Catch the Eye

A Photographer's Guide to Visual Design

NOTES FROM THE PRESENTATION by JOHN ELLERT

Consider why you take pictures. Do you consider photography as a means for recording personal history, a commercial enterprise, or as a creative endeavor? Regardless of your reason, consider what it is that your eyes see and your mind perceives that makes you want to capture any particular scene. No matter what your level of photographic interest or skill level, considering compositional factors when you are shooting will help you express what you have in mind.

The effective use of composition in any two-dimensional work is what will catch the eye of the viewer and draw them into the image. This is not magical, but it is up to you to use those design elements to create an image that draws a viewer into it

I learned from one of my first teachers that painting is an additive process painter can add to an image anything from memory. Photographers, on the other hand, must find ways to subtract or minimize. Nature photographers are often burdened with the attitude that they are being honest with the scene if they include everything before them.

We may think of composition solely in terms of the arrangement of elements in what we term "picture space", but before we finish, I hope to show you there is a lot more to composition than that.

There are entire books written on composition; I have read some of them, taken drawing courses, and studied composition with master photographer Freeman Patterson.

Like a well-designed house, a well-designed image does what it is supposed to do without calling attention to its structure. In both cases, you will scarcely notice the structure unless you set out to find it.

A poorly designed house, on the other hand, gets on your nerves every day and a poorly designed image scarcely merits a second look.

Building Blocks & Techniques

There are two major sets of related concepts to keep in mind when composing two-dimensional work. The first of these comprises basic building blocks, and the second encompasses techniques of using those blocks. Compositional building blocks, like your camera and lenses, are tools in your toolbox. You use only those that are necessary in a given situation to work toward the vision that you have for an image.

Let us look at these basic tools in turn:

LIGHT

LINE

SHAPE

TEXTURE

PERSPECTIVE

1. LIGHT

Light, as we might well deduce from the two roots of the word photograph, is the most basic raw material with which we work.

Light has two major components, or contrasts: brightness, or as many photographers call it,

tonality, and **color**.

The photographer shooting in black & white works only in tonality while those of us who work in color *add* that contrast to our tool kit.

Tonal Contrast

Tonality has everything to do with gradations of shade from light to dark, and nothing at all to do with color, though it can be hard to separate the two

Light: Color Contrast

Color contrast relies on differing colors to convey a message.

All the colors in such an image may be in the same tonal range, or they may spread across a wide spectrum.

Using Light Effectively

Consider some of the ways you can use light effectively in your photographs. You can change your position so the angle of light changes on your subject.

Light Direction

Consider the way that light may strike your subject – from the front, rear, or side.

Where the sun is at your back, your subject is frontally lit. The light is generally even, and there are not many shadows except those that fall away from you.

Conversely, when your subject is between you and the source of light, it is rear-lit, and there are deep shadows and generally your subject is in silhouette, as in this sunset image.

The main light source for a side-lit image comes from one side or another (even top or bottom), resulting often in an interesting interplay of shadow and light.

Return at Different Times

Changing your position works well for small subjects, but one cannot change the position of the sun with regard to a large landscape. However, you can return at a different time of day or different season of the year.

Or, consider a change of seasons.

Shoot in Adverse Conditions

You can shoot in less than ideal conditions. Although we, by nature, prefer bright light, tonally narrow images shot under heavy cloud cover can be just as expressive. I love to shoot light (and sometimes weather conditions) that would keep many people snuggled up in bed

Contrasts of Hue

Contrasts of hue become more important when there are narrow tonal contrasts.

The Color of Light

The color of natural light changes during the course of each day. The light early in the morning and around sunset is more yellow in color than the blue-tinged light at midday.

The Quality of Light

Besides the color or vibrancy of light, we must also consider the quality of light in terms of direct light or diffused light. In conditions of direct light, light falls directly on the subject.

Conversely, if something, clouds for example, block all or part of the light, we call the quality diffused. Besides clouds, the shaded side of a building, or under a tree can provide you with diffused light, as can diffusing discs, or even the shade of your own body for a small subject

Color Vibrancy

Vibrant Colors are emotional triggers. Think about your personal reactions to the primary additive colors used in photography: Red, Green, and Blue.

