

7 DECADES OF

# David Muench

A PORTFOLIO EDITED BY  
BARBARA GLYNN DENNEY & JEFF KIDA

IN JANUARY 1955, WE WELCOMED DAVID MUENCH TO THE PAGES OF *ARIZONA HIGHWAYS*. HE GOT THE COVER THAT MONTH, AT THE AGE OF 18. SINCE THEN, THERE HAVE BEEN TOO MANY PHOTOGRAPHS TO COUNT. WHAT WE DO KNOW IS THAT MR. MUENCH HAS BEEN SHOOTING FOR US FOR PARTS OF SEVEN DECADES, AND HIS BODY OF WORK IS AS IMPRESSIVE AS IT IS EXTENSIVE.



**Preceding panel:**

No matter how many times David Muench visits Monument Valley, he'll attribute many of his photographs of the region to luck — as he does with this one, which he made during a particularly heavy snowstorm. "Storms like these used to happen all the

time," he says. "You'd have to be extremely lucky to catch these within hours, or they'd start melting. A lot of my work revolves around the 'timeless moment.' You have things that happen, and then they're gone. There's the past and the future — and then there's that image right in between. The

fog makes this image for me. The ambient light."

**Left:** In this, another photograph from Monument Valley, both Photo Editor Jeff Kida and Editor Robert Stieve are drawn to the tuft of grass in the foreground. The ripples in the sand

pull Muench into the image, however, and he looks at it in its entirety as an example of his framing photographs either very high or very low. "We've all seen Monument Valley," he says. "So how do you do it differently? I was concerned about that, about how to make things work, so

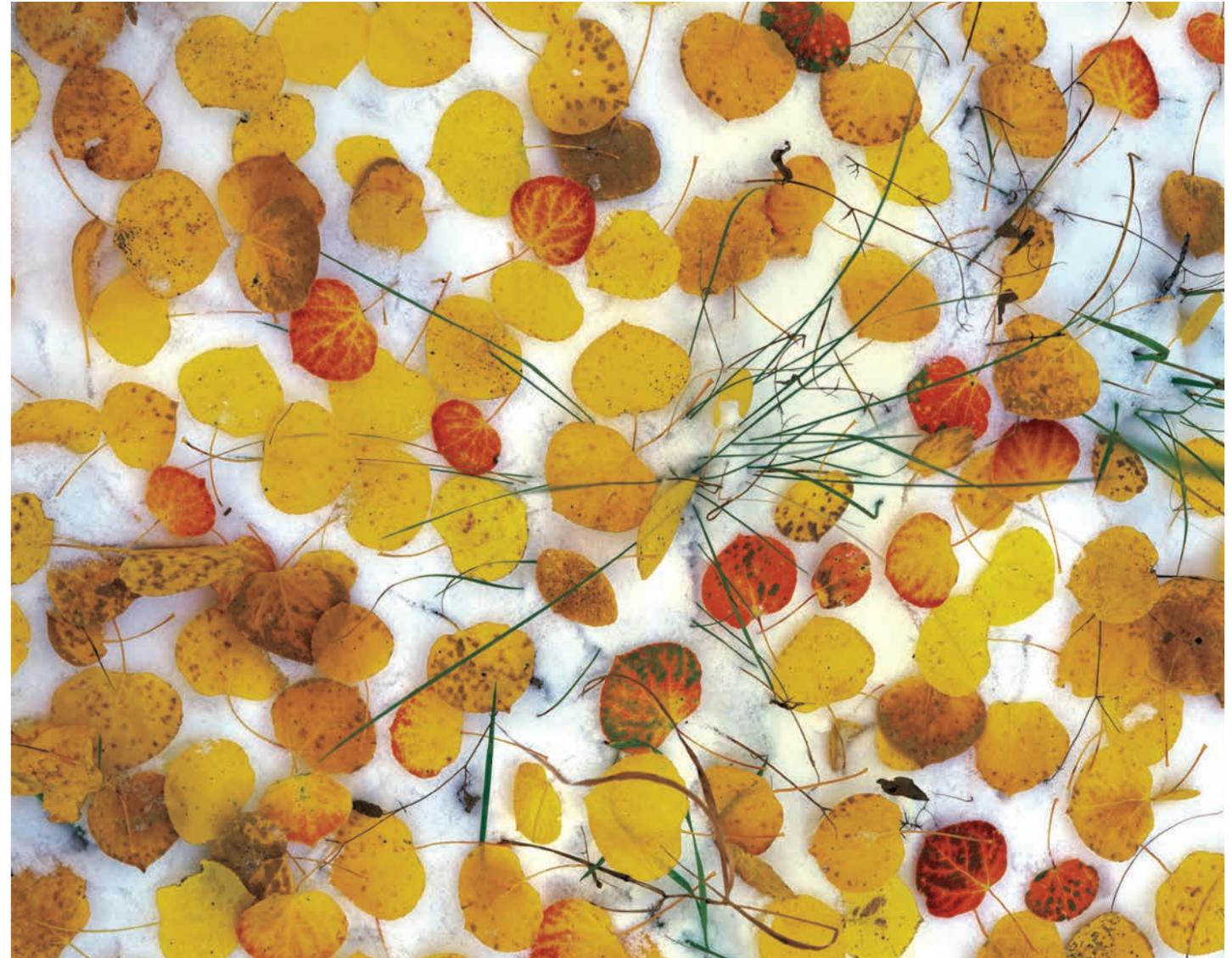
I was developing my own style with this ripple cascade and something close going all the way up through the middle ground to the top one-eighth of the image. I do that a lot. In this case, the middle ground is the real story. Usually that's the hard one to find."

