

flowers

fine art photography techniques and tips

~ a photo44 ebook ~
by Shelley L. Ball

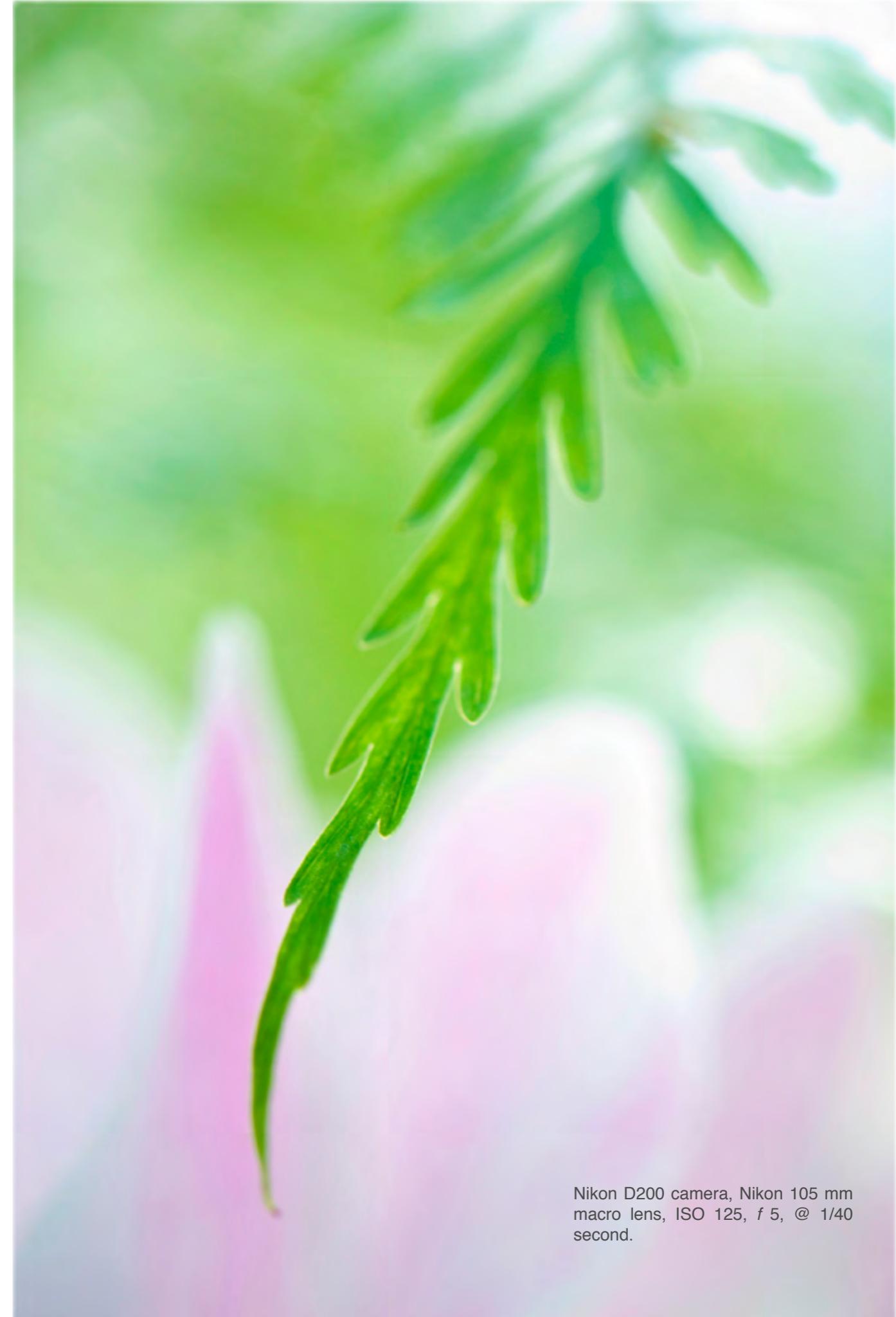
Flowers: fine art photography techniques and tips
Shelley L. Ball
44th Parallel Photography
Westport, Ontario
Canada

shell@photo.net
www.photo44.net

Copyright © 2012 by Shelley L. Ball
ISBN 978-0-9917422-0-2

NOTICE OF RIGHTS

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means without the prior written permission of the author.



Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 125, f 5, @ 1/40 second.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my Mum. She inspired me, by example, to be the best I can be and to give the best I can give. I'm grateful that some of her creativity rubbed off on me and I hope this book would have made her proud. And to Bernie Foley, a wonderful man with a passion for flowers and an incredible green thumb.



Oxeye Daisy. Nikon D200, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 160, f3.5 @1/200 second.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have always loved photography and always had a camera in my hand. In my career as a biologist, I used my camera to document the biological diversity of the amazing places I have had the good fortune of visiting. But my journey into the more creative side of photography began when I moved to New Zealand in 2003 - a country with a huge love affair with photography. New Zealand must have more photographers per capita than any other country in the world!

When I moved to Christchurch, I was surrounded by photography. I joined a few camera clubs, including the Photographic Society of New Zealand, the Christchurch Photographic Society, and the Nature Photography Society of New Zealand. I am grateful to members of these photographic organizations for welcoming me into their circles, for encouraging me, and most of all, for sharing their wealth of knowledge and their passion.

In particular, I thank members of the Nature Photography Society of New Zealand. They are an amazing group of talented, passionate and inspiring photographers and friends.

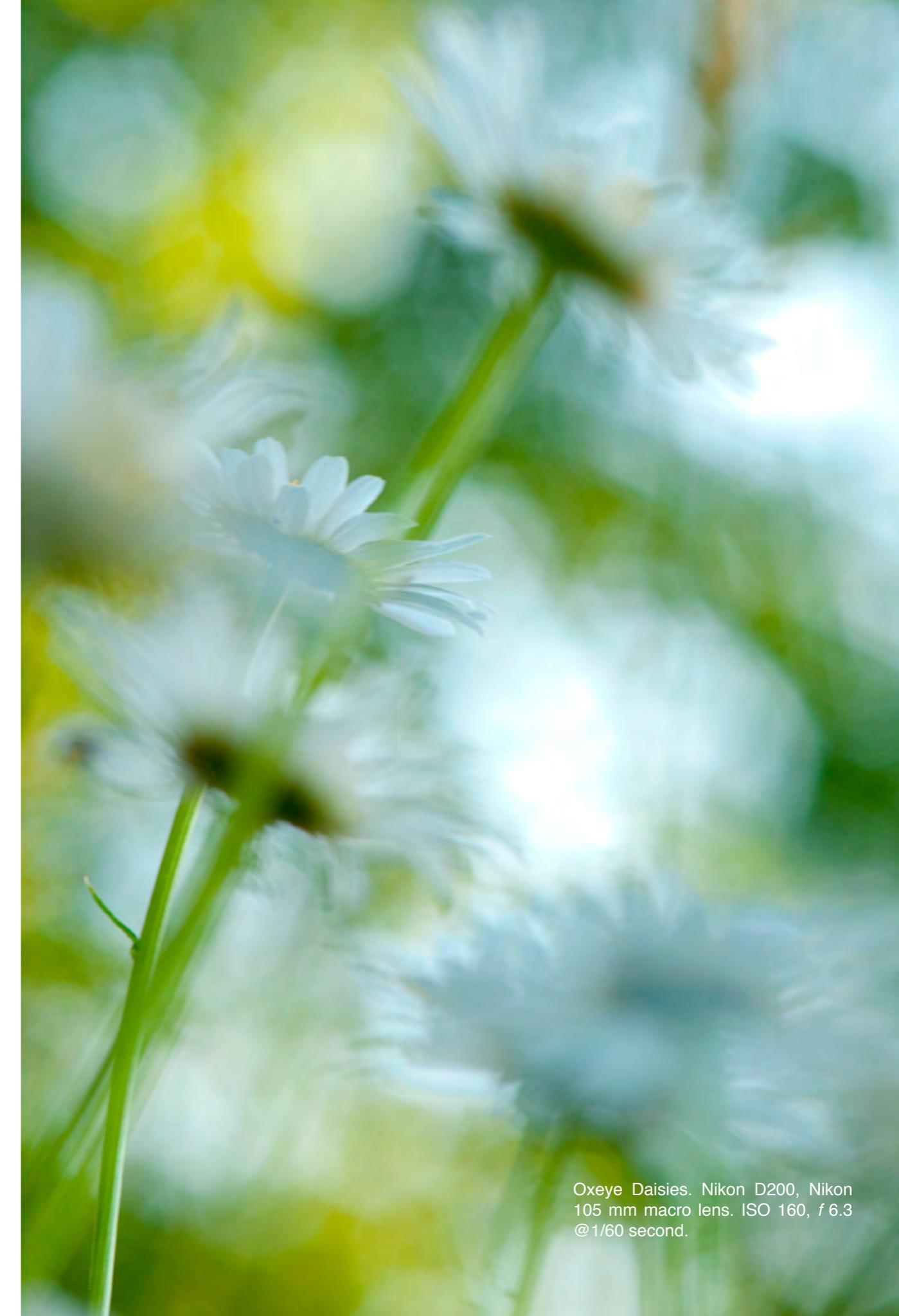
I am extremely grateful to Freeman Patterson for sharing his wealth of talent and for showing me the incredible things that one can do with a camera. It was Freeman who lit the fire in me for abstract and photo-impressionism photography. I still remember sitting across from him at lunch and talking with him during a workshop he gave for the 10th anniversary of our Nature Photography Society of New Zealand and thinking what a kind and down-

to-earth soul he is. It was on one of Freeman's week long workshops in New Zealand, a few years later, that I really began my journey into creative photography and I have never looked back. I am truly grateful.

I extend a heartfelt thanks to Sally Mason of New Zealand. Sally inspired me, through her beautiful images, to see that photographs of flowers could be dreamy, ethereal and evocative. She is a truly talented and inspiring person.

A very big thank you goes to a very special group of people, - Maryjo Bedford, Anne Johns, Roseanne Cameron, Ian Walls, Witta Priester, Meg Errington, Ann Worthy-Stephenson and Tim Stephenson. Their willingness to share their talent, time, homes and friendship is so much appreciated, especially since it came at a challenging time in my life. They are all wonderful and talented and inspiring people whom I miss very much.

Finally, I thank my friends and family - some of whom live near me and others who live thousands of kilometers away - for support and encouragement along the way. Their words of encouragement mean more to me than they know.



Oxeye Daisies. Nikon D200, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 160, f 6.3 @1/60 second.

PREFACE

When I started making fine art flower images, I was still using slide film. I enjoyed what I was doing, but was reluctant to experiment much. Slide film wasn't cheap and I couldn't afford to shoot a lot on my budget at the time. Plus, any experimenting I did meant I had to carefully record, for each frame, what I had done as well as record the f-stop, shutter speed, ISO, etc. That got old pretty quickly.

I think the biggest hurdle to improving my skills was the lack of immediate feedback that came with using slide film. It was a week or two before I had my images back. And then I had to review them and go through my notes, seeing what settings I had used to achieve a certain result. I'm not complaining; that was just the way it was back then. But then along came digital photography. And wow - you could immediately see your image on an LCD screen on the camera. For me, that was the turning point.

Using a digital camera was *the* single biggest thing that allowed me to quickly improve my photography. I could try a technique, use a combination of camera settings, and immediately see if the image 'worked' the way I wanted it to. If I liked it, it was a keeper. If I didn't, I hit the delete button. With digital photography, I began to experiment. I could afford to. Experimenting no longer cost an arm and a leg. For me, that was the beginning of my journey into creative photography and especially, fine art flower photography.

My goal in making this book is to teach you a variety of techniques that, with practice, will help you acquire new creative skills and begin making the

kinds of flower image you'll enjoy and will want to hang on your walls. It is meant to help both the beginner and advanced photographer. I have assumed that you have a basic understanding of photography (e.g. f-stops, shutter speeds, ISO, etc.) and of your camera. But that's all you need to begin learning how to make beautiful images of flowers. The rest is up to practice and the limits of your creativity.

I have included descriptions of techniques, specific tips, and lots of examples of the kinds of images you can make using each technique, along with brief descriptions of key things I did to make them.

This book is about more than fine art photography, more than teaching you techniques. It's about showing you how to break the mould and how to make images that perhaps you've never even thought of trying before. It's about encouragement and experimentation. I hope you will try new things. Be bold! Force yourself out of your comfort zone. At first, not every image will be a keeper, but with practice, more and more will be. If you're shooting digital, you can afford to experiment. Mastering the techniques in this book is an iterative process - the more you shoot, the better you will become. So shoot lots and use the immediate feedback you get from a digital camera to fine tune your approach.

Most of all, I hope this book helps you to experience the joy and satisfaction of making beautiful images of the subjects you love, flowers.



Oxeye Daisy. Nikon D200, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 160, f 6.3 @1/160 second.



With so many colours and shapes, the possibilities are endless!

INTRODUCTION

Whether it's extreme abstracts or a more literal approach, flowers are wonderful subjects for photography. With so many colours and shapes, the possibilities are endless! And flowers are so abundant. From the polar deserts of the high arctic to the lush forests of the tropics, flowers are everywhere. But you don't have to be in an exotic location to make beautiful flower images. Oh sure, it would be great to photograph fields of red poppies in Tuscany. But you can make equally stunning images right outside your own front door. By practicing a few simple techniques outlined in this book, you too will be producing eye-catching images that you'll want to hang on your walls.



Summer Meadow. Nikon D200, 600 mm lens. ISO 160, f 14 @1/250 second. Shot on an overcast day for greater colour saturation.

CREATE YOUR OWN GARDEN

Creating your own garden is one of the best ways to have a nearly endless source of subjects. I live on 15 acres of property. Much of it is forested. But the area around my house provides plenty of planting and landscaping opportunities and so I plant the kinds of flowers I most want to photograph.

Sketch out the areas of your yard suitable for small gardens. Then pick up a copy of your favourite seed and plant catalogue or get online and start making a list of the flowers that you want to photograph.

Look at your yard and map out the sunny and shady areas and begin to match your chosen flowers to these. You don't have to create a landscaping masterpiece or a yard worthy of the cover of Better Homes and Gardens. All you want to do is plant the flowers that you love to photograph so that you'll have a great supply of photographic subjects.

Be sure to choose flowers that can survive in your climate (the seed catalogues call these zones). Also consider a mix of perennials and annuals. With perennials, you won't have to plant them each year; they'll re-grow on their own.

But if some of your favourite flowers are annuals, there's no reason not to plant them each year.

Also try to select a variety of flowers that have different blooming times. That way, you can ensure you have blooms to photograph from early spring through to mid fall.

If you live in an apartment or simply don't have the space or time for planting gardens, don't worry. There are some great alternatives. Consider a balcony box or large pot. And if you don't even have the space or time for those, that's ok too. Consider buying some potted plants for indoors or even cut flowers in a vase. All of these will provide plenty of photographic opportunities as well as brighten up a room.

Pink Lupin. Nikon D200, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 320, f 10 @1/90 second. Shot on an overcast day for greater colour saturation.



TECHNIQUES

There are a number of different techniques for photographing flowers. Some will produce more literal images, others very abstract. The approach you use will depend partly on the result you want to achieve and partly on the equipment you have available.

Although equipment does matter, it doesn't mean you need to go out and spend a bundle on a fancy lens or an expensive dual flash bracket system. Work with what you have. If you find you love making macro images of flowers, but you want the benefits of a true macro lens, then consider buying a second hand lens to start with. That's what I did.

In this book, I describe a number of approaches and techniques you can use for your image making. Experiment. Force yourself outside your comfort zone. Be different. If you're not really a fan of abstract photography, try it anyway. I guarantee your photography skills will improve tremendously and that you will develop a new way of seeing. And you might just discover a new style of photography that you had never tried before, but becomes your new favourite. This is what happened to me! Most of all, have fun. That's what fine art flower photography is all about.



Tulip Bed at the Ottawa, Ontario Spring Tulip Festival. Nikon D200, Nikon 18 - 200 mm zoom lens, ISO 160, f 10 @1/100 second. Shot at mid day on a bright sunny day.

Flower Portraits

If you're new to flower photography, making flower portraits can be a great starting point from which to launch your journey into fine art flower photography. You don't have to have a pricey macro lens or a long telephoto. Anything in the 50 - 150 mm range of focal lengths will do the job. A good all-purpose lens for starting out is a medium focal length zoom lens. This gives you a range of focal lengths to play around with. I'll go into the nitty-gritty of equipment a bit later, but for now, work with what you have at hand. There's always a way to make it work for you.

If you know you want to make close-up images of flowers as well as portraits, then consider buying a macro lens. I use my 105 mm macro lens for a lot of my flower portraiture as well as tight close-ups. It's an extremely versatile lens and excellent value for the money, when it comes to flower photography. But you don't absolutely have to have one.

Here are some key techniques and tips to get your flower portraiture started. With these, you'll quickly be producing beautiful images that you will be happy to hang on your walls (or someone else's!).

Perspective

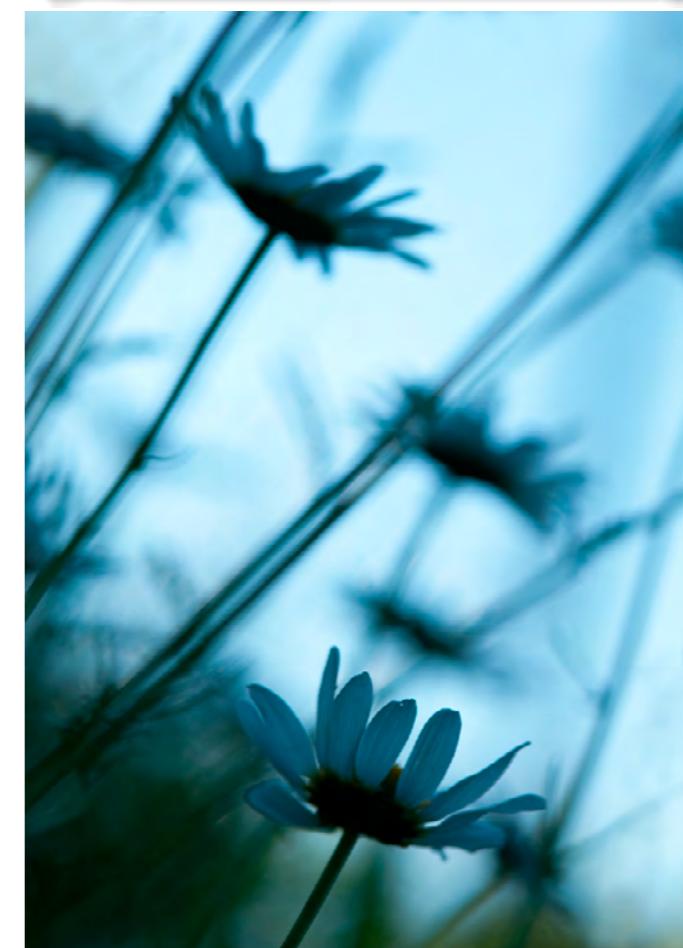
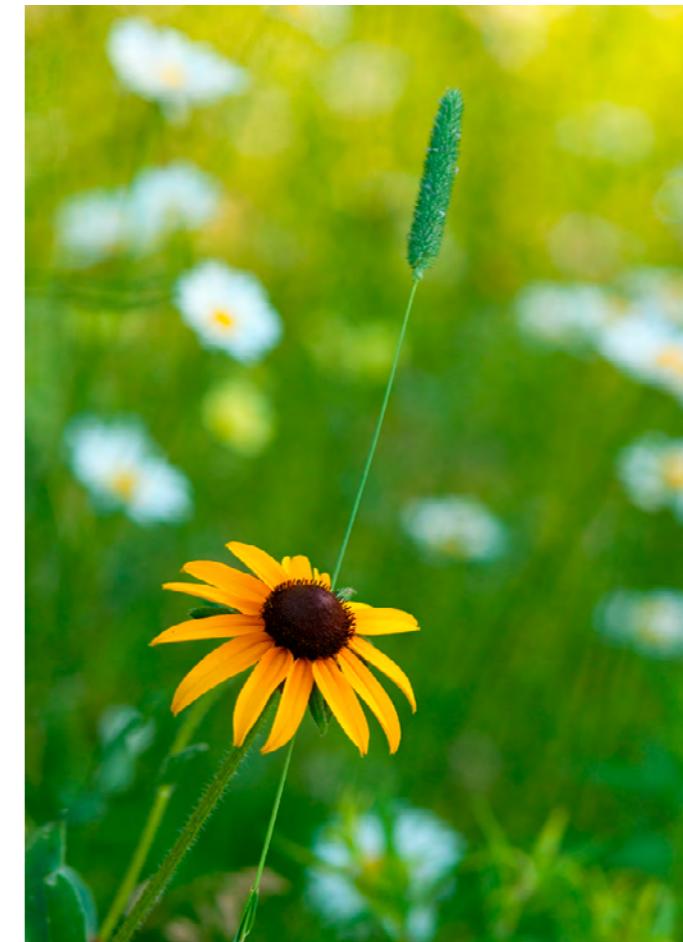
The position or angle from which you shoot can have a dramatic impact on your image. Shooting from the flower's level, so that your camera is at the same height as the flower, brings a more personal, intimate feel to the

shot. In contrast, shooting from above, looking down on the flower is good too. It is less intimate, but it can allow you to capture more of the flower's surroundings. It can also convey a sense of power, dominating over the flower. If you're looking for the opposite effect, then shoot from below the flower, looking up. I love using this approach as it can convey a sense of spaciousness. Seeing a bright blue sky behind the undersides of the flowers can give a sense of openness. Shooting from below also gives you the option of creating a silhouette or doing something a bit more creative with the lighting to make a more moody image.

Each position or perspective will convey a different 'feel' or communicate a different message. Think about what it is you want to 'say' with your image. The position you choose to shoot from really depends on what you're trying to achieve. And if you're not sure, shoot from several different perspectives or positions and see which you like best.

Top: Brown-eyed Susan. Nikon D200 camera, 105 mm macro lens. ISO 200, f 5.6 @1/90 second. Taken from above to include the white Oxeye Daisies in the background. I made sure to move myself around the main flower and experiment with positioning, so that none of the white daisies in the background appeared to be butting up against the yellow flower.

Bottom: Oxeye Daisies. Nikon D200 camera, 105 mm macro lens. ISO 160, f 6.3 @1/400 second. Shot from below. It was late in the day; rather than light the flowers from below, I chose only to increase the exposure compensation a little bit and create a silhouette. The late day light resulted in the blue hue.



Daisy from underneath. Nikon D200, 100 mm macro lens. ISO 250, f 4 @1/125 second. Shot indoors with natural light.





