

Abstract Photography¹

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What is Abstract?

Since the renaissance, artists have been tried to represent the world as it is. In the first half of the 15th century Alberti and Brunelleschi were experimenting with linear perspective. In the late 15th century, Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo were looking ever more critically at what the world actually looked like rather than what received wisdom said it looked like. Earlier painting had often followed painting conventions rather than following what was actually in front of the artist.

By the nineteenth century artists were trained in these conventions. For some it became limiting. The Pre-Raphaelites, for example, looked back to a time before these conventions: before Raphael.

Then came photography.

Photography automates the process of recording accurately what is out there. For some artists this was liberating. It freed them from the need to record accurately. Instead, they had the opportunity to distance their painted images from



The-Lady of Shalott, John William Waterhouse (1888)



Fruit and Flowers, Roger Fenton (1860)

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reality. This distancing is what has become called abstraction.

Abstraction is sometimes presented as an alternative to reality. In practice there is a range of increasing abstraction as an image moves away from reality. The more distant the image is from the reality of what we see in front of us, the more abstract the image is said to be. This freedom led, in the early 20th century to cubism and, by the 1960s, to the op art of artists such as Bridget Riley where the image is abstracted to the point where it is a decorated surface with little or no reference to the outside world.

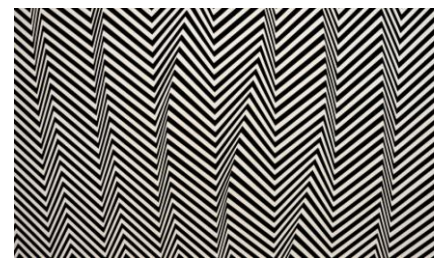
In photography there are conventions about how to make a “good” photograph. Within club photography this goes back to Roger Fenton in the mid 19th century. He wanted photography to be considered an art and be judged alongside painting. To promote this idea Fenton founded the “Photographic Society” which by the end of the century had become the RPS we know today. For Fenton, painting was image making designed to represent the beauty of the real world. It was image making which the artists of the renaissance would have understood. By the end of the 19th century, Alfred Stieglitz was promoting the idea of photographic pictorialism. Pictorialism is simply the idea that a photograph should be like a picture: that is, like a painting. For the pictorialists, the camera was just another tool to sit alongside a painter’s paintbrushes or a sculptor’s chisels.

Not all photographers followed this path. Ansel Adams started by following the ideas of Steiglitz but rejected them in favour of his own purely photographic approach. In parallel with the rise of pictorialism, photomontage was used to extend the range of photographic expression. In 1857 Oscar Gustave Rejlander produced the moralistic “The Two Ways of Life”. This combined thirty-two separate images into a final single work. In the early 20th century photomontage was widely used in dada and surrealism. In Germany, John Heartfield used photomontage as a satirical weapon to attack Hitler. Heartfield’s images do not represent reality in terms of what the world looks like, but engage directly with the political reality of the world at that time.

Pictorialism is a set of conventions about what makes an image acceptable. Abstract photography questions and subverts these conventions. Abstract photography feels modern, but it is chastening to recall that photography is running over a hundred years behind painting! Picasso’s cubist images were produced before the First World War.



Guitar, Juan Gris (1915)



Descending, Bridget Riley (1965)



Venetian Canal, Alfred Steiglitz (1894)



Two Ways of Life, Oscar Rejlander (1857)

Like abstract painting, abstract photography distances itself from simple representation and can become a decorated surface like Bridget Riley's op art. As with painting, you can think of abstraction in photography as a range of possibilities. At one end of the range is the unadulterated image representing what was in front of the camera when the shutter was pressed. As we move through the range of possibilities, the relationship between the image and what was in front of the camera becomes more and more distant until all connection with the original image is lost and the image becomes pure decoration.

How much an abstract photograph distances itself from representing reality is a choice to be made by the photographer... by **YOU!**

Practicalities of Abstract Photography

Manipulating an image can take place in the camera where any controls or menu options might have the potential to create something interesting. Alternatively it can take place during post-processing using software such as Photoshop or by directly modifying prints using a scalpel or a pair of scissors.

