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# The Foundation to Photographic Success

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Samantha Strykowski

Booth Library

"Excellence in Research and Creativity"

March 21, 2011

"The Foundations to Photographic Success"

In 1994 the band Nirvana came out with their ground breaking album "Nevermind". Within lies the song "In Bloom", where Kurt Cobain hashes out some insightful lyrics to how he views some of his fans...

*"And he's the one who likes all our pretty songs,  
And he likes to sing along, and he likes to shoot his gun,  
But he don't know what it means,  
He don't know what it means,  
and I say 'Yeahhh.....'"*

These same lyrics translate into how I feel about photography and digital design, and those who chose to pursue the field. The average camera has more features than ever before. In a USA Today magazine back from 2002, we learn that the average price of a 2-megapixel camera went from being \$866 in 1999 to \$332 in three years (1d). Even a 4-megapixel camera is weak in today's age. My 10 megapixel DSLR cost just \$400 last March! The emergence of the digital camera has made photography less expensive, faster, and easier to share. Technology and material upgrades aside, many self-described photographers do not have the slightest idea about what goes on beyond the obvious. What I am referring to is the design and compositional elements of photographs. What makes a shot and its'

editing successful? Why? How do you follow the rules and mix in personal touch? As a young aspiring artist on the verge of entering the cut-throat world of photography I feel the need to express my knowledge of design to make a successful career out of art. This will enable me to set myself apart from the competition who, in the words of Cobain "Likes all our pretty songs (or photos in the case at hand)... but don't know what it means..."

The purpose of my research is to prove that after five years of schooling I have developed an essential understanding of foundations and can apply the knowledge to my work. All photographs were taken in Charleston and the surrounding area. I have grown attached to Charleston in my years here, and I have discovered so much more to the town than the school. It upsets me when I hear people talk down about the town; if they took the time to explore more outside of the Panther Paw they might not have such bad things to say! By making my theme around the town I hope to show fellow students all that Charleston has to offer. I'll be talking about the pictures individually, from the story behind them to why and how I manipulated them, and the purpose that they serve design wise. It has always been a personal thought that the arts and digital retouching are not best taught by the books, but by practice and exploration. Most of the Photoshop skills I have acquired I learned myself. However, I did study design principals which helped guide my pieces as I shot them, keeping in mind what makes for a solid foundation in a photograph. Design principals have been around a long time, and I purposely looked for an older book to prove that technology and fancy picture books aren't the key to being successful in this field. Booth did not disappoint me in my search; I found the perfect one book from 1971 solely on the principles of 2-demansinal design that was very helpful to me. I am going to list what I feel are the most basic and important elements of design I found in the book, and will use the terminology throughout the paper. In the following definitions I have added my own commentary to elaborate on the terms:

1. Line- "Line is a conceptual element ....as a point moves it becomes a line" (Wong 7). Lines are very important to compositions. Lines can be static (still) or dynamic (with movement). They vary in thickness and color; the possibilities for what can be done with lines in terms of composition are endless.

2. Volume-"Volume is a conceptual element....in two-dimensional design, volume is illusory" (Wong 7). Volume can help give a 2-d work a 3-D feel. It can add to the concept of space that an object occupies in a composition.

3. Shape- "Shape is a visual element...Anything that can be seen has a shape which provides the main identification in our perception (Wong 7)". Shapes can be organic or geometric. Organic shapes are those found in nature, such as plants and the human form. Geometric shapes are generally man made, such as buildings and architecture. Shapes come in endless possibilities and are generally the main focus of a composition.

4. Texture-"Texture is a visual element....Texture refers to the surface characteristics of a shape" (Wong 7). Textures can be smooth, rough, lacy, jagged, or pretty much anything. Texture helps give depth and interest to a picture, giving the illusion that a 2-d design can have the 3-dimensionality of texture.

5. Direction- "Direction is a relational element...Direction of a shape depends on how and it is related to the observer, to the frame that contains it, or to other shapes nearby" (Wong 7). Direction is what makes the eye move from one point of the composition to the other; it can draw your eye in one direction or many.

6. Space-"Space is a relational element...Shapes of any size, however small, occupy space. Thus, it can be occupied or left blank (Wong 8)". Space can also be flat or indicate depth and volume.

First we will examine my photographs on self-expression, my favorite and most challenging part of the project.

