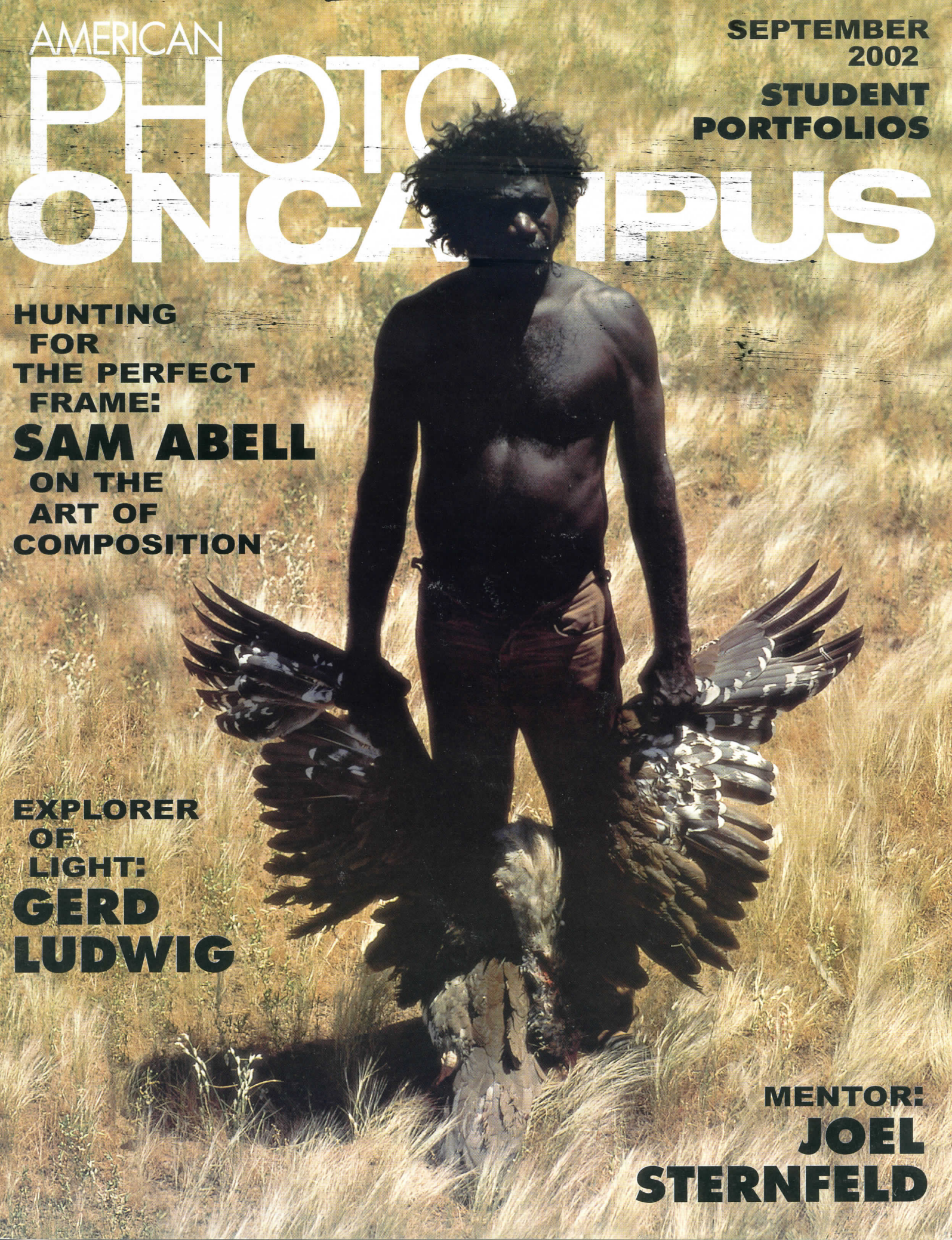
AMERICAN
PHOTO
ON CAMPUS
SEPTEMBER
2002
STUDENT
PORTFOLIOS
HUNTING
FOR
THE PERFECT
FRAME:
SAM ABELL
ON THE
ART OF
COMPOSITION
EXPLORER
OF
LIGHT:
GERD
LUDWIG
MENTOR:
JOEL
STERNFELD

ZEN AND THE ART OF THE PERFECT FRAME.