Found Abstract

While most abstract images require some kind of intervention by the photographer, there are abstract images out there in the world just waiting to be captured. Look for reflections in water and windows. Reflections in shop windows can combine the reflection with the goods on display. This was a technique used by surrealist photographers such as Eugène Atget.

Try going in close looking for details which hide the form of the original subject.

Intentional Camera Movement (ICM)

In conventional photography, we are taught to keep the camera steady either by using a tripod or by relying on image stabilisation. ICM subverts this by choosing not to keep the camera steady.

The idea is to move the camera during a long exposure. Typically this means a hand held exposure of something between 0.1 sec and 1.0 sec hand held.

As to movements....

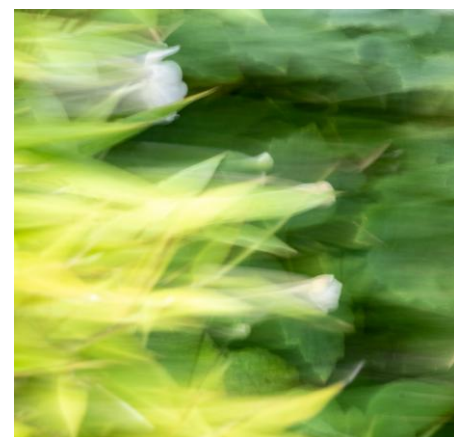
- Panning: Move the camera vertically or horizontally. The movement need not be in a straight line. Try following the shape of a hill or a roller-coaster.
- Rotation: Hold the camera in front like a steering wheel and roll the camera from side to side.



*Avenue des Gobelins, Eugène Atget
(1925)*



*Camera Club Meeting
ICM hand held: exposure 1/4 sec*



*Foliage
ICM hand held: exposure 1/2 sec*

- Hand held: Hold the camera for a long shutter speed. Maybe jiggle it around randomly.
- Zoom: on a zoom lens, move the zoom during the exposure
- Walk: Point the camera in front of you and walk forward during the exposure.
- Centred Subject: Point the camera at a subject. Then walk round the subject keeping the subject in the same place in the frame.

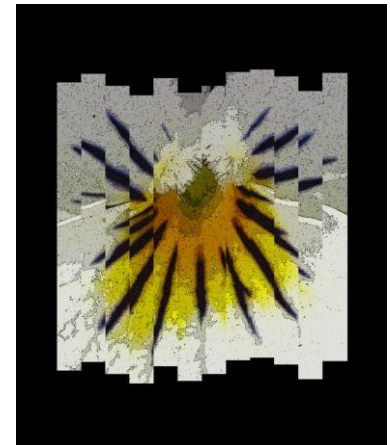
You could combine any of these. Indeed, you could try throwing your camera into the air and hoping you can catch it. If you try this, please check that your damage insurance is up to date first and don't complain to me if it isn't.

Photomontage

Photomontage is the assembly of multiple images into a single work. Outside the photographic world it is known as collage.

Before the rise of editing software, this would have involved cutting up images and arranging them to be re-photographed. There are a few issues to be aware of:

- Cut edges must be a clean cut. Otherwise the ragged edges will show. (Unless, of course you want ragged edges to form part of your composition.)
- Even when the cut is clean, the cut edge of a photograph can show as a white line. To prevent this, darken the cut edge by running a black fibre tip pen along it.
- If the cut components are not held flat there can be shadows along the edges. The obvious solution here is to use a glass sheet to hold everything flat. Fine, but not everyone has an A3 glass sheet to hand.
- If you have many components, moving one will disturb others placed near it. One solution here is to use a glue stick to hold things together. Just use small spots of glue otherwise you are in danger of creating a new three dimensional collage stuck to your fingers.



Sliced Violet



The Coming Frost

David Hockney created what he called "joiners". Here many images of the same subject are piled up to create an effect recalling cubism or Cézanne. Take a look at his image "My Mother" created in 1985.

Today it is almost always easier to scan everything and build a photomontage using the layers in Photoshop.

Software

I have used examples from Photoshop here. This is not because other software is inferior. Rather it is because I happen to be familiar with Photoshop.

Any control on your chosen software package can, in principle, be subverted to serve the needs of abstraction. For example, if you have multiple layers, you could explore the effects of different blending modes.