A highly blurred background forces the eye to focus on the main subject, the flower. The blurred objects in the background balance the composition and provide some interest, but don't detract from the main subject.

Brown-eyed Susan. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 200, f6.3 @1/40 second.



Flower portraits can include one or several flowers. The key to a balanced composition, which is pleasing to the viewer's eye, is to isolate some part of the cluster of flowers as your main focal point and ensure that point is in focus. In this case, I focused on the flower on the right and didn't worry about the rest. Notice the flower on the right is also on the thirds (more about that later).

Nikon D200 camera. Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 200, f 8 @1/90 second. Shot on a bright, sunny day around mid day.

Depth of Field

Depth of field refers to how much of the image, from foreground to background, is in focus. With flower portraits, a shallow depth of field is usually the best option because it isolates the main subject of the image. It throws everything in the background out of focus, making the flower stand out from its background. This means that the viewer's eye focuses on the main subject - the flower - and is not distracted by elements in the background, which may compete with the main subject.

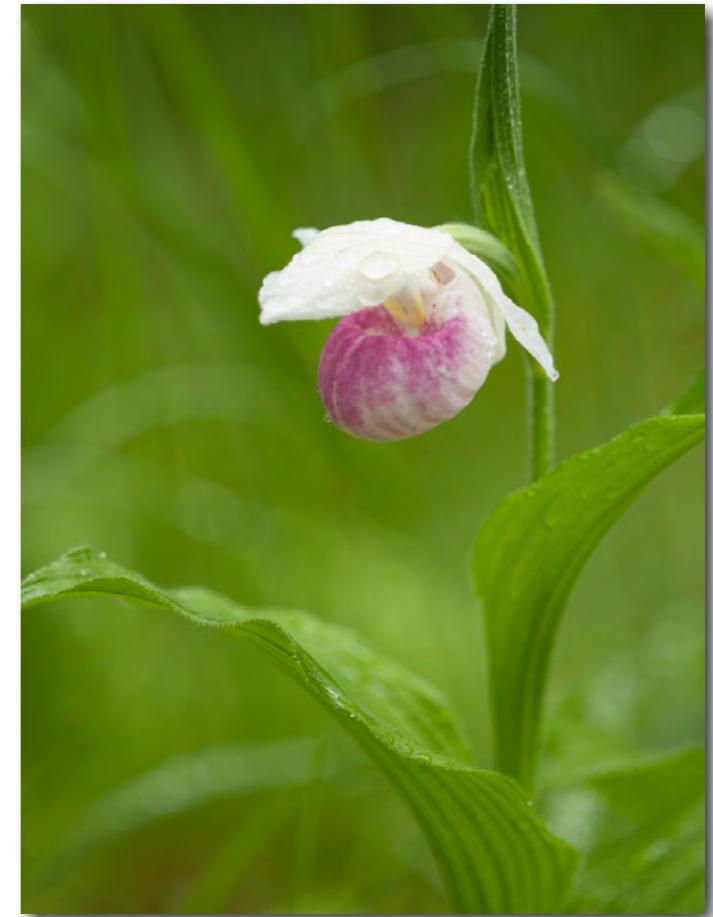
A shallow depth of field also creates a 'soft' feel to the image. Again, it's all about mood and what you're trying to achieve. There is no one right way to do it. You are the artist; you decide what the end result should be. But following a few simple guidelines can help you achieve beautiful results every time.

Ok, so shallow depths of field are good. But what *f*-stop should you use? Again, it's up to you to decide what effect you want to achieve. If you want a very shallow depth of field that will really isolate the flower from the background, try using *f* 2.8. Use that as your starting point and try bumping the *f*-stop up a bit with each frame to see what the results are.

If the main flower you are photographing has a lot of depth to it (like the orchid on the bottom right) and you want most of that flower to be in focus, you'll have to use a bigger *f*-stop (*f* 6.3 - *f* 8). It's all about finding the balance between blurring out the background and getting enough of your focal flower in sharp focus. But it's up to you to decide what effect you want.



Top Left: Bog Orchid. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 200, *f* 9 @ 1/60 second. Top Right: Oxeye Daisies. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 160, *f* 9 @ 1/50 second. Bottom Left: Poppy. Nikon D200 camera, 18-200 mm zoom lens @ 100 mm. ISO 100, *f* 3.5 @ 1/60 second. Bottom Right: Showy Pink Lady Slipper Orchid. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 160, *f* 7.1 @ 1/125 second. Taken on rainy day which resulted in high colour saturation.



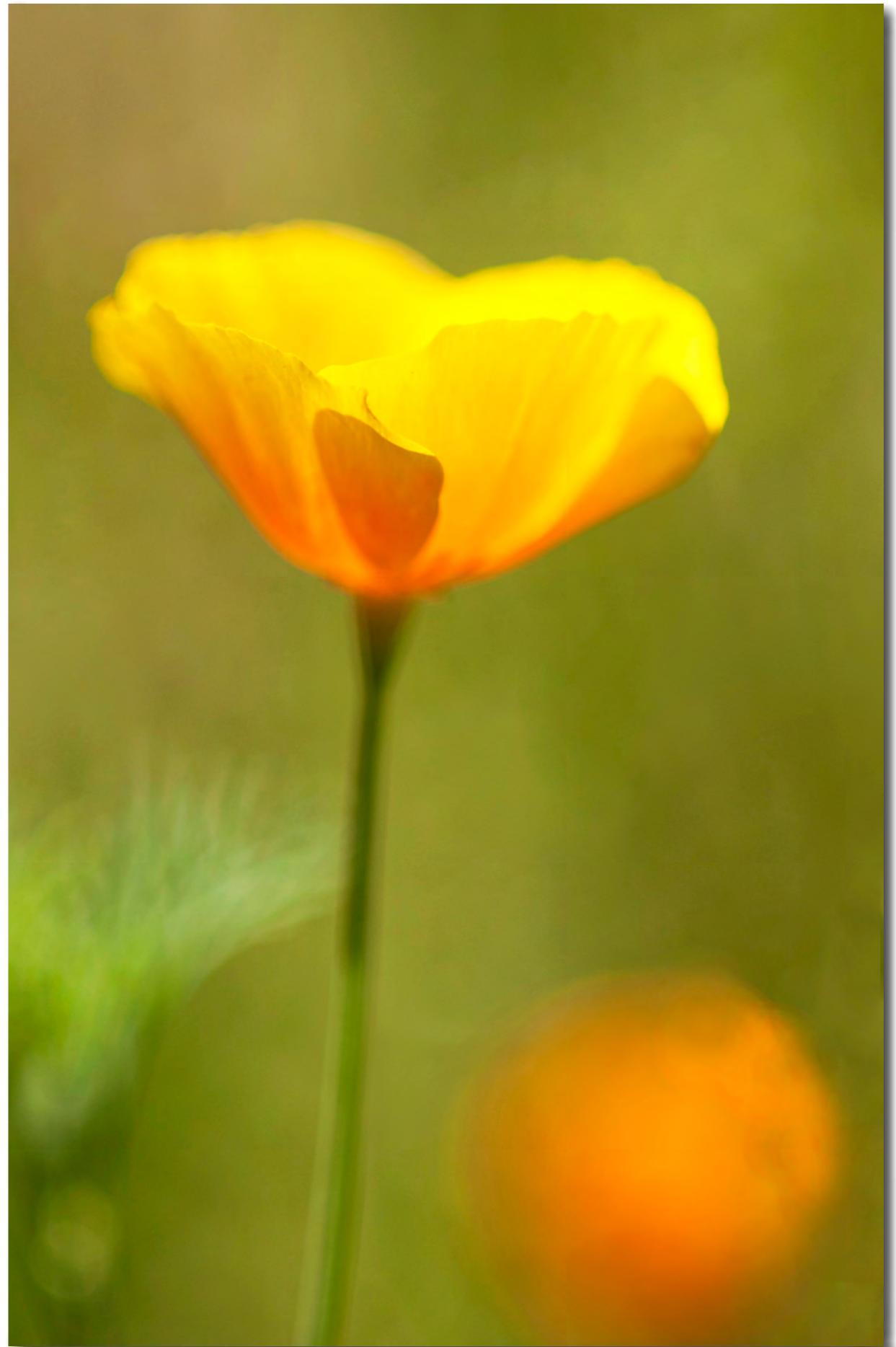
Here are three images of the same Pink Showy Lady Slipper Orchid that were made with different *f*-stops. On the left, this image was made using an *f*-stop of 10. The grasses in the background are easily discernible and a bit distracting. The middle image was made with an *f*-stop of 5.6; you can see how the background is becoming more blurred and there are fewer elements to distract your eye from the main subject. On the right, this image was made with an *f*-stop of 3.2. Most of the background elements are blurred or at least softened enough that they are no longer distracting.

For flower photography, choosing the appropriate aperture is generally far more important than shutter speed, in terms of the factors you want to control. For the vast majority of my photography, I shoot in Aperture Priority, meaning that I set the aperture and then let the camera automatically set the corresponding shutter speed. However, think about your exposure before you press the shutter release. You may need to increase or decrease your exposure, depending on conditions. I typically do this using my exposure compensation dial. Alternatively, I'll shoot in Manual mode. But I never use Programme mode, where the camera chooses both the aperture and shutter speed. This gives up your creative control and can lead to exposure problems since in this mode, the camera will meter for an 'average' exposure, which may not be appropriate for your lighting conditions.

Nikon D200 camera. Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 160. Shutter speeds were: 1/10, 1/25, and 1/80 second. Shot on a rainy day for high colour saturation and vibrancy.

California Poppy, Waipara, New Zealand. I used a very small *f*-stop to blur out the background. In fact, very little of the focal flower is in focus. But just enough of it is in focus to hold the eye. Although the background flower on the right is blurred and looks like an orange circle, it complements the main flower. If I had cloned out the orange circle and the leaves on the left, the image would be nice, but perhaps a bit less interesting. You be the judge.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 100, *f* 3.5 @1/1250 second.



California Poppy, Waipara, New Zealand. With this image, I positioned myself such that there were no flowers in the background to provide shapes of colour. The flower is the only element. Not much of this flower is in focus, which is fine. The small *f*-stop and effects of the macro lens give this image a soft, ethereal feel to it and, to an extent, make this image look a bit like a painting rather than a photograph.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 100, *f* 3.5 @1/640 second.



Light Up Your Flower Portraits



Lighting can take an otherwise ordinary looking image and turn it into something special. In the image on the left, I positioned myself, relative to the tulip, so that the sun was behind it and slightly off to the right. Not only did this backlighting give the flower more depth, but it also created a wonderful shadow of the little aphid crawling around on the leaf. The image of the daffodil, on the right, was taken in late day sun, with the sun beaming at an angle onto the 'face' of the flower so that it created some shadow on the near side.

Left: Nikon D70 camera, 100 mm macro lens, ISO 640, f3.5 @ 1/100 second. Right: Nikon D70 camera, 18 - 200 mm zoom lens @ 200 mm, f5.6 @1/320 second



Focal Length

In addition to using a shallow depth of field, isolating the main flower from the background can also be achieved by using a long focal length lens.

The long focal length compresses the depth of field, thereby isolating the main subject from the background. The combination of the longer focal length and choice of *f-stop* can create lovely, soft shapes of colour in the background, which can compliment the main subject.

In this case, I've used a 105 mm macro lens. But instead of being up close to the flower, I positioned myself away from it so that I could include other flowers in the background. The combination of focal length, *f-stop*, and the properties of the macro lens were ideal for creating a pleasingly soft background, yet still allowing me to isolate the main subject.

Nikon D200 camera. Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 250, *f* 4 @ 1/1000 second. Shot on a bright, sunny day around mid day.



California Poppies, Waipara, New Zealand. Indirect natural lighting was enough to light up these poppies so that they almost glow. But the light is not directional and hits each poppy equally. The *f*-stop used here allowed me to keep a few poppies in focus, but isolate them from a blurred background.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 18 - 200 mm zoom lens @ 200 mm, ISO 160, *f*6.3 @1/250 second.

Selective Focus

By throwing objects in the background out of focus, the viewers eye focuses on the main subject, the flower. I've talked about how this can be achieved using a small *f*-stop or a long focal length. Another way of drawing the viewers eye to the main subject is to use selective focusing.

This technique works well when photographing clusters of flowers, but where you want only a single flower or a few of them as the main subject. Use selective focus in combination with a small *f*-stop or a long focal length as an extremely effective way to isolate your main subject and produce a very appealing result.

The key to this technique is to focus on a flower or a few flowers in the foreground, allowing the small *f*-stop or the long lens to help throw the background out of focus. Alternatively, you can focus on a flower in the background, throwing those in the foreground out of focus. But you have to be careful with this latter approach, though. If there are too many flowers or objects in the foreground, you run the risk of having a collection of out of focus blobs that are distracting to the eye. They will actually pull the viewers eye away from the isolated flower, which is exactly opposite of what you're try-

ing to achieve. Another potential pitfall is if the flowers or objects in the foreground are exceptionally light or dark relative to the focal flower, or if they are brightly coloured and contrast significantly with the focal flower, this will result in an unbalanced and distracting composition. It just takes a bit of practice to get the composition and balance right.

Before you press the shutter release, let your eye move around the field of view while you're looking through your camera's viewfinder. Getting in the habit of doing this will allow you to check to see if there are any distracting elements in the image. If there are, then you can shift your position to recompose your image and see if you can remove them.

Another key to selective focus is to position yourself so that the flowers in the background are at least several inches behind the focal flower. By increasing the distance between the focal flower and the background elements, you'll be better able to throw those background elements out of focus.

Purple Loosestrife. Nikon D200 camera, 105 mm macro lens. ISO 400, *f* 3.2 @ 1/1000 second. I used a macro lens to isolate just one flower stem from an entire field of them. The properties of the macro lens along with the small *f*-stop resulted in the background flowers being nicely out of focus. Furthermore, the complimentary colour of the green grass provides contrast to make the foreground flower stem really stand out!





One way to isolate a flower from its background is to ensure that the focal flower is far from the flowers in the background. When the focal flower and the background elements are far apart, a telephoto lens enables you to completely blur the background.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 250, f 3 @ 1/2000 second.



Another example of selective focus. Flowers and cattails are in focus enough that you can recognize them, but out of focus enough to create a soft, ethereal feel to the image.

Nikon D200 camera, Sigma 50-500 mm lens @ 320 mm, ISO 500, f 6.4 @ 1/45 second.

I used selective focus here to draw attention to the sedge grasses intermingled with the Purple Loosestrife flowers that are in the same plane as the poplar tree. To compress both the foreground and background, making them out of focus, I shot this image using a very long telephoto lens - a 600 mm lens - and also a small *f*-stop.

A tripod was definitely needed to make this image because of the extremely long focal length.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 600 mm telephoto lens. ISO 320, *f*4 @ 1/400 second.



Indoors vs. Outdoors

Should you shoot indoors or outdoors? That will depend on several factors, not the least of which is whether you want or are even allowed to cut the flower to bring inside. Please, if you're in a botanical garden with your camera, don't even entertain the thought of pinching any blooms to take with you. That's just plain wrong. And anyway, most likely the flower will end up as a wilted heap of petals by the time you get it home. But hey, I don't have to worry, you wouldn't even think of bringing the garden clippers with you on your photo shoot to a botanical garden.

Let's assume you're photographing in a place where you *do* have the option to cut the flower and bring it inside. Which should you do? Shoot outside or inside? Is it easier to photograph flowers indoors? The unsatisfying answer is yes and no. Each environment brings with it, its own set of benefits and challenges.

Outdoors

With photographing outdoors your biggest nemesis (next to mosquitoes or black flies, depending on where you live) is wind. Even what seems like a slight breeze can make it next to impossible to make an image that's in focus. Lying on your belly at the edge of a

bog, trying to photograph an orchid that's swaying in the breeze can be a frustrating experience. Good luck getting a sharp image (although see my section on Creative Photography later in the book). But you can't cut that orchid and take it with you. So you just knuckle down, do the best you can with your circumstance and most importantly, enjoy yourself!

The challenge of shooting on a breezy day will also depend on the kind of lens you're using. If you're shooting close up using a macro or using a long focal length, what may seem like a tiny bit of movement is magnified into something far greater when you look through your viewfinder.

Under these circumstances, one trick I use is to stabilize the flower using clamps or a piece of wire. You don't need anything fancy to do the job. Raid your kitchen drawer and shove a handful of twist ties in your pocket. Use these to tie the flower's stem to an adjacent branch or bring a thin wooden dowel or some coat hanger wire with you so that you can stick it in the ground beside the flower; then twist-tie the flower stem to it. This does wonders for keeping the stem steady if there's a slight breeze.



Blue-eyed Grass. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 400, f5.6 @ 1/400 second.



Another trick for shooting outside on a breezy day is to time your shutter release for that brief instant where there isn't any perceptible breeze. Depending on conditions, these pauses may be rather far apart and it will test your patience. But keep at it. Remember, if you're shooting with a digital camera, you can delete all those nasty, out of focus images later. So just shoot lots of images, time your shots carefully, use props like wire to stabilize the flower stem and do your best. If you do, I'm sure you'll end up with some fantastic keepers.

Nikon D200 camera, 18-200 mm zoom lens @ 100 mm. ISO 100, f3.5 @ 1/80 second.

One of the best things about photographing flowers outdoors is the way that warm, magical light early and late in the day can light up the flower and make it glow.

Now that I've made photographing outdoors seem like an exercise in futility or a massive test of your patience, let's focus on some of the positives, the most notable being, light. Depending on weather conditions and time of day, there are occasions where that golden light you find yourself in just can't be created indoors no matter how fancy your lighting system. An hour after sunrise and an hour before sunset are the times when I most love to be out with my camera. Those times when the light has that wonderful golden hue. Magical light, I call it. You just can't beat it!

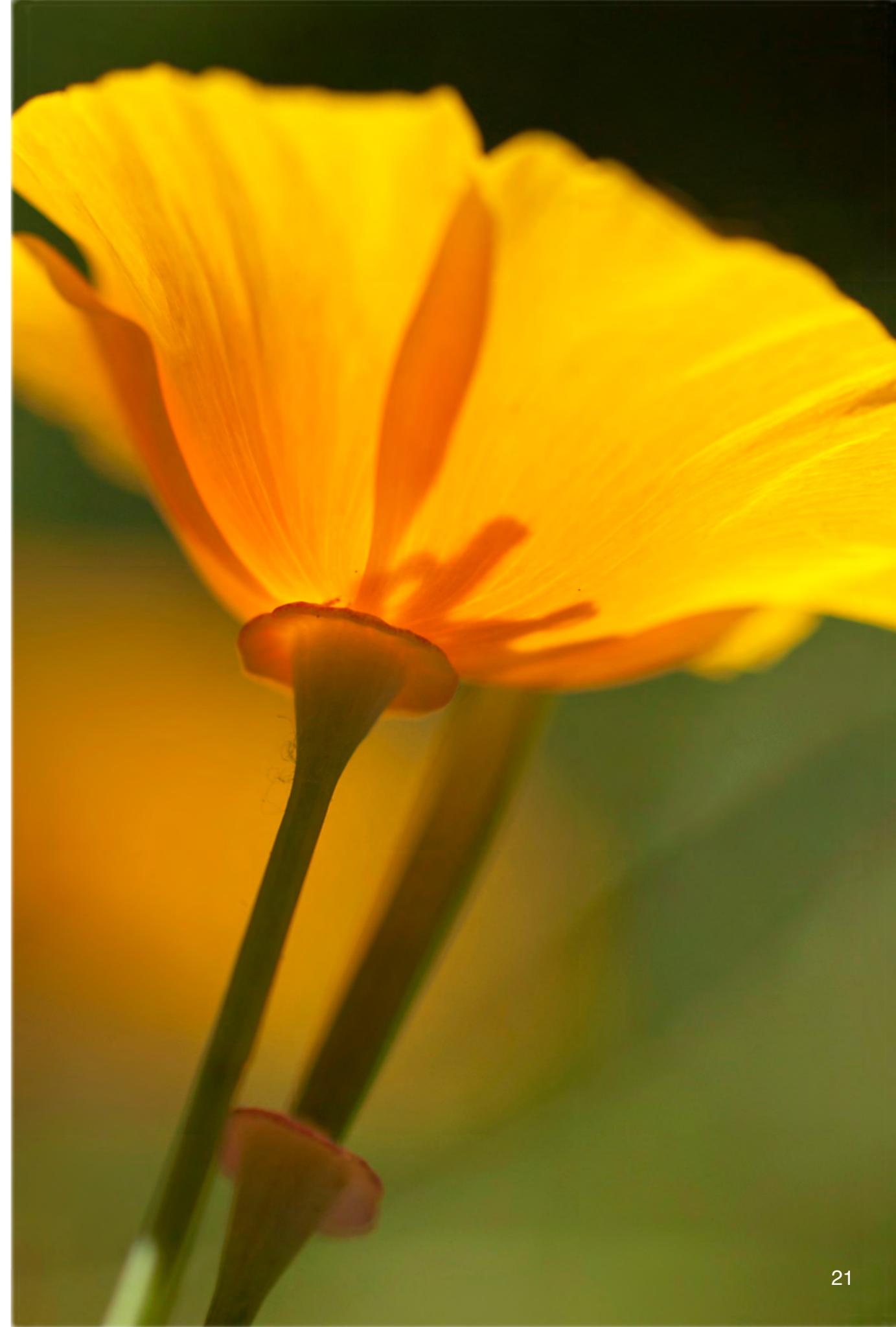
Mid day, when the sun is strongest and the bright light creates challenging high contrast conditions and shadows, is generally not the best time to be out photographing flowers. But again, sometimes you don't have a choice and so

you just have to work with the conditions you find yourself in. Be creative; see what you can do to make your surroundings work for you as best you can.

Another advantage to being outside in that magical, golden light is that you can use it to backlight your flower. How well this works will depend on the kind of flower you are photographing and its colour, as well as the thickness of its petals.

On the right is a good example of using that golden morning light to backlight this California Poppy. Because the poppy's petals are so thin, the light shines right through them. You can also get silhouetting of the internal structures of the flower (stamens, the bits carrying the pollen and pistils, the female parts).

California Poppy, Waipara, New Zealand.
Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro
lens. ISO 100, f5 @ 1/640 second.



Bring on the rain!

A lot of beginning photographers think the only good time to get out with their camera is on a sunny day. I can't argue that it's great weather to be enjoying the outdoors. But photographically speaking, there are actually better times to get out with your camera if your mission is flower photography.