**Above:** While Kida appreciates the juniper branches as a frame in this photograph of Monument Valley, Muench disagrees. "It isn't really a frame, but it is quite scrappy," he says. "It shows the wildness of the country, and the Mittens are well lit, so it has lasting power."





“In my day, David set the bar for anyone doing scenic photography. He is one of the greatest landscape photographers of all time. Many of us envied the work he did.” – PHOTOGRAPHER JERRY JACKA



**Preceding panel:** Snow served as a natural reflector for this photograph, which Muench made on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. “Ponderosa pines are great, and if they get a little wet with snow, even more so,”

Muench says. And for Kida, the reds of the pine trunks, along with the cool blue of the light, create leading lines up and into the image, while the color contrast adds interest.

**Left:** A sifting of snow over Wupatki National Monument helped create circular forms and patterns that, to Kida, make the image. For Muench, though, playing off those patterns is just a matter of instinct. “Everything in this

image ties together,” he says. “The repeating of the snowmelt on the slick-rock — I just go to that. With the ball court in the foreground, I could get close to it and make it bigger or get way back and it would just be incidental, but this

is the same size, and I like it.”  
**Above:** “When I’m walking, I go on momentum, and I’m always looking for foregrounds,” Muench says. “When you get something that’s timed perfectly

like this, it’s just natural.” For Kida, this photograph’s strength is in its soft light, and Muench believes he made the photograph on an overcast day. “You dream of that in this situation,” he says.

