Helderberg Photographic Society – Monthly Meeting Judging
Month: November 2026
Judge: Mariana Visser

🏆 Overall Winner

Title: Nightly reading
Photographer: Hugh Michler
Mark: 14/15

🌟 Top Entries – Open Category

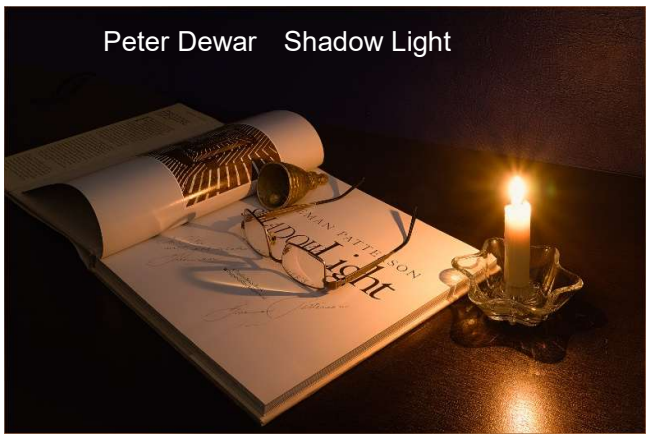
Steve Trimby	Canary Wharf Tube Station	14/15	Cat winner
Peter Dewar	Start of Dune 45 Climb	13/15	Runner-up
Izak van Niekerk	Solitaire	13/15	3rd

🌟 Top Entries – Set Subject: Bell, Books and Candle

Hugh Michler	Nightly Reading	14/15	Overall winner
Peter Dewar	Shadow Light	14/15	Cat winner
Steve Trimby	BBC2	13/15	Runner-up
Hugh Michler	Amen	13/15	3rd


Hugh Michler Nightly Reading


Steve Trimby Canary Wharf Tube Station



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Photographic Society

Open Category

Eskom Management Meeting at Sunset – Antenie Carstens (Score: 11) The photo captures a beautifully moody, minimalist slice of everyday life with strong graphic lines. The strong silhouettes of the utility poles on the left anchor the image perfectly. The diagonal power lines cutting across the frame create excellent leading lines that draw the eye directly to the birds. The way the birds are spaced almost mimics notes on a musical staff, which gives the image a poetic, rhythmic feel. The soft, overcast sky creates a beautiful, subdued colour gradient ranging from warm cream tones to cool slate greys. The exposure is well-handled to ensure the foreground elements are entirely silhouetted against the bright sky without losing the subtle textures in the clouds. However, the framing feels a bit heavy on the left, and the bottom edge cuts off the utility pole structures abruptly, creating a slight visual imbalance.

Klein Karoo Soul – Carima van den Berg (Score: 10) This landscape study utilizes a layered compositional approach to create depth, with the repeating silhouettes of the ridges leading the eye through the frame. Technically, however, the image faces significant challenges that detract from its salon potential. There is severe chromatic aberration (purple and blue fringing) visible along the high-contrast edges where the mountain peaks meet the sky, which is a major technical flaw. Furthermore, the sky is completely blown out with no tonal information, creating a harsh transition that lacks the subtlety required for high-level landscape photography. While the atmospheric haze provides a pleasing sense of scale, the dark foreground lacks sufficient shadow detail, resulting in 'crushed' blacks that feel heavy. The textures in the mid-ground hills appear to suffer from digital noise or over-sharpening artifacts, reducing the overall clarity and resolution of the fine foliage. The lone tree serves as a helpful focal point, but it is not enough to overcome the technical limitations of the capture and processing.

Lost – Hilldidge Beer (Score: 13) Your photo is a conceptually fascinating and visually striking image that uses selective colour isolation to brilliant effect. The concept here is brilliant. Taking a traditional directional signpost—which usually points to geographic cities—and replacing them with famous artworks, artists, and their massive physical distances is incredibly creative. It turns the signpost into a literal map of global art history. • Isolating the vibrant yellow signs against a completely desaturated, monochrome background completely eliminates distracting colours from the modern architecture behind it. It forces the viewer's eyes onto the text and the intricate web of overlapping arrows. • The framing is tight and keeps the focus entirely on the subject. However, the signs are so densely clustered in the centre-left that it feels slightly compressed vertically, cutting off just a bit of the breathing room around the edges. • If you zoom in closely on some of the white brackets and screw heads attaching the signs to the central pole, there are tiny spots where the desaturation mask bleeds slightly or leaves minor artifacts. Clean, tack-sharp edges on your colour masks make selective-colour images look professional and flawless.

