

Understanding Photography by Studying Other Art Forms

There is a technical side and artistic side to photography, I'm covering the more artistic side in this article. A question I will ask later on is why invest your time in non-photography related fields and most of what I talk about covers this concept. To make this a little more interactive there will be a few questions with answers on the next page to give you time to think about the answer. Links to useful channels on youtube and websites will be at the end of this article while not extensive they are resources I have visited more often.

Photographer's Essential Checklist:

- Camera / Lens
- Tripod
- Filters
- Other items as required

This list is missing one more key piece of gear a photographer needs can you guess what it is? The answer is on the next page but if your answer fits in the other items as required it is not it.

The answer is the photographer (i.e. the artist).

Why do I consider the photographer the essential piece of “gear”? First of all without the photographer the tools are useless because they don't use themselves. Also we tend to upgrade our gear so why not upgrade ourselves by learning and trying new things. With the many resources available to learn from like books, online resources, classes, and our fellow photographers there is no reason not to better ourselves.

I want to focus on the mind set as the filter we use when seeing the world. “I am the camera” so I select the scenes to compose through the camera and its own unique point of view. Technically neither how we see or how the camera sees are the same so the unique blending of the two can result in some interesting pictures. What exactly are we looking for plays a role in scene selection as well because subtle as it maybe it does influence us. For example in one photo session I took pictures with black and white photos in mind but was really focused on 3Ds so depth became my main selection factor not shapes, lines, and textures and my results wasn't quite what I expected. Maybe having a specific goal in mind is actually desired so by setting up a set of rules or criteria to look for the selections made will follow them too. Where your mind goes so does your camera.

Why invest your time in non-photography based resources? Everything we see or hear can influence us at some level so why only focus on photography since it is part of a vast visual world to be studied. The disadvantage is not everything will apply directly to our chosen craft of photography but it doesn't have to because even the exposure to new ideas leads to unexpected ideas we can apply in a more relevant way. I have found that if nothing else my appreciation of what other artist do and how they work allows me to enjoy art more as my world view expands.

Photography, painting, and drawing share common characteristics but the traits manifest differently in each one. In some ways this is the story of an additive process and subtractive process applied at the time of creating an image. Inherent in each process is also a point of view in interpreting the scene itself and reasons for selecting the scenes we do.

First I want to cover the subtractive process where we react to a scene as that is how photography works. The camera captures the light present in the scene at the exposure setting chosen as such whatever is in the cameras field of view is captured. Given this limitation the only way to remove an unwanted element is to recompose and arrange the existing scene. The photographer doesn't need to understand to all the details within the scene just select it based on what they liked.

The additive process allows a more active control requiring the artist to be more aware of how a scene is constructed because it is recorded on a blank piece of paper or canvas using the medium of chose. Be it pencil or paint brush the skill of the artist in layering the elements and understanding how to reproduce a scene is based on a more purposeful observation to achieve the results. They have a higher degree of freedom to alter a scene as they please often being simplified in the process but are not limited by reality so can make more creative decisions if they wish.

A photograph is a visual record of how the camera captured a scene but it also contains volumes of hidden information. In post processing this information can be useful to manipulate the image. One of the less useful perhaps but still interpreted is the monocular depth cues encoded into it seen when viewing the photograph. The luminosity (tonal values) and color in an image is used in post processing but photographers see it one way and painters another way. The one piece of information that stuck with me the most was the painter mixes pigments not colors. What this cleared up was the confusion I

had trying to understand two incompatible systems but how the painter uses color and the theory behind it does provide a new way to understand color. Another insight gleamed along my journey is as long as the tonal values match what we expect you can alter the colors in more creative ways.

Part of the learning process is to keep in mind what worked and didn't work but the best frame work I have found to use as a reference is the terminology used in drawing. Horizon line maybe a common term but other terms define the types of shadows, how light is cast, perspective, and elements taken for granted. Knowing something about how artist who view the world in this more detailed and defined way could help how we observe our surroundings.

My journey into photography is still mainly influenced within this art form but exploring the other art forms has provided alternate points of view beneficial in inspiring me to try new ways of processing photos with an artistic result in mind. What you get from your own journey into the unfamiliar is unknown but in my opinion worth it.