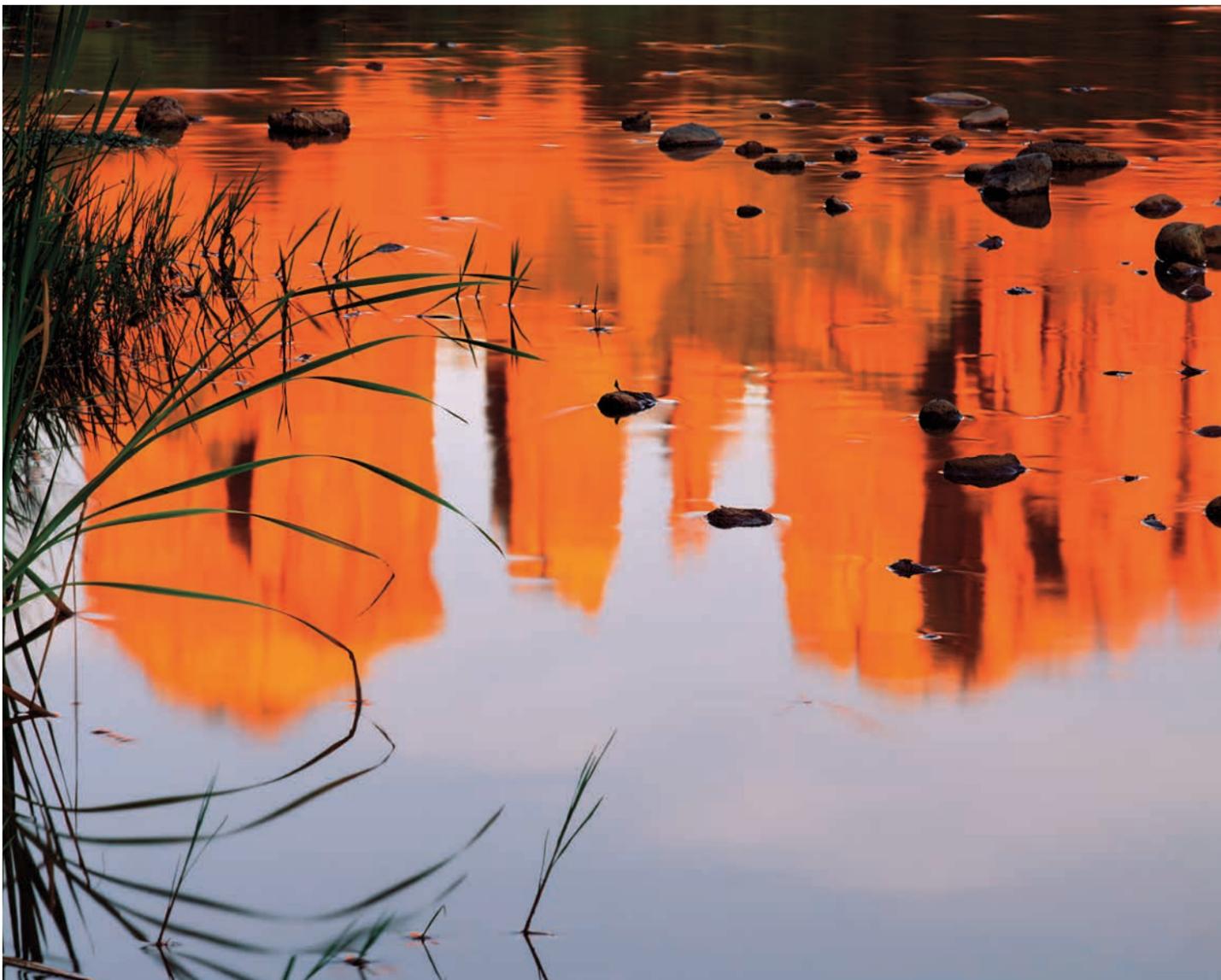


“He was a force of nature. David changed everything in the world of color landscape photography. When I was living in Chicago, his style defined my concept of the American West. He had a Wagnerian sense of light.”

— RICHARD MAACK,  
FORMER ARIZONA HIGHWAYS  
PHOTO EDITOR

Because the Grand Canyon is the best-known and most frequently photographed destination in Arizona, it's challenging to make a unique image of it. But thanks to an inversion, delicate light and being in the right place at the right time, Muench made this photograph stand alone. “The fog just floats there,” he says. “And look at the little bit of sun on the top. Everything is formed in a ‘V.’ It feels like everything is just nestled in there, and, again, there's a very high horizon.”





**Preceding panel:** As Muench's work evolved, Kida says, the photographer tended to find vistas or foregrounds that other people hadn't. But for Muench, making photographs like this, from Lukachukai, was a result of very little planning. "I was just following my

nose on so many of these photographs," he says. "With this one, there's a real 'near-far' feeling, but there's also a big sky. I always try to work around the sky, just open it up and let it happen. I moved this rock up enough so there's just a little room between the

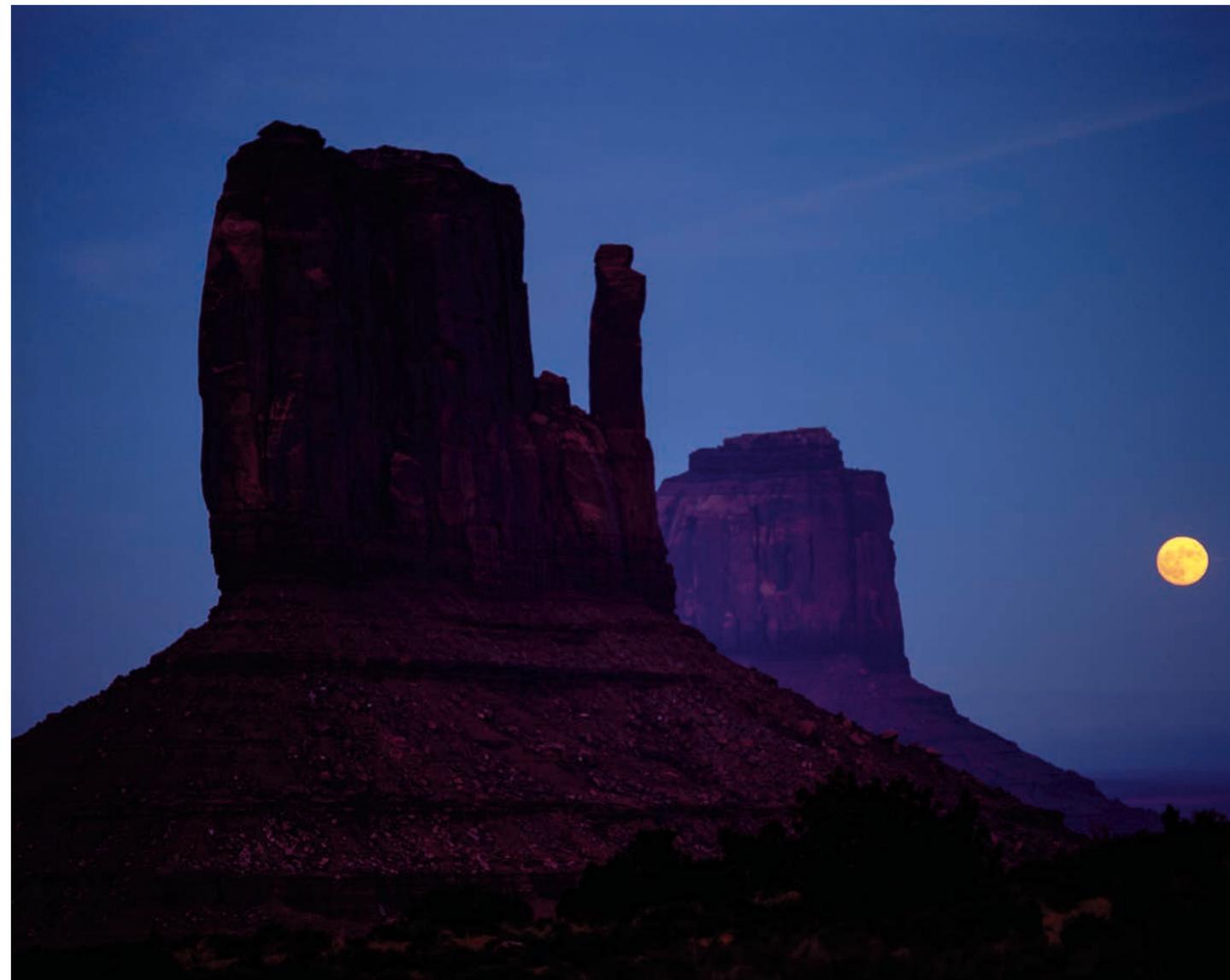
rock and the view. You could cram it together and get the same effect — just let the sky give you space, which the country is notorious for. And it's special. More special now than ever."