Sam Abell's ghostly view of an aboriginal Australian was the June 1996 cover for *National Geographic*.

SEEING THINGS

We admit that even the best photography magazine is no substitute for the classroom experience. But we think we've come pretty close with this issue's profile of *National Geographic* photographer Sam Abell. It offers an exclusive look at how Abell thinks about composition—perhaps the most undefinable of photographic skills, and certainly the hardest to teach. In this revealing story you'll find some of Abell's most successful pictures side-by-side with outtakes that led up to or followed them, along with the photographer's articulate commentary, drawn from his lavish new book, *Sam Abell: The Photographic Moment.* (See page 16 to win a copy.)

In this back-to-school issue we also cover the small but exciting photo program at Sarah Lawrence College, with a broad sampling of student work (see page 22) and a profile of Sarah Lawrence professor and noted fine-art photographer Joel Sternfeld (see page 18). It's a real inside look, provided by 2002 Sarah Lawrence graduate Krissa Corbett Cavouras, who also happens to be the new assistant editor of *American Photo On Campus.*

Finally, we have our customary reviews of cutting-edge photo technology, including Canon's new digital SLR, the EOS D60, and a unique slide film: Kodak Elite Chrome Extra Color 100, which offers the highest color saturation in its class.

Russell Hart, EDITOR

AMERICAN PHOTO ONCAMPUS

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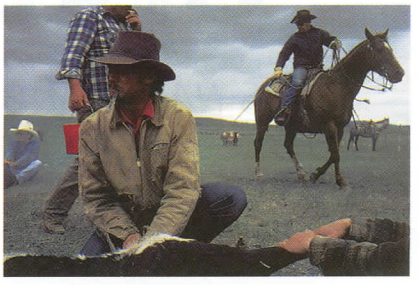
MPA

MASTER

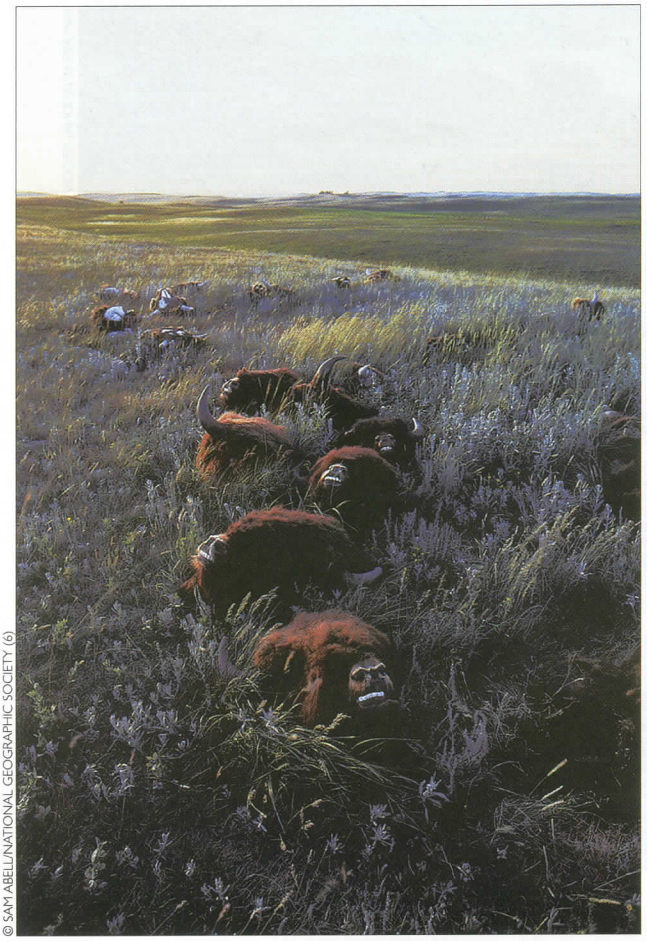
SAM ABELL

THIS VETERAN *NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC* PHOTOGRAPHER HAS AN UNERRING EYE FOR COMPOSITION. HERE HE OFFERS PRIVATE LESSONS IN THE ART OF THE PERFECT FRAME. **BY RUSSELL HART**



