

FOOD AND PHOTOGRAPHY RETREATS™

with the Benvies

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MENU

Picture of the month
Solomon's seal, France

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Idea

Life and the miracle of being

Skill

Creating "Chocolate Bars"

Food

Asparagus wraps

Featured Retreat

Burgundy, France, September 2019

Inspiration

Pål Hermansen

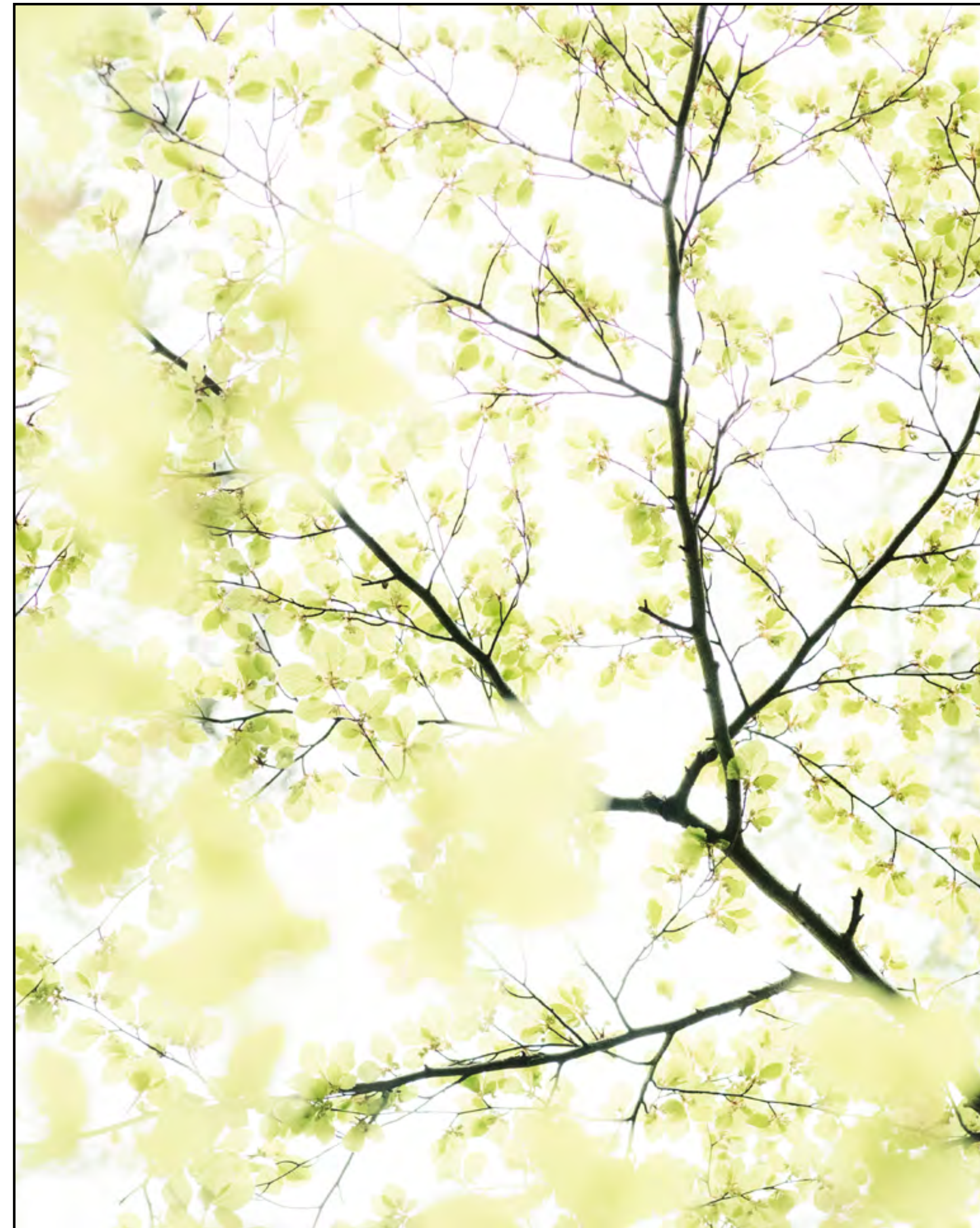


Polygonatum multiflorum
Pail, Nièvre, France

If there is just one word to describe an unfurling Solomon's seal plant, it would have to be "elegant". And there is no better way to display that elegance than in the field studio. During our Retreat in Burgundy in April, with Willi Rolfes and nine guests, we came across a number of plants on a quiet roadside and set about photographing them again backlit white backgrounds. After nine years of using softboxes for the lighting, I've reluctantly concluded that, in fact, a piece of acrylic behind and envelope stiffener in front provide the best light modification; there is a subtle directionality that is lacking with the more "wrap around" softbox lighting. The good news is that if you want to do this, you can save yourself hundreds of pounds on softboxes. I going back now to experiment with strobes rather than portable studio lights... If this works out, the size and weight of the field studio kit will shrink dramatically. We will be using the field studio with guests again on our Burgundy Retreat in September this year - see the featured Retreat in this issue. - Niall

News from Niall and Charlotte

Before we even ran our first Retreat last year we knew that cooperation would be the key to developing the business. That cooperation takes the form of having the right people working with Charlotte on the hospitality front (Beth, Lydia and Emely - you've all been fantastic!) as well as working with Niall to provide effective - and enjoyable- tuition. During our recent Retreat in Burgundy, we teamed up with German photographer, [Willi Rolfes](#), to deliver a diverse programme - and learned some new teaching methods along the way which we have since adopted. What we didn't expect though, was a gift from one of our regular guests, Martin