20 Ways to Take Stunning Portraits

Discover the secrets of stunning portrait photography in this tutorial.

by [Darren Rowse](#)

How do you take Portraits that have the 'Wow' factor?

Today and tomorrow I want to talk about taking Portraits that are **a little out of the box**. You see it's all very well and good to have a portrait that **follows all the rules** - but it hit me as I was surfing on Flickr today that **often the most striking portraits are those that break all the rules**.

I want to look at some ways to break out of the mold and take **striking portraits** by breaking (or at least bending) the rules and adding a little randomness into your **portrait photography**. I'll share ten of these tips today and a further ten tomorrow (update: you can see the [2nd part here](#)).

1. Alter Your Perspective

Most portraits are taken with the camera at (or around) the eye level of the subject. While this is good common sense - completely changing the angle that you shoot from can give your portrait a real WOW factor.

Photo by [striatic](#)

Get up high and shoot down on your subject or get as close to the ground as you can and shoot up. Either way you'll be seeing your subject from an angle that is bound to create interest.

Photo by TeeRish

2. Play with Eye Contact

It is amazing how much the direction of your subject's eyes can impact an image. Most portraits have the subject looking down the lens - something that can create a real sense of connection between a subject and those viewing the image. But there are a couple of other things to try:

A. Looking off camera - have your subject focus their attention on something unseen and outside the field of view of your camera. This can create a feeling of candidness and also create a little intrigue and interest as the viewer of the shot wonders what they are looking at. This intrigue is particularly drawn about when the subject is showing some kind of emotion (ie 'what's making them laugh?' or 'what is making them look surprised?'). Just be aware that when you have a subject looking out of frame that you can also draw the eye of the viewer of the shot to the edge of the image also - taking them away from the point of interest in your shot - the subject.

Photo by monicutza80

B. Looking within the frame - alternatively you could have your subject looking at something (or someone) within the frame. A child looking at a ball, a woman looking at her new baby, a man looking hungrily at a big plate of pasta…. When you give your subject something to look at that is inside the frame you create a second point of interest and a relationship between it and your primary subject. It also helps create 'story' within the image.

Photo by paulbence

3. Break the Rules of Composition

There are a lot of 'rules' out there when it comes to composition and I've always had a love hate relationship with them. My theory is that while they are useful to know and employ that they are also useful to know so you can purposely break them - as this can lead to eye catching results.

The [Rule of Thirds](#) is one that can be effective to break - placing your subject either dead centre can sometimes create a powerful image - or even creative placement with your subject right on the edge of a shot can sometimes create interesting images.

Photo by [reportergimmiâ€žÂ¢](#)

Another 'rule' that we often talk about in portrait photography is to [give your subject room to look into](#). This can work really well - but again, sometimes rules are made to be broken.

Photo by Bukutgirl

4. Experiment with Lighting

Another element of randomness that you can introduce to your portraits is the way that you light them. There are almost unlimited possibilities when it comes to using light in portraits.

