

# Pictorial Elements of Composition

# Composition

Unless the visual elements in a photograph are organized and presented in a meaningful way, the image is likely to become only a shallow account of subjects and events that would have seemed far more intriguing had some planning taken place before the shutter was released.

Organizing the visual elements and presenting them in such a way as to convey meaning, mood, emotion or insight is the function of composition.

# Composition

As you gain better control of your medium, you may increase your ability to emphasize important details and relationships, to subordinate others, to guide the attention of viewers, and to affect them intellectually and emotionally.

# Composition

This lecture will serve as a basic expansion on terms you may have learned in Beginning Digital Photography. At the very least, these elements will help the you to further develop your composition skills and judgment.

# Composition

- Composition refers to the way in which visual details are selected and organized within a photograph to convey meaning
  - The organization will alter the content of the visual image, and relationships among the visual elements
  - The approach taken depends on the photographer's interpretation in the scene

# Composing Photographs

- Without the mind's organizing power the visual world would be completely chaotic
  - The mind helps us pick and choose what we see
  - We view details until a pattern of meaning emerges

# Composing Photographs

- The mind, not the camera, selects and organizes visual detail so that meaning emerges
  - If a photographer is going to convey meaning, then the photograph must be organized around an idea to shared
  - Without this, a photograph is little more than a chaotic record of what happened before the shutter was released

# Pictorial Elements

Pictorial elements describe the characteristics of an image

- Line
- Mass
- Tone
- Contrast
- Color

# Pictorial Elements

## Line

- Refers to the arrangement (real or imagined) of outlines, contours, and other connecting elements within the image



Joshua Lutz



Kristin Ashburn

# Pictorial Elements

## Line

- Refers to the arrangement (real or imagined) of outlines, contours, and other connecting elements within the image

## Mass

- Refers to the areas of density within the image that cohere together



Lee Balzano



Dionys Moser



Thom Jackson

# Pictorial Elements

## Line

- Refers to the arrangement (real or imagined) of outlines, contours, and other connecting elements within the image

## Mass

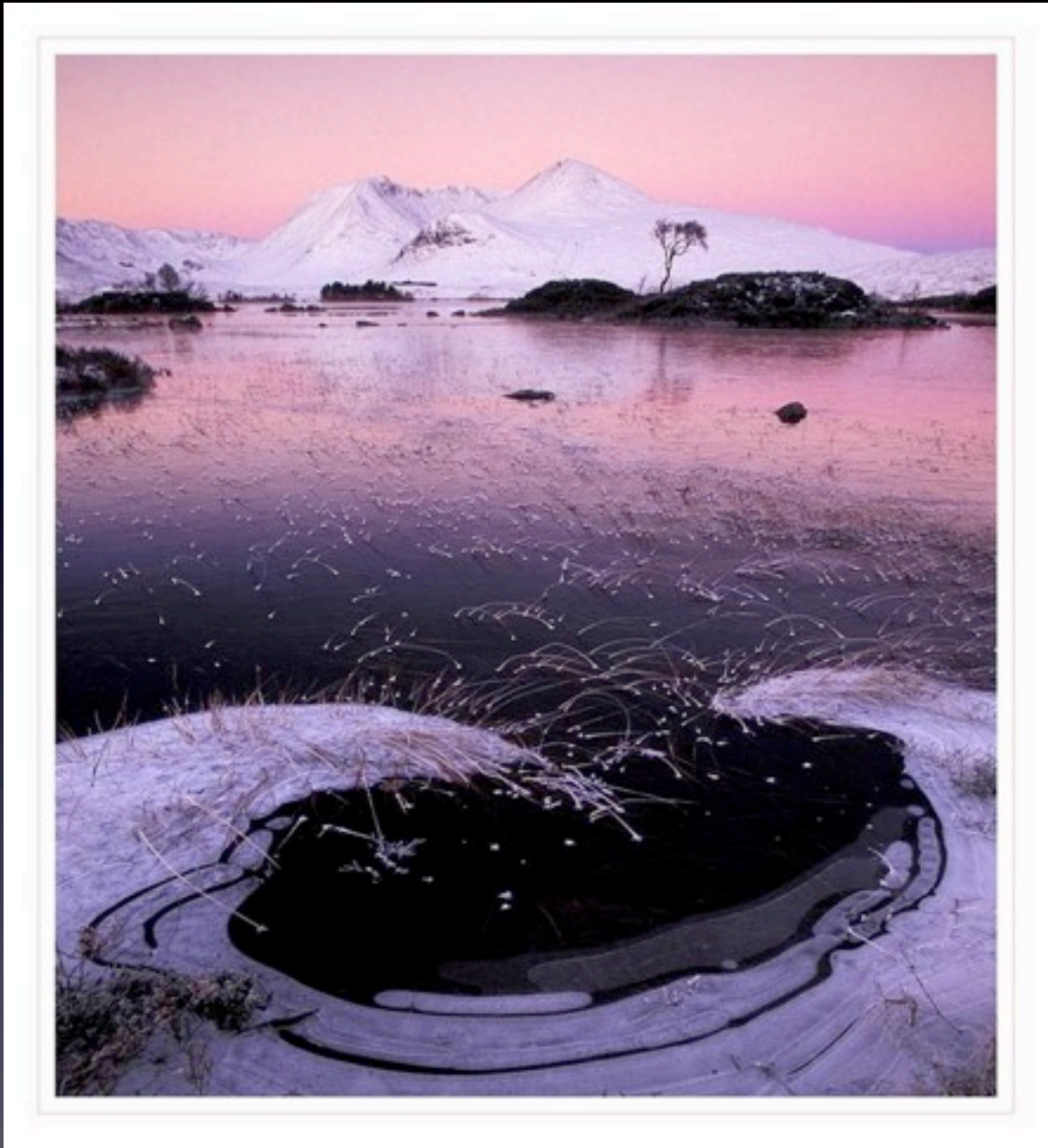
- Refers to the areas of density within the image that cohere together

