

Improve Your Artistic Eye

Two professional photographers offer advice on how to expand your sense of style

By Dave Willis

Photography by Richard Hamilton Smith & William Neill

Design in photography is basically a combination of the functional with the aesthetic. What does that mean? It means that it's hard to define. The slightest variation in light, tone, colors, patterns, shapes, focus, motion, shading or viewpoint can lead to a drastic difference in the overall feel of a photograph. By manipulation of shutter speed, aperture and lens choice—the functional aspects of a camera—you can vary these elements of design in endless ways.

Because good design is so open to interpretation, there aren't any laws that will lead to a perfect design for every photograph. There are concepts and ideas that can point in the right direction, however. Recently, we spoke to William Neill and Richard Hamilton Smith, two frequent contributors to *OP*, for advice on how to improve your sense of photo design.

"For me, personally, I don't think design is concrete," says Smith. "As soon as we try to define design, that means we're trying to put a fence around it. I think it's an evolving process."



For Neill, good design is a question of asking himself how he can arrange everything in the frame for the best effect. "After I've identified the subject, which is certainly the most difficult aspect, then comes the photographic phase of the process. Is the light right? What lens do I use? Camera position? How do I arrange the elements of my image within the camera's framing?"

Choose A Good Subject

Subject choice is probably the most important part of the photographic process. Don't simply look for an interesting subject; find a way for it to be shown in a different or unusual manner.

"I look for many different things," Smith says. "How light and shadow touch an object, or textures, shapes and patterns. The way colors interact. Those are all part of what goes into the mix of making a picture.

Lastly, I decide which parts aren't necessary for the image I want."

Once you've selected your subject, it's important to maintain the balance of the shot.

"How well does everything fit?" Neill asks. "Is something important running off the edge? Is the essence or subject of the photograph distracted by other elements in the image? I think that's a key thing. Have I distilled the image down into what it's really all about?"

Try Different Compositions

The rule of thirds is a good guideline to help your photo design. It separates the picture's frame into a grid, with two evenly spaced horizontal and vertical lines dividing the image into thirds. Then, when placing the subject at the intersections of these lines, the picture becomes more visually pleasing because the subject isn't centered or symmetrical. But even this tried-and-true method isn't always the best choice for a composition.

"For a person who's just learning to make pictures, it's fine to work with the rule of thirds, but don't stop there," says Smith. "Sometimes I might frame the subject right in the center because I feel that's where it should be."

He continues, "I like to shoot from different points of view. I'm fond of getting on the ground or standing on my car or a ladder. Taking it beyond what and where the normal snapshot would be."

"Photographers often set up their cameras in one spot, take one photograph and move on," says Neill. "Sometimes this approach works, but most often, it indicates a lack of attention to the subject and results in poor composition. Experiment and try out different possibilities. There's a significance to even a minor adjustment of camera position."



Practice By Proofing

"Editing," says Neill, "is where all the learning takes place. It's where you get to see options and see that 'that branch' running cramped right up against the edge isn't a good fit, and 'a little more space' in the other

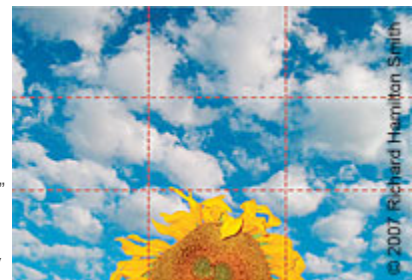


image is better—and those are the kinds of things you learn in editing. And they're the things you take out with you when you go shoot the next time."

Smith studies his own work, as well. Even after editing, he'll go back and recheck his images to see if he may have missed something.

"I find if I revisit work two or three months later, there may be something in there that I initially thought didn't work," he says. "Perhaps in the evolutionary process of shaping and challenging my own vision, there's been some development that now allows me to go back and 'see' it."

Experiment

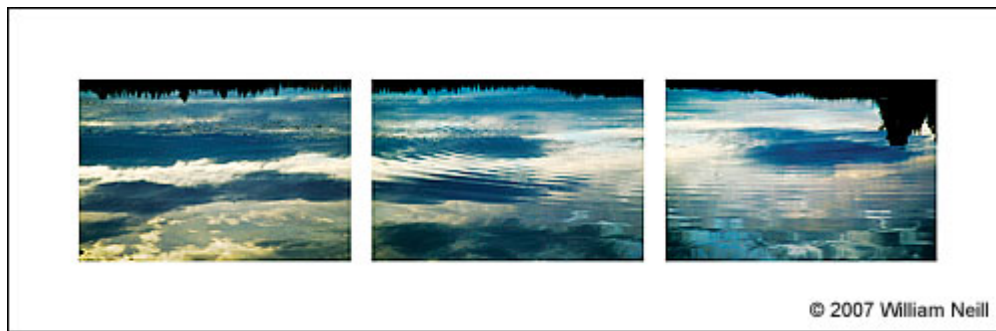
"If I were a beginning photographer, I would get into the books and read about how to design a photograph," says Neill. "It's a good place to start. But it's also a place people tend to stop.

"Using rules is fine, and it's good to learn them," he adds, "but being willing to push yourself beyond and experiment and try new things is a vital part of being creative."

There are so many ways to experiment in photography. Take the time to shoot the same scene at varied exposures. Try filters for differing levels of color saturation or effects. Photograph at different depths of field.

"I've been free to make my own mistakes," Smith says. "In the beginning, I kept copious notes of camera settings so I could learn how those settings worked for exposure, depth of field and composition. Once I had that understanding, then I tried unconventional settings to learn from those results. Many of those mistakes revealed the creative possibilities, so I'm always willing to try things, just to see what happens. I'll ask myself if I do 'this,' what will happen to 'that'—to color, exposure, pattern?"

"I also like to play quite a bit with motion," continues Smith, "either deliberate camera motion, or a static camera with subjects that are moving, or variations with different shutter speeds, or multiple exposures, just to see the results. It's moving beyond the actual subject for what it might become artistically."



Go With Your Gut

"The adage that I've written about many times," says Neill, "and it applies to composition as well as to the overall approach to my work, is that I'm more interested in asking questions than I am in answering them. A broad scenic kind of answers all the questions. You know, 'Let's put on a wide-angle lens and let's get all the information we can in there.' But by selectively isolating and paring down, you can create a mystery to an image."

He continues, "Using rules is fine; just don't worship them. If you're following the rules of composition, you're going to get a very nicely composed, but not particularly exciting or innovative image. Instead, think about what the important part of the image is. What is the essence of what you're trying to say?"

"The best shots for me end up being a gut feeling," Smith concludes. "It's not so much about mastering a particular technique or camera function or technical application. It's more so about challenging and growing my way of 'seeing.' It's 'Wow, that's different! That's a picture!'"

