

Your Inner Gift: Cultivating the Art of Simplicity in Photography

Session 5: *The Medium, Part II – Abstraction as simplification*

This session will expand on the practical lessons introduced in Session 4, and focus on the art of *abstraction* as – somewhat paradoxically – a concrete method of simplifying photographs. We will discuss specific ways of creating abstractions, including creating so-called “minimalist” images, the selective use of neutral density filters, and macro photography.

Seeing the graphical essence of things

“Abstraction allows man to see with his mind what he cannot physically see with his eyes... Abstract art enables the artist to perceive beyond the tangible, to extract the infinite out of the finite. It is the emancipation of the mind. It is an explosion into unknown areas.” – Arshile Gorky (1904 – 1948)

What is an abstract photograph? To some degree, all photographs are abstract. There is the story about a man who finds himself sitting next to Pablo Picasso on a train one day, and asks Picasso why he paints only abstractions. Picasso thought for a moment, then queries back, “What do you think reality looks like?” To which the man replies by pulling a picture of his wife out his wallet, showing it to Picasso and declaring, “Here, this is reality. Here is my wife.” Picasso looks at the photograph, smiles, and counters with, “This is really your wife? She is very small, and rather flat, don’t you think?”

The distinction between reality and our perception of reality is not as clear cut as we might first think. And the depicted reality – whether photograph, painting, sketch, memory, or whatever – is obviously different from the reality itself.

A deeper answer to the question, “What is an abstract photograph?”, is that it is any image that is not obviously representational; i.e., that the point of constructing the image is not to convey an image of a “thing” (recognizable or not) but to focus on and combine the aesthetic elements that make up any image (e.g., forms, tones, textures, colors, patterns, rhythms, and so on). Where a head-on picture of a tree (such as my example of the luminescent-seeming white tree against a dark background in Session 1) is obviously representational – that image practically screams, “*I am a Tree!*” to the viewer – a focus on only the details of the geometry of a tree’s branches and leaves already represents a basic step towards abstraction.

This is why it was important for us to discuss a bit of composition theory in Session 4 – before tackling abstraction – since it is only when we achieve a familiarity with (and effortless proficiency in) how images are constructed, that we hope to craft images that are attuned to our aesthetic predilections. While a simple “point and shoot” photograph of a

random piece of asphalt on your driveway might qualify as an “abstract” image, it is unlikely to be perceived as anything but a “picture of a random piece of asphalt” *unless* the graphical elements that make up that image – the basic forms, tones, textures, and so on, that appear in it – are also arranged in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Of course, *you* must decide what “aesthetically pleasing” means; but that is the whole point. Step one is to learn – and master – the elements of the photographic process that are under your immediate control. Step two is to use this skill to focus the object of attention in your images not on the obvious *things* that your lens is trained on but on the graphical and aesthetic elements used to depict them.

When I work as a physicist rather than photographer (remember that your workshop leader studies something called “complexity” when not looking for “simplicity” with his camera), much of my work depends on *abstracting* the elements of physical systems. Real systems are almost always much too complicated to describe directly and fully. Instead, what we do is strip away whatever details are unnecessary for understanding whatever problem we are trying to solve (e.g., I don’t need to know the color of a car to model how fast it can move), and work with just the bare essentials that describe the systems of interest (e.g., I might model a real car as a flattened egg on wheels). Indeed, it is an old joke among physicists that, to us, everything in the world can be described as a system of blocks, ovoids, and springs.

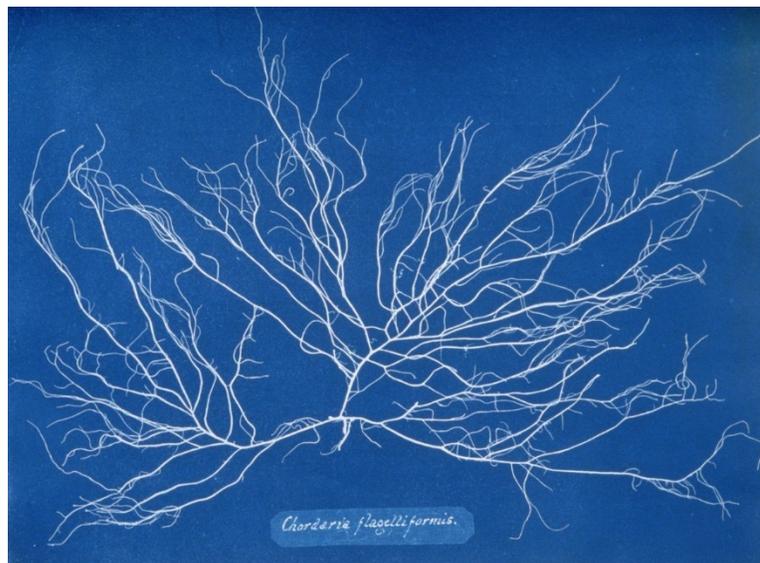
Abstraction in photography works in much the same way. It is the deliberate stripping away of everything in an image that is extraneous to the graphical elements alone. The deeper the sense of mystery that the arrangement of these graphical elements infuses into the final image – gently compelling viewers to “solve” the latent riddle, “What am I?” – the more successful the “abstract photograph” is likely to be. Sometimes, even the most obviously realistic photographs can make wonderful abstracts, provided that everything in the photograph that lends a context or scale to what is shown has been deleted. For example, a travelogue-style picture of tourists wandering atop sand dunes in the desert is obviously nothing but a representational image of sand dunes. But crop out or delete the tourists and their footprints (or position your camera view in such a way so that the lens sees nothing but dunes) and that otherwise “representational” image may become a magnificent abstract.

