

Abstract Photography Notes ¹

I am always doing that which I can not do, in order that I may learn how to do it.

Pablo Picasso, Spanish Cubist painter (1881 - 1973)

In the spirit of Picasso's quotation, this article will be on abstract photography, as subject which I love but have no formal training in. So, Feel free to email me with corrections and please take whatever I say with a grain of salt.

First, I'll record a few definitions.

1 Abstract photography

Call a photographic composition *abstract* if its subject is somehow separate or 'abstracted' from reality².

Abstract art places a new world, which on the surface has nothing to do with 'reality,' next to the 'real' world.

Wassily Kandinsky, Russian abstract artist (1866-1944)

Abstract photography is of course disjoint from documentary photography, which illustrates or 'reports' something external to the photographer. The book by Hurn and Jay [HJ] has an excellent description of documentary photography.

Abstract photography can be subdivided into two subfields:

- *Non-objective* or *non-representational* abstract photography.

An example of a non-representational abstract photograph could be as depicted in Figure 1.

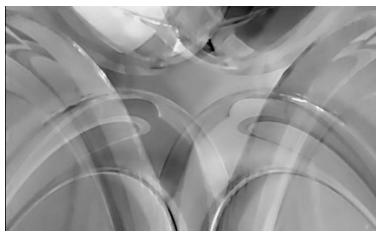


Figure 1: Non-representational abstract photograph.

It's hard to tell what this is but the curves and superimposed negative image illustrate a kind of flowing asymmetric image.

A special case of non-objective abstract photography is *geometric abstract photography*, which is based on the use of simple geometric forms combined into non-objective compositions [G]. The image in Figure 1 could be regarded as belonging to this subclass.

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²Likewise, *abstract art* is art that does not depict objects in the natural world, but instead uses colour and form in a non-representational way [A].

- *Representational* abstract photography: A photographic composition representing a real object in an unusual way which illustrates a pattern or abstract concept.

To the complaint, 'There are no people in these photographs,' I respond, 'There are always two people: the photographer and the viewer.'

Ansel Adams, US nature photographer (1902 - 1984)

An example of a 'realistic' abstract photograph could be as depicted in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Realistic abstract photograph.

It is clear what this image is, even though the glasses which create the shadows against the wall are actually out of the shot. The abstract curves and lines created by the "real" shadows and glass form the subject.

In a naive sense, *all* photography is abstract in that it is a depiction of a moment frozen in time separated from the constantly changing nature of reality. However, abstract photography is not 'reporting' a scene or event, it is depicting a concept. However, photographs can be both representational yet connote an abstract concept. For example, an architectural photograph of a building, say a church, can have several elements: (a) it could 'report' the image of the church at that instant, (b) connote spiritual concepts through the symbolism of the objects depicted, (c) depict an architectural construction suggesting abstract geometric patterns.

References

- [A] *Abstract art*, Wikipedia article. Available:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abstract_art
- [G] *Geometric abstraction*, Wikipedia article. Available:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geometric_abstraction
- [HJ] David Hurn and Bill Jay, **On being a photographer**, 3rd edition, LensWork Publishing, Anacortes, WA, 2007.

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