

Extracting the Abstract



Lines, Dart River

How often when a group of people are looking at a photograph that is not easily recognizable do you hear the comment “What is it? Well it’s an abstract of course!”

It seems that the word abstract has a few different meanings, but taken in the art context it usually refers to not being able to easily recognize something, an image that cannot be defined, but with the intent and focus on internal structure and form.

If you are photographing and printing by traditional methods then it is more than likely to be an extract rather than an abstract. For all we are doing as photographers most times, is coming in closer and selecting just a portion of the landscape or subject that our cameras are pointed at.

With the viewer there is often a reassuring sigh when the confusion before them, all of a sudden becomes recognizable. They can relax a little now that they know what they are looking at. From that position then appreciation or lack of it (of the image), takes over. Now in this comfortable state one will decide whether or not they like what they are looking at. If this position of understanding is not reached then I would suggest that we are more than likely, to be unsure of our feelings for the photograph.

Photoshop has allowed us with relative ease to make photographic abstractions that are not really real. On the other side of the photographic juggernaut I would say that 95% of the “abstract” photographs taken by traditional means are mealy extracts of a greater landscape or in some cases, because of the conditions, of the landscape itself.

I think my all time favourite photographer of days gone by, Brett Weston took some of the best extractions I have seen. He was a past master at “seeing” unusual form at his feet or within the ruins of an old rusted car body or inconsequential junk.

To often we are looking at the greater scene before us and often forget to isolate just smaller sections of what is before us. Once during a workshop I was teaching I asked one of the participants how they were going and their response was that I wasn’t telling them what to photograph. I asked this person how could I see for them and suggested maybe they were not looking hard enough.

If sometimes you do get stuck and can’t see anything before moving on try to look deeper into the scene or try isolating sections of the scene. Walk up close to something and blot everything else out. It might surprise you what you actually do see.

When we do photograph something that we put into the abstract category then the real departure from reality comes, as a rule, when printing these images. There is a tendency to add a little more contrast than usual to accentuate the line and form of the image. In issue #38 I included a photograph of ice patterns taken in the Snowy Mountains. It was literally photographed at my feet and it was no bigger than a size 10 shoe. As I looked at the image in my view finder I had already decided that probably a grade 4 would be required for me to be satisfied with a print of this subject.

One of the images I have presented for you here was no different as I looked at it through the view finder. The image “Lines, Dart River, South Island, NZ” was printed on a grade 5. It was another of those images I took after the conference I spoke at in Auckland in 2005. We were merrily driving along chatting away and out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw some interesting shapes. STOP! I yelled and almost instantly the van we were in came to a sudden stop. I jumped out and walked back to where I thought I had seen a something. I hurried back to the van and said that I wanted to make a photograph.

As we all piled out of the van we scattered in different directions. While I was setting up my camera I was already thinking of the print and what grade might be a good starting point if I was to reproduce how I had envisaged it in my minds eye. I originally started at grade 3+ but found that with this image it was still lacking. Apart from the increase in contrast to grade 5 some burning in has been done to the top, bottom and to both sides. It was only gradual and only near all four edges.

I should say that printing at grade 5 is a rarity for me, but felt that this particular image needed it for what I had in mind. I should also mention that grade 5 on one enlarger is not always the same as on another. For example if you are printing from a colour head which usually has a maximum of around magenta 170, you will find that this is closer to a grade 4 than 5. It is the nature of colour heads. Filters under the lens will vary depending upon the manufacturers and also some papers are only capable of a grade 4 or grade 4 and a bit. If you know your equipment and the paper you are using then you just print using that knowledge. I print visually to the satisfaction of my eye. No other way.



The other image from New Zealand, this time taken in the North Island, is really quite the opposite to the river bed. As we fought the elements at Muriwai beach I was drawn to this rock wall that formed the cliff face off the ledge where we were situated. I think I must have looked at it for several minutes before I set up my camera. I was trying to decide on several options that I could see, but finally settled on this. The natural colour of the wall was a dark gray and the white bleaching on the rock face, developed over thousands of years, was a result of being pounded by the elements and water washing down from the top.

This print was printed on Grade 2 1/4 so as to maintain the darkness of the wall and also to keep the white areas from flattening out into an off white. The image was taken with a slight tele photo lens, but is far from a close up. I would guess that the actual size of the scene is probably about 5 meters by 3 1/2 meters.

During printing of this image the bleached areas at the top have been held back, each for about 20% of the base exposure time, then the same amount of time was given to the top 1/3 of the print which brought back those bleached areas close to normal. A little extra burning was then done to the top left and top right as well. Then a very light solution of potassium ferricyanide was then applied to that white area top left to balance it a little better with the right side. Even though it was held back originally and then burnt back in, it still wasn't enough.



The third image was taken in the USA in 2003 which is of a small section of a Bristle Cone Pine probably around 250 years old. It was quite an amusing sight to see about 10 4 x 5 cameras converge on these two lonely trees perched on a hillside. When printing this image the contrast has been increased slightly to Grade 2 1/2 so as to emphasize the strong lines that existed along the trunk. The actual size of the image area is probably only about 11" x 14", but in some ways that is irrelevant.

Given that this is the trunk of a tree and trees are usually round in shape holding sharpness at this close range can be somewhat difficult. This will apply to any close up unless it is a flat field image. My usual tendency is to stop down the lens quite a bit to improve my depth of field. This image was given minimum aperture of F64 and an exposure time of 7 seconds. Of course working off a tripod is imperative and photographing with a camera that has a mirror lock up facility or a leaf shutter is an added bonus. Minimizing any vibration possible is the name of the game.

In the darkroom apart from the choice of filter setting to establish the contrast I was happy with I have dodged the darker area in the middle, given extra to the top left corner and top of the print, burnt in the right hand side and also a small area middle right of the print about 1/3 up from the bottom.

Just a note on the basic darkroom practice of dodging and burning. I know I have mentioned this before. There is quite a bit of difference to what our eye can see to what a negative can record to what paper is capable of reproducing. When we look at a subject with different degrees of light our iris will open and close depending upon the intensity of that light. When we record it with film we capture it as it and to the capacity of the film, which is somewhat less than what our eye can record. Film has great latitude, but it does have limitations. Then transferring that to paper is a further compromise on what was recorded. Paper is only capable of so much and so to bring out all that has been recorded on the negative some burning in needs to be done. And sometimes when our exposure under the enlarger is based on a certain area of the print then dodging is required to give balance or to show detail. This might be bleeding obvious, but if the exposure had been based on the section that required dodging then we would need to burn in all the rest of the image. Sometimes I suppose based on aesthetic desire we give more or less of these two applications.

Try looking around your own home, inside and out, for things that don't quite look right when viewed through a view finder. Sometimes the harder you look the more you will see. It really is amazing what you might come up with. Good luck with your seeing.

Cheers till next time. Richard

Richard White lives in the North East of Victoria. His main subject matter is the Landscape and people in their environment. He is a Master Photographer with the AIPP and in 2003 he won the Landscape section of the Victorian Professional Photography Awards. He conducts photographic workshops around the state and interstate and also overseas. For more information or a current illustrated brochure on these workshops write to Richard at P.O. Box 425, Mansfield, Vic 3722, phone / fax 03 5776 9533 or Email: ragwhite@mcmmedia.com.au Alternatively fill out the reader information card and circle the appropriate number. Richard's web site is www.richardwhite.com.au