## Tone

- Refers to the color quality or brightness value in a portion of an image



Lars Topelmann



Brian Clark



Panya Wong



David Roossien

# Pictorial Elements

## Contrast

- Refers to the magnitude or brightness differences between adjacent masses



Doug Burgess



Crystal Mill



Karl Root



Guillermo Labarca



Ansel Adams

# Pictorial Elements

## Contrast

- Refers to the magnitude or brightness differences between adjacent masses

## Color

- To the visual sensations produced by different wavelengths of light



Eric Fredline



Andrzej Dragan



Photograph © Keith Laban

Keith Laban

# Functions of Composition

- One function of composition is to achieve emphasis within the image
- In an effective composition, pictorial elements within the scene are *selected* and *emphasized* to communicate the photographer's ideas
- Other elements are subordinated, or eliminated altogether
- Thus, a major function of composition is to focus the viewer's attention upon certain details. Doing this, the photographer communicates a central or dominant idea.



Skip Hunt



Nina Andersen

# The Photographer's Eye

John Szarkowski

# The Photographer's Eye

- No longer in print, published in 1966
- John Szarkowski was the Director of Photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art from 1962-1991
  - Personally picked by Edward Steichen to be his successor

# The Photographer's Eye

- The book is an attempt to define the characteristics of photographs
  - “What photographs look like, and why they look that way.”
  - Argues the importance of looking carefully and bringing every bit of intelligence and understanding as a viewer

# Photographs

- Early photographers struggled with the mechanical aspect of photography
  - Many emulated other arts such as pictorial painting
    - Henry Peach Robinson's *Fading Away*
    - *Two Ways of Life* by Oscar Rejlander





# Photography Characteristics: Made vs. Taken

- Unlike paintings that were “made,” based on traditional skills and theories, photographs were selected, or “taken”
  - Photography is defined *not* by those emulating traditions of painting
  - It’s characteristics are shown in the work of those who purposely break from tradition, or who are ignorant of previous tradition

# Photography: Art by the Masses

- The dry-plate process expanded the base of photographers
- Roll film made photography available to everyone
- Multitudes of photos began to be the sole influence for new photographers
  - With hand-held cameras came new points of view such as *snapshots*
  - Photography created it's own vision

# 5 Aspects of Photography

- The Thing Itself
- The Detail
- The Frame
- Time
- Vantage Point

# The Thing Itself

- Photography deals with the actual
- Clearer, permanent version of aspects of the world
- Photograph appears true, lens is impartial, photographer's role ignored
- Reality is filtered, reduced in size, clarified or exaggerated

RP Ricci  
Photography  
*Untitled*



Eric Alan  
Pritchard  
*Trees of Ankgor*





Bryce Pincham  
*Dream Big*

# The Detail

- Isolating and documenting fragments gives details meaning and significance
- Details in photography often reveal compelling clarity
- Details relevant in photography were too ordinary to paint
- Photographs could be read as symbols



Lorne Resnick  
*Sisters*



Amy Pollard  
*Market Day*

# The Frame

- “To quote out of context is the essence of the photographer’s craft.”
- Photographer must decide what to include and what not to include
- The frame creates new relationships between subjects in the frame by cropping
- There are an infinite number of croppings in any given situation