Santbergen, in the shape of a suite of Photoshop templates. These allow our guests to assemble Colour Transects and Chocolate Bar composites without having to create the documents from scratch - a time-consuming process for people less familiar with Photoshop. This not only makes these novel approaches more accessible but also fast-tracks the creativity of more advanced photographers. So, thank you, Martin!



This got us thinking about the age-old problem of how to cater effectively for both new and experienced photographers in the same group. So, we are now using a two-tier approach that reflects the respective needs

of each guest. While advanced photographers don't always welcome a tutor breaking their concentration in the field by offering advice on basic technicalities, they often want artistic or practical guidance at the production stage in the studio - which we provide. Less experienced photographers, however, tend to need more help outside with essential techniques (see our new exposure infographs on the next page) to get the photos they want and might not yet be ready for complex production processes. If they do want to try them, however, we have the Photoshop templates they can use without needing an in-depth knowledge.

We understand the usefulness of in-depth reviews of guests' work and we do this by taking just two images from each guest at a time and analysing their technical, aesthetic and narrative qualities in turn. This is done on our stunning 55 inch Sony AF8 UHD OLED TV screen to show the pictures at their best and we often refer to the small library of photography titles that travel with us on Retreat.

News from Niall and Charlotte

EXPOSURE

AVAILABLE LIGHT

ISO DETERMINES HOW SENSITIVE TO LIGHT THE CAMERA'S SENSOR IS.
 A HIGHER ISO VALUE (eg 800) MAKES THE SENSOR MORE SENSITIVE THAN A LOWER ONE (eg 100).
 THE WIDER THE PIE SLICE, THE HIGHER THE ISO VALUE - AND MORE SENSITIVE THE SENSOR IS MADE.

APERTURE DETERMINES HOW MUCH LIGHT THE LENS LETS THROUGH ON TO THE SENSOR.
 A SMALL NUMBER FOR THE APERTURE VALUE (eg f2.8) LETS MORE LIGHT THROUGH THAN A HIGH ONE (eg, f16).
 THE WIDER THE PIE SLICE, THE SMALLER THE APERTURE NUMBER - THE MORE LIGHT IS ALLOWED THROUGH THE APERTURE.