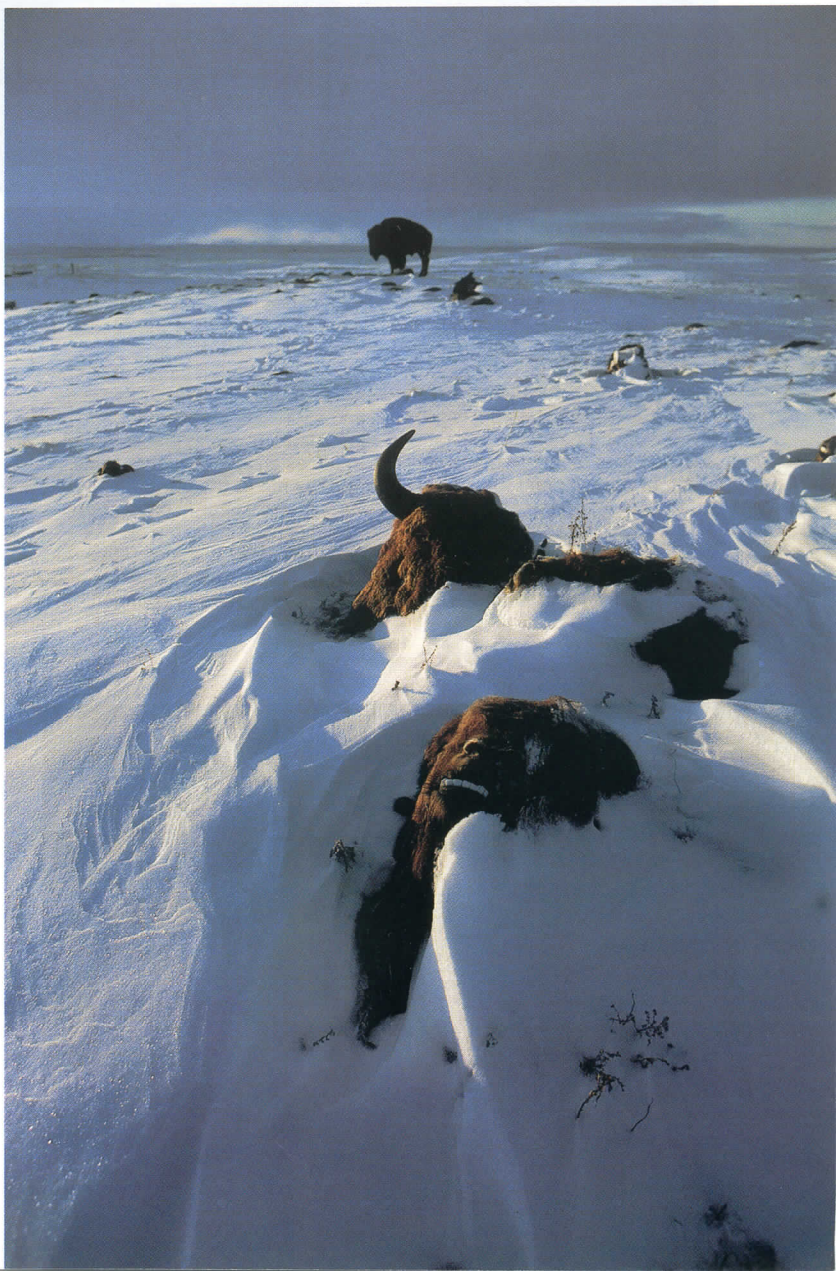
Utica, Montana, May 1984
"All the elements for a finished photograph are present in the first frame (at left, top). Of these the most important is the deep background where prairie and sky meet on a clean and graceful horizon," says Abell in his new book. "On this foundation the photograph is built. I concentrated the composition on one cowboy and the action around him.

