Back to basics: Structure

SEPTEMBER 2, 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…

I've put off writing this article for a very, very long time for the simple reason that there are visual things that I have to figure out how to explain which somewhat transcend the limits of the written language to describe. Even defining the meaning of 'structure' in a photographic sense is tricky: we understand it to be a system of support that is not necessarily seen but underpins what we see on the surface – both physical and metaphysical. It is the means by which order is created out of chaos. Photographically, I like to think of 'the structure of an image' as the flow or visual rhythm of elements. Controlling the structure of an image controls the order in which the elements are read, and in turn the idea or story implied by those elements. Without conscious management of structure, it is therefore very difficult to consistently create images with anything more than a very literal impact.

We can identify an image with structure almost instantly, usually because it has a clear subject and various feature that pull you inexorably towards a single point or points, in a certain order. This is not be confused with subject isolation, though the two are inextricably related. Subject isolation merely defines how well distinguished an element is from its immediate background – it's how well we manage to translate three dimensions into two. However, the order of reading of an image is much more complex. Given a uniform background, an image will flow in order of decreasing subject isolation: the eye will first go to the most outstanding element, then follow to subsequent elements in order of separation. Reality is quite different though: you almost never encounter uniform backgrounds for multiple subjects, which means that the background itself* now starts to play a role in directing the eyes of your audience.

**Arguably, in a good image the background is a critical element in itself since it provides context; the definition of 'background' therefore becomes what we consider to be the subject of least importance and therefore with nothing to be isolated against.*

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Backgrounds contain textures, patterns, lines, changes in luminance and colors that can all serve to both call attention to themselves and lead the eyes of the observer in a certain direction; the term ‘leading lines’ exists for a reason. We pattern-recognise the line – whether explicitly solid or implied by a sequence of staccato objects – and follow it to the terminus. It is not something you can easily consciously control; our brains are just wired this way. It is therefore important to be aware of this when photographing to both actively use the line to draw the attention of the audience to a desired element in the composition, as well as avoid unintentionally misleading to an unimportant element. These visual flow lines can cancel out or reinforce each other – in a way, much the same as vectors in conventional physics or math – except here, the magnitude of the vector is analogous to visual weight and determined by contrast and color. One very important thing to note is that in almost all cases, the resultant net vector follows the orientation of the frame – more likely to be vertical for portrait, and horizontal for landscape. Anything else frequently results in empty space and visual imbalance.

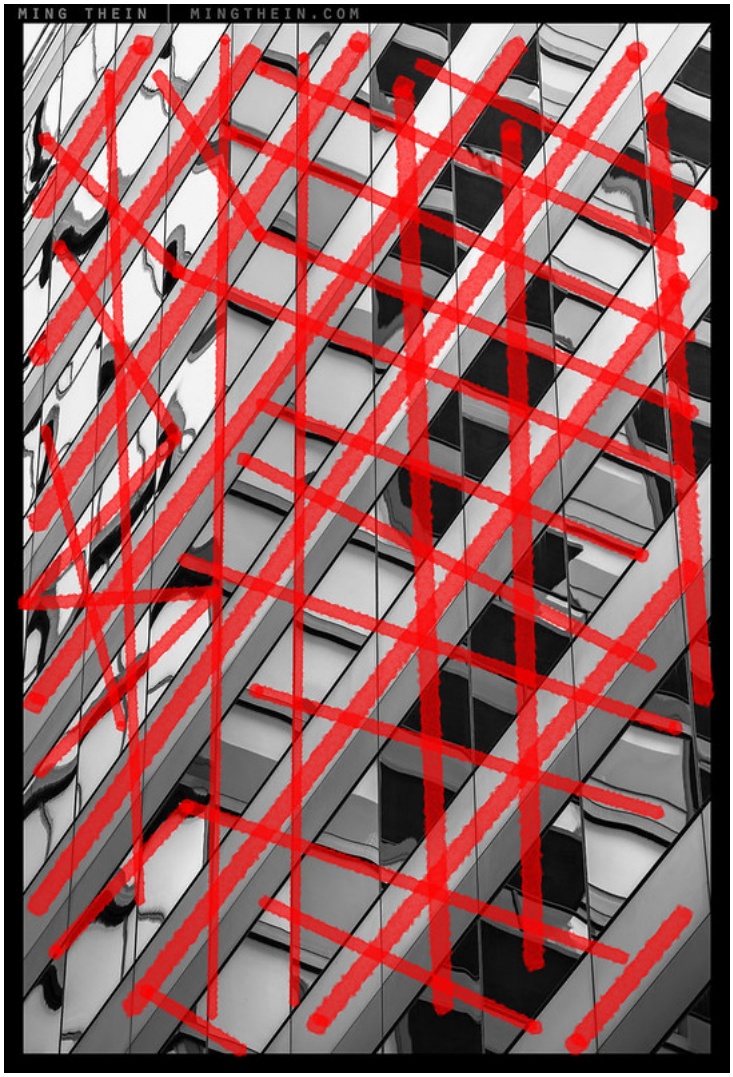
In order to create an image that works without conscious consideration by the viewer, we must actively think about the way the subconscious brain works to ensure that we do not include any contradictory elements; the artist has to do his or her best to put themselves in the place of the audience, including removing as much subjective bias as possible. We are typically drawn to a certain element in a scene first, and then arrange the other elements around it – hopefully in a way that both clearly isolates the primary element and then uses the secondary remaining elements to imply some sort of story or causality determined by the spatial positioning of those elements. Oh, and it should be aesthetically pleasing, too – or at least able to achieve the emotional impact intended by the photographer (repulsion may well be the objective). The question of what is 'aesthetically pleasing' represents a minefield unto itself: there's simply no way to answer this objectively because it depends on the preferences of the audience, too.