SHUTTER TIME DETERMINES HOW MUCH LIGHT COMING THROUGH THE APERTURE IS ALLOWED THROUGH THE SHUTTER ON TO THE SENSOR.
 A SMALL SHUTTER NUMBER (eg, 1/8 sec) ALLOWS MORE LIGHT THROUGH THAN A LARGE ONE (eg, 1/250 sec).
 THE WIDER THE PIE SLICE, THE SMALLER THE SHUTTER NUMBER - THE LONGER THE SHUTTER IS OPEN.

This picture is too dark - it is under-exposed. The histogram is pushed over to the left. The settings don't fit the amount of light available.

This picture has the best detail in highlights and shadows - it is well exposed. The histogram is evenly distributed. The settings fit the amount of light available.

This picture is too light - it is over-exposed. The histogram is pushed too far to the right. The settings don't fit the amount of light available.

Change the angle of any pie slice and it is balanced by those either side of it.

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PRIMER EXPOSURE COMBINATIONS

Subject

- Animate
 - Tripod
 - Bright: ISO 400, F STOP 5.6, SPEED 1/2000
 - Dull: ISO 1600, F STOP 5.6, SPEED 1/2000
 - Hand-held
 - Bright: ISO 400, F STOP 5.6, SPEED 1/2000
 - Dull: ISO 1600, F STOP 5.6, SPEED 1/2000
- Inanimate
 - Tripod
 - Bright: ISO 100, F STOP 16, SPEED 1/15
 - Dull: ISO 100, F STOP 16, SPEED 1/2
 - Hand-held
 - Bright: ISO 400, F STOP 8, SPEED 1/250
 - Dull: ISO 1600, F STOP 8, SPEED 1/250

These are guideline figures only - but in choosing your combination, give priority to Speed and use the ISO you need to achieve it.

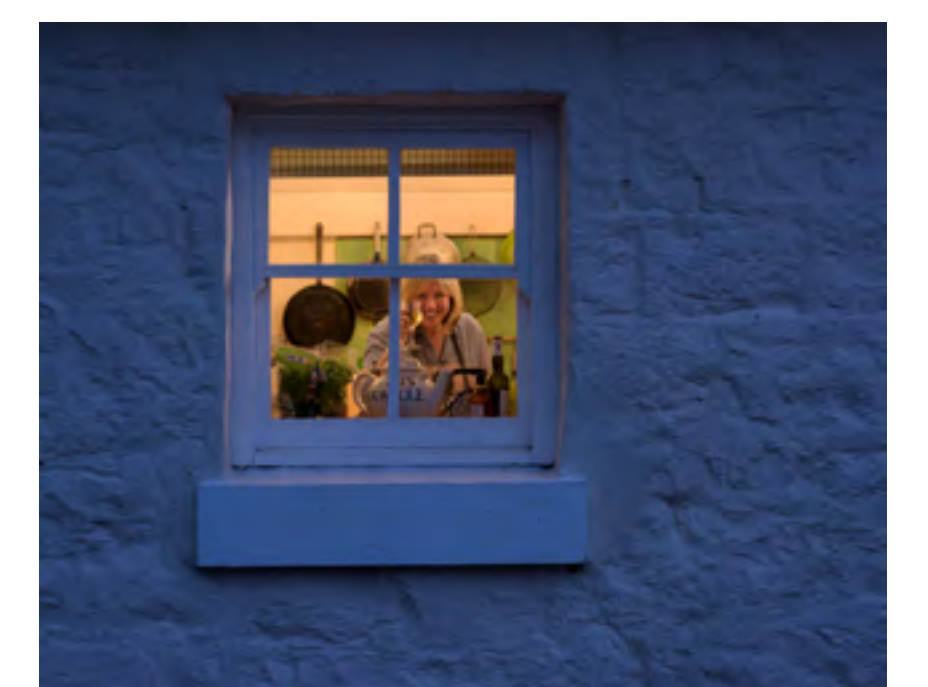
INFOGRAPHIC © NIALL BENVIE

The French Retreat also proved the worth of our "cooking offer" as two guests enjoyed time learning from and cooking with Charlotte as well as a day at the famous "Cook's Atelier" cookery school in Beaune. This option is open on our September Retreat this year for any husbands / wives / friends accompanying their photographer partners.

