



ART PHOTOGRAPHY ACADEMY · TALK SUMMARY & COMPANION NOTES

The Clinical Perfection Trap

Stop Chasing Sharpness

Is your photography gear outperforming your visual intent?

MARTIN OSNER · Co-Founder, Art Photography Academy

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

What This Document Is

This companion pack accompanies Martin Osner's talk of the same title. It includes a full narrative walkthrough of the discussion, the four disciplines Martin teaches for managing sharpness, focus and blur, supporting visual references, the Visual Intention Checklist promised in the video, and — at the back — the complete transcript of the talk, word for word, so you can read along or revisit any section in detail.

Use it however suits you: read it straight through as a summary, dip into the checklist before your next shoot, or turn to the full transcript when you want Martin's exact words.

Want to watch the talk again while you read? [Watch “Stop Chasing Sharpness” on YouTube](#)

There is nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept.

— Ansel Adams

1. The Clinical Perfection Trap

Martin opens with a term he calls “Clinical Perfection” — a state in which a photographer's technical mastery and equipment have quietly outpaced their creative vision. It's an easy trap to fall into, and he walks through exactly how it happens.

It starts at the camera shop. You've saved up, you're excited, and the salesman is just as enthusiastic as you are about the upgrade — eagerly taking your credit card as he promises the new gear will transform your work. You head home with the latest technology, expectations high. There's nothing like the smell of a new camera coming out of the box.

But underneath the excitement is a 2 am wake-up call: a quiet recognition that we've done this before, and very little actually changed in our photography as a result. On the first shoot, the new camera feels good — but that feeling is emotional attachment, not necessarily better work. Weeks or months later, once the emotion fades, we see the photographs for what they really are. They're good. They're not outstanding. Friends and family call them “nice” — and in high-end photography, as Martin puts it, nice is a death sentence.

This is what he calls the vicious circle: mastering the exposure triangle, shooting razor-sharp images, and knowing, quietly, that the satisfaction is coming from technical ability rather than creative depth.

Martin traces this pattern back to his own early competition years. Judges acknowledged his technical proficiency but never gave him the credit he felt he deserved — because, looking back, there was very little artistic endeavour or creative intent in the work. He was influenced at the time by Alfred Stieglitz's idea that photography can hold “a reality so subtle that it becomes even more powerful than reality itself.” His own photographs were technically correct, but lacked soul. A fellow photographer once remarked that you could always recognise Martin's work because it was “technically perfect” — and that comment became his wake-up call. He was a predictable photographer.

If you are honest enough to admit it, your equipment might be outperforming your intent.

— Martin Osner

2. Two Kinds of Gallery Visitors

Martin illustrates the core problem with an observation from his own art galleries. Two types of visitors consistently show up in front of the same photograph.

- The Art Lover steps back. They discuss the emotion, the tension, the intent — and they don't ask about the equipment.
- The technically obsessed visitor moves closer, glasses out, nose almost to the glass. They aren't looking for the art — they're looking for pixels, and the first question is almost always about the camera and lens brand.

Great photography is about depth of feeling, not about depth of field.

— Pieter Adams

Martin's response to this is simple: the single most important component in any camera is the twelve inches behind it — you and me. It's why he no longer judges photography competitions. He didn't want to be the gatekeeper of sharpness.

He also references a well-known exchange between Henri Cartier-Bresson and Helmut Newton, in which Cartier-Bresson dismissed sharpness as a “bourgeois concept” — sharpness used as a status symbol, a way of bragging about technical polish rather than capturing the moment that actually matters.

3. Why Sharpness Has a Voice

Sharpness, Martin argues, is a double-edged sword. Used well, it's your greatest ally in holding a viewer's attention. Used too often in the same frame, it can slice through your creativity — like too much lemon concentrate in a cocktail. There's a real difference between visual indigestion and selective, creative intention.