**Above:** "There's late light in this photograph of Sedona's

Cathedral Rock," Muench says. "It's that fleeting, ever-changing light," Kida adds. "You waited until the shadows hit Oak Creek and exposed for the highlights in the rocks. That allowed form to become the dominant aspect of this image."

**Above, right:** This photograph is interesting because the second Mitten isn't revealed in its entirety, Kida says. What's more, there's natural color contrast between the ink of the sky and the yellow-orange of the moon. Muench agrees. "This is different than the

standard Monument Valley shot," he says. "I like the light because the moon has good detail. This was just the right time — the photographer's moonrise."



“It was pretty amazing, all the places that were open at the time. Looking back on it, now, with the permits, you can go here, [but] you can't go there. It's just amazing the window of time he had and we had as a family, going to places.”

— ZANDRIA BERALDO, DAVID MUENCH'S DAUGHTER



“David combined landscape with adventure, taking us from mountaintops to deserts. He’s created a body of work that will endure well beyond his years, and it will be an inspiration to future generations.” – PHOTOGRAPHER JACK DYKINGA



**Preceding panel:** “Petrified Forest is one of the most underplayed national parks,” Muench says. “Permission to get to these places to photograph was sometimes very sticky. Sometimes I didn’t even want to ask, but

the guys at this time were very helpful. This was summertime, maybe May. The remnants of a storm.”

**Above:** Most people never find their way to Mount Bangs, in the far northwestern corner of Arizona, but

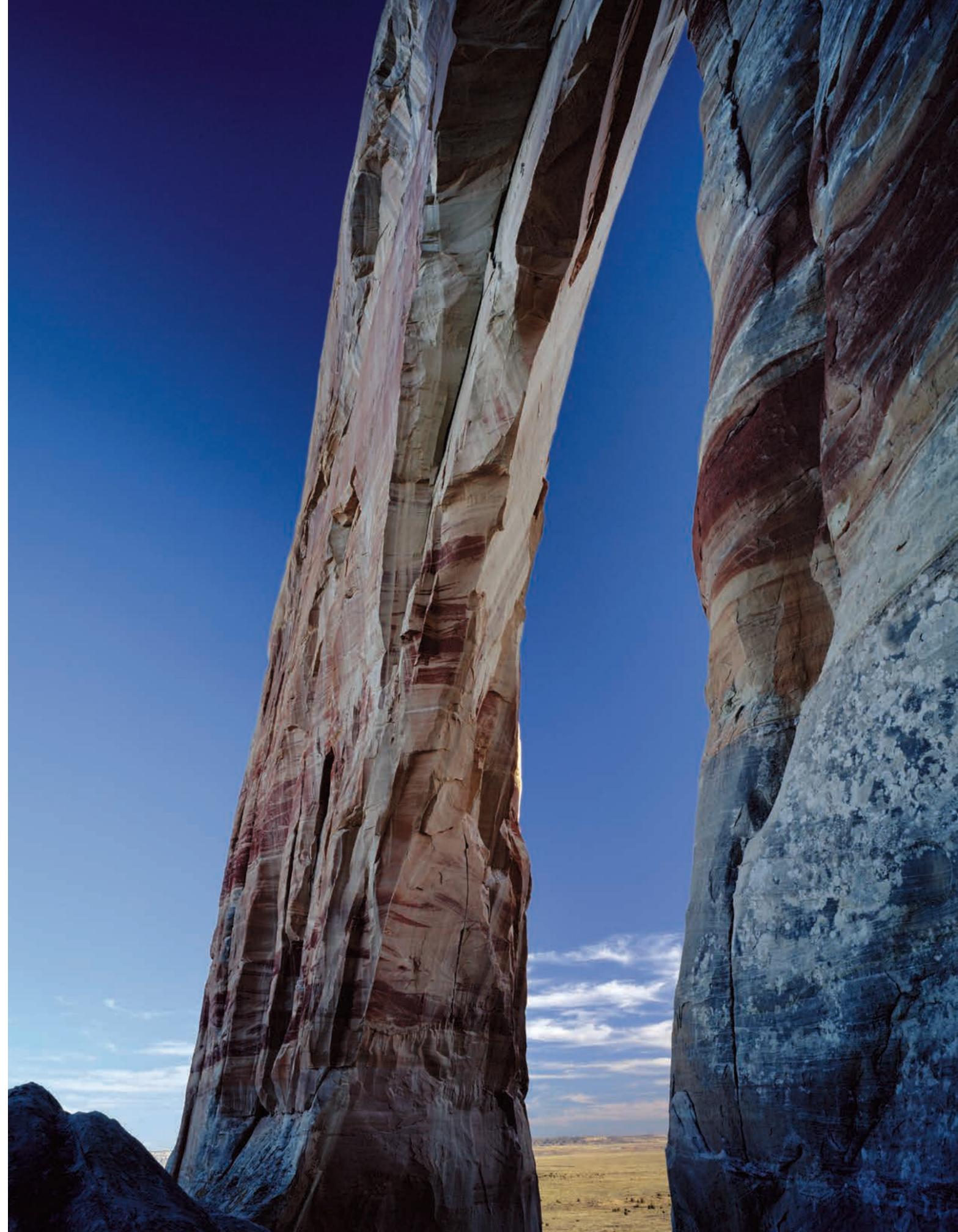
Muench found himself there one snowy morning. “I was just being crazy,” he says. “Halfway up, there was a road up the south side. I parked and slept there and then just took off in the morning, knowing something could be