Relax in shade – Hugh Michler (Score: 11) The technical quality of this wildlife portrait is commendable, particularly regarding the focus on the leopard's eyes, which creates a compelling point of engagement. Upon closer inspection, however, the fine details in the fur and whiskers lack the bite and clinical sharpness expected in high-level salon competition, possibly due to a slight diffraction effect or noise reduction that has softened the micro-contrast. The rim lighting is a highlight of the image, beautifully outlining the subject's head and ears against the dark, shadowed foliage, which provides a sense of depth and three-dimensional form. The exposure is expertly handled, maintaining a balanced histogram that preserves detail in the dark spots while preventing the backlit highlights from clipping. Compositionally, the leopard is positioned centrally, which feels a bit static. The foreground is heavily cluttered with out-of-focus dry grass and twigs that cut across the animal's chest and paws; while this adds to the natural feel, these elements act as visual barriers that distract from the subject. The image is a faithful representation of the species in its environment, adhering strictly to the no-manipulation rules of the nature genre. It is a strong, clean capture that would benefit from a more considered camera angle to minimize foreground interference.

Solitaire – Izak van Niekerk (Score: 13) Your photo is an awe-inspiring, deeply evocative nightscape that beautifully contrasts the immense, chaotic patterns of the cosmos with a lonely, grounded human element. The clarity of the Milky Way core stretching across the top of the frame is outstanding. You have achieved pinpoint stars with zero visible star trailing, indicating a perfectly calculated shutter speed or the use of an accurate star tracker. The black-and-white conversion is masterful, transforming what could be a typical colourful space image into a high-contrast, timeless fine-art piece. • Light-painting or illuminating the small house creates a vital focal point. Without it, the bottom fifth of the frame would be a dead, black silhouette. The light outline cleanly separates the roof and the adjacent tree from the dark terrain, anchoring the entire stellar sky to a specific physical location. To improve: Due to the extreme wide-angle lens, there is a noticeable falloff in brightness and slight star stretching/smearing in the far top-left and top-right corners. While common with wide apertures at night, slightly cropping the edges or applying lens-profile corrections could sharpen those outer boundaries.

Three in one – Neels Beyers (Score: 11) This is a fascinating action shot that captures the dynamic energy of water sports with an intriguing, rhythmic progression. this is a perfectly stitched multi-exposure sequence of a single kiteboarder or three athletes riding in absolute, flawless synchronization, the repetition of form creates a mesmerizing pattern. The body language—crouched low, muscles tensed, hands gripping the control bars—perfectly communicates the intense physical demands of the sport. The diagonal alignment of the riders ascending from right to left creates a powerful sense of forward momentum. The lines extending up to the kites cut through the frame beautifully, creating sharp, graphic elements. The vibrant, turquoise-green water provides a striking colour contrast against the dark black wetsuits. The splash of warm red and yellow details on the harnesses breaks up the monochromatic gear nicely. However, the overall colour saturation and contrast feel slightly pushed, resulting in a somewhat harsh digital look rather than a smooth, natural gradient in the water. The highlights on the wetsuits and the white spray look heavily edited, creating a slight "halo" effect around the figures. Easing back on the contrast and clarity sliders in post-processing will preserve the fine detail of the water spray without making it look crunchy. The water lines slant down toward the right slightly. Straightening the frame using the natural horizon or the major line of the ocean swell would give the composition a cleaner, more professional foundation.