Learning how to paint – So how does one learn to paint? According to a youtube video I found it goes in stages. The physical stage is where you learn what your paint and brushes can do with the goal using them without thinking about it. The next stage is to learn how to observe the world around you but more importantly get to the next stage of thinking conceptually. Without some concept to put the pieces together the creative process is limited. This is universal to all forms of art!

In photography our medium is light and our brushes the camera but knowing how your particular camera works and how to set it up to capture a shot is important. Should that rare opportunity to capture a fleeting moment occur a fast response is needed. Conceptually as the artist I have a mental image in my head be it a presentation format in need of an image to use in it or as a post processing idea with a set of images to create the image but knowing my gear and being observant makes it possible. Beyond what is possible is the imagination and the impossible ideas that challenge us to keep learning and grow to make them possible.

While there are specific limits on our tools and what they can do consider that between observing the world around us and what we can conceive there is enough latitude to co-mingle ideas and concepts from all the art forms. The challenge is translating these ideas into a practical solution that fits into photography. Having covered some of the alternate resources already lets looks at some more to consider.

Videography / Cinematography - Obviously they use a camera so are more directly related but the focus is on capturing movement over multiple frames so perhaps can provide a guide to composing a photo to convey motion. Part of the movie making process is also creating sets and stages along with special effects applied in post production so is another area to look at.

Video games – Personally I have never really got into video games but found channels on youtube delving into the development behind them interesting. Being computer generated maybe they relate to drawing more but the visual worlds they create can be appreciated. This world building process works over a longer time so some lessons can be learned for those creating a series of photos. Start to finish the imagery needs to stay consistent so design elements and color schemes are finalized early something that long term would also apply to a series of photos. The player interactively goes through the game and their view comes from an in camera view. The virtual camera is an interesting concept to consider and designers in more photo realistic games lose control of it but in the entry and exit of a new space can compose that sequence and design for the mood created. How they do this might be of

interest in composing our own pictures. Finally there is a lesson to be learned in working within limits maybe not so much now but in the 8-bit graphic days and the hardware of the time it especially did. I can't say it will help your photography but seeing ways to work around limitations can be inspiring at least.

Comic books / Manga – You have probably seen how comic books are layed out but manga might be a little different since it is a Japanese version using larger panels and covering a wider range of subject matter. The artist or writer is called a mangaka and a search on youtube will show some good example of how they work. Search for images only with the search term manga and the range is amazing I picked one to show here.



The same concept as in painting where the panel size alters how quickly you can comprehend or read the content applies here. The framing and composition used help tell the story and compliment the dialog. These are not photographs but how they are composed and effect they convey is something we can learn from and apply to our own work. This is not my area of expertise but I came across the video called Stan Lee's – How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way that initial caught my eye and my starting point in this resource.

Theatrical – Long before the camera the stage was the center of attention and can be another source of useful resources. In terms of staging and production the composition happens framed within the walls of the stage but is more interactive with the audience. In movies this is called breaking the 4th wall but if you compose a scene for this effect then here is some guidance from another point of view. If we are creating a set to photograph verses an existing scene then props and lighting are a must and here again is a source of help.

I will close this list of alternate resources with one other category. Thanks to the Internet and many creative people there is an active maker community and cosplay community building their own costumes and props sharing how they make them and ways to handle the materials available so if you are so inclined this is also a resource to keep in mind.

“Practical” Applications

The results of sampling so many ideas and concepts at random is a whirl wind of information filtering through how I have developed my post processing and presentation style; however, in all the chaos nothing is useless and eventually influence me in a more direct way. While these examples of how I try to put the theoretical into practical use are unique to my own way of processing images you may find them helpful as well.

Bracketed sets - Having multiple exposures of the same scene even when not needed has proven useful when I try to bring out details in the image. The discovery of HDR photography and using a histogram got me using these types of sets more often as I was trying to learn about this method of photography and because my processing method is more manual I found a trick to share with you. The advantage of doing all the work myself made me understand what was captured in that set and this may seem counter intuitive but the underexposed image (darker visually) is actually your highlights and the overexposed image (brighter visually) is actually your shadows. Ideally your neutral image gets the midtones and is exposed for best results overall. So here is a quick introduction to help make my trick make better sense.

I found a very basic formula for a tone map to begin my journey into black and white conversion and as a starting point it was perfect. Using layers and mask it made sense to me and it is the masking element that is changed later on.

