

The Photogenic Self

What our photographs tell us about who we are.

Livio Fent

Objectives

The basic goal of this course is to introduce the concept of using photography, and specifically our own photographs, as a means of introspection and self-discovery. We'll do this by:

- Understanding how our own images mirror special photographed instances in our life stream via psychological mechanisms
- Being able to analyse our images both objectively and subjectively
- Ascribe meaning to our image objects, both literal and symbolic
- Develop a narrative that links the symbolic objects into a personalized storyline of our self.
- Review basic design techniques to improve our image stories

Course outline

1. Background and definitions
2. Photographic duality: objective and subjective image perspectives
3. Psychological dynamics in the process of photographing
4. Symbols in images
5. Developing a personal image narrative: visual grammar and image structure
6. Assignment Discussion.

Background

All art has the unique capacity to provide insight to its creator; what is the message, who is the person.

- λ The communication process at play is both overt and covert. The covert message or meaning is typically transmitted by symbolic representations in artistic space.
- λ In the visual arts we most often associate this type of interplay with painting, watercolor, drawing etc.. because the art form is created from nothing, or more appropriately from the artist's imagination.

Background cont'd

Photography also functions as a visual art but it does so quite differently than the traditional fine arts; it 'creates' from what exists (notwithstanding digital manipulations). Upon adding its scientific and technological dimensions, it is sometimes derided as a fine art.

One of the goals of this course is to show that photography functions well as an art at communicating covert symbolic meaning, *always*. Infact, because it has our physical environment at its disposition, its potential for ascribing meaning is immense.

Background cont'd

As photography's capacity to encompass meaning is huge, it follows that if one of the functions of art is to communicate meaning both outwardly (to the viewer) and inwardly (to the artist), then photography should be one of the more important artistic mediums to enable this function.

'The Photogenic Self' is an exploration of the inward communication process that is often neglected in photography instruction (maybe even other fine arts). The goal of the course is to show how photography can mirror our being and provide insight into who we are.

Definition: Photogenic

- λ From Dictionary.com: “forming an attractive subject for photography or having features that look well in a photograph: eg. a photogenic face.”
- λ From the Urban Dictionary: “Suitable for being photographed. Someone who looks good in everyday life but really shines out in pictures.”
- λ From Collins English Dictionary: “ ..having features, colouring, and a general..appearance that look attractive in photographs”

Photogenic

- λ An object (person, place, or thing) that lends itself to being *photographed*
- λ There is an appealing and/or attractive quality to the subject matter of the photograph
- λ The photograph *captures* this quality in time and space and allows the viewer to reflect on its appeal.
- λ Although the medium is understood as being photography the true perceptual medium is photonic energy: light

The 'Self' in Photography?

- λ Start by considering human experience as a continuous stream.
- λ The stream would be composed of perceptions, thoughts, activities..
- λ The sum total of the stream create a sense an ever expanding sense of who the person is.
- λ When a person picks up a camera and takes a photograph, something quite special happens: an instant of the continuous stream is captured.
- λ The instant is certainly reflective of a perceptual moment in time and space but it can be much more..

Photography's 'two-way' mirror

Most obvious in the process of photographing the recording of a time, event, action, etc. that occurred in the photographer's life stream.

λ It certainly represents an 'interest' that the photographer has about what he/she photographed. But it also represents a personal expression of what is being photographed:

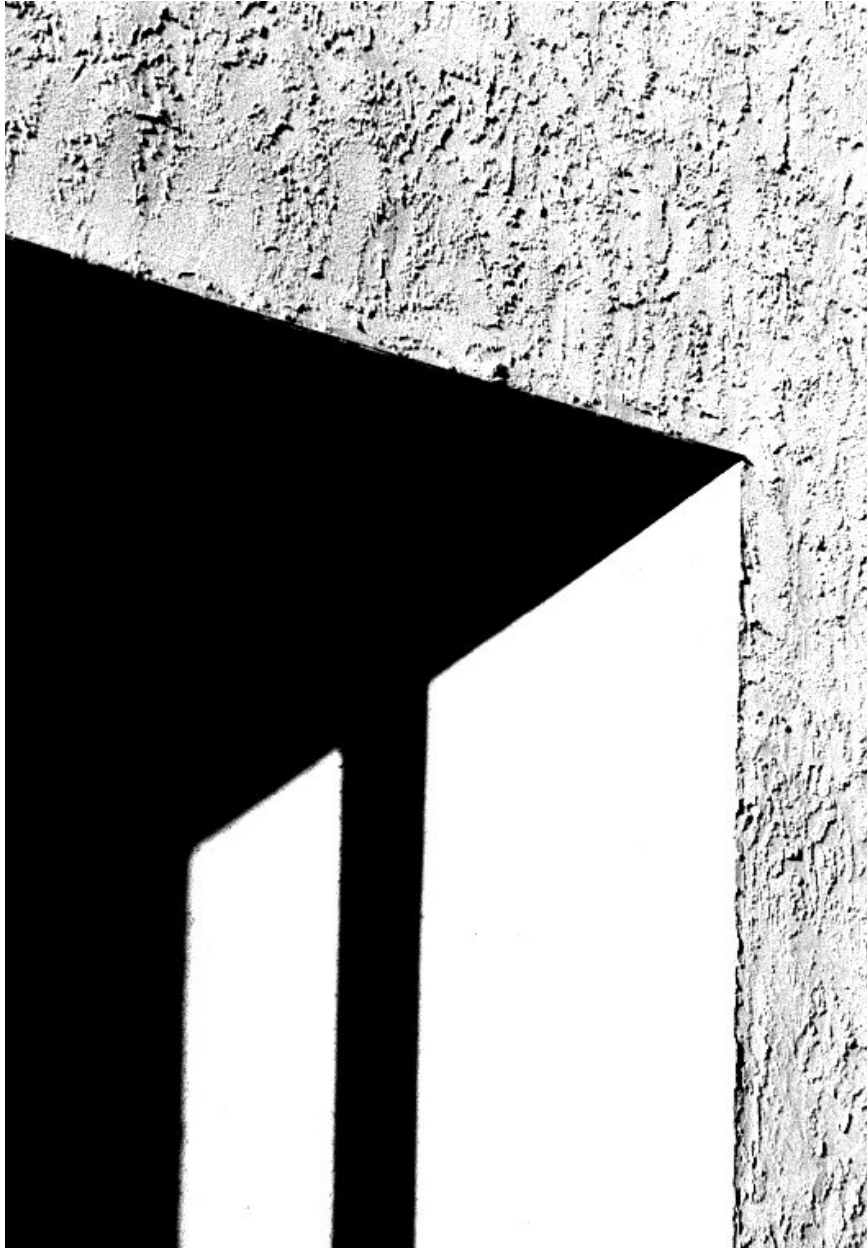
- | | |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| – Family/friends | - Love, admiration, respect |
| – Scenery | - Connection to Nature, elemental |
| – Action/sports | - Dynamism, motion, energy |
| – Documentary | - Social consciousness, altruism, ethical ctr. |
| – Artistic view | - Beauty, order, statement/message |

Why is your photograph 'you'

- λ The photograph acts as a visual memory component; as you can recall memories of your life stream, the photograph is a tangible piece of evidence of part of that stream.
- λ The photograph represents:
 - What/who you saw, where you saw, maybe when you saw
 - It may also represent how you saw and why you saw.
- λ In other words it is 'you' in that time and space.
- λ The alternative argument is that it is simply the people, objects, or places in photograph and that no personal aspect is involved, ie. No consciousness in taking the photograph.

*Which of these two views is more accurate?
Predominant? Acceptable? Risky?*

What was the motivation?



- λ Artistic expression
- λ Interest in light effects
- λ Challenges the viewer
- λ Suggests interest in geometry
- λ Illusory
- λ Deceptive

What's the photographer's message to us?

What's the photographer's message to him/her-self?

Duality in the Photographic Message

Photography can be seen to communicate its visual message in two basic ways:

- λ An objective recording of some state in time and space. Photographs of family, friends, places, photojournalistic photos of events, people, all attest to this definitive recording. In most of these cases the photographer is thought of secondary in the viewing process, it is the immediate content of the photograph that is relevant.
- λ The subjective recording implies that the photographic content is subject to the photographer's personal stake in the matter. It is a unique personal viewpoint in time and space.

The objective message



The spectacular Grands Jardins National Park in Quebec. A nice place..