The secondary, or subtractive, colors can also be used to good effect.

2. LINE

Line is the 2nd major building block. In essence, a line has length and relatively little, though still discernable, width.

Consider a picket fence with each picket and the space between them forming distinct alternating lines. Lines lead the eye & mind across, into, or through picture space. Keep in mind that the longer the line or the higher its contrast, the greater its visual importance. You might expect that the pickets and spaces between them, being more or less equal in width, would have equal visual weight, but because the pickets are white, they carry greater visual weight and we see a picture of a fence, not one of the background view interrupted by a fence.

Line Orientation

Lines may be horizontal, vertical, or oblique, and in an image, the ORIENTATION of a line is very important.

Vertical lines suggest strength and stability. They lead the eye/mind from bottom to top, but impede visual movement across picture space. On the down side, photographs built extensively on the vertical can seem stodgy and stiff.

Horizontal lines suggest repose and can lead the eye/mind across the photograph, but impede the eye as it tries to move vertically in the image. Images, which heavily rely on the horizontal, can seem static

Oblique lines suggest dynamism, movement. They can lead the eye/mind into and through a photograph. A downside to oblique lines arises when too many lines running in many directions confuse the eye, leading to greater chaos rather than simplicity.

Implied Lines are imaginary lines created by the brain to form visual relationships

Change Your Position

Sometimes you can change the direction of lines by slightly moving your position

EDGE

Edges are a special type of line.

They strongly resemble lines and have two of the same properties – length & orientation, but edges have zero width. Edges form the defining boundary of most shapes

3. SHAPE

Shape is the next major building block. Shapes enclose space and create in the viewer a sense of that which is within and that which is excluded, though the two are often mutually reversible depending on point of view. Shapes are defined by a combination of tonal contrast, color contrast, line, and texture. There are three primary shapes: the circle, triangle, and square, with 1, 3, and 4 boundaries, respectively. The secondary shapes of oval, rectangle, or more complex shapes are deformations of the primary shapes. The circle is the simplest, with one defining boundary. Those with three sides are, of course triangles. Squares, and their derivative rectangles, have four boundaries.

Abstracting Shape

We abstract shape from content either from objects with certain attributes or by the arrangement of elements in picture space. Here too, you can change the camera position to affect the shapes within picture space, especially those close to the camera, and thus alter the message.

Frame Selectively

When you aim your lens at any scene you frame *selectively* what is important. By excluding something from the scene, you create shapes that have no counterpart in nature.

Visual Simplicity

I encourage you to work toward *simplicity* in your images; too many competing shapes can become distracting to the point that the viewer may have trouble deciphering what the real subject is. Think about shape in this way: most images consist of a combination of

1) those which intersect one or more edges – again, think back to the prairie/sky shots – and

2) shapes that do not touch the edge of the frame.

The interplay of shapes and other elements can make for some very powerfully graphic images. While this all may seem complex and difficult to remember, it is really just a matter of practice. You will find that you become accustomed to considering the shapes in your images, and doing so becomes second nature.

4. TEXTURE

We often overlook **Texture** as a building block because it is usually internal to other elements, especially shape. Textures are highly varied and range from smooth to rough, from lack of pattern to repeating pattern.

5. PERSPECTIVE 110

The final building block is **perspective**, and that means the representation on two-dimensional media of the **effects** of depth or distance. Linear Perspective as we understand it on two-dimensional media was not formulated until the early 15th Century by the Italian artist and architect, Filippo Brunelleschi, though painters prior to that time commonly applied perspective to human portraiture.

Wired with the ability to take the visual information transmitted by our two visual sensors – the eyes – our brains turn the sensory information into something more than the sum of the parts. Because the eyes are a distance apart, the two images transmitted to the brain are slightly out of registration and the brain translates that into a sense of depth. A flat painting or photograph cannot duplicate that separation, and so we must use other ***visual cues*** to fool the brain into perceiving perspective.

Let me state it again, perspective is the representation of depth on a flat surface, and this reduces to the arrangement of shapes, lines, and textures in such a combination to give the viewer a sense of looking into the image.

