positioning the camera so it looks up. This "bug's eye view" can be challenging when capturing mushrooms that grow close to the ground. It is easier to use this option when the forest floor is uneven and where mushrooms grow out of embankments, or above the ground on tree stumps, and piled rotting logs. Substrates that can be easily rolled or temporarily relocated can also reveal that "under the hood" look.

Figure 8. *Amanita smithiana* covered by the cottony remnants of a universal veil. Lisa Pedscalny photo.

Figure 9. The beautiful and enigmatic *Xeromphalina enigmatica* is a recently described species that is visually indistinguishable from *Xeromphalina campanella*. Pieter van Heerden photo.

Captured by Pieter van Heerden, the images of the same cluster of *Xeromphalina enigmatica* in Figures 9 and 10 show just how much POV can affect how we perceive a mushroom. Visually and anatomically interesting decurrent gills not visible from above are easily seen from below. In photography, capturing a mushroom from above gives the viewer a sense of superiority while capturing it from below creates an illusion of grandeur and dominance and makes the viewer feel they are in the frame. When shooting the bug's eye POV on the forest floor, resting the camera on a bean bag will give it the support necessary for long exposures.

A recurring theme in mycology is that mushrooms do not exist in isolation. Like most mushrooms, *Leccinum* species in Figure 11, for example, has a symbiotic relationship with the trees growing nearby. Another ecological

Figure 10. Looking underneath an unfamiliar mushroom can be filled with surprises, so documenting the nature of the hymenophore of a mushroom cap is important in mushroom identification. Pieter van Heerden photo.

role is as a source of food and shelter for other life forms. The bug's eye POV used here reveals that this *Leccinum* is the home of an insect likely in its maggot stage.

Depth of Field and Background Blur

The storytelling in creative photography has a great opening line (the subject), and a background that can occupy a significant part of the image and be a supporting character in the visual narrative. When rendered largely blurred, background elements can complement the subject by creating contrasts that highlight the subject's shape and form and make it stand out. A background can also contribute to the image's overall mood and visual appeal. It can even influence perspective and give the two-dimensional photograph a three-dimensional look.

In mushroom photography, backgrounds include the fungi's natural surroundings—leaf litter, moss, tree branches, leaves, decaying wood, flowers, and even other mushrooms. The type and placement of these objects are often outside the photographer's control, so they have to learn to work with what nature provides. For example, light reflected off forest floor vegetation and the sunlight that sneaks through gaps in the forest canopy, form background lights and highlights that can be blurred, creating a stunning visual effect called "bokeh" (pronounced bow-ka). Once referring only to the circles of light in a blurred background (Fig. 12), bokeh now refers to any type of background and foreground blur. Bokeh is a very subjective element in photography. It is usually described as good (creamy and soft and buttery circles) and bad (messy and visually confusing).

Bokeh is affected by the aperture, the camera-to-subject distance, and the subject-to-background distance. With so many combinations of these variables possible, getting bokeh creatively correct requires the photographer to experiment with slight changes in one or more of these factors over multiple shots. There are no rules to creating bokeh, but wider apertures are the best choice at any distance. It is also worth knowing that the further the background

Figure 11. This bug's eye POV reveals that a *Leccinum* is the home for another form of life. Jim Cornish photo.

Figure 12. This "vibrant jewel" is the bolete *Xerocomellus zelleri*. The mushroom takes on a purplish color when saturated. Here, the bolete is set against the lights and highlights of the forest understory which are rendered into circles of lights by a macro lens. Lisa Pedscalny photo.

Figure 13. A pair of "embracing" *Helvella* mushrooms are set against a moss-covered forest floor that serves as foreground and background. Lisa Pedscalny photo.

is from the subject, the creamier the bokeh becomes. Also, the closer the camera is to the subject, the blurrier the background will be.

It is not possible to see bokeh through the viewfinder of a DSLR camera. But It can be viewed on the camera's flip-up LCDs or live view option, although not exactly as rendered in the final image. So it is always a good idea to view the image after each capture and adjust accordingly to tell your story.

