



A presentation by Jane Trotter

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I want to go beyond what I see.

*For me, photography is not so much about artistically
recording what is there, but creating something new
and different out of what exists already.*

*I want to alter and challenge my perspective. To take
the 'known' and invite the 'unknown'.*

Jane Trotter

Getting Started and Experimenting

- ♦ Try working in Studies or Themes, for example, 'Lines and Curves', '3', 'Shadows', or 'Triangles'.
- ♦ They are a good way to keep you focused, motivated and provide a sense of direction.
- ♦ You will learn to look at objects with a specific purpose in mind.
- ♦ Aim for a good variety and diversity of images overall within the study.
- ♦ Mini-Studies are a useful method of exploring different ways of photographing one subject and experimenting with several different photographic techniques.

My Guiding Principles

- ♦ Images conceived of as 'artwork' rather than 'photographs'.
- ♦ Abstracts are captured in camera.
- ♦ Images are not heavily manipulated or artificially created.
- ♦ 'Transformative Process' – alter and challenge perspective.

Defining Abstract

Wikipedia defines abstract art as a “visual language of form, colour and line to create a composition which may exist with a degree of independence from visual references to the world”.

- ♦ An abstract image is conceived apart from concrete reality.
- ♦ The subject is represented by shapes and patterns, rather than by realistic likeness.
- ♦ The intellectual and affective artistic content depends solely on intrinsic form rather than pictorial representation.¹

So essentially, an abstract image relies heavily on internal structure and form. It's non-representational and generally will emphasise lines, colours, textures, geometrical forms and their relationship to, and interaction with one another.

It's an image which leaves much to the imagination.

I think one of the most colourful and almost whimsical explanations of abstract photography comes from Anne Darling. Anne writes:²

“Abstract photographers allow the lens to focus so acutely that we see the wrinkles but do not recognise the elephant in the picture. The repetition of objects photographed from some unusual or distant vantage point produce rhythmic colour. And allowing the lens to blur reality dissolves an object beyond recognition into pure colour and amorphous shapes. The abstract photographer thus makes a picture meant for pure visual sensation.”

My Photographic Goals

- ♦ To look at objects in my environment with fresh eyes and a new perspective.
- ♦ To find beauty and transcendence in the everyday and commonplace.
- ♦ To turn the ordinary into the extra-ordinary.

What Makes a Good Abstract?

These are my own personal guidelines and what I aspire to in my own abstract photography. If you speak with another abstract photographer you may encounter a completely different set of criteria.

1) Simplicity

- ♦ For me, simplicity is the most important element.
- ♦ I think there should be a singularity of purpose – by that I mean make a single statement with your image, remove any unwanted or distracting elements and don't confuse the viewer.
- ♦ There's likely to be an element of uncertainty in the viewer's mind already as they may not be able to recognise or determine the original subject matter. Don't add to the confusion.

- ♦ What's important is that the design elements from which the shot is constructed are clean, uncluttered and easily processed.

2) Composition

- ♦ Having that clear structural design is paramount.
- ♦ Abstract photography is not a licence to do whatever the hell you like, where the normal rules of composition don't apply. If anything, they become even more important and accentuated.
- ♦ Give consideration to how you are going to order the shapes, patterns and colours within the image.
- ♦ In particular, think about balance and proportion. These aspects are crucial as often you may be relying upon very little to create your image.
- ♦ How do the colours contribute to the construction of your image? Some colours may be 'weighted' more heavily and draw our attention, either to where we want it, or less ideally, to where we don't.
- ♦ A colour's visual impact will be dependent upon and relative to the other colours surrounding it, so think about how you can control the colours in your image to emphasise the shapes or highlight a point of interest.
- ♦ Equally as important is the use of leading lines to control your entry into the picture and subsequent movement around the shot. Do the shapes lead your eye to the main point of interest within the photograph?
- ♦ Clever and judicious use of depth of field will also contribute to highlighting areas and guiding your eye to the desired location.

3) Lighting

- ♦ Lighting can be used to enhance or exaggerate shape and form.
- ♦ And to give prominence to certain areas within the image.
- ♦ I almost always use natural light.
- ♦ Several of my images are strongly backlit and that can provide a very different and dramatic effect.

4) Angle of View

- ♦ Angle of view relates closely to composition.
- ♦ You may need to eliminate certain distracting or displeasing elements. For example, a colour which stands out too prominently, or a particular shape which leads you out of the frame or doesn't sit well with the other patterns in the image.
- ♦ Work at finding the angle of view which will give you the best possible vantage point for your subject with the least amount of distraction.
- ♦ Be prepared to be flexible and experiment.
- ♦ In fact, you may continue your experimentation post capture by rotating or flipping your image. This is a great opportunity to compare how a shot will look with a differentiation orientation. You may be very pleasantly surprised with the results. Abstracts tend to lend themselves more to this kind of investigation so it's well worth doing.