Perspective, or the lack thereof, is neither good nor bad – it all depends on what message you are trying to convey, but generally speaking, in landscapes, the more you can lead the viewer into the image, the more interesting it becomes.

Jim Griggs, in his presentation last spring, thoroughly discussed four primary means of showing perspective:

Classic Perspective

Overlapping Planes

Broken Continuum

Tonal Gradient

Classic Perspective

Parallel lines appearing to converge to a vanishing point

Overlapping Planes

Portions of an image closer to the eye overlapping more distant portions, obscuring them.

Broken Continuum

Some manner of continuous line – a road or a stream, for example, which disappears and reappears the "deeper" it goes into the image.

Tonal Gradient

In our experience, landscapes in nature become progressively lighter in tonality with distance. Having atmospheric moisture present in the form of mist, fog, or haze can make the distant elements "fade" more rapidly than they would on a clear, dry day.

Distorted Space 124

I have been taught a 5th way to provide the illusion of depth:

distort or deform space.

enlarge a foreground object or area in your composition relative to the background

However, it's all too easy to use wide angle lenses is to include more, but that makes it easy to get into compositional trouble by including so much that there is no longer a central subject of interest.

Remember that as photographers, we have to seek ways to exclude that which is unimportant or distracting.

In composing, you must lower your viewpoint to a position somewhat closer to the ground and then tilt the camera downward so that parallel lines converge in the distance. Then, at smallest aperture, you focus on your foreground subject. It will be enlarged relative to the background, but – given common experience that closer objects are larger than the same object at a distance – the brain will be fooled into perceiving depth on a flat piece of paper.

a wide-angle lens produces the greatest sense of depth in a scene when you turn the camera sideways so the long side of the image runs from bottom to top. When the lens is set to its smallest aperture you can render everything in focus, from the foreground object to the farthest point.

BUILDING YOUR IMAGE

Memorable images are much more than a random assemblage of various elements.

The way in which you put everything together, choosing which building blocks to use, their relative dominance, proportion, and balance, are what sets an image worth remembering apart from a snapshot that is your personal record of a moment in time.

There are principles and guidelines but no hard and fast rules. Rely, instead, on your imagination and the common sense that you have gained from the years that you have observed your environment. You will create your best work if you use your sense of how everything should fit together rather than some preconceived ideal.

Do not worry if many of your images seem ineffective at first. Evaluate your work with an open and honest eye, learn from your mistakes, and your ability will grow.

One of my teachers seldom critiqued my images directly, and instead asked me to tell her if the image did what I wanted it to, and if not, to analyze why. By forcing me to defend my images to her, I learned to do this for myself, and the ability to critique one's own images is invaluable.

One goal for you in image making is to establish some degree of order and sense of structure. Think of a continuum from perfect order and formality on one end to complete chaos and randomness at the other. From our human perspective, nature can be visually chaotic, and our job as image makers is to show some of the underlying order. We seek to simplify the riot of shapes, colors, lines, and tonalities to an essence that magically works together to communicate something to not only yourself, but to another viewer as well.

Generally speaking, the more simple and orderly your composition, the more rapidly and effectively it communicates its message to the viewer.

A visual composition that is simple in basic arrangement or structure may indeed have an internal complexity which weaves a rich texture and carries secondary messages beyond that which is immediately apparent.

TECHNIQUES

There are four compositional techniques used to connect and unite those building blocks:

Dominance

Balance

Proportion

Rhythm

DOMINANCE

A sense of dominance comes from that building block most heavily weighted in a visual sense. An element may be dominant because of size in proportion to the rest of the picture space, its distinctive color, Singularity or location within picture space, or symbolic value to the viewer.

Put another way, dominance is that which is the center of attention. Not all compositions require a single point of interest or a single dominant element, and sometimes you do not want to have any at all.

BALANCE

We tend to recognize **balance** rather easily, even if we are not always aware of it. Research has shown, for example, that faces universally regarded as attractive are balanced and symmetrical. Nearly every scene contains multiple tonalities, shapes, lines, or textures that vie for attention, and the degree to which each one does gives it visual weight.

