



ARTFUL SILHOUETTES

Quick Guide

Written by Teddi Tostanoski



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The word 'silhouette' is in my list of top five words that I can't ever spell! Hopefully that's not too embarrassing to admit! Besides my inability to put together the 10 letters, a silhouette is actually something I find not only insanely beautiful, but also a great tool to use in photography!

The history of the word 'silhouette' is particularly intriguing. At first, when Googling the word, I thought I was just going to come across some basic Latin origin describing how an object blocks light and creates a dark outline. However, the word 'silhouette' is actually named after Étienne de Silhouette, a French author and politician. The more artistic reason why the silhouette was named after him is because he famously decorated his château at Bry-sur-Marne with cheap cutouts of himself. You've seen this type of graphic before, right? Perhaps you even created them in elementary school with a projector. I did!

It is also rumored that the term "à la silhouette," or "in the manner of Silhouette," was used frequently as a means to describe things that were cheaply done, referring to Étienne de Silhouette's terrible economic choices during the Seven Years' War. And now, come to think of it, his cutouts were also a very cheap alternative to commissioning a portrait. Alas, the story will remain a mystery as the concept of a silhouette has turned into a beautiful tool to explore shape, dark space, and contrast in many forms of art, including photography!

Before getting too far ahead of myself, if you don't actually know what a silhouette is, especially in terms of photography, here is the official definition: "a dark area outlined against a lighter background."



Photo by Andrew Smith

Note: If you'd like to learn how to effectively use composition in your shots, grab a copy of Photzy's best-selling premium guide – [Understanding Composition](#).

Check out this photo of a crow. The crow and the power line is the “dark area,” and it's outlined against the light background.

In my opinion, a photograph using a silhouette as its main focus is about the contrast between the subject matter and the background. The photograph needs to be composed well and the subject matter interesting. I'm always pushing the boundaries of some sort of standardized photographic technique. By the end of this guide, we will have pushed past the cliché standards of silhouettes, and you will know how to use the silhouette as a creative tool to impress all your colleagues!

Let's get started! In honor of the word 'silhouette' spearheading my list of my top five most misspelled words, here are my top five tips on how to take astonishing silhouettes! The objective of this guide is to understand the technical side of setting up your camera as well as the compositional aspects of using a silhouette. Then, we are going to push the boundaries of both.



1

Find a bright background!

When Mr. Silhouette decided to create a silhouetted portrait of himself, all he had to do was cut out some black paper and glue it to some white paper to create his image. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately!), with a camera you have to do a little more work than that. The key to an intriguing silhouette is shooting a scene with a brighter background than your subject. We do this because it is most conducive to how our cameras work.

Another tip for picking a bright background is time of day. If you're outdoors, sunrise and sunset are perfect, and they can provide mesmerizing tones to take your silhouette shots. If you're indoors, make sure your subject is right in front of a bright light source.



2

De-clutter the composition!

Silhouettes are generally simple images. There should be one or two interesting subjects and then that beautiful and bright background. Since we are underexposing our subjects, we need to make sure they aren't layered "on top of each other," because if they are, we won't be able to disseminate what the subject actually is in the photograph.

Take, for instance, this dock with the people and trees. A lot is going on (almost too much going on, actually), including the fellow closest to us in the foreground. It would be nice if it were just the people on the dock, or just trees, so that we could focus on those outlines and the sunset's gradient colors.

Right now, the silhouettes are blending together and we are losing the shapes of the trees into the wood pillars, and then we lose the shapes of the people behind the same pillars up above.



Note: If you'd like to learn how to effectively use composition in your shots, grab a copy of Photzy's best-selling premium guide – [Understanding Composition](#).

In contrast, we have this image of a couple on their wedding day. Yes, the sky is quite alive with colors and extremely beautiful. This helps mimic the silhouetted moment happening in the foreground. Nothing is taking away from the beauty of their wedding, but we are also left in curiosity about who this couple is.