As usual, we've not had much time at home between trips this spring but as well as work for Food and Photography Retreats, Niall has been putting the finishing touches to his book due out in the autumn (in German, only, at the moment) and creating a new set of pictures to accompany an [essay](#) which is his response to the ecological collapse. It is a sobering

read - which in no way reflects his joviality as a host (!) But an artist has to do what an artist has to do...

Our best to you all.
Niall and Charlotte



Life and the miracle of being



Astronaut William Ander's photograph, *Earthrise*, taken during the Apollo 8 mission, is perhaps the most important picture of all time. The perspective it offers on our planet, of its isolation in the lifeless void of space, is staggering. Never before had the entirety of life on Earth been contained in a single image.

Contrast that with the images that have been coming in from NASA's Mars Curiosity rover since 2012. In their own way, these pictures are just as fascinating - not least because of the technology the Americans have developed to allow us to see the surface of another world in detail. But on another level, the pictures are shockingly bleak; it is a place utterly devoid of life, or even any trace of it save the tracks left by the rover as it trundles alone across the Martian desert.

I find the interest in, and resources devoted to, the exploration of lifeless space extraordinary at this time given the existential crisis that so much life on Earth faces. It's a crisis that is finally being whispered at senior levels of government around the world. This seems like a good time, then, in our conversations and in our photographs, to re-state the "miracle of being". It's hard to impress on people, even those who have looked in wonder at *Earthrise*, that life itself is anything remarkable - it is so ubiquitous on Earth, even if its diversity is dwindling. The real miracle is that any

living individual is here at all. It's easy to understand that, if your great or great great grandfather had died childless in the First World War, you would not be here. But Norwegian author, Jostein Gaarder, dramatically deepens our understanding of this miracle in his novel, *Maya*, by adding an evolutionary perspective.

"...my lineage, my family tree, my unbroken line of zygotes and cell divisions - [has] survived millions of generations. In each of these generations I had managed first to divide my cells, then breed, fertilise or lay my eggs and, in the final phase, bear live young. If just one of my millions of ancestors, for example an amphibian living its clammy life in the Devonian... had bitten the dust before sexual maturity, I wouldn't have been sitting on the verandah now...The genetic relay baton [has] been passed from generation to generation hundreds of millions of times."

So, the miracle is not just life itself but the individual lives that populate the Earth today, each with one thing in common: we've all beaten unbelievably slim odds to be here: we've won the Lottery time after time after time. If that understanding doesn't give cause to re-evaluate our relationship with other living things, I don't know what will.

About 20 years ago, I went to a public lecture hosted by *New Scientist* magazine as part of the Edinburgh

