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Back to basics: Turning an idea into an image

SEPTEMBER 14, 2019 BY **MING THEIN**
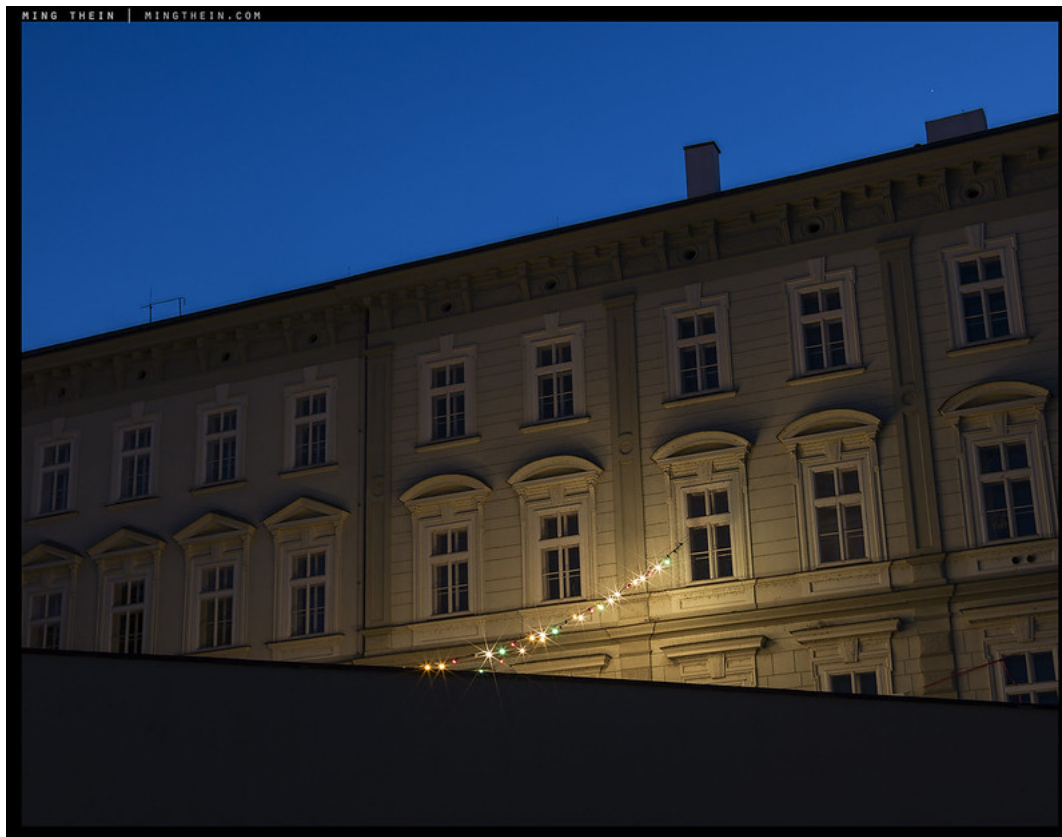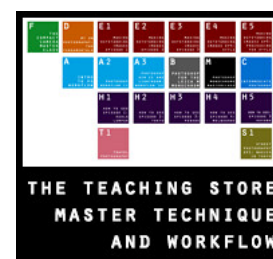

Alienation and transience in Prague, I

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...

Today's article has proven to be another one of those significant challenges to write, once again for reasons of limitations of language to describe visual elements. On top of that, there are three conceptual leaps that have to be made: abstract idea, to descriptive language/ elements to characterise and quantify the specific unique traits of that idea so we conceptually understand it, then the final translation to a visual idea that can be understood by a wider audience than just the creator. There are really two questions at hand here: firstly, what is the idea, and secondly, what's needed to convey it – and what do we need to avoid overdoing that results in dilution or confusion?

