

Design: Visual Foundations

LEARNING TO SEE: COMMUNICATING WITH DESIGN

When it comes to photographic imagemaking, people have plenty of questions about cameras but don't often ask about how best to accomplish their visual goals. What determines the success of an image is not the camera, but the knowledge of the person operating the camera. The principal job of a photographer is looking, which defines all photographic processes. Good photographs are made by learning to see. Good photographers become skilled at following their eyes and seeing things others overlook. Imagemaking is 10 percent what we encounter and 90 percent how we respond. A good photograph creates a memory in a viewer by communicating an experience to another. Good images are powerful shaping tools that don't just communicate facts, but create facts by generating their own history — past, present, and future — that can stand alone as a statement. Good

photographers organize and synchronize their visual material by managing the visual disorder within the confines of the photographic space. The arrangement of objects within a pictorial space determines the degree to which a photograph communicates. Visual order revolves around understanding composition, which Edward Weston said “is the strongest way of seeing” a subject. The foundation of composition is the design process.

BEGINNER'S MIND

Beginner's mind is a Zen Buddhist concept that refers to maintaining an attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of preconceptions when studying a subject, even at an advanced level. The phrase was also the title of Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki's book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (1970), which reflects his saying: “In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few.” Make the



2.1 "These pieces were inspired by the idea of creating a new kind of icon; one that is not manufactured due to a religious or moral construct, but rather one that celebrates the simplicity of the here-and-now of nature. The surprising visual power behind their elegant simplicity transforms the natural objects into metaphors. I see these objects both taxonomically, displaying the beauty of the natural form, as well as metaphorically, describing what else the natural form can signify. To make these images, I replaced the lid of the scanner with a piece of black felt and then arranged the object underneath the tent of felt, directly onto the glass of the scanner. The felt absorbs extraneous room light so the only light to reach the object is from the scanner itself."

© Marie R. Kennedy. *Couple*, 2006. 20 x 20 inches. Inkjet print.

most of the innocence and simplicity of the first inquiry when one's mind is ready to accept and to doubt and is open to all possibilities. It allows you the chance to see things as they are and intuitively realize the core nature of what you are observing, thereby providing an excellent point of departure. Take advantage of digital imaging's

instantaneousness to capture your first responses to a subject, but don't hesitate to rephotograph or rescan after studying your first results.

THE DESIGN PROCESS

Design involves all the visual elements that make up a composition. The design process is the act of organizing all these parts into a coherent whole for a specific purpose. A good photographic image is an extension of the photographer and creates a response in a viewer. A good photograph engages and sustains a viewer's attention and elicits a response. When these criteria are met, the design can be considered effective. The making of effective photographs can be enhanced by first understanding the nature of the photographic process. Design is like a muscle; it swells, strengthens, and becomes more flexible with exercise.

THE NATURE OF PHOTOGRAPHY: SUBTRACTIVE COMPOSITION

Making camera photographs involves the practice of subtractive thinking. Anything touched by light can be photographed; thus the camera is an arbitrary and indiscriminate instrument. This leads many beginners to overcrowd their pictorial space with too much information. This can generate a visual chaos in which the idea and motivation behind the pictures gets lost. The critical power of a photographer is in choosing of what to leave out of a picture. Photographer Ray Metzker said, "The camera is nothing but a vacuum cleaner picking up everything within range. There has to be a higher degree of selectivity." In the act of making photographs, selectivity is all. Since the

camera makes no objections or judgments about what it records, it is the photographer who creates the reality, making all photographs simultaneously true and false.

Use subtractive composition by going directly for what you want to include in the picture and subtracting all that is not necessary, even if it means eliminating elements that interest you. Concentrate on communicating one thing well while bearing in mind the idiom: "Keep your eye on the prize." Stay focused. Don't get distracted by other pretty bits of information in the scene. Compositions suffer when you dilute your message with unneeded visual distractions. Eliminate visual clutter. Concentrate on communicating one thought by having a point of departure. Instead of trying to make a picture that communicates three ideas, make three images that each communicates a single concept.

