

Can Composition Be Taught?

I first did these composition classes on the Minolta Forum in 2003. Originally, my idea was simply to shake up the technophilia of the DPReview forums a little bit; I thought that the community could benefit from a little reminder of what the cameras are about, in the end. The lessons were rather more successful than I expected, and I was asked for a re-run. However, I feel that I've learned a thing or two about photography since then, and maybe also about teaching it. Therefore this preamble.

A photographer whom I admire a great deal, Ed Leys (see his work at California Light and Structure [http://www.blackmallard.com/cal_ls/]) feels very strongly that composition can't and shouldn't be taught at all. He believes that "teaching composition" imposes arbitrary and artificial constraints on creativity, and as a worst case could stifle the flame and vision of a creative genius, thereby making the world a poorer place. While I don't entirely agree with him, for reasons I'll discuss below, I think he makes a valuable point.

The dilemma of "teaching composition" is that there's no way to do it meaningfully without imposing rules or constraints, and it's all too easy to get caught up in these rules or constraints, and mistake them for standards of excellence. Inevitably, the acquisition of these "rules" will shape the vision and photography of the person learning them. This can well detract from the individual quality of the work. The fact remains that a picture composed "by the book" is simply a picture that has been skilfully composed "by the book." Whether it's interesting or evocative or has artistic power or not has nothing to do with it.

However, I'm not as pessimistic as Ed. I happen to be lucky enough to know a few people with genuine artistic talent -- that inner fire that manifests itself in a need to create highly individual, unusual, even visionary work. None of them would be able to express that vision without having acquired the craft. At some point, all of them went through the constraints of doing stuff "by the book," and as often as not, this served as a useful framework to rebel against and break. In my experience, genuine artistic vision is anything but fragile -- on the contrary, it's the kind of fire that will burn through stone and steel to express itself. Check out a Picasso retrospective: he was doing beautifully composed and executed drawings and paintings in the academic style -- when he was fourteen. And I have a sneaky feeling that he wouldn't have produced Guernica had he not done those figure studies in art school.

But can composition be taught?

In a trivial sense, certainly. There's nothing unteachable or unlearnable about simple compositional techniques like the famous (or infamous?) rule of thirds, leading lines, geometry, figure-ground juxtaposition, motion, and so on. However, in my view, this is missing the point. The function of the "rules" isn't that if you apply them, your pictures will be better (although, if the alternative is the usual "instinctive" non-composition, they usually will be). Instead, their function is to spur you to "think compositionally" -- to give a rough set of conceptual tools with which to consciously approach the challenge of composition. A kick start of sorts to "seeing photographically."

So, I'm going to risk it, and go ahead with these composition classes, in much the same format as I did last year. However, do try to keep in mind that the rules and restrictions inherent in the lessons are there for purely educational purposes: to be used as crutches as long as you need them or feel they're useful, then discarded. Simply applying them blindly may or may not make your pictures look better, but it will not

give them any artistic merit. If you're working on a photo and attempting to apply the "rules" to it, but get a feeling that that's not quite right, you'd rather shoot it some other way -- congratulations, you've just graduated: you're seeing compositionally, and taking an active role in creating the photo *your* way instead of some instructor's way. You're well on your way to finding your personal photographic vision.

So, if you feel that composition classes are unnecessary or pernicious, please stop following now. On the other hand, if you feel like you're shooting your pictures in the dark -- that they're not quite as good as you'd like, but you don't really know what's wrong with them, then these lessons might be fun or instructive or even helpful for you. In any case, remember that photography is supposed to be fun, so don't take this too seriously and jump in.

Assignment

I want you to forget everything about the way you do your photography -- set the clock back to zero, or as close to it as is feasible. Also, I think this is a lot of fun -- I just did this exercise myself a few days ago, and got a tremendous kick out of it. So, here's the first assignment of Petteri's Composition Classes, model 2004.



One of the personal top five from my grab shot series.

Grab a camera. If you have a small point-and-shoot model, grab that. If not, grab your usual camera. If you have an SLR, use the smallest, lightest, most compact lens you have. Set the camera to a full-auto mode you're comfortable with -- if you're a beginner, the general point-and-shoot mode will do great; if you're familiar with operating your camera, you might want to fix one or two variables like ISO (set it high enough that you don't need to worry about running out of light) and white balance (Cloudy or Daylight). The main thing is that the camera is ready to shoot with a minimum of fuss.

If you want to use the ideal instrument for this exercise, go buy yourself one of those cardboard disposable film cameras. Just remember to take it to the Fuji Frontier lab so you can get the pics on CD as well as on paper -- otherwise, you can't share them with the rest of the "class."

Go for a walk. If you commute on foot or by public transportation, your commute would be a perfect setting for this. If you have a dog, go walk him or her. If you have a wife, husband, boyfriend, girlfriend, kid, friend, or whoever else, take him or her along. But also take your camera.

Then shoot anything that catches your eye. Don't look out for pictures. Look at the things you'd normally

look at, only this time take a quick grab shot of it. Forget about composition, sharpness, noise, precise focus, camera shake, or whatever: just shoot it as quick as you see it. Make sure you shoot at least a roll's worth of frames (that is, minimum 36 exposures). More is better.

Then get the pics onto your computer. Pick the five you like best, and the five you think are complete washouts (excluding the ones that are so bad technically you can't make any sense of them, unless they look good anyway, of course). Present them, and discuss why you chose the pictures you chose. Also describe how it felt to shoot these non-compositions. Most of all, remember to enjoy yourself: this is supposed to be fun.

And don't worry: in the next lessons, we'll lose the touchy-feely and will be taking a look at some of the more classical "rules" of composition.

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