Layer 3 (overexposed) [mask=overexposed-inverted] apply blend mode – percentage

Layer 2 (underexposed) [mask=underexposed] apply blend mode – percentage

Layer 1 (neutral) with no mask Normal – 100

The mask in layer 3 is inverted because you want the shadow details to be applied in the image. Very basic but the mask can be replaced with a new one while still using the original layers content. Be it subtle or more obvious the artistic enhancement is worth it. A more complex masking element can be made by combining the over and neutral or under and neutral images often allowing more selectivity as you play with the blend mode and opacity but the key is to realize it isn't the finished product but a way to help achieve it. Here is sample set and how I made the combined results.





layer 2 under blend mode=burn @ 100 percent
layer 1 neutral blend mode=normal @ 100 percent

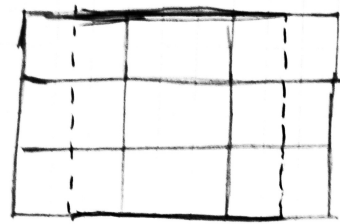


layer 2 over blend mode=dodge @ 100 percent
layer 1 neutral blend mode=normal @ 100 percent

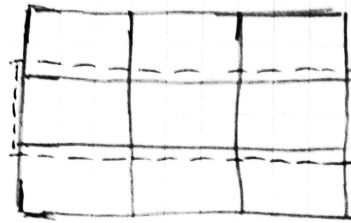
Try it for yourself load up two images as layers and play with the blend mode and opacity of the top one since the goal is to find a useful in between step it doesn't have to be pretty but how would it apply as a processing element is the question. Blend modes that darken are darken only, multiply, burn, and linear burn each progressively more drastic in conjunction with the opacity applied. Blend modes that lighten are lighten only, screen, dodge, and linear dodge (add) each progressively more drastic in conjunction with the opacity applied. Combinations to try include over the same image n over n, u over u, and o over o along with combinations like o over n and u over n as a start.

Other type of sets - Collecting as much information in field as possible with a post processing idea in mind are the other types of sets I take. Consider the case for emulation verses optically blurring an image I prefer optically doing it. I take a shot with the focus I want then two more progressively more out of focus that I combine for an artist effect. A long exposure via multiple shots is another option since movement is captured but can be processed in unusual ways. Theses are two examples of collecting extra information for post processing.

Utilize your in camera's grid lines - Most cameras can display a grid of the classic rule of thirds and I have mine turned on. In general it is to help in composition but it is also an useful reference to compose for a ratio desired like a square area and not the full rectangle. Surprises in post processing can be minimized this way.



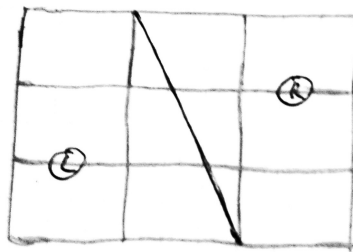
Square ratio



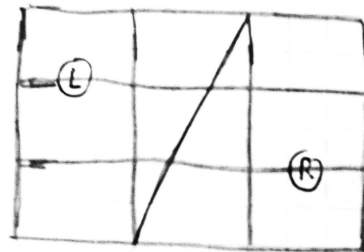
Thin strip only

Think Portrait vs Landscape Orientation

From the list of resources previously mentioned I will illustrate how matching the composition to the targeted ratio to be used is critical. The first one was video games in relation to two players on one screen and the split-screen format they used inspired me to compose two shots in field to match in post. The other example is based loosely on the idea of panels as used in comic books to explore a scene in a new way.