The trouble is, most photographers never quite get beyond considering the elements immediately proximate to the subject or gross structure; either there isn't the time in fast moving situations, or conscious awareness is not yet developed. This is the reason you see so many images that have distracting elements that break the flow of a composition, and frequently the reason an attractive element or subject failed to translate into an attractive photograph – something distracted the audience and in turn broke concentration on the subject. It is therefore necessary to move from the subject-first process of composition to considering the background structure and subject(s) in tandem, plus of course the implied relationship between then and the causal flow suggested by the background.

In fast-moving situations, I find it necessary to almost be continuously aware of the background, contextual elements contained within, light direction, and then only actively look for a subject suitable to my narrative intent to place within that stage. It is of course necessary to leave an opening in the stage for the actor, too. Further complicating things are possible differences between the quality of light on background and subject; it's also possible to be overly focused on background and neglect subject isolation.

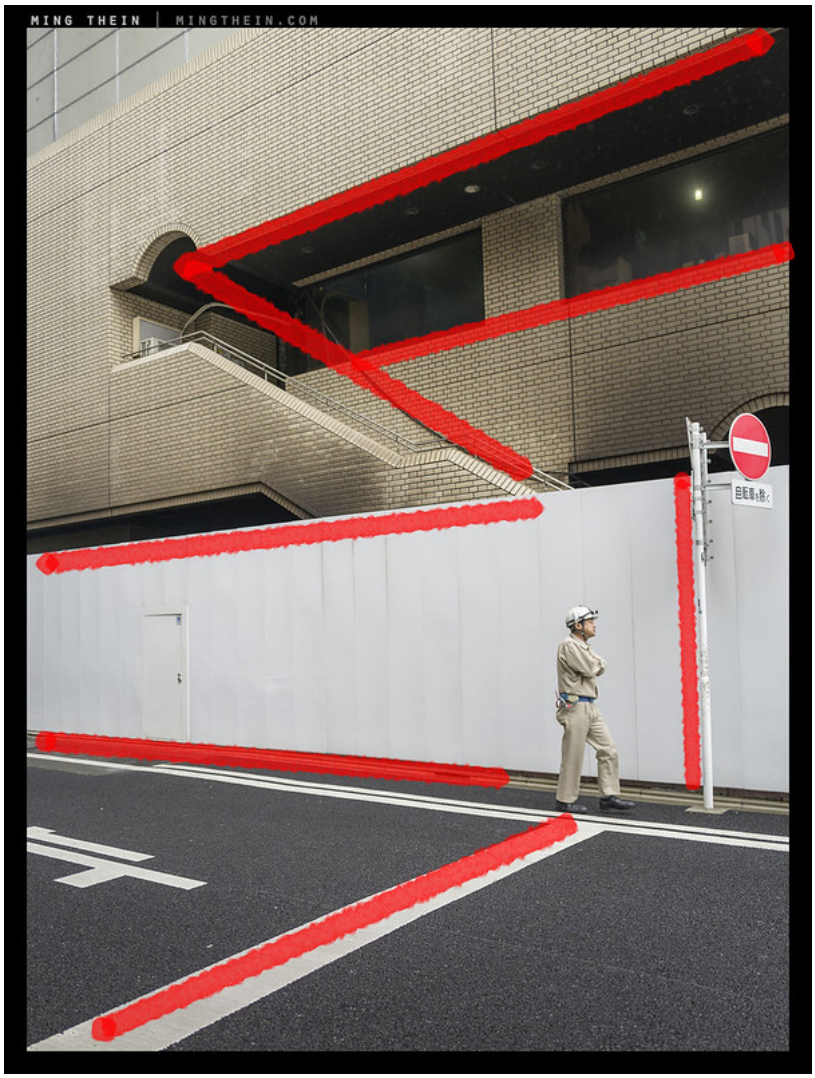
I think at this point it's clear why this is a very tricky topic to explain; we had best go to some examples.