But we can also see that:

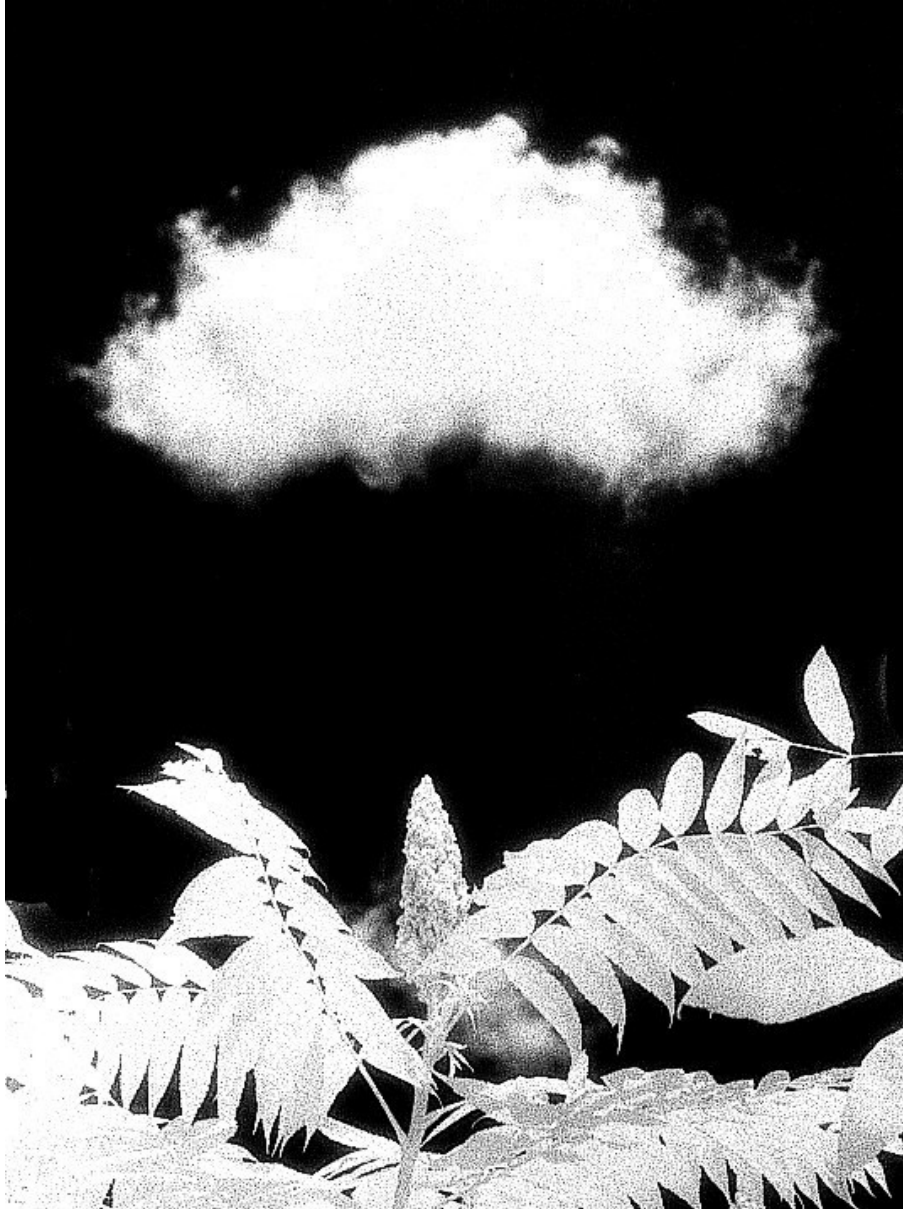
It is autumn, the photograph is taken from what looks like a summit with a rock cairn. The mountains are generally tree covered and rounded but there are significant rock faces. The vegetation is mostly deciduous trees but coniferous types occupy the higher elevations. A road transects the valley, a parking lot is along side it.

The rocks seem granitic, the valley is U-shaped (glacier formed), it's a nice day. The sun angle implies that it may be near Noon, photograph points northwards..

The lower photo tells us that it is a nice Sunny day and that the place has blueberries growing there. Also that there is a person with fair skin and well kept Nails.

In both these photographs we never stray from interpreting the objects. The Photographer is incidental to the process

Another objective photo interpretation



Photograph depicts a plant with a flowering top along with a cloud suspended above.

The plant is a type of Sumac, the cloud is a cumulus type.

The black sky suggests that the photographer used a red filter to absorb the blue light, the white foliage indicates that an infrared type exposure was used. Can any other fact be discerned from the image?

Most photographic interpretation is of objects, persons, events, places, Actions..