Overcast or even rainy days are absolutely superb times for flower photography. You're probably thinking... what? Is she crazy? Really, I'm not leading you on. On overcast or rainy days, you'll notice that the subdued light boosts colour saturation. Those lovely pink blooms that looked light pink on a sunny day now look deep pink on a rainy day. I'm not going to bore you with an explanation of the physics of light (I'll stick with talking about things I actually know about!). But next time you're outside on a cloudy or rainy day, look around you. The greens will be more vibrant. Pinks and purples will pop, especially against a background of vibrant green.

So next time you look out the window on a dreary day and think ho-hum, better stay inside (it's gonna rain anyway...), you'll know better. Grab your camera gear and get going before the

rain dries up and the sun comes out!

Being out on a rainy day also has the advantage of providing lovely little raindrops as an added touch to your flowers. Those glistening droplets will add an heir of delicateness to your image.

On the right is an image I made of a Pink Showy Lady Slipper Orchid flower just barely starting to open. Not too far from where I live is a conservation area jam-packed with these orchids and a wooden boardwalk right through the middle of them. It's perfect for flower photography. I often will pass up the opportunity to photograph orchids there unless it's a cloudy day. I've tried a few times, but it just doesn't seem worth the trip. The sun just washes out the colours, resulting in some pretty mediocre images compared to what I can make on a rainy day.

One note of caution, when you're out on a rainy day, make sure you have your camera gear adequately protected. You can buy fancy rain covers (which I have done), but I usually end up throwing a plastic shopping bag or a disposable hotel shower cap over my camera and lens; it works just as well.



Pink Showy Lady Slipper Orchid bloom just opening.
Purdon Conservation Area, Lanark, Ontario. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 160, f 8 @ 1/15 second.

Taking It Indoors

I hope I've convinced you that photographing flowers outdoors is a worthwhile pursuit. Sure there are challenges involved. But if you don't try, you won't get. And remember.... you can always hit the delete button on your digital camera if you're not happy with the results.

Some days, photographing outdoors just won't be an option. For me, those days would be in the dead of winter when it's minus 20 Celsius and our snowbanks are 4 feet high. Instead I head to our local florist or grocery store and treat myself to a bouquet.

There are a number of advantages to photographing indoors. Wind. Generally not a problem. No need for clamps, twist ties or an abundance of patience. And I'm normally not swatting mosquitoes and black flies inside.

A lot of beginning photographers ask me whether they should use natural or artificial light when photographing indoors. It really depends on what equipment you have available and what effect you are trying to achieve. I don't own any studio lights. To date, all my indoor flower images have been made with natural, ambient light or by using a desk lamp to light the subject. Far from a fancy set up, but it works for me!

On the right is a poppy that I photographed indoors. I used an inexpensive desk lamp to light the flower. I moved the lamp and the flower around until I was happy with the result. This image was shot on my dining room table. I placed the flower stem in a jar and set up some black cloth for a background, to contrast with the orange poppy. I should also mention that I did not use a flash for this image; I rarely use flash.

I set my camera on a tripod beside the table and then moved the flower and the desk lamp around to achieve the right perspective and lighting. The tripod allowed me to ensure my image would be sharp. I also used a remote shutter release and set my camera to mirror lock up (more on that soon).

A very important consideration for indoor photography is white balance. Photographing under incandescent or fluorescent lights can result in a colour cast to your image. I much prefer to set my white balance on cloudy, but to shoot images in RAW format so that I can adjust white balance later, during processing. I strongly encourage you to shoot in RAW format if you aren't already.



Orange Poppy. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 18 - 200 mm zoom lens @ 100 mm, ISO 250, f5.6 @ 1/4 second. Shot indoors with artificial lighting.



I made this image of a single Fuschia bloom on my office desk. I used a clip with one end attached to the small flower stem and the other end attached to a wire, so that the flower would hang, much as it would if it were attached to the plant. The same black cloth (a piece of black velour) as in the previous image was my background. I focused on the purple part of the flower and used a large *f*-stop to try to get as much of the flower in focus as possible. The tips of the red bracts are pleasingly out of focus. I had the camera on a tripod because of the slow shutter speed and also used a remote shutter release and mirror lock up to ensure the sharpest possible image.

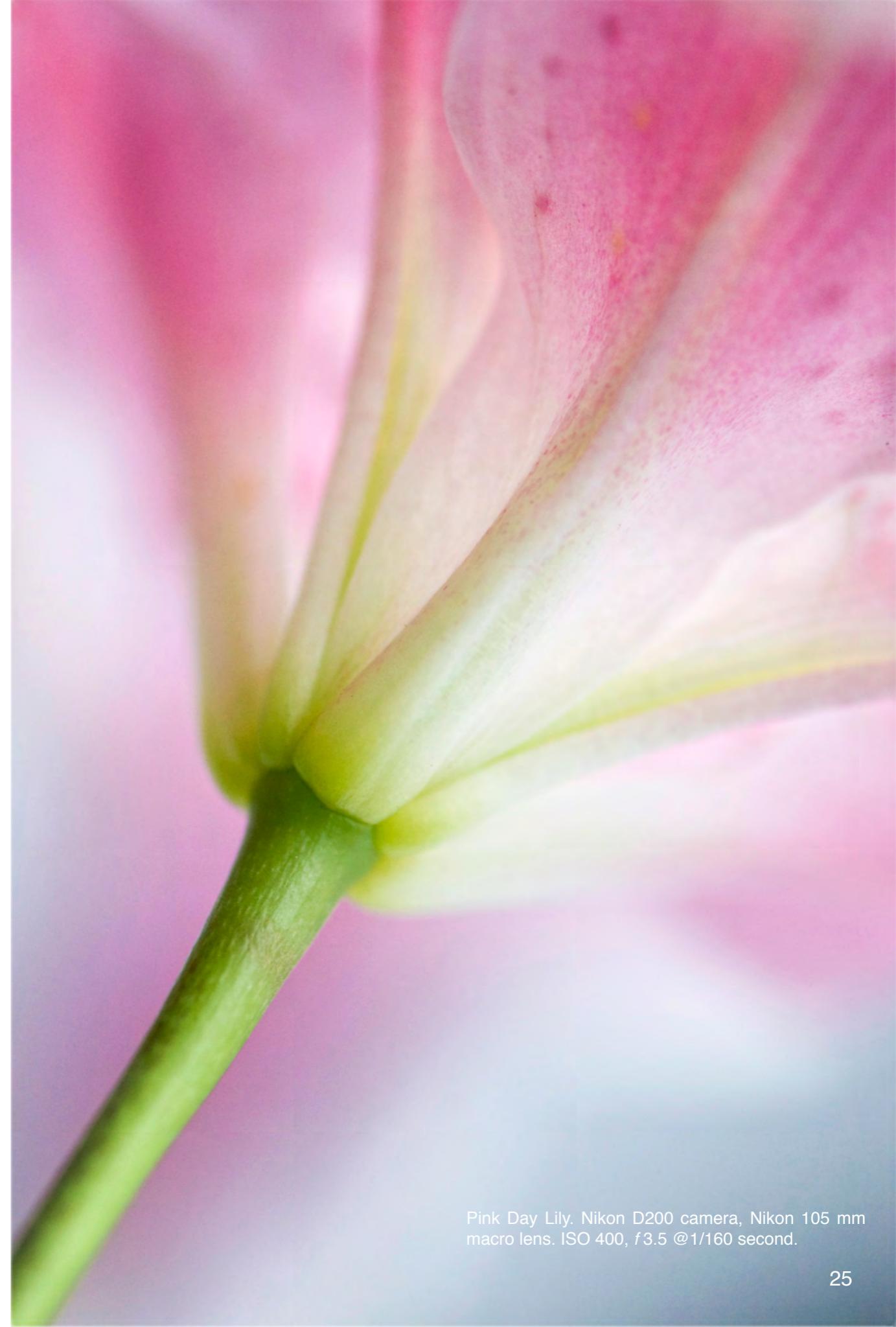
Red Fuschia. Nikon D200 camera, 100 mm, macro lens, ISO 100, *f*16 @ 0.8 second.

Some thoughts about ambient lighting indoors

When shooting indoors, you have two options: 1) use studio lighting, a desk lamp or any other desired light source to illuminate your flower, 2) use the ambient lighting in your house - the light coming through your windows. When I do shoot indoors, I often opt for ambient lighting - just the natural lighting inside my house. Why? Because it usually results in a soft, non-directional light that can give your image a 'gentle' look to it. You can accomplish this with studio lighting, but since I don't have any, it's not an option for me and it's not something I want to get into at this point (but never say never...).

My suggestion is that you do a tour of your house to get a sense of the quality of light in each room. If you live in the northern hemisphere, a south facing window will give you stronger, directional light. On the other hand, a north facing window will give you softer, less directional lighting. Check out the rooms in your house at different times of the day and make notes about the quality of light. Maybe this sounds odd to you, but I consider it to be yet another scouting trip, except that I don't have to leave the comfort of my home.

On the right is an example of an image I made indoors using ambient light. I like the soft, gentle lighting, which seems appropriate for this delicate, pink day lily. How did I get this lighting? I shot it in the best lit room in our house in New Zealand - the bathroom. Seriously! In that room the window was large, filling most of one wall. And the pane was made up of that 1970's style of thick textured glass. You know, that opaque glass that provides privacy because you can't actually see through it? At certain times of day, it yielded fantastic ambient light conditions. I'd set up my camera on a tripod and move a small end table into the bathroom. I'd put a coloured table cloth on the table and then set my flower in a jar or vase on the table and start playing around with positioning the flower in different locations for the best lighting and composition. It was by far the best room in the house for ambient lighting. The only problem was that once I started shooting, the room was 'off limits' because I didn't want to disturb my set up. So if you find yourself shooting flower images in your bathroom, make sure you give everyone fair warning before you lock the door and start shooting.



Pink Day Lily. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 400, f3.5 @1/160 second.



This image was shot indoors, using ambient lighting and a blue background placed about 8 inches behind the flower. The blue background provided a nice contrast to highlight the form of the white petals and the yellow centre of the flower.

Nikon D70 camera, 100 mm macro lens, ISO 250, f 3.5 @ 1/200 second.

A little trick for creating coloured backgrounds

Wanting a coloured background for your indoor flower image? Here's a great trick for creating any coloured background and you don't have to have 18 different coloured rolls of background paper or cloth swatches.

Get your flower set up in a vase or jar and place it in front of your computer screen. Turn on your computer and fire up Photoshop or any other software that will enable you to create a blank 'canvas'. For Photoshop, create a new file and make the canvas size such that it pretty much fills your computer screen. Then use the fill function to fill your blank canvas with whatever colour you want. Choose something that complements the colour of the flower. Not sure what colour to choose? Experiment!

When you come up with a colour you like, position your flower in front of your computer screen and start shooting! That's how I made this image as well as a few others in this book. I did this one on my lunch break at work. It took me 5 minutes to create my coloured background, set up my flower and rattle off a pile of great shots.

Pink Petals. Nikon D70 camera, 100 mm macro lens. ISO 640, f 3.5 @ 1/200 second.

COMPOSITION

Entire books have been written on composition. It's a big topic! Here, I just want to highlight a few key points and provide some examples. In photography, there are some basic rules (I prefer to call them guidelines) we are told to follow. When starting out in photography, we're told to follow them. That's not a bad idea initially so that you'll develop good habits. But with experience, you'll learn how to 'break the rules' and still make wonderfully composed images. Photography is an art and as the artist, it is up to you to decide what rules you will and won't follow.

Let your vision and creativity guide you.

White Pond Lilies. Nikon D200 camera, Sigma 50 - 500 mm zoom lens @ 500 mm. ISO 160, f8 @ 1/250 second. Shot at mid day on a bright sunny day.



Putting it on the thirds....

In photography, there's this thing called the Rule of Thirds. But since I hate rules, I'm not going to call it that. I'm just going to call it, "putting it on the thirds". What this means is that when you are looking through the viewfinder and composing your image (before you press the shutter release) it's a good idea to put the dominant elements of your composition one third of the way into your composition, either horizontally or vertically.

If you take a ruler and divide your image into three equal sections by drawing two horizontal lines, where those lines are, those are 'the thirds'. Same thing is true if you use a ruler to draw two vertical lines to divide your image into thirds the other way. The so-called rule says that the subject or dominant element of your image should be on one of these thirds. Similarly, if you're shooting a landscape, the horizon line should not divide your image into two equal parts. Instead, the horizon line should be on one of the thirds.

I won't go into the psychology behind this concept, but suffice it to say that having important elements on the thirds provides a more pleasing composition for the human brain (however, I've never asked my cat if she too finds elements on the thirds to be more pleasing; maybe it's just a human thing....).

Use this idea of thirds as a guideline, not a rule. With experience, it will become instinctive to put main elements on the thirds. But.... there are plenty of cases where having main elements or horizon lines not on the thirds works just fine! Experiment. Try shooting different compositions and then look at your images on the computer to see which you find most pleasing.

White Trillium Amongst Horsetails. Nikon D200 camera, Sigma 50-500 mm zoom lens. ISO 160, f18@ 1/250 second.



Shoot subjects in threes....

Ok, so this is another one of those psychological elements of composition. Conventional wisdom in photography says that having main elements or subjects in threes is more pleasing than having main elements in twos. Again, I'm not sure why the human brain likes this (and I haven't asked the cat her take on this one either), but apparently it does.

In the image to the right, there are several flowers within the frame, but there are three main flowers somewhat stacked on top of each other in a curved line. These three flowers are the ones you see the most of and are facing you. The other flowers provide colour and support the main subjects, but they themselves are not the main subjects. So, do you think this image 'works'? Do you like the three flowers? Would it look better with two?

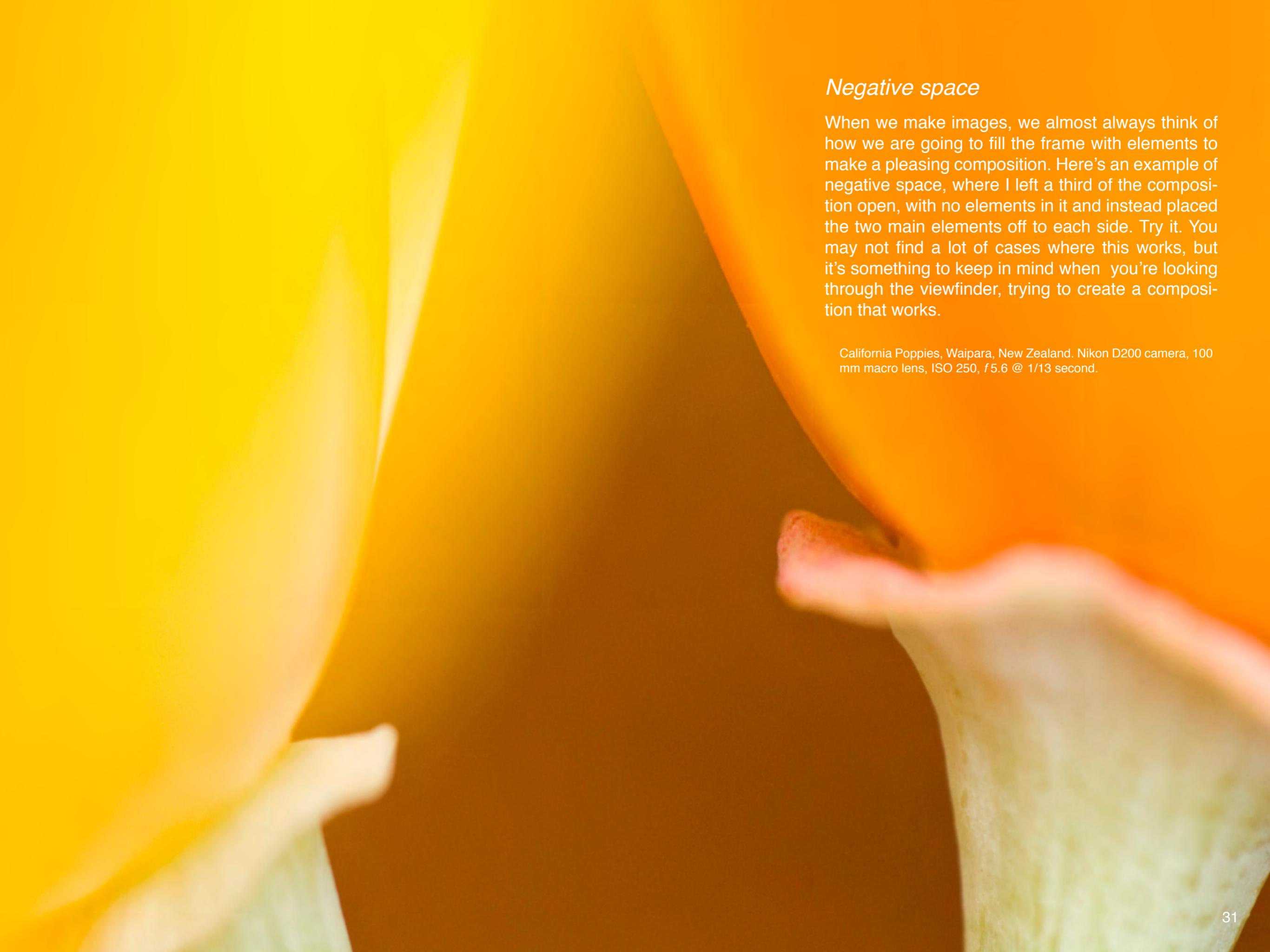
As I said with putting things on the thirds, this is a *guideline* only. There are plenty of cases where two elements together, or even four, makes for an equally pleasing composition. Experiment. Try different combinations. Be willing to 'break the rules'. When shooting a cluster of flow-

ers such as this, I usually spend a few minutes walking around the flowers, checking them out from all angles. What I look for is natural clusters of flowers that create a nice composition. In this case, the two big flowers with the smaller one nestled slightly in behind and between the two caught my eye. I think the composition works because of the three main elements and because they form an imaginary curved line through the three of them. The green leaves provide a bit of framing to isolate the three main flowers from most of the rest.

In cases where you have a collection of flowers, it really is worth it to take the time to 'scout out' your composition. I'll get into this more a few pages, but try to look for geometric shapes, curved lines, lead-in lines. If you start thinking of the elements of your composition in terms of geometric shapes, you'll end up producing more pleasing compositions. And with experience, this will become instinctive - you won't even realize you're doing it.

Pink Petunias. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 200, f8 @ 1/90 second. Shot at mid day on a bright sunny day.



A close-up photograph of California poppies. The flowers are bright yellow and orange, with some petals in sharp focus and others blurred in the background. The background is a solid, warm orange color, creating a large area of negative space. The composition follows the rule of thirds, with the flowers positioned on the left and right sides.

Negative space

When we make images, we almost always think of how we are going to fill the frame with elements to make a pleasing composition. Here's an example of negative space, where I left a third of the composition open, with no elements in it and instead placed the two main elements off to each side. Try it. You may not find a lot of cases where this works, but it's something to keep in mind when you're looking through the viewfinder, trying to create a composition that works.

California Poppies, Waipara, New Zealand. Nikon D200 camera, 100 mm macro lens, ISO 250, f5.6 @ 1/13 second.

Geometry

This is something I learned from Freeman Patterson. I have taken a few of Freeman's workshops. If you have the opportunity to take one of his workshops, I highly, highly recommend it! You'll learn a ton! One of the many things I learned from him was to consider the role of geometry in composition. Look for parallel lines, triangles, squares, circles, etc. And look at how patches of colour can create these geometric shapes. Pay attention to how these geometric shapes are positioned relative to each other, within the frame, and how they might produce a balanced composition which is pleasing to the eye..

In this image, the light green goldenrod stems in the foreground create triangular shapes. The dark green patch on the left third looks like a darker green upside down triangle, which balances the light green ones. The Purple Loosestrife creates a band of purple which is balanced by the narrower band of green goldenrod plants at the top of the image. In between the two is a small patch of white and green Queen Anne's Lace that creates a partial band.

Before you press the shutter release, spend time looking through the viewfinder to look for geometric shapes. When you find them, try to frame your image so that they balance each other and result in a pleasing composition. And aim for simplicity rather than a lot of clutter in your image.

Purple Loosestrife, Goldenrods, and Queen Anne's Lace. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 18 - 200 mm zoom lens @ 200 mm. ISO 400, f10 @1/40 second.





Focal point

Another ‘rule’ you’ve likely heard is that your image must contain a focal point. In other words, there needs to be *something* in the image that the eye will rest on - some dominant element or subject in your image.

I won’t argue that this isn’t good advice because it is. But like some of the other things I’ve just covered, it is a guideline only. Not a rule. There are plenty of images that do not have a focal point, but that work just fine.

So why do images without focal points work? There are a number of reasons, but often it may just be the distribution of contrasting or complimentary colours that makes the composition pleasing. There are many factors which may contribute to the success of the image. If a scene catches your eye, but you don’t see an obvious focal point, go ahead and shoot it anyway. Play around with perspective, lighting, depth of field or use different focal lengths. All of these things, in some combination, will help you produce a beautiful image, even if there is no focal point in it. The key, as always, is to experiment.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 250, f8 @ 1/400 second.



There is no focal point here; there doesn't need to be. Compositions like this give a sense of spaciousness because the composition is not anchored by one particular point.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 18 - 200 mm zoom lens @ 24 mm. ISO 400, f/22 @ 1/13 second.



With this image, there is no real focal point. But the complimentary colours of the green grass and Purple Loosestrife, as well as the high colour saturation due to overcast conditions, provide enough to make this image work. The focus of this image is texture rather than a main focal point.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 600 mm telephoto lens. ISO 320, f11 @ 1/80 second.



Your composition doesn't have to include the entire flower. Sometimes, just showing part of the flower provides an element of mystery and enticement.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm lens along with a 36 mm extension tube.
ISO 250, f 5 @ 1/20 second.

MACRO PHOTOGRAPHY

Many flowers have intricate details such as petals and reproductive structures that can be captured using a macro lens or other close-up photography equipment. Macro opens up a whole new wonderful world to the flower photographer. I guarantee that once you start making macro images, you'll be hooked.

Pink Chrysanthemum. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 200, f 6.3 @ 1/80 second.



The Macro Lens

A true macro lens is a very versatile lens. In the images to the right, I've focused in on the circular collection of ray flowers in the centre of each bloom. With the top image, I used a higher magnification to focus right in on the disc of ray flowers. The macro lens allowed me to capture the fine detail of these tiny flowers as well as the bright orange pollen produced by the male flowers on the top bloom. For the bottom image, I put more distance between me and the flower so that I could include more of the petals around the disc of ray flowers in the centre.