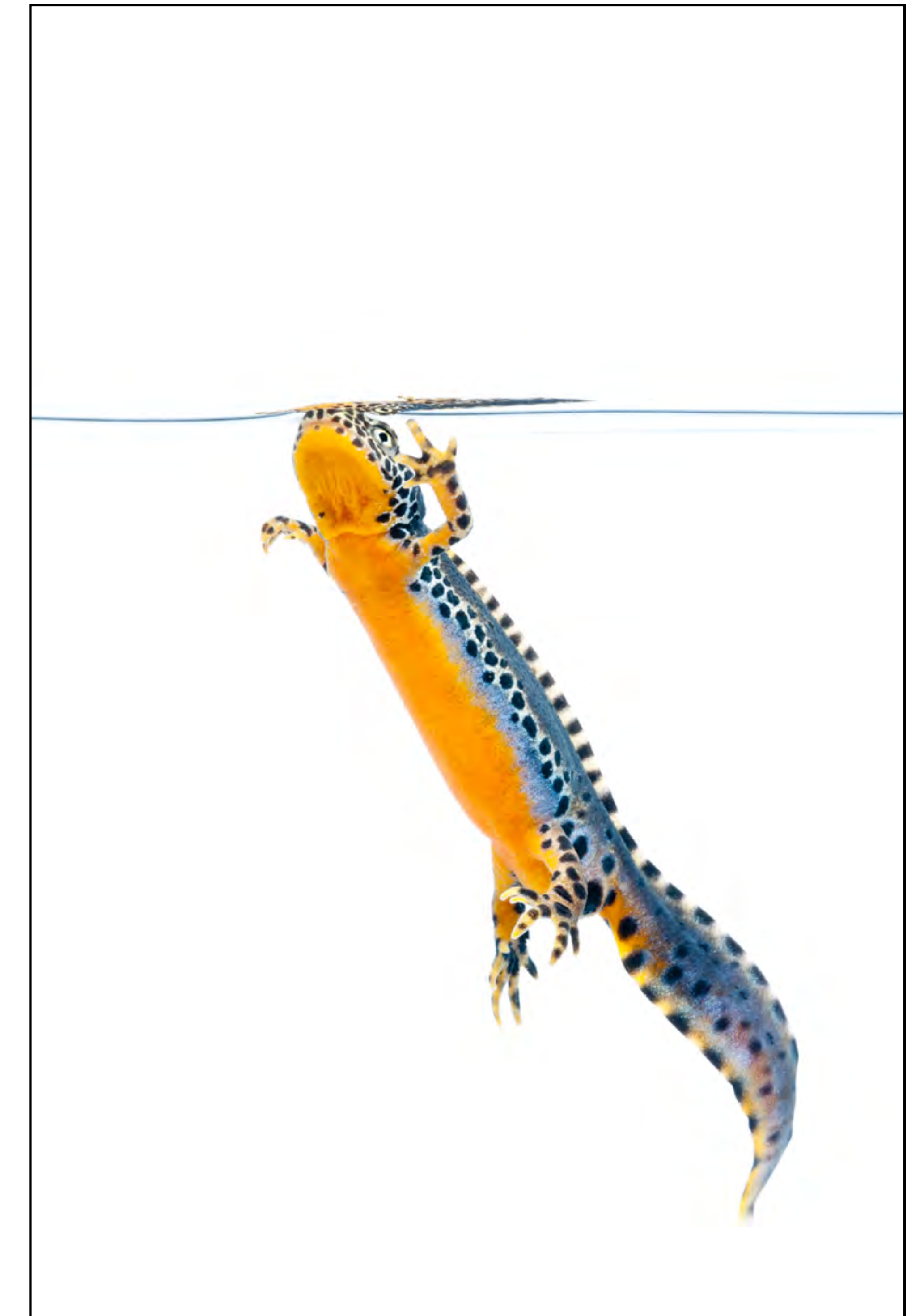
Science Festival. I can't even remember the subject of the debate now but I do recall, as a dry-mouthed member of the public, putting forward the idea that, just as the 20th century had been dominated by the schism between liberal values and those, in turn, of imperialism, fascism and communism, I thought that the 21st century would see a similar divide between people who believed, almost as an article of faith, in the liberal model, with free markets and unlimited economic growth and those who believed that we had to recognise our dependency on natural systems and change our behaviour and economies accordingly. My prediction didn't draw much response; it wasn't a particularly profound insight and, frankly, the liberal order had recently prevailed (again) with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and looked unassailable. The "end of history" had been declared by political economist Francis Fukuyama a few years earlier as the world seemed to be reaching a broad consensus on the "right" form of governance .

In the intervening 20 years, there have been a lot of distractions from this underlying schism, a diversity of righteous zealots that has lead us to believe that "the crisis" lies elsewhere, that the demon is "the other". But our abusive relationship with life on Earth remains the fundamental threat to our collective well-being and it is heartening to see it creep up the political

agenda, along with a growing acknowledgement of our collective role in the crisis. And as we find the courage to look our predicament squarely in the eye, the speed of its ascent is sure to increase.

Ultimately, we face a conflict of values. Those on the side of Earth, with its diversity of miraculous lives, have a monumental task to wean people from the ease, comfort and convenience that the liberal order has delivered to some, even as their awareness of its consequences for our fellow travellers grows. Yet, the inconsolable loneliness of a place like Mars is no alternative; it shouldn't be a hard sell.