"I was after a layered picture and thought circumstances were best for this when, in frame two (middle), the calf was branded, but layering depends on separation of elements that didn't exist at the top of the frame. Without moving, I turned my attention to the horse and rider and swung the composition rightward as they moved off. A man approached from the left carrying a bucket, spoiling the exit of the rider (bottom). I recomposed on the cowboy and made the final frame as a new tableau of cowboys appeared in the distance and the bucket swung to the edge of the frame (above). My colleagues like this picture for its complexity, but I want something more in it. I want the branding iron."



Standoff, Alberta, 1984 and 1985 "My yearlong search to find bison skulls for the concluding photograph in an essay on the life of Charles M. Russell ended on a dry Canadian prairie. After photographing the skulls in the grass (left), I considered my work finished. But the results were flat, and I persuaded my editor, David Arnold, to send me back six months later. Conditions the afternoon I arrived were harsh and marginal—bitter cold and only moments of light left. As I framed the still life, a bull bison unexpectedly strode into the background, animating the picture in a way Russell himself would have appreciated (below). From an early age I've made photographs a certain way: compose and wait. The pleasure of working this way goes back to outings with my father and his advice on how to see ('Look for strong diagonals').

"Growing up and photographing in Ohio gave me the idea a place could be known by seeing its structure. The structure of Ohio was straightforward and strong. The world was divided by a level line that split the world equally—above and below, near and far, known and unknown. When I left Ohio for those unknown places the structure of it stayed with me. A level line is at the center of my seeing and gives to deeply different places a common ground."

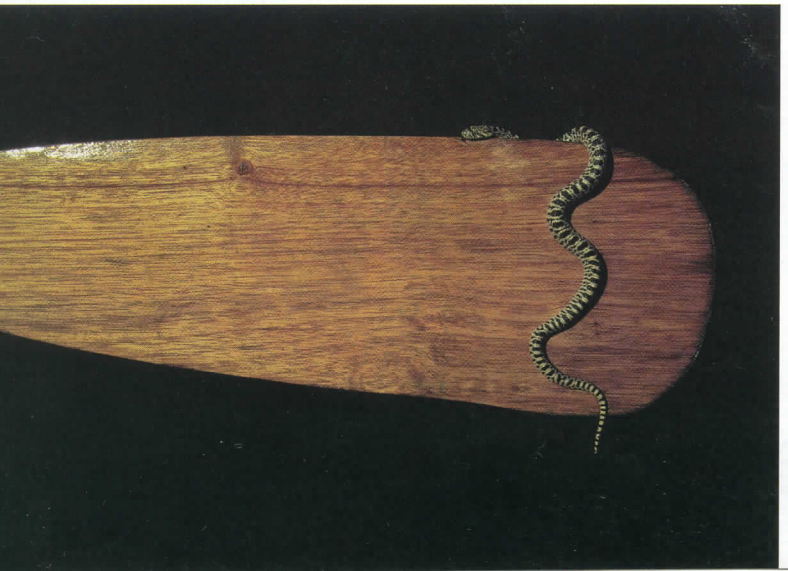


Photographer Sam Abell was flying to his next assignment for *National Geographic* magazine when, down the aisle, he saw a man reading the latest issue of that yellow-bordered publishing institution. "He was just thumbing through a story I'd spent a year shooting," says Abell. "I'd taken 25,000 pictures for the story, and in the end, eight were published. I wasn't sorry it was eight, because they were all good ones. So I knelt down in the aisle beside the man and said, 'Friend, slow down.' And I started telling him some of the background behind each picture."