Yuri Dojc  
*O King*



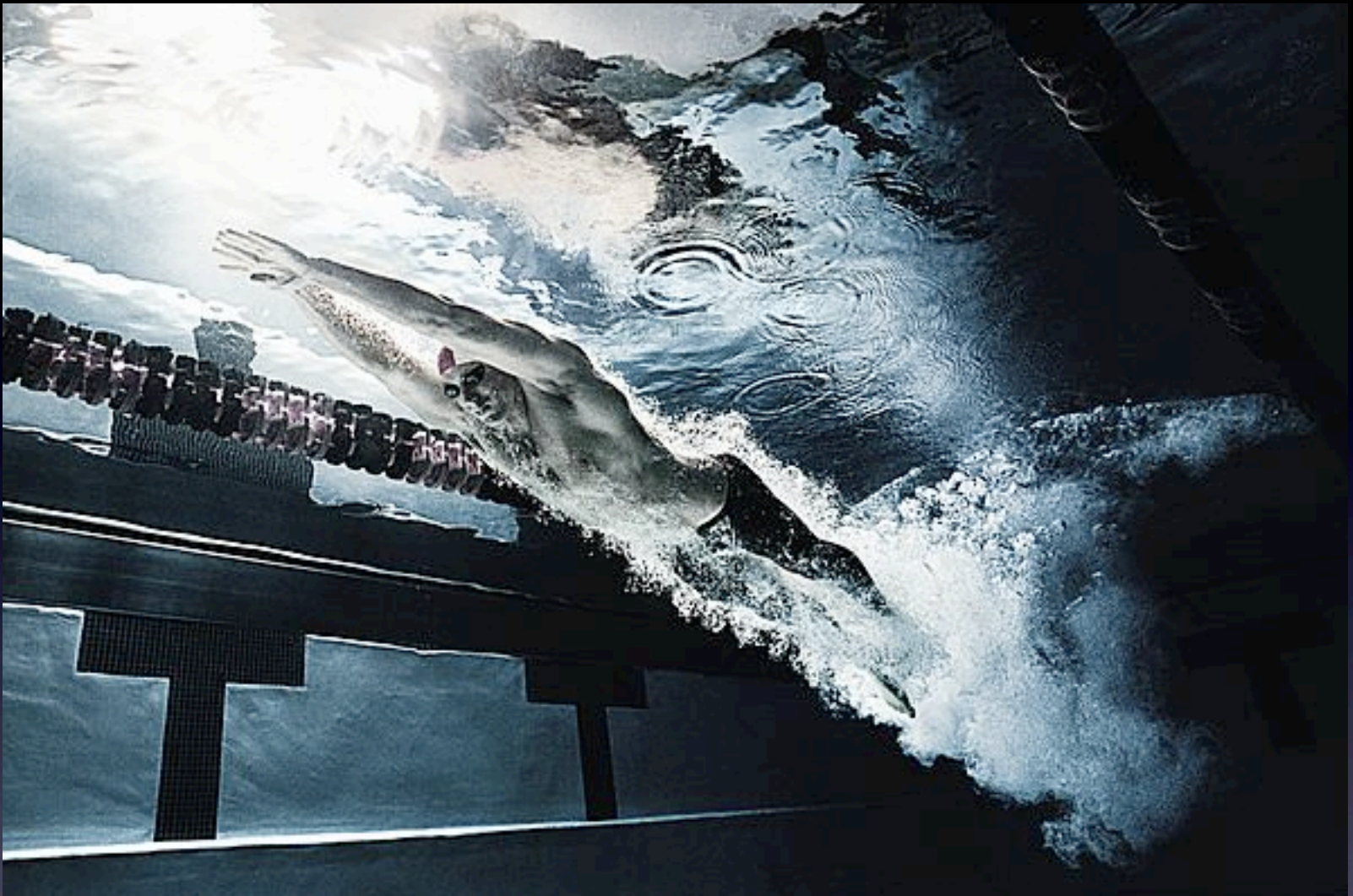
MacDuff Everton  
*Dawn at Taj Mahal*

# Time

- Photographs are a record of the *present time* of which they were taken
- Photographs are not instantaneous
  - They describe shorter or longer lengths of time
- The photographer selects a decisive moment to capture the image



Patrick Cavan Brown  
*Arctic Terns*



Marcus Swanson  
*Jason Lezak*

# Vantage Point

Photography utilizes unusual angles of view:

- Bird's eye view
- Worm's eye view
- Foreshortening (or not)
- From the back
- Selective focus & depth-of-field
- Ambiguity, obscurity

Onne Van der Wal  
*Shaman Ice and  
Boots*





# Summary

- Pictorial Elements of Composition
  - Line
  - Mass
  - Tone
  - Contrast
  - Color
- 'Photographer's Eye' aspects native to Photography
  - The Thing Itself
  - The Detail
  - The Frame
  - Time
  - Vantage Point