Note that – in my view (other photographers may choose to differ) – being able to recognize objects in an image does not preclude that image from being an abstraction. All that is needed for the image to work as an “abstract” is that the *recognizable* object in question is secondary in importance (in terms of the relative degree of attention it compels the viewer to give) to other graphical elements that make up the image. It is in this sense that abstraction can be thought of as a method of simplifying your photography: it frees you from thinking about *what* you are capturing images of, and leaves you free to compose just with your aesthetic eye. More to the point, *abstraction disentangles cognition from creation*. Before looking at some examples, and taking some on your own, let’s take a brief look at the history of abstraction in photography.

(Short) History of abstract photography

“No human hand has hitherto traced such lines as these drawings display, and what man may hereafter do, now that Dame Nature has become his drawing mistress, it is impossible to predict.” – Michael Faraday (Physicist, 1791 – 1867)

Abstract photographic images have existed almost as long as photography itself (invented, independently, in two different ways, but in the same year – 1839 – by Louis Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot), though their true origin is perhaps best traced back to when early to mid 19th century scientists (like astronomer John William Draper, physicist Antoine Henri Becquerel, and botanist Anna Atkins) started using photography to document their work. Because many of these early images depicted parts of the world that was not normally perceptible to the human eye, they were *abstract* by definition. For example, Atkins often made images – technically called *photograms* – by placing organic material such as algae and plants onto photographic paper. Since these photograms looked nothing like anyone had ever seen before at that time, it can be argued that they are among the first abstract photographs produced. Here, for example, is an image from 1844 that is now in the public domain:¹



s5-i1

Abstraction soon embraced art proper, not just science, at the turn of the last century, as photographer and modern art promoter Alfred Stieglitz started displaying the works by both abstract artists and photographers (such as Edward Steichen, Alvin Langdon Coburn, and Paul Strand) in his New York gallery and unabashedly publishing abstract images in his seminal photographic journal, *Camera Work*.

¹ For a collection of Anna Atkins images archived at the *New York Public Library Digital Collection*, see: <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/photographs-of-british-algae-cyanotype-impressions#/?tab=navigation>. A wonderful book on the history of early scientific photography is: Jennifer Tucker, *Nature Exposed: Photography as Eyewitness in Victorian Science*, John Hopkins University Press, 2013.

After Steiglitz came the surrealist photographers – such as László Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, Jaroslav Rossler, and Maurice Tabard – who used abstraction to illustrate the basic precepts of surrealism. As articulated by André Breton in his 1924 opus, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, the surrealism sought to tap into the creative powers of the unconscious via dreams, intoxication, sexual ecstasy, madness, and chance. Though photography played a key role in this movement – processes such as double exposure, solarization, multiple exposures, montages, and rayograms (which did not even require the use of a camera)² were all used to evoke some bizarre union of dreams and reality – strictly speaking, it was not really “abstract photography” in the sense articulated earlier. The surrealist’s use of abstraction was not for the sake of abstraction, per se (i.e., to emphasize basic aesthetic and/or graphical elements), but rather to deliberately instill a sense of the outrageously bizarre and otherworldly.

More artful examples of abstraction (*as abstraction*) in photography that followed the surrealists can be seen in the works of such photographers as: Andre Kertesz, Lotte Jacobi, Aaron Siskind, Harry Callahan, György Kepes, Harold Edgerton, Frederick Sommer, James Welling, and, of course, Minor White. Some of the better known modern abstract photographers (or those whose body of work includes abstraction) are Penelope Umbrico, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Wolfgang Tillmans, Uta Barth, Ilan Wolff, and Silvio Wolf.

Of course, this is far from a complete set; these merely represent the names of a some of the photographers that I can think of off the top of my head. I urge you to Google (images by) some of the names listed here to get a feel for the variety of work and approaches. One of the cardinal “rules” of being an artist (from beginner to accomplished master!) is to *seek out the work of other artists*; not to copy (though that will always take place on an unconscious level; it is how our minds – how our creativity – works!), not to get depressed over how much better their work is than ours, but for ideas and inspiration.

Two great places to see curated examples of abstract photography are on: (1) *artsy.net* – <https://www.artsy.net/gene/abstract-photography> (over 11,000 images, as of early August 2017); and (2) Art Photo Index (API), with over 1800 images –

http://www.artphotoindex.com/api/recently_added.cfm?to=photographers#search/s/abstract

Another place to look is the archive of images submitted to the *Joseph Miller Abstract Photography Exhibit*, which is an annual contest held under the auspices of the Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs. Abstracts from the 2017 edition of this exhibit can be seen at this link: <http://nvacc.org/home/category/gallery/>.

The single best reference on the history of abstract photography and state-of-the-art in modern abstract imagery is *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography*, by Lyle Rexer, and published by MIT Press in 2013.