Nature photography, at its core, is all about sharing values. It's fun too, of course, and that has value in itself. But honest work has a role in shaping the new stories we need to start telling ourselves about ourselves and our place in the world. After all, we remain better connected to it than most.

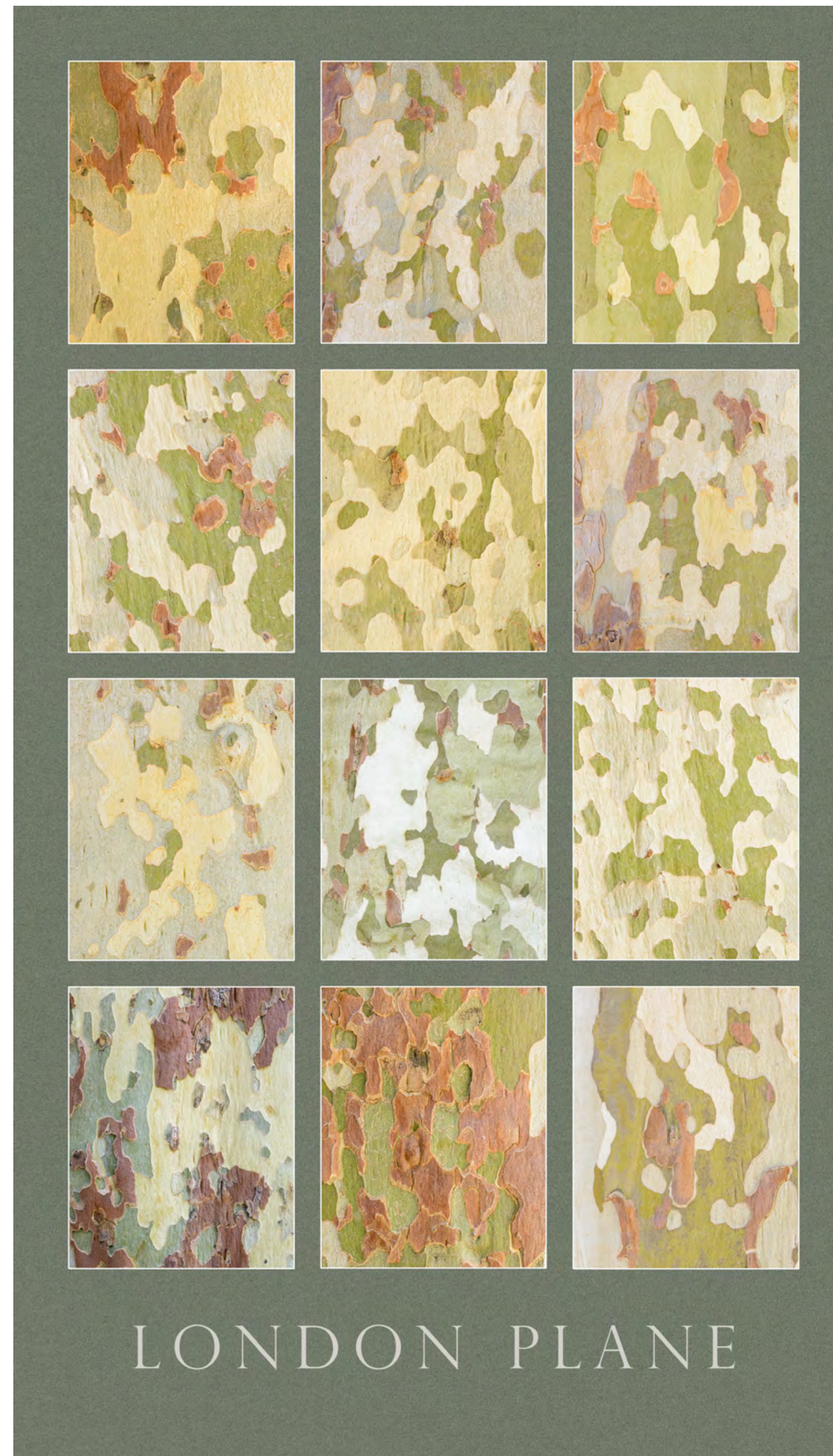


Alpine newt, France. Every living individual on Earth today has beaten impossible odds to be here with us. That deserves some respect.