To de-clutter a silhouette image, think about your depth of field: the foreground, middle ground, and background. Try to make sure there is only a foreground and a background – avoid anything in the middle ground. Objects in the middle ground might take away from the strength of the silhouette and clutter up the background.

Also, try composing with a low horizon line. This allows a large amount of bright space into the image. In the wedding image, the ground is almost touching the bottom of the frame. That placed the strength of the dark, black silhouette onto the couple, which could then be framed by a wildly colorful sunset.

3

Set the exposure for that bright background!

When taking a silhouette image, expose your shot for the background and not your subject. This will not only provide a brilliantly lit and colored background, but it also underexposes your subject to hopefully near black, and that is how you will achieve your silhouette.

Here are some guidelines on what to do with your camera's settings; but please, break the guidelines as your ingenious mind sees fit. I encourage it!

1. Shoot in manual. This will allow you to control every element of your image.
2. Choose a high f-stop. This will allow your foreground and background to be in focus (your silhouette and the sunset that you're chasing will both be in focus).
3. Up your shutter speed. As I mentioned, you need to expose for the lighter background and underexpose your silhouetted subject.
4. As for your ISO, find a setting that allows for the exposure of your background, but not high enough that it becomes noisy.



Photo by Teddi Tostanoski

Images of the Colosseum, in Rome, Italy, typically show up in two fashions: cluttered with people, or in contrast, exemplifying perfection through post-production. And while my image on the left may still have people in it, it was taken from a worm's eye view, and there is individuality to be found because of my use of a silhouette.

Since the hordes of tourists are on the same plane as the mighty walls of the Colosseum, they are exposed just as darkly. Their black outlines fill the open spaces between each strong arch. The walls seem to sprawl upwards towards the bright blue sky, but you're reminded that you're standing below, and within the walls, of an ancient building as the lip of a nearby arch juts out above you.

Compositionally, the image is simple. The dark areas of the silhouette are expansive except when the occasional person appears. The low horizon line allows for the sky to be featured in its deepest blue, and finally the sharp edge on the right grounds the viewer to provide perspective.

In terms of settings, the f-stop was high enough with a wide-angle lens at f/5 to allow for each area of the image to be nicely defined and in focus through depth of field. The quick 1/2500 shutter speed, and an ISO setting of 100, both contribute to the underexposure of each element except for the sky, which remains bright azure.

4 Go beyond the traditional bright sky silhouette

Now that we've covered some of the technical and compositional aspects of taking a silhouette, how can we push the boundaries a bit?

Silhouettes are very popular, meaning everyone can and does photograph them. Lots of silhouettes are in front of awe-inspiring sunsets, like we've been talking about, and include a person, a tree, etc. But silhouettes can be useful in various other settings too.

If you've read anything else that I've written for Photzy, you know that I'm a huge fan of breaking the rules and trying out photography techniques in new ways.



Photo by Teddi Tostanoski

Take a look at the wine glass photograph. It looks nothing like a traditional silhouette, but the hand is clearly silhouetted by the ground. Wait, the ground? Not the sky? The transparency of the wine glass allowed it to expose properly along with the bright wood background. The edges of the glass add another dimension entirely, which creates an interesting relationship between the glass, the hand, and the wood flooring background.



Another exhilarating idea is to create silhouette images at night – if you dare! Take a look at this desert image. You're still exposing for the background, but it's not as typical as a sunset when you start dealing with the stars!