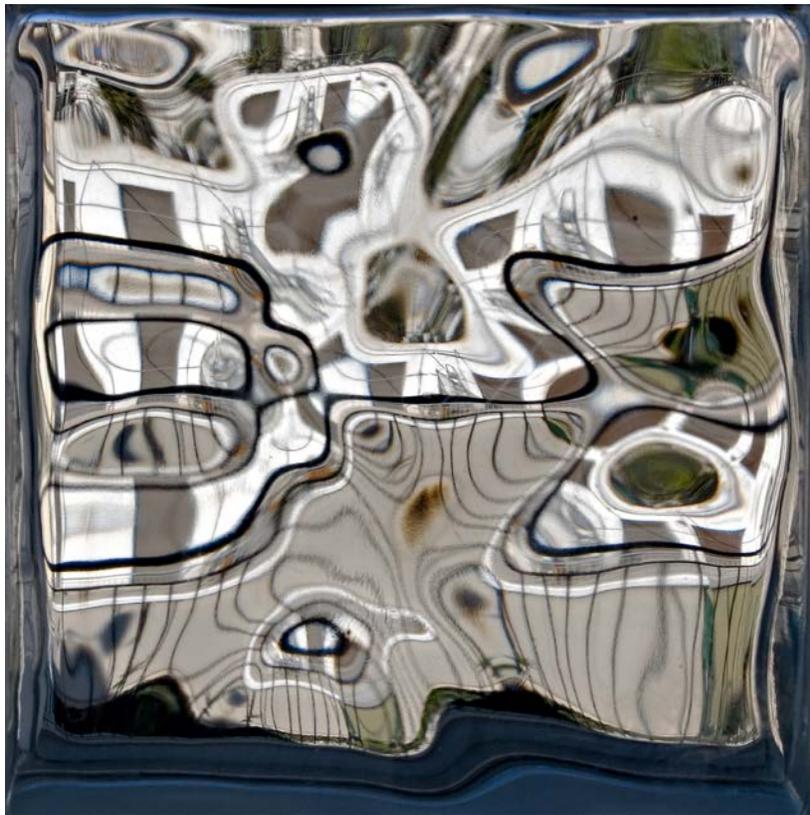
² Cameraless photography has both an interesting history and is something more and more photographers are interested in exploring. Two good books on the subject are: *Emanations: The Art of the Cameraless Photograph* (Geoffrey Batchen, Prestel, 2016), and *Shadow Catchers: Cameraless Photography* (Martin Barnes, Merrell Publishers, 2012).

Ways of creating abstract images | *Examples*

Abstract images can be created in a near infinite number of ways, using essentially any method that allows an image to be manipulated in some way. Here are a few specific techniques you may find useful, and which you can refine and improve upon as you discover what works best for you.

Direct Capture

By far, the easiest way of creating abstract images is to “see” and capture them directly. For example, one of my favorite images from a few years back was captured (almost too easily!) just outside a hotel room my wife and I were staying at in Athens, Greece. As I was waiting for my wife to emerge from our room before we left for lunch, I noticed a wall with some very thick semi-translucent glass, through which I could see beautifully distorted views of the houses across the street from our hotel. Had I been in too much of a hurry, and/or had the light not been right, I would have missed capturing this abstract:



s5-i2

I “saw” the following image – an overhead shot of the geometry of form, light, and shadow on the ceiling – while sitting with my oldest son at a local DMV waiting for his name to be called for his driver’s permit test (it was captured with my iPhone):



s5-i3

Cropping

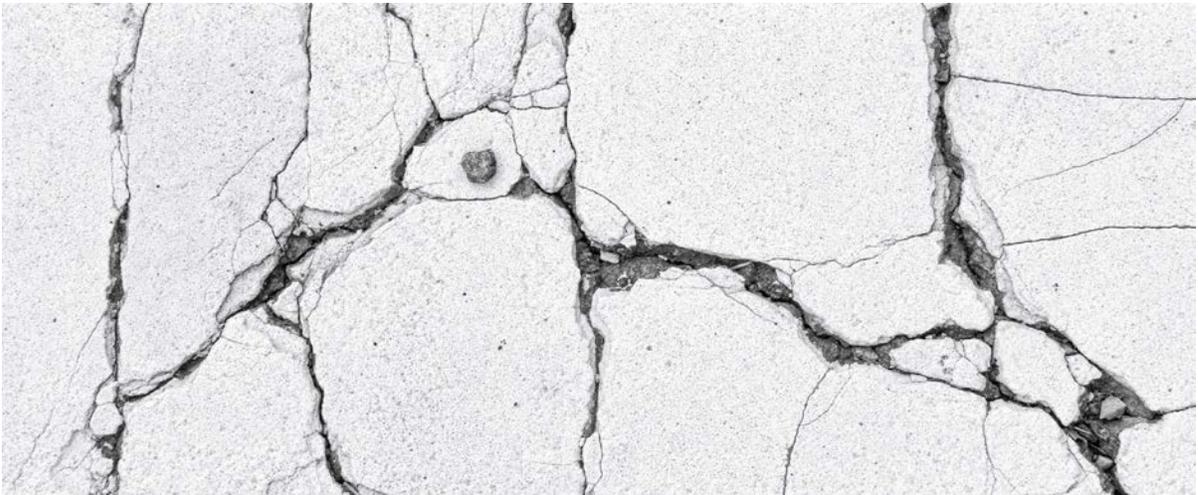
The simplest technique to use after an image is captured is *cropping*, and/or deleting (or selectively “healing”) parts of an image using the appropriate tools in Photoshop or other image manipulation program). Of course, cropping can – and ought! – be done in-camera, as you are composing an image. But it is sometimes impossible to include and exclude everything you wish in-camera alone. The general idea (whether before or after image capture) is to include only those parts of an image that contribute to it being an “abstract” image. How do you know which parts to exclude? If it provides an explanation of, or clue about, what the image is really about, if it sets the scale for the image, or if its presence detracts from the “abstract” core of the image, eliminate it. Remember, the lesser the degree of focus on the physical *thing* that is actually depicted in the image, the better. Keeping anything that tends to focus a viewer’s attention *on* the thing rather than away from it (and toward elements such as form, color, texture, etc.), will tend to render the image as less abstract.