very nice. Maybe it was the storm that said, ‘Be awake in the morning. Be aware.’ I just went right up. To have to do that again, I’d have to spend three months just waiting, then prepare, because the Virgin Mountains are

7,000 to 8,000 feet in elevation. If it’s a good year, a storm will pass and leave some snow on the range.”

**Right:** Muench is fond of this image, which he made on White Mesa, because of its lines. “I love it for its

narrowness,” he says. “Vertical composition in a horizontal country. It was exciting to get up into this little niche. That’s part of the involvement with the place — just responding to something so close.”







“David Muench is one of our ‘founding fathers.’ It was his foregrounds that captured me. Boulders, flowers, tumbling streams, jutting rim rocks, *blam*, stuck right in front of your nose, set against what other photographers would consider enough — the background. The depth, the counterpoint, the balance (or tension) of near-to-far burned into my brain. Along with dramatic weather and lighting, grabber foregrounds are my favored image ‘tools.’”

— PHOTOGRAPHER GARY LADD

**Preceding panel:** “This was spring, when the brittlebushes were blooming away in Organ Pipe [Cactus National Monument],” Muench says. “I wish there were more clouds, but this was

very early, and it has to be April. It feels like the light is southward. The Ajo Mountains in the background make the image three-dimensional.”

**Above, left:** This photograph of a reflected Spider Rock is unlike any we’ve ever seen from Canyon de Chelly. “In the 1970s, the canyon would have good summer rain,” Muench

says. “The water makes this special. I like the light. It’s very late, but it’s angular, not straight from the side. You’re almost looking against the light.”

**Above:** “The line of color drew me to this image of Canyon de Chelly,” Muench says. “I like the autumn coloring against the blue. Your eye wants to go from left to right, then all of a sudden,

you have to go back up into that [upper left] corner and finish off. Something’s happening there you want to know about.”

“David is a personal hero, and his work has been an incredible inspiration. In terms of style, he opened my eyes to the possibility of shooting landscapes with telephoto lenses. Prior to that, I was shooting everything with a 20 mm.”

— PHOTOGRAPHER  
ADAM SCHALLAU

“I think this is a stunning image because, naturally, at the magazine, we’ve seen thousands of photographs of the Grand Canyon,” Kida says. “But I think this transports people. When I see this image, it becomes something about ... form.” And that’s an important point for Muench. “I like to have that noted,” he says. “It’s form versus light and contrast. The contrast between light and shade is where your eye goes, and that’s where it delineates things too much. It’s rare and special for Arizona that the light is always busy, and that creates contrast.”



“My first camera was a Brownie camera. I remember we were in Yellowstone [National Park], and I shot the whole roll off on one Old Faithful eruption, because I had watched [my father] photographing, and it was always *click, click, click, click*, and I thought, *I’m going to do that.*” – ZANDRIA BERALDO, DAVID MUENCH’S DAUGHTER



**Above:** As they discussed this photograph, another of Wupatki National Monument, Kida praised Muench’s ability to wait for the right moment to make his images. “You’ve

