

Frame it Up

By Chuck Palmer

This is the third article in a series on Photography Composition Tools and Concepts for remarkable photography. So far, we have explored some practical applications of the Rule of Thirds and Negative Space. In this article, let's look at secondary frames which is a very useful technique to enhance our subject, while creating more interesting images.

If you subscribe to the view that the most critical ingredient for consistently creating captivating images is seeing and composing creatively, then you probably realize developing our creative vision takes practice. This series of articles attempts to break down some key components of composition in a way that can be easily applied to your photography. So, in this installment, let's look at some practical ways we might incorporate secondary frames in our remarkable images.

You may already be familiar with the concept of secondary frames, or sometimes called sub-frames. Some authors occasionally over-simplify the concept labeling it a "picture within a picture". Although the concept is pretty simple to understand, creatively applying multifaceted secondary frames is not often appreciated.

If you are not familiar with the concept, secondary framing is a composition technique where we compose elements within a scene to create a secondary frame within our image frame that enhances the entire image. The primary role of a secondary frame is to draw your viewer's eye to the primary subject of your image. The impact can be dramatic.

The classic example of a secondary frame is photographing a subject through a physical window, door, or architectural feature. This is an effective way to call attention to your main subject.



However, a secondary frame can enhance an image in many more ways than just focusing your viewer on the primary subject. The shape of the frame and how it relates to your image story can significantly impact viewer interest while keeping your viewer focused on your subject. A secondary frame that relates to your story can be especially effective when the subject is small and surrounded by details. A well-placed secondary frame can provide viewers with a greater context, giving the image a sense of time or place. For instance, framing the woman surfer in the unique frame shape of the sea grape trees and dune boardwalk does more than focus our attention on the woman, it also helps tell the story about her.



Organizing your composition with a creative secondary frame goes beyond creating a simple picture within a picture. We are not only calling attention to our main subject, but we are also impacting how the viewer interprets and feels about the whole story. We are creating a remarkable image.

Now that we have a better understanding of how secondary frames can make our images more compelling, what can we use to serve as a secondary frame that goes beyond the most basic physical elements of windows and doors? The possibilities are limited only by our imagination. Let's look at a few secondary framing opportunities we can put in practice to create powerful images.

- Look for opportunities to use multiple secondary frames within one another to create an amplified sense of depth and interest. This technique may be especially valuable when the main subject is small.



- Compose leading line elements that lead your viewer to your secondary frame.

- Experiment with depth of sharpness (depth of field) to capture your secondary frame in soft or sharp focus. Different frame sharpness can be effective in different images. Frames made up of elements with many details may be more effective if rendered in soft focus.



- Look for opportunities to compose images with multiple secondary frames side by side, each framing unique subjects. The secondary frames may contain different or commentary stories.



- Experiment with the position of your secondary frame within the image frame. Don't be hesitant to place your secondary frame so it extends beyond one of more edges of your image.



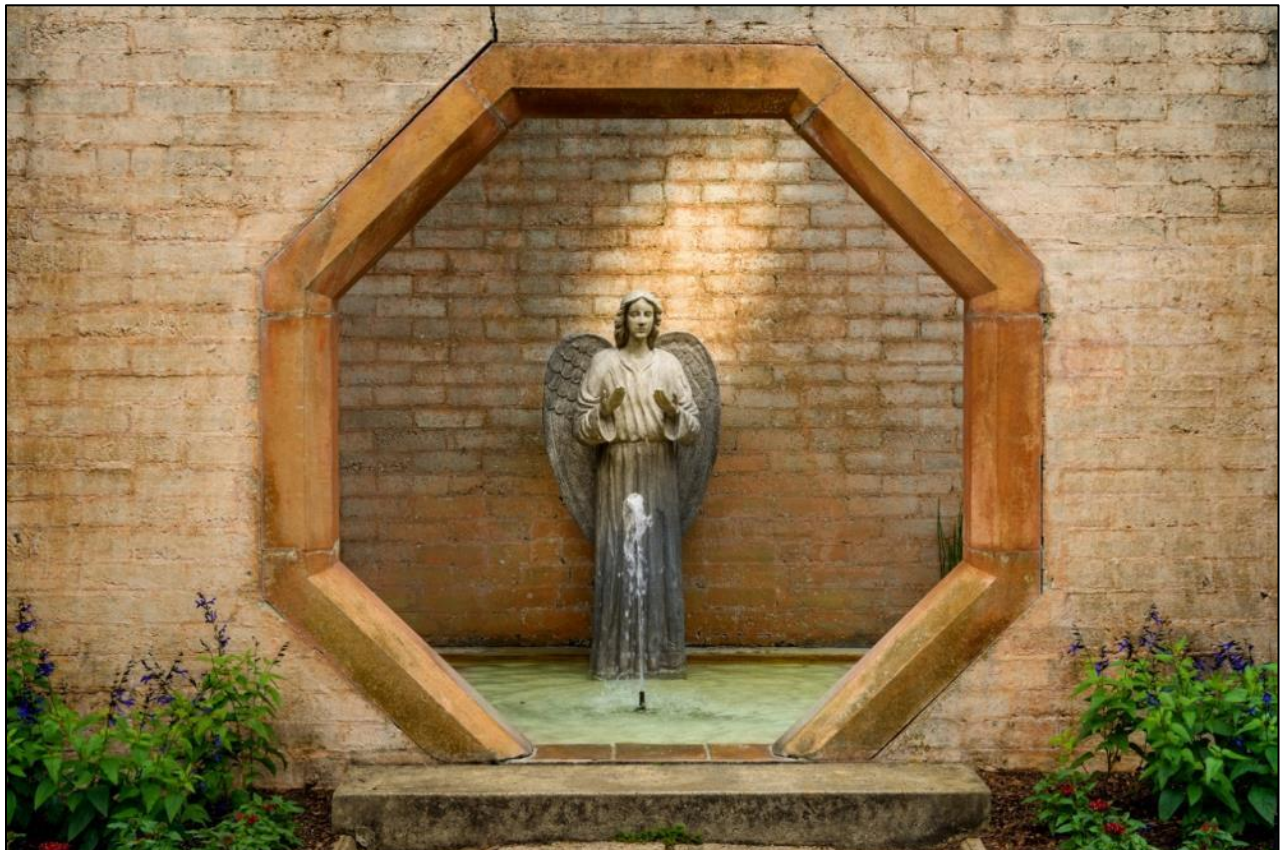
- Look for opportunities to use one or more conceptual elements (light, shadow, or color) as a secondary frame that highlights your subject.



