

# The Mouth of The Kenai

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## Plugged In: Find photos to fit a theme, not a theme to fit photos



Illustration 1

**By Joe Kashi, for the Redoubt Reporter**

Curating your own photos is nothing more than making the final choice of which photos you'll show others, whether as large prints at a formal exhibition or in an online gallery. Being your own worst critic is surprisingly hard work, full of indecision, delay and second-guessing.

Although there are no easy rules or foolproof shortcuts, this week I'll discuss the process that often works best for me. Over the years, I've found it helpful to have an organizing theme as a general starting point for selecting a series of related photographs that mutually enhance each other and look good together.

I'll first tentatively define a theme or title and search my existing photos for images that may fit. That works better for me than defining a theme and then trying to make new photos to fit. Doing so feels forced and succeeds less often, at least for me.

As I go through existing photos and gather the initial batch, my initial concept typically evolves in unexpected directions or is even discarded entirely where a different approach is more in harmony with available photographs. At this point, it's important to keep an open mind.

After gathering a large initial group of candidate images, it's helpful to get second opinions from others whose judgment and taste you respect. That helps avoid the trap that we all face, choosing lower-quality photos that personally appeal to us because they're associated with positive memories, or choosing "outlier" photos that don't really fit the overall theme and seem jarringly disconnected from the others, no matter how individually good they might be.

There are no set patterns nor unyielding rules to choosing photographs and developing your theme, nor should there be. You might choose photographs showing different aspects of a single subject, person or place. Another approach might group photos that are related by a consistently similar appearance or that use a particular technique that appeals to you as a personal style, in my case full-color-spectrum images that appear at first glance to be traditional black-and-white photos.

A grouping of consistent, related images is your body of work. Compared to a "best of" smattering of good but unrelated photos, a consistent body of work is generally considered to show a higher level of skill and sophistication and usually results in a better overall impression when viewed as a whole.

Your choice of images obviously depends on your intent. A straightforward exhibit of aircraft and tank photographs taken at a World War II museum is very different than images suggesting the emotional intensity of actually visiting a Nazi-era concentration camp. The latter requires careful choice of photographs that allow viewers to also experience what you have experienced without forcing your "message" too blatantly.

After making your initial choices on your computer screen, print each as a small print, about 4-by-6 inches, cut so that each photo is on a separate sheet of paper. Go through those prints several times, adding and deleting. When you're down to about twice as many images as you need, lay them out on a large table and decide which images fit together best, and what sequence of images is most effective. Again, start early enough that your review and decisions are not forced by impending deadlines.

As a general rule, viewers tend to relate more intensely to images that allow them to project their own experiences and feelings into an image. Somewhat ambiguous or abstract-appearing images often work best, rather than a play-by-play description that leaves no room for the viewer's personal reflections. That's rather similar to haiku, a common Japanese form of poetry in which a very general mood or scene is described in three short but very carefully composed lines.

Occasionally, before selecting any images for an exhibit, I'll first define my theme by choosing a key image as the central focal point of the exhibit along with a haiku that generally suggests the exhibit's theme. Once the key image is chosen and the haiku feels close to its final form, I'll use these as a sort of gestalt aid to selecting photographs that fit. That's not a mystical process, but simply a mechanism to help focus curating decisions while not forcing a prematurely completed effort that leaves no room for later intuition and improvement.

As a working example, I did a 2014 solo exhibit at Kenai Peninsula College centered around photos taken at the Dachau concentration camp the year before, with the opening reception and gathering honoring Fred Kiehl, a Soldotna Rotary Club member who had been one of the first

American soldiers to enter and liberate Dachau at the close of World War II.

I chose as my key image this week's Illustration 1, a deceptively simple photo of shadows on a wall. At that point, the exhibit title "Fleeting Images" and following thematic haiku promptly came to mind as the exhibit's theme around which to select and organize the remaining images.

As our shadows brush

the wall of eternity,

Fleeting images

At that point, I finally had a clearly delineated theme, making the final choice of images easier. Rather than forcing the process, allowing it to evolve naturally resulted in a stronger exhibit overall. Several weeks elapsed and much indecision occurred before I was comfortable with my ultimate "curation" choices for the "Fleeting Images" show.

I usually print and frame several more images than will fit in the actual exhibit space. That allows me to make any final decisions on the spot while hanging the images, and to choose the images and their sequence that result in the best overall impression.

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