Start of Dune 45 Climb – Peter Dewar (Score: 13) This is an incredibly serene, evocative fine-art piece that beautifully conveys a sense of isolation and quiet contemplation. • The photograph is wonderfully atmospheric. The solitary figure sitting on the bench beneath the sweeping branches of the massive tree tells a poignant story of solitude, reflection, or finding peace in nature. It instantly connects on an emotional level. The placement of the tree using the rule of thirds anchors the frame beautifully. The towering structure in the background (which resembles a massive desert sand dune or rock formation shrouded in haze) creates an exceptional sense of scale, emphasizing how small the human element is in comparison to the vastness of the landscape. • The monochromatic, warm-toned sepia palette works brilliantly with the desert-like environment, giving the image a timeless, archival feel. The sketch-like vignette framing texture softens the borders beautifully. However, the overlay texture applied over the centre can occasionally flatten out the fine, intricate textures of the tree bark and leaves, reducing some of the photograph's natural depth. • To make the image pop even more while keeping the fine-art style, consider using a layer mask to subtly clear or reduce the texture overlay directly over the solitary person and the main trunk of the tree. This would restore fine optical details to your main focal points while keeping the dreamy, sketched effect in the background and sky. The figure on the bench is the emotional heart of the image but slightly blends into the background tones. Gently darkening the silhouette of the person or deepening the shadow directly under the bench would create a sharper focal anchor for the viewer's eye.

Hurry home – Sandra Snyman (Score: 10) The technical execution of the static elements is sound, with the cobblestones and architectural textures showing good detail resolution and sharpness. The exposure is well-balanced, successfully managing the high-contrast interior of the shop window against the shaded exterior walls. However, the primary creative element—the motion blur of the scooter—is problematic. While intentional, the blur is visually chaotic and heavily obscures the shop window, which serves as the image's natural anchor. This creates a conflict in visual hierarchy. Furthermore, the figure on the right is positioned too close to the frame's edge and appears disconnected from the central action, acting more as a distraction than a narrative component. The composition feels fragmented into three vertical sections that don't quite harmonize. While the orange jacket provides a welcome splash of colour, the overall impact is that of a street snapshot rather than a deliberate, salon-grade composition.

Blackfriars Station – Steve Trimby (Score: 13) photo is an exceptional piece of street photography that masterfully utilizes strong graphic lines, high-contrast lighting, and human geometry. Your decisive moment is absolutely perfect. Catching the pedestrian mid-stride, perfectly separated from the dark background, creates an incredible sense of motion. • The high-contrast black-and-white treatment works brilliantly here. The dramatic beam of light creates a wonderful diagonal geometric shape on the ground and wall. It cuts through the moody, heavy shadows on the upper-left and emphasizes the gritty, historic texture of the white brickwork on the right. • The graffiti, posters, and weathered textures paint a rich, gritty picture of city life. The leading lines of the pavement tiles naturally draw the viewer's eye across his path of motion. • The small, framed menu/advertisement board on the far-left edge cuts into the frame abruptly. It carries a lot of fine text that slightly distracts from the massive, clean typography of the main station sign. Cropping just an inch inward from the left would clean up that border completely.

Looking at the city – Wynand Muntingh (Score: 11) The image captures a beautiful, classic panorama of Toledo, Spain, featuring prominent landmarks like the Alcázar dominating the skyline and the Toledo Cathedral spire to the left. • The photo utilizes an excellent elevated vantage point (likely from the Mirador del Valle), providing a great, layered depth from the foreground foliage up to the historic city walls and skyline. The sweeping road in the lower-middle ground acts as a nice leading line. However, the composition feels slightly centre-heavy, and the empty sky takes up a large portion of the top frame without adding significant visual drama. • The colour palette is naturally warm and earthy. However, the lighting lacks a strong directional quality (such as early morning or golden hour light), which leaves the overall image looking a bit flat and desaturated.

Strijdom van der Merwe in his artwork – Antenie Carstens (Score: 13) This is a striking and highly creative piece of multimedia photographic art, combining organic elements, sketch portraiture, and a clever multi-layered composite technique. • The image has an immediate visual grab. The conceptual blend of a human face emerging from a mosaic of autumn leaves creates an evocative theme of aging, nature, and fleeting time. The decision to slightly elevate the central panel with a soft drop shadow gives the piece a captivating 3D physical collage effect. The central portrait is well-framed, and the line art seamlessly overlays the leaf fragments. However, because the pattern of the leaves is uniform from edge to edge, the central face struggles slightly for contrast against the background; some darker leaves or shadow work around the facial perimeter could help separate it even further. This is an excellent exhibition-grade image. It pushes the boundaries of traditional photography into fine art beautifully.