- Look for opportunities to combine physical elements with conceptual elements such as shadows, light or color to form the borders of your secondary frame.



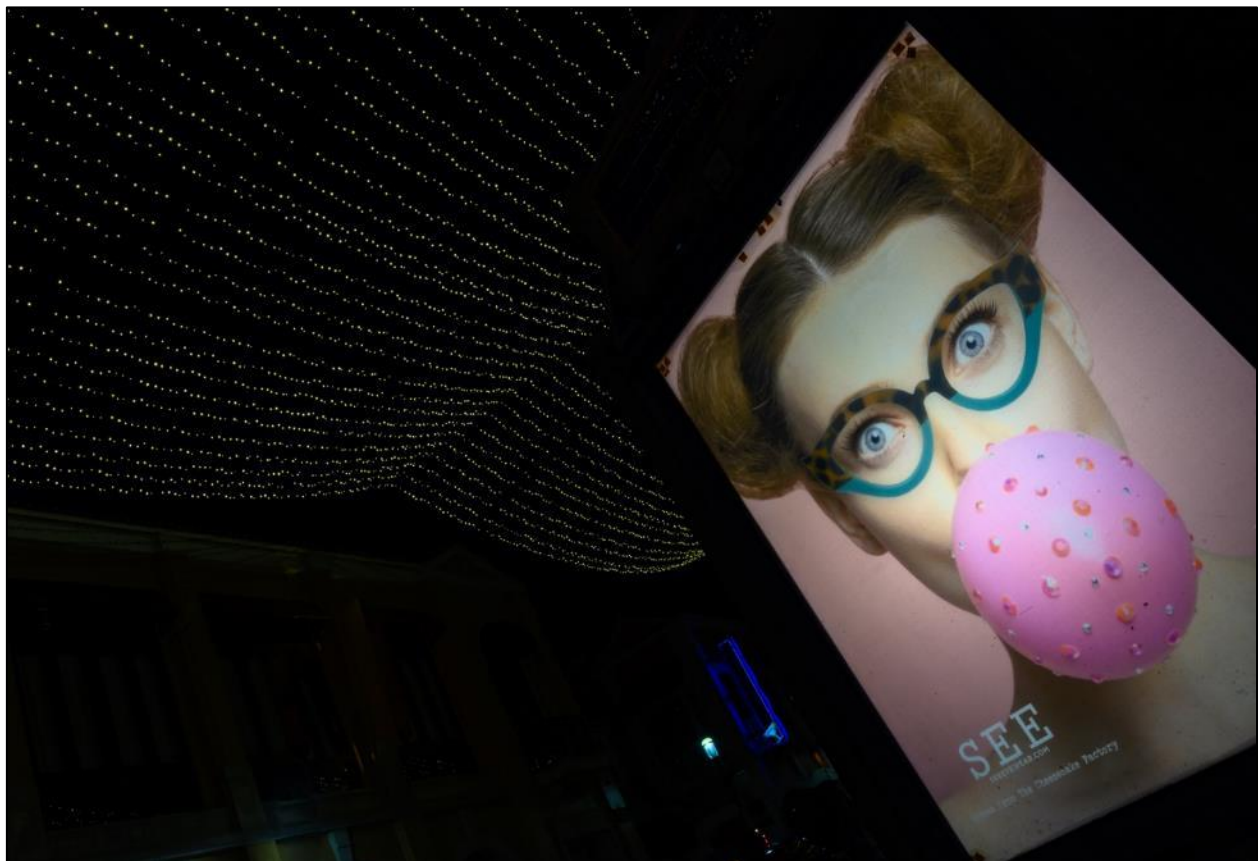
- Look for opportunities to use contrasting tones and colors between the secondary frame borders, your subject, and the surrounding elements.



- Look for reflective surfaces such as mirrors, windows, or puddles to form the secondary frame, capturing an image that might not otherwise be viewed in the scene.



- Look for posters, TV, computer or mobile device screens that contain an image that complements the surrounding scene or story.



- Look for opportunities to create secondary frames by underexposing or overexposing elements that create contrasting shadows or highlights between the secondary frame borders, your subject, and the surrounding elements.



Composing using secondary frames can be a powerful way to make your images even more remarkable and interesting. You now have a list of ideas to experiment with but use your imagination and be open for secondary framing opportunities. Use them when they work and avoid them when they don't. Combining secondary frames with other composing techniques we have reviewed can be the difference between an ordinary good image and an extraordinary one.

As always, keep shooting and may only the remarkable images be yours.

Chuck

Authors Note: This article is the third in a series on composition tools and principles. References for these articles include Composition Design Considerations, a series of articles in EV magazine by Angelo; Ioanides"; "Design Principles" by Robin Griggs Wood; The Photographer's Eye by Michael Freeman; Extraordinary Everyday Photography by Brenda Tharp and Jed Manwaring