



## ANDREW ILACHINSKI

Born 1960, Sea Cliff, New York

### Why photography?

Photography keeps me sane. More precisely, it provides a counterweight to my decidedly “left brain” day-job as a research analyst for a naval think tank. As I’ve always been a visual thinker (even when working on my endless equations and computer code), photography simultaneously provides a rest from “logic” and nurtures my ability to engage in it.

### Formal/informal photo education?

I am self-taught, and started by fiddling around with a Polaroid Instamatic camera my parents gave me for my 10th birthday. I got serious about photography after getting an SLR using the proceeds of some academic awards in college. A camera has been my constant companion ever since.

### What is the role of photography in your life?

About the only way its presence could be greater is if its fruits were able to pay for the mortgage ;-). As it is, I spend most of my (“day-job free”) waking hours either taking pictures or processing them. The best pictures of all, of course, are the ones I only imagine taking while otherwise waiting in northern Virginia traffic to get to work.

### Sources of artistic inspiration?

First and foremost my dad, who was not a photographer but was a lifelong artist. He lived art 24/7 to the end, passing away in 2002. Everything I know about tone, light, composition, expression, and overall approach to art I’ve learned by being around my dad. As for photographers whose work has most deeply influenced me, in no particular order: Ansel Adams, Minor White, Fay Godwin, Paul Caponigro, Brett Weston, and Carl Chiarenza.

### How do you describe “home”?

Where my beautiful (and wonderfully patient!) wife Irene, our two boys Nosh and Josh, one black pug, a guinea pig, two fish, more chipmunks in our yard than any of us can count, and I all live, in a northern Virginia suburb, not far from Washington, D.C.

**Equipment:** Canon 5D and 5D II

**Website:** [www.sudden-stillness.com](http://www.sudden-stillness.com)

**Blog:** <http://tao-of-digital-photography.blogspot.com/>

# AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

*A Harmony of Contrasts*



by

*Andy Ilachinski*

Andrew Ilachinski

*An additional 39 images are included in LensWork Extended #95,  
as well as an audio interview with the photographer.  
Also see Ilachinski's work at [www.sudden-stillness.com](http://www.sudden-stillness.com)*

This project self-spawned out of our family outings—but took over a dozen years for me to recognize! For many years my family and I have visited Luray Caverns, a popular natural attraction in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley. And, though I was always armed with my camera to take the “we were here” variety of family photo, I lamented not having the right kind of time to really photograph the caverns. Weeks passed. Then months. I finally called the park, introduced myself as an impassioned local photographer, and asked if I might have a bit of “extra time” to capture Luray’s natural beauty. A shot in the dark, so to speak, but I soon got a welcome reply and an offer to freely roam the caverns for nine hours. Considering Luray attracts 500,000 visitors each year, this was an extraordinary opportunity.

Apart from the experience itself—of having the caverns to *myself* for nine hours—my most memorable experience (and, in hindsight, a major lesson) was the profound angst I suffered for weeks (*months* really) before my day in Luray! I agonized over whether I’d even know what to do with so much uninterrupted time. I even suffered a few sleepless nights over it, since I rarely have the luxury of spending more than a few hours at a location. Like many photographers with families, I (happily!) take vacation photos of all of us in interesting places, but rarely do I have more than a quick 15 minutes to make my own images. I seriously wondered if I was adequately prepared to take *nine hours* with a subject. In the end, my fears were mostly unfounded, although I did suffer a bit of guilt over having such an embarrassment of riches virtually all to myself for a day (which I got over quickly.)

In the end, the actual preparations were minimal (with the exception of taking time off from work to drive out to Luray the night before). Wanting to cover every contingency, I was challenged to not over-stuff my camera bag, and settled on two cameras (one with zoom lens, the other with wide-angle, and spare lenses for each), enough flash cards to last a day, and enough food and drink to keep my energy up. On a mission, I shot 26+GB of RAW files.

While I am happy with the overall results of my day’s “work,” I was surprised at how difficult it is to capture the caverns’ innate aesthetics. There are several reasons for this: (1) light (as in “lack of control over”); (2) contrast (as in “there is too much of it”); and (3) innate dissonance. Indeed, the “forms”—such as they are—are best described as large to massive needles made of rock, arranged in staccato fashion throughout “rooms” that range in size from smaller-than-cramped office cubicles to mini-cathedrals. Far from a harmonious whole, the caverns offer a visual cacophony of not-always-obviously correlated patterns. The problem (a welcome one, though not an easy one to solve) was to find a pleasing holistic harmony somewhere within these ostensibly discordant compositional components.

