Slowing down is fundamental to Sam Abell's photography. Abell himself seems constitutionally unhurried, his speech so measured you can practically hear the thought behind each word. That character is in keeping with *National Geographic* assignments, which give photographers months rather than days to shoot a story (one reason the magazine's photography is always so good). But such deliberation is also at the core of Abell's success as a teacher. Well-known for the time and patience he devotes to his students, he is in great demand on the photo workshop circuit, teaching regularly at the Woodstock Photography Workshops and the Santa Fe Workshops, where he was the force behind a special program for photographers doing long-term projects. "Sam's got just ten slides in his lecture," says photographer and fellow teacher Chris

Missouri River, Montana, 1976 "We encountered a water snake attempting to swim across the river, and my cousin Craig gathered it onto his canoe paddle. My first instinct was to photograph the snake and paddle in such a way that they linked to the landscape of the river and the countryside (above). I then concentrated on the snake and paddle only, exposing in such a way that the color and texture of the river darkened and disappeared (below).

"A canoe is a place. Often it is more of a place than the scenes it passes by. I felt that at 12 when I first slid a wooden canoe onto still water and got in. Within its secure and subtle shape I could quietly go places. It was as transforming to me as a camera, which came into my life at the same time. Twenty years later I spent a year canoeing with my camera. The resulting essay is a meditation on stillness, something canoeing and camera work have in common."



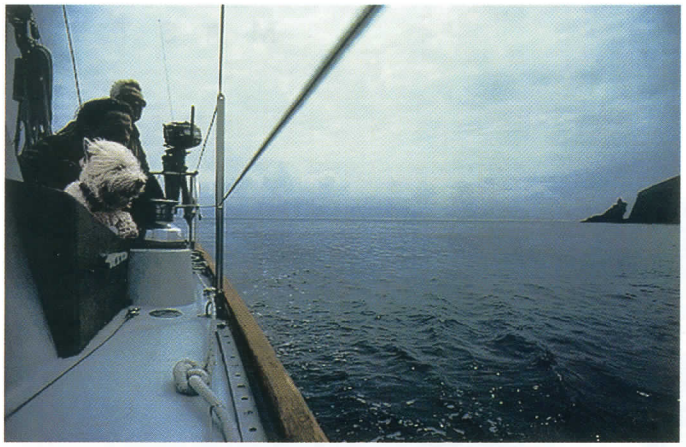
Rainier. "But they're his most profound slides. He talks for an hour, and you're practically in tears."

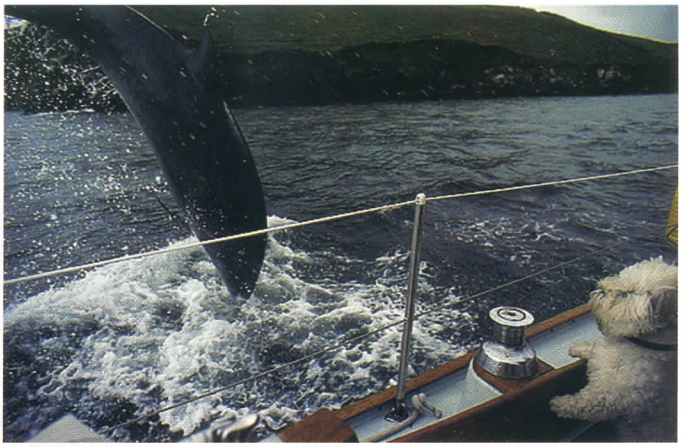
The man on the airplane was thumbing through a 1984 *National Geographic* story that Abell, a member of Canon's exclusive Explorers of Light group, had shot on the life and times of cowboy artist Charles M. Russell. The story's final image—of dead buffalo buried up to their necks in snow—is a perfect example of Abell's approach. Animal remains are an overexposed icon of the American West, yet the photographer pushed beyond that cliché in his image. He found the subject on his third trip for the story, already a year in the making, just across the Canadian border from Russell's Montana stomping grounds. After shooting it he returned to the magazine's headquarters in Washington, D.C., to do a picture edit.

