

Composition Case Study #13

ADVANCED COMPOSITION

A favored technique with street photographers (and one that I also find useful for candid photography in general, and even for weddings) is to find an interesting background and then wait for something interesting to happen in front of it.

When I pick an interesting background, it usually has something to do with the lighting, a strong graphic element, or a subliminal message.

This image started as an interest in the lighting and the strong graphic element.

This was taken just outside of the Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle, Washington. The woman is

standing within an interactive sculpture. The time of day was around 7:00 P.M.

My interest was in the repetition of shape provided by the sculpture, along with the warm evening light that was highlighting the color of the sculpture.

As I often do, I parked myself in front of my chosen background, camera ready, waiting for something to happen, and then this woman walked into the scene.

Let's take a look at the use of space in this picture.



Photograph by Kent DuFault

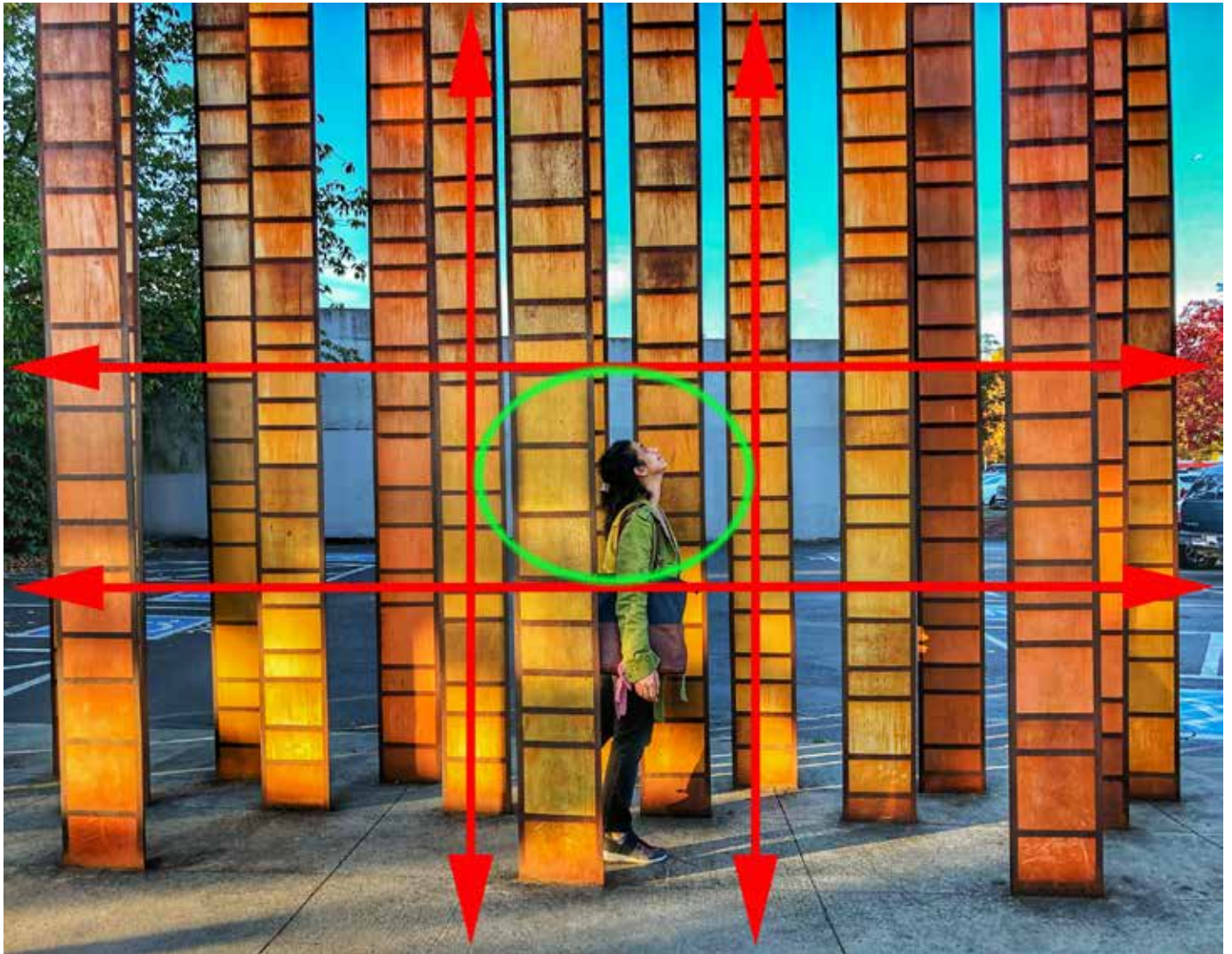


Oftentimes when shooting street or candid photography, you must work very quickly. The composition must come to you with lightning speed.

