

The Sublime in Photography

What's poppin, people? It's Dante.

Today I want to talk about **the sublime in photography** and how we can evoke the sublime in a photograph.

What Does “Sublime” Mean?

When you look at the word *sublime*, it comes from the Latin root meaning:

- *Uplifted*
- *Lofty*
- *Elevated*
- *On high*

At its core, the word implies **rising beyond an ordinary limit**. And that's where the challenge begins for us as photographers:

How do we engage with the mundane world around us and elevate it into something extraordinary?

The Sublime as an Emotional Experience

For me, the sublime isn't something you fabricate in post or plan intellectually. It's an **emotional quality** you experience *out there* — walking, exploring, and photographing.

Lately, the way I've been making pictures has felt more intuitive. More liberating. I'm engaging my senses instead of overthinking, and I'm allowing that feeling to flow through me and into the photographs themselves.

The sublime can be:

- Physically elevated — standing on a cliff, looking at the horizon
- Figuratively elevated — lofty thought, noble speech, exalted spirit

Over time, the idea came to represent something even deeper:

*An experience that overwhelms rational comprehension — mixed with **awe, fear, vastness, and transcendence.***

Something so powerful that it pushes the mind beyond its limits.

Elevated Spaces & Personal Meaning

When I visit the cliffside behind the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I feel the sublime deeply.

I go there often. I stand at the edge and look beyond the horizon.

It reminds me:

- How open the world really is
- How much there is to see, explore, and photograph

That feeling flows through me when I'm in elevated spaces — and it stays with me when I make images.

The Irrational Pull of Certain Places

When you're photographing, you'll notice something strange:

You feel an **irrational pull** toward certain locations.

For me, that might be:

- Landscapes
- Alleyways
- Streets
- Or even a shopping mall

Watching people move through space, watching systems operate seamlessly — trains, crowds, flows — it can feel overwhelming in the best way.

There's a sense that everything is interconnected, vast, and somehow holding together.

That feeling is hard to explain with words, but it moves through me when I'm photographing.

Storm Clouds, Light, and the Edge of Fear

In one behind-the-scenes moment from a photograph I made at the cliff, you see two boys running toward the horizon.

But what truly evokes the sublime for me are the **storm clouds**.

Storms are a classic expression of the sublime:

- Beautiful
- Awe-inspiring

- Slightly terrifying

It's that fine line between light and shadow where emotion lives.

Why Black & White Evokes the Sublime

This is why I'm drawn to **high-contrast black and white**.

When light and shadow collide, you get:

- Bliss
- Awe
- Fear
- Ambiguity

All at once.

Photography is light. That's the root of the medium.

When you strip things down to light and shadow, something powerful happens.

Light, Shadow, and Chiaroscuro

I often think about painters like Caravaggio and the use of *chiaroscuro*.

Light and shadow elevate the emotional weight of a scene.

Crushed shadows create ambiguity.

Ambiguity forces the viewer to *feel* rather than analyze.

That ambiguity is where the sublime lives.

Follow the Light, Not the Plan

Photography comes from:

- *Phos* — light
- *Graphe* — drawing or writing

So the simplest way to evoke the sublime is this:

Follow the light.

I don't go out with preconceived ideas.

I photograph from my gut.

- No expectations
- No rigid goals
- Just instinct

I respond to what I *feel*, not what I think I should be making.

Elevating the Mundane

Sometimes the most ordinary moments become extraordinary:

- A man standing in fog near City Hall
- A figure gazing into a void of light and shadow

By:

- Crushing the shadows
- Exposing for the highlights

The moment is elevated.

Gazing Into the Abyss

When you look into the horizon, into the abyss — it gazes back.

There's an irrational pull:

- Awe mixed with fear
- Beauty mixed with uncertainty

The same feeling you get from:

- Storm clouds
 - Crowded cities
 - Watching life unfold in real time
-

Being in Tune With the World

To evoke the sublime, you must be **in tune**.

That means:

- Watching patterns
- Studying light
- Observing people
- Feeling rhythm and movement

You're not thinking.

You're responding.

You're prepared and receptive.

Why Color Can Distract

Color can be powerful — but it can also distract.

When you reduce an image to:

- Light
- Shadow

You focus on emotion.

A car on fire.

Faces lit at a crosswalk.

Figures emerging from darkness.

The excess disappears.

What matters remains.

Surprise Lives in Presence

In places like Shibuya and Shinjuku, I leaned into this fully.

Using:

- Tight framing

- Slow shutter speeds
- Strong directional light

I wasn't chasing moments.

I was letting them happen.

Surprise emerges when you're present, prepared, and aligned with the rhythm of the street.

The Sublime Can't Be Forced

The sublime isn't something you can manufacture.

It comes from:

- Intuition