Side-lighting can create mood, backlighting and silhouetting your subject to hide their features can be powerful.
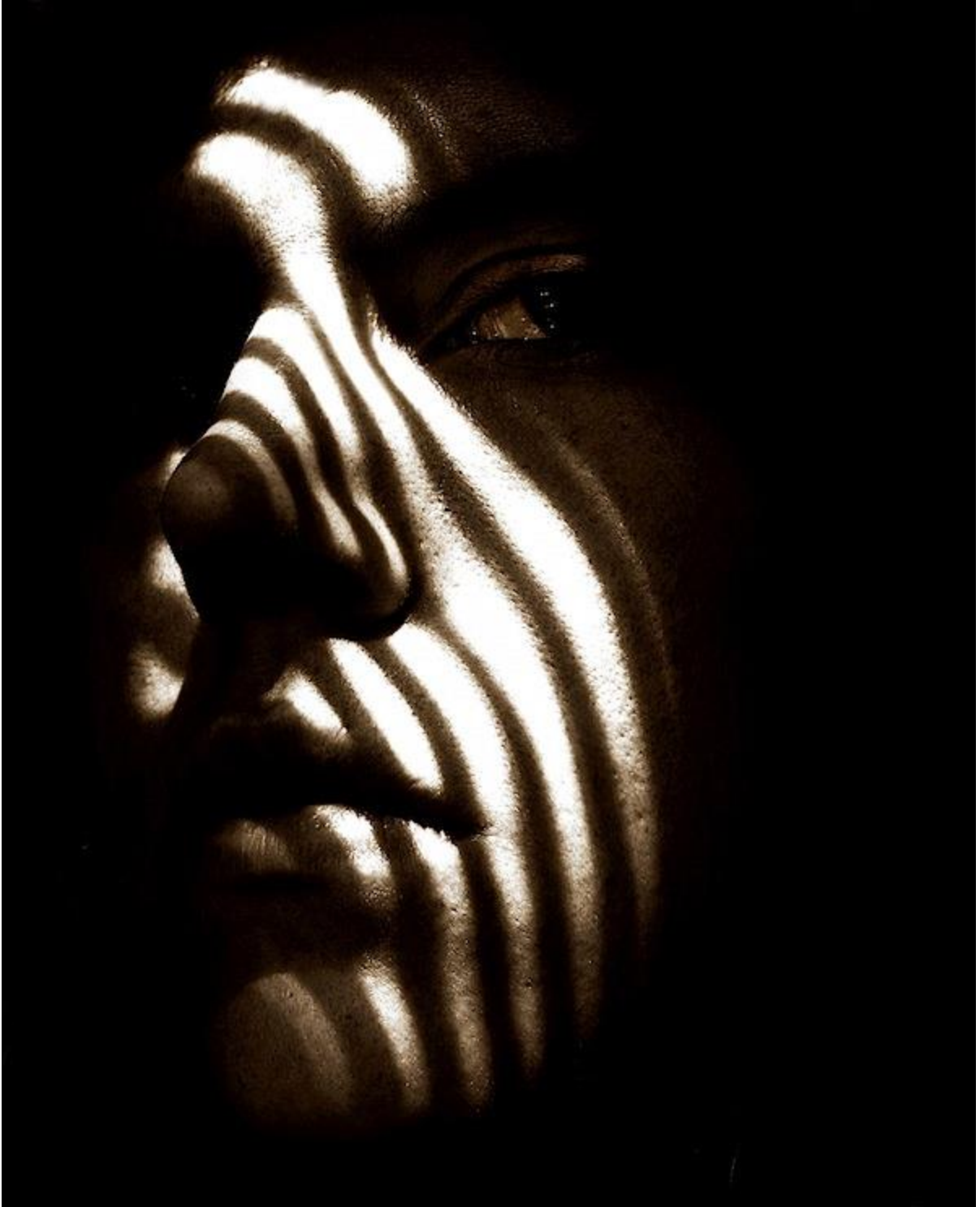
Photo by [Bukutgirl]

Using techniques like [slow synch flash] can create an impressive wow factor.

Photo by diskomethod

5. Move Your Subject Out of their Comfort Zone

I was chatting with a photographer recently who told me about a corporate portrait shoot that he had done with a business man at his home. They'd taken a lot of head and shoulder shots, shots at his desk, shots in front of framed degrees and other 'corporate' type images. They had all turned out fairly standard - but there was nothing that really stood out from the crowd.

The photographer and the subject agreed that there were plenty of useable shots but they wanted to create something 'special' and out of the box. The photographer suggested they try some 'jumping' shots. The subject was a little hesitant at first but stepped out into the uncomfortable zone and dressed in his suit and tie started jumping!

The shots were amazing, surprising and quite funny. The shoot culminated with the subject jumping in his pool for one last image!

While this might all sound a little 'silly' the shots ended up being featured in a magazine spread about the subject. It was the series of out of the box images that convinced the magazine he was someone that they'd want to feature.

Image by [TeeRish](#)

6. Shoot Candidly

Sometimes posed shots can look somewhat…. posed. Some people don't look good in a posed environment and so switching to a candid type approach can work.