This woman walked through the sculpture from the left to the right and kept on going. She stopped momentarily to look up. I managed to shoot three frames, of which this was my favorite.

When you have to shoot quickly, the crop tool becomes your friend to help improve things after the fact.

However, looking at this with the Golden Ratio grid applied, I rather like the outcome.



The Golden Ratio often works well when a scene displays symmetry. In this image we can see that the symmetry is quite obvious. Placing the

woman dead center gives her the visual weight that she needs to carry her own within a complex background.



The woman looked up. Personally, I feel that her momentary upward gaze solidifies this composition.

Thinking of the line of sight rule, why is this not a frame break? Some folks might claim that it is. Personally, I don't see it that way.

Let me tell you why.



The strong repetitive vertical lines dominate this picture. With the woman looking upward, she becomes part of this pattern. Were she looking straight ahead, she would break the pattern.

This raises an interesting question. Is this picture about the woman?

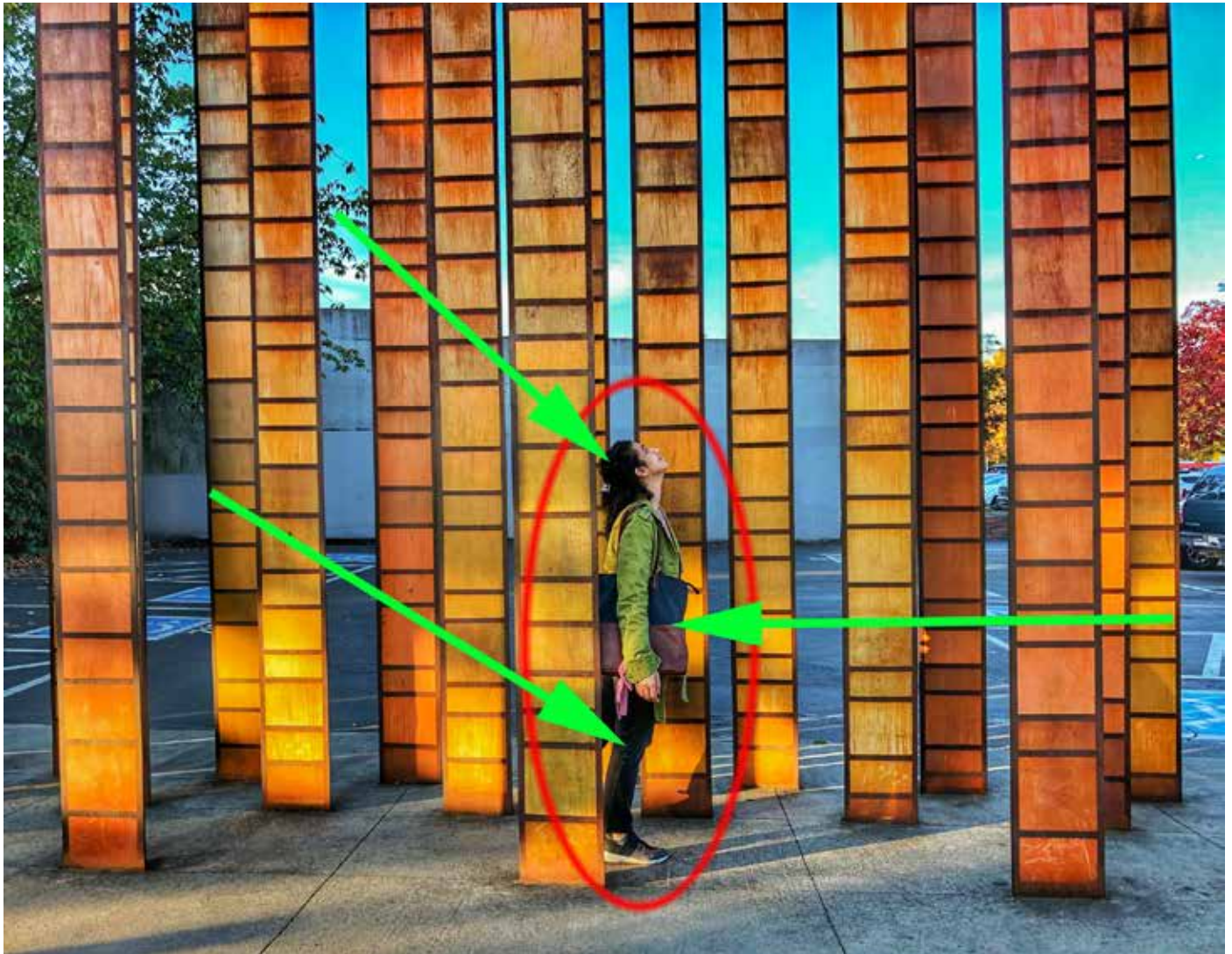
I would argue that no, she is not the true subject of this shot; she is an integral part of something bigger.