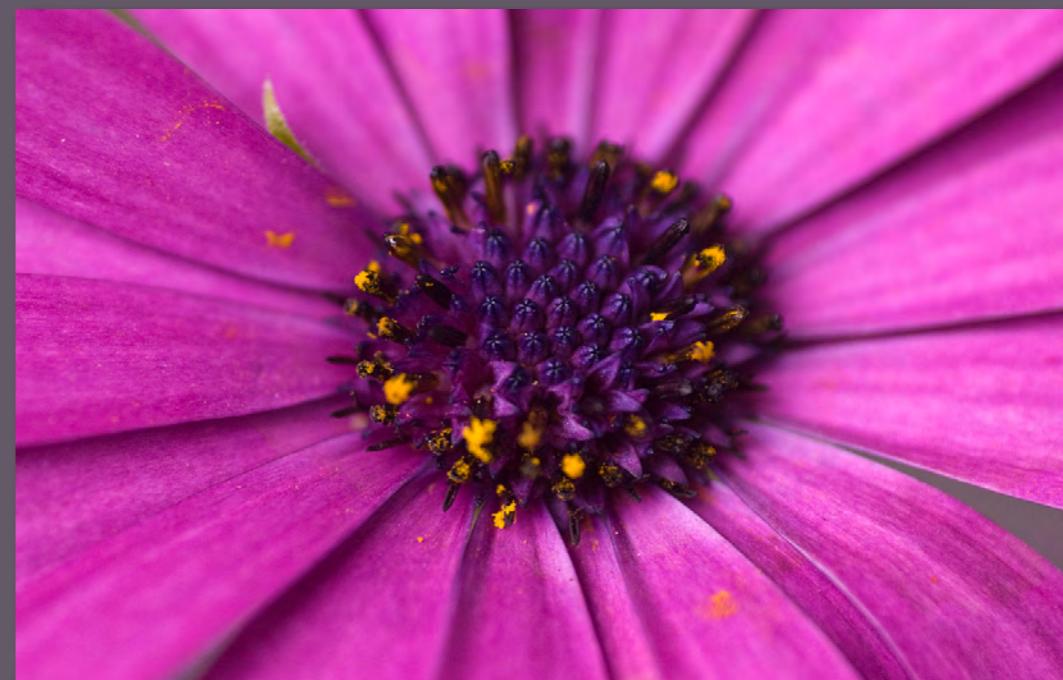
The great thing about macro lenses is that they allow you to focus really close on the fine details. But you can also back off, increasing the distance between the lens and the flower, to make an image that encompasses more of the flower or other flowers around it. So, a macro lens will allow you to focus up close on fine details or create a portrait of the entire flower.

Macro lenses are fantastic for making flower portraits. By increasing the distance between your lens and the flower even more, your composition can encompass the entire flower. And

you may recall from earlier in the book, I talked about how macro lenses and long focal length lenses compress the depth of field to create a pleasingly blurred background. Combined with a small f-stop, you'll be able to make flower portraits with a soft, non-distracting background that focuses the viewer's eye on the flower, rather than elements of the background.

The whole field of macro photography is a book unto itself. If you're looking for a good instruction book, especially one that discusses the variety of equipment you can use for macrophotography, check out "*Up Close: a guide to macro & close up photography*", by Andrew S. Gibson. It's available for download through the Craft & Vision website (www.craftandvision.com).

What I cover here is an introduction to macrophotography, highlighting some of the techniques, and equipment, and illustrating the kinds of images you can produce using a macro lens. But if you love macrophotography and want to learn more, consider buying some books specifically on the topic or take a workshop. Workshops are always time and money well spent.



Top: Nikon D70 camera, 100 mm macro lens, ISO 125, f4.5 @ 1/125 second. Bottom: Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 125, f6.3 @ 1/50 second.

There are some key things you'll need to do to make great macro images

A macro lens functions a bit differently than most of the lenses you may be used to working with. For example, if you want the reproductive structures in the centre of the flower to be in focus, then turn the ring on the barrel of your lens so that your lens is set at the highest magnification. You'll need to move your lens toward or away from the flower to focus on the parts you want to be in sharp focus. If you want more of the flower in the image, you'll turn the ring on the barrel of your lens in the opposite direction and move your camera farther away from the flower. I do have an auto-focus feature on my macro lens but never use it. It's far better to compose your image at the magnification you want and then move your camera closer to or away from the flower to fine-tune your focus.

Another very important aspect in making great macro images is to keep your camera and lens from moving as you press the shutter release, both to prevent your composition from changing once you press the shutter release and also to ensure that your image is in sharp focus. A little later in this book, I talk about tripods and whether they are necessary. For now I'll say that whatever approach you use - tripod, bean bag or hand holding - just make sure you don't end up with camera shake ruining your image. I most often use a tripod or some sort of device to stabilize my camera. This, combined with mirror

lock-up, will ensure that your image is nice and sharp. Having said that, many lenses these days come with image stabilization (IS) or vibration reduction (VR), which means you can hand hold shots and reduce the chances of camera shake compared to cameras without this feature. But even with IS/VR, there is still a limit to how slow a shutter speed you can use and still get a sharp image.

If you're shooting at full magnification, the longer lens barrel will allow less light to hit the sensor. So you'll have to be careful to check your shutter speed before you release the shutter. If ambient light levels are low, you may be forced to use a tripod if you need a high *f*-stop to ensure large depth of field, if that's what you want. If you're using flash, this isn't really an issue. But trying to hand-hold a shot in low light conditions and achieve a sharp image can be challenging at best if not impossible.

Important tip - before you press the shutter release, also check your depth of field (d.o.f.) by pressing the depth of field preview button on your camera, if you have one. Most dSLR's these days, have one. I find it is an invaluable feature. It lets you see what your actual depth of field will look like in your image before you take the shot. If you haven't got exactly what you want, then you can tweak your aperture before you take the shot.



Pink Lupin. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 320, f9 @ 1/60 second. Shot on an overcast day.



Here are two images I made one after the other. The one on the left, with lower magnification, shows much of the flower cluster and conveys the round shape of the cluster. The image on the right was taken at higher magnification and focuses on a few of the individual flowers in the cluster. I also used this tight composition to highlight the lines of the individual flower stems, which radiate from a central point. I placed the convergence point of the stems toward the lower right and roughly on the third. I wanted this image not to be just about the individual flowers, but about the geometry that the arrangement of flowers created with their radiating stems.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 200. Left: f 5.6 @ 1/60 second; Right: f 8 @ 1/30 second.



For this image of a purple aster, I used my macro lens on full magnification. The small *f*-stop allowed me to blur the parts of the flower furthest away from the lens, to create a soft, delicate feel. I also placed the central disc of yellow ray flowers just off to the left of centre to create a more interesting composition.

Purple Aster Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 250, *f*4.2 @ 1/50 second.

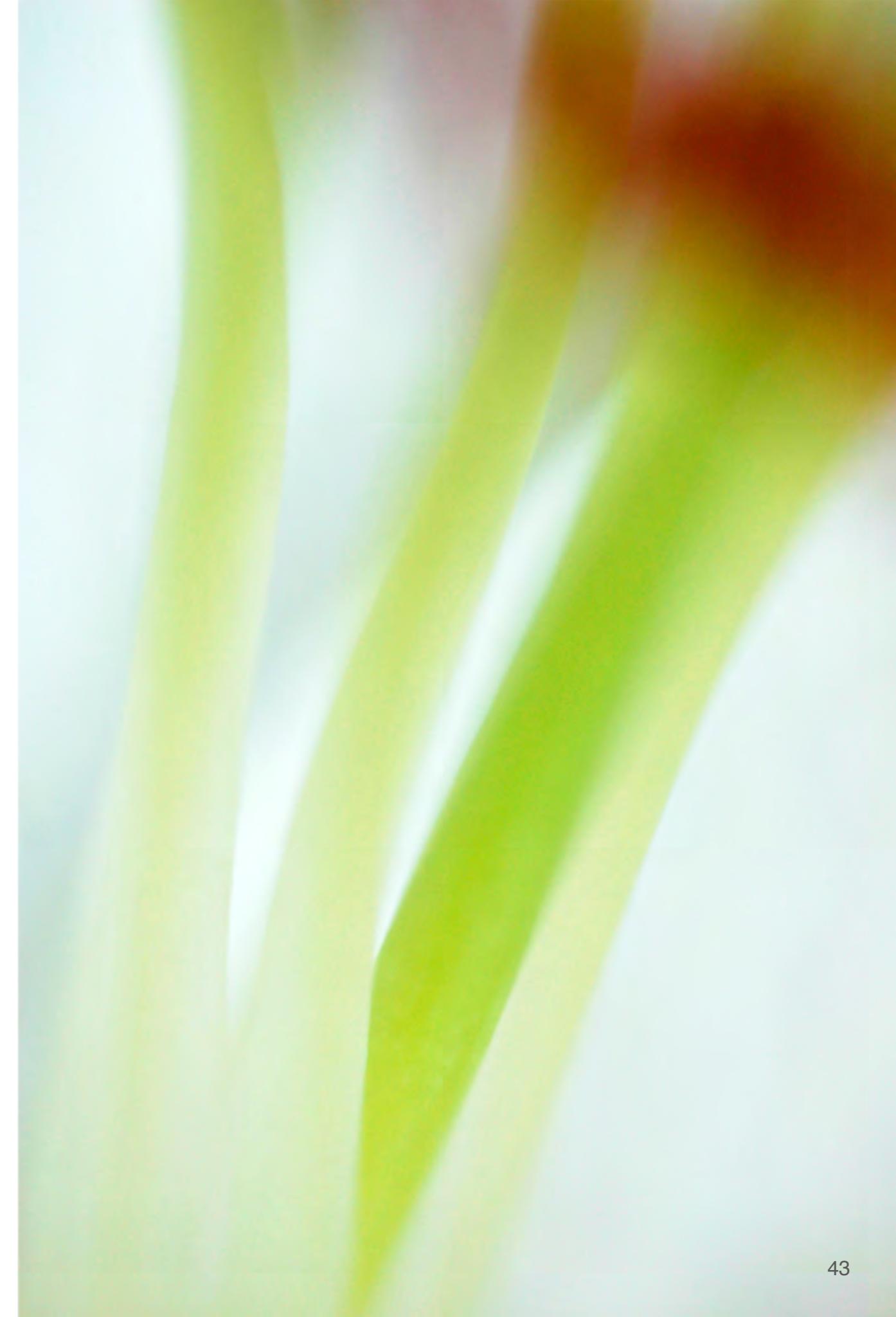


Macro lenses allow you to take extreme close-up images such as this one. I set the lens on full macro and put it inside the flower to make an image of the flower's reproductive parts. But I wanted it to have a graphic look so I pushed the lens in past its closest focusing distance, which made all the structures in the flower out of focus.

Nikon D70, 100 mm macro lens. ISO 200, f 10 @ 1/5 second.

This is a close up of he stamens inside the flower. By pushing the lens actually into the flower, I got so close that only the stamens filled the field of view. Also, by being so close, the stamens are out of focus because I'm closer to them than the closest focusing distance. But this is the effect I wanted to achieve to make the image look soft and delicate. The pollen-bearing part of the stamens which looks reddish, I placed in the upper right corner to anchor the image and provide a starting point the eye, which then follows the long part of the stamens into the image, along the darkest green one.

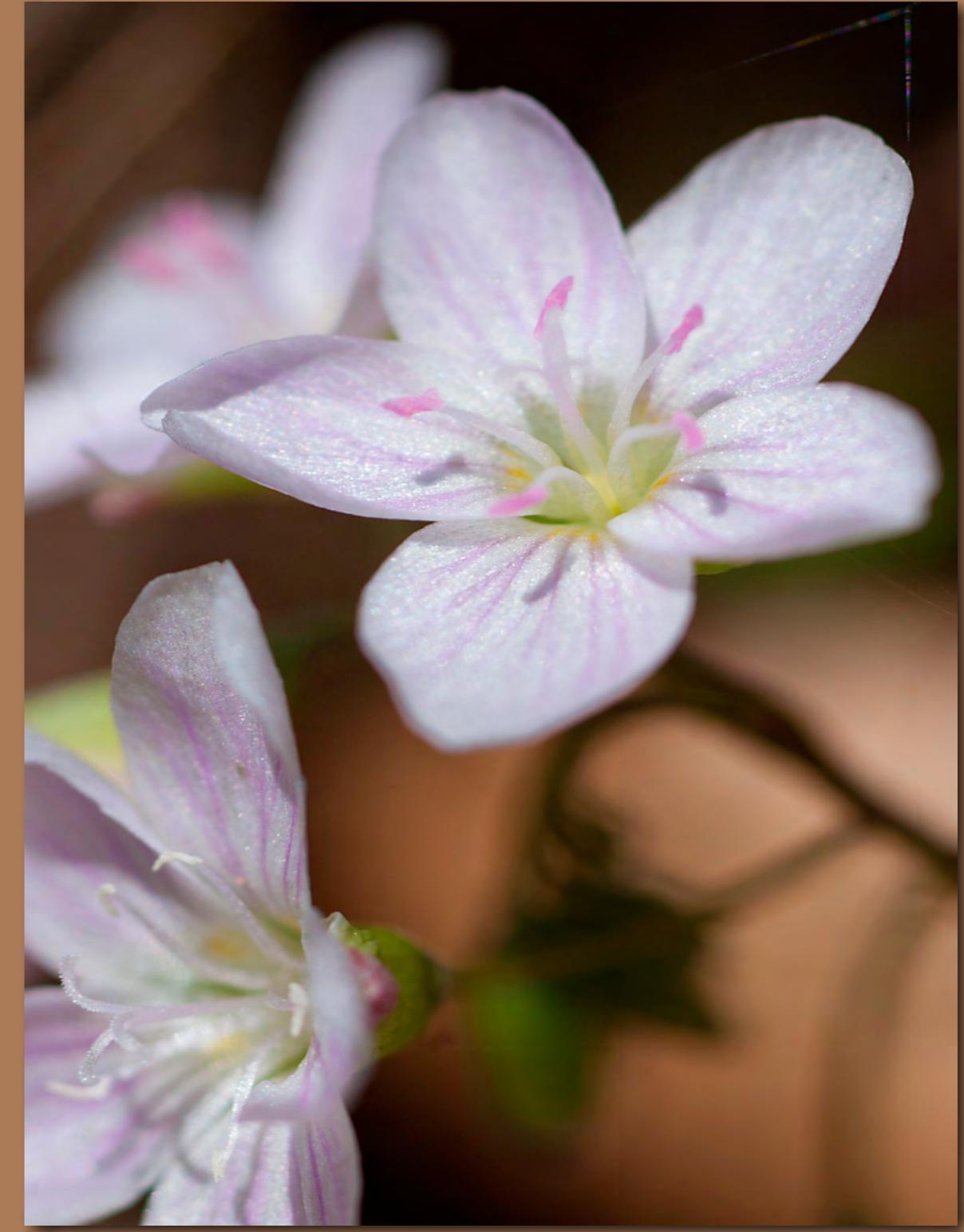
Nikon D70, 100 mm macro lens. ISO 200, f3.5 @ 1/50 second.





With this image I tried to create a bit of mystery and sensuality by only have the tips of the pistils sticking out from the flower. You can barely see the pollen-bearing stamen on the edge of the petals.

.Nikon D70, 100 mm macro lens. ISO 400, f3.5 @ 1/250 second.



These images of forest wildflowers were made using my Nikon 105 mm macro lens. On the left is an image of the woodland flower, *Hepatica*. I positioned the lens at the same level as the flower to create a more intimate portrait. I also used a small *f*-stop for a shallow depth of field, to blur out most of the bits of grass and other flower stems. The parallel curve of the flower stem and grasses leads the viewers eye up and to the left, terminating at the centre of the flower. On the right is a Spring Beauty flower. For this one, I moved closer to have the main flower fill more of the frame. I used an *f*-stop of 10 so that I could keep most of the main flower in focus and blur everything in the background. The flower on the lower left is partially in focus, but that doesn't detract from the composition. It helps to balance the composition since it is partially out of focus.



A blue composite flower that I photographed at the Christchurch Botanic Gardens in New Zealand. The macro lens allowed me to capture the fine details of the reproductive parts in the centre of the flower.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 125, f14 @ 1/5 second.



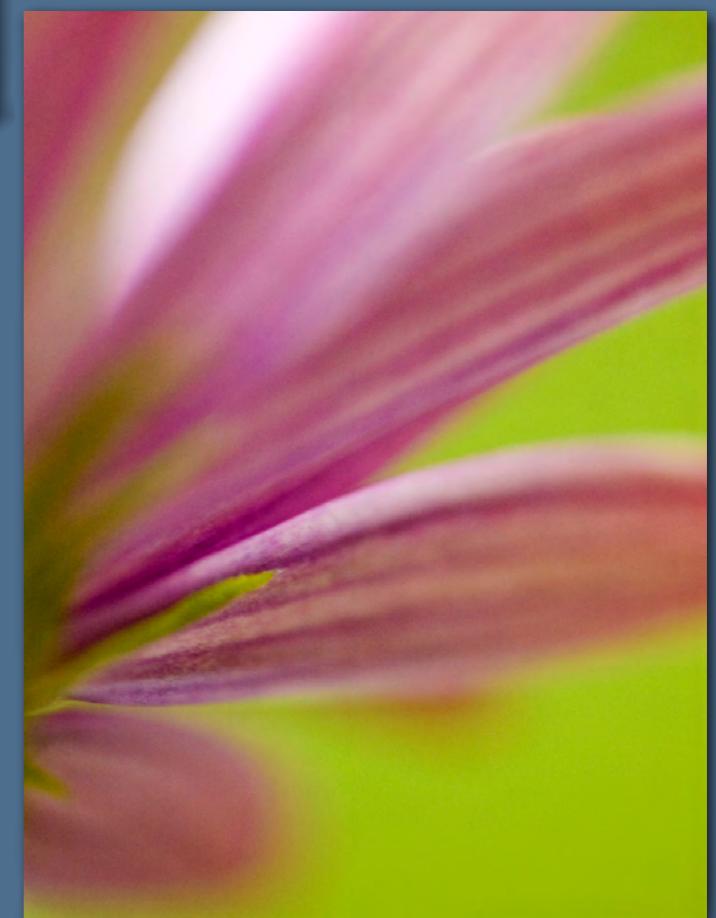
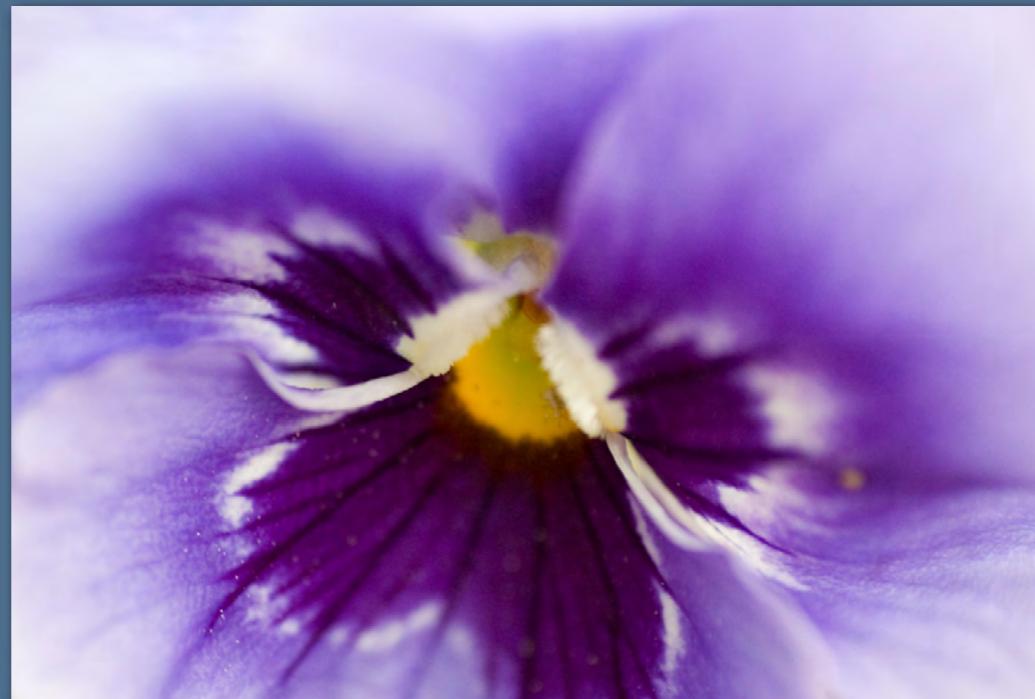
Getting in really close changes the image to a more abstract form. Here, it was the concentric curves of the petals that caught my eye, not the actual flower as a whole.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 200, f4.5 @ 1/20 second. Shot indoors under ambient light from a window.

Three examples of images made with a macro lens, but at different magnifications. The Agave flower (top) was shot at low magnification to include the entire cluster of flowers. The purple pansy (below) was shot at an intermediate magnification, with only the central part of the flower filling the frame. The third image was shot at high magnification so that the entire composition consists of petals. Only a small part of the image is in focus, but it's just enough to hold the viewer's eye.

Macro lenses are versatile and can be used to achieve a diversity of results, making them excellent value for the money.

Agave flower (top): Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 100 $f\ 9$ @ 1/40 second. Blue pansy (bottom left): Nikon D70, 100 mm macro lens. ISO 400, $f\ 3.5$ @ 1/100 second. Pink aster (bottom right): Nikon D70, 100 mm macro lens. ISO 640, $f\ 4$ @ 1/60 second. All taken with ambient light.





I made this image using the first macro lens I owned - a very inexpensive lens. It wasn't even a true macro (1:1 magnification) because I needed to add on a close-up filter it came with to get to 1:1. The optics weren't great on this lens. In fact, with the close-up filter attached for the greatest magnification, it gave the image a significant graininess. But in this case, I think the graininess caused by the lens quality, along with the high ISO, actually adds to the image. Sometimes you just have to make the best of the equipment you have and turn a negative into a positive.

Nikon D70, 100 mm macro lens. ISO 640, f 3.5 @1/120 second. Shot indoors with natural ambient light.