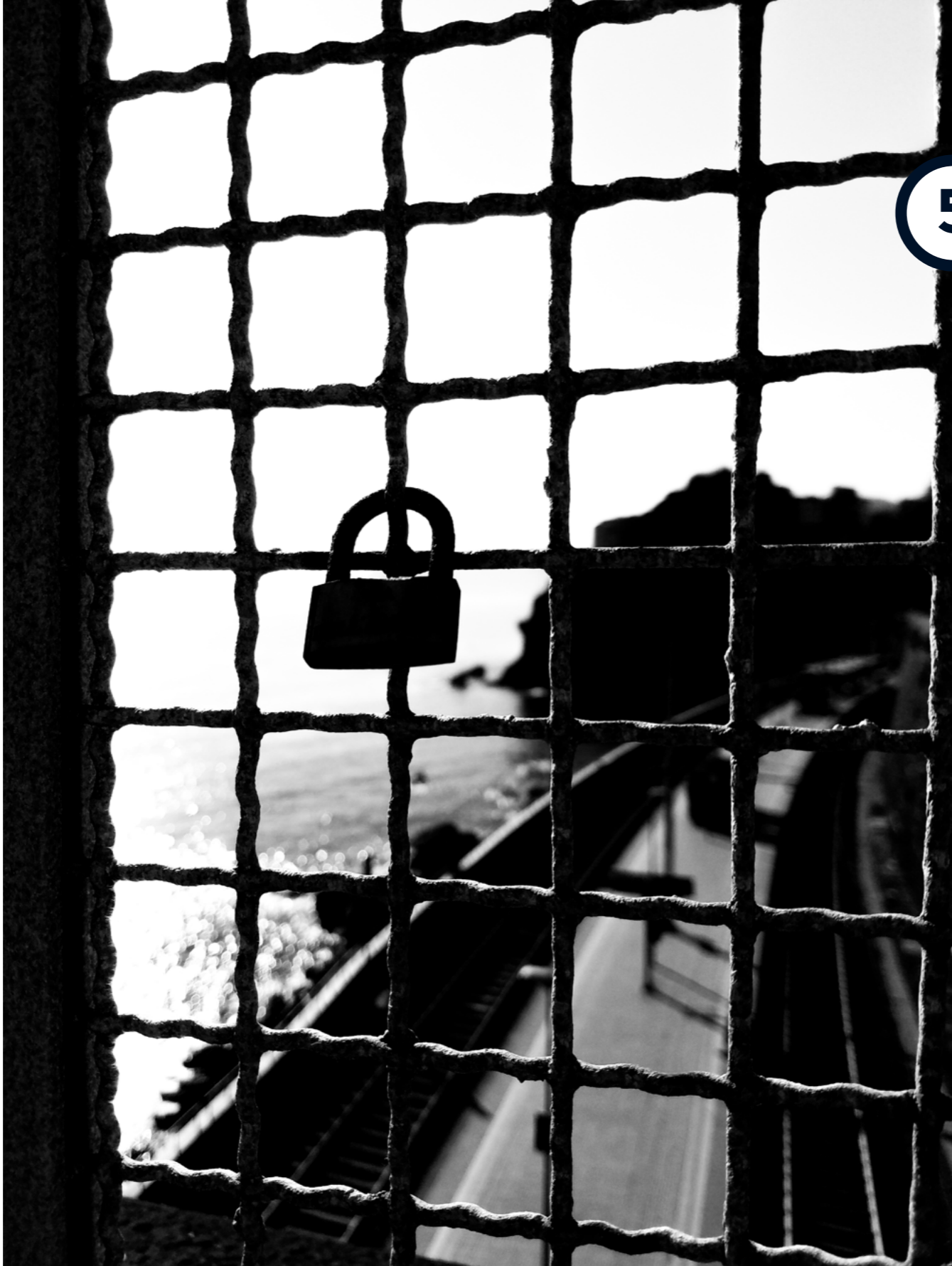


Photo by Teddi Tostanoski

5

A little bit of editing can go a long way

I was most unfortunate not to be able to stroll down Via dell'Amore while trekking through the hills of Italy this summer, but that didn't stop me from imagining the essence of the path of land stretching between Riomaggiore and Manarola in Cinque Terre. I could see the path. It was bright and welcoming on the other side of the fence, but I was left in the shadows.

This was one of the favorite silhouette images that I've taken, and as you can tell, I've already started to break a few of the guidelines I've set out. However, this image did not start out as profoundly marvelous as you're seeing it in its final state.

