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## Life lit up is the essence of photography



All the elements came together in this “Red Bucket” photograph. Sam Abell shot his perfect photograph at Ken Rosman Ranch in Utica, Mont.

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LIFE LIT UP IS THE ESSENCE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

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With infinite patience Sam Abell waited as the elements of a perfect photograph began to converge.

Through the viewfinder of his camera he watched a glow of bright, clearing light appear just above the horizon. It added just the right contrast to the gunmetal-hued cloudbank above him and Ken Rosman’s ranch.

Before him on the green Montana prairie, cowboys wrestled writhing calves to the ground to be branded and castrated. Muscle-aching minutes passed as he waited in motionless anticipation for that elusive something that would trigger his response.

Then, with the coppery smell of fresh blood and singed hair thick in the air, a series of rapid-fire events began to occur. A calf is body-slammed to the ground just feet away.

A cowboy with a blood-tipped scalpel clutched in his teeth kneels to do his quick work. Over his right

shoulder two other cowboys wrangle another calf to the ground just as a horseman rides into the frame.

At that moment another cowboy carrying a red, plastic bucket is about to step out of the frame. In one fleeting instant of time Abell has to make a defining, split-second decision whether to capture the image that could never be again, or let it pass.

“My dad had been an ardent amateur photographer, and he taught me to compose a photograph from the back to the front, and then populate the picture,” Abell said

recently as he looked at his famous photograph while enjoying a warm autumn morning on the side porch of his Albemarle County home.

“That’s what I did, and eventually a highly dimensional, multi-layered drama developed in front of me. Now, it’s important to know what I was thinking right at the moment I took the picture, and that was the red bucket, because it was swiftly swinging out of the picture.

“The man holding the red bucket was a nanosecond away from leaving the frame. I’m deciding in or out? Better with it, better without it? And I make the commitment to take it, because it seems to finish the photograph.”

In more than 50 years of taking photographs, nearly 35 of them as a staff photographer for National Geographic, Abell has captured myriad memorable images. To his thinking only two have reached perfection, one of them being what has become widely known as the “Red Bucket” picture.

This piercing photograph, along with nearly 200 others from Abell’s public as well as personal body of work, appear in the just released book, “The Life of a Photographer.” Published by National Geographic, Abell’s words and images combine to answer the elusive question of what creates the spark that gives life to a photograph.

Much of the answer is found in sliver-thin subtleties such as the separation between objects. This is exquisitely illustrated in the other Abell photograph he feels achieves human perfection — “Woman on the Plaza.”

Yet again the difference between good and great rests within a millisecond of time.

“If her shadow touches the shadow of the bank building, and it’s only separated by an inch, I don’t show this picture,” Abell said of the photograph that features a woman lost in thought crossing an austere, uncluttered space.

“But ultimately what made it perfectly perfect is what I would call photography magic, and that only comes from light. Essentially what photography is is life lit up.

“And the lighting on this photograph is unique, never seen by me before or since and unexplainable still today.”

The master photographer thumbs deeper into the book, stopping at a photograph of dignitaries

arriving at a spring garden party at the Japanese Imperial Palace in Tokyo. A light rain was falling, necessitating the use of umbrellas.

“If his umbrella touches the edge of the pond, this is significantly less of a photograph,” Abell said, referring to the central figure and the bottom tip of his blue umbrella that appears to be no more than a molecule above the dark rim of the pond.

“Is this a perfect photograph? It is not. It’s lacking to me one element, and that is the stride of the person holding the blue umbrella. I would lengthen that stride.

“In almost every photograph I have ever made there is something I would do to complete it. I take that to be the spirit hole or the deliberate mistake that’s in a Navajo rug to not be godlike, but to be human.”

Abell considers his new book the best one-volume collection of his professional and personal work. He hastens to add that it’s not a memoir like his retrospective book “Sam Abell: The Photographic Life.”

Neither is it a compilation of his greatest pictures. Rather, it attempts to reveal things such as why and how the photograph that has a life may be the imperfect one.

“I think as you move toward perfection of a composition you can drain a photograph of its life,” Abell said. “Walking that line between rough vitality and over perfected embalming of an image is in this book.

“There are many answers to what gives life to a photograph and my answer is embedded in the book as well. The other thing I want the book to represent, unmistakably, is that photography is a form of thought.