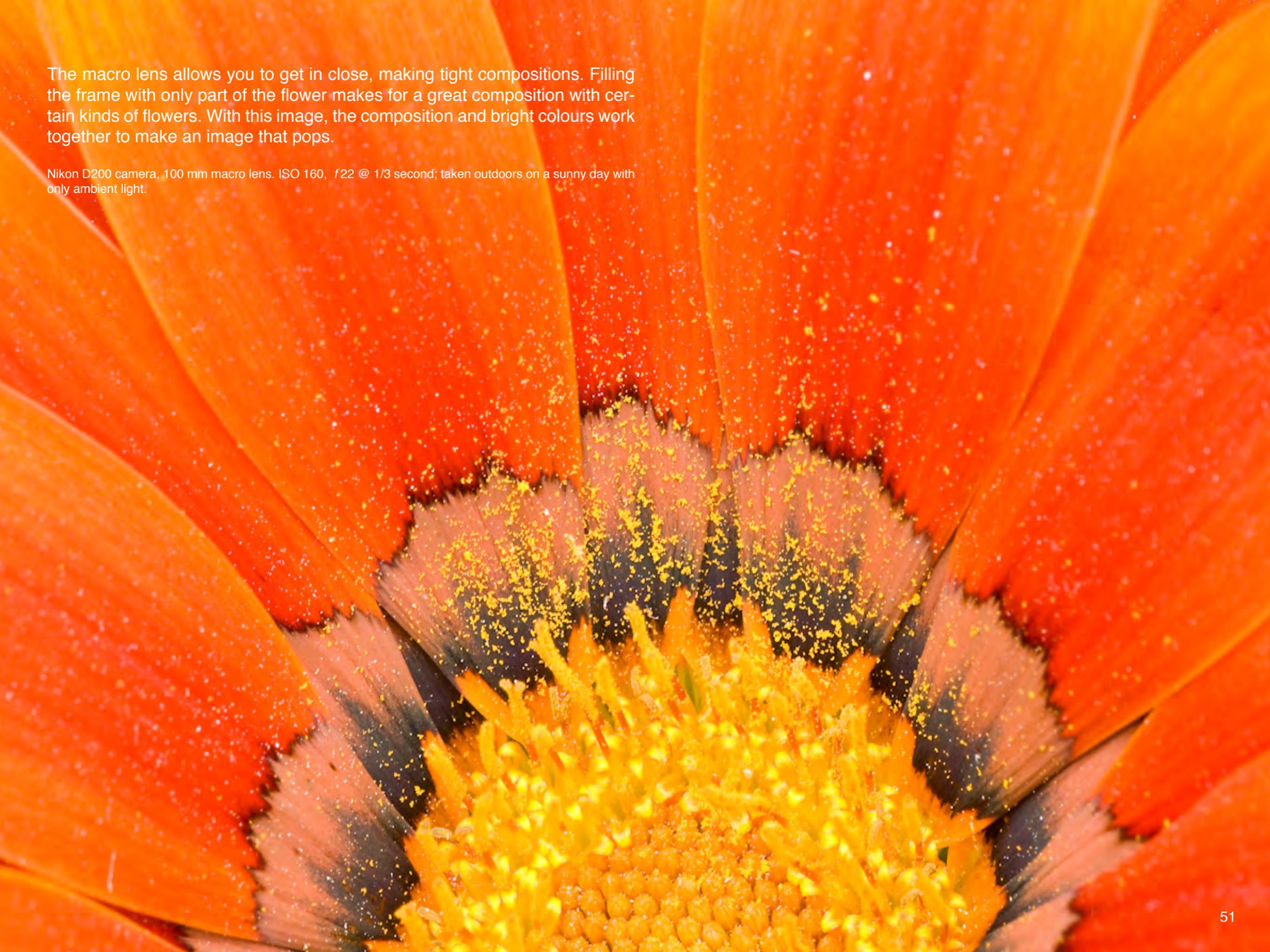
This is an image of a cactus flower made with my 105 mm macro lens. I focused on the ring of petals, keeping some of them in focus, but letting others be out of focus. And I didn't worry about keeping the reproductive structures in the centre perfectly in focus. The petals create a circular composition that leads the eye into the centre of the flower. And just enough of the structures in the centre of the flower are in focus to hold the viewer's eye.

What I love about this image are how the spines on the cactus, out of focus, create triangles in the background. The geometry adds to the photo. And the triangles are out of focus enough not to be distracting. The muted colour of the background also helps the pink flower to stand out.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 200, f 6.3 @ 1/60 second; taken indoors with only ambient light.

The macro lens allows you to get in close, making tight compositions. Filling the frame with only part of the flower makes for a great composition with certain kinds of flowers. With this image, the composition and bright colours work together to make an image that pops.

Nikon D200 camera, 100 mm macro lens. ISO 160, *f*22 @ 1/3 second; taken outdoors on a sunny day with only ambient light.



This woodland wildflower, *Hepatica*, was shot with an *f*-stop small enough to blur out the background, but large enough to ensure part of the focal flower was in focus. The flower beside it is entirely out of focus, but balances the composition and doesn't pull the viewer's eye away from the focal flower because the two are close enough together.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens.
ISO 250, *f* 7.1 @ 1/250 second; taken outdoors
with only ambient light.



Working A Subject

I wanted to include a section on working a subject because it's something I don't think photographers do enough. Certainly not flower photographers. Working a subject refers to spending the time to photograph the same subject from different perspectives. I often see people out photographing flowers and making a single image, or very few, of a flower and then moving on to the next one. It's great to include a diversity of perspectives and compositions in your shoot. Otherwise, you may have missed a fantastic shot simply because you didn't spend the time to look at your subject from all angles.

Refresh your memory by going back to the section of this book on Perspective. Experiment. Work the subject. Shoot from every angle you can. Try a variety of techniques like image overlay or shooting through another subject. I'm willing to bet you'll be really happy with the results and glad you spent more time on that one subject before moving on to the next. For me, I like to shoot until I exhaust all possibilities or until I get bored of shooting that one subject. It usually takes me quite a while to get bored of photographing any flower.

This image and the succeeding four show how you can work a subject. I picked a *Hydrangea* bloom off a plant on campus and brought it home with me to photograph. I spent an hour on it and shot about 80 images of this one subject. I was on a photographer's high while doing this. Talk about being in the zone - that feeling you experience when you know you're getting some great images and you're having a blast making them.

Blue Hydrangea. Nikon D70, 100 mm macro lens, ISO 100, f4.8 @ 1/8 second. All taken with ambient light shining in a nearby window.





Blue Hydrangea. Nikon D70, 100 mm macro lens, ISO 100, f 4.2 @ 1/15 second. Taken with ambient light shining in a nearby window.



Blue Hydrangea. Nikon D70, 100 mm macro lens, ISO 100, f 4.8 @ 1/8 second. Taken with ambient light shining in a nearby window.



Blue Hydrangea. Nikon D70, 100 mm macro lens,
ISO 100, f9 @ 1/2 second. Taken with ambient light
shining in a nearby window.

A close-up photograph of blue hydrangea flowers. The flowers are a vibrant shade of blue, with some purple and white highlights. The petals are delicate and layered, creating a complex texture. The background is blurred, making the flowers stand out. In the top right corner, there is a text box with the following information:

Blue Hydrangea. Nikon D70, 100 mm macro lens,
ISO 100, f4 @ 1/20 second. Taken with ambient light
shining in a nearby window.

THE REALLY CREATIVE STUFF

Over the next several pages, I discuss some of the techniques you can use to produce really creative images. This includes making abstract and photo-impressionistic images. The techniques are easy to learn. They just require practice to produce the effects you want consistently. You'll never be 100% able to predict the end result, but that's the beauty of these approaches - by definition you can't know exactly how they'll turn out. But that makes them just that much more fun to produce.

Techniques such as panning, zooming, multiple exposure and image overlay can produce some incredibly creative images. I'll also talk a bit about the Lensbaby and the kinds of abstract images you can make with it.

The key here is to be willing to experiment. Work outside your comfort zone. Force yourself to play with these techniques, even if they aren't normally your cup of tea. You'll learn a lot about producing different effects in-camera and you may be pleasantly surprised by the results!

Pink Tulips blurred by panning upward. Nikon D200 camera, 18 - 200 mm zoom lens @ 112 mm. ISO 100, f36 @ 1/3 second. Taken at mid day on a sunny day.

Panning & Zooming

Panning

Panning and zooming involve moving the camera in certain directions during a long exposure. The key to these techniques is to use a sufficiently slow shutter speed to create a blur and yet not completely blur the image so that the subject is unrecognizable (unless that's what you want).

For these kinds of images, I generally use a high *f*-stop (in this case, *f* 25) so that the corresponding shutter speed is slow (2 seconds, in this case) and there is sufficient depth of field of the elements in the image.

To make panning images such as this one, dial in a slow shutter speed (generally about 1-2 seconds, depending on ambient light levels); you can do this by setting a high *f*-stop and lowering your ISO, or some combination of both. If it's a really sunny day, you may have to crank down your ISO and maximize your *f*-stop to get a slow enough shutter speed.

Once you have your settings dialed in (ideally you should be shooting in manual mode here) press the shutter release. While you do this, move your camera, either up or down, from side to side, or in circles, as I have here. You can move the camera in any direction you want! The idea is to do it in a way that you think will produce a pleasing result.

With this image, I photographed a planter full of colourful pansies that had some white daisies on the outer left edge. I set my shutter speed, ISO and *f*-stop and once I depressed the shutter release, I slowly moved the camera in a circular motion. Had I moved the camera too quickly, I may have ended up with too much blur to still recognize the daisies. It's a matter of finding the right speed of movement and this only comes with practice.

Nikon D70, 18 - 200 mm zoom lens @ 85 mm, ISO 200, *f*25 @ 2 second. Slow pan in a circular motion.



Zooming

This is an example of zooming, which creates a composition that converges on the centre. You'll need a zoom lens for this. As with panning, set a slow shutter speed (here I used 1.6 seconds) and a large *f*-stop (I used *f* 25). You can play around with the ISO too, if needed. If it's a bright day, dial down your ISO to 100 or less if you can, so that you can get your shutter speed sufficiently slow.

Press the shutter release, hold the camera steady, but twist the barrel of your lens to zoom into the flowers. Remember, if you do the zooming motion too fast, you'll lose the detail of the flowers. But that's ok if what you want to achieve is a burst of colours. The flowers don't need to be recognizable. You decide what effect you want to achieve.

Try different setting combinations, zoom speeds. Try zooming out instead of in. But be careful when zooming out as you may get elements in your image that you don't want. It's safer to compose your image at the lowest focal length and zoom in.

Experiment! Because you aren't precisely controlling the speed at which you zoom the lens, the effect you achieve from one image to the next will vary. But that's ok. If you're shooting digital, you can afford to shoot a lot of images and keep only the ones you like. When you review your images, make a note of what *f*-stop and shutter speed settings produced the effect you most like. Remember, there is no one 'right' way to make these images. Experience is your best teacher here.

Nikon D70 camera, 18 - 200 mm zoom lens @ 48 mm. ISO 200, *f* 25 @ 1.6 second. Slow zoom inward.



Who says the flowers have to be recognizable! In this case, I used a slow shutter speed, but also moved the camera in an up and down motion to create a wavy pattern. Because I moved the camera relatively quickly, it blurred the flowers to the point where you can still make out some of the flower, but not much. The objective of this image was colour and patterns, not individually recognizable flowers.

Nikon D70 camera, 18 - 200 mm zoom lens @ 105 mm. ISO 200, f 2.8 @ 1.3 second. Slow pan in a horizontal wave motion.



If you thought the previous image was pretty abstract, take a look at this one! Do you recognize this as an example of panning in a diagonal direction? Yup. Do you recognize these as flowers? Nope. I moved the camera so quickly that it just created a blur of colour. For me, I love this effect! I love the colours in this. It's not everyone's cup of tea, but these are fun to make. They look more like abstract paintings than photographs.

Nikon D70 camera, 18 - 200 mm zoom lens @ 70 mm. ISO 200, f25
@ 1.6 second. Slow pan in upward diagonal motion.



Another very abstract image, like the previous one. But with this one, the colours are far from subtle. Don't worry about the colours, just have fun. The key to these images is simply to play and create.

Making these kinds of images reminds me of the sort of artistic freedom we had while finger-painting in kindergarten. It's too bad that adults relegate finger-painting to something young kids do. Here's your chance to reclaim some of your childhood and to 'paint' with reckless abandon!

Nikon D70 camera, 18 - 200 mm zoom lens @ 70 mm. ISO 200, f25 @ 1.6 second. Slow pan in an upward and diagonal motion.

Multiple Exposure

If you really enjoy abstracts or photo impressionism, you'll love making multiple exposure images. I often use it to make images of trees in a forest. Basically, any scene where there are elements that stand out from others, will be a good subject for this technique.

In this case, the stems of the Purple Loosestrife flowers, the green Milkweed plants and the white Queen Anne's Lace interspersed amongst them provided the right ingredients for a multiple exposure image.

With multiple exposure, there are a number of ways to make these images. The nice part is that most Nikon and Canon dSLR's have a multiple exposure function on them. So all you do is dial in the number of multiple exposures you want (I think my Nikon D200 gives me a maximum of nine) and set the gain function (which gets the camera to automatically adjust the exposure of each image for the number of exposures you dial in).

The process of creating the multiple exposure is easy: dial in the number of exposures you want to make, turn the gain on (highly recommended), press the shutter release to make your first exposure. Then, move the camera slightly, then make your second exposure. Then move the camera slightly again, and make your third exposure, and so on. Once you've made as many exposures as you dialed into your camera settings, your camera will then process the images and combine them into a single frame.

Multiple exposure with 6 exposures. With each exposure, I moved the camera very slightly in a horizontal direction, from right to left. Nikon D200 camera, 18 - 200 mm zoom lens @ 95 mm. ISO 400, f10 @ 1/60 second.



If your camera doesn't have a built-in multiple exposure function, don't worry. You can create multiple exposures manually in Photoshop. Just shoot your images, but instead of your camera combining them, you will do the job in Photoshop. So if you shot nine images, then you simply add these nine images together into a single file in Photoshop. Each image added will be a separate layer. You simply combine all of the nine different images and then flatten the image layers. Pretty easy!

If you do your multiple exposures manually, by creating several different exposures to combine in Photoshop, or even if your camera does have a multiple exposure function, it may not allow you to set the gain (the exposure of each image). In that case, you'll have to adjust for this manually. Remember, you'll be putting several images on top of each other. If each was taken at an average exposure, the resulting composite image would be too dark.

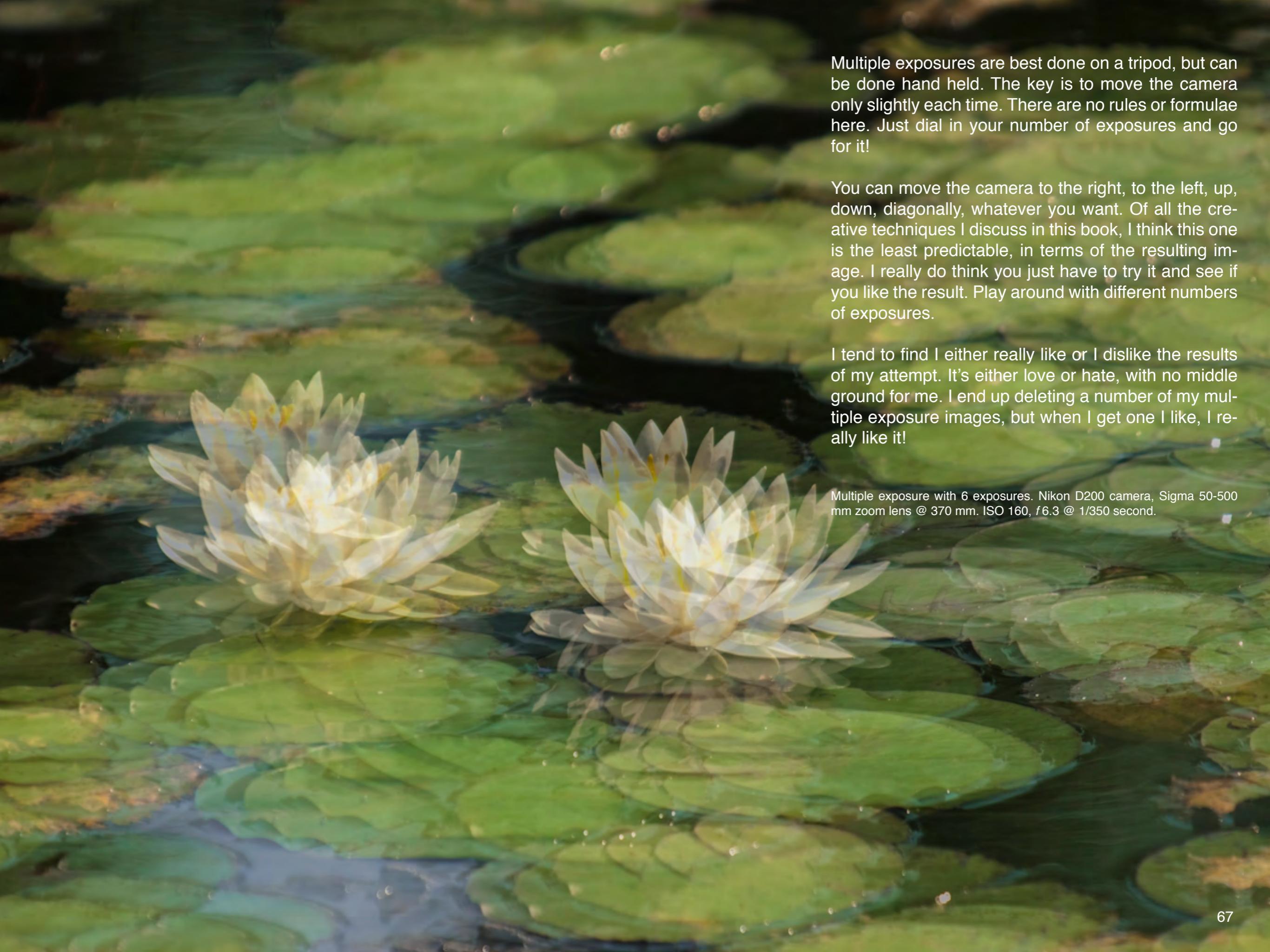
Instead, you'll need to reduce each exposure to lighten them so that when you combine them, the final image has an average exposure. There's a really simple little guideline to remember. Take the square root of the number of images you want in our multiple exposure and make that number, the number you dial into your exposure compensation to reduce each exposure. For example, if you want to have a multiple exposure with nine images, then set your exposure compensation for minus 3, since three is the square root of nine. This means each image will have its exposure decreased, but put all together, the final exposure should be exactly right. I do, however, encourage you to shoot in RAW format (not jpeg) so that if you do need to tweak the final exposure, you have full control to do so with the RAW image.

Nikon D70, 18 - 200 mm zoom lens @ 105 mm. ISO 200, f29 @0.8 second. Multiple exposure with 3 exposures.

This is an example of multiple exposure with movement in a slightly diagonal direction. For this image I focused only on the part of the planter that had blue and yellow pansies. I avoided the red ones so I could create a more subtle image. Had I included the red flowers in here, I think they would have overpowered the image and created a distracting patch of colour.

For an excellent description of both the artistic and technical aspects of making multiple exposures, read *Photo Impressionism and the Subjective Image*, by Freeman Patterson and Andre Gallant. It's a treasure trove of information and examples of creative image making.





Multiple exposures are best done on a tripod, but can be done hand held. The key is to move the camera only slightly each time. There are no rules or formulae here. Just dial in your number of exposures and go for it!

You can move the camera to the right, to the left, up, down, diagonally, whatever you want. Of all the creative techniques I discuss in this book, I think this one is the least predictable, in terms of the resulting image. I really do think you just have to try it and see if you like the result. Play around with different numbers of exposures.

I tend to find I either really like or I dislike the results of my attempt. It's either love or hate, with no middle ground for me. I end up deleting a number of my multiple exposure images, but when I get one I like, I really like it!

Multiple exposure with 6 exposures. Nikon D200 camera, Sigma 50-500 mm zoom lens @ 370 mm. ISO 160, f6.3 @ 1/350 second.

Shooting Through Another Subject

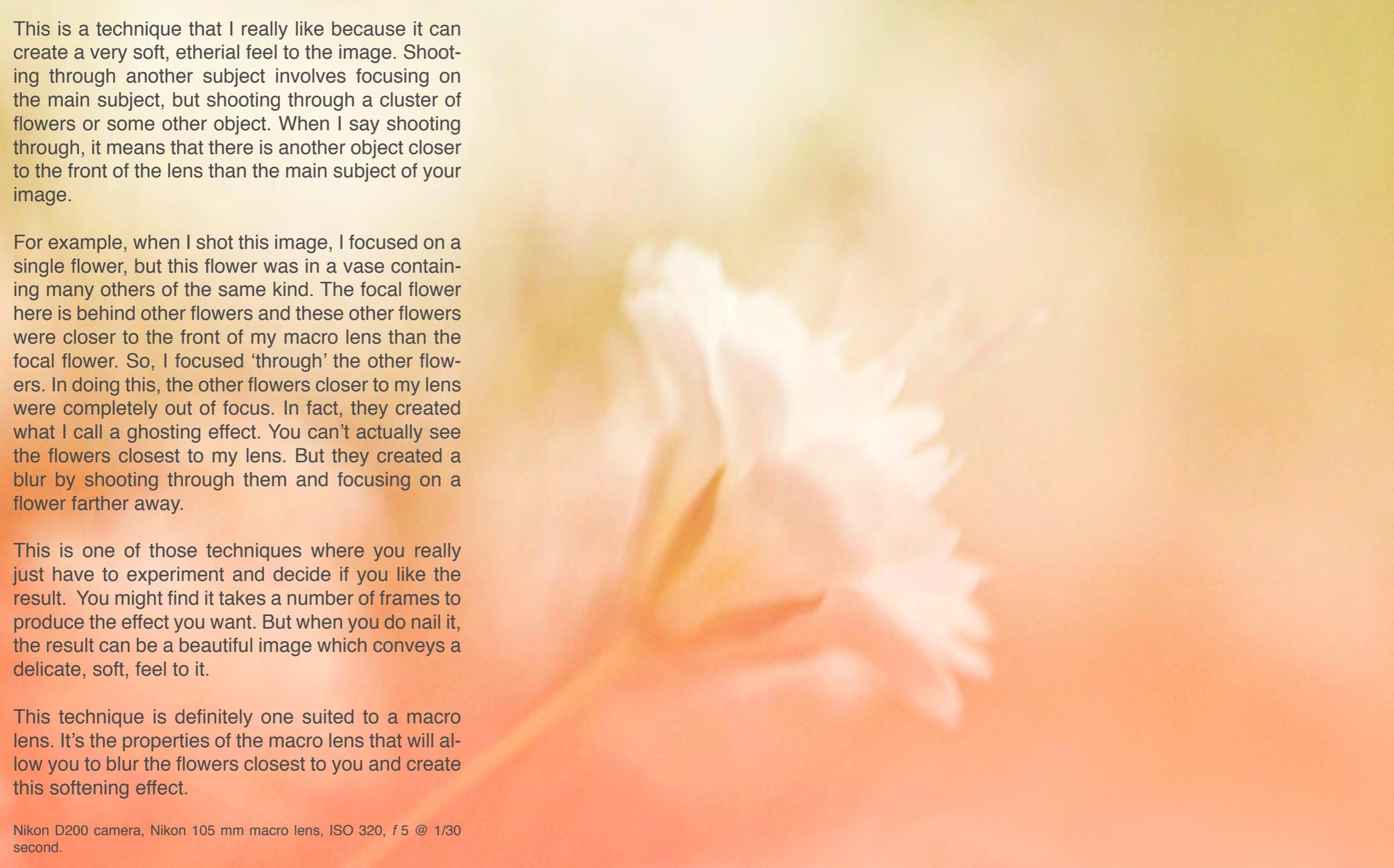
This is a technique that I really like because it can create a very soft, ethereal feel to the image. Shooting through another subject involves focusing on the main subject, but shooting through a cluster of flowers or some other object. When I say shooting through, it means that there is another object closer to the front of the lens than the main subject of your image.