In this day and age, editing tools are so handy, and silhouettes can still be difficult to achieve depending on if you're getting the right exposure, etc. If I'm not using Instagram to get a post out quickly, proper editing will put the final touches on your silhouette. I use Adobe Lightroom, but any photo-editing platform can work.

For me, a silhouette image is all about the contrast, and Lightroom makes it so easy to bump up the contrast so that your blacks fully achieve a deep tone, leading to a great silhouette shot! Lightroom can also help you create a silhouette by darkening and lightening areas of an image.

Here is the step-by-step guide of what I did to *Via dell'Amore* and why.

Take a look at the original image on the next page. Notice that the settings are ISO 50, f-stop f/1.7, and exposure 1/5800. Besides the shutter speed, the image goes against everything I just talked about. It's also cluttered.

There is a lock on top of a fence, which is on top of an ocean and a train track background. You can see the details of the fence, including the writing on the lock! It's still an interesting photograph; however, I thought it needed a bit more flair and mystery!



Histogram ▾



ISO 50 4.2 mm f / 1.7 1/5800 sec

Original Photo

Copy Name Copy 1

Folder Phone Photos

Title

Caption

Copyright

Copyright Status Unknown ▾

Creator

Sublocation

Rating

Label

Capture Time 6:19:29 PM

Capture Date Jul 10, 2016

Dimensions 3024 x 4032

Cropped 3024 x 4032

Exposure 1/5800 sec at f / 1.7

Focal Length 4.2 mm

ISO Speed Rating ISO 50

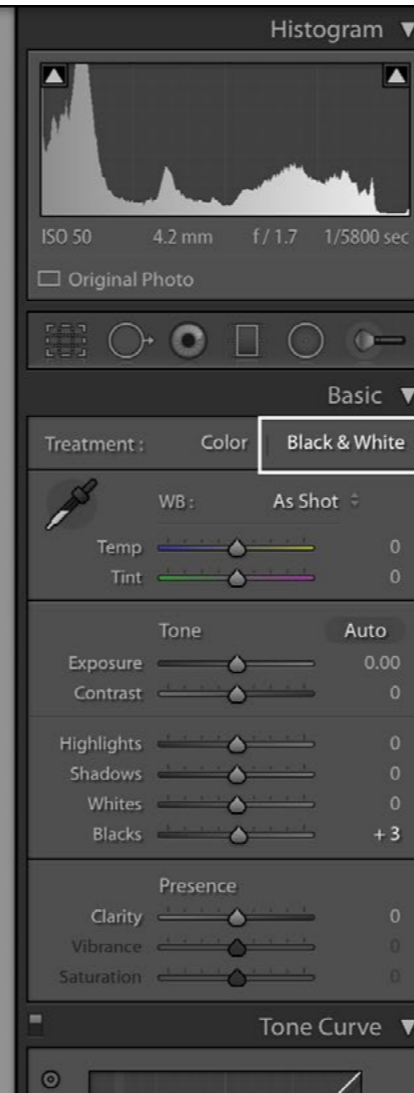
Flash Did not fire

Make samsung

Model SM-G930V

GPS

Comments ◀



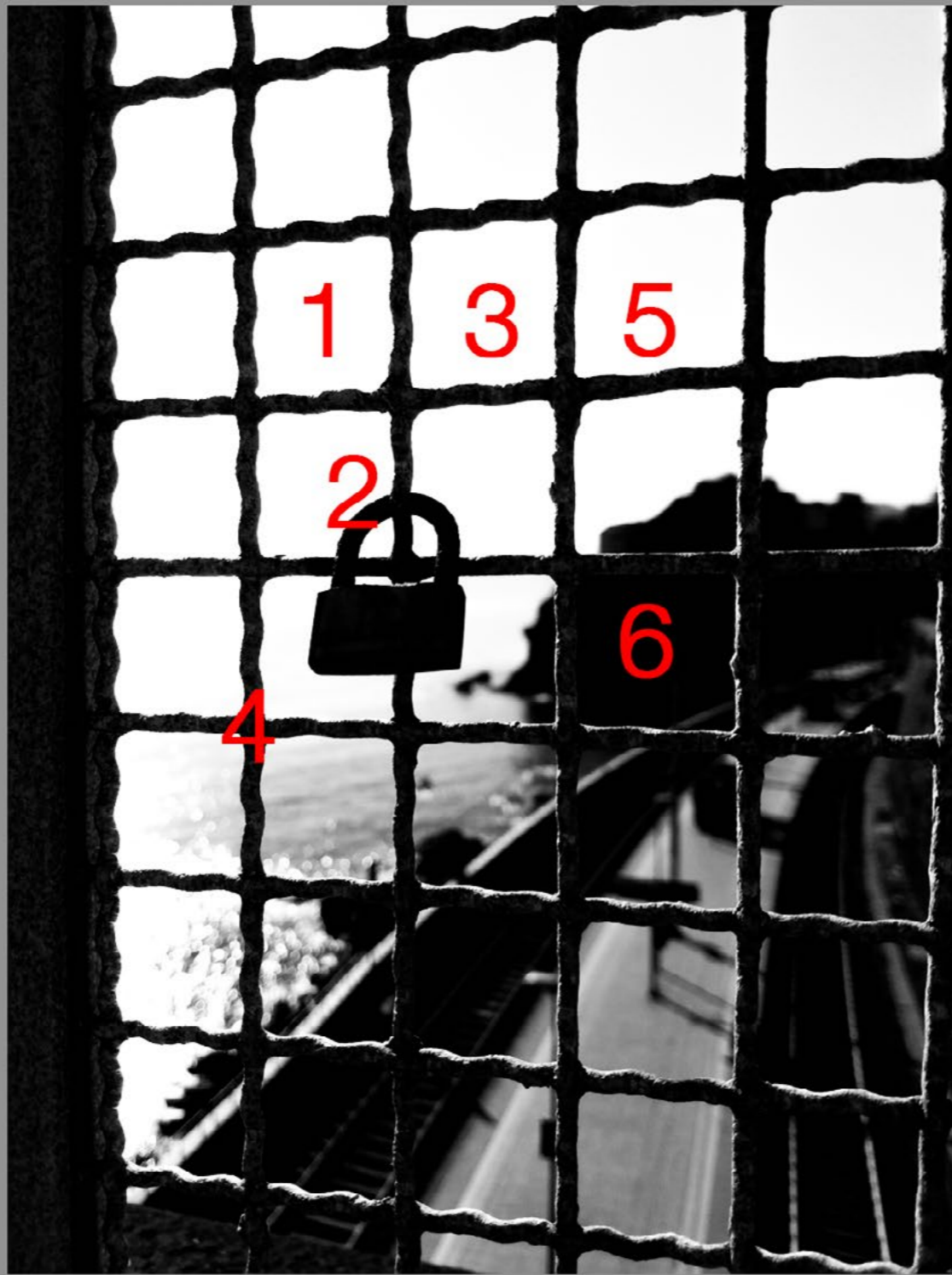
The first thing I did was transform the file into a black and white image. In this case, I liked the contrast between black and white better than high contrast color.

Note: Learn how to effectively transform your color images into black and white by grabbing a copy of Photzy's Premium guide, [Better Black and White](#).


These are the six adjustments that I made to this image, not including the change to black and white (illustration on the next page).