Umoya Wamanzi Spirit of the Water – Carima van den Berg (Score: 12) This monochrome study of a hippopotamus captures a moment of high drama with significant visual impact. Technically, the focus is precisely placed on the open maw, revealing intricate details of the palate, tongue, and teeth that are often lost in wildlife photography. The resolution is high, and the textures of the wet skin and bone are well-rendered. However, the image suffers from noticeable processing artifacts; specifically, a bright halo or 'glow' is visible along the top edge of the head and ears. This is a common byproduct of aggressive sharpening or excessive use of local contrast tools, which can be problematic in the 'No Manipulation' nature genre as it creates an unnatural separation from the background. The exposure is handled with a low-key approach that effectively isolates the subject, though the transition into the deep blacks of the water feels somewhat abrupt in places. Compositionally, the verticality of the yawn is emphasized by the cantered framing, and the reflection provides a pleasing symmetry that grounds the animal. While the creative choice to use monochrome enhances the textures, the post-processing needs to be more refined to avoid distracting technical flaws that detract from an otherwise powerful salon-standard image.

Tunnel vision – Hilldidge Beer (Score: 11) The image offers a powerful and classic visual narrative of a journey or exploration. The silhouetted figures walking toward a bright opening evoke immediate feelings of mystery, curiosity, and destination. The high-contrast format enhances the dramatic, cinematic feel. • The composition relies heavily on a framed-within-a-frame structure. The concrete archways create strong, repeating lead-in lines that guide the viewer's eye directly to the main subjects. While the figures are roughly cantered, a slightly lower camera angle could have made the tunnel feel even more imposing. As a monochrome piece, the image succeeds in using stark black and bright white. However, the tonal range is highly compressed. The highlights at the end of the tunnel are completely blown out (lacking detail), and the shadow areas are largely clipped into pure black.

Leo Looking back – Hugh Michler (Score: 13) This photograph captures a striking, authentic moment of a leopard navigating its natural environment. The cat's alert posture and side-profile glance give a sense of active hunting or scanning the terrain. The inclusion of the massive, weathered deadwood grounds the subject beautifully in a harsh, untamed ecosystem. • The composition excels by placing the leopard in its environmental context rather than tightly cropping it. The sprawling, gnarled tree branches create powerful diagonal leading lines across the frame. The leopard is positioned well on the left third, looking into the open space of the image, which balances the overall frame perfectly. The details on both the leopard's coat and the coarse texture of the tree bark are remarkably sharp.

Sendelingsdrif – Izak van Niekerk (Score: 10) This monochrome abstract utilizes a mirrored long-exposure technique to create a compelling geometric pattern of star trails. Technically, the image faces challenges with significant digital noise, particularly visible in the lower third of the frame and the darker regions of the sky. While the trails themselves maintain a decent level of brightness, they exhibit some aliasing and lack the biting sharpness expected in high-level salon work. The composition is strictly symmetrical, which provides a strong graphic impact, though the mirroring is quite evident in the repetitive shapes along the horizon line. The tonal range is well-handled, offering a full spectrum from deep blacks to clean whites, which enhances the celestial feel. The low horizon grounds the abstract patterns effectively. However, the lack of fine detail in the terrestrial elements and the presence of processing artifacts where the images meet at the centre line detract from the overall quality. The creative intent is clear and successful in transforming a standard astrophotography shot into an engaging piece of digital art, but it requires more technical refinement to compete at the highest levels.

Into the air – Neels Beyers (Score: 13) The photograph delivers an adrenaline-fueled visual punch, capturing peak action at the perfect split second. Seeing the entire inflatable racing boat launched completely out of the water—with the exposed propeller visible—creates immense dramatic impact. The flying sea spray framing the vessel amplifies the raw speed and intensity of the sport. The tight framing keeps the viewer focused entirely on the high-stakes moment. The composition is nicely balanced between the turbulent foreground water and the cleaner, deep blue sea in the background. The high shutter speed successfully freezes the dramatic explosion of water droplets and the motion of the boat perfectly.