For example, when I shot this image, I focused on a single flower, but this flower was in a vase containing many others of the same kind. The focal flower here is behind other flowers and these other flowers were closer to the front of my macro lens than the focal flower. So, I focused ‘through’ the other flowers. In doing this, the other flowers closer to my lens were completely out of focus. In fact, they created what I call a ghosting effect. You can’t actually see the flowers closest to my lens. But they created a blur by shooting through them and focusing on a flower farther away.

This is one of those techniques where you really just have to experiment and decide if you like the result. You might find it takes a number of frames to produce the effect you want. But when you do nail it, the result can be a beautiful image which conveys a delicate, soft, feel to it.

This technique is definitely one suited to a macro lens. It’s the properties of the macro lens that will allow you to blur the flowers closest to you and create this softening effect.

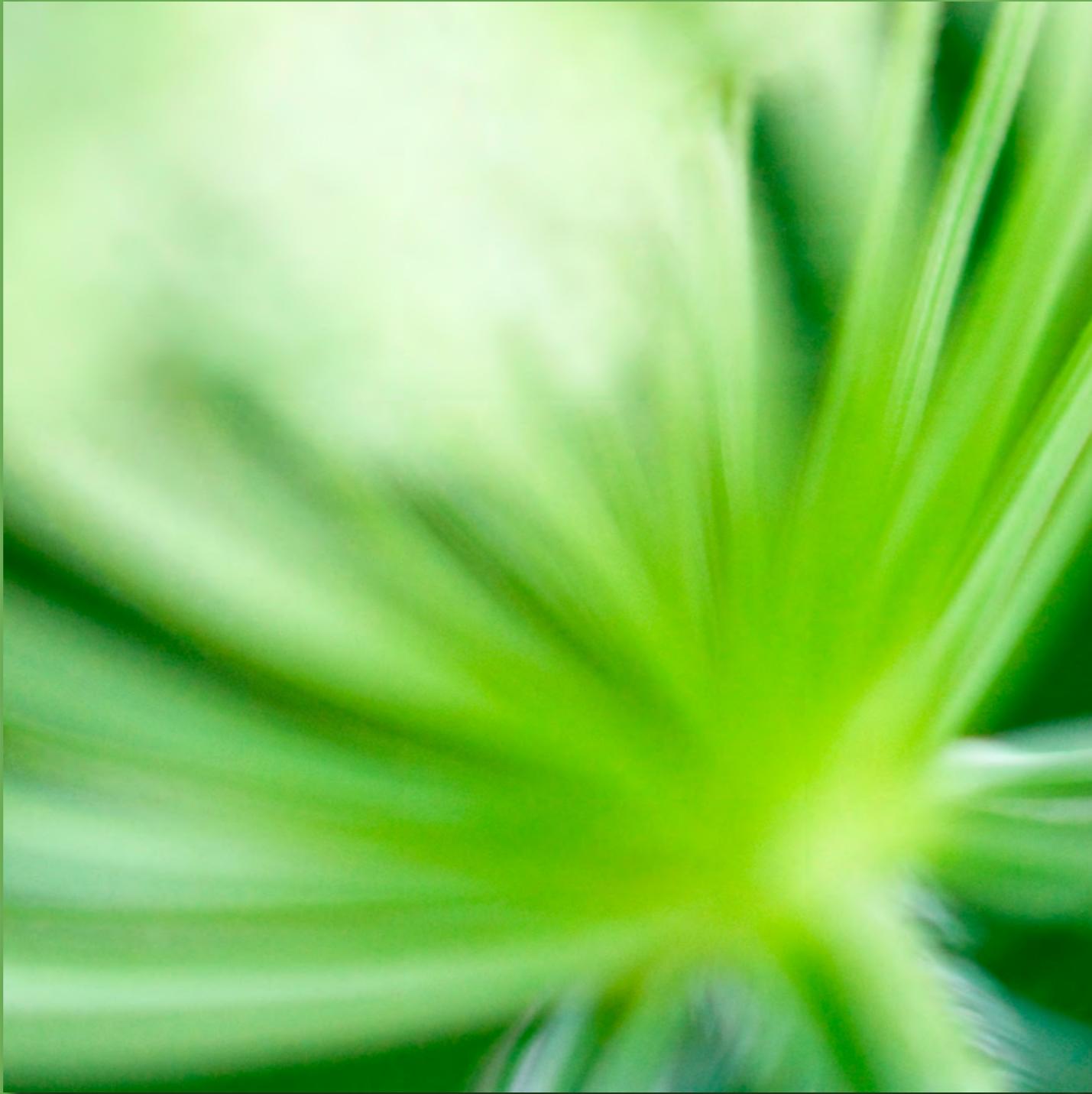
Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 320, f 5 @ 1/30 second.





Here are some Goldenrod flowers, shot through another cluster of flowers. You can see how the flowers on the left create a yellow patch of colour, but the flowers themselves are not recognizable. The flowers on the right were partially behind other flowers and so are very blurred. This is a technique that takes a bit of practice to do it well, but it's worth the effort. You'll become adept at consistently producing beautifully soft images. Sometimes, the images look more like paintings than photographs.

Nikon D200, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 320, f4, 1/500 second.



Here's another example of shooting through a cluster of Queen Anne's Lace flowers to make this macro image of another flower of the same type. I focused specifically on the base of the flower cluster because I loved the way the individual flower stems radiate out from a central point where they all connect. Using a macro lens on high magnification and shooting through the stems from another flower cluster closer to my lens than this main subject, created the very soft and yet rather graphic or geometric look seen here.

Queen Anne's Lace flower head. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 320, f5.6, 1/60 second. Taken with ambient light outdoors.

These are flower stems shot through other flowers to create a soft effect. You can't actually see the flowers; instead, the flowers just create patches of colour, which adds a bit of texture to the image.

Nikon D70 camera, 100 mm macro lens, ISO 640, f 3.5, 1/60 second. Taken indoors with natural ambient light.

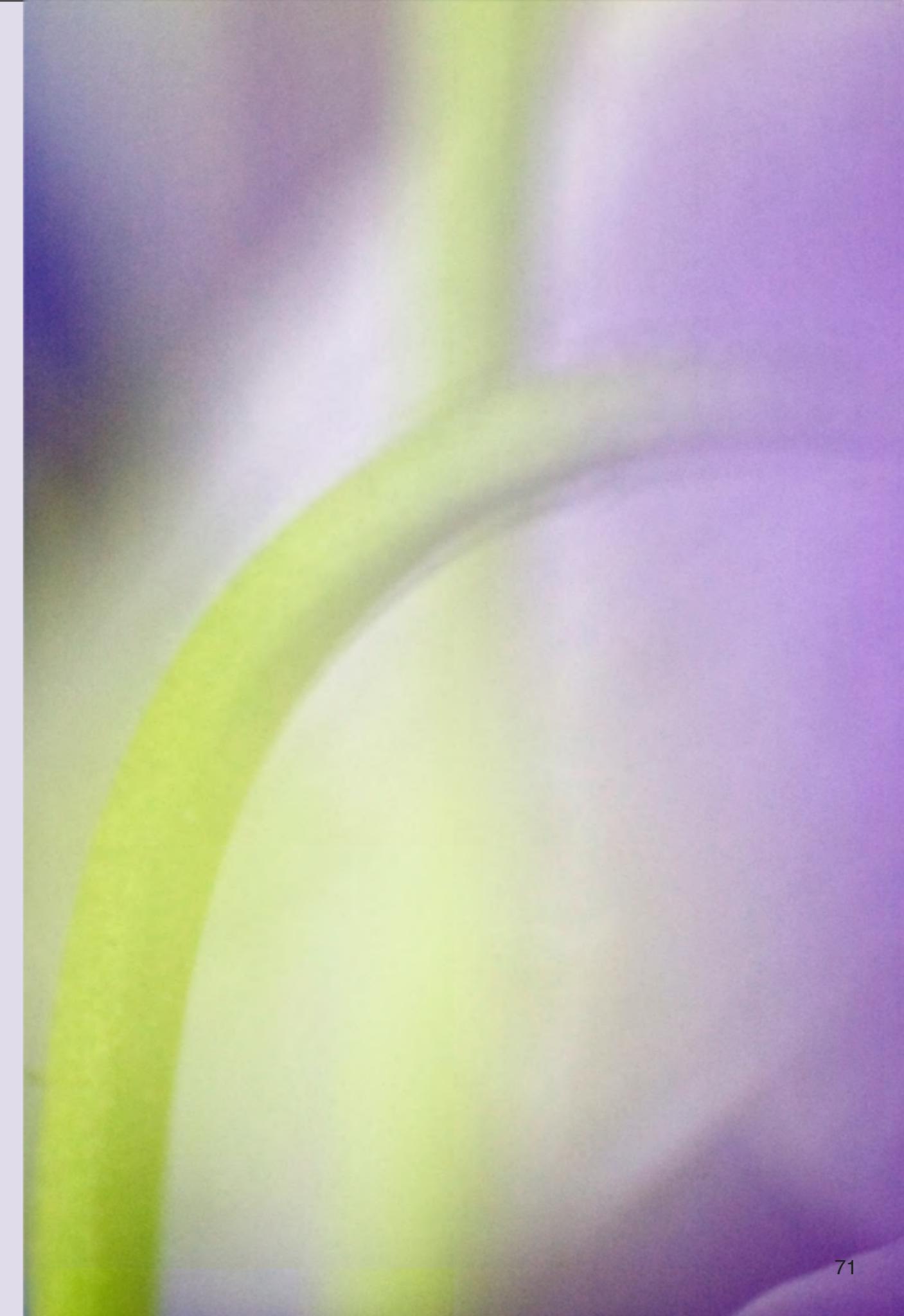
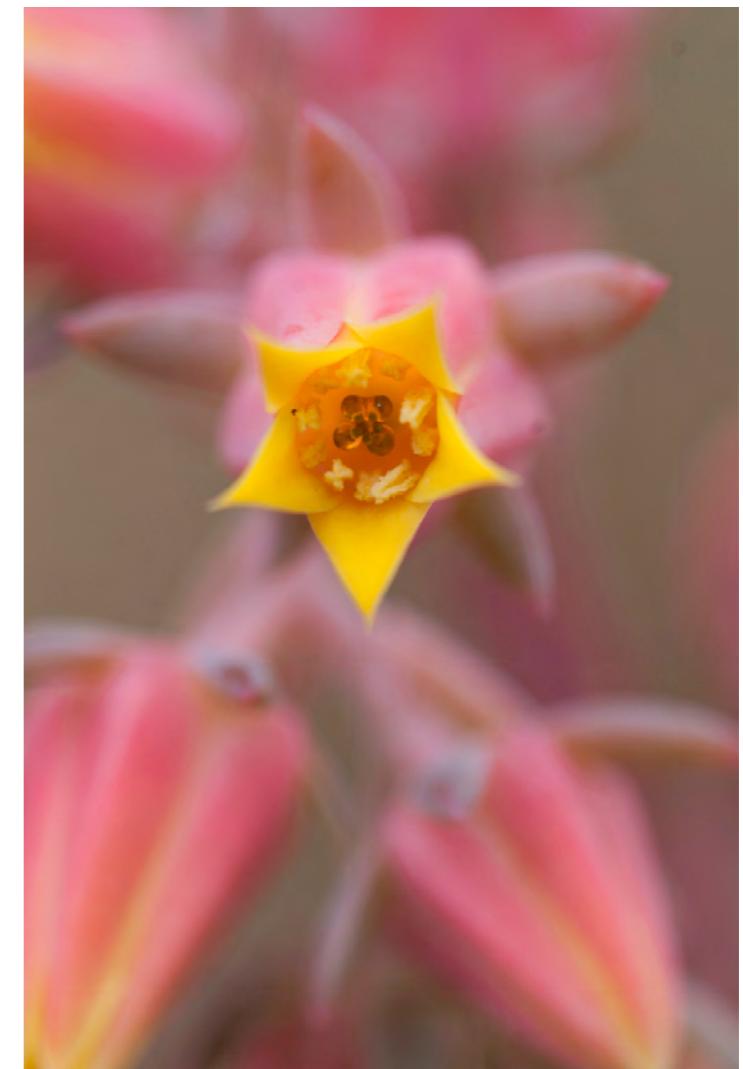


Image Overlay



A very simple technique for producing beautiful images is image overlay, where one image is superimposed over another. This can be done by post-processing in Photoshop, but for you Nikon users out there, most Nikon cameras now have a built in function to do this. To get the softening effect of image overlay, first make an image of your subject as you normally would. Use a fairly large *f*-stop to ensure you capture enough of the detail throughout the depth of the image. Then make another image, this time throwing the image out of focus. You can throw it out of focus a bit, or a lot; it's up to you. Once you've done this, you go to the Image Overlay function in your camera menu and then choose the two images you want to overlay. Once done, then choose Save and the camera will automatically combine the two images to create a new image. The effect you get is a significant softening of certain parts of the image. You might be able to achieve the same result by using a very small *f*-stop (e.g. 2.8), but if you don't have a lens with an *f*-stop that small, here's the next best thing. Another effect you can achieve with this method is a halo or glowing effect. It will depend on how much you throw the second image out of focus, but if it's really out of focus, the resulting combined image will sport a glow or halo. It's one of those techniques that isn't appropriate for every kind of subject, but for flowers, it often produces beautiful results. You can also use image overlay to superimpose two images of completely different subjects on top of each other, for a very creative effect.

Agave flower. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. Left: ISO 100, *f*20 @ 1/6 second; Middle: ISO 100, *f*9 @ 1/30 second, with the focus only on the centre of the flower; Right: the resulting image after combining the two with the image overlay function in my camera.



An image overlay of two images, but with the central part of the image (yellow part) in sharp focus with the first image and only slightly out of focus for the second image. By changing the focus, you also change the position of the elements in the frame and so can end up with an image that looks a bit like a multiple exposure (which it is, but of only two images). In this case that effect is partly due to the higher *f*-stop (larger depth of field) used here, compared to the previous image overlay example.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 250, *f*10 @ 1/10 second.

Focus? Really?

Since I've spent a few pages of this book talking about rules and how you should strive to break them, why stop now? Here, I want to talk about focus, or more specifically, about the lack of it. One of the 'rules' you'll hear about in photography is to always make sure that at least some part, even the smallest part, of your photograph is in focus. I respectfully disagree. But that's just me. I'm an abstract and photo impressionism junky and so for me, no part of the image *has* to be in focus. Remember, we're the artists and maker of the image and we can do whatever we want!

I know this isn't everybody's cup of tea. I know a lot of people who do not like abstract images (well, until they start shooting them and then they're addicted. Reminds me of a 'friend' I have... ahem...). But that's ok. You don't have to like these types of images. I do encourage you though, to give it a try. Force yourself outside your comfort zone. And if you really don't like what you're producing, that's fine. You can give it up. But at least you tried it. I still think you'll be amazed by what you can do with a camera and that maybe, just maybe, you'll like some of the results of your foray into abstract photography.

The reason I like abstract, out-of-focus images is that I love colour.

Just patches of colour appeals to me. I'm perfectly happy hanging something like that on my wall. It 'tickles' my brain (just the way chocolate does for some people). It makes me feel happy. I guess I get my own mini-endorphin rush from it. But bottom line is, I like it. If you don't like it, don't worry. There are plenty of other techniques you can play with to be creative. If you do love extreme abstracts, the good news is, the sky's the limit!

On the right is an example of an image that has very little in focus. There are a few tulips that are somewhat in focus, but you kind of have to hunt for them. Regardless, I love this image. It's the complimentary colours that do it for me. And the softness of the image. The unopened blooms in the background, just in front of the wire border, adds a bit of interest to the image. It's not in focus, but you can still recognize what it is. I really do encourage you to play with this technique of throwing everything out of focus. You can always hit the delete button....

Pink Tulips, Dow's Lake, Ottawa, Ontario. Nikon D200 camera, 18 - 200 mm zoom lens @ 200 mm. ISO 200, f5.6 @ 1/250 second.

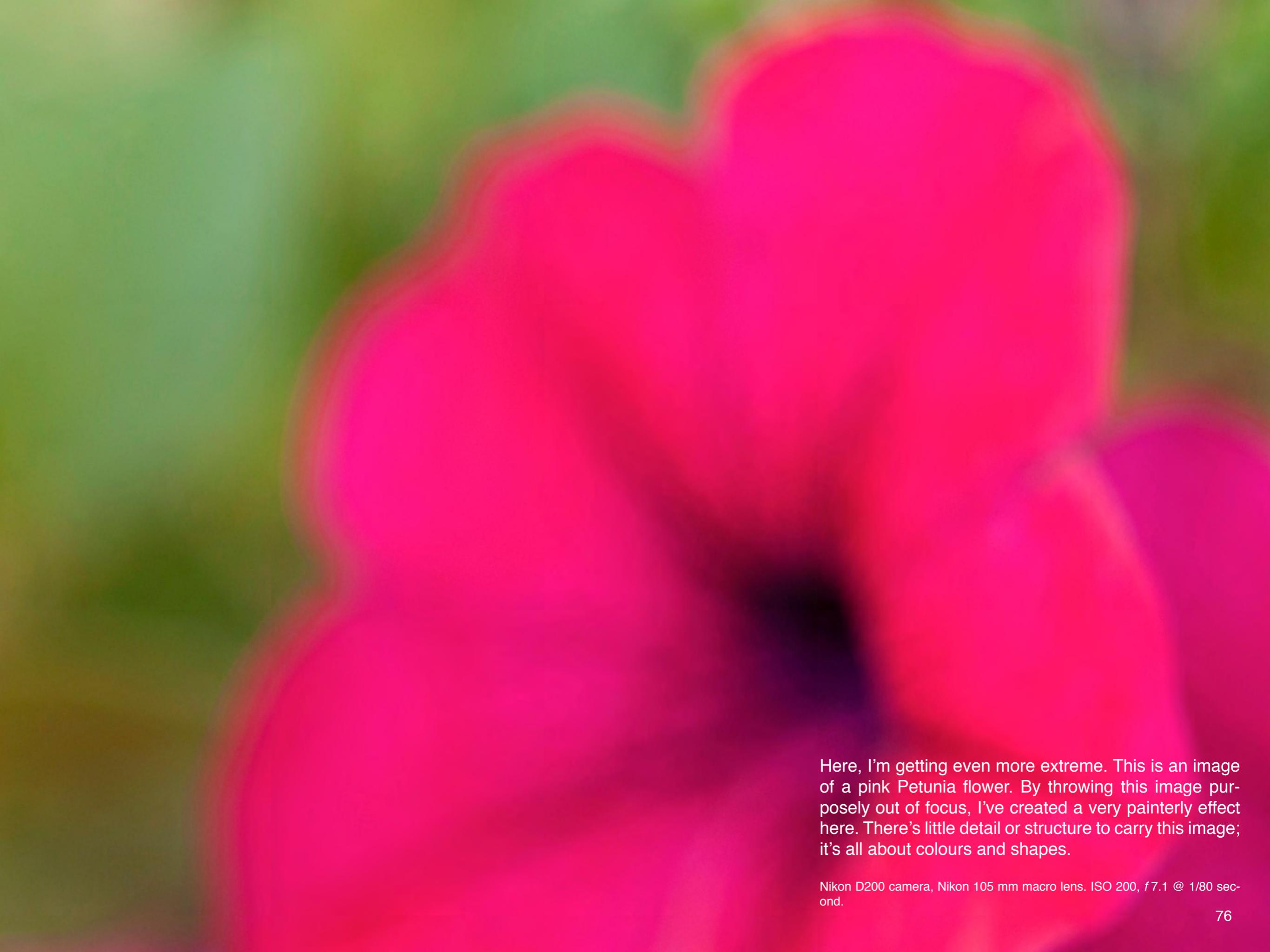




Have we gone from bad to worse? Not a single part of this image is in focus! But does it need to be? Can you still recognize the pink blob as a flower? And can you tell it's a tulip? Maybe....

The cluster of pink against a green background are what carries this image. Red and green are complementary colours, which is very appealing. Neither the red and pink, nor the green are solid. They vary in hue and brightness. The flower stems provide some structure and variation to the image, even though they are not in focus.

Nikon D200 camera, 18-200 mm zoom lens @ 200 mm. ISO 300, f 4 @ 1/800 second. Shot at mid day on a bright, sunny day.



Here, I'm getting even more extreme. This is an image of a pink Petunia flower. By throwing this image purposely out of focus, I've created a very painterly effect here. There's little detail or structure to carry this image; it's all about colours and shapes.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 200, f 7.1 @ 1/80 second.

A blurred, colorful image of tulips, showing a variety of colors including yellow, orange, red, and green. The image is out of focus, emphasizing the overall color palette and composition.

This one might just push you over the edge. There's nothing in focus. And, you can't even tell these are flowers, let alone that they are tulips! Does it matter? The variety and complementarity of colours are what make this image appealing. So does the distribution of colour. Having green to break up the other colours and having the green primarily in the bottom right part of the images helps to create some balance.

This image may not be the sort of thing you want to hang on your wall. But they do make great background images. You can put text on it, use it for an art magazine spread. I often add my own text like a saying or a poem and print it out and hang it on my wall. Or use it for a greeting card.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 250, f6.3 @ 1/500 second.



Some white tulips photographed during the annual tulip festival at Dow's Lake in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. The tulip festival is a photographers dream!

This image was taken on a very bright day, where there was a lot of high contrast light. Not great for photography. To make the most of the conditions, I got down low, at the tulip's level, and threw the entire scene out of focus. You can still tell these are flowers and probably tell they are tulips, even though the details are missing. The green stems and the light pink blooms in the background add just a bit more interest to the image. Who says at least some element of the image needs to be in focus?