This subtractive method of putting the picture together can help you learn the basic visual vocabulary, which leads to producing images you desire. A good photographer is like a magician who knows how to make all the unwanted objects on stage disappear, leaving only what is necessary to create striking images. Do not assume everything that happens to you is going to be interesting to someone else. Selectivity also applies to the ideas that make up your pictures. Some ideas are better than others. Ansel Adams said, "There is nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept." Simplify, simplify, simplify. Imagine being a sculptor of images who chips away at a monolithic block of reality until only what is absolutely necessary remains and then relies on each viewer to fill in the missing pieces to complete the meaning. When you compose, fill your frame by getting close to what is most important to you. Compositions are weakened when important subject matter is too small for viewers to

see. Think about what photojournalist Robert Capa said: "If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough."

DEPARTURE POINT

Think about what you want to do before you do it. When you pick up a camera to do something deliberate and specific, the possibility of capturing the significant and the useful is greater than if you stand on the corner hoping and waiting for something to occur. Avoid being the photographer Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw described, who, like a codfish, lays a million eggs in the hope that one might hatch. Prepare your mind in advance and start in a specific direction, but remain flexible and open to the unexpected. Look for the fortune cookie that reads: "Intelligence is the door to freedom and alert attention is the mother of intelligence."

ATTENTION SPAN AND STAYING POWER

Before satellite radio, cell phones, giant screen televisions, the Internet, and iPods, educated people devoted time to read books — long and complicated books such as Adam Smith's 900-page tome, *The Wealth of Nations*, which revolutionized economic thought and theory when it was published in 1776. That is no longer the case. In our media-saturated climate, imagemakers compete in a no-time mentality of multitasking and channel surfing. This makes it critical for imagemakers not only to initially grab viewers' attention, but to keep it as long as possible by producing work that continues to say something over time. Photographic staying power has almost nothing to do with the technical means of producing a photograph, for the truth is found in how we visually express our thoughts and feelings about



2.2 Stone's departure point is "starting conversations with strangers to satisfy my curiosity and to accumulate images." When seen in a grouping Stone's images become a map of himself that ironically reflects the larger sociological matter of intent versus actual achievement.

© Jim Stone, *Frank's Awesome Tie Dye*, Pineville, Missouri, 2002. 24 x 30 inches. Inkjet print.

a subject. When the expression of something of significance is communicated, an image can be said to possess meaning.

PHOTOGRAPHY'S PRIVILEGE

Photography is omnipresent in our society, so when you go out with a camera people will often give you a unique privilege, some leeway,



2.3 In this series, a response to the Boom and Bust Nevada lifestyle as seen from the viewpoint of roadside venues erected during the 1940s-late 1950s, Lauritzen uses color and juxtaposition to catch and hold viewer attention. "People drove across Nevada at night due to the heat and no air conditioning in most cars. In response to this mass relocation west, small way stations were built, with the necessities for getting across the Nevada deserts. This was the BOOM of Nevada's roadside commerce. Then, in the mid 1960's: BUST! The Interstates arrived and the way stations 'just up and left' — their owners leaving everything behind to rush to their next hopeful strike. Nevada inhabitants live and work on tenuous foundations. We are a State truly on wheels, always looking for and then moving to the next Boom!"

© Erik Lauritzen, *Green Bug*, from the series *Stop the Car Dad*, 2005. 16 x 20 inches. Inkjet print.

in that they too have directly experienced the photographic process. Learn to use this shared understanding to your advantage, not as an excuse for irresponsible or unethical behavior, but to make the images you want to make without exploiting the subject. With the appropriate approach, you can get people to act in your picture, to get out of your picture, to hold equipment, or to just leave you alone. It all depends on the attitude that you project to others and your interpersonal skills in getting people to cooperate.

THE LANGUAGE OF VISION

In ancient Greece, Socrates spoke of the eternally beautiful geometric forms. Over time these forms have codified into an analytical system that has tremendously influenced imagemaking. This language of vision utilizes light, color, contrast, line, shape, pattern, texture, similarity, and movement. Through these formal visual elements, one can make images that convey and enlarge our ideas of what is worth looking at, what we have the right to observe and make pictures of, and how we interpret pictures. Photographic imagemaking can transform any object and make it part of our experience by changing it into something that can be fixed and studied later at your convenience. Influential photographers understand the visual process and its tools, allowing them to express the ideas and stories that resonate in their time. Photographers with vision push out the boundaries of the language, invent new means for the rest of us to use, and create images that affect how we know the world.