This image of peeling paint (my homage to Aaron Siskind) works as an “abstract” because I’ve cropped out the window that sits a few inches to its left in the full image:



s5-i4

As another example, consider this image, captured a few years ago while I was waiting for a light to change at a local intersection in our neighborhood:



s5-i5

Can you guess what it is? The “object” in the image is a section of an old painted sign on the road, but which has been cropped to show only the cracks in the ground (along with one stray pebble, every so perfectly positioned). Had I chosen to keep a bit more of the “real” image, the boundary between the white paint of the sign and black asphalt along the top and bottom would have revealed one clue, and the curb on the right would have revealed another. Both would have rendered the image as much more so *obviously* representational than my cropped image shown above.

Movement

Motion of any kind, whether “out there” in the world that is captured with a stationary camera, or “in the camera” (whereby the camera is moved as you take an exposure of an unmoving object or landscape – try panning and/or tilting the camera as you press the shutter!) can be used to reduce clutter and visual information in an image, thereby injecting an abstract quality into your picture. A simple example is photographing ripples in water, with the caveat that your exposure time should be fast enough to capture whatever details are in the reflection, but slow enough to render them not obviously recognizable. You may need to experiment a bit, but the reward for your effort will be some wonderful abstractions:



s5-16

Getting closer (or farther away)

As we move in closer to an object, perhaps by using a macro lens (though that is not a requirement), details that are normally invisible to us may appear and be used to our advantage in creating abstractions. We can then play with different compositions under various lighting conditions to find images that are most appealing. The trick, as always, is to first find the “object” for which getting closer pays dividends. Here is a short story of how I chanced upon such an object a few years ago, and whose discovery – and subsequent abstract experimentation with – resulted in a portfolio publication in the photography magazine, *Lenswork*.

Because of my training as a physicist, my approach to photography has always been somewhat cerebral. Of course, my mind is certainly clear of equations while I shoot, and my “trigger finger” is driven more by intuition than math; but I just as often find myself analyzing the *Whys* and *Meanings* of a shot, with something approaching a clinical precision, even as the shutter is clicking. I suppose it is the price I pay for having a decidedly left-brain “day job.” So naturally, my cerebral side is almost always the one that guides me from shot to shot, and decides what new projects to start. Almost, but – happily – *not always*.

My family and I were sitting down to dinner one fateful autumn evening. Nothing out of the ordinary; indeed, one might even say, intimately banal. The furthest thought from my mind at that moment — at the end of a long photo-safari day, during which I took many soon-to-be-forgotten photos of rocks-and-water at a local park — was “analyzing” the mathematical pros and cons of possible new projects to start. All I wanted to do was eat. But, as my fork was about to pierce the skin of a potato, my wife nonchalantly placed two old small acrylic candle holders (that were given to us years ago as a wedding gift, but which I had never really “seen”) on the table, and reached for a match to light the candles. A cliched phrase aptly describes my reaction: *I see!* To say that the creative fire that instantly stirred within my photographic eye upon intuiting the limitless compositional possibilities of the “worlds within worlds” of trapped air bubbles *alone* sufficed to ignite the candles that evening may be a slight exaggeration. But it is a fact that these two humble holders (1) *left me dinnerless that night* (as, without a word, I rushed headlong for my tripod, hardly even giving a thought to the morsels of meat and potato still dangling from my beard), and (2) *completely consumed my photographic attention for the next two months*, as I zealously explored the magical universe that unfolded before my macro lens.



s5-i7

Random patterns

Another way of creating abstracts is to generate a large set of related but random patterns of some kind, and select those that are particularly appealing to you (presumably those images whose random graphical elements are arranged in an aesthetically pleasing way). I’ve already mentioned the example of just pointing your camera at random sections of asphalt on your driveway to look for “interesting” patterns. But there are obviously no limits to what you can focus your camera on: leaves, clouds, sand, waves, reflections, and – in the example at the top of the next page – *paint splotches* on rubber tires.



s5-i8

Digital manipulation

Sometimes it is not enough to find (or crop) an image “out there” in the real world, and it takes a bit of work to render it sufficiently “abstract.” Of course, the greater the required effort (or thought), the likelier it is that we will complicate, not simplify, our photography. In my case, I tend to keep my digital manipulations to an absolute minimum, focusing on very basic processing tools such as tonal variation, (local and global) contrast, noise control, and sharpening.

For “abstraction” I seldom do little beyond deliberately reversing tones; i.e., rendering light tones dark, and dark light. For those of you familiar with the “Curves” command in *Photoshop* or *Paint Shop Pro*, simply drag one corner of the curve (say, the one at bottom left, which nominally maps black – luminosity value = 0 – to black) all the way to the top (so that black is now mapped to white, with luminosity value = 255), and the opposite corner (top right) all the way to the bottom (bottom right). While nothing else is changed in any image to which this simple command is applied, the tonal reversal is often all it takes to inject a bit of mystery into an image that otherwise *may* appear (or be guessed) as purely representational.

Here are a few examples: *fire*, *ink*, and *moonlight* reflected in water, respectively.



s5-i9

Blurring

Deliberately blurring most, if not all, of the parts of a given composition can be an effective way to emphasize the abstract qualities of an image, and take the viewer's attention away from the purely representational aspects. One of my favorite recent (indeed, still ongoing) portfolios consists of images in which the depth of field – the part that is in sharp focus – is so narrow that *nothing* (or almost nothing) is in focus; ironically, however, the point of the portfolio – my aesthetic focus, if you will – is to use the total blur to evoke the impression of an out-of-focus real landscape. I call the series “Synesthsapes,” and have more to say about it in a stand-alone essay (a link to this essay is provided on the workshop page for this session, along with additional links to images from this portfolio that were published in *Lenswork* magazine a few years ago, and an audio interview I did with the editor of *Lenswork*, Brooks Jensen, about the process of creating them). Image s5-i10:



Minimalist Photography

Though it is hard to define an entire *class* of “minimalist” images (the range of images that fall into this set is far too broad to pigeon hole), generally speaking this class of images includes those that: (1) have large areas of negative space (that is, empty regions devoid of any subject of interest, and in which there is no obvious point of focus), (2) relatively subdued color palettes (typically with no more than a few colors, and even then with minimal dissonance, or, most commonly, monochromatic), and (3) whatever subjects are in the image are usually small, well-defined, and have strong, sharp transitions that separate them from the background. It almost goes without saying that minimalist images are seldom “complex,” though creating such images takes some skill and considerable practice. Because they are so simple, every potential distraction – a tonal imbalance here, a barely discernable detail over there – may throw off an entire composition. Perhaps the most difficult concept for beginning photographers to embrace is that of negative space as a palpably real compositional element in its own right. Evoking a sense of Tao and Zen (recall our discussion in Session #3), the absence of a thing may often be as real as the thing itself. As far as aesthetic composition is concerned, clearly defined areas of white (as in pictures of snow) and black (as in deep shadows) are as “real” as physical objects, and have just as much say in what either makes or breaks a composition. One of best practitioners of the “minimalist” art in photography is Michael Kenna (<http://www.michaelkenna.net/>).

A few reeds in a pond, along with their reflections and just a hint of what is under water, make for a lovely minimalist image. Note that it is virtually impossible to find such an image when we are not receptive to it! A gentle reminder that the cultivation of simplicity in photography begins not with the camera but a quiet inner state of mind. Image s5-i11:



Because of the sparsity of focal points of interest, minimalist images usually work well as abstracts. In the reeds example, even though we know precisely what we are looking at, and the image is strictly representational, since there is literally nothing that distracts from the purity of seeing reeds alone in the water, the image transforms into something abstract. At the same time, had the reeds not been arranged in the image *exactly* as they appear – if say, only the center reed was visible (with the other reeds either cropped out or digitally deleted), the smaller group of reeds in the lower right excluded, or the water rendered completely white (thus removing the “hint” of what happens beneath the surface) – the resulting image would have been (in my opinion) far less interesting and much less successful. To emphasize, because there are so few elements to work with, by design, the photographer must therefore be that much more cognizant of applying the compositional rules she has learned to intuit.

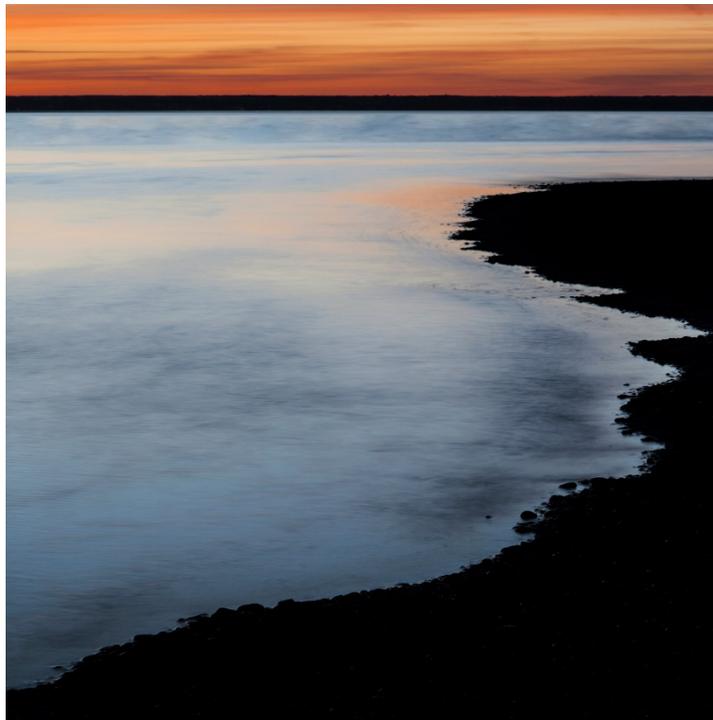
Here is a slightly “busier” minimalist image that adds tonal gradation and an extra (albeit blurred) composition element or two:



s5-i12

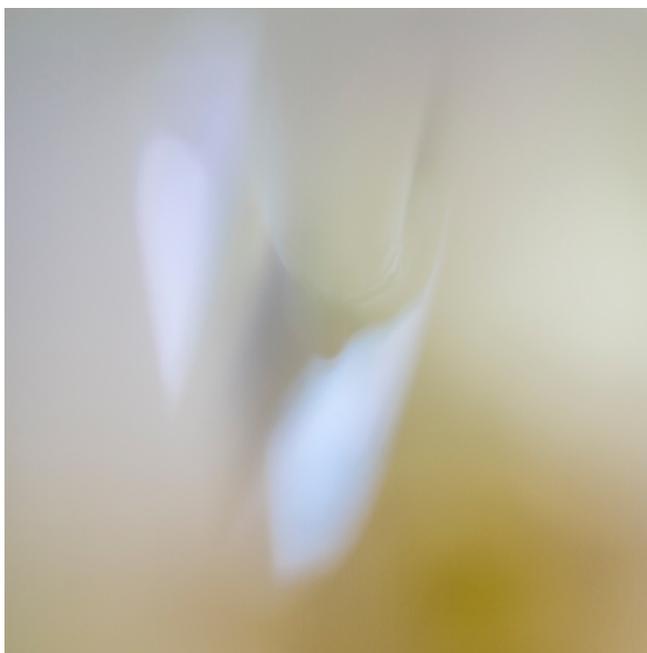
Although there is “detail” in this image (compared to the reeds example), it still works as both a minimalist and abstract photograph. Obviously taken on a fog-ridden day (arguably among the best possible conditions in which to capture minimalist images!), the trees and shoreline in the distance are rendered simply as tones. The wispy white highlight that spans the width of the image and juts out from the shoreline is a critical compositional element on par with the trees and reeds; yet, objectively speaking, it is only light, not substance. The minimalist abstraction has rendered an otherwise ethereal element as real.

