

Environmental Portraits



Environmental portraits

- **Are more** revealing than a basic portrait of an individual or a simple headshot
- tell some of the **story of the subject** .
Who is this person?
What does he/she do?
How does he/she feel about this activity?
- give insight into the life and character of the subject -not a picture of the person's outer appearance, but something of his/her **inner self**.
- Captures the **subject within his/her typical environment**, perhaps the home, workplace, place of worship or leisure or **anywhere that relates to who he/she is as an individual**.
- Knowing something about the person's life story will help you create more compelling portraits

Positives

- You are photographing someone in a space that he/she is used to; so more **likely to be at ease** with his/her surroundings.
- This strengthens the chances of **capturing natural facial expressions and body language**.
- The hands fall into place on familiar objects and the subject may even be in a position to put the photographer at ease!
- **Subjects** who love what they do and are **comfortable and easier to photograph in this way, resulting in better and stronger images**

The environment – an essential, part of the portrait.

- The key is finding the **right balance** between the ‘environment’ part and the ‘portrait’ part.
- shows subjects in natural surroundings- no artificial studio with fake lighting and a specially painted backdrop.
- E.g. a carpenter in his workshop with workbench covered in wood shavings and his overcoat covered in dust. It shows him in to the place where he spends his time and therefore gives us a clearer picture of who he is.
- Allowing your subject to choose the location can be beneficial when you are working in unfamiliar territory and can save a lot of time looking for a location yourself.
- Determine the style of the shoot, the purpose and the mood you intend conveying. Examine the setting carefully.

Backgrounds

- BACKGROUND in environmental portraiture is **the make or break element perhaps almost as important as the sitter.**
- Making the environment **work with** the picture, rather than against it. **No distractions.** Location can dominate the image so much that it distracts your viewer away from your main focal point (the subject).
- **Less is always more** and a huge pitfall is for the surroundings to dominate the subject. Include just enough to tell viewers a bit about the person, while not allowing the subject to be overshadowed. **Try to avoid cluttered areas, colors that are too bright** etc. You can decrease the distractions with clever use of cropping, depth of field and subject placement
- The goal is to convey more about the subject than simply appearance; the picture story is a powerful tool.

Examine background carefully

- clear space around the subject, especially the head, so he/she will be better defined within the surroundings.
- when composing your shots ensure that the background doesn't detract from the presence of your subject. The focus should be on your subject.
- Another way to **enhance the atmosphere** of your portraits is by adding **smoke** . Darker backgrounds work best for smoke.
- **Candlelight** is another natural light source to create ambience.
- Use **Props** if they help **tell the story**. If there is a dull background, introducing a prop can make a big difference. Props are a great way to add more **culture, color, or texture** into an environmental portraiture.

Establish Rapport 1

- Thank the subject for his / her time
- let him / her know you are enthusiastic to work with him/her.
- sit where the subject will be sitting or standing. See the world from his/her perspective.
- get the subject talking and involved in his/her interest,
- ask questions and allow elaboration
- occasionally put the camera down and show your interest in him/her as a subject, and as a person.
- the conversation requires **more listening** than talking.

Establish Rapport 2

- be sensitive to the type of person the subject is and respond accordingly.
- be friendly and relaxed from the start, and show a professional enthusiasm for doing a great job with the portrait.
- You need the subject to trust you. Give instructions when, and if, needed.
- When happy with the initial photos show them on the back of your camera. This usually leads to conversation, and more photographs
- .
- The more you relax and enjoy the process, the more likely is your subject to relax too.
- Create a positive vibe. Smile, and chat..

Posing the subject

- pre-visualise how the subject can be placed in the scene. Most people feel at ease when sitting or having something to lean against (wall, doorframe for example); this is a good starting point.
- may not be necessary if the subject is relaxed in the familiar environment and you connect with his / her interests. The subject will be more relaxed and have more trust if you know what you're doing.
- never physically handle your subject
- keep instructions to a minimum

E.g. If necessary, decide if the subject is better sitting or standing

- Moving the head up or down
- Turning towards the light
- Turning the left shoulder towards the camera slightly
- ask him/her to look off into the distance, or to focus on something
- If you are shooting candidly there is no need to pose. Anticipation is key, wait the decisive moment to take your shot.