If her gaze broke the pattern, she would then be the subject.

Is the sculpture the subject? That's debatable. The sculpture certainly holds more visual weight than the woman does.

If this image were to be used in a brochure for the museum, then, indeed, the picture would be about the sculpture.

If the image is simply a creation of art, I see it more as a semi-abstract, where the sculpture and the woman combine to create the subject. Both are necessary to a satisfying outcome.



I want to point out two interesting aspects to this composition.

Black is a power color that works with any other color.

The black hair and the black pants serve several purposes as a centrally located power color within the space of this composition.

- They draw attention to the woman.

- They provide a visual frame for the arm, which is repeating the vertical pattern!

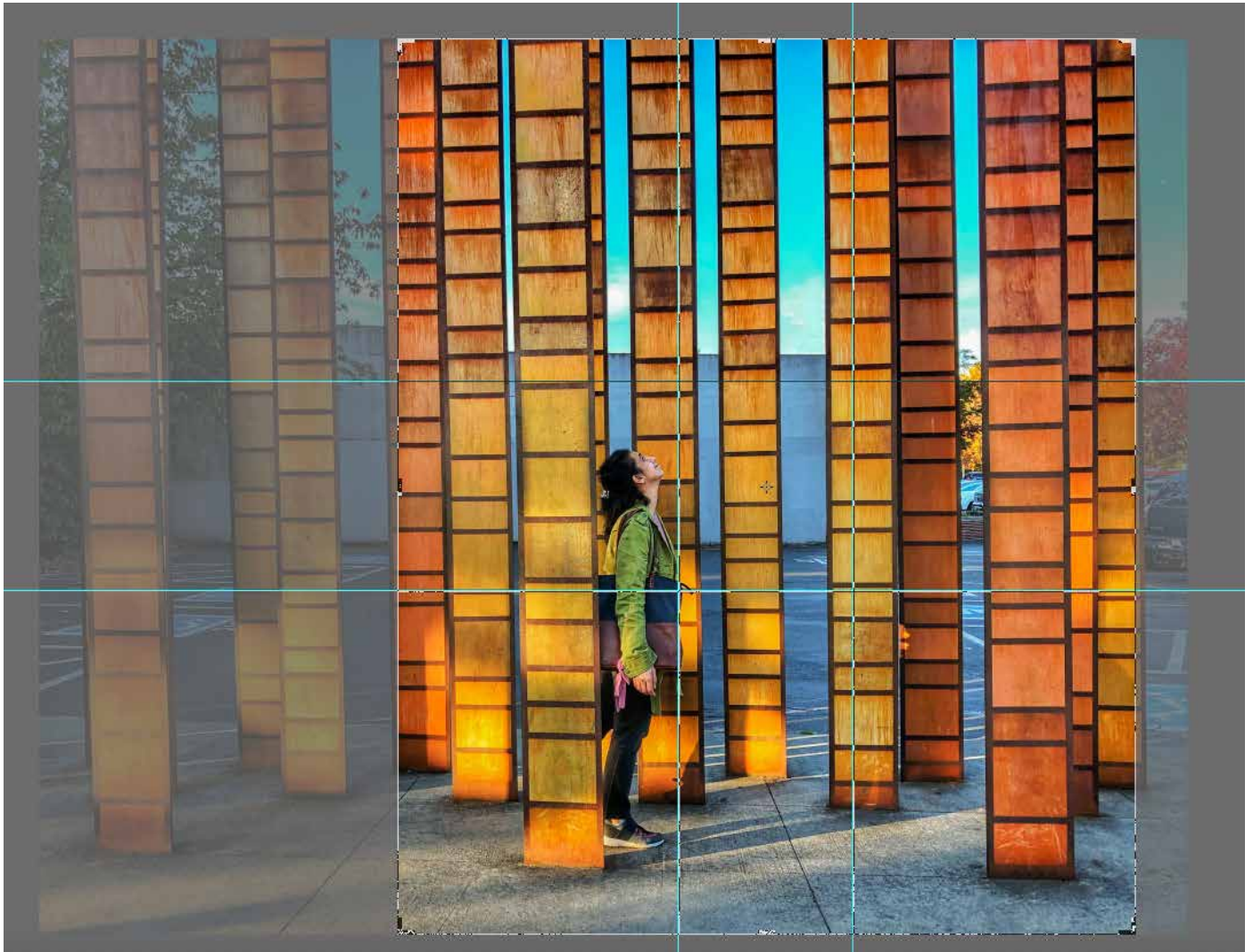
Now, look at the purse. The arm has divided the purse into four rectangles. What visual element do those four rectangles provide? They repeat the pattern that is present throughout the entire sculpture!