The Objectifying Process

- λ Assign language to all the objects, places, times, actions visible in the image
- λ The process is called verbalizing the image.
- λ It induces two actions:
 1. Makes us completely aware of what, where, when, who and how the image was taken.
 2. Leads us to explore the relationships that exist in the image; provides us insight into how the image is composed.
- λ The extent of the verbalizing process is dependent on our knowledge of language (assigning words to visual material). The language can be general (it's a blueberry) or specific (it's the fruit of the species *Vaccinium angustifolium*)

Exercises in Image Objectification



The subjective message

- λ Consider that in the continuous stream of a person's life events, a photograph they take represents a significant event in that life (or at least effort was made to record that moment).
- λ It follows that the place, time, objects, people, and actions in the photograph speak to the photographer's heightened interest in selecting that slice in time and record it in the photographic process.
- λ Subjective photographic interpretation reverses the direction of the interpretation process and points it towards the photographer; the photographer's motivations for taking the photograph are of interest. It is from this perspective that we will engage our photographic inquiry.

An example..



The Facts

The image highlights a cyclist and his bicycle. They are on the edge of a river or lake, there is another shoreline in the distance. The person has his back to the photographer and it is a sunny day.

The Question

Why does the photographer want highlight this event in his life?

The first level of interpretation is an 'existential' one and simply suggests that the photographer enjoys cycling. The second level attributes basic symbols to the objects: the bicycle represents, mobility, freedom, the cyclist is identifying with that freedom but the composition is such that there is some distance between the two. Attributing more symbols to the water (refreshing, cleansing, emotive) and the distant shoreline (some ultimate goal) the interpretation is complete: some emotive gap hampers the photographer from feeling or being free to attain some objective or goal.

What did we just do?

- λ The subjective analysis of the previous image involves a number of processes:
1. We make the assumption that the photographer identifies with the image and the objects s/he has chosen to photograph
 2. An inventory of image objects is made. This would be analogous to the 'objective' evaluation of the image.
 3. The photographer projects her/his self-interests into the image.
 4. The 'why' of taking the image is interpreted from attributing symbolic connotation to the objects, from the utilitarian and existential (level one) on to more general and archetypal symbols (levels two and three).
 5. With each interpreted level more of the photographer's self-circumstance is revealed.

The dynamics of photographing

Subjective image interpretation 'works' because of some well founded principles rooted in photography and psychology. On the photographic side:

- λ The photographic driver has already been discussed to some extent: the photograph represents a 'highlight' a “frozen moment” in the continuous stream of events that a person engages in their life experience.
- λ Allowing us to observe a “moment in time and space” confers on to us a special dynamic; one is memory stimulation and its associated emotional connotations. Second, it allows us to focus attention, meditate if you will, on the moment photographed.

Some observations on photographic dynamics

- λ Henri Cartier-Bresson, a renowned French photographer, coined the phrase “the decisive moment” in taking a photograph. That moment is when in our daily experience we choose to decisively capture an instant that means something special to us.
- λ Susan Sontag notes in her 1977 book 'On Photography' that “The camera makes everyone a tourist in other people's reality, and eventually in one's own”.
- λ Minor White, eminent American photographer of the 20th century: “There seems to be growing frequency on the part of contemporary thinkers about photography to point out that people see themselves in photographs *in spite of themselves*.” (my italics), Mr. White wrote this half a century ago. (1963)
- λ Ansel Adams “a great photograph (is) a full expression of what one feels about what is being photographed in the deepest sense and is, thereby, a true expression of what one feels about life in its entirety.”

Photography's Transformative Power

These photographers and thinkers wanted to say that photography's special uniqueness for Self-expression is available to us all – and even more so in today's digital age.

Photography's ubiquity as in compact cameras, phone cameras, among the more traditional DSLR and professional systems, makes it the art of the masses *extraordinaire*.

It confers to us all the power to transform the way we observe our reality, as simply objective spectators or as subjective participants.

On the psychological side..

The psychological component can be attributed to two schools in psychology, Freudian and Jungian.

- λ The Freudian aspect of the “decisive moment” and “..seeing yourself” involves the processes of projection and identification.
- λ The Jungian aspect is associated to this school's development and interpretation of symbols (as in dream therapy)

We'll look at these processes a little more closely since they provide the foundation of concept of the 'Photogenic Self'

Identification and object relations

This process is defined in psychology as “A process by which an individual unconsciously endeavors to pattern himself after another person (or thing).”

http://www.medicalglossary.org/defense_mechanisms_identification_psychology_definitions.html

..images of people and events turn into objects in the subconscious that the person carries into adulthood, and are used by the subconscious to predict people's behavior in their social relationships and interactions.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Object_relations_theory

Kenneth Wright: “Knowledge about oneself exists in a different space from both the space in which one acts..in the world and the inner representations (identifications) of that action space which consciously guides our behavior in relation to objects

in the world. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/35513249/Connection-Between-Object-Relations-Theory-and-Attachment-Theory>

This is all to say that we identify with our pictures and those objects in the images we take based on a lifetime of experience

Projection

Projection or more specifically, projective identification, is the other mechanism operating in our photography. Its definition is as follows: Projective identification is a psychological process by which a person projects his or her own thoughts and beliefs onto a third party

<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-projective-identification.htm>

“The projector strives to find in the other, or to induce the other to become, the very embodiment of projection.”

