

Exercise 2, Part 2

One-Focus Composition (With a Camera This Time)



The camera can loosen us up and free us.

But here we're going to use it with strict limitations. Stick to them exactly and you'll learn a secret.

Most of us, including me, spend a lot of our art-making time setting up circumstances that are controlled and comfortable. But our most alive, most inspired work comes when we're at the edge of control or have lost it altogether, barely hanging on, feeling a little desperate, but awake!

Imagine you've arrived in a strange city in the middle of the night and the airline has lost your luggage. You're distressed, yes, but you're also very alert, and being in that state of alertness let's you see what you might normally miss. You could go to your hotel and curl up in a ball, but better to take a long walk and look around. Seriously. Write down what you see and feel.

That state where your habits of being are overthrown and you are wired and observant is exactly the state an artist wants to be in. and it is what this exercise induces.

So first, grab a camera and put a slightly long lens on it. In 35 mm camera equivalents, that'd be around 100 mm. If you are using a zoom lens, set

it somewhere close to 100mm and leave it there during the whole of the exercise. Tape it down if need be.

Second, turn the control to manual and set the distance to one foot or so, and again tape the focus ring so it won't shift. Now your camera is locked down.

Your assignment is to make at least 100 exposures of light on a human body, composing as follows: put the camera to your eye, then move in and out until some part of your subject is in focus. *Don't refocus the lens.* You're going to change focus only by moving toward or away from your subject!

Now, who should provide that body that is your subject? Many people use themselves. Maybe it's that they don't want to feel they are imposing on someone. Much more likely its because they are uncomfortable with the physical closeness. But listen ... just go ahead and get past all that. If you want your pictures to have an impact, you have to

have an impact. Friends won't mind doing this for you, not at all. And the discomfort with closeness vanishes the very moment you begin. It's gone.

The biggest advantage of using someone else is that you are free to move around and follow impulses without having to contort yourself. So just go ahead and ask a friend.

Once you've found a body the next question is, should it be unclothed or clothed? Also, must it be fit and beautiful, or can it be like the rest of us? The answer is, it really doesn't matter. I've seen hundreds of people do this exercise with all kinds of bodies and the lesson always comes out exactly as it should. You'll see.

Then there is the light. The quality of the light can change everything. It can be direct, it can be a soft window light, it can be artificial. The source doesn't matter, but look for a light that does something, that makes shadow shapes happen as it falls. Do it at night with some kind of artificial light — light from a TV, a refrigerator, a

desk lamp or a streetlight. In fact, it would be great if you did this assignment in several different kinds of light.

So those are the elements of the exercise: a camera focused at a close distance, a human body, some light, and you.

Now look through the camera and start moving and taking pictures. Move as you look, and whenever something feels right, make an exposure, then move on. Do this at least 100 times. Don't think, just move and shoot, move and shoot. Whenever you get the urge, shoot...then do it again. 100 times.

The one rule is, DON'T REFOCUS OR ZOOM!

This is crucial. There will likely be some point at which you think, "If I just back up a hair and get the fingertips in it'll be a better picture." It won't, trust me. This workout gets its effect from staying exactly within the limitations.

And the job of the limitations is to keep you from working from rationality. I'll explain why after you're done. For now, think of it as something like writing a haiku. If you stick to the syllabic scheme, it forces you to come up with fresh language that is different from the way that you speak all the time, that is poetic and compressive.

(By the way there's nothing in these restrictions that says the pictures you take have to be in focus. See where that thought takes you.)

Now go ahead and make some pictures, lots of them. Exhaust it.

Done? Good.

Now before we look at your photos I'll tell you something about why we did this the way that we did.

First, the constrictions of the exercise are there to push you past looking at the things in the picture (the arm, the knee, the hair) as known objects and toward seeing them as energies (a big bright thing, a small dark area, some red light, a shape swooping into the frame). That's why we worked so close, to reduce the objects to shapes and energies. You weren't taking pictures of things, you were arranging energies, shadows, shapes — unconsciously and automatically. As with musical notes, they had no intrinsic meaning. Being so close takes away their thingness and instead they become energies, not necks or fingers or feet, certainly not a person. Those pure energies are your subject!

Normally our first conscious response to almost any object is to somehow say what it is, to name it, to put it in a category.

Thus: AH! ... beautiful ... tree ... beautiful tree ... a maple ... sugar maple? And so on, until we nail it down. Once we get it on the right shelf we go

from seeing it to thinking about it. We see an idea.