Alienation and transience in Prague, II

The whole concept of what's being discussed here is I think a core fundamental of taking photography beyond the purely reactionary or observatory. There are fundamentally only two types of images: the kind that are captured as an instinctive or semi-reflex response to external stimuli that appeal to us at a subconscious level and trigger enough interest to motivate us to capture; and the kind that must be consciously created and are the result of an idea that in itself may or may not be triggered by a response to external stimuli. The key difference here is one of consciousness and deliberation: yes, it's a continuum of degrees in that at one end might sit an image that contains one single element that's of interest to the creator, and the other is a film set in which everything has been deliberately included/excluded/positioned/lit with a single overarching objective. Both are very different to the 'I'm-here-so-I-should-just-take-a-picture' mentality of the former.
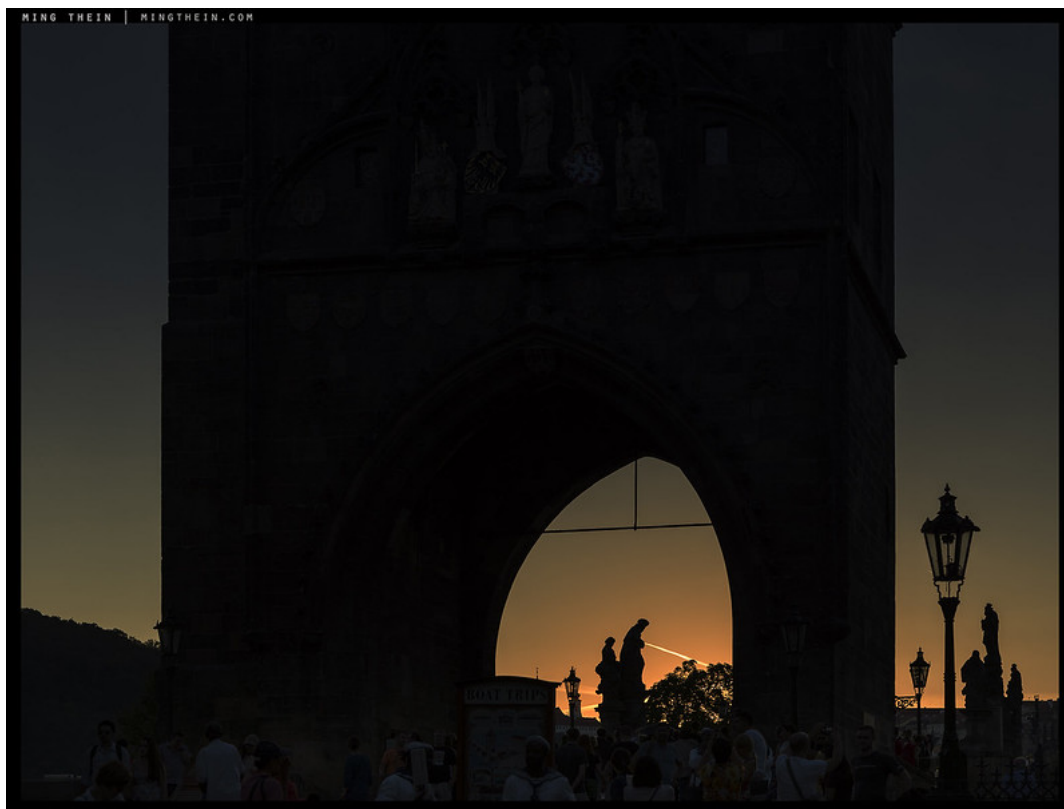
Alienation and transience in Prague, III

I think of the image creation process as:

Observation > Idea > Distillation > Execution and Presentation.

The observation phase is what we've just discussed: it isn't necessarily even direct observation of a scene, but it could simply be the subconscious synthesis of a whole lot of other things we've seen and slowly gel together in the background – for instance, spend long enough in a certain place and you will probably be able to specifically describe a few things that uniquely identify that place. In Prague, for example, that might be cobblestones, trams, 'clean' pastel buildings, those bulgy red street signs affixed to walls, an art deco feel to the more modern elements, gothic spires, and light that's always at an angle due to the latitude of the country. There are of course the more famous landmarks, too. Have most of these and we're pretty much there, but you might need all or a certain few in combination to really move things beyond doubt.