But when Abell saw the buffalo pictures on the light table he was disappointed; he convinced his editor to send him to Montana once again (*Geographic* photographers call it a "go-back"), a trip he made six months later, in the dead of winter. "I went back to the same spot," says Abell, who shoots with a Canon EOS-1V and favors Canon EF 28mm f/1.8 and and 28-105mm f/3.5-4.5 USM lenses. "But this time, the remains were covered with snow." Visually, the snow simplified the subject and added a stark symbolism. Better yet, while Abell was trying different ways of composing the scene, a live buffalo wandered into the background. (Good

The Kimberley, Western Australia, 1989 "'Son, you can photograph anything you want on this cattle station except the girl.' I said okay and left. But now 'the girl' was in front of me and I badly wanted to photograph her. My promise not to was now hours, and many miles, behind me. All I needed was a moment of light. But the clouds on the western horizon were blocking the sun which would soon set. I photographed despite that, believing irrationally that it would cause the sun to shine. It worked. Light struck the scene, I made the photograph, and the station manager drove up, all at the same time.

"'Son, what'd I tell you about not photographing the girl? Now we've all got a problem.' The problem was that she was Canadian, not Australian, and had no work permit. I made another promise; this one I kept. When the picture was published, I didn't reveal her name or the name of the station. By then she had returned to Canada."



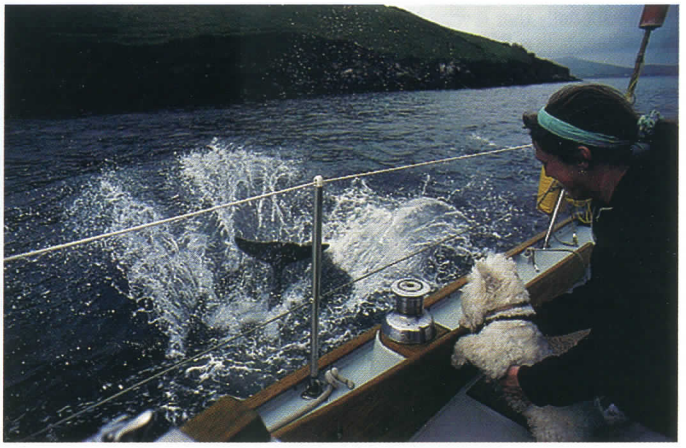


Dingle Bay, Ireland, 1999 "I had been mugged and robbed in Dublin. I left the city and drove diagonally across Ireland to the Dingle Peninsula and holed up in an inn while it rained for a week.

"One day the innkeeper offered to take me on an outing on his sailboat to see Fungi, the wild dolphin who lives in the harbor. He said Fungi and his dog had 'a relationship.' I saw no future in this outing. Seasickness possibly, but no pictures. For a while, things went as I had expected: nothing. Then, abruptly, Fungi shot straight out of the water high over our heads, looking down for the dog.

"Pandemonium. The barking dog went for the railing. The innkeeper shouted, 'Grab the dog!' The cook collared the dog before it jumped. Fungi disappeared. I got serious, and built a composition in three layers: the dog in the foreground, the hills in the distance, and the middle empty. Then I awaited the dolphin.

"When a photograph is published it gains a life, and it loses one. The life it loses isn't small. The process of publishing formalizes a photograph and takes it another strong step away from its complex, and often chaotic, origins in the field."



Aran Islands, Ireland, 1993
"I saw the sleeping horse from the roof of an inn where I was reading and taking in the rare sunshine. The scene below looked eccentrically interesting, so I made a few photographs. When I moved on I forgot about it.

"During the night, I awoke and climbed out the bedroom window to take in the moonlight. The horse was still there. Moonlight transformed the scene. What had looked eccentric in the afternoon now looked mysterious. I climbed back into the bedroom and in the dark put my camera and tripod together.

"The night was still—rarer even than sunshine in the Aran Islands—but during the long exposure the horse's head blurred as it nodded off and on. When I finished photographing, the horse was still standing there, but in the morning it was gone."

National Hotel, Moscow, 1983 "I'd been in Russia for a month working every day on the street with an entourage of interpreters. Finally I took a Sunday off and spent it in my room photographing pears. Arranging them was engaging, but uncharacteristic of my documentary photography. Still, it was careful camera work, and contemplative, and on that day it was what I needed. In the final frame, middle ground is excluded. Then sunlight strikes the pears and the cupola of St. Basil's Cathedral as a breeze lifts the hem of the curtain into the composition and holds it there.