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 250, f3 @ 1/2000 second.

Ever Used A Lensbaby?



For the ultimate in creativity, there's the Lensbaby. I'll talk a bit about it in the upcoming Equipment section, but first I want to introduce you to what it can do. If you've never used one, you've got to try it! If you can borrow one, that's the best strategy. Not everybody feels they need to have one of these in their camera kits. But if you like very creative and abstract images, I highly recommend you get one. They come in several different flavours as they have evolved over the past several years. A Lensbaby can make for some really fun photography!

Nikon D200 camera, Lensbaby 3G. ISO 100 @ 1/250 second.

So what exactly does a Lensbaby do? Well, in a nutshell, it throws things out of focus. I can just *hear* what you're thinking... gawd... not again! And now I have to spend money to make things go out of focus? Well... yes. But this is a special kind of out of focus. Yes, I can hear you groaning. But seriously, it's a neat little lens.

The Lensbaby allows you to distort the image by moving the front part of the lens from side to side, up and down, diagonally - whichever way you want. With the version I have, you can also pull the lens toward you or move it away from you to shift the centre of focus. I know.... this isn't making a lot of sense right now. I promise I'll talk more about this in the Equipment section.

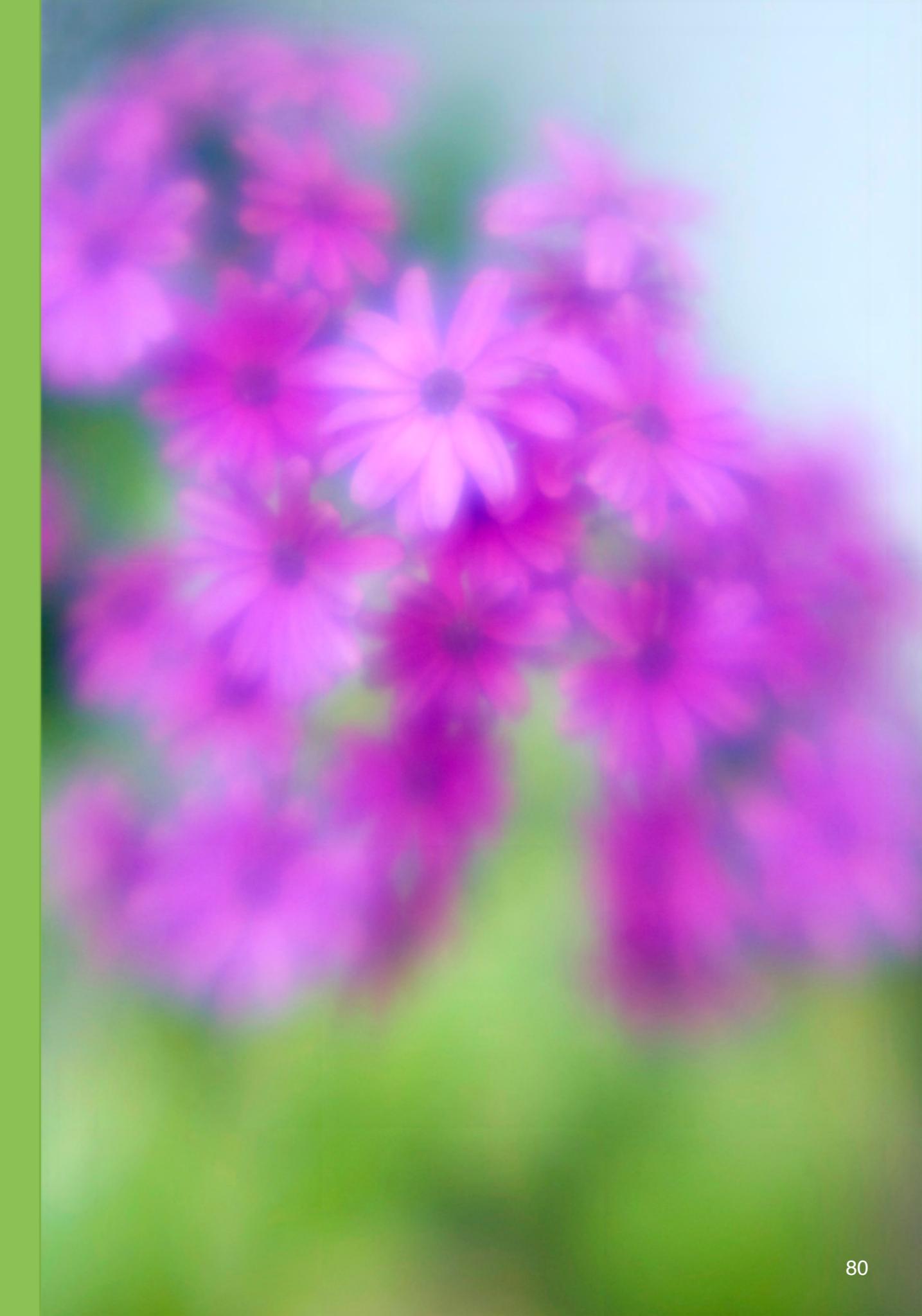
With a Lensbaby, you can have part of the image in focus or none of it. You can 'bend' the lens to create some interesting warping effects. With the version I have, you can add in different aperture inserts that go from *f*22 right down to the biggest aperture (or smallest *f*-stop). This will affect how much of your image will be in focus, at least in part.

It's a tough gizmo to explain. You really do have to just put one on your camera and play with it to

really understand how it works and to appreciate what it can do. I have a friend who, at least for a while, shot almost exclusively with a Lensbaby. Her images were incredible! Many of the images had a ghostly appearance to them.

A Lensbaby definitely falls within the 'experimental' category. But working outside your comfort zone is a great way to improve your skills and to expand your way of seeing.

Nikon D200 camera, Lensbaby 3G. ISO 125 @ 1/40 second.





Here's an example of an image of a Monarda flower, taken with a Lensbaby. What I love about this lens is that you can create images that have a very painterly look to them.

Nikon D200 camera, Lensbaby 3G. ISO 100 @ 1/1000 second.



This is my Lensbaby 3G. It's at least 5 years old now and there are new, zoomier models out there. But I still love this for making certain kinds of creative images. It came with five aperture disks to alter the depth of field of your image.

The funky knobs and screws on the Lensbaby are for locking the position of the focusing collar once you've found the sweet spot (the part of the image in focus) and have the focus where you want it. There are also knobs for tweaking the fine focus. The screws are for fine tuning the tilt of the focusing collar.

I also bought some extra filters to add onto it - two close-up filters (+4 and + 10) and a circular polarization filter.

If you want some ultra-creative fun with your photography, I highly recommend you try a Lensbaby. Whether you're shooting flowers, landscapes or anything else, I guarantee you'll have fun and you'll definitely be forced outside your comfort zone, which is always a good thing.



This is the same Monarda flower as before, but with a bumble bee visiting it. Not much of the bee is in focus, but you can tell it's a bee. The Lensbaby gives the entire image a very soft feel to it. And the bee adds a bit of colour and interest to the image.

Nikon D200 camera, Lensbaby 3G. ISO 100 @ 1/1250 second.



Here is an example of how you can ‘pinch’ the Lensbaby in a direction to create a distorted effect. None of the image is in focus, but it becomes increasingly out of focus toward the left side of the image.

Nikon D200 camera, Lensbaby 3G. ISO 125 @ 1/20 second.



This is an image of a day lily taken with a Lensbaby. I had the Lensbaby almost inside the flower to capture the colours and details of the petals. The distortion of the colour spots on the inside of the flower resulted in an image that looks like a human face. For me, the image looks like an angry face.

Nikon D200 camera, Lensbaby 3G. ISO 100 @ 1/500 second.



None of this image is in focus. But does that really matter? You can still tell that these are poppy flowers. The Lensbaby has distorted the light reflecting off the hairs on the flower stems to create a sense of movement.

Nikon D200 camera, Lensbaby 3G. ISO 100 @ 1/500 second.

Use the Lensbaby for flower portraits indoors or outdoors



Red Poppy, taken indoors using a desk lamp to light up the flower. Nikon D200 camera, Lensbaby 3G. ISO 100 @ 1/25 second.



Pinks. Taken outdoors using ambient light. Nikon D200 camera, Lensbaby 3G. ISO 100 @ 1/250 second.

IMAGE PROCESSING

I get asked frequently about whether I process my images in Photoshop and if so, what do I do. The answer is yes, I use Photoshop. In fact, I organize my images in Lightroom, tweak the exposure and then export the image to Photoshop. Once in Photoshop, I play with the Levels (I do use Curves, but find it's really easy to 'over cook' an image and so I use Curves only for certain images), bump the Vibrance up a bit, tweak the Brightness and that's it. I'll sharpen the image for whatever output I want (e.g. print, web, etc), but that's usually as much as I do. It's pretty minimal processing.

Because the beautiful colours of flowers is one of their main attractions, it's important to make sure your processed image captures that colour. So I usually bump up the Vibrancy a bit. But I seldom play with Saturation because the effects of increasing saturation are often too much for my liking. Increasing the saturation too much can make the image look artificial. Tweaking the Vibrancy is a more subtle way of bringing out the colour. This is, of course, unless you intentionally want an image that specifically has very

high colour saturation as a creative effect. Remember, you are the artist and the image is an expression of *your* vision. So if you want to bump up the Saturation, go for it. But just make sure this is an intentional and creative effect you want.

For this image of a Pink Showy Lady Slipper Orchid, I did my usual image processing, but then added a soft glow and some vignetting to create a more dreamy look. The image without these effects is nice, but for me, these effects give the image more 'mood'.

You can achieve these effects in Photoshop and many other excellent image processing software. Another of my favourites is Nik's Color Efex Pro. The software is easy to use and comes with a number of creative filters you can apply. But the software also lets you adjust the filter properties and strengths and so is very flexible.

Showy Pink Lady Slipper Orchid. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 160, f7.1 @ 1/25 second.





For this image, I bumped up the Vibrancy, tweaked the Saturation just a bit (because I wanted the colours to pop a bit more) and then applied a Diffuse Blur filter in Photoshop. This resulted in the very soft, dreamy look of this image, which is exactly what I wanted.

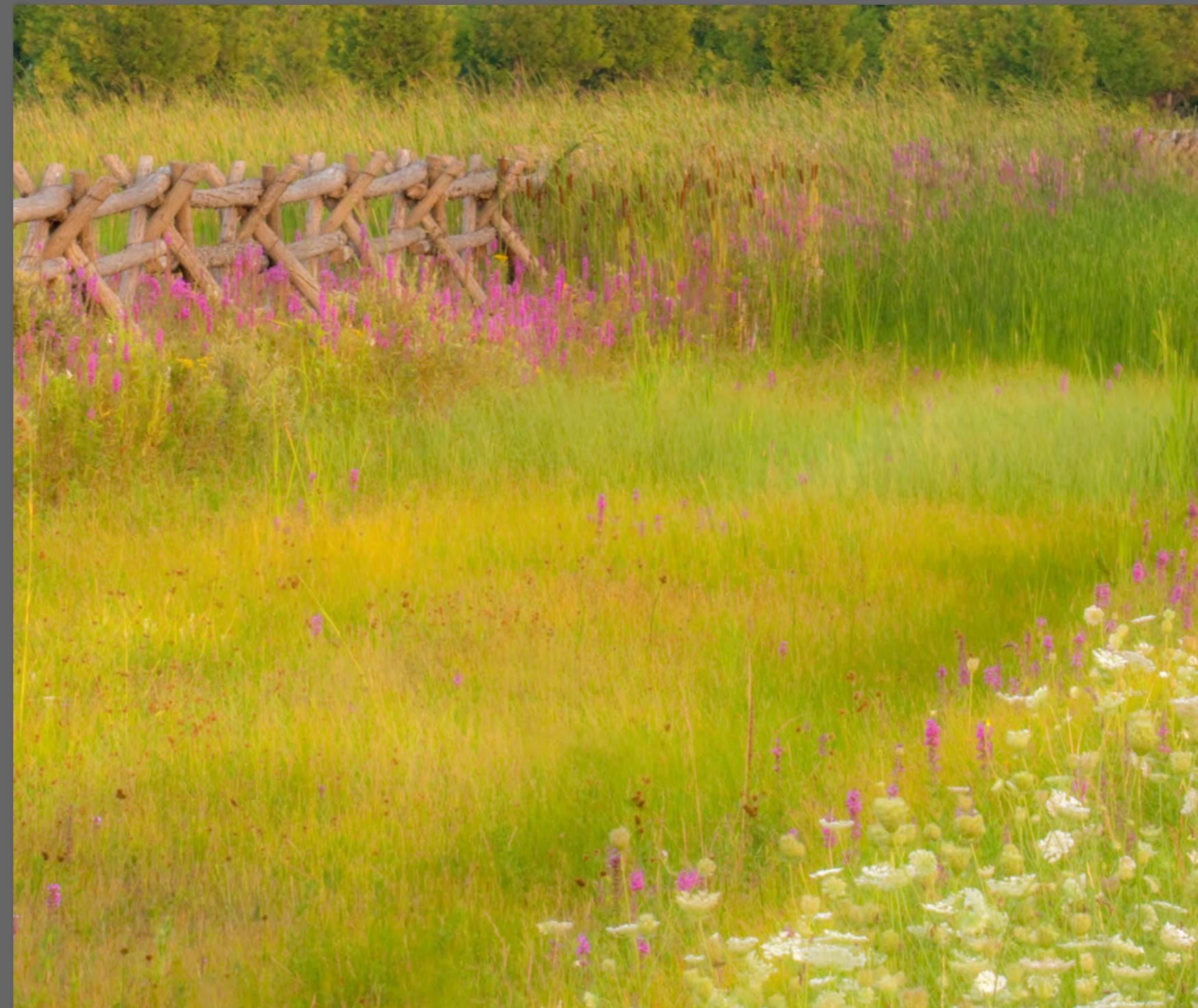
Experiment with filters and different effects, but make sure you think about what you want to achieve rather than just applying a filter for the heck of it. It's good to pre-visualize the end result you want to achieve. But also don't be afraid to experiment if the effect you pre-visualized just doesn't seem to work for the image.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, ISO 100, f7.1 @ 1/60 second

This image also has a bit of a soft, dreamy look to it. But I didn't actually have to do much to achieve this effect. There was a slight breeze blowing and so a slow shutter speed resulted in a slight blurring of the grass and cattails. I accentuated this by bumping up the saturation a lot, which gave the image a bit of a glowing effect.

I loved the complimentary colours in this image - the greens of the grass and cattails and the purple/pink of the Purple Loosestrife. But I wanted to really accentuate these colours. Pushing up the Saturation accomplished this as well as creating the glow. Achieving these effects were purely the result of experimentation. Once I had an effect I liked, I stopped.

Nikon D200 camera, 18-200 mm zoom lens @ 135 mm.
ISO 400, f32 @ 1/4 second.





I processed this image the way I usually do in Photoshop, but then imported it into Nik's Color Efex Pro and applied a Glamor Glow filter to it. I bumped up the saturation considerably to create these bright colours. I also slightly increased the glow temperature to make it 'warmer'. Finally, I bumped the glow setting way up to create a more surreal effect.

Nikon D200 camera, Sigma 50-500 mm lens @ 370 mm. ISO 400, f29 @ 1/3 second.

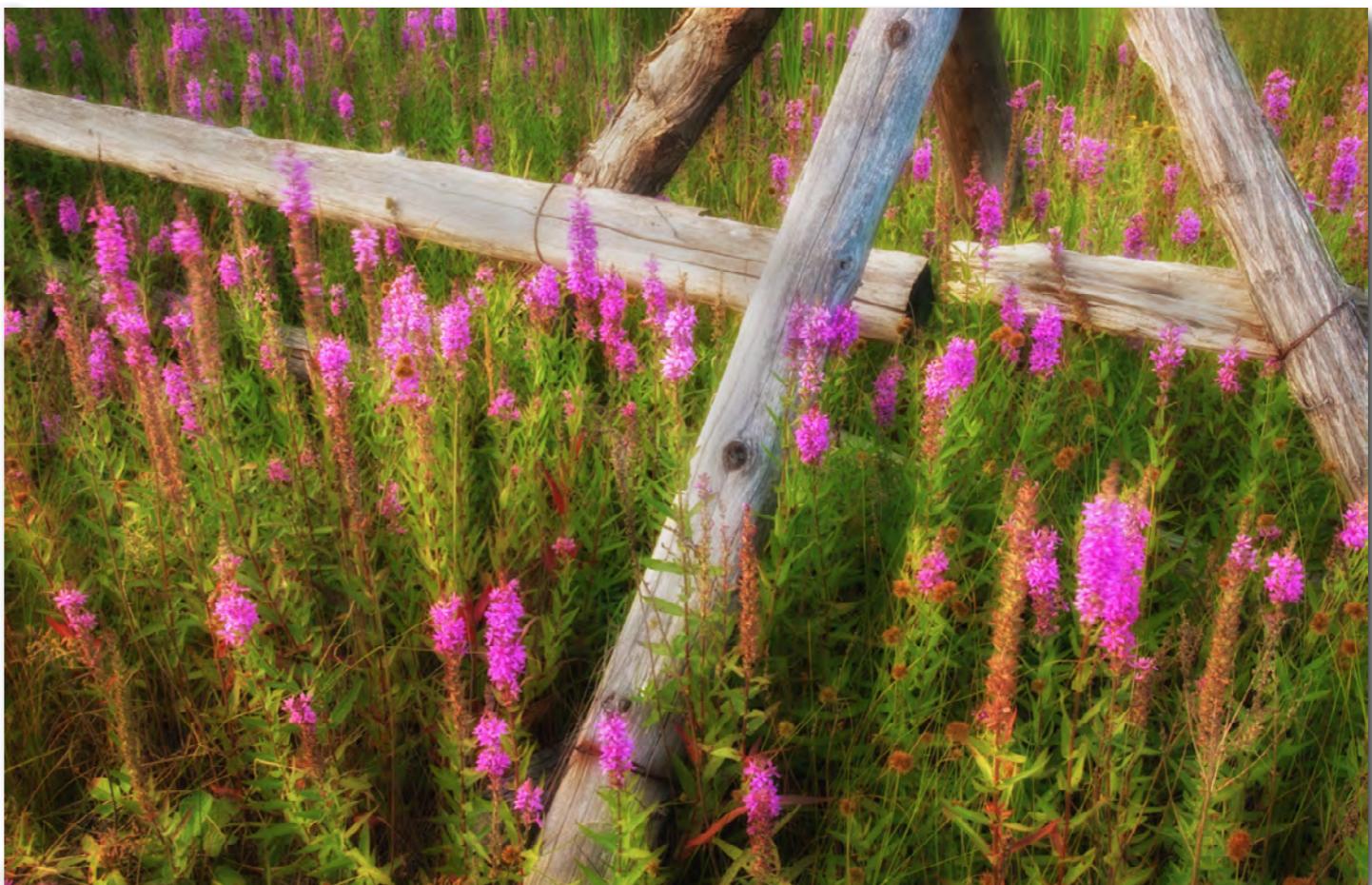
Fun With Filters

Here are two versions of the same image. On the top one, I performed my usual processing - levels, vibrance, brightness, sharpening.

On the bottom image, I took the top image and using Nik's Color Efex Pro, applied a Glamor Glow filter. Color Efex Pro allows you to manipulate various aspects of the filter such as the amount of glow and the glow temperature. You can also use Nik's control point tool to limit the effect (or remove it) from specific parts of the image. You can achieve the same result in Photoshop using layer masks, but I like the Nik software and find it easy to use and love the effects it creates and the control it gives you over those effects.

Although it's possible to go overboard with filters, I think it's a great idea to try them out. Decide first what sort of end result you would like to achieve and then play with the filters. This way you ensure that any creative filters you apply are done with intent rather than just playing with filters and applying things that may not be that appropriate for that image. Applying any old filter to jazz up an image is not the goal here. Applying filters with intent, to create certain effects and end results should be the goal. That doesn't mean you shouldn't experiment. Quite the opposite! Just don't go hog wild and create something ghastly (although beauty is in the eye of the beholder). Most of all - have fun and learn something. I truly believe that you learn best by doing.

Nikon D200 camera, 18-200 mm zoom lens @ 24 mm. ISO 320, f 22 @ 1/3 second.





This was a pretty ordinary image of daffodils in Hagley Park, Christchurch, New Zealand. In springtime, these flowers carpet huge areas of the park. But I could never get a shot that satisfied me and conveyed the expanse of green and yellow. So I experimented with filters. Here I used a radial blur, centering the blur around a lone flower. This way, the lone flower functioned to anchor the radial blur.

Nikon D70 camera, 18-200 mm zoom lens @ 56 mm. f4.8 @ 1/80 second.

EQUIPMENT

And now, a few words about equipment. I've left this section for last, probably because I find it the least interesting part of fine art flower photography. But there are certain important tools of our trade and so I think it's worth spending a bit of time highlighting some of them.

Over the next several pages, I describe the equipment I have used to make the images in this book. Whether you use some or all of this equipment or some equivalent is up to you. It will depend on what kinds of images you are inspired to make. There are entire books written about the different kinds of camera gear. That's not what this book is about. Rather, I want to highlight the things I used so that if the kinds of images in this book are the kinds of images you want to make, you'll know what equipment you need to do the job. But I think an important message is that you don't have to spend thousands of dollars to do fine art flower photography. A lot of my equipment is simple and pretty inexpensive. In fact, I started doing flower macro images with a macro lens that cost under \$100. Was it a great quality lens? No. But I made it work for me. Once I was bitten by the macro bug, I started saving my pennies and finally bought a top quality macro lens. It's a superb piece of glass and I have absolutely no regrets in spending the money on it. But even this fantastic lens didn't break the bank. And if your budget constraints are big, consider buying used equipment. That's how I started out.

Pink Lupin. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 320, f6.3 @ 1/160 second.



dSLR vs Point and Shoot

The images I've presented in this book were taken with a dSLR (digital single lens reflex) camera. With these cameras, lenses are interchangeable and all of the settings on your camera can be manipulated to achieve the result you want. This kind of camera offers you the greatest control and flexibility in your shooting. Since I started shooting with a digital camera in 2006, I've used both the Nikon D70 and the Nikon D200 camera bodies. I decided to go with Nikon, but Canon produces equally fantastic equipment. You can't go wrong with either one.