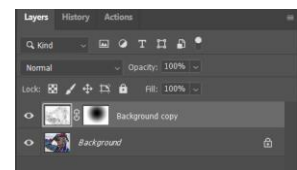
However, there is one particular approach using the layer structure of Photoshop which I have found to be particularly useful. The idea is to have two layers. The bottom layer is the original image. The upper layer is either an adjustment layer or another image. If it is another image it could be a new image or a duplicate of the bottom layer. Changes are then made to the upper layer. These changes are then mixed with the original image in the lower layer by using blending modes and masks.

In Conclusion

Do whatever comes into your head. There are no rules. As I said earlier... **YOUR** objective, as a maker of abstract images, is to subvert the rules.



Steampunk Lady



Photoshop Layers in Steampunk Lady

Annex: A Few more Examples

The examples here are by Steve Wells. As I suggested earlier, abstract images form a range of possibilities from unedited images to pure decoration. So, some of these images are more abstract than others.



Riding Out of Petra

Petra is an old city in Jordan. Access is along a mile long gorge descending from the car park. To get back up, the locals will (for a price) carry you in horse and cart. The ground is not even so you have to hold on hoping not to break too many bones. This is an ICM image taken during the ride. The white patch is the end of the gorge. The dark tones are the sandstone walls of the gorge. The red patch is a blanket over the back of the horse while the horse's head can be made out just left of centre.



Dancer

The original of this image was taken during Venice Carnival. In the background you can see the Doge's Palace.

The technique which has been applied is similar to the "SteamPunk Lady" illustrated earlier. In Photoshop, the original image is in the bottom layer. This has been duplicated as an upper layer. The "Find Edges" filter has been applied to the upper layer. A radial mask on the upper layer allows the unmodified face from the lower layer to show through.



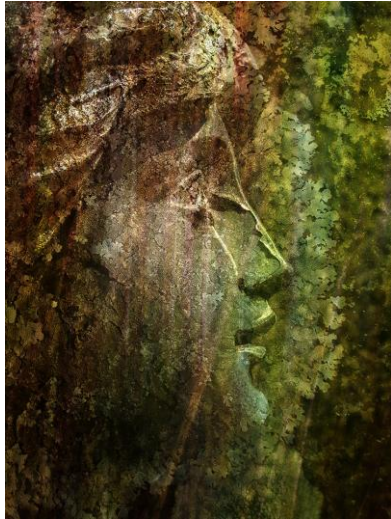
Tea Room Talk

While sitting over a coffee in the Ashmolean Library coffee shop in Oxford, I took several ICM images of the table next door. I then combined two of them in Photoshop.



Christmas Baubles

The three images here started as three Christmas Lights photographed on Thornbury High Street. The circular baubles were created using Polar Coordinate distortion.



Edge of Dreams

This is a combination of three images. The face was taken from a metal statue in Seville. The lichen was taken in Thornbury cemetery. Finally, this has been combined with a texture layer which started out as an ICM image from my garden.



Striped Face

The original image was taken in Venice. This was the stylised using a poster effect. Finally, a white layer was put on top a mask containing black lines was applied to the white layer.

The difficulty was getting the lines in the right place. The eyes and the centre of the mouth need to be visible. There was a lot of trial and error here!



I'm For Ever...

I took an ICM (Intentional Camera Movement) image during a break in a meeting of Thornbury Camera Club. This became the background. The same image was then converted into two circular baubles and overlaid.



The Famous Thornbury Jumping Man Festival

This image is an ICM (Intentional Camera Movement) image with an exposure of about half a second.

As to the title... I had just been looking at some images from an event which takes place every year in the Arizona desert. This event is called "Burning Man". A variation on the name just seemed to work.



Paper Edge Landscape

This image was created by photographing the edges of pieces of paper held in a curve. Several such images were then stacked in Photoshop.

Annex: Other Photographers to take a look at

Stan Farrow FRPS visited Thornbury Camera Club in January 2025 to talk about Abstract Photography. He suggested some other photographers who would be worth looking at:

- Aaron Siskind - 1903 -1991
- Ernst Haas – 1921 -1986
- Saul Leiter – 1923-2013
- Wolfgang Tillmans
- Angie McGonigal
- Matthieu Venot
- Alexander Jaques
- Maija Savolainen
- Ola Kolehmainen