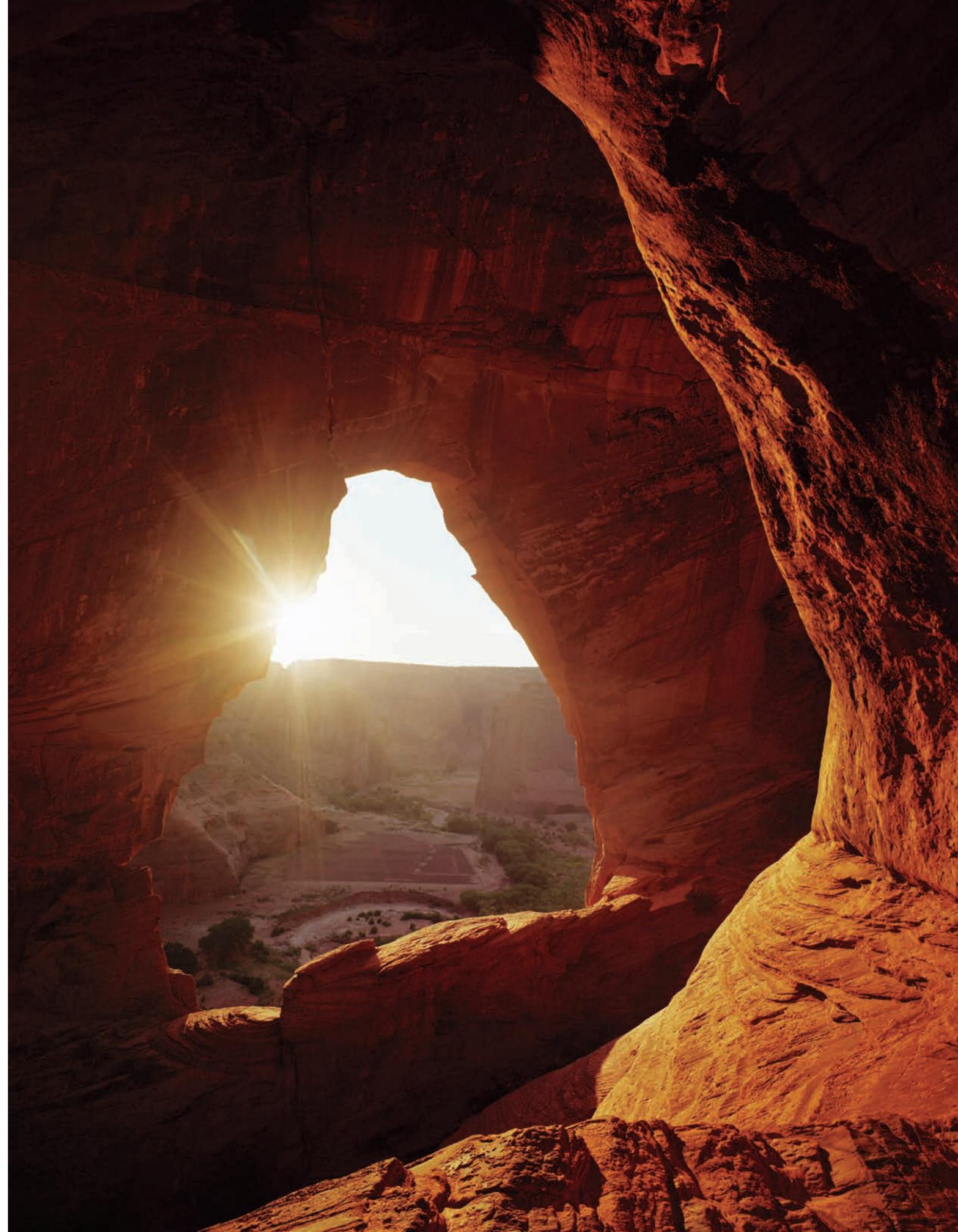
waited until your shadows have crept right beneath the ruins to create a nice anchor,” Kida says. “It’s just sort of holding you down because of the darkness of that form. You’re not

competing with the textures, and the foreground isn’t competing with the ruin itself.”

**Right:** According to Kida, photographs that incorporate

sunbursts can feel two-dimensional, but not this one, which Muench made at the Window, along North Rim Drive of Canyon de Chelly. “That’s the wide-angle thing,” Muench says. “By

using a prominent foreground, it creates an added dimension. You get the sun on something and the sun star — this is sunshine country.”



“The Center for Creative Photography has long acknowledged the important contribution that *Arizona Highways*’ many stellar photographers have made — not only to the history of the state, but to the history of photography. David Muench’s particularly acute awareness of light, and the way shifting light impacts the brilliance and mood of the color that fills a scene, gives his work a powerful emotional sensitivity. Muench’s work in the center’s collection will allow scholars and researchers for generations to come to appreciate his unique perspective on photographing the wilderness, in Arizona and beyond.”

— REBECCA SENF, NORTON FAMILY CURATOR, CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY

“I love the spacious quality of the Kofas,” Muench says. “This image has autumn and spring in the same shot. The ocotillo is turning autumn-colored, but it’s blooming in April. The ‘V’ gives your eye an opening to go up into the range, right up the middle.”

