

Exercise 2, Part I

Is Composition Everything?



The music is in the space between the notes.

Claude Debussy

Composition moves the eye, the eye moves the mind.

In the next three chapters we'll take a deep dive into composition to get a direct experience of how it works and how we can use it. the deepest possible grasp of how it works, become more conscious of the huge part it plays in your work, and relax and allow it to work in.

For a long time I've gone through museums noticing works that call me over to them and trying to see why. And it is almost always an invitation in the *energy* of the composition.

Our exploration here will be a matter of looking and also doing. And the first thing to do is to tear up the Rule of Thirds — and every other rule of composition. If you search online you'll see *The Eight Rules of Composition*, *The Seven Rules*, and *The Six Rules*, one right after the other. But while rules simplify complexities, we'll be look at the complexities themselves.

I imagine composition working like the different sounds one might hear walking down a street lined with music clubs — something frantic and sweaty from one doorway, something earnest from the next, further on something soulful, and next an exhalation that of cool. Or you could walk around the corner and drift toward a church door that sends a Bach organ fugue into the air.

So which party will it be? And what lets you decide?

On one level sound is just frequencies and intervals. Middle C means nothing, but add a few other notes and you have a chord that calls up an emotion. Then shift one or two of the notes and sound and emotion modulate. And the way the notes combine, and change take us on a journey.

Think of visual composition as working like music. You can see the elements, their placement,

the space between them, the sequence through which they lead us, the colors, they all direct our eye and our mind, tell us where to go, ask us to pause, and take us to a resolution. They set the tempo for this walk through space and time. It can hint at things that are there but that we can't see. The experience can be quiet or chaotic.

If an image speaks, composition is the grammar.

And you already speak this language. You have been exposed to it all your life. You can use it without thinking — in music, painting, poetry, architecture, gardening, laying the table, anything at all.

So why dissect it here? If you become a bit more familiar with the ways it works, you can use it more consciously and confidently.

So now let's do some composition, explore with our hands and eyes, and see what we know.

You'll do this in two parts. The first is very simple, just making apparently random brush marks on paper then looking at what they say.

In the second part, you will make some photos, but in an unusual way that is very tightly controlled—and surprising in its outcome.

The thing that makes both exercises work is that while doing them you completely stop thinking. There is simply no room and no need. That doesn't mean that you go unconscious or into some kind of trance. Think of it like dancing to a great band, but there is no band.

I promised myself I would never abuse the word or the idea of Zen, but actually ...

Part one: Composing without trying

Get yourself about 10 or 15 sheets of regular copier paper, some ink, and some kind of flexible brush. I like Chinese brushes for the dynamic marks they can make, but you could also use a

scrap of a sponge, even your fingers. I once had a class extemporize brushes out of handfuls of grass and some gaffer tape. (I'd forgotten to bring the brushes.)

Oh, and some newspaper to protect whatever surface you're working on from ink soak-throughs.

Alright, newspaper on the table, ink in a cup or dish, stack of paper, brush in hand. Ready!

First, place a piece of the paper in front of you. You're going to make three marks on it *in random disarray*, without thinking. The marks can be anything—lines, dots, splotches.

OK, three marks, random disarray. *Go!*

Then set what you've done aside, take a fresh piece of paper, load your brush, and wait, and wait...and NOW put three marks on the paper as quick as you can, bang, bang, bang!

Now, new paper, brush loaded, and gently stroke three marks onto the paper that are about...flute music.

And three marks that *overwhelm* the paper.

And three marks about distant thunder.

And three that look the way Beethoven sounds.

Three that are from Hell.

Three more that hurt.

Three that soothe.

And three that are *ugly*.

All right, now spread your sheets out on the floor where you can see them all at the same time. For this next bit it would be great if you had a friend look at them with you. Don't think about what inspired each sheet. Treat them as though someone had handed them to you and

asked what their energy reminds you of, what they make you feel.

All right then, here is an example, three marks at random, no particular connection or relationship.



Now look at your images and find one that is a picture of someone you wouldn't want to take a cross-country car trip with. Here's my vote.



What about flute music?



Distant thunder?



Get the idea? Here are a few more (done, incidentally, with those brushes made of grass).



What stories does the energy in them tell, what is their music?

Now take a long look at what you've done. Is there a drawing that looks like a bad party you're glad you left early ... like person who'd be great to travel with. Is there a cat looking at two mice?



The marks have no content, of course, but they certainly have effects. The vigor of the marks themselves (small, large, brutal, fluid), the way they fall in relation to each other, the way they move the eye (serenely or nervously), all these

things have energy, and that energy provokes meaning. They work like the volumes and pitches and tempi of musical notes. When they are brought together in chords or progressions, whether they are played loudly, played on a piano or a tuba or a violin, everything changes and coheres differently. Music works that way.

So does vision.

A difference is that notes are abstract while visual elements can look like things. But even though the content may be arresting, the way that it is unfolded throughout the frame — the pacing and relationships, the way the parts amplify each other — is what makes the image speak.

People look for “interesting” subjects and hope that their pictures will be interesting. They won’t. You can go to Yosemite with Ansel on your mind and get Half Dome in your viewfinder, but you won’t capture the spirit and grandeur of Nature that way. If you want that, *you’ll* have to make that happen.

So having done this exercise, go back and look at those three marks that had no particular connection. Notice anything?

That’s right, they’re connected. One of the main activities of the human mind is finding connection and pattern, no matter what is in front of it. So viewers collaborate in realizing the image — or poem or novel or song. They become invested. That may be part of the satisfaction that people feel after a museum visit. Remember that. Use it. Count on it.

So you just made a series of studies that convey feeling through energy alone, and you didn’t have to think about how to do it for a second. It was all right there in you. That’s the point of exercise one.

Next we’ll try the something with a camera and see what happens.



Tania Vasallo

A group at the Santa Fe Workshops looks
for the energy in their brushwork.