Skill - Creating Chocolate bars

I need a lot less space to describe this technique than I would have done before [Martin Santbergen](#) created a suite of Photoshop templates to fast-track their production. He has made it a simple drag and drop process, requiring fairly minimal knowledge of Photoshop to achieve eye-catching results.

So, let's look instead at the idea behind Chocolate Bar collages. At its heart, it's all about showing variety where people expect uniformity. That could be in the form of sand patterns on a beach - the Luskentyre panel (far right) - or the "urban camouflage" of London plane bark, photographed in Beaune. But these images are also a response to the modern problem of how to keep our audience with a picture for more than two seconds. By creating works with many discrete elements, the viewer is tempted to compare and explore in a way that doesn't happen in single image pieces. I prefer to leave a "breathing space" between each element rather than butt them all together but there is no right or wrong way and we hope that Martin's templates will act as a springboard for guests to explore this exciting approach.



Why "Chocolate Bars"? Well, if you're very hungry, are you satisfied by a single chunk of chocolate? It's nice, like any of these individual photos, but it's just not enough. So we set out to fill you up, visually, by giving you the whole bar.

Food - Asparagus wraps

This tasty starter, comprising asparagus and mozzarella wrapped in prosciutto ham, is best enjoyed outside on a warm summer's day with a glass of chilled white wine (if that's your poison). In Scotland, we can always dream.

Photography note

This was the first outing for my piece of vintage marble, acquired at great expense from our local up-cycling shop. I always think that marble implies a warm climate or at least, summertime, so it was my first choice for this overhead of one of Charlotte's seasonal starters.

I used heavily flagged, diffused daylight for ease and because I wanted to see what was happening with the shadow from the bottle. But the main work happened afterwards in Lightroom where I used a Radial Filter to manage the colour and tonality of the food, and to lift it from its quite dark surroundings. An Exposure increase to 0.18 and Shadows lift to +25 did the trick. Given that many plates are round, this is an especially useful, highly controllable tool for food photographers.





Ingredients

16 trimmed white or green asparagus spears
125 g of buffalo mozzarella, cut into four
12 slices of (nitrite-free) prosciutto di Parma
4 tbsp of extra virgin olive oil
1 tbsp of red wine vinegar
3/4 tsp of Dijon mustard
20 g of pine nuts
Fresh basil leaves, chopped
Fresh thyme for garnish
Cherry tomatoes
Salad leaves.

How to

- Blanch the asparagus for two minutes in boiling water then plunge into cold.
- Cut each slice of the mozzarella in two the rest them on top of two asparagus spears before sandwiching them between another two spears.

- Create a parcel by wrapping the mozzarella and asparagus in three or four pieces of prosciutto.
- Lightly fry the parcels in 1 tbsp of olive oil until the prosciutto is crisp and the mozzarella is beginning to melt.
- To make a dressing, mix 3 tbsp of olive oil with the vinegar and Dijon mustard and lace it with the chopped basil leaves.
- Create a bed of salad leaves to receive the parcels, lay them out, then garnish with pine nuts and thyme.
- Decorate the plate with some halved cherry tomatoes and drizzle the dressing over it all.

- *Charlotte*

*Featured Retreat -
Creative Techniques, Burgundy*



A PHOTOGRAPHIC RETREAT IN
RURAL BURGUNDY, FRANCE
27 SEPTEMBER -
4 OCTOBER, 2019

Our Retreats are about so much more than rising at dawn, and shooting until you drop. We're more "slipper" than "boot" camp. Yes, we will take advantage of the light when it's right but we also want you to take away skills you can continue to use long after the Retreat is over. We also want you to relax and enjoy your time with us so Charlotte goes to some lengths to make sure you are comfortable and can enjoy her brand of rustic-with-flair cooking. Always delicious, always beautiful; always wholesome; never pretentious. This is as much a part of your holiday as pressing the shutter. And in the [Chateau de Magny en Morvan](#), right in the heart of rural France, we have a fabulous base to work from.