1. I only moved the exposure up ever so slightly to bring more light into the image. This is especially key for those brighter moments along the edges of the fence. I don't want to lose those.
2. I bumped the contrast up to +49, because this really defined the edges of the fence and lock against the sky. I also started to lose some of the details there too, which is what I wanted to create that silhouette look.
3. I maxed out the highlight slider to +100, because this really makes the sky bright. The bright sky against the black of the fence creates more contrast, and high contrast is something I'm always looking to create.
4. I didn't have to bother with the shadows too much because of my changes to contrast and the blacks. This choice was to keep some of the detail in the tracks and along the fence.
5. Just like with the highlights, I moved the white scale up very high to +88. This again aided with blowing out the sky and the ocean. It also removed some of the detail in the lighter part of the fence so all you focus on there are the highlights of the front side of the fence contrasted against the darkness of the back side of the fence.
6. Finally, I dropped the blacks down to -79, which clips the top of the histogram and creates those crisp, black lines that I was looking for.

And Viola! I easily created a silhouette image out of an ordinary smartphone image that I snapped while adventuring across Europe.



Histogram ▾



ISO 50 4.2 mm f / 1.7 1/5800 sec

Original Photo

Basic ▾

Treatment: Color | Black & White

WB: As Shot ▾

Temp 0

Tint 0

Tone Auto

1	Exposure	+ 0.85
2	Contrast	+ 49
3	Highlights	+ 100
4	Shadows	- 11
5	Whites	+ 88
6	Blacks	- 79

Presence

Clarity 0

Vibrance 0

Saturation 0

Tone Curve ▾

SUMMARY

As popular as silhouettes are in the photography world, they can be tricky to snag. Understanding the basic principles of exposure is paramount to achieving these results. The reason for this is that your camera is trying desperately to properly expose the entire image, and that isn't what you want.

When starting out with silhouette photography, go for it and take the cliché photographs.

Have your kids jump on the beach while backlit by a brilliant sunset. But, also challenge yourself.

Don't take the easy way out like Étienne de Silhouette did.

Try incorporating interesting subjects into your work. Shoot at night, or try keeping some details in your silhouette. The most important part of learning anything is understanding the core concepts, and then putting that knowledge to use until you can reproduce something similar.

Then, move on to your own style. Try incorporating unusual elements of a silhouette into your work.

With that being said, Arrivederci my friends! And, as always, feel free to reach out if you have any questions.



Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful (*and FREE!*) photography resources:



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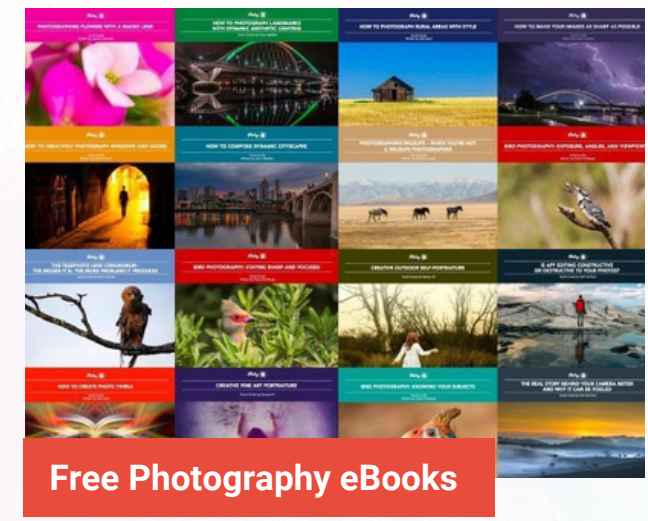
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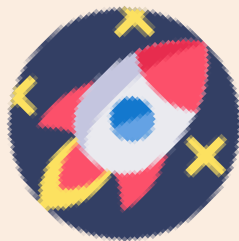
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Like many photographers, Teddi Tostanoski has been creating photographs since she was very young and has continued her passion into early adulthood. During her time at the

University of Colorado, she found her love for high contrast photography, whilst also digging deep into her family heritage and exploring alternative photographic mediums. Teddi supplements her artistic endeavors by contributing to many areas of the photography industry. Besides writing and reading up on photographic art history, she has carved out a space for herself within the marketing realm for companies like Canon and Ricoh Imaging-Pentax.

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