What are the best ways of seeing and capturing minimalist abstractions? Apart from being at – or *getting yourself* into – the right time and place (I made a special point of stopping by a local park on the way to work one day with camera and tripod in hand as soon as I noticed a strong fog while getting into my car in the morning!), look for anything with an obvious contrast of tones and forms. Monochrome works especially well for obvious reasons, so having a facility with converting from color to black and white in *Photoshop* is a plus (for those of you interested and who never done that before I can certainly provide a simple tutorial). Color works just as well, provided (as alluded to earlier) that it is used sparingly and appears only as an element of composition (e.g., as an “area of color”) and/or to provide or enhance contrast with other elements of the composition. For example, here is a minimalist/abstract sunset that consists effectively of four graphical elements: a band of orange, a horizontal strip of black, an “area of blue,” and an “area of black.”



s5-i13

As with the reeds, and because of the simplicity of the composition, *knowing* what you are looking at does not detract from *seeing it as an abstraction*. We’ll get to how to produce the silky smooth water in a moment (see below). The picture at the top of the next page gives another example of the use of color in minimalism, this time not as a solid block of color but as a gently varying “tonal field.” These two examples underscore two technical ways that you can use to capture these kinds of images: (1) *long exposures* (the “silky smooth” water part), and (2) *macro photography* (that allows you to zoom in particularly close to your object). While I cannot do justice to either technique in the short space I have available here (or time in the workshop), for those of you who are new to either technique, here is a quick primer. Neither technique is particularly challenging; nor does either require the use of special equipment (though it does sometimes help).



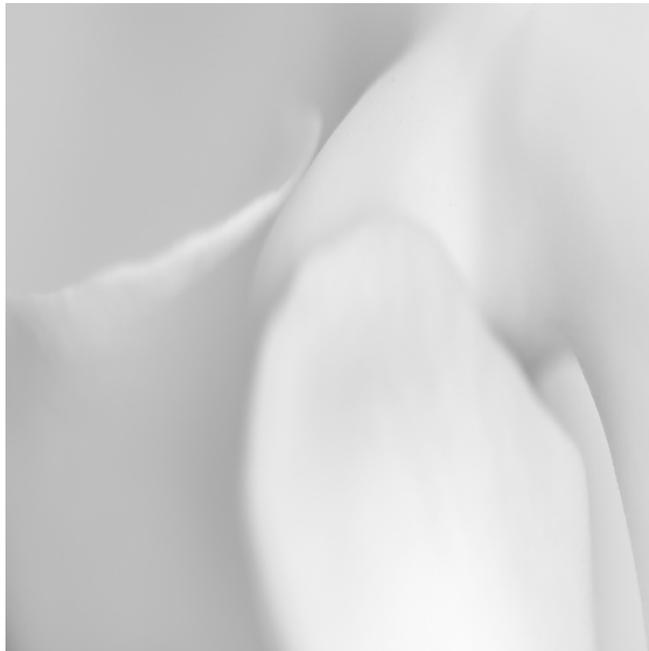
s5-i14

Long exposures are just that; i.e., exposures significantly longer than the old “sunny 16 rule” (i.e., an exposure time of about 1/100 sec at f/16 on a sunny day). Here, “significantly longer” means any exposure that is long enough to render whatever is moving in your picture to appear smooth. If these moving parts happen to be gently lapping waves on a beach at dusk or sunset, the light may already be low enough for the “correct” exposure (say, a few seconds; in the example above, I used a 10 sec exposure) so that you can just take the picture as any other (provided you’ve steadied your camera with a tripod!). If the light is *not* low (or is bright enough for your camera to suggest exposures on the order of fractions of a second), you may need a neutral density filter (NDF). An NDF reduces the intensity of light (equally, for all wavelengths), thereby increasing the effective exposure time as the amount of reduction increases. NDFs are typically rated by the number of “f-stops”-worth of light reduction they impose. For example, if a “normal” exposure at f/8 is, say, 1/500 sec, then a “2 f-stop” NDF will increase the exposure to 1/125 sec (at the same aperture); and an “4-stop” NDF will further increase it to 1/30 sec. I always carry at least two NDFs in my bag, one 3f-stop and one 6f-stop. The range is important, for it allows me to “see,” say, a stream of water, as anything from a “frozen” state (using a “normal” fast exposure), to a delicate blur (for exposure times between 1/4 to 1 sec), to cloud-like ethereal “abstractions” (for exposures times greater than 5 sec or more). If you happen to be “seeing” minimalist abstract possibilities in daylight (remember, overcast days are better than sunny ones, and fog is best!), and stuff is moving in your view, you may need to invest in an NDF or two. If you have a DSLR whose lenses are threaded, just note the diameter and purchase an NDF of the same size. Many (but not all) point-and-shoot cameras also have threaded lenses, so consult the manual that came with your camera. If your photography is limited to using your camera’s phone, your only option is to find an application that allows you to manually set the exposure setting. However, because most camera phones have very small sensors, keep in mind that digital noise may be excessive in long exposure shots.



