Booklet #24: The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs

ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY

by

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PREFACE

The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs (NVACC) is an informal organization started in 1997 by Joseph Miller with the assistance of Dave Carter and Ed Funk. Our purpose is to promote communication and cooperation among camera clubs. We accomplish this by (a) publishing a monthly calendar of the member clubs' activities; (b) conducting training seminars for photographic judges; (c) maintaining a registry of trained judges who serve the clubs' monthly competitions and critiques; and (d) maintaining a directory of speakers who have been recommended by the various clubs. You can learn more about NVACC by going to our web site at www.NVACC.org.

This booklet is one of a series that was developed by NVACC during the period 1998-2008 to capture the considerable expertise of the many accomplished photographers in Northern Virginia and share it with others. Over recent years, we have seen significant change in the photographic art form and very rapid technical advance in both the media of photography (film and digital) and the tools (cameras, lenses, computers, and software). For that reason, the detail of some of these booklets may seem "dated", although the ideas and techniques presented transcend "progress" and the digital-film divide. Watch the NVACC web for new booklets as well as revisions that incorporate new technology and ideas into the existing ones.

Originally, our booklets were made available through member clubs for a small fee that covered the cost of reproduction. Now, however, the booklets are available on www.NVACC.com where individuals may download one machine-readable copy and one print copy per page for personal, noncommercial use only. Written permission from NVACC is required for any other use.

If you would like to know more about NVACC or have questions or suggestions concerning our booklets or services, please feel free to contact us at JoeMiller@NVACC.org.

Abstract Photography

Abstracts are the poetry of photography – free verse written in color and tone producing poems of mood, feeling and emotion. Photographers are writers, visual communicators, who for the most part use their cameras to write declarative sentences. But cameras can be used to record more that just a literal story. Photographers can also use their cameras to create abstracts – visual mysteries that can awaken the reader's imagination and sense of wonder.

There are two kinds of abstracts: found and created. Both are characterized by designs depicting no immediately recognizable object(s), only images of color, tone and texture. By avoiding the familiar, abstract photography can more readily encompass imagination, emotion and creativity. When the fusion of color, tone and texture is done well, abstract photography becomes visual enjoyment, and possibly even art.

All photographs do not need a subject. Indeed, the photograph would not be an abstract if it were literal and clearly representational. The charm of an abstract is its mystery.

To communicate well, one must know the parts of speech. At an early age we were taught in school the parts of written speech – noun, pronoun, verb, adverb, adjective, etc. But the parts of visual speech (visual communication) are not formally taught even though we live in a visual world with television, computer screens, movies, etc. While abstracts may appear to be different from traditional photographs, the parts of visual speech (visual communication) must be understood and applied. Given the absence of the familiar or representational in an abstract, good visual design is even more important.

In addition to the building blocks of visual design – lines, shapes, texture and perspective – other factors that should be considered when making an abstract are color, tone, harmony, rhythm, contrast, balance/imbalance, proportion, dominance, spacing, placement, etc.

Since the effect of an abstract image depends on the emotion evoked, the photographer must understand the psychological impact of design elements, such as:

- A horizontal line suggests rest.
- A vertical line suggests strength.
- An oblique line suggests transition or movement.
- A perfect circle commands visual attention.

- An oval points the eye in the direction off the oval.
- The point of a triangle directs the viewer's eye.
- A horizontal rectangle suggests rest.
- A vertical rectangle suggests strength.
- An oblique rectangle suggests movement and transition.
- The eye is attracted to what is sharp (in focus).
- The eye is attracted to contrast(s).
- The eye is attracted to certain colors, e.g., bright red.
- The eye is attracted to elements near the retaining walls (borders).
- Dominance does not necessarily mean taking up a large area of the picture space.
- Texture is a major element of visual communication.

In abstract photography, the careful and thoughtful photographer (there should be no other kind) is encouraged to consider the following when creating abstracts:

- distribute dark tones uniformly throughout the picture space
- distribute light tones uniformly throughout the picture space
- balance dark tones with light tones
- balance color and/or tone throughout the picture space
- balance color and/or tone in the corners
- introduce secondary motif lines to support the primary line
- create repeating themes to enforce the primary theme
- use repetition - - patterns, colors, tones, shapes, etc. to suggest rhythm
- strive for compositional balance - - but be mindful that sometimes imbalance can be very powerful
- avoid the temptation to include an apparent "center of interest" which may alter the entire mood of the image
- remember that exposure changes will likely change the mood of the image
- remember that even though the image may not be recognizable, all parts of the picture space should make a contribution
- remember that abstract photography is often more effective when there is an illusion of texture in the image

There is an excellent training exercise to learn to see design elements in an abstract. Gently crumple a piece of aluminum foil so as to produce random patterns of lines and shapes. Use colored lights, gels, reflectors, etc. to project various reflected hues onto the crumpled aluminum foil. Slightly move the aluminum foil or your camera to change the arrangement of colors, tones and shapes in the viewfinder. Ask yourself why you like or don't like the different images. Why are some more pleasing and some less pleasing to your eye? When you can verbalize your responses, you are on the way to becoming an abstract photographer.

The important "rule" in abstract photography is: isolate, isolate, isolate. Photographers often ask where one can find abstracts. Fortunately the answer can be given in one word: EVERYWHERE. The key to creating abstracts is to abstract — that is, isolate, isolate, isolate. Generally, macro lenses and telephoto lenses isolate best. Wide angle lenses, because of their broad coverage, usually include too much peripheral information.

Abstracts are not understood by many photographers (and by many judges) in part because of the absence of a subject. Indeed, the mood and effect of an abstract would be destroyed if there were a subject or an obvious center of interest. Yet abstracts have long been an important part of the art world. From such diverse styles as Wassily Kandinsky to Georgia O'Keeffe, artists have painted abstracts. Much of today's "Modern Art" would have to be classified as abstract.

While abstracts are not well accepted in camera club competitions bound by traditional dogma such as the rule of thirds, a need for a center of interest, etc., many master photographers have produced outstanding abstracts that transform the camera from an ordinary recording device to an instrument that creates fine art. Think of Edward Weston's peppers or his shells. Harry Callahan and Man Ray were pioneers in creating abstract designs. Among contemporary photographers, Freeman Patterson's images are true works of art.

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