5) Harmonious Union of Elements

- ♦ Because there tends to be very little in my shots, what I decide to include must work together harmoniously and cohesively.
- ♦ So in terms of the balance and proportion of the image, there needs to be a complementary 'weighting' of elements.
- ♦ Patterns and colours within the image can't contradict each other or work in opposition. In other words, I don't want them fighting for dominance, creating confusion, or drawing the viewer's eye away from where I want them to be looking.
- ♦ Lines, curves, colours and patterns will ideally co-exist rather than compete, enhance rather than detract.

6) Mystery & Accessibility

- ♦ As in all photography, I think an abstract image should engage us on an emotional level.
- ♦ What I'm looking for is an element of mystery, mood and intrigue.

- ♦ I want my images to be inviting, encouraging viewers to really look, so even if they're unsure of the actual subject matter, they can still appreciate the shapes and forms which make up the image itself.
- ♦ Above all, I want to stimulate the viewer's imagination and sense of wonder, to share and communicate my vision.

Ideas Can Grow and Develop

Often one shot can stimulate another idea which extends and expands upon your original concept. Ideas can form, and then inform and influence other projects.

For example, I have a variety of images which all involve using a bright, colourful stripy bag. My first thought was to place the bag beside a teapot. The wonderfully distorted, misshapen lines and curves were reflected in its metallic surface. Then I tried the same technique using a torch instead of a teapot, and finally I placed some crinkly tinfoil beside the bag. From this one prop I have created three distinct and different images.

Another sequence used a multi-coloured, triangular glass vase. I first photographed the vase on its own, then in combination with a glass mushroom and a small glass prism. The colours from the vase were reflected in and around the different objects, producing unusual shapes and patterns.

What are the Advantages of taking Abstracts?

*What benefits will you gain from delving deeper into this style of photography?
Here are my top 10 reasons:*

1) Expand your creativity and imagination

I certainly enjoy things which make me think and determining the best way to photograph a subject and to give it new life often means you have to think outside of the square and re-evaluate your approach. There's also a lot of learning on the job as new ideas grow and develop as you are working with

a subject. Allowing yourself to be open to these possibilities, even though they may, at first, seem unlikely, fosters an adventurous and creative spirit.

2) Encourage you to look at things differently

Often abstract photographers will create an image out of a combination of disparate elements or alternatively, focus on a small area of a particular subject. This ability to juxtapose or extract, isolate or blend, to re-invent what you are seeing, and to finally communicate your new vision to the viewer is a skill which I hold in very high regard.

3) Pleasure of creating something which is truly unique

The beauty of abstract photography is that we can move beyond the conventional or representational into creating images of pure imagination. We can express a very truly unique vision.

4) Set yourself a challenge

If you want to shake up your photography and try something different – the challenge of making something new out of something familiar couldn't be better. Take an ordinary, everyday object in your home and turn it into something of wonder and beauty.

5) Strengthen your compositional skill and awareness

I think taking abstracts is one of the fastest ways to develop and improve compositional awareness. Abstract photography relies heavily upon the intrinsic form and structure of the image. As the image may not represent anything based in 'concrete reality', the viewer must gain visual satisfaction and understanding from the skilful construction and manipulation of shapes and patterns into a pleasing whole. Once you become skilled at seeing and analysing these shapes and patterns, you can then apply this to other styles of photography. You will become more adept at decoding the underlying structural framework of an image.

6) You don't have to be an expert in Photoshop

Get clever with your camera first. My philosophy has always been that it's more important to spend time behind the camera rather than in front of the computer. Taking abstracts is a great way to learn and experiment with different photographic techniques and seeing the effects they have on your images, particularly depth of field, use of movement, shutter speeds, and the influence of lighting.

7) You'll never run out of subject matter

Imagine the possibilities - everything around you is potential material. You'll uncover a whole new world. I haven't even left the house yet, and I still think there's more I can do!

8) You don't have to travel & you don't need any special equipment

My home has been my muse and goes to show that you don't have to travel to get good material for an image. Many of my images were taken with the standard 18 – 55mm lens, and many were hand-held. The most important piece of equipment for the abstract photographer lies between their ears.

9) Can create very powerful images

All photography works on an instinctive and subconscious level, but more-so with abstracts. When we look at these types of images we don't necessarily have a rational response. The images are suggestive, sometimes shunning the logical and expected. They are mystifying rather than explanatory, unusual, quirky, idiosyncratic. Their uniqueness makes them very powerful and can engage our imagination very quickly.

10) It's fun!

It's liberating. It's freedom. You're working with no preconceptions. Often you'll have absolutely no idea of how your images will turn out, but that's the enjoyment of the journey. Sometimes you'll make a photograph out of the

most mundane things – but the joy and satisfaction of seeing what you can achieve is extremely gratifying.

Final Thoughts

The world of abstracts lies at your feet.

Take that first step – be bold and adventurous.

Colour your life with new possibilities.

Look below the surface.

Don't accept the superficial.

Question beyond the obvious.

Slow down.

Take time to look.

Take time to think.

And let your imagination run wild.

¹ As defined by 'The Free Dictionary', www.thefreedictionary.com/abstract

² Anne Darling, www.annedarlingphotography.com/abstract-photographers.html