When we make art, we need to set that analytic process that is dyed in our being aside and see as a child would, have a direct experience of energies, colors, interactions of shapes. Perfect! This little exercise we've just done, with its tight restrictions, pushes us past the analytic and into a state of awareness — which is just what an artist needs

A musician could certainly do a similar exercise with sounds or notes, just moving them around until they fell into some unexpected relationship, harmonious or disharmonious. The sound might send us to a sense of lost love, or we might feel like jumping up and dancing.

Or you might be at your piano, feel lost love and start moving notes together until they somehow sounded forlorn. It is all a matter of their relationship, of how their energies work together.

Poetry often works the same way. Sounds and rhythms, the very spaces between words provoke responses not contained in the words themselves.

As an example, read this:

*So much depends upon a red wheel barrow glazed with
rain water beside the white chickens.*

It's a simple declarative sentence.

But William Carlos Williams made the words into a poem when he added space, pauses for thought, musicality. Now it unfolds and changes as we read it.

*so much depends
upon*

*a red wheel
barrow*

*glazed with rain
water*

*beside the white
chickens.*

Williams interrupts our expectations of his words with a rhythm of unexpected line breaks, and he gets us to look again and find a deeper feeling.

In our close-up exercise we imposed a similar alteration to interrupt expectations and take us to a different vision. We used shapes, colors, objects and the space between them, rather than words. If you can set aside your predictive and constructive thinking and look without expectation, a different kind of image becomes possible. Artists in every form count on this to get beyond their constructs. But in this exercise you get to see what you produce when you're not trying to produce a particular thing, and you find you can trust this kind of empty awareness.

Look at your photos

But first consider this: painters tend to start their work by drawing or sometimes going right at a canvas, writers start directly with writing. They are all looking for a sense of something that isn't there yet. Photography is different. What's there is there in front of the camera in some form at the start. Photographers tend not to linger in the contemplation stage as long. They make a lot of exposures, then they look to see what they got. Some look to see if their pictures came out the way they thought they would. If they did, it's like a participation award.

But when we are functioning as artists we open a batch of files and cruise through them, looking for what jumps out, *what went beyond our intentions*. And beyond our intentions is the place to look.

Look at the work as though someone else had handed it to you and asked you to respond.

Don't ask, *Is it good?* Instead ask, *Is it alive?* That's the right question. If work surprises us, if it holds more than we expected and wakes us up, then it's alive.

And if it is alive, good will take care of itself. I have come to think that, of all the artistic considerations, aliveness is where our good work is rooted, and the surprise of it gets us going. That's something I learned from Lisette Model.

The Edit

Alright, now look at your close-in photos the same way you looked at your ink drawings. See what draws your eye, what moves it from place to place. Notice the rhythm of your eye movements. Is it quick and choppy, or a slow, serene progression? Rhythmic or arrhythmic? Does it finally settle, or does it just keep moving round and round? Or does it perhaps move deep into the distance?

Finally, how does this energy relate to other things in the image, like content or color? Does it harmonize or work against them?

If there were a sound track to the picture, would it be music or some other kinds of sounds? If this were a shot from a movie, what would the scene be about?

My approach to editing is not at all analytic on the first pass. I quickly go through what I've done and mark anything that gets my attention with two stars. Then I go through them again and really start to focus, particularly on the variants and details, adding a star to the ones that I like. At that point I usually walk away for a bit—an hour or a day—and then come back for another pass. At this point choices become either obvious or excruciating and what remain are usually single images or occasionally two variations of the same thing.

The big prize is the image that makes you gasp and wonder who did it. I can't describe this phenomenon here. You've had it already, or you will, and you'll know it.

For the present exercise, cut your edit down to however many pictures cohere, then go through them noticing how your eye moves. See if a one-word response comes to mind. Say it aloud. If you can't come up with a word, if your eye doesn't move, cut the picture.

There is no need to pick a "best" photo. We're trying to find something out, not pick a winner. If your editing program will let you, make a slideshow with dissolves, then watch the group as a single sequence. Does it flow? Does one or another picture arrest the flow? And is that a good thing or not?

