Back to basics: Layering

SEPTEMBER 8, 2019 BY MING THEIN

Judging from the correspondence and comments flying around recently, it's about time we did a refresher course here on the fundamentals of composition and image-making. As usual, there's far too much obsession over hardware and not enough thought about what it's actually being used for. This will be the first of several posts from the archives in this theme. That said, those people are unlikely to read these posts anyway…

There are two obvious definitions to layering: the literal splitting of the frame into planes of different distances, and the metaphorical addition of implied meaning through careful choice of subjects and subject placement. Ideally, an image should employ both to reward the viewer on further contemplation and to provide a visual that isn't overly literal or one-dimensional. Unquestionably, a degree of ambiguity is required too, especially when working with implied meaning. But how can we consistently make images that fire on all cylinders?

The literal

Firstly: perspective deals with the spatial relationship between foreground, midground and background elements. For a given subject magnification (size in final image), wide perspectives emphasize foreground over background; telephoto perspectives tend to make everything about the same. Having spent quite a bit of time attempting to maximise layering with a wide range of perspectives, I've come to the conclusion that it's easiest to accomplish with the midrange: anything wider than about 28mm becomes difficult because the foreground dominates; anything longer than 85 is tricky because you have to have very distant elements or risk large amounts of blur completely obliterating all context. Of course, there are situations in which extreme perspectives are useful – for instance, if all of your compositional elements are relatively close to the camera, then a very wide lens works just fine; on the other hand, if we're talking kilometres between successive mountain ranges or other geologic features, then you're going to need something longer.

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Literal layering is no different to good perspective use: be aware of what distances render as foreground/ midground/ background for your given perspective, and then make sure that there's something of importance – and prominently so – in each of them. If one of the elements is missing, you'll likely find the resulting image becomes very flat: subject in front of background or vice versa. There is no sense of spatial separation or three dimensionality; even worse if the ambient quality of light is overcast or does not contain strong shadows. In effect, what we're trying to do here is use depth of field and scale cues to trick the viewer's subconscious into following our intended order of subject priority.

Here's where some deliberate ambiguity comes into play: your subject does not always have to be in the foreground, or in focus, or the largest object in the frame; it merely has to be *the most visually prominent*. The *Idea of Man* series deliberately exploits this. On top of that, use of out of focus foregrounds in the cinematic fashion can create the illusion of being an observer as well as create a smooth (i.e. non-distracting) transition between scene and 'not scene'; important and unimportant. The beauty of ambiguity is that the less you give, the more the audience has to supply for themselves – and in doing so, fulfil their owns expectations. Reactions to abstract photos, for instance, are more a mirror of the audience than the photographer: you see what you want to see. People have negative or confused responses because they aren't really aware of their own biases and thought processes – it's far too easy to be told what to think by media and other social influences.

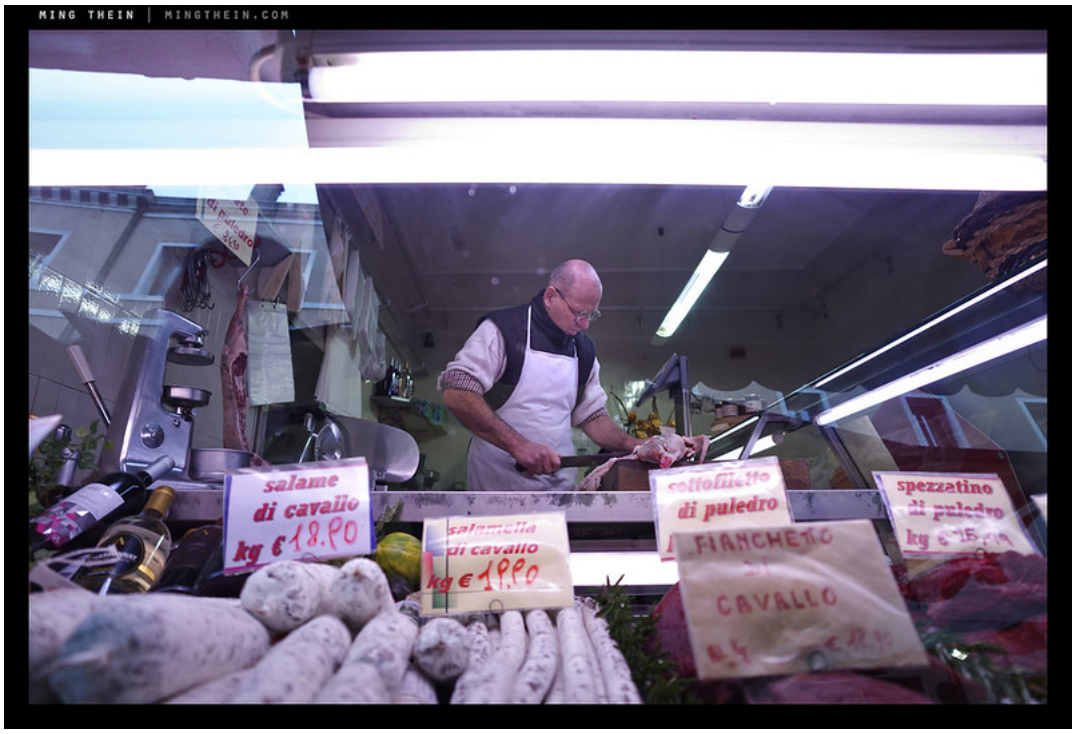
There is one caveat to all of this: go out of your way to avoid any possible distractions, because they may well unintentionally introduce another layer of confusion or ambiguity that could contradict your intended narrative. Unintended pictorial elements that do not fit the expectation of the audience then draw attention to themselves: this could be a deliberate non-sequiteur to change the direction of thought or provide intellectual reward for noticing, or it could just be a cut off foot or intrusive tree branch. Practice conscious exclusion at all times, and take care to avoid distracting overlaps of out of focus areas – in both foreground and background.

