

Experience Music Project

Concrete Abstracts

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Tuscan window

Many photographers enjoy creating abstract images: images in which the subjects are recognizable and enjoyable, but are less important than the abstract shapes and colors. A picture of rolling fields in the Palouse, for example, looks very much like one of the exteriors of the Frank Gehry Experience Music Project in Seattle, if the viewer is willing to abandon interpretation of the shapes, and simply enjoys them.

The evolution of photography has followed that of painting. Traditional painters used compositional methods developed in the Renaissance to convey the illusion of depth and reality to images made of inks or paints on a flat surface. Such methods include linear perspective, lead-in lines, S-curves, framing, rule of thirds, and so on. Traditional photographers followed their example. During the last century or so, some painters having mastered the traditional methods, began to produce pictures that were more or less unrealistic, and some, such as Braque, Motherwell, Archipenko, Miro, and Gorky abandoned traditional forms altogether and made images we now call abstract. In recent years many photographers have done the same. There are many techniques, such as camera motion, defocusing, and multiple exposure that

photographers like Ernst Haas, Uta Barth, Iain Stewart, Freeman Patterson, André Gallant, and Roderick Packe use in-camera to create similar images, and of course when Photoshop® became available, many others, such as Huntington Witherill and John Paul Caponigro experimented and produced spectacular results.

Some painters, such as Mondrian, Nicholson, Rothko, and Diebenkorn chose to make images consisting of simple blocks or abstract shapes of color, or even black and white. Photographers, if they make careful use of subject, angle, and light, can do this too. The work of Franco Fontana provides some excellent examples.

In many parts of the world one can find tight groups of brightly painted homes, each a different color from its neighbors. They consist of buildings of solid colors juxtaposed with other buildings of conveniently contrasting colors. An excellent example is the Venetian island of Burano, which has many rows of such homes along narrow walkways with canals for reflections, and no cars. Many Italian and French towns and some of the Greek Islands provide similar rows, though without the canals. Other sites, more convenient for Americans, are Mexican villages like San Miguel de Allende and Guanajuato, which also have rows of colorful buildings but lack the canals and have lots of cars. In the US, subjects can be



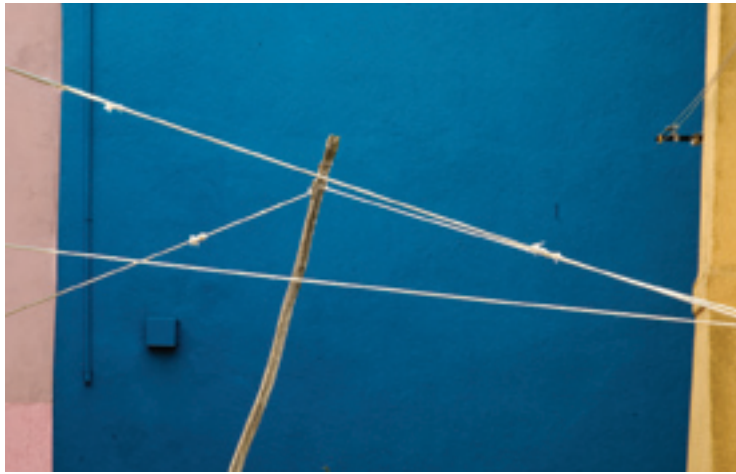
Palouse landscape



San Miguel building



Towel in Capitola, CA



Burano clothesline

found in places like Santa Fe, San Francisco, or Tucson, although it requires some searching to find them.

Many of the places with these homes are in “Mediterranean” climates, and so the sun can be very bright and will cast strong shadows. There are two solutions to this problem. One is to make the shadows part of the composition, the other is to visit in winter, when the sky is often overcast. It is very effective to show one colorful building flanked by small portions of one or two others of contrasting color. With care, the photographer can choose light and angles such that even if depth is present, the photograph can be made to convey more or less flat blocks of colors and shapes. Because a large number of these buildings have stucco exteriors, it is irresistible to refer to them as “Concrete Abstracts.”

Although it is certainly feasible to make effective images from simple blocks of color, extra content, called “juxtaposition” by Richard Martin or “counterpoint” by Arthur Meyerson, makes images more interesting. Simple windows, clotheslines without clothes, bare tree trunks, or pipes are examples. The idea is to emphasize shapes and colors, not details. Of course, many

photographers have made wonderful images of detailed windows and doors; in fact a book of pictures of the doors of San Miguel de Allende has been published. Abstracts are simply another interesting way to explore these subjects.

In places like Burano many people leave brooms, mops, or bicycles outside their homes, and their colors often contrast with the colors of the walls. Flowerpots are also very effective. Some residents also hang out clothing like hats or gloves, and sometimes other objects like buckets or pieces of string. In Italy it is customary to dry laundry outdoors, though including it in an image is now a bit of a cliché. All of these contrasting items provide opportunities to increase interest without detracting from the abstract form of the composition. (Of course it is perfectly acceptable for a photographer to add items either physically or with Photoshop if none are present.)

For photographers who are enthusiastic about making simple, austere compositions with bright colors it is worthwhile to search out places that have these wonderful buildings. Then they, too, can create concrete abstracts. ■

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Burano net



Burano brooms