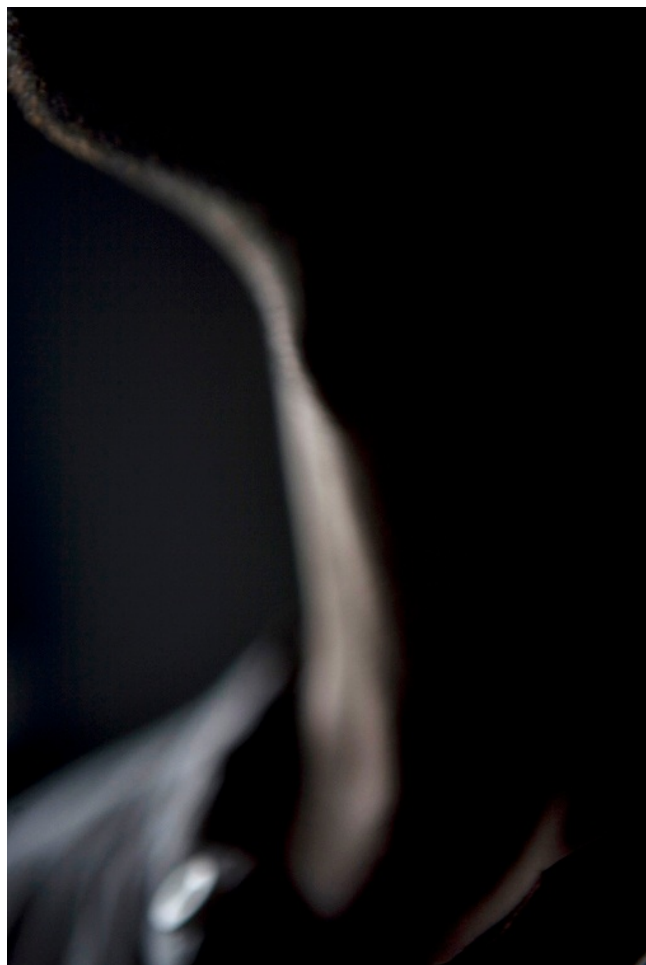


Let's look at some work a class did with this exercise. The glasses are the entry into this picture, the first thing my eye goes to, and as I take in the rest of the face, the brightness keeps bringing me back. As I return the second or third time, I see

there is something contradictory in the fact that, while glasses help one to see, the eyes behind them are closed. There is a sense of a mind active behind the closed eyes. (The slightly furrowed brow suggests this.) And by staying tight,

excluding detail and compressing the energy, we don't get involved with a story about who it is. It is a photograph about thought and vision, not

about this person. I can pretty much guarantee that the photographer wasn't consciously thinking about any of this or constructing it this way. And yet these thoughts arise.



Jane Wiley

Let's look at another. It takes a moment to become clear that this is a picture of a throat. The dimness of the photo obscures the "subject."

Then you notice the light on the neck.

That neck is

a strong line in the center of the image, a weight-

bearing column in the architecture of the photo. Then you start looking around, to the shirt and its button, which tell you further what it is a photo of. Then you—or I, at least—go up to the chin and start down to the neck again. The throat is unguarded, and the glance travels down it. The darkness and indistinctness make the whole thing mysterious, and the mystery is a huge part of what the picture is about. There's a mystery in that throat-baring gesture and in that picture.

Now look at the next photo.



There's a structural element in the strand of hair that is similar to the throat, but there is some energy going on in the hair above it too, a sweeping diagonal fall. The picture is less abstract, moving more toward recognizable subject matter.

But there's a satisfying music in the contrast between the more complex bank of hair above and the single line that emerges from it. Its elements form a kind of musical/sculptural structure. That's what makes the picture happen.

Finally, there's this. When it popped up on the screen in class it had quite an effect. Why?

For one thing, the composition is strong and simple, a black swoop that takes over the image, almost *is* the image. For another, it is recognizably ... a crotch! What a subject, something you'd never walk up to and stare at so closely, and that's a big part of its effect.

But the main attractor, I think, is that it was just unexpected, for the photographer and so for the viewers to find a powerful visual in that particular place. There was something about getting lost in

the task that carried the photographer past any thought that either he should or shouldn't point



his camera into someone's crotch!

Steve Levinson

Of course he should have! And that's just the way
And a few more from a recent workshop.
you



Antelo Devereux

work

at your best, past all thought. You can think later.



Suze Düggelin



Here are two fairly complex photographs take minutes apart that have compositional effects that are quite different. On the left, the eye drifts laterally as we take in each figure. On the right, the center figure spins the energy outward into a circle where it passes from figure to figure all around the periphery of the group and of the photo. One is serene, the other is kinetic, though still fairly controlled.