The metaphorical

Just as it is impossible to write a story without having some idea of the plot beforehand, it's equally *impossible to create a visual one without knowing what you want to say first.* I either go in knowing what I'm looking for and therefore the elements my image needs to have – the 'photojournalism approach' – or alternatively, I turn my awareness level up to eleven and look for interesting anchor subjects. Once an anchor is found, I'll then look in its immediate surroundings to see if any of those elements could be used to add some implicit layers of meaning, or create contradictory signals and must therefore be marked for exclusion.

Simple stories have few additional elements beyond the primary subject; everything else is merely context. There's also not a lot of opportunity to add meaning beyond the literal: what you see is what you get. This is an additional challenge of extreme perspectives: with wides, your foregrounds are so large and dominant that the background does not play much or a role, or everything is unimportant and small. With teles, it's either difficult to separate elements of different intended narrative prominence because they're all the same size, or the background fades into undifferentiated blur. Remember: every time you add another element, it will have an impact on the narrative. Does this strengthen the story to the direction you want, or add confusion?

There's also a spatial aspect to consider: not just differentiation of distance in a single ground plane, but also implications from relative positioning and size within the frame. We perceive larger objects as more important; smaller ones as less important. Elements above the main subject are detached; elements below are supporting or unimportant, whilst others are affected by the sight lines of human subjects: concentrated upon, ignored, or historical. And the relative space between elements compared to the external size of the frame matters, too: more space between edges and subjects implies closeness; subjects close to the edge implies there's some sort of escape going on or repulsion from whatever might be in the middle.



It gets more complicated still: there are non-spatial considerations that impact mood, such as quality of light, amount of light/brightness of the scene and dominant colours. All of these things trigger certain memories and expectations within the audience and can be used (or distracting, if not paid attention to). Warm light and a clearly cold/hostile subject can invoke a sense of danger, whereas the same quality of light and homely subjects would be inviting. Putting both together could be confusing, or implicit of hidden danger or something sinister, depending on the spatial arrangement of the elements. Further complexity of interpretation is added depending on the experiences and biases of the individual audience member. I think it's now clearer to see how many possible interpretations might be engineered into a photograph – and we haven't even discussed how titling can completely change interpretation by drawing attention to parts of the image that might not necessarily be visually prominent.

However, most of the time the audience does not consciously pick up on these things: they're the compositional equivalent of body language cues. We notice them but are not necessarily aware of them; however, as the artist, we need to be working one level deeper than the audience if we are to get our idea across convincingly. We need to be aware of how human visual psychology works. A good litmus test is to ask yourself: is there more than one possible story here? Is that story detailed and

well-told? Are the other fundamental four things taken care of? If so, then chances are, you're on to a winner that will stand the test of time because multiple viewings result in additional visual reward. If not – ask yourself, what's missing? MT

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Comments

Michael says:
January 25, 2020 at 2:16 AM

A good read, the metaphorical examples hard to make sense of. The literal examples work well. Image with sign, field, tree, gives me a little electricity. Fishmonger pic does nothing. Not judging, feedback.
The place i live I feel I have exhausted, to press more would be scraping the barrel. Determinedly trying to expand ones own perspective photographically, for my part, take away something. No photos in past couple of years , the unfullfilled yearning to preserve a scene adds a tinge of melancholic poignancy in the moment. Often hard to tell what part of the scene is responsible.
I like your gear talk btw, has an artisanal vibe.

bt says:
September 26, 2019 at 2:32 PM

I related to your notes about the useful limits of wide and long lenses.

For many years I used a 35mm and an 85mm as my only lenses, travelling around the world. No 50mm – why bother – Then you are stuck with a 24 and a 100 mm as you next jumps up and down.

I would still say that it's an ideal pair of lenses.

Ming Thein says:
September 27, 2019 at 8:25 PM

28/85 is my preferred set, though with some practice 50 can be composed to read as either wide or tele depending on how close together your foreground/midground/background planes are. This can't be said of anything much wider or longer, though; there's either too much difference in relative sizes or too little.

Pavel P. says:
September 10, 2019 at 10:07 PM

First comment (on non gear content) :).

Ming Thein says:
September 11, 2019 at 3:13 PM

Heh 😉

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