There are two kinds of balance in your imagery:

Symmetrical

Asymmetrical

Symmetrical images are those in which all building blocks are visually structured and more or less identically weighted on either side of a single axis, usually either horizontal or vertical.

Asymmetrical images abound in nature, but balance becomes a bit more difficult since you have to deal with more than one building block in order to achieve an image that appears balanced.

Balance can depend on psychological elements as well as physical arrangement.

Imagine an image of a maimed human form.

Even if this element is relatively small and pushed off to one side, we will react to it very strongly, even though the rest of the image may be overwhelmingly that of a crowd of shocked onlookers.

Including a person in a landscape pulls the eye very strongly, no matter where they are placed and how small they are.

Appropriate balancing is critical to the success of an image. The ability to do it every time comes through practice and critical evaluation of your images afterwards.

PROPORTION

Proportion, not surprisingly, concerns itself with the relative sizes of objects in picture space. We have already seen many examples of proportion, as in the sky/landscape pairs where I chose one proportion over another. When composing through the viewfinder, change the camera position while observing the elements in the picture space. Try different proportions and shoot several variations.

Rule of Thirds

Here's a familiar technique that may help you break out of the static proportions that infuse many snapshots where the subject is invariably placed on dead center. It is sometimes called a "rule" but like everything else in creative endeavor, the "rule of thirds" is meant to be broken as often as observed. In short, the rule of thirds suggests that the most dynamic positions in picture space occur one-third of the way from the top, bottom, or sides of an image and that especially powerful points occur where two of those imaginary lines meet. Work the concept into your images, but remember that the principal of balance means that for anything you place off-center, there must be something else opposite, which in some way balances the off-centeredness.

RHYTHM

Rhythm is the harmonious, repeating pattern of contrasting elements.

Rhythm in an image, not unlike rhythm in music, lends a sense of order and structure.

EVALUATING YOUR IMAGES

Self-evaluation is one of the most important things you can do to improve your skills and this last step is an essential one to mastery. When you first review your photos after a shoot, start with a clean mental slate. Discard all ideas of the picture you intended to make at the moment you set up the shot and look instead at the When reviewing, as I did in this case, you should indeed look at technical measures such as exposure and focus. But do so in light of what the image says all on its own.

First of all ask the simple question, does this image work for me? In reviewing my images, I quickly cull those that possess no redeeming qualities; I often delete these in-camera during off moments, or as part of the image ingestion process.

Upon processing the rest in Bridge (or Lightroom) I assign everything one star to indicate to myself that I've reviewed the image. In subsequent passes for critical review I re-star those images deserving it from two to five stars.

We are usually excited to see our new work for the first time and so are neither in a mental nor emotional position during that viewing to be truly objective. We may be thinking too hard about the picture we wanted to make and not about the one we actually made, or we may be savoring the memories of a pleasant experience. Under those circumstances, it is difficult to distance ourselves from our preconceptions.

Despite what I have said about maintaining emotional distance while *evaluating* your images, I hope that you ***are*** all emotionally involved in **CREATING** your work. If you are not, your images may be technically correct, but fail to engage the viewer and fail to communicate anything *except* technical competency.

If you are at all serious about photography, please do yourself the biggest favor you can and go out and shoot frequently, carefully reviewing your images each time.

The photographer (and Nikon guru) Thom Hogan recently wrote a piece on the number of hours required to achieve mastery. He used the number of 10,000 hours behind the viewfinder as the time it takes for one to start shooting consistently at a professional level.

for the complete article, see

http://www.bythom.com/2011%20Nikon%20News.htm, "***How Many Hours?"*** *July 19 (commentary)"*

You did not learn to play an instrument, or baseball, or knitting by doing those things only when you had a good excuse to or your mother made you.

You may have heard the story about the tourist on a New York street who stopped a gentleman carrying a violin case to ask the way to Carnegie Hall. Came the reply,

Practice, practice, practice

And so it is with photography. The tools – contrasts, shape, line, texture, and perspective, coupled with the techniques of dominance, balance, proportion, and rhythm are your scales and chords. Playing with them in the field is your batting practice. Learn them well, and your photographs will rise above the ordinary to the spectacular.

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