s5-i15

Macro photography (such as what I used to create the “tonal field” color example at the top of the previous page, or the monochrome closeup of a part of another flower shown below) is another technique that deserves much time and effort to get right. While it is certainly true that the best results are typically achieved with a dedicated macro lens (or a normal lens that has a macro capability built-in), having such a lens is far from necessary. Macro is just a fancy term for “getting closer to your subject” (and blurring anything that isn’t the object of focus). Since most modern digital cameras have in excess of a dozen or more megapixels, cropping a view given by a standard lens is an easy way to “get closer” to something without a special lens.



s5-i16

When a lens *is* needed, being a Canon user – I will allow myself to mention something other than the pure “art” of photography just this once – I favor Canon’s wonderful 100mm macro lens that works both as a standard 100 mm lens and a 1:1 macro lens (meaning that it projects a full – one-to-one life size scale – view of the subject on the sensor). Of course, Nikon, Sigma, Tamron, and other lens manufacturers all have similarly performing lenses. Whatever route you choose, the idea is the same as for other kinds abstract and/or minimalist images: strip away everything in an image that is extraneous to the purely graphical elements of an image. The fewer “recognizable” parts that remain the better. But make sure that the elements that are present are arranged in a harmonious manner (as discussed in the previous session).

One last note about finding subjects for minimalism. Recall that in an earlier session we discussed Galen Rowell’s “participatory” approach to photography. This is a reminder that great images seldom just magically appear (though it is wondrous when it happens!), but must be actively sought. Among other things, this means that when you see an opportunity for an abstract or minimalist shot, but for which the immediate conditions are not right (perhaps the light is off, the wind is too strong or not strong enough, or there are too many people milling about), it behooves you to try, and try again, until you get the shot you instinctively saw in your mind’s eye. Photography is as much about patience (and perseverance) as it is about taking the “quick shot.”

Here is an example of one of my favorite recent minimalist images that was conceived one fine spring day (as I chanced upon a gorgeous tree, but knew that this was not the shot I wanted), and shot – *for real* – about 9 months later after a snowfall in winter, when I rushed out with my camera knowing that the overcast snow-ridden conditions would render a wonderfully minimalist picture.



s5-i17

Subject matter ideas for abstracts

Here are some idea to jump start your own abstractions: light (of any kind), shadows, clouds, walls, textures, floors, carpets, windows, reflections, books, broken glass, mirrors, railings, bridges, bubbles, leaves, glasses, lines, curves, patterns, rocks, sand, *parts* of objects, flowers, water drops (on glass, windows, the recording sides of DVDs), flowing water, waves, sand dunes, buildings, stairs, candles, ...*the list is endless!*

The *spiritual* dimension of abstraction

“The great epoch of the Spiritual which is already beginning, or, in embryonic form ... provides and will provide the soil in which a kind of monumental work of art must come to fashion.” – Wassily Kandinsky (1866 - 1944)

So prophesied the great Russian painter, Wassily Kandinsky, in his masterful *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1914. Since then, of course, and to varying degrees, art has been replete with many aspects of the spiritual; indeed, the traditionally religious-centric interpretation of the term has on occasion been considerably expanded by art to include mysticism, ritual and myth, symbolism, the occult, and pure abstraction. A wonderful book – *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* – that chronicles much of the history of spiritual art, and contains many wonderful reproductions of important works, was published in 1985 to highlight an exhibit held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. A recent Dover reprint of another classic survey – *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* – is also available. (Links are provided on the workshop webpage.)

The impact of the “spiritual” on photography is less clear, and has, sadly, less of a clear history. To be sure, the spiritual has never been far from photography's best practitioners; though not necessarily in overt form. Alfred Steiglitz's *Equivalents* are nothing if not quiet, soulful expressions of an inner reality, and are obviously infused with spirit in the deepest sense.

Ansel Adam's portfolio of ostensibly “grand sweeping vistas” filled with Wagnerian-scale drama, are both creative affirmations of everything that is beautiful “out there,” beyond the artist behind the lens, and of the poetic soul yearning desperately for a way to better communicate the transcendent beauty it sees on the inside. Adams' quest was a quintessentially spiritual one, much more so than merely aesthetic; a quest that is, regrettably (and profoundly erroneously, in my view), all-too-quickly dismissed by some latter-day photographers as a product of “vision-less” Zone-system technobabble and attention to irrelevant minutiae of craft. Many of Minor White's best works can be compared to those of Kandinsky, in the sense that both artists (used their respective media to) point a way toward a radically new grammar for spiritual expression. And Carl Chiarenza's visionary explorations of the “inner landscape” have been available for all to “see” for decades.

Still more recently, I've encountered the works of spiritually inclined artists such as Doug Beasley, Nicholas Hlobeczy, John Daido Looi, Deborah Dewit Marchant, and Jerry Wolfe, who each in their own way, pay homage to the spirit of Steiglitz's equivalents, and use their photography to reveal otherwise invisible realms of the soul. (Not surprisingly, Hlobeczy, Looi, and Wolfe all worked with Minor White.)

But, while there are plenty of contemporary photographers and artists whose work is very spiritual in nature, there is little evidence to suggest that “spiritual photography” (at least in the sense I mean here) is emerging – or has ever emerged, for that matter! – as a bona-fide movement in photography. Kudos to people like Christine Cote and her efforts to provide a haven for spiritually inclined artists with *Stone Voices* magazine (now merged with *Still Points Arts Quarterly*) and Shanti Arts in general. But, if books such as *reGeneration: 50 Photographers of Tomorrow* (published, ironically, by *Aperture*, a magazine founded by Minor White and Ansel Adams) are true indicators of the direction in which photography is currently “moving,” that direction is visibly leading away from, rather than anywhere near, spirit. Deliberately staged images that shock and pound the senses into a surrealistic (and often numbingly ugly) unreality seem to be the norm; pictures that invite a quiet meditation or that simply, but sincerely, ask, “Is this not beautiful?” are rarely seen today – and when they do appear, are routinely scorned by critics as unimportant “pretty pictures” that convey no lasting meaning. I hope I am wrong, for to move away from spiritual expression is, in my opinion, to move away from the most meaningful connection we have to the spiritual world – which is our essential wellspring of existence – as physical beings. Severing this connection, even if only implicitly by focusing our collective artistic / photographic energies onto more “sterile” – and spiritually inert – aspects of the world, means we must face the specter of losing ourselves in (or devolving backwards to) the merely physical.