Although the dSLR camera offers you the greatest control and flexibility in your shooting, that doesn't mean you can't use a point and shoot. If you don't own a dSLR at this point, that's fine. I suggest you try your hand at fine art flower photography using whatever equipment you have, to see if it's something you really enjoy and want to do more of. If it is, then it may be worth investing in a dSLR and maybe a macro lens. But if you're not sure you want to invest in that equipment or can't afford the cost right now, just use your point and shoot.

You may be amazed by what you can actually do with a point and shoot camera. In fact, I was astounded by the kinds of images made by a fellow participant when I took one of Freeman Patterson's week long creative photography workshops in New Zealand. A fellow showed up for Freeman's course with nothing but a point and shoot. Some participants were dubious about the

kinds of images he was going to produce. But by the end of day 1, it was clear that a point and shoot was no limitation at all! His images were stunning! They were creative, fun, and beautiful. You would never have guessed they were made with a point and shoot camera! It's more about what you do with the equipment you have, rather than worrying about what you don't have.

The great thing about point and shoots is that they have come a long way. Many of them have 10 mega pixel (MP) or higher sensors in them, which will give you plenty of resolution for fine art flower photos. And many of them allow you to change the depth of field or shutter speed. Even if you can't do this with yours, most point and shoot cameras have a macro setting. For many of the point and shoots I've seen, this setting works really well. So, if you don't have a dSLR camera, don't sweat it. Just grab your point and shoot and try it. If you're not sure how to use your macro setting or whether you can change your *f*-stop, dig out your camera manual and have a look. It'll be worth the investment of a half hour to better understand the features on your camera.



This close-up was made with a dSLR camera and a macro lens, but I'm amazed at the quality of some of the point and shoots on the market now. Many have macro settings that would rival what you can do with a macro lens on a dSLR.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 320, *f*5.6 @ 1/40 second.

Lens Choice

Throughout this book, I've talked about lens options - macro lenses, long focal length telephoto lenses and zoom lenses - so I'm not going to rehash the topic here. But suffice it to say that any of these are perfectly good options for fine art flower photography. If you can only afford to buy one lens, the one I'd recommend is a macro lens, something in the 100 mm range.

The Nikon 105 mm I have is a superb lens. But I didn't always shoot with this. Until I could afford it, I shot with a 100 mm macro; I can't even remember what brand it was. It was a cheap lens. I think I paid about \$70 U.S for it in 2001. It wasn't even a true macro, meaning it didn't magnify to 1:1 (or life size). Instead, it came with a close-up filter you had to screw onto the front of the lens to approximate 1:1.

The optics were not high quality and you could tell because the images it produced with the close-up filter on it were rather grainy. I could have viewed this as a really big negative, but instead I tried to use it to my advantage. I made images with it that actually looked nice with that graininess; it contributed to that soft, ethereal look. Some example of images shot with this lens are on pages 32, 33, 48 and 71.

If you have a 50 mm lens or a zoom lens and can't or don't want to invest in a macro lens right now, consider buying close-up filters or diopters. These are pieces of glass that screw onto the front of your lens to provide magnification. They usually come in sets of 3 as +1, +2, and +3. You can use them singly or combine them in any combination. The higher the number, the greater the magnification. Combining them is ok, but if you stack all three together, you'll find that only the centre of your field of view will be sharp; the edges of the image will likely be out of focus. And, as you increase magnification, you lose depth of field, meaning that the entire depth of your image will not be in focus. But that's ok. If you're wanting the effects of selective focus or are focusing on a subject that does not have a lot of depth, that's ok.

There are disadvantages to using close-up filters, but for the price, they can do a very respectable job. If you decide to buy a set of close-up filters or diopters, don't buy the cheapest ones available. Aim for something middle of the road or higher so that you're getting decent quality glass. There's no point in putting really, really cheap glass in front of an expensive lens..



Pistils and stamens. Nikon D70, Nikkor 105 mm macro lens. ISO 200, f3.5 @ 1/50 second. Taken indoors with natural ambient light.

Another option for macro work is extension tubes. These are essentially hollow tubes without any glass in them. They work by increasing the distance between your sensor and lens and they allow you to focus closer to your subject. This results in greater magnification. Extension tubes usually come in sets of three and like close-up filters, can be used singly or in combination. If you do use all three together, you'll notice that you'll have to compensate for less light hitting your sensor much the way you would with a longer focal length lens. Most extension tubes these days are compatible with the electronics on your camera and so allow your through the lens (TTL) metering to still function.

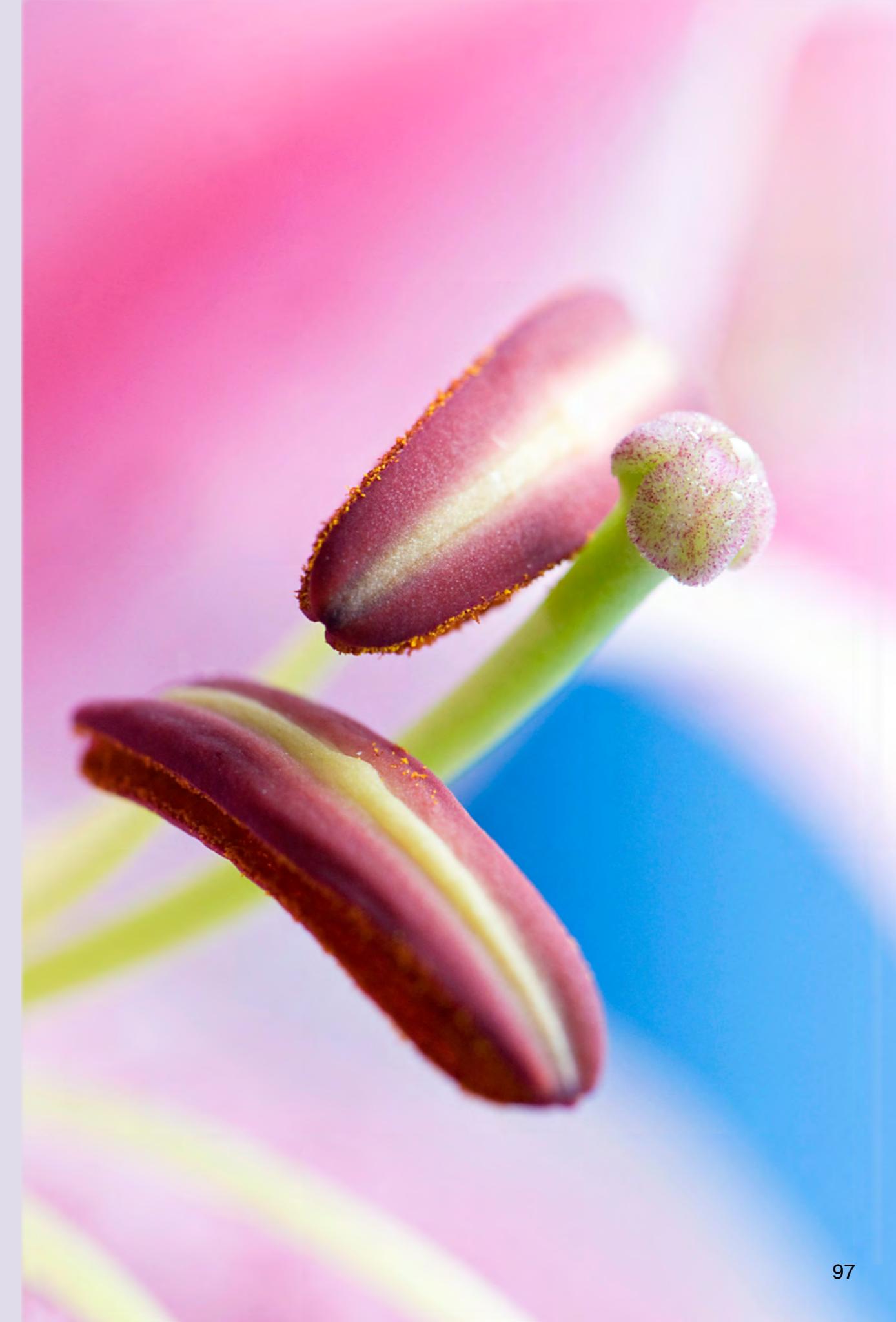
There are yet other options for increasing magnification, one of them being lens reversal. By mounting your lens backward and stacking it onto another lens, you can greatly increase your magnification beyond 1:1. There are disadvantages to using this approach, but like most options there are pluses and minuses and you just need to weigh those things before you decide on a certain option. If you want excellent, in depth information on all the different equipment options for macrophotography, I highly recommend getting Andrew S. Gibson's e-book, *Up Close: a guide to macro & close up photography*. It's available through the Craft & Vision website.

Finally, I can't end a discussion about macrophotography without mentioning about Canon's MPE 65 lens. This is a 65 mm macro lens that focuses from 1:1 (life size) to 5:1 (five times life size). I haven't used one and so can't comment on its performance, but it has certainly caught my eye! A single lens that lets you shoot from 1:1 to 5:1 is something that really appeals to me!

Knowing Canon, the optics are probably fantastic. I imagine at full magnification, you'd pretty much have to use a tripod, but that's ok. For making images of the small details of a flower or for photographing insects, this seems like the best lens to do the job. I've read a number of reviews about this lens and they are all good.

If you Google the MPE 65 for images, you'll find a number of images on the internet that have been made with this lens. I'm truly astounded by the magnification and by the sharpness of images made with it. Although I'm a Nikon shooter, I plan to buy this lens (I think it currently retails for about \$1100 US) and a Canon dSLR solely for the purpose of insect photography. Nikon does not currently make an equivalent to Canon's MPE 65.

Reproductive structures of a pink day lily. Nikon D200, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 400, f 11 @ 1/15 second. Taken indoors with natural, ambient light.



This is the equipment I have - a Nikon D200 camera body with a Nikon 105 mm macro lens. I also have a wireless shutter release unit attached so that I can trigger the shutter release without touching the camera and possibly causing camera shake, which will blur the image. Also shown (below) are three extensions tubes as well as a set of close-up filters (bottom).





Extension tubes can be used in combination with a macro lens to get you in really close. With this image I used a 105 mm macro lens along with a 36 mm extension tube. I had the lens very close to the flower and then intentionally threw the image out of focus to create a dreamy effect.

Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens, 36 mm extension tube. ISO 250, f 4.5 @ 1/8 second.

Keeping It Sharp

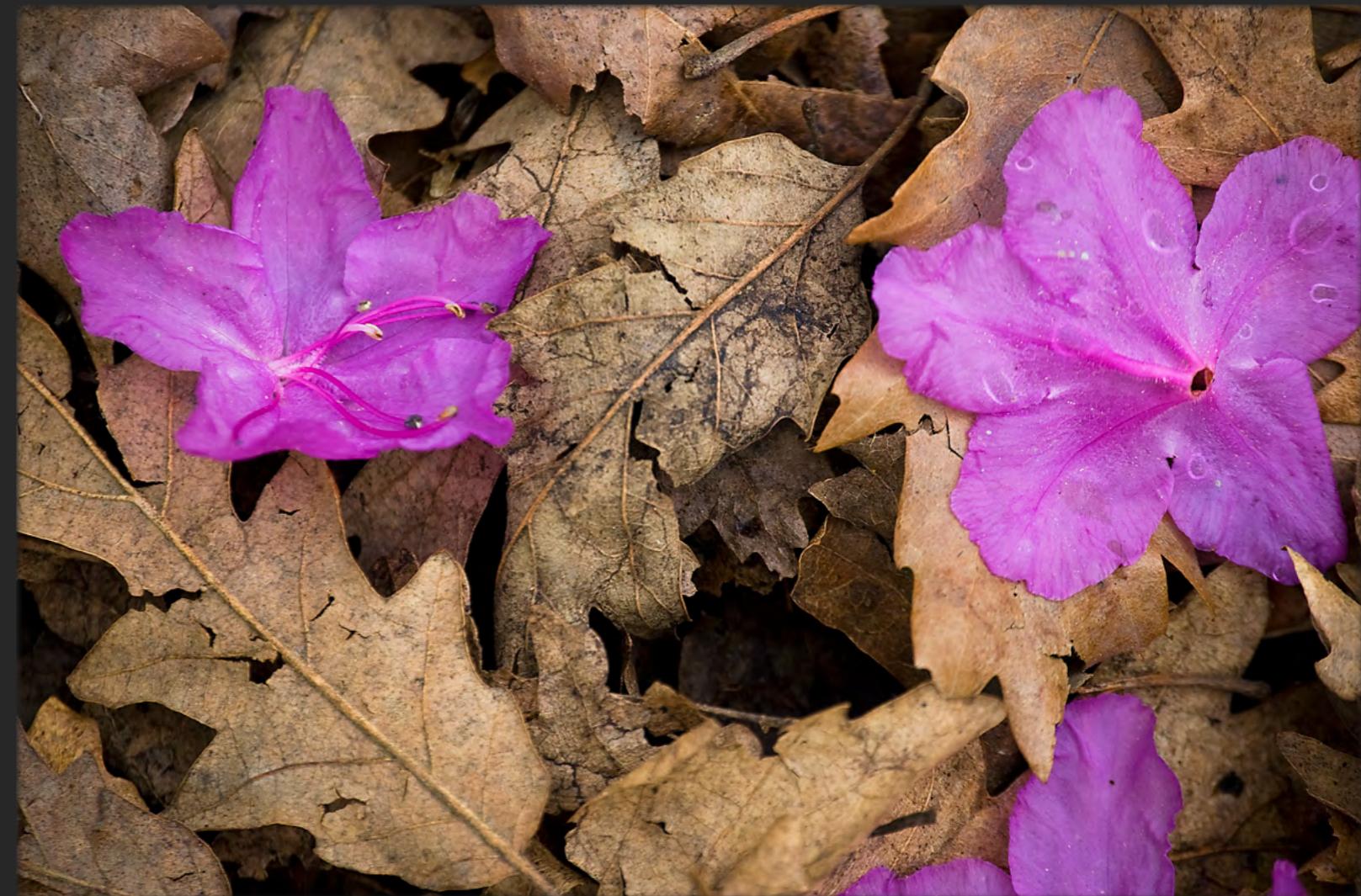
I often get asked if I use a tripod when making fine art flower images. The answer is yes, sometimes.... I'm a firm believer in tripods and just about anything to keep your camera steady, in the right situation. I say *in the right situation* because there are times where a tripod will simply get in the way of your image making.

When I want to capture the fine detail of a flower or shoot extreme close-ups, a tripod is a must. With these kinds of images, you're most likely going to use a fairly high *f*-stop so that you have a lot of depth of field in your image. With a high *f*-stop, less light will reach your sensor so you'll need a slower shutter speed to compensate. If your shutter speed is under about 1/100th of second, my advice is, use a tripod. With images where you want to capture all the fine detail and keep it sharp, you don't want any camera shake happening to introduce blur into your image.

I would also highly recommend that you use a remote shutter release - either a cable or a wireless release - so that you don't have to physically press the shutter release button. With really slow shutter speeds or at really high magnifications, this alone can introduce camera shake.

Another good habit to adopt under these circumstances is to set your camera, if you can, to mirror lock-up. What this does is lock up the mirror on your camera so that the movement of the mirror doesn't introduce vibration and cause you to end up with a blurry image. This is really only necessary when shooting with extremely slow shutter speeds or at very high magnification.

Nikon D70 camera, 18 - 200 mm lens @ 125 mm. *f* 6.3 @ 1/125 seconds.



If you're shooting an extreme close-up, especially something with a lot of depth of field, you might also consider using a focusing rail. This is a device that you mount your camera onto and then attach to your tripod. Knobs on the focusing rail allow you to move your camera toward or away from your subject by fractions of a mm with each turn of the knob. This way you can ensure that your focus is pin-sharp in the exact place you want it.

I do use a focusing rail in certain situations, but it is awkward and takes patience when shooting with it. But it can be very well worth the effort if really sharp focusing is critical to the success of your image.

If a focusing rail or even just a tripod are too restrictive for your image making, another option is to use a beanbag. These are bags that you fill with beans or some other material. They are soft and you can squish them into the shape you need, just like your pillow. I often use a bean bag when I'm shooting wildflowers on a bright day. It provides enough support to keep my camera from moving, minimizing camera shake.



My Manfrotto focusing rail. I attach my camera to the top part of the rail that moves. The bottom part is attached to my tripod. By turning the knobs just a small amount, I can adjust my fine focus. With extreme macros, sometimes moving your camera only a few mm will make your focal point in perfect focus. It is finicky work using one of these, but they can be extremely valuable when shooting an extreme close-up or when you want a large depth of field and so are forced to dial in an extremely slow shutter speed.

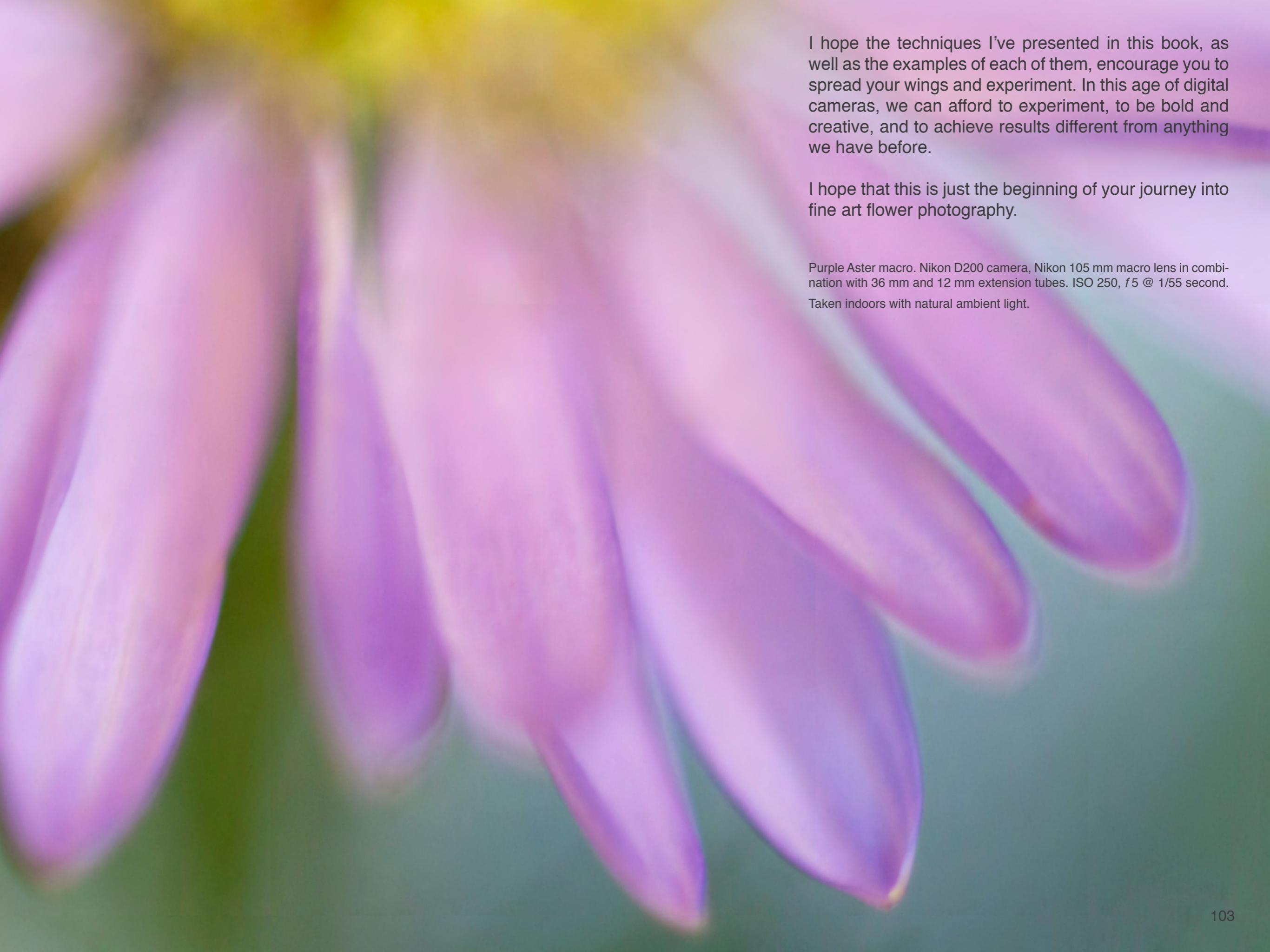


I don't always use a tripod when shooting fine art flower images. If the lighting conditions are bright enough that I'm not forced to use a slow shutter speed, I often like to 'work' a subject handheld. This way I explore all angles and compositions. Even doing this, if the light changes and I need to use a tripod, I'll work the subject to visualize what images I want, before I put my camera on the tripod.

I often forego the tripod if I'm shooting extreme macros, but not wanting much of the image, if any, to be in focus. In those cases I'm usually using a really small *f*-stop, which lets in lots of light and so shutter speed isn't usually a limiting factor in these situations.

Bottom line is, use a tripod when you need it. Even if it's a pain to set up and awkward to use, you may end up regretting not using one when you get home and see your images on your computer screen and see that they aren't as sharp as you wanted.

Oxeye Daisies. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens. ISO 160, *f*7.1 @ 1/45 second.



I hope the techniques I've presented in this book, as well as the examples of each of them, encourage you to spread your wings and experiment. In this age of digital cameras, we can afford to experiment, to be bold and creative, and to achieve results different from anything we have before.

I hope that this is just the beginning of your journey into fine art flower photography.

Purple Aster macro. Nikon D200 camera, Nikon 105 mm macro lens in combination with 36 mm and 12 mm extension tubes. ISO 250, f5 @ 1/55 second.
Taken indoors with natural ambient light.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I have always had a passion for photography, but as a professional biologist, used my photography to document the environment and its inhabitants. I have been fortunate to experience the beauty of some of earth's most remarkable places, such as the rain and cloud forests of Central America, the Canadian sub-arctic, the alpine tundra of the Colorado Rockies, and the diverse landscapes of New Zealand.

In recent years, my photography has taken on a more creative flare and I enjoy capturing the natural world through my lens in non-traditional and creative ways that convey its beauty.

A visual communicator, I strive to use my images to inspire an appreciation of the natural world and a desire to conserve it. I also have a passion for teaching and enjoy giving presentations and running photography workshop where I work closely with participants to give them hands-on experience with a variety of techniques and to develop new, creative ways of seeing.

Committed to conservation, I donate a portion of the profits from my photography to conservation organizations.



If you would like to order a print of any of the images in this book, please visit my photography website at:

44th Parallel Photography www.photo44.net

I have fine art prints and posters, note cards, stock images and e-books for sale through my website. I also post details of upcoming photography workshops.

Also stop by my blog at <http://44thparallel.wordpress.com>