All photographers should be able to take a feeling or idea, turn it into an expression that is transferable in the 2 or 3-D world, then properly execute the idea and capture it on film. Sometimes an opportunity or idea will spring up fast, such as with photojournalism. Other ideas take time, thought, and planning. Whenever I sign into Facebook I am bombarded by cheesy self-portraits of my friends, most taken with their camera phones and showcase their Moms' shower curtains as a backdrop. All these generic images gave me the idea to do a series on real self-expression, meaning display my true feelings on the inside to everyone who chooses to look. The first photo, titled "Bleed Love. Cry Passion" showcases me with colorful tears running down my cheeks, with color bleeding from my chest. I feel full of energy, ideas, and inspiration all the time. However, I also feel very trapped and confused being as young as I am trying to gain entry to jobs that are very difficult to obtain. Alas, when I cry, it is in color; art is a passion that will forever be in my heart. When I release my pain the colors come along for the ride as well. I am bare-chested, standing for how vulnerable and exposed I feel when showcasing my thoughts to the world. The camera is pointing down at me, putting me in a position of submission. Even when staying positive I do not always feel in control of my work, which in return makes me feel looked down upon. In this photo I wanted a strong, yet alluring look. My hair is down with its' natural curl intact to keep my natural state preserved. To create the rainbow tears I simply mixed corn-syrup with Crayola paints. I did not mess around with the photo retouching a whole lot. In "The Art of Digital Photography" I did find a useful tip on adjusting the color curves (Ang 59), which I applied to this photo and almost every other. I brought out the colors by using the saturation and selective color tools under Image>Adjustments in Photoshop. The other self-expression piece, titled "Alienated" is perhaps my favorite of the series. I feel very odd as an artist whenever I showcase new work, I am always afraid people won't "get it". I "get it"

and so do my friends who are fellow artists, but for the most part I feel that I am seen as being different for my passion, not to mention the weird looks I get when people see my laying on the ground to take a photo. I used a solarizing filter after adjusting the color curves and cranking up the vibrancy. I knew from practice that the solarizing filter creates a negative-type image, which I knew would give me an ‘alien’ look. After applying the filter, I created a second texture filter to add some depth. My hair turned white as a result of my retouching, which frames my face in, especially with the white glow under my chin where a shadow was cast on the original version. Everything is organic and pure; there is no use of geomantic shapes in the composition. My eyes are piercing the camera, wide open. I don’t look sad, but instead daunting and inquisitive. I want to stand strong in the world of art and use my sense of being different to my advantage. I would love to one day be an art director and stand tall about all who have ever given me self –doubt and unprofessional criticism, and I believe I captured that feeling in the photo.

“Emily” is a portrait of my neighbor, taken on the outside stairs of Old Main. There was quite a bit of photo-retouching to this photo. I had painted on her eye a flower to make the picture look more interesting. First I cut out the flower on her face and pasted it into a new layer in Photoshop. I realized I needed to work on blending layers better, so I turned to the books for help. “The Art of Digital Photography” once again came in handy. I found the some blending ideas for feathering (Ang 53), and applied the effect to the portrait. I also used the function keys on the layers pallet for addition blending and rendering of the shadows on the flower layer. After I worked on the flower I cut her body out of the composition and put that in a third layer. I used a filter tool called “radial blur” on the original photo to draw the movement to her, but with her being in an above layer she would be safe from the filter. I wanted her to be the main focus. I then decided to remove saturation from all of the layers except the one with the flower. This really made the flower stand out. I decided to keep her eyes red because I wanted both of them to pop. I personally feel eyes are the gateway to the soul, and making them the

attraction of a photograph is one of my personal preferences. The lines behind her create a nice frame that additionally draws the attention to her instead of the background.

“Cassie” is another portrait of one of my friends. I took her photo on the country roads of Charleston. I prefer being outdoors when taking pictures because I love working with natural lighting. I am into makeup and costume design and decided to give her bright and bold make up that I knew would stand out against her darker features. The yellow of her makeup is the brightest part of the picture, and it draws attention to her eyes which is exactly what I was aiming for. I learned from a class that you should never be afraid to crop. The closer you come to a person’s face the more intimate the picture becomes. Her hair creates a frame against the blues of the sky that helps bring attention to her face. I did not retouch this portrait apart from cropping and color curve adjustments. Notice the use of the rule of thirds, her face is in the right side of the composition. Portraiture is a topic that I would like to further explore in my art career.