The design principles, such as variety, scale, balance, and emphasis, control the representation of the overall structure of any composition. The visual elements such as line, shape, color, and texture organize and embody the detail and content within the structure.



2.4 "I begin by selecting a subject, and spend time with him or her—asking about their job, and watching them work. After collecting information about the scenario for the photograph, I set up the camera and begin to direct the person throughout the space, asking them to act as if they were actually working while striving to find a balance between humor and esteem. The rhythm that results from hours of contemplation while constructing an image in Photoshop has shown me that the process of actually taking the picture is only the beginning: gathering components you might say. Digital technology offers me an opportunity to fine tune and perfect my images so that they most successfully convey the idea I want to communicate, and this has become an indispensable aspect of my work."

© Nathan Baker, *Mail Service*, 2003. 40 × 50 inches. Inkjet print. Courtesy of Schneider Gallery, Chicago and Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco.



2.5 This image, part of a series of butterfly chrysalises, depicts actual metamorphoses. Fuss's detailed chrysalises, magnified hundreds of times and presented vertically on velvety black backgrounds, appear more extraterrestrial than butterfly-like. The delicacy and fragility of the encased body are distinctly present. Fuss's solemn and darkly luminous, human-sized blow-ups of butterfly chrysalides call to mind a sarcophagus while showing us a moment just before a new kind of life begins. His unspoken subject has been called the evolution of the human soul, a watcher who experiences our singular lives, from whom meaning emanates, and from whom we perceive our true self.

© Adam Fuss, *Untitled*, 2003. 72 x 44 inches. Inkjet print. Courtesy of Chem & Read, New York.

Together, these principles and elements provide the basic tool set that needs to be mastered to communicate photographically.

PHOTOGRAPHY'S NATIVE CHARACTERISTICS

Theoretically, a "line is a line" regardless of the medium, but a line painted on canvas is different from a line made photographically. Why? Any visual element photographically represented has more inherent real-world content because of its foothold in concrete reality. Imagine the world before photography. In her book *Photography and Society* (1974), photographer Giselle Freund observed, "Before the first press pictures, the ordinary man would visualize only those events that took place near him, on his street or in his village. Photography opened a window. As the reader's outlook expanded, the world began to shrink." Even if the subject is unfamiliar, the visual language of photography and its connection to reality is immediately recognizable. Therefore, a line created by a street curb in a photograph creates a much different meaning from a line painted on canvas because of all its real-world associations. One is not better or worse than the other, but they are different. It is this intrinsic difference that imagemakers must come to terms with and understand to succeed photographically. One should keep inquiring into photography's native characteristics and how its direct, realistic connection between the subject being pictured and the resulting image can be applied to achieve one's desired outcome. Try dipping into the history of photography to compare and contrast how important imagemakers such as modernist Paul Strand and constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko had highly divergent ideas about how to organize their visual space.

2.6 “The photographs in *NextNature* are inextricably linked to the plants and forests from which they came. I present these materials life size, emphasizing the primary physical reality in a format that references the magnitude of the forest floor. The works are composed on a large lightbox and then photographed straight down using a high-resolution scanning back in the place of film, enabling me to show an astonishing visual clarity at large scale. This allows me to make images that are less metaphorical in their representation and more direct, which in turn supports a sense of ‘matter-of-fact-ness’ in the work.”

© Stephen Galloway. *Scatter* from the series *NextNature*, 2004. 40 × 76-1/4 inches. Chromogenic color print.



DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Unity and Variety

Unity and variety are visual twins. Unity, also known as harmony, is a state of forming a complete, consistent, and pleasing whole that is planned and controlled by the imagemaker. Variety refers to a similar class of subject that is somehow diverse or different. A composition devoid of a unifying principle will generate a chaotic or haphazard response to what has been photographically represented. A completely unified composition without variety is often boring and monotonous. Unity controls variety, but variety provides the diverse visual pull within unity that keeps things visually intriguing. Effective compositions usually have a balance between these two qualities — a variety of elements held together by a unifying device.