Foveal Vision: *The part of our eyesight responsible for sharp, detailed focus. It comes from a tiny area in the centre of the retina called the fovea, which contains a high concentration of cone cells. This is the vision we use when reading, recognising faces, judging fine detail, or looking directly at something. Everything outside this small central area forms part of our wider peripheral vision.*

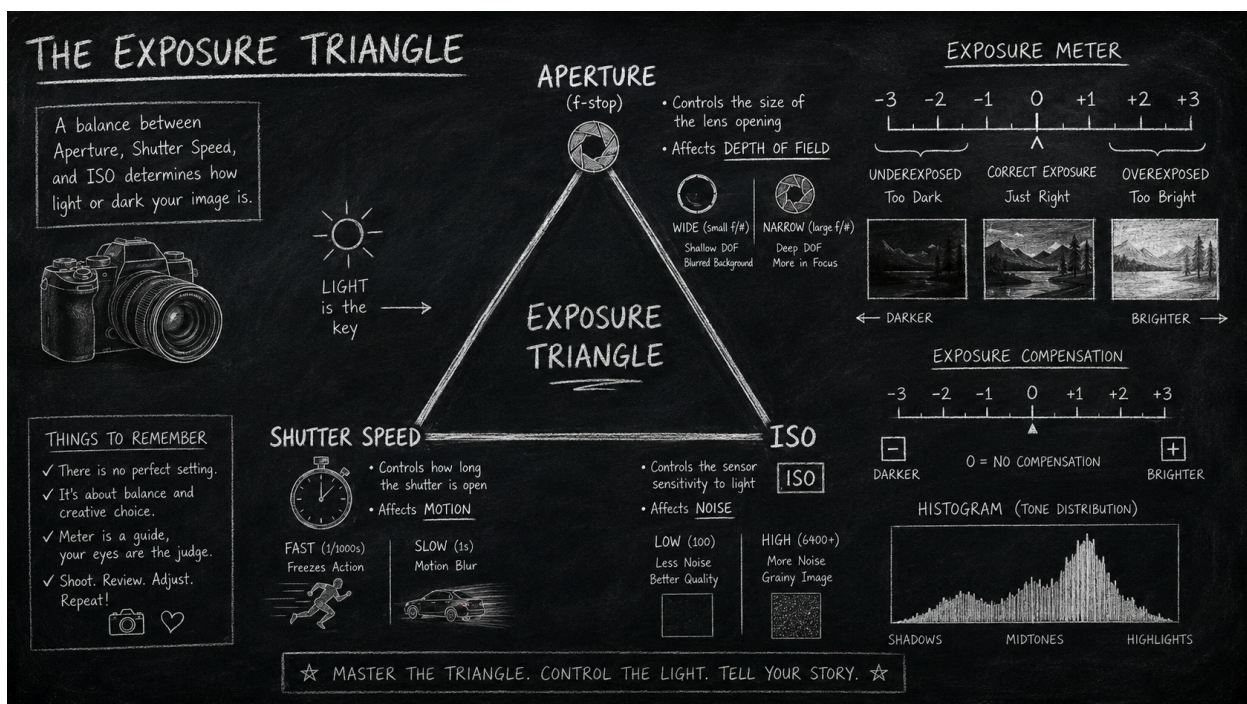
Superman Syndrome: *The illusion that we can see everything in sharp focus simultaneously — we cannot. Human vision has a narrow spotlight of true clarity, and everything beyond it is peripheral blur. The illusion exists because our eyes move and refocus so quickly that the brain interprets the rapid sequence as a single complete image.*

A camera lens does the opposite of our own vision by default: it can record everything in high focus all at once, which is precisely why an image shot this way can feel uncomfortable and distracting to the human viewer — it fights against how we naturally see.

Sharpness & Softness: *Sharpness has a voice. It says: “Look here. Concentrate.” Softness has a voice too. It says: “This is an illusion. This is a dream. Rest here.” The eye naturally drifts over the soft areas, unable to settle, always drawn onward toward the sharp. That quiet pull is the conversation every photograph has with its viewer.*

Martin's advice: make a conscious choice. Force your eye to move across every corner of the composition before you take the photograph. Ask whether each element should be there. Start close, and earn the right to move back — great composition comes as much from what you choose to leave out as from what you include.