SS Soren Larsen – Peter Dewar (Score: 12) The photograph presents a deeply serene and picturesque scene that beautifully blends maritime heritage with natural landscape. The presence of the tall ship resting on calm waters at what appears to be golden hour evokes a strong sense of tranquillity, nostalgia, and adventure. The sky, filled with textured clouds catching the low sun, creates a captivating backdrop that instantly draws the viewer in. The composition effectively balances several elements across the frame. The leading line of the stone wall and shoreline on the left pulls the viewer's eye into the image toward the distant mountains. • The colour palette is exceptionally rich, showcasing a brilliant contrast between the warm golden tones of the sunset/sunrise and the deep, vivid blues of the sky and water. The reflection of the warm light on the ripples adds fantastic texture. However, the image shows signs of heavy HDR (High Dynamic Range) processing or excessive saturation. This has introduced a slightly artificial glow around the ship's rigging and the mountain line, as well as a bit of oversaturation in the blues of the upper sky, which detracts slightly from a natural look.

Out of office – Sandra Snyman (Score: 12) This photograph carries an exceptionally strong, thought-provoking narrative rooted in modern social realism. The juxtaposition of a person experiencing homelessness or displacement alongside a modern laptop creates an intense, ironic commentary on the digital age and societal gaps. The chaotic red-and-white hazard tape, the graffiti, and the packed shopping cart tell a vivid story of survival, isolation, and adaptation. The composition captures the scene effectively by keeping both the subject and their life-possessions (the shopping cart) in a balanced horizontal relationship. • The overall image would benefit from a slight increase in micro-contrast or selective dodging to make the subject stand out a bit more from the busy background.

Canary Wharf Tube Station – Steve Trimby (Score: 14) The photograph is a visually arresting study of modern architectural geometry and scale. Captured inside what I think is Canary Wharf tube station, the image frames a futuristic, subterranean cathedral-like atmosphere. The presence of the small figures on the left emphasizes the sweeping, massive scale of the concrete structure, creating an evocative sense of urban movement and design excellence.
• Composition and Framing: The symmetry in this composition is exceptional. The technical quality is very strong, with sharp focus extending from the foreground escalators all the way to the grid pattern of the skylight.

Footprints in the sand – Wynand Muntingh (Score: 10) The photograph successfully captures an expansive, rugged sense of isolation and coastal beauty. The vast stretch of empty beach, combined with the atmospheric mist or sea spray hugging the mountain base, creates a moody, tranquil narrative. The footprints leading off into the distance add a subtle human element, giving a poignant sense of exploration or a solitary journey along the shoreline. • The composition relies heavily on strong diagonal lines to move the eye through the frame. The sweeping curve of the shoreline on the left, the tracks in the sand running through the centre, and the sharp slope of the mountain on the right all converge beautifully toward the distant horizon. However, the horizon line is placed near the vertical centre of the frame, shifting it slightly lower could have given the dramatic sky more dominance, or lifting it could have emphasized the textures in the sand. The high-altitude wispy clouds add wonderful texture to the sky. However, from a technical standpoint, the image suffers from a lack of punchy contrast. The harsh overhead sun has created a slightly washed-out or hazy look across the entire scene, which flattens the details. Additionally, the sky in the upper left is pushing toward being overexposed, while the shadow side of the mountain lacks definition.

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Set Subject: Bell, Books and Candle

Title – Name (Score: Score)

Nightly reading – Hugh Michler (Score: 14) A stunning moody photo. The arrangement uses a classic triangular structure, leading the eye from the crystal bell up through the open book and glasses to the wheat stalks, down to the burning candle, and across via the dark reflections. The vertical reflections add excellent depth, effectively doubling the visual interest of the image. The warm, low-key Chiaroscuro lighting perfectly suits the vintage, academic theme. The focus is sharp on the text and glasses. • Exposure is well-managed to prevent the candle flames from completely blowing out, while keeping the background rich, deep black.

Spier Light Art visitors – Neels Beyers (Score: 6) **[Disq]** This photo does not contain a bell, a book, or a candle. Instead, it shows an outdoor light or lantern installation with people gathering at night. Because the image completely misses the requested "Bell, Book & Candle" theme, it cannot score points.

Shadow Light – Peter Dewar (Score: 14) The layout is exceptionally clever. Using a book explicitly about light and shadow (Shadow Light) • directly complements the high-contrast candle setup. The glasses casting a shadow across the title text add a brilliant layer of depth and storytelling. The diagonal placement of the open book effectively guides the eye across the tabletop. The warm radiance of the candle creates a highly intimate, cozy, and classical mood.