The reason I chose these particular images to illustrate the article is because they are a mix of structural strength; whilst all have a clearly defined flow, not all have clear leading lines or dominant visual pathways. In fact, several are the opposite and reflect images that on hand have no structure: abstracts are actually more difficult to compose than appearances suggest because we have to deliberately ensure the *lack* of any structure at all; balance must be perfect. Making an outwardly random arrangement of elements is nowhere near as easy as it seems. With these points in mind, let's look at the images again, this time with some explanation. The red lines are dominant underlying structure, with thicker lines representing areas of higher prominence.



For this abstract, note how there are plenty of leading lines but nothing dominates: if anything, they cancel each other out. Dominant lines flow orthogonal to each other and diagonally through the image; verticals in the right and centre portions offset the chaotic upper left.

This image is a good example of ‘net direction’ – I think the triangles formed by the light are obvious; the triangles formed by the three foreground heads and flow of people further down the escalator echo that form, with the apexes adding to create the blue line of flow. The right side is somewhat empty, but the eyes are prevented from leaving the frame by that reflection on the right wall, which creates a further suggestion to lead back towards the foreground man on the right.



I think this image is quite straightforward: strong lines of contrast flow from left to right and use the full width of the frame to draw the eyes of the audience to the subject, which is tonally coherent with the other elements in the frame, but clearly isolated against a very plain background.

The strongest two elements in the image are the black line that both leads the eye to the woman and the high contrast line formed by the woman herself; there are further diagonal lines formed by the shadows on the building and the kerb to guide you through the empty right portion and to the secondary subject, which itself is not as well isolated as the woman in white, and therefore not as prominent.

This image is much more complex and chaotic: on the face of it, the human elements are not that well isolated (there are both high contrast elements and text elements that can be pattern-recognised) but for the fact that we pay attention to human elements first. However, the vertices of most of the elements have been carefully positioned to lead your eyes to the centre of the frame; the coloured elements are mirrored on each side of the centreline (e.g. the red lanterns, the orange signs) and cancel out, leaving you back in the middle – where the true subject really lies.

Though the immediate response is to think of this image as an abstract, that's not quite true. The triangular lanterns and the approaching front of the moving bike both form strong lines of contrast or area, and divide the frame into two. The man on the bike is of low contrast and saturation, but the motion streaks create their own dynamic and once again pull you back to the middle, where the diagonal zigzag flow of the lanterns creates momentum that encourages your eyes to look at both halves of the frame. Note composition in portrait orientation: this image would not work as a landscape because there are insufficient horizontal elements compared to vertical ones to encourage exploring the frame laterally.

The final image is a strong one because not only are there explicit lines leading to the central subject, but there are also implied lines formed by the vertices of various points (shadows, heads) that reinforce the explicit lines *and* balance each other off diagonally. This image deliberately employs geometric distortion created by the wide 21mm perspective to further enhance visual concentration towards the centre subject, which herself has a strong isolating and supporting line created by the shadow on the left.