R.D. Laing

If we are identifying and relating to the objects in our images then we are projecting our Self into the image: our photography and us effectively are one and the same; the extent to which we want to see our Self in our photographs depends on how deep we want our inquiry to go. It is not for the faint-hearted!

Projective identification examples



Peeling the photographic onion: symbolising the image

Having established the process of image objectification and the self-reflection that is inherent in all images we take, we move further into the world of meaning: the symbolic association of objects.

Here, we start to draw not only on association with personal experience to assign meaning to the image but of the connection of our lives to our environment, culture and humanity as a whole.

Symbols are the vehicle that allow this to be possible. And symbols can be interpreted from the most mundane to the most profound. Let's start with an example....

Symbolizing the image



The objects:

- λ Dog
- λ Building wall (left) and wall (right)
- λ Downward road to buildings
- λ Chimney
- λ Lens ghost, front/side sunlight

The symbols:

Dog: companionship, playfulness

Walls: restriction, boundary, blockage

Road: the way forward, future

Buildings: Shelter, protection

Chimney: air foulness, waste

Light/Ghost: life, energy, maybe spirit

The story:

The search for companionship is blocked by the greater need for security and that security is producing undesired results especially at the mental level.

There is a sense that it will be overcome

Is there validity in the process?

Let's check off the items and analyse:

- ✓ Objects are described with fair accuracy and is repeatable
- ✓ Symbolic association may be generally repeatable but there be may variations in symbol object association
- ✓ The assemblage and association of the symbols into a storyline minimizes the repeatably of the process, infact, it make it quite unique.

So, the process is valid for the photographer; it is his/her photograph, his/her composition, his/her life's moment, his/her choice of objects. The symbols are more generic but still his/her to choose, and the storyline is his creation, speaking wholly to his Self.

- ✓ The outcome of the process has generally become known as “Therapeutic Photography”

Foundations of Therapeutic Photography and Phototherapy

The concepts, processes and exercises we've investigated are the basics of two approaches in using photography to analyse the Self.

- λ Therapeutic Photography involves what we just finished doing; gaining insights into ourselves **by ourselves**. Its proponents include photographers such as Minor White, teachers such as Ralph Hattersley and psychologists like John Suler. The key to therapeutic photography is our own photography and our evaluation of it.
- λ Phototherapy also uses photography but it may or may not be our own, and most important, the process is administered by a professional therapist, delving deep into the psychological aspects of the photograph and individual. The Phototherapy Institute in Vancouver (dir. Judy Weisner) was one of the first to explore this modality, Great Britain and Finland are other places where the technique has been popularized.

Back to Symbols

Since symbols figure prominently in the non-literal interpretation of our images, it is important for us to understand how they work.

We are certainly aware of the mechanics of symbols as metaphor in literature but we'll restrict ourselves to psychological perspective.

We'll briefly touch on Jungian psychology and investigate what this field has to say about symbols.

We'll also investigate what some of the recent research in brain neuroscience has established regarding aggregate neuronal cell firings, memories, and their associative behaviors that lead to defining symbols

Jungian symbolization

Jung is one of the best known contemporary contributors to symbolization. Let's look at some excerpts from his last work entitled 'Man and his Symbols' :

<http://mythsdreamssymbols.com/mansymbols.html>

- λ What we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning.
- λ Man . . . never perceives anything fully or comprehends anything completely. He can see, hear, touch, and taste; but how far he sees, how well he hears, what his touch tells him, and what he tastes depend upon the number and quality of his senses. These limit his perception of the world around him.
- λ There is . . . another kind of symbolism . . . also connected with the periods of transition . . . they concern a man's release from any confining pattern of existence, as he moves toward a superior or more mature stage in his development.

What was Jung driving at?

- λ Symbols enable us to access aspects of our own unconsciousness to fully realize our selves (a process he called individuation).
- λ He also emphasized a cultural thread that connects us and our ancestors through symbolic archetypes, he noted “It is not easy for modern man to grasp the significance of the symbols”

But when is a picture of a dog just that, a picture of a dog?