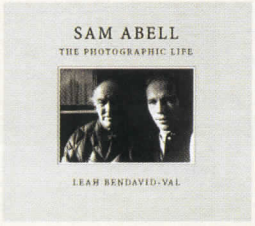
"The photographic life I imagined was straightforward—documentary work done for publication. But it took me away from another life—the life of observing small details."

things come to photographers who wait.) He quickly pressed the shutter button, and the image was complete. "It took a year and a half to get that photograph," he says.

The picture is reproduced side by side with its older outtake in Abell's sumptuous new book, *Sam Abell: The Photographic Life* (Rizzoli, $60), and in a major retrospective at the University of Virginia Art Museum (on view through September 15, then traveling to the Kathleen Ewing Gallery in Washington, D.C.). Edited and curated by Abell's *National Geographic* colleague Leah Bendavid-Val, the book and show are highly personal and unlike any photographer's retrospective we've seen. Both are divided into sections, starting with the black-and-white diary Abell has kept since grade school (work that has never been seen and is a revelation coming from a photographer known as a colorist) and ending with "The Life Behind Things," a grouping of images that shows how Abell has made a photographic virtue of Zen-like understatement.

In between is a section called "Seeking the Picture," in which Abell tells the visual story behind the making of specific images and reveals some versions that never made it into print. As the examples here show, in some cases the outtakes are subtle variations of the final shot and illustrate how Abell finessed his point of view, perspective, and framing while shooting a roll or two of film. In other cases, such as the buffalo shot, the variations are more spaced out in

Sam Abell's Rizzoli monograph, **Sam Abell: The Photographic Life,** is both deeply autobiographical and full of hard-learned lessons in how to capture the perfect frame from one of *National Geographic*'s finest photographers. To win a copy of the new book, send a postcard with your name, address, phone number, and school affiliation to *American Photo On Campus*, 1633 Broadway, New York, NY 10019. Indicate "Abell book" on your card; the deadline for contestants is October 1, 2002. Congratulations to Jillian Johnson of New York's Pratt Institute of Art & Design, who wins a copy of Robert Glenn Ketchum's *Rivers of Life: Southwest Alaska, the Last Great Salmon Fishery* (Aperture), and to Betty Cuanalo of East Los Angeles College, who wins a copy of William Albert Allard's *Portraits of America* (National Geographic).



book giveaway

time, as Abell returned repeatedly to the same subject and saw new ways to compose it, found it in a better light, or simply caught it at a more revealing moment.

Yet Abell's pictures are less about specific moments than those of his talented *National Geographic* colleagues. They have an overarching graphic power—the word "composition" seems too prosaic—that captures the soul of a place. Abell thinks it goes back to growing up in Ohio. "It was so flat, with the horizon line dividing everything equally wherever you looked," he says. "That line persists in my photography. I see the world structurally, and on that structure I put other shapes, whether it's the shape of a canoe or the Imperial Palace in Japan. Most documentary photography pursues content. But I tend to pursue the form of a thing and then bring the content into that."

Ever self-critical, Abell doesn't necessarily see that habit as a virtue. "I think sometimes I go to the point where in trying to find the best structure, I actually risk losing the moment," he says. "And I know other photographers who consider that unforgivable." Have a look at Abell's pictures, and we think you'll forgive him. ■

Brigus South, Newfoundland, 1970 "These frames are from the 17th roll of film from my first extended assignment. Handling situations was something I was learning, and on this morning I felt in the way of the fishermen. The routine of the men, father and son, was based upon a close rhythm of work. There was no place in it for a photographer. But I worked as intently as they, and this, at least, they understood. We were both seeking something. I was after a layered photograph that gave equal emphasis to both men. The composition was resolved when the son turned toward me and, simultaneously, a swell lifted the father's dory briefly above the horizon.

"Seeking the picture is the complex process that dominates documentary photography, and in the seeking there is often a story. The story varies. At its worst it is bitterly frustrating—you see the picture, but you can't get to it. At its best, it is a magical process."