Traditional Bokeh

Figure 12 shows a bolete growing out of a mossy forest floor as captured by Pedscalny. The bokeh has the traditional circles of light formed by the blurring of light streaming between the trees and the blurring of light reflected off tree trunks and leafy vegetation in the background. The vertical arrangement of the light circles creates the illusion of movement as if Pedscalny captured falling raindrops. Her inclusion of a little foreground helps to create the three-dimensional effect. The centered composition, which breaks the rule of thirds, works because mushrooms are naturally symmetrical, and often look better when centered in the frame.

Smooth Transitions that Flatter the Subject

The human eye can distinguish more shades of green than any other color in the visible light spectrum. Forest floors that receive even a little light are often covered with patches of moss that vary in texture and hue. This makes moss a versatile background element for bokeh. In Figure 13, Pedscalny uses the moss to create bokeh that gradually transitions from one shade of green to another, creating an appealing backdrop that flatters the subject.

Creamy All the Way

Backgrounds are located well beyond the depth of field are often rendered as one creamy mass as pictured in Figure 14. Since there are no distractions, this type of bokeh is ideal for setting the subject apart.

Having Fun with Bokeh

One of the rules of macro and close-up photography is to remove distracting detritus from around the subject. For a free-spirited photographer like Pedscalny, this litter is an opportunity to break the rule and grab the viewer's

attention with something attractive and unusual. In Figure 15, Pedscalny uses a medium depth of field to turn orange autumn leaves into a whimsical bokeh fire that adds stunning beauty to this unusual and creative image.

Being Creative with Wide-Angle Lenses

All of the photographs featured in this article were captured using macro lenses. Most of them do not capture context, defined as the environment in which the mushroom grows. Context is often very important to identifying species but creative close-up photography rules suggest leaving it out, making it another rule worthy of breaking. One way to capture context is via "wide-angle close-up photography." This may sound like a contradiction in terms, but when wide-angle focal lengths, which tend to make things small and distance, are combined

Figure 14. A cluster of *Mycena* is contrasted by a dark background that shows only subtle differences in tone. Lisa Pedscalny photo.

Figure 15. Taking advantage of colorful background elements to create unusual imagery is a good example of the creative use of bokeh. Lisa Pedscalny photo.

Figure 16. This image of *Lactarius hibbardiae* was captured with the camera placed on the ground at the minimum focusing distance of 9 inches. The exposure was 2.5 seconds at f/22 and 100 ISO. Jim Cornish photo.

with a camera placement at or near the minimum focusing distance of the lens, it is possible to capture a focused close-up view of the subject and a softly focused or acceptably sharp view of the background in the distance (Figure 16).

Figure 16 is an example of a wide-angle close-up of a small cluster of *Lactarius* mushrooms in its natural boreal forest habitat of spruce and fir trees. It was captured with a Canon Rebel XT kit lens in 2009 when I first started photographing mushrooms. It is not a particularly fancy or creative shot, but it does show what is possible with a minimum of camera equipment and thinking outside the box. Many variations of this image are possible. Shifting the location of the mushroom in the frame can change the composition and changing the camera to subject distance can change the size of the subject and the depth and clarity of the background. Exploring the possibilities is what makes mushroom photography interesting and the results rewarding.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the photographers who freely shared their images for this article. **Lisa Pedscalny** is an avid nature enthusiast and hobby photographer living in British Columbia, Canada. Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/Lisapedscalnyphotography. **Pieter van Heerden** is a mushroom enthusiast and photographer living in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. Flickr: https://www.flickr.com/photos/vanheerdenpieter/albums. **Renée Lebeuf** is a photographer and independent researcher living in Quebec. Flickr: https://www.flickr.com/photos/21189203@N05/albums/: **The creativity of other mushroom photographers** Photogenic Fungi—the Art of Mycography. https://www.facebook.com/groups/1138491606309769/