Photograph your subject at work, with family or doing something that they love. This will put them more at ease and you can end up getting some special shots with them reacting naturally to the situation that they are in. You might even want to grab a longer zoom lens to take you out of their immediate zone and get really paparazzi with them.

I find that this can particularly work when photographing children.

Photo by phitar

7. Introduce a Prop

Add a prop of some kind into your shots and you create another point of interest that can enhance your shot.

Yes you might run the risk of taking too much focus away from your main subject but you could also really add a sense of story and place to the image that takes it in a new direction and gives the person you're photographing an extra layer of depth that they wouldn't have had without the prop.
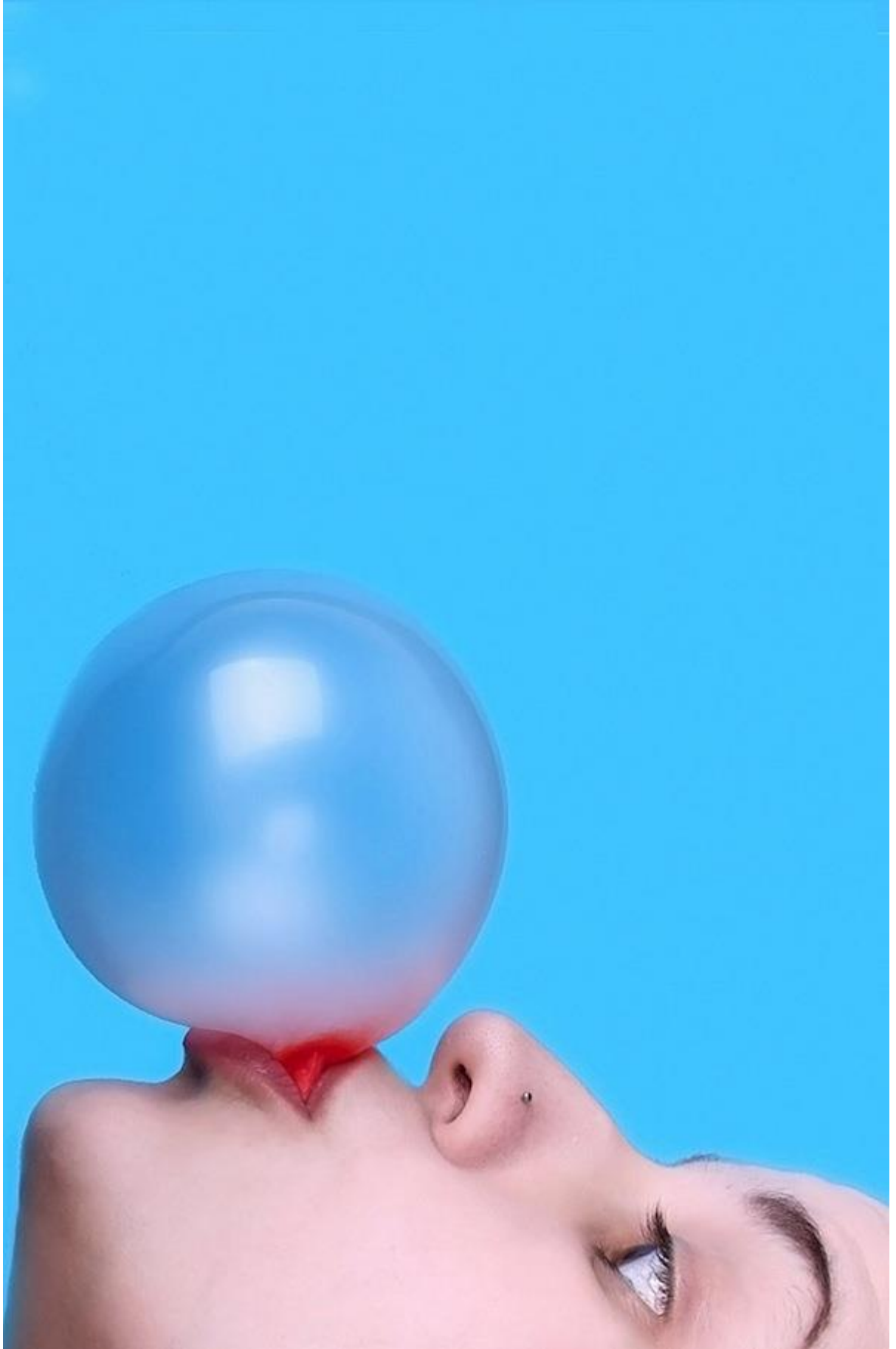
8. Focus Upon One Body Part - Get Close Up