“Boating” is a photojournalistic photo. I took this while exploring Lake Shelbyville with some friends last August. I didn’t plan the composition out before I shot; I just looked down and thought it might make for a neat picture. One thing I have learned about photography is that sometimes you just get lucky, and I think this shot is one of those instances. The waves take up a majority of the composition, with very dynamic waves that create a splashing sense of movement. Notice the break in the waves that appears by my left foot. It breaks the top portion of the composition up, giving it some relief and creates interesting negative space. This also draws attention to my feet, which point back out at the lake. The wood frame that separates the bottom and top portions of the piece has brightness to it that helps keep the color balance in check. The waves are organic in form as well as my feet, but the boat itself is geometric. I like finding interesting ways to take pictures of my feet. They are with me

wherever I go, and pointing the camera down can create a visually pleasing new perspective on photojournalistic works.

The picture titled "Dancing Man" has an interesting story behind it. I first discovered the tree three years ago when I was a sophomore. I came across this tree, which is located by the Physical Science Building and The Union. I went up to the tree, stood against the base, and simply looked up to admire it in all its' beauty. To my surprise I discovered "The Dancing Man" within. The trunk that runs from the bottom right corner and up the page, is his leg, which stands strong and in place. His other leg is only partially seen and curves with his other leg and extends off of the page in the middle of the left hand side of the composition. His torso looks small, and his right arm extends behind his left leg. His head in this photo has ice spikes on it as hair. His left hand extends to the corner of the upper left hand side of the piece. I was overly amused with my finding, and have a photo of him from every season now. This particular photo was taken in early February, right after the crazy ice storm we endured. His trunk divides the composition up into two asymmetrical halves, with the top portion showing more dynamics than the bottom because of the extra branches and clouds. The twigs form organic lines that are very crisp and vary in line thickness. These lines also run in multiple directions which add more eye direction to the work. The tree itself forms the positive space, while the sky takes up the negative. This tree means a lot to me and has become one of my favorite personal landmarks on campus.

"The Country Road" was taken this fall on the country roads of Charleston. I babysat a child with Autism and his family lives out on a farm. It was always such a beautiful drive, especially when the leaves were still on the tree. I decided one day to get out of my car and take pictures of my favorite part where the road bends after a bridge and wraps around in the back scenery. There are trees that line the roads to add natural frames around the path. To take this I actually squatted down to get lower to the ground and angled my camera to add new perspective to the road. The road lines begin in the bottom



corners and go diagonally inwards. The lines in the pavement add direction to the photograph which draws the viewers' eyes to the bridge in the composition. The trees add new texture and a lot of volume, along with the grass. The sky is smooth and almost cloudless, which helps prevent the work from looking too busy. This piece contains a lot of organic lines. Even the road, that is not natural, shows lines that are soft and bending. The road starts off compositionally thick, but thins as it wears off into the distance. Normally I do not personally like sun glare, but I felt this one actually helped by moving the eyes back to the road where the ray hit. I did add vibrancy to the sky to make it really pop and touched up the trees to give them more depth and volume because some of the leaves were too understated for my liking. Driving around in Charleston is one of my favorite things to do, and I am happy that I took the time to record the roads with photos instead of relying on my memory to reminisce on when I graduate this May.

"Irony" was also taken while on a country cruise with one of my friends. This would be a photojournalistic photo, even though it might look set up I honestly just saw it on the side of the road and knew it was photo-gold! The old fashioned television set was just sitting by the side of the road in-between some cornfields. I call the piece "irony" because it is a man-made object that was thrown into the abnormal scenery of nature. The television cannot function without electricity, apart from the amusement value finding it brings. I used the duotone effect found in "The Art of Digital Photography (Ang 70) because I thought a sepia feel would add to the antiqueness of the old television. For the most part everything in the image is crisp and clean. The grass blades all reflect the light and the corn crops stand sharp as well. The sky is lighter than the rest of the composition apart from the TV screen, which helps balance out the piece as a whole. The sky and the fields below are how the composition divides itself. The TV is pretty much in the middle of the piece. The angle of the TV is slightly different from the angle of the fields, so the two perspectives work together to add movement to an otherwise still piece. The TV is placed where the field is dark, which brings the attention to the set. Everything is organic in

the photograph apart from the television, but the screen is soft and rounded which helps it blend with the rest of the composition. This was probably one of the most interesting finds I came across from all my hours spent exploring Charleston roads. When I came back to reshoot it a few days later the TV was gone, so I feel very grateful that I had my camera on me when I found it.