- λ Always! But it can be more if you so choose. Jung's symbolization process allow us to explore our photographic motivations



The Photograph as Mandala

Because the photographs we take allow us to ascribe meaning beyond the literal, their use as tapestries for focused attention allow for insight beyond the reality of the overt nature of the objects in the image. Typical compositional techniques tend to emphasize a generally circular pattern (rule of thirds) hinting at a centre.

- λ Mandalas work exactly this way and are time-honored tools for self-discovery. Jung described Mandalas as “a representation of the unconscious self”, psychologist David Fontana, its symbolic nature can help one “to access progressively deeper levels of the unconscious, ultimately assisting the meditator to experience a mystical sense of oneness with the ultimate unity from which the cosmos in all its manifold forms arises.”

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandala>

- λ That photographs can act in this way is revealing, personal, and insightful; it all depends on how deep one is willing to carry the symbolism

More recent insights on symbols

Much of Jung's work was done in the early to mid-20th century when brain functions were less understood than today. How is his symbolization work and today's neuroscience being reconciled?

- λ Symbols arise from a common understanding of their meaning. In society we organize and agree that an image of red octagon means stop.
- λ Brain neurons essentially work the same way; a cluster of neurons may fire in response to an experience..a memory is formed. The next time that that experience (or an image of it) is encountered the same cluster of neurons fires to invoke the memory. Neuroscientists call this a self-organizing associative memory. Symbols act as representations these self-organized cellular activities and connect the symbolic image with the associated memories.

Symbolic Levels



Let's look at the mountain in this image from various symbolic perspectives.

Level 0 – The literal interpretation
A mountain is a mountain Is a mountain, Period.

Level 1 – Generalized connotations
Achievement, effort, goal attainment

Level 2 – Philosophical meanings
Elevated thought, ideas (height and air)
Higher knowledge, a spiritual level

Level 3 – Esoteric meaning (in this Image)
The breast of the the earth goddess (Gaia) giving life below

Let's recap..

- λ The action of photographing highlights an instant of our life stream.
- λ Since we took the photograph it is our experience that is being highlighted.
- λ Since it is our experience we identify with, an aspect of our self is projected on to that experience and the objects photographed.
- λ In viewing the image we can choose to see our self through the symbols the objects represent, from the literal to the metaphorical, cultural and spiritual. The deeper we go the more we strip our ego-constructs of who we *think* we are and see who we *really* are. Again, as already noted, not a walk in the park.

Structuring the story

So far we've been concentrated with image content:

- What is in the image
- Where is the image taken
- When is it happening
- How is it occurring
- **Why** is it happening

The process involves developing an image narrative. That narrative can be easy or difficult to develop. The degree of difficulty is dependent on how our use of *visual grammar*.

What is visual grammar?

As we use nouns, verbs adjectives etc.. to express ourselves in written language, a visual language would use graphic elements for expression.

These elements are:

- Lines
- Edges
- Contrast
- Color

We are biologically 'wired' to detect and enhance these graphic features; understanding how they function enables us to express ourselves better with photography. We also have the added benefit of understanding what makes a 'nice' photo!

Creating an image dynamic

If the objects we photograph can be considered the 'nouns' of our story then the verbs, which are action words, can be analogous to the lines, edges, and so on.

- λ These features create eye motion in the frame and provide the relational ties between objects.
- λ The relational ties is how we build a story with our objects and/or symbols, between things that are seemingly unrelated.
- λ Elements such as tension, rhythm, balance, contrast, perspective, etc. are some key design basics.

Adding 'feeling' to the image

Are we ever indifferent to the photos we take? Usually not. We either like them or not, remember, we have a psychological investment here! Verbalizing what we feel about a photograph adds an important dimension to our story.

- λ Sensations or feeling are not easy to verbalize and rationalize. We know what we feel but may not have the word to adequately describe the sensation.
- λ Using word lists is helpful in providing context.
- λ Ascribing feeling to a photograph is an important component in our process; it really provides the setting for our symbolic interpretation

And finally, Simplify!

Interpreting meaning in an image is often a challenge in the best of circumstances, the more things that are in the image the more difficult it is to decipher the message. The problem is one of complexity. The effect is:

- λ Multiple messages
- λ Lack of clarity
- λ Information overload
- λ Lack of focus

The problem is averted by keeping the message simple: two to four key objects at most with relational ties using strategies such as the rule of thirds.

Pulling it all together..