Guests on previous Retreats to Burgundy with us have commented how they feel they are in an "authentic" part of France, with little in the way of dressing up for tourists. We think this is good but we do also take you to some of the better known spots too, such the Chateau de Sully, where we will be given afternoon tea, and the UNESCO World Heritage site, Hospices de Beaune, in that famous wine town.

If your friend, spouse or partner isn't a photographer but is interested in cooking and French food, we can

organise a separate programme for them including a day at the famous [Cook's Atelier](#) in Beaune. They will also do chocolate work, patisserie, and some vegetarian cooking with Charlotte and pick up a host of useful tips.

During the Retreat, Niall will teach you these specific skills (as well as ones suited to less experienced photographers - optimal exposure, composition, and sharpness.)

- Creating "Colour Transect" images..
- Creating "Chocolate Bar" composites.
- Post-production for mood in Lightroom, Photoshop and Alienskin Exposure .

All this is supported by detailed notes in PDF form. We provide these ahead of the Retreat to give you a chance to practice beforehand so that when you arrive, you "know what you don't know".

The climate is very agreeable in this part of France, with autumn temperatures typically in the upper teens (often higher) sometimes with morning mist in the beech and sweet chestnut forests. We use organic fruit and vegetables including some straight from the Chateau's own vegetable patches within the walled

garden. The Estate has an arrangement with its neighbours for the supply of free-range eggs, game and meat (this is Charolais country) for our house parties. Guests are spoilt for choice when it comes to local wines and we make sure you have the chance to buy according to that evening's menu.

You can read the brochure for the Retreat [here](#). **And if you can bring a group of at least four, everyone will receive a 10 % discount - perhaps enough to cover your travel to France.**



The Chateau and our apartments.

Dates - our Retreats in 2019 and 2020. Full details on our [website](#).



Inspiration - Pål Hermansen

I was mortified: about half the audience had walked out of Pål's Arctic av-presentation before it was finished. I had suggested him as a speaker at this Scottish event but his blend of avant-garde photography and jazz had been too much for many in the audience. At the end, he smiled at me. "That was good; when I showed it in Finland, just about everyone left the theatre!"

Pål's work is important because it pushes the boundary of "outdoor photography" further than just about any other worker. He abandoned the shackles of traditional nature photography a quarter of a century ago and since then has defied pigeon-holing with a body of work that is in turn playful, disturbing, brilliantly-observed, sardonic and, I'm sure he won't mind me saying, sometimes just plain bonkers. I have worked alongside him on three trips and he provides an education in creativity and imagination.

One of his more accessible (and popular) collections focuses on a car graveyard in southern Sweden



© Pål Hermansen. www.palhermansen.com

created by two brothers in the forest. There, Pål has documented the absorption of the old Saabs and Volvos into the forest ecosystem and the animals that

make their lives amongst them. It's an unexpectedly hopeful set of pictures about the resistance of natural forces to the hubris we call "development".

Bonus footage - Water and air



While the "realm of mush" - long exposures of moving subjects - has been pretty thoroughly explored, I think there is a lot of exciting work still to be done at the other end of the time scale. Here we're talking more 1/8000 second rather than 8 seconds. This approach is ideally suited to the bright light of the middle of the day that normally sends landscape photographers scuttling for cover, rather like trolls worried about being turned to pillars of stone...

The ideal set of falls has a moderate flow with a dark background to the falling water. This sets up the contrast necessary to see the extraordinary detail of air bubbles in the water this approach can reveal. You needn't worry about cranking up the ISO (in this case, to 2000) in order to get the sort of speeds you need to freeze every drop - typically 1/4000 - 8000 second, depending on how close you are to the falls. Depth of field can be problematic, which is one reason I always shoot the front of the falls rather than from the side.

- Niall.

MENU is published bimonthly. The next issue, No. 9, is out on 16th July 2019. Words in turquoise are linked to external web pages.

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