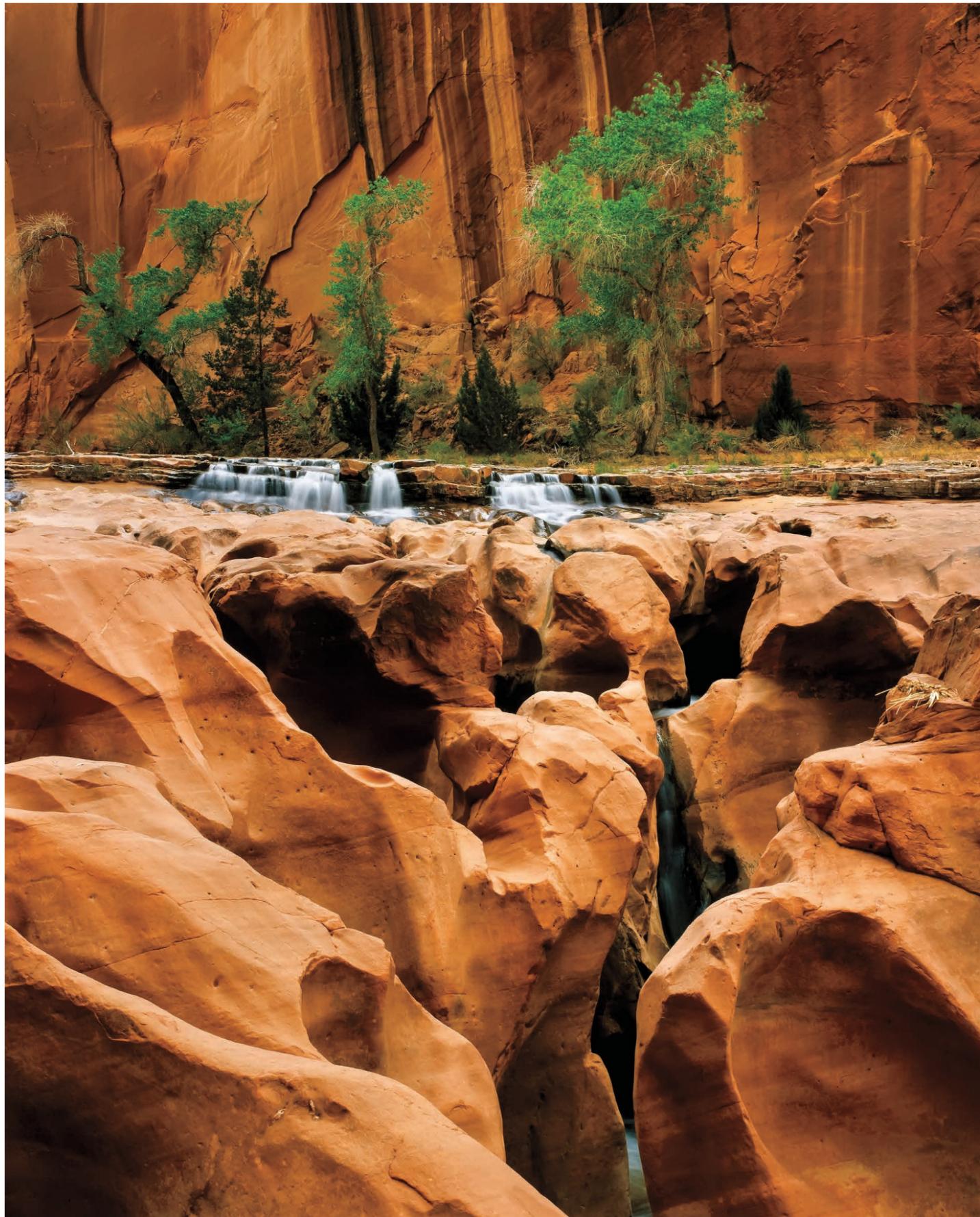




“David has a different way of dealing with familiar scenes. I would see his work and often say, ‘That’s an amazing shot; how did he do it?’ His style is different from his predecessors. It is truly influential. Instead of standing on a rock, he will use it as an element in his photo.”

– PHOTOGRAPHER TOM BEAN

“This was just ‘f/11 and be there,’” Muench says, referring to an old saying among photographers. “There’s the volcanic thing off the road, and I thought, *I’ll just go out and look and take the camera along.* Of course, there were summer clouds [and Agathla Peak in the background], and you can’t argue with those. I thought, *Don’t try to be fancy. Just do the 75 mm lens and let it happen.*”



**Left:** "This photograph of Glen Canyon has good forms," Muench says. "You can feel the water back there. It looks very innocent and beautiful. It's nice to hike into this kind of thing. You look at

what's going on in the next layer of rock below, and you can see that there's even a little bit of water there. It excited me to no end to do hikes in some of the deeper canyons."

**Above:** Muench made this photograph in the Coconino National Forest during an overcast day. "I think it's profound when you expect desert for Arizona," Muench says. "People want all that sun. But this is also

a very respectable snow country: the San Francisco Peaks, Humphreys Peak, the whole Mogollon Rim."