The repetition of pattern, shape, or size plus the harmony of color and texture are visual ways of creating unity. The more complex

a composition is, the greater the need for a unifying device. A more subtle method is continuation, such as when a line or the edge of an object leads a viewer's attention from one area of a composition to another. Consider a checkerboard pattern or grid that is completely unified and therefore static. Vary the color, size, or texture of the pattern and it immediately becomes dynamic. In photography, contrast is a major method of controlling variety — light against dark, large against small, smooth against rough, hard against soft. Dramatic lighting, known as *chiaroscuro*, emphasizes these contrasting gradations of light and dark values in two-dimensional imagery, while soft lighting minimizes these differences.

Emphasis

Most photographs need a focal point or points to provide visual emphasis. These are elements that attract the eye and act as a visual climax, stressing a key point or points within the composition.

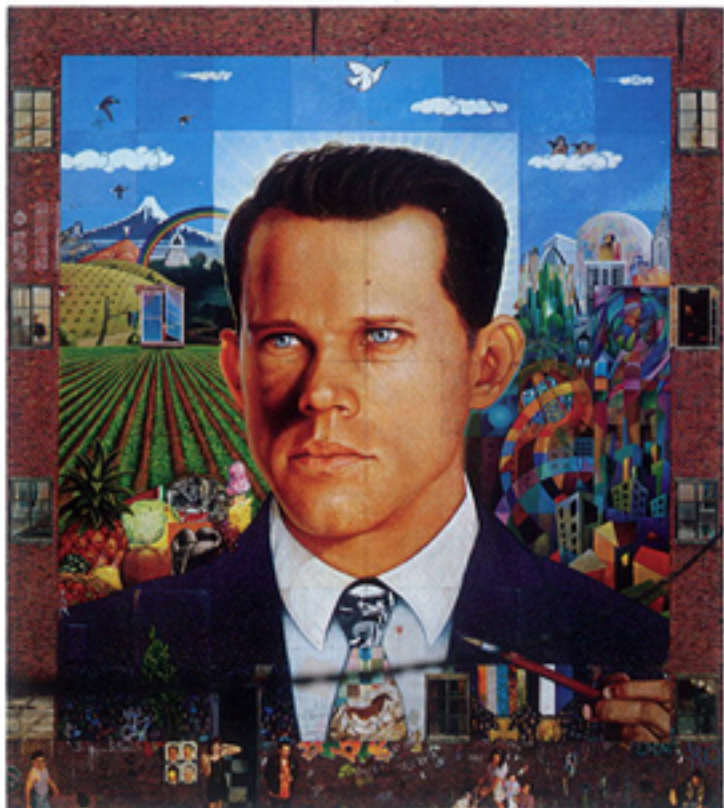
2.8 By building scale models and casting himself as all the characters, Adams fabricated an elaborate parody of a grandiose political poster, featuring a mixture of clashing political and artistic themes and styles. “Rather than cover up or reject the influence of digital imaging, I suggest digital manipulation that was not done. Instead of a fake photograph of a real scene, it’s a real photograph of a fake scene [made with an 8 × 10 inch view camera], in which authenticity, illusion, and apparent digital manipulation create a maze of puzzles and paradoxes. There are often clues to the illusions, such as reflections of the backs of cardboard characters and extra figures lying around the set. But their being dubious documents of illusions is fully in keeping with the other contradictions and deceptions in the piece.”

© Bill Adams. *Billfound* 2006, 2006. 29 × 32 inches. Chromogenic color print.

Without emphasis, your eye tends to wander and is never satiated. Focal point devices to keep in mind are color, contrast, depth of field, isolation, light, placement, perspective, and size. One is often played off against another; for example, a limited depth of field may be used to isolate the primary subject. Secondary points of interest, known as *accents*, can direct the eye to parts of a composition that have less visual value than the primary focal point, but are still important for understanding the work. Yet sometimes an imagemaker will purposely create an ambiguous composition without a single focal point by deploying a multiplicity of points; this draws attention to the entire surface of the work instead of its individual elements.