One of my favorite things to shoot are shadows, I find them to make very interesting compositions. "Ghost Bike" was taken in summer of 2010 at the bike rack in front of Pemberton hall. The spindles on bikes almost always make for neat pictures because of all of the lines and directions that form from the pieces. The ground is textured because the bike rack lies upon gravel. I turned up the saturation to give more life and expression to the otherwise dull white that the shadow rested on. I adjusted the levels to make the shadow darker to make it the focus of the piece. I left in some of the tire on the bottom portion instead of cropping it out so that the viewer can see where the shadow came from. I really liked the basket that was on back of the bike, it helped give it some personality. I feel that the piece is static, without much movement, apart from the spindles because they all move diagonally and into the same spot which draws the eye to the center. The piece mixes organic and geometric lines in the shadow and bike. The lines are not too thick, and vary in size. There is repetition in the tire with all the lines that are within. I try to go photo taking in the afternoons, preferably near sunset because that is when I think the sky has the best lighting and natural glow, which I like to reflect in my work.

"Minds in Transition" is an example of digital manipulation. The original is titled "Minds Un-retouched" which is showcased above the altered version. This was taken in Dounda Fine Arts center over the summer of 2010. There was a display of sculptures, and the white one really stood out to me as being very creative and unlike the rest. I decided to duplicate the head to see how it would look. As I was progressing, new ideas kept coming to my mind. By the end, I had 23 layers on Photoshop. I wanted the picture to look like the heads were bleeding color from the throat, which is exactly how it turned out.

In every layer, I first had to apply a photo color filter to give the head some base pigment so I could apply richer colors. Since the head was white, tools such as hue and saturation were not giving me the results I needed. I have nine heads because I like working with odd numbers. I used the clone stamp tool to render in the colors flowing underneath the heads that I took from the base of the head. I loved the texture, and though it would translate nice if spread out. I also used the clone stamp when making the dripping elements from the heads' chin. I made the background black to bring out the bold and bright colors of the minds. I also wanted the background smooth so the textures elsewhere on the piece would stand out. I paid very careful attention to color, making sure that two heads next to each other did not have the same color. The shapes are organic, but on the inside head of the first green shape you can see organic lines manifesting. The heads get slightly smaller as the composition moves on, creating direction that moves with the shapes. I shot the piece at an angle, so they have a sense of movement thanks to the perspective. The heads create repetition and rhythm, which help the eye flow from one to another smoothly. I put shadows in-between each head to give a sense of space and 3-dimensionality between each figure. I was very proud of this piece upon completion because I was able to utilize my knowledge of Photoshop with a picture I had taken to create a completely new composition!

"The Eye" was found in Dounda. I feel that I got very lucky, had I gone to the art center at another time the lighting may have been different and the photo opportunity may have never presented itself. The light coming from the window creates a beautiful "frame within a frame" that shines down on the wall art below. This composition mixes geometric and man-made lines on the window and shadow with hand drawn ones from the eye flower. The piece is cut in halves by the light. The light starts to fade out as it hits the flower and shines down. The flower is roughly the same height as the window, although the two are portioned on different halves of the piece so the balance is not overwhelming. The texture is gentle, although you can see eraser marks on the part of the wall that the light shines on. The lines throughout are smaller, apart from the one the sunlight makes. The black of the piece is the negative

space, while the flower and window occupy are negative. This piece is unique by the means that I turned the art of someone else to art of my own without copying or borrowing ideas from the original. I did not touch up the photo much apart from adjusting the color curves and adding saturation and vibrancy. I wish I knew who drew the flower so that I could show them how successfully it translated into photography.

I thoroughly enjoyed making this research project. I found the library very useful with the help of EBSCO search engine as well as the fact that the fish bowl computer labs have Photoshop so all students have the chance to explore the program. More importantly than the resources, I am happy that the school gives students the opportunity to showcase independent creativity, and award them for a job well done. This was the perfect opportunity for me to not only showcase my current works, but write and prove myself as an emerging artist. I felt like I got a lot of concern off my chest, and this project inspired me to push myself out there to gain exposure. Through the use of practicing photo-editing and explorations of the possibilities and old-fashioned research I was able to compile my first independent paper as an artist.

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