“The work of art is born of the artist in a mysterious and secret way. From him it gains life and being. Nor is its existence casual and inconsequent, but it has a definite and purposeful strength, alike in its material and spiritual life. It exists and has power to create spiritual atmosphere; and from this inner standpoint one judges whether it is a good work of art or a bad one. If its “form” is bad it means that the form is too feeble in meaning to call forth corresponding vibrations of the soul... The artist is not only justified in using, but it is his duty to use only those forms which fulfill his own need... Such spiritual freedom is as necessary in art as it is in life.” – Wassily Kandinsky

For me, photography – *all* creative art forms – are languages of the transcendent. They represent a way for gifted “seers” – otherwise known as “artists” – to remind the rest of us that none of us are merely creatures of the flesh. We will expand considerably on this theme in the concluding session of the workshop, as we come full circle and reflect on how a lifelong journey of pointing our cameras at things “out there” ultimately reveals the deepest truths “in here.” In searching the world for things to photograph, we discover ourselves.

“That which you are seeking is doing the seeking.” — St. Francis of Assisi.

- **Exercise S5-1: *Look at abstraction and minimalism on the web***

Spend some serious time (an hour or two) perusing the work of photographers and artists whose work you admire, along with discovering the work of new artists. You can start the links I provided earlier (I've also posted them on our workshop webpage), but I urge you to just go exploring on your own. Another idea is to go to self-publishing sites like blurb and lulu and search on keywords like abstracts and minimalism. Make a mental note of the kind of images with which you resonate most strongly. What is it about them that touches you, while other kinds of images leave you cold, or are simply “uninteresting”?

- **Exercise S5-2: *Finding abstractions in the world***

Now, go out and use your camera (and lens) to find abstracts. Do what you need to do to frame the abstract *in your camera's view*. Minimize – better yet, eliminate completely, if you can – the need for any selective cropping in *Photoshop*. Get close, move farther away, use different lenses (if you have a zoom lens, it will come in handy here, but is certainly not necessary). As you frame and compose, remember that the easier it is for someone to recognize some object(s) in your photograph, the less “abstract” it will appear. simple rule: Focus on geometry, pattern, texture, form, and tone. Look for lines, curves, light and shadow, boundaries, color, and anything else except obviously recognizable things. Try to come up with as many different examples as possible.

- **Exercise S5-3: *Creating abstracts from non-abstractions***

Now take “normal” pictures (of anything conventionally representational) that you wish – i.e., pictures of anything that is *obviously something*, but just as obviously not abstract (still lifes, landscapes, portraits, street scenes, whatever subject matter interests you at the moment) – but do so with an eye toward creating at least one abstract from those pictures by a cropping away everything that takes a viewer's attention away from geometry and graphic design alone.³ Again, come up with as many examples as you can, and for as large a variety of subject matter as possible. Don't just take the larger (uncropped) photo for the sake of cropping out some smaller scene you saw as an abstract. The larger picture should stand on its own as an image worth taking.

This exercise is far more challenging than the first, in that it is designed to make you see the world in multiple layers: things within things, compositions within compositions, and images within images. While the usual form of a well-known adage may be “A picture is worth a thousand words,” the deeper truth is that “A picture contains within itself a thousand more.” Photographers, as keen observers of the world, need to be particularly receptive to the richness and nested complexities of everything around us (you knew I was going to weave in “complexity” eventually, now didn't you?). As you become attuned to the ubiquity

³ Taking a panorama of a wall filled with a dozen works of abstract art hanging in some local gallery, and cropping out each of the works as “abstracts” obviously does not count 😊

of multiple types of images (abstract, representational, minimalist, etc.) simultaneously existing alongside and nested among each other, on multiple levels, in everything around you, you will be able to “see” far more deeply into your visual and aesthetic surroundings than ever before. As for the exercise itself, we will see whose images are the hardest to deduce the uncropped (representational) forms of when viewing the abstracts alone, and who can generate the greatest number of “abstracts” from a single representational image.

The goal of this penultimate session is just to have some fun discovering ways of finding and “seeing” abstractions. I look forward to seeing and discussing the fruits of your labors on our *Facebook* workshop page.

Postscript

There is an amusing story I once heard about Brett Weston (1911 - 1993), the second of Edward Weston's sons and, of course, an accomplished photographer in his own right. Brett, who like his dad, spent most of his time taking photographs in California (in places like Point Lobos and Big Sur), was one day invited by a friend to join him on a trip to Europe. Agreeing to go, after some cajoling, Brett and his friend visited Ireland, then Scotland, and later London. But Brett's eye, perhaps even more so than his father's, was tuned strongly toward abstraction (see link on our workshop page). Thus, despite traveling through some of the most beautiful landscapes on the planet before arriving in London, Brett had not once pulled out his camera to take pictures! “And what did he eventually come home to California with?”, you may be wondering. *Why, rust, of course!* Brett had been so mesmerized by a patch of rust on the London bridge, that on one of the very last days of their trip, he finally whipped out his camera and spent several hours in photographic ecstasy, exploring nothing but a small dilapidated metal plate. Such is the “eye” of an abstract photographer 😊