Scale

Scale and proportion are interrelated and both refer to size. Scale indicates relative size or extent in comparison to a constant standard, that is, relative to the size something “ought to be.” By showing objects larger or smaller than normal, a viewer is made to see the



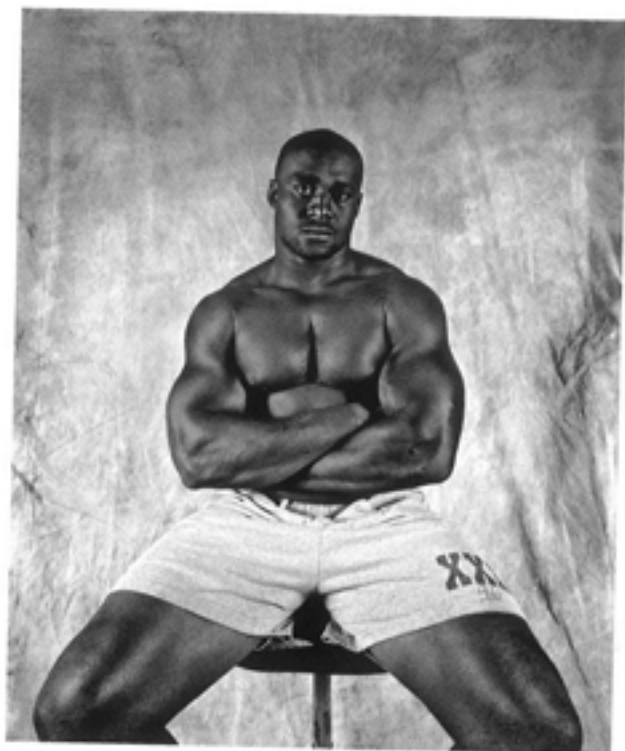
form in a new way. Such juxtapositions encourage audiences to take a fresh look at the subject. A classic example is the *diminutive effect*, which is visible when a human figure is arranged in conjunction with a massive natural or human-made site such as the Grand Canyon or a Gothic cathedral. Dadaist and surrealist artists often employed scale as a way to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Varying the focal length of your lens is a good initial way to experiment with scale.

Proportion

Proportion involves the relationship in size or shape between one thing and another or between the parts of a whole within a composition. Shapes are proportional to the area they occupy within the composition. Proportion is linked to ratio. The proportions of a subject are considered correct or normal if the ratio of one component to another is acceptable. For example, when making a portrait, if the circle formed by the head is 3 inches in diameter on a 6-inch background, it will be more disproportional than if it were placed on a 12-inch background. Correct proportion is generally based on what society considers real, normal, or ideal and can change from one generation to the next.

The Golden Mean

The ancient Greeks developed a set of ideal proportions called the *Golden Mean*, which they converted into ratios that could be applied to draw the perfect body or build the perfect architectural structure. The Golden Mean, AKA the Rule of Thirds is the proportion arising from the division of a straight line into two, so that the ratio of the whole line to the larger part is exactly the same as the ratio of the larger part to the smaller part. Mathematically, it is a ratio of 1 to $1/2(\sqrt{5} + 1)$, a proportion that is considered to be particularly pleasing to the eye and can be found in natural growth patterns in nature. Its modular repetition has facilitated its use throughout the history of design. The Golden Mean can be a good starting point, but just because something is disproportional to a subjective ideal does not make it flawed. On the contrary, uniqueness is often attention getting. This means that deliberately changing a composition's proportions can be a good method for creating impact. The position of the camera and the distance of the subject from the lens are the easiest ways to



2.9 In a makeshift studio, Goldberg formally photographed members of the Dallas Cowboys during training camp. By posing the subject with his muscular legs in the foreground, Goldberg was able to make use of our innate sense of human proportion to generate viewer interest while conveying a sense of strength and athleticism.

Gary Goldberg, *Honoring Haddon*, from the series *Dallas Cowboys*, 2000. 18 x 12 inches. Inkjet print.

manipulate proportion. Digital imaging software allows for extensive post-camera modifications to be made in the areas of proportion and scale. All these factors control how the meaning is constructed. Garry Winogrand observed, "Photography is about finding out what can