If you look carefully, there's one more thing beyond just lines: notice how the eyes are drawn through a progression of luminance, too: light to dark, dark to light. This is also a deliberate flow to help orient the viewer within the image. Dark at the top suggests night; light at the top, day. I do consciously adjust my composition at the time of shooting to make the most of these structural elements; at the same time, it's important to be aware of what doesn't belong and apply the principles of conscious exclusion to avoid including potential distractions in the scene. This is not something I have always done; in fact, I think I only became actively aware of it in the last five years or so. I suspect this may be the reason behind people finding my images too 'clean', 'clinical', or 'ordered' – the chaotic distracting elements are usually not present or not obvious; why would you want them to be unless chaos is your objective? MT

Learn more about subject isolation, balance, structure, exclusion, leading lines and the flow of an image in the Making Outstanding Images video series – episodes 1-3.

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Comments

mcrcbryant says:
September 6, 2019 at 8:24 AM

I had the pleasure to be a part of your email school a few years ago, and it was the best decision I ever made with my photo journey.

This article reminds me why I always tell others to take a course whom ask about my photos, or what camera to buy.

This article was well worth the wait.

Thanks x10000.

I only wish I had taken myself until one of the workshops back in the day!

Ming Thein says:
September 6, 2019 at 9:30 AM

Thanks! There is a small chance I may be guest contributing to a workshop next year...

Casey says:
September 6, 2019 at 10:21 PM

Let me check...yep, next year is open for me. I hope it comes to pass...

Ming Thein says:
September 7, 2019 at 2:59 AM

Still working on the details, but stay tuned...

Wayne says:
September 3, 2019 at 1:19 PM

Thank you. Again. You continue to provide thoughts and advice which are valued for both: the sensibility of the content; and your coherence of expression. Your efforts (and I'm sure it does take some effort) ARE appreciated.

Ming Thein says:
September 3, 2019 at 5:56 PM

My pleasure!

Goetz says:
September 3, 2019 at 5:44 AM

This is true mastery, my friend. What a pleasure to read and be inspired.

Ming Thein says:
September 3, 2019 at 9:17 AM

Thank you!

Serguei Son says:
September 3, 2019 at 2:20 AM

Ming, I can no longer view your images on Flickr when I click on them, Flickr now requires a password.

Ming Thein says:
September 3, 2019 at 4:00 AM

I have no means to change this, unfortunately...

Michael Fleischer says:
September 2, 2019 at 10:42 PM

It is very helpful to revisit this series of fundamental skills, which deepen ones perception and sharpen the visual toolkit to improve & achieve a sound basis in which individual art may emerge into...!

No-one ought to give in to the lowest possible bias; “the-internet-master-voice-criteria, like and dislike” – you clearly explain/demonstrate/share the need for deliberate basic elements to hang a visual idea upon!

Simply brilliant reading, thanks...;-)

Ming Thein says:
September 3, 2019 at 4:00 AM

My pleasure!

jean pierre (pete) guaron says:
September 2, 2019 at 1:11 PM

” . . . I suspect this may be the reason behind people finding my images too ‘clean’, ‘clinical’, or ‘ordered’ . . . ”
??
It might equally well be that they are using those expressions to explain away the fact their own images are not as well put together, and include things like clutter. Or that they get rid of clutter by over-indulging the use of bokeh and zone focusing, instead of by planning their images more carefully. Or is that the same thing as using these terms to distinguish your images from theirs? [Thinks – am I starting to go round in circles?]

Ming Thein says:
September 2, 2019 at 5:26 PM

“Or that they get rid of clutter by over-indulging the use of bokeh and zone focusing, instead of by planning their images more carefully.”
Entirely possible – but in the process also remove the possibility for layering, storytelling and context 🙂

Gerner says:
September 2, 2019 at 5:42 PM

JP and MT ... indeed you are right. In particular if you wish to tell a story (i.e. me expressing emotions). Bokeh people comes to their right making protraits more over the minimalist expressionist who turns clutter into art.

Ming Thein says:
September 3, 2019 at 4:00 AM

It helps separate layers, but one must use it like salt: carefully! 🙂

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