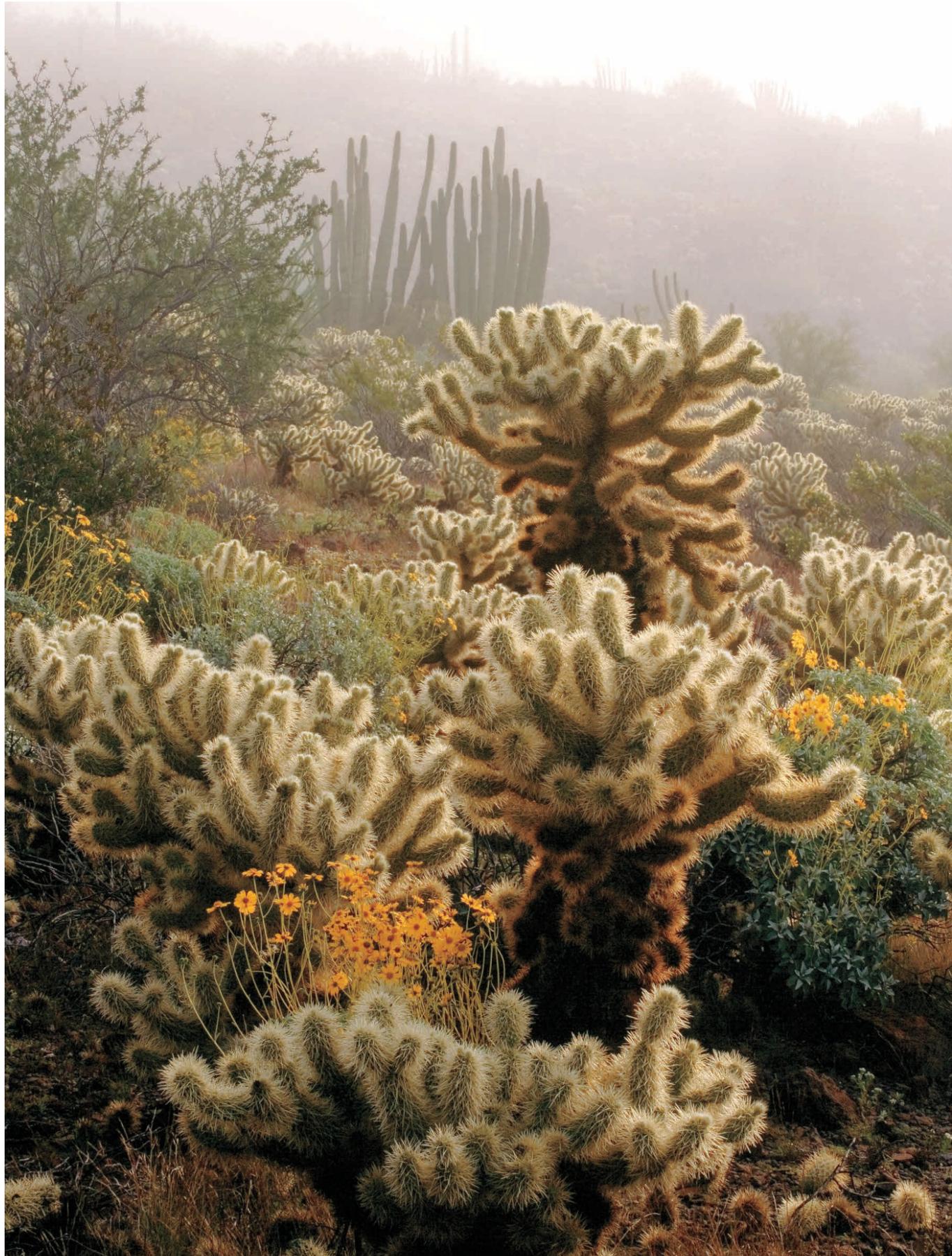


“It’s as if David invented the concept of ‘near-far’ in photographic composition. He really brought forceful foregrounds into play. His work set a lot of people on journeys.”

— PHOTOGRAPHER  
DEREK VON BRIESEN



Although this image is similar to another of Muench's more well-known photographs from the Grand Canyon, he appreciates the forms and foreground in this version, as does Kida. "The forms are like fingers; they're directional," Kida says. "We often see this vista, with Lava Falls below, but we don't see it framed this way."



**Left:** For this, another photograph of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Muench describes the light as wet. "You can almost taste it," he says. "That wet light. I don't think — in some areas — it

would ever get foggy there, so don't try to go there to do a photo essay on fog. This must have been January or February. It's hard to do this in Arizona."

**Above:** Muench made this photograph in a remote part of North-western Arizona, the Detrital Valley Basin near the Cerbat Mountains. "A lot of the snowfall in that region was good,"

Muench says. "That's what was so surprising. There were times you could go from one area to another and have the snowstorm follow through."

“I think he came up with many new images of the American West at a time when everything was being published through a few channels: *National Geographic*, *Reader’s Digest*, *Arizona Highways*. So the imagery he was producing was what was being published in American landscape, and [he] became synonymous with images of these incredible places that people hadn’t seen.”

— MARC MUENCH,  
DAVID MUENCH’S SON

“I love the clouds either coming or going,” says Kida of this photograph, which Muench made in Cochise Stronghold in the Dragoon Mountains. “It feels like something’s happening. There’s a dynamic here.”



“David is truly an innovator. He has the ability to pre-visualize: He actually sees what will happen at a particular location. I honestly don’t know anyone else who does that.”

— PHOTOGRAPHER PAUL MARKOW



**Left and above:**

These photographs are double exposures on single pieces of film, which became part of Muench’s “sky islands” project. “It’s just silhouettes working together and

balancing exposure with one piece of film,” Muench says. “I would just get excited about the landscape and try to create something that said how exciting it was.” **AH**