BBC2 – Steve Trimby (Score: 13) This image offers an incredibly clever and witty spin on the theme. Instead of a physical brass bell, you used a bottle of Bell's Blended Scotch Whisky as a brilliant literal play on words. This is flanked by a stack of adventure novels (books by Wilbur Smith) and a large pillar candle on a decorative wooden stand. The arrangement feels distinctly masculine, rugged, and sophisticated—perfectly matching the African adventure themes of the Wilbur Smith books (Assegai, Elephant Song) The low-key spotlighting isolates the subject nicely against the pitch-black background. The amber liquid in the bottle and glass catches the light beautifully, creating a rich, warm glow. The textured, patterned tablecloth underneath anchors the tabletop scene perfectly. • Area for Improvement: The candle on the left feels completely dead or unlit compared to the warm, glowing amber of the whisky. If it is an electronic candle, turning it on fully to emit a warm flame-like flicker—or using a real candle with an active, dancing flame—would bridge the mood together and match the dynamic energy of the rest of the shot.

Amen – Hugh Michler (Score: 13) This photo hits the "Bell, Book & Candle" theme perfectly. Bringing in three staggered pillar candles adds beautiful structural variety to the right side of the frame. The sweeping plumes of smoke rising from the newly extinguished wicks add a phenomenal sense of time and passing action—it completely transforms the narrative from a quiet study scene to a dramatic "just ended" moment. To improve: Because the candles have just been snuffed out, the strong golden light illuminating the centre of the book pages feels slightly detached from its source, as there are no active flames to cast that bright of a glow. Shifting a subtle, warm off-camera fill light further to the left could balance the scene to imply a dying fire or secondary room glow instead.

Hugo de Groot – Neels Beyers (Score: 12) While you have featured a spectacular antique book (Inleydinge tot de Hollandsche Regts-geleertheit by Hugo de Groot) and a beautifully lit candle in a classic copper chamber candlestick, there is no bell present in the frame to complete the triad. The introduction of a human hand actively turning or holding the page adds an amazing layer of life and motion to the photo. The lighting execution here is exceptional. The deep, dark background focuses all attention strictly onto the book and the hand.

The Excommunication – Peter Dewar (Score: 10) The technical execution of this composite image presents significant challenges that impact its salon potential. The most pressing issue lies in the sharpness and detail resolution; there is a noticeable inconsistency in clarity between the foreground elements and the background. The masking around the angel statue and the bell appears harsh, with visible aliasing and cut-out artifacts that prevent the elements from integrating naturally into the scene. Furthermore, the tonal range is heavily compressed in the shadows, resulting in a significant loss of detail in the dark carvings behind the cross, which creates a 'muddy' appearance. While the Open Colour genre allows for extensive manipulation, the lighting remains inconsistent across the various components; the light falling on the angel does not match the directional light suggested by the stained glass or the candle. Compositionally, the frame feels cluttered, with the Bible and candle competing for attention against the central cross and the large angel figure, leading to a fragmented visual flow. The colour palette is cohesive in its warmth, but the saturation in the golden tones borders on excessive, leading to a loss of fine texture. To reach a salon standard, the artist should focus on refined masking techniques, harmonious light matching, and preserving shadow detail to create a more believable and immersive environment.

BBC1 – Steve Trimby (Score: 11) You nailed the literal translation of the theme by including a brass bell, a stack of books, and a large candle. A clever and playful addition is the bottle of Bell's Scotch Whisky, which acts as a fun pun on the "Bell" component! The only minor detractor is that the theme historically evokes an atmosphere of mystery, excommunication, or the occult; the modern Wilbur Smith novels lean more toward historical adventure, which slightly shifts that classic mood. The grouping of the items creates a solid, stable triangular shape that guides the eye well. However, the candle feels slightly hidden and crowded behind the prominent whiskey bottle and the bell. Separating the elements slightly or altering the height layers could give each object more room to breathe. To improve: Right now, the candle is heavily obscured. Consider pulling the candle slightly to one side or placing it on top of a small block to elevate its flame/wick area above the bottle line. To truly emphasize the "Candle" element of the theme, lighting it would introduce a warm, live flame. This would add dynamic highlights, shadows, and a cozy, atmospheric glow to the entire scene.