Your Inner Gift: Cultivating the Art of Simplicity in Photography

Session 4: *The Medium, Part I – Toward a Visual Grammar*

*** Exercises ***

- **Exercise S4-1:** ***Identifying "local" moods of an image***

Consider these alternative crops of the previous image (s4-i1):

S4-i2

They all work in their own way (to varying degrees), but each also exudes its own unique mood. Carefully examine each image, and note what thoughts/emotions it evokes in you, and what either works or does-not-work; you will all have varying opinions, which is at it should be; there is no "right" or "wrong" here. Consider *why* a given image has the effect it does on you.

Now reach into your archives and look for an analogous "single point focus" image (or a few, if you have time) with which you can play the same game: namely, take a few notional crops around the "central focus" in the image (so that each isolated area stands on its own as "interesting"), and consider the same kinds of questions as for my Skye picture: why is the crop weaker (stronger?) than your original image? What's "different" about your crops, relative to how the original makes you think/feel?

The idea in this exercise is to get you to explicitly think about the "devil is in the details"-level minutiae that make up an image – and that directly shape how we react to it – but about which we seldom pay much attention to. One you have familiarized yourself the basic elements of visual grammar, you will be able to predict, and therefore control, how your image will be viewed and interpreted by others.

- **Exercise S4-2: *Developing an eye for elemental shapes***

This is a two-part exercise, that – I warn you – might at first appear too trivial to spend much time on. I urge you to try it, particularly if you have never tried this before.

The first part consists of drawing (freehand or with straightedge, whichever you prefer), then cutting out some basic shapes: *triangles*, *squares*, *rectangles*, *thin long rectangles* (to approximate "lines"), *circles*, and *ellipses*. Draw them all out on a standard 8-1/2-by-11 sheet of paper; make several different-sized variants of each. Cut them out and assemble them on the table. Now take another piece of paper, and draw some rectangles to approximate a typical frame of film of various aspect ratios (or the one or two that you most like to use: square, 4-by-3, 2-by-1, whatever); make the frame large enough to comfortably accommodate the placement of several of your "cut out" shapes. *Now play!* Spend 15-20 minutes just playing around with various "compositions" (of shapes). Notice what "feels" right when something just "clicks" and seems to be in place. Do you prefer to have a single "square" sitting off to one side, with a smaller-sized circle some distance away? Do you like an equal mix of linear and curved shapes? What relative angles do you best like to position your shapes? The point of this part of the exercise is to learn your "style" of assembling elemental graphical shapes in a frame. As I said, it may *seem* almost too trivial to try; but I'm guessing that not all of you have actually ever *done* it. If you do it sincerely (and practice on your own, during and after this workshop), you will eventually train your eye to *automatically* see just those assemblies of abstract forms in the real environment that are the most pleasing to you. Developing this instinct begins with what only *seems* like frivolous grade-school "play."

The second part of this exercise involves applying what you've hopefully learned about your own aesthetic predilections from "playing" with shapes in frames to the real world. Either go out with your camera or search through your archives search for images that emphasize *points, lines,* are these three primary shapes: *triangles, squares*, and *circles*. Just as any color is a blend of the three primary colors, so all shapes may be viewed as deformations or arrangements of primary shapes. Capture (or Identify) images that contain one or at most a few simultaneous elements. Try to get a few examples of each. This, again, might sound

simple – and it *is* – but it is also instructive, as it emphasizes a different way of looking at the world (and of finding potential subjects to photograph). The "sage photographer" ignores the names of things, and instead sees the world as an assemblage of primary shapes.

If this is something you have not done before, you may be surprised at what a creative spark this seemingly "simple" two-part exercise can bring. Rather than waiting for a Henri Cartier-Bresson "Decisive Moment" to strike (though we should all be ready for that, as it can happen at any time!), or looking for "interesting things," the right light, or other subject matter to appear for you to photograph, instead look – deliberately, patiently, and sincerely – for nothing other than "interesting arrangements" of lines, triangles, squares, and circles. The caveat, is that these "lines, triangles, squares, and circles" are not (necessarily) literal, but are the abstract forms that populate whatever scene you are photographing (as in the shapes overlaid on top of my shots of *Luray Caverns* in images s4-i8 and s4-i9).

- **Exercise S4-3: *Learning to "see" light***

In many ways, this entire workshop can be summarized by these three "simple" insights: (1) slow down and still your mind before letting your eyes "see" the world, (2) always *first* look at light (never objects), and (3) when you do train your eyes on objects, observe them not as things but as *tones* and *shapes*. In this exercise, you will start training yourself to see and react to different forms and qualities of light.

As you go about your usual business during the coming week, wherever that may be or wherever it may take you (office, car, street, shopping mall, park, etc.), mentally frame – *compose* – an image of a scene in your mind's eye. Try to determine its darkest and brightest spots. Look closely; is the white paint on the asphalt ahead of your car really the brightest thing in your view? Compare it to the glint or glare that you see on parts of cars the surround you. Is the asphalt itself really as dark as it appears to be? How does its appearance change when a sunny day turns cloudy? Note and compare how different tonalities are distributed throughout the scene.

If you find yourself in a park and near some trees (or perhaps there are some outside your office window), pay attention to how it appears under different types of light; how much detail can you make out in bright light? How does the tree look when moist after rain? On a cloudy day? If you see (and examine) a tree under bright light one day, try to anticipate what it will look like under a more diffuse light; then, if possible, go back to it when the conditions are right and compare what you expected to see to what you really see. Try anticipating what other objects will look like under different lighting conditions.

Now, open up *Photoshop*, or whatever image processing program you are familiar with (any program will do, so long as it includes an "eye dropper" option with which you can sample the luminance of selected parts of an image), and play the game of predicting the luminance values of, say, the brightest, darkest, and "closest to mid-tone" parts of an image.

Are you right? If you have never done this before, you may be surprised at how difficult it is to find the "extremes," or even just predicting the relative tonalities of an image, in general. As alluded to before, our eyes react to tone (and color) locally, in context of what they are surrounded by. Something that appears "bright" may have caught your attention only because it is surrounded by darker parts, and vice versa. Other, objectively brighter spots, may appear less bright only because they are surrounded by similar tonalities.

By diligently practicing both parts of this exercise – and, in the second part, paying close attention to how your expectations differ from precisely measured luminance values – you will, over time, tune your "eyes" and sharpen your intuition to automatically recognize different forms of light, tonal distributions, and how the perception and interpretation of scenes changes with changing conditions.

I look forward to hearing about the results of your experiments, and what you learned from them, on our Facebook page!

- **Exercise S4-4: "Moonrise over Hernandez"**

Watch Ansel Adams describe how he "saw" and *created* "Moonrise over Hernandez":

https://petapixel.com/2016/06/24/making-ansel-adams-famous-image/

Compare Adams' *straight* print (that has no tonal manipulations applied to it, and that appears at the 6:07 mark of the video), with the final (rightfully, well-known, but heavily manipulated) version. Had Adams captured this same image using color film instead of black-and-white, and applied the same range of tonal manipulations (albeit tailored to and commensurate with the latitude afforded by color), the result would have been unbearably garish, and ugly. Adams' aesthetic vision, technical skill in the darkroom, and wide tolerance of tonal manipulations afforded by black-and-white film, all conspired to create a masterpiece.