“It’s not decoration, it’s not illustration. It itself represents the thoughts, ideas, feelings and aspirations of the photographer. It’s a common idea, universally agreed upon, that words represent thoughts.

“So do images. By presenting the two views of one situation, or in some cases multiple views of one situation, I introduce the idea that photography is a process.”

Abell said his new book is designed to take the reader two places. One is into the field with him where he sizes up a situation, makes decisions and ultimately commits to a photograph.

The other place is the editor’s chair where the critical judgment concerning which picture is going to get published is made. Basically, it’s from this perspective that the decision is made as to which picture is going to have a life.

Reid Callanan, founder and director of the Santa Fe Photographic Workshops, has known Abell for 30 years. Since he started the workshops in 1990, Abell has taught at least one workshop there every year.

“Sam’s book ‘Stay This Moment’ is still one of my favorite photography books ever,” Callanan said

via telephone. “But I think in terms of an educational book ‘The Life of a Photograph’ is one of the best I have seen, and I’ve seen a lot of photography books in my day.

“I like the way he shows the photographic process, as well as the thought and visual process behind the making of images, and how you edit down to that one definitive image. The whole thought process that goes on in the photographer’s mind in terms of editing, composition and the so-called ‘decisive moment,’ which is a phrase coined by Henri Cartier-Bresson, a French photographer who many think of as the father of photojournalism.

“It’s that one quintessential slice of time when all the elements come together. The right light, right gesture, right color to make this one amazing image.”

Abell’s first amazing image was of his mortified fourth-grade teacher in curlers and under a beauty salon hair dryer. He took the picture when he was 10, and it taught him a number of things.

“Together with a friend I had stalked her tree by tree, block by block from the grade school to downtown,” Abell said as his smile grew. “We knew she got her hair done there in the shop behind the five and dime store, and we knew what day it was.

“She was helpless to stop us, because we photographed her through a very large picture window. I still vividly remember the very sour expression on her face. Her and my mother were very good friends, and after a scorching phone call from her to my mother about her out of control son I had my Brownie Hawkeye camera confiscated, and was grounded.

“But that episode showed me how having a camera in your hands made you a bolder and more daring individual. And the idea that photography could take you backstage in life was imprinted on me by my dad at an early age.”

With only a camera in hand Abell has faced down attacking javelin boars in the Amazon, been overtaken and nearly killed by a cyclone off the coast of Australia and has been catapulted from a dugout canoe into a piranha-infested river. The camera has also given him access to some of the world’s most beautiful places, and vastly interesting people.

As Abell’s new book shows, numerous elements need to come together for the pictures of these things to be fully realized. There also needs to be an unnamable intuition that sees what others often do not.

“There is a quiet strength to Sam’s photographs,” Callanan said. “An underlying strength, dignity and beauty that grows on you.

“I think the power of a photograph is only told over a long period of time. There are plenty of pictures that I think are very strong and compelling and I put them up, and within days they lose their power and value.

“But in Sam’s pictures there is some eloquence that makes them memorable, and makes you want to live with them for a lifetime, and many people do. He is one of my favorite photographers, because he has such telling and beautiful insights into the quiet moments that make up our lives.”

On an overcast day in 1984, the man who grew up in Sylvania, Ohio, patiently waited on a Montana prairie for such a moment. He waited not so much for a photograph, but for a temporal flash of time that would express eternal things beyond the seeable.

“I find that photography for me is still, and always has been, physical, mental, spiritual, esthetic and artistic,” the 63-year-old master said. “How the visual world appears is important to me.

“I’m always aware of the light. I’m always aware of what I would call the deep composition. Photography in the field is a process of creation, of thought and technique.

“But ultimately it’s an act of imaginatively seeing from within yourself.”

Sam Abell will give a slide presentation, talk and sign copies of “The Life of a Photograph,” at Les Yeux du Monde, 500 W. Main St., at 6 p.m. Nov. 24. For information call 973-5566 or visit Web site [www.lesyeuxdumonde.com](http://www.lesyeuxdumonde.com). New Dominion Bookshop on Charlottesville’s Downtown Mall will be holding a similar event at 5:30 p.m., Dec 2. For information call 295-2552.