

Your Inner Gift: Cultivating the Art of Simplicity in Photography

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

*** Exercises ***

- **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.¹ 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.

¹ 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 😊

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 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.