As a photographer, this type of instantaneous visual recognition and composition can only come with study and practice.

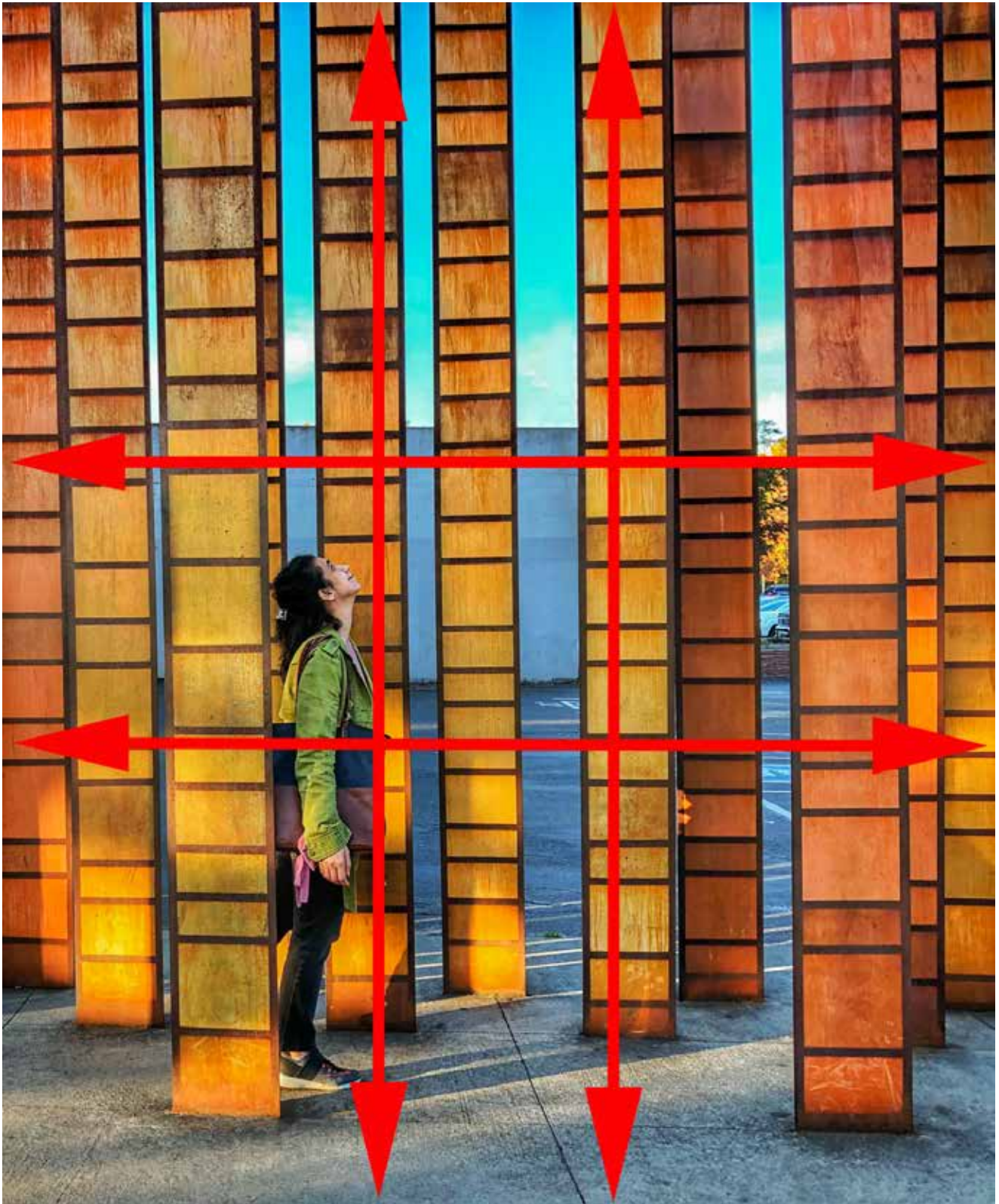


I imagine that some folks might suggest that cropping could improve the composition. The idea is that a crop would remove some of the background elements along the edge of the frame (as indicated by the red arrows).

I even thought about that myself. So I experimented.



Here we are looking at a vertical crop, while still using the Golden Ratio as a guide for the division of space.



Cropping in this manner does eliminate the background details along the edge of frame.

However, in my opinion, I feel that it weakens the shot by eliminating some of the repeating pattern, as well as flattening out the perception of depth.



The original is on the left and the cropped version is on the right.

What do you think?

Cover one with your hand and then the other.
Go back and forth until you decide which version holds a stronger impact for you.