Posing

- **Position your model in the light against the dark area.**
- Notice how the light highlights your subject and the background is dark and free of distractions.
- Keep an eye on the light and try **shooting from different angles**, or **reposition your model** to stand half in the shadow and half in the light to create deep contrasts. This is the easiest way to manipulate natural light for a more dramatic feel.

Have your camera ready

- Prepare your camera's settings before you engage your subject. Think about exposure levels.
- Best lens choice is a mid-range lens- between 35mm and 70mm is a good choice.
- Have a comfortable distance when making environmental portraits.
- **Fill the Frame**
- Remove any distractions in the frame. Everything in your frame should support the story you are telling. Ask yourself if everything is relevant and related to your subject.
- If it's not, do something about it.

E.g.

Move your point of view;

Have your subject move;

Move the distracting element from the background.

Eye contact?

- You can tell a great deal about people by looking in their eyes.
- The choice you will have to make as an environmental portrait photographer, is whether or not you will want to establish eye contact with the subject.
- While eye contact **increases the intimacy** between the viewers and the photograph, making them feel drawn in and present in the picture, as if the person is looking at them.
- Yet, a photograph of a person looking away from the camera can feel **more real, and less posed**, as if he/she is just going about the daily routine.

Keep post processing in mind

- In more challenging lighting situations, e.g. harsh mid-day lighting; or backlighting; part- shade or shade from a hat, asking your subject to move, or waiting for the light to become favourable isn't always an option, so it's good practice to **shoot with post-processing in mind**.
- By underexposing or overexposing elements in a scene allows the freedom of recovering lost details in your editing software by adjusting the shadow/fill depending on the situation. **Expose for the highlights and tweak the shadows in post.**
- If this increases digital noise (grain) you can reduce this with some noise reduction in post.

Post-Process to Enhance

- Sometimes you will not be able to control the lighting of your subject and background. Then improve your environmental portrait during the post processing stage. Change the **exposure levels**.
- Remove distracting objects by **cloning** them out. If there is something behind your subject that you cannot move remove it or **blur** it slightly.
- Use the **burn tool** or a similar technique to darken the background. Done correctly, the subject's colors, exposure and contrast will enhance. The viewer's attention will be drawn more to them. The **Dodge tool** can be used to lighten important features.
- Creating a **vignette** is also a popular method to help bring more attention to the subject. Be careful not to overdo this technique and lose detail relevant to the story you are telling.

Extending our knowledge

- **Study some of the old masters**, including painters as well as photographers. Look at how they've placed the subject within the setting, which elements have been included to help the composition or the 'message' and take note of what the light is doing.
- Consider the photography of grand master of environmental portraiture **Arnold Newman**. His composition and use of light was always controlled and considered. But perhaps his greatest skill was incorporating found elements to give a psychological edge to the portrait.

JUNE's SUBMISSION

DEFINITION

- **An environmental portrait is a portrait executed in the subject's usual environment , such as in his/her home or workplace, and typically illuminates the subject's life and surroundings. Environmental portraits**
- give context to the subject you're photographing
- often give the viewer of your shots real insight into the personality and lifestyle of your subject.
- sit somewhere between the purposely posed shots of a studio portrait (they are posed and they are unmistakably 'portraits') and candid shots which capture people almost incidentally as they go through their daily life.

The Challenge

- Read and interpret definition.
- Research topic “Environmental Portraits”
- Choose subjects and locations
- Prepare camera and lighting, reflectors, props (if needed)
- Edit images
- Present and submit - Good Luck!
- **Can you extend the photographic skills and topics you usually attempt?**