Get a lens with a long focal length attached to your camera - or get right in close so that you can just photograph a part of your subject. Photographing a person's hands, eyes, mouth or even just their lower body… can leave a lot to the imagination of the viewer of an image.

Sometimes it's what is left out of an image that says more than what is included.

Photo by [Bukutgirl](#)

9. Obscure Part of your Subject

A variation on the idea of zooming in on one part of the body is to obscure parts of your portrait subject's face or body. You can do this with clothing, objects, their hands or just by framing part of them out of the image.

Doing this means that you leave a little to the imagination of the image's viewer but also focus their attention on parts of your subject that you want them to be focused upon.

Photo by [BigBlonde](#)

10. Take a Series of Shots

Switch your camera into 'burst' or 'continuous shooting' mode and fire off more than one shot at a time.

In doing this you create a series of images that could be presented together instead of just one static image.

This technique can work very well when you're photographing children - or really any active subject that is changing their position or pose in quick succession.

Image by diyosa

11. Frame Your Subject

Framing is a technique where by you draw attention to one element of an image by framing it with another element of the image.

Image by [darkmatter](#)

Framing gives an image depth and draws the eye to a point of interest in the image.

You could do it by placing your subject in a window or doorway, have them look through a small gap or even use their hands around their face. See more examples of framing in photography here.

12. Go with a Wide Angle

Shooting with a wide angle lens attached to your camera can help create some memorable shots when you're doing portrait photography.

At very wide focal lengths you can create some wonderful distortion. It might not be the type of shot you take of your wife or girlfriend (unless she's in a playful mood) but using these focal lengths will enlarge parts of the face or body that are on the edge of the frame more than what is in the centre.

It can also give a wide open and dramatic impact when your subject is in an impressive setting.

Image by paulbence

13. Play With Backgrounds

The person in your portrait is the main point of interest - however sometimes when you place them into different contexts with different backgrounds you can dramatically alter the mood in a shot.

Sometimes you want your background to be as minimalistic as possible.

Portrait by akbar1947

While other times a dramatic or colorful background can help your subject really stand out.

Photo by paulbence

The key is to experiment.

14. Change the Format Framing

Many photographers get stuck in a rut of only ever shooting either in 'landscape' (when the camera is held horizontally) or 'portrait' (when the camera is held vertically) modes. Look back through your images and see which one you use predominantly.

Just because a vertical framing is called 'portrait' mode doesn't mean you always need to use it when shooting portraits. Mix your framing up in each shoot that you do and you'll add variety to the type of shots you take.

Image by bikeracer

15. Hold Your Camera on an Angle

Horizontal and Vertical framings are not the only options when it comes to shooting portraits. While getting your images straight can be important in when shooting in these formats holding your camera on a more diagonal angle can also inject a little fun into your images.

This type of framing can add a sense of fun and energy into your shots. Just don't 'slightly' do it or you'll have people asking themselves if you might have mistakenly held your camera crooked.

Photo by puja

16. Take Unfocused Shots

As photographers we have 'sharp focus' drummed into us as an ultimate objective to achieve in our work - but sometimes lack of focus can create shots with real emotion, mood and interest.

There are two main strategies for taking unfocused images that work:

1. Focus upon one element of the image and leave your main subject blurred. To do this use a large aperture which will create a narrow depth of field and focus upon something in front of or behind your subject.