or



Divided diagonally to create interesting composition

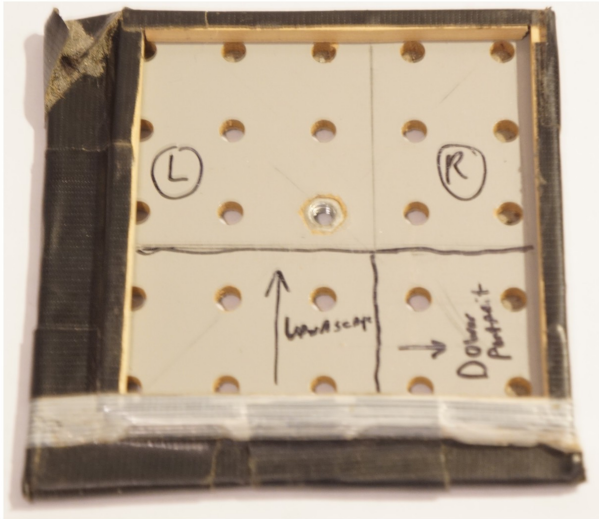
The idea of a split-screen allows for two point of views with a common object in between but composing for a distinct left side and distinct right side can be tricky and easy to confuse so I try to map it out in my head. In terms of space both images get an equal amount of area with a focal point to compose by. A three way split is possible but limitations can't be ignored.



Telling a story is part of why we take a photograph but we don't see the world at once but in glances composed into one “image” in our brain. Comic books tell a story as well and the panel sizes help readability and importance of the content so I borrowed from it and compose within a larger area I see and record pieces of it to composite later. I pick the panel sizes for the three images I capture at the time usually creating the leading line an image would have had plus pick the over all background image. To increase contrast I found you shoot the primary set at one angle and the background using a different angle. From this example you can see what my goal overall was.



Translation of a drawing concept - I will not go into too much detail here but on rare occasions the crossover concept can inspire me in unexpected ways. I pondered how to learn to draw by not drawing while killing times between counts at a work and observing the warehouse for a demonstration at the Artisan Art Walk. For the record if people had actually attended it would have been a odd mix of elements to comprehend but this came out of it.



What do these three items have in common?

Horizon Line

Answer is on the next page.

What do these have in common? The short answer is a way to use unlike focal lengths to create a stereo card. How I arrived at my solution to make it work was an observation about how we see and our brains ability to adjust the two unlike input from the left and right eye. To see what I mean try tilting your head to the left and then the right notice the ground level stays stable. I believe it is the horizon line as seen from each eye that provides a common reference and allows the stabilization. Optically two unlike focal lengths don't overlay correctly but introducing that common "horizon line" and scaling by it solved my problem. The 3D process I came up with is hard to explain but with the rig I came up I can produce decent results.

Horizon line - In general this divider is a quick reference to assess foreground elements and sky providing a type glue. This is one of many comparisons done to assess a scene without us thinking about.

Tilt-head - To create a common "horizon line" I tilt the camera up or down to match usually the 1/3rd or 2/3rd mark of the grid lines on something in the scene. The ability to scale the narrow field of view and wider field of view to each other is why I use this tilt-head.

Square 3D slider - "Precision" at least in 1/4th increments in both directions to better control how I produce my stereo pairs.

While I can't explain my process easily I do want to say that a random observation sparked new life into an older project stuck in my head.

I took a rather simple question and proceeded to answer it at quite some length but hopefully this will get you to see the world of art resources around you in a new way. Questions lead to answers but more often than not to more questions and my journey down this line of thinking was with a simple question initially. What do photographs and paintings have in common? How are they different? Hopefully your inquires will lead to some interesting places too.

Index of Resources

Drawing / Painting

Colour In Your Life – Australian show promoting artist of all types.
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvXYd9tyeV4QmtnSx7XOQnQ>
<https://www.colourinyourlife.com.au/>

Bob Ross - The Joy of Painting and his calming step by step painting advice.
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCxcnsr1R5Ge_fbTu5ajt8DQ

Ray Grimes – Abstract Art – He creates amazing images out practically nothing. Good examples of simplification.
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9y4KZ2MXaBTYp_UJ5hFIjA

Cesar Santos – Artist with some good advice.
<https://www.youtube.com/user/wapangacy08>

Videography

Filmmaker IQ – Very well thought out and informative view point.
<https://www.youtube.com/user/FilmmakerIQcom>

Video Games

Games Done Quick - Fast play thru of games.
<https://www.youtube.com/user/gamesdonequick>

GDC - Game Developers Conference
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0JB7TSe49lg56u6qH8y_MQ

Video Game Animation Study
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8A3Zig-dNx2kZmy1FovTEA>

Virtual Landscapes – Umran Ali
<https://umranali3.wixsite.com/virtuallandscapes>

Comic Books / Manga

Internet Archives – Comic Books and Graphic Novels
<https://archive.org/details/comics?&sort=-downloads&page=1>