You do not take a photograph; you make a photograph.
— Ansel Adams



The Exposure Triangle — aperture, shutter speed and ISO, and how each shapes the image.

4. The Four Disciplines

Martin breaks the management of focus, sharpness and blur into four disciplines — tools to move between them deliberately, rather than defaulting to one out of habit.

1. Corner-to-Corner Sharpness — The classic reproduction of reality — everything in focus. A valid starting point (think f/16, or Weegee's “f/8 and be there”), but a starting point only, not the destination.

2. Selective Focus — A shallow depth of field is used to build a hierarchy: what matters stays sharp; everything else softens away. Martin's challenge — shoot only with a wide-open 50mm lens for a month to build this instinct.

3. Intentional Camera Movement — Removing hard edges altogether for a dreamlike, impressionistic result — moving from the clinical into the ethereal, like viewing the world through a rain-streaked window.

4. Post-Processing & Development — Refining the narrative in the digital darkroom. Martin distinguishes processing (developing the raw file) from editing (working the resulting pixels) as two distinct stages.



The same street, four ways — focus, selective focus, intentional camera movement, and fully out of focus. One scene, four disciplines.

SELECTIVE FOCUS CHALLENGE

Practice shallow depth of field by working with one standard lens for one month.

1 THE CHALLENGE

- Use a 50 mm standard lens for one month.
- Photograph with that lens only for the entire month.
- Keep the aperture wide open on every shoot.
- If your lens is f/1.8, use f/1.8.
- If your lens is f/1.4, use f/1.4.
- If your lens is f/2, keep it at f/2.

☆ Wide open = shallow depth of field

2 WHAT HAPPENS?

- Because a 50 mm is a standard lens, you naturally move a little closer to your subject.
- At a wide aperture, the area in focus becomes shallow.
- Your subject stands out while the background falls softly out of focus.
- This is selective focus in action.

4 HOW TO SHOOT

- Move closer to your subject.
- Look for a clear subject.
- Keep the background farther away.
- Watch how focus changes from shot to shot.

3 WHY 50 mm?

- A standard lens gives a natural perspective.
- It encourages you to think about distance and framing.
- It is ideal for practising selective focus without extreme distortion or compression.

5 NOT FOR WIDE ANGLES

- Wide-angle lenses are not ideal for this exercise.
- Their depth of field is usually too deep.
- It is harder to get that soft, selective-focus look.

6 NOT FOR LONG TELEPHOTO LENSES

- Long telephoto lenses are also not ideal for this exercise.
- Their depth of field can become too narrow or too compressed.
- That makes the exercise less balanced for learning.

7 YOUR GOAL

- Train your eye to see selective focus.
- Learn how distance, aperture and lens choice affect depth of field.
- By the end of the month, your use of shallow focus should feel intentional.

1 MONTH CHALLENGE

The Selective Focus Challenge — shoot wide open on a 50mm lens for one month to train your eye.

WEEGEE: f/8 AND BE THERE

"f/8 and be there" is a famous photographic expression often attributed to Weegee. It reminds photographers that, at times, being present for the moment matters more than chasing perfect technique.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?
 See the moment → Raise the camera → Take the shot
 Sometimes speed and presence are more important than perfection.

THE IDEA BEHIND f/8
 * A practical working aperture
 * Enough depth of field for many scenes
 * Lets the photographer work quickly
 * Supports sharp, responsive shooting

WHY IT STILL MATTERS
 ✓ Be ready for fleeting moments
 ✓ Don't let overthinking make you miss the picture
 ✓ Technique is important — but timing is vital
 ✓ Great photographs often happen in an instant

THE PHILOSOPHY
 Weegee Arthur Fellig New York photojournalist
 Timing, Presence, Instinct, Opportunity
 Action can sometimes be more important than reflection.

THINGS TO REMEMBER
 ✓ Use technique to support the moment
 ✓ Stay alert and observant
 ✓ Work simply when speed matters
 ✓ Being there is the first step

★ BE READY. BE PRESENT. f/8 AND BE THERE. ★

"f/8 and be there" — Weegee's reminder that presence and timing can matter more than perfect technique.