Photo by Jeff Kubina

2. Leave the full image out of focus. To do this again choose a wide aperture but focus well in front or behind anything that is in your image (you'll need to switch to manual focussing to achieve this).

These kinds of shots can be incredibly dreamy and mysterious.

Portrait by peskymac

17. Introduce Movement

Portraits can be so static - but what if you added some movement into them? This can be achieved in a few ways:

Photo by [Michael Sarver](#)

- by making your subject move
- by keeping your subject still but having an element in the scene around them move
- by moving your camera (or it's lens to achieve a zoom burst)

Portrait by philippe leroyer

The key with the above three methods is to use a slow enough shutter speed to capture the movement.

The alternative is to have your subject obviously move fast but to use a shutter speed so fast that it 'freezes' their movement.

18. Experiment with Subject Expressions

In some portraits it is the expression on the face of your subject that makes the image.

Get your subject to experiment with different moods and emotions in your image. Play with extreme emotions

Portrait by [carf](#)

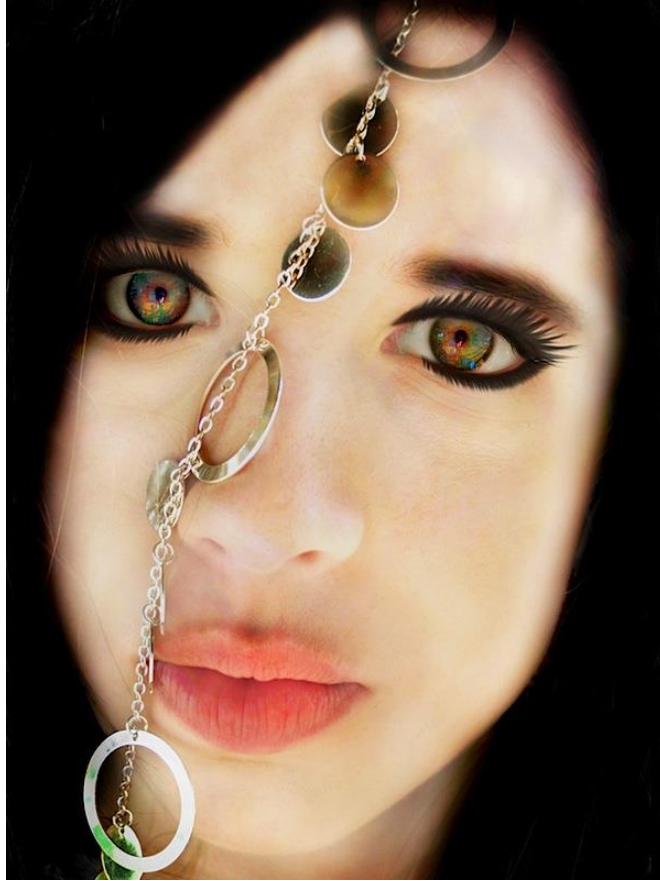But also try more sombre or serious type shots

Photo by [Stuck in Customs](#)

19. Fill the Frame

One way to ensure that your subject captures the attention of the viewer of your portrait is to fill the frame with their face.

It's not something that you'd do in every shot that you take - but if your subject is the only feature in the shot - there's really nowhere else to look.

Portrait by kkelly2007

20. Find an Interesting Subject

I have a friend who regularly goes out on the streets around Melbourne looking for interesting people to photograph.

When he finds someone that he finds interesting he approaches them, asks if they'd pose for him, he quickly finds a suitable background and then shoots off a handful of shots quickly (if they give him permission of course).

The result is that he has the most wonderful collection of photographs of people of all ages, ethnicities and backgrounds.

While many of us spend most of our time photographing our loved ones - perhaps it'd be an interesting exercise to shoot interesting strangers once in a while?

Portrait by .mushi_king

What Did I Miss?

So there you have it. 20 ways to add variety to your portraits (including yesterday's 10 tips). But what have I missed that you'd add? I'm sure if we put our heads together we could come up with plenty of other techniques and ideas to add a little variety to our portrait photography. Looking forward to reading your suggestions in comments below.