THE POWER OF f/16 IN LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

f/16 is a go-to aperture for landscapes when you want strong picture clarity and extended depth of field. It helps keep more of the scene sharp from foreground to background.

APERTURE COMPARISON
 WIDE APERTURE f/2.8 → SMALL APERTURE f/16
 LARGE OPENING Less in focus → SMALL OPENING More scene in focus

WHY USE f/16?
 * Excellent picture clarity
 * Extended depth of field
 * Keeps more of the landscape sharp
 * Ideal with wide-angle lenses
 * Great for foreground-to-background detail

BEST USED WHEN
 ✓ Shooting expansive landscapes
 ✓ Using a wider-angle lens
 ✓ You want near and far subjects sharp
 ✓ You have time to work carefully

EXTENDED DEPTH OF FIELD WITH f/16
 Tripod + careful composition
 FOREGROUND: Close subjects
 MIDDLE GROUND: Mid-distance subjects
 BACKGROUND: Distant subjects
 Extended depth of field Front-to-back sharpness

THINGS TO REMEMBER
 ✓ Use a tripod if shutter speed gets slow
 ✓ Focus carefully into the scene
 ✓ Watch for diffraction if you stop down too far
 ✓ f/16 is a dependable landscape starting point

WIDE-ANGLE LENS
 Wider field of view + f/16 = Maximum scene sharpness

f/16 IN ACTION
 Broad, front-to-back sharp coverage

★ SMALL APERTURE. BIG DEPTH. SHARP LANDSCAPES. ★

f/16 and extended depth of field — a dependable starting point for corner-to-corner landscape sharpness.



Processing versus editing — developing the raw file is non-destructive and reversible; pixel editing is creative, layer-based work on the rendered image.

Sharpness has a voice, and blur has a voice too. Multiple competing focus points in the same frame make a picture busy and cost you the narrative. Blur tells the viewer to rest or to move past an area toward what matters. In strong photography, you'll usually find a combination of both: sharp means “look”; soft means “rest.”

If you're struggling to let go of technical proficiency, you may simply have reached the ceiling with your equipment — and that's the moment to turn toward the true art of photography instead.

The Visual Intention Checklist

The practical checklist referenced in the talk. Run through it before you shoot — or use it to review a session afterwards.

Before You Raise the Camera

- What single idea or feeling do I want this photograph to convey?
- If I could only keep one element sharp, what would it be?
- Is my equipment or technique doing the deciding here — or is my intent?

Composing the Frame

- Scan every corner: does each element in the frame earn its place?
- Where do I want the viewer's eye to land first — and where should it rest?
- Am I including this detail because it serves the image, or out of habit?
- Have I started well and earned the right to move back?

Choosing Sharpness & Blur

- Which of the four disciplines fits this image — corner-to-corner, selective focus, intentional movement, or a post-processing decision?

- Am I creating a hierarchy or leaving every point equally sharp?
- Would this photograph benefit from a place for the eye to rest, not just look?

Before You Walk Away

- If this were printed and framed on a wall, what would a viewer feel first?
- Am I chasing sharpness for its own sake, or in service of the concept?
- Would I rather this photograph be technically flawless or genuinely felt?

The Gospel According to Martin

Martin closes the talk with a set of direct statements — the advice he'd give if he could leave you with nothing else.

Stop trying to prove how good your camera equipment is.

Stop trying to extract every megapixel you have.

Stop being so loyal to a camera brand. It's not about the camera. It's about you.

Turn your efforts inward and start to create mystery and intrigue in your photography.

And ask the important questions, every time:

- What do I want my viewer to see?
- Where do I want the eye to go?
- What do I want them to experience?
- Where am I going to allow their eye to rest?

Stop taking nice pictures and start making interesting photographs.

— Martin Osner

Want to go deeper into building your own visual language as an artist?

**Explore the six-week Art Photography Academy programme at
artphoto.academy · artphotographyacademy.com**