Alienation and transience in Prague, IV

Taking things to the next step, generation of an idea is preceded by the observation of something that's of personal interest to us – emotional investment, I guess – which in itself is a product of our own preferences/biases/experiences etc. It's probably interesting because it's either very different to anything else we've seen previously, or it's very similar but in an unexpected place. *(Anything else tends to not really make the radar; arguably even more so in the current media-heavy environment we live in.)* The first step of ideation then tends to be rooted in similarity or difference: we must therefore figure out which it is, and how we can strengthen the visual impression of either the former or the latter by highlighting those similarities or differences. This is actually the easy part: you just have to consciously include as many elements are possible that are unique to that place, or consciously exclude them to the point of anonymity.

Alienation and transience in Prague, V

The next bit is harder: in a lot of cases, the idea goes beyond simply location and similarities or differences; there's a metaphorical or conceptual element that requires further translation. For example, the images in this post are around the idea of 'alienation and transience in Prague': this is both simultaneously defined and open to wide interpretation. The only part of this idea we've really addressed so far is the 'in Prague' part: images need to have some identifiable elements that are unique to that location. The concept of 'alienation and transience' implies a whole host of other things which we must then distil into something that can actually be translated into visual elements. My interpretation of the concept centres around separation between individuals and their environment; we must therefore have both identifiable individuals and something that serves as a visual barrier between them and the rest of the frame, which must in turn be recognisable as the environment of Prague. This could be a purely visual or metaphorical element (e.g. a change in color, a shadow, a line projected, or a convenient alignment of framing that surrounds and isolates the subject from the rest of the composition) – or a physical/real one, such as a wall or a door. Either way, the element is identifiable as a boundary of sorts, and does not physically *be* alienation, but may merely represent it.

Alienation and transience in Prague, VI

'Transience' suggests some feeling of impermanence must be conveyed. We can do this visually in several ways: firstly, by using the photographic properties of time and freezing dynamically unstable motion for a longer period than the actual event (e.g. something falling, exploding, or more simply, mid-stride or suspended in mid-air) and using common knowledge/experience that such events must be temporal. Alternatively, we can again use physical elements that metaphorically represent transience – methods of transportation, locations associated with transportation, visual cues for motion (such as walking). Finally, there are the tools that are completely subject/element independent and a product of the execution process only: a visual method of making something seem impermanent or less 'solid' or defined than it might otherwise be. We're of course talking about shallow depth of field, transparency, reflection, motion blur etc.

Alienation and transience in Prague, VII

An important thing to note is that translation of the idea itself requires breaking it down into smaller individual logical chunks, and then parsing those into either physical, metaphorical or photographic elements: there are only those three methods of translation. The physical of course represents the literal, 'real' world: a person is a physical being but could also represent an

individual, an emotion, or the presence of humanity – for example. The metaphorical are conceptual elements we associate with things that cannot be physically and *visually* represented – e.g. freedom, separation, impermanence, temperature, smell. Finally, the photographic elements are the properties of the medium which we need to learn to use to our advantage: things which we can use to suggest concepts but are not necessarily visually possible with the naked eye.

Alienation and transience in Prague, VIII

In this particular example, we can combine those three elements – 'alienation', 'transience' and 'in Prague' – and their physical, metaphorical and exceptional interpretations in a wide range of combinations that result in different interpretations of what may well even be the same subject matter. Execution then becomes a matter of consciously looking for those elements and then figuring out how to frame and compose them in a way that's aesthetically pleasing (and/or different), uses the fundamentals of vision and The Four Things to crate the clearest distillation possible, and preferably with a little something extra. If anything, there's *still too much* open-ended possibility here, and we would have to further curate the result down to something with higher consistency – around subject, mood, style, light etc. or a combination of several of those. I'd put the final bit of the process – presentation – into this bucket, too. The method of execution is inextricably linked to the presentation method: if immersiveness in large print is the objective, then there are very different considerations to solely viewing on mobile social media. The possible range of differences here is probably not as large in the grand scheme of things – but it is still enough to make a difference to what kinds of images 'work' at higher or lower (i.e. smaller physical size) total information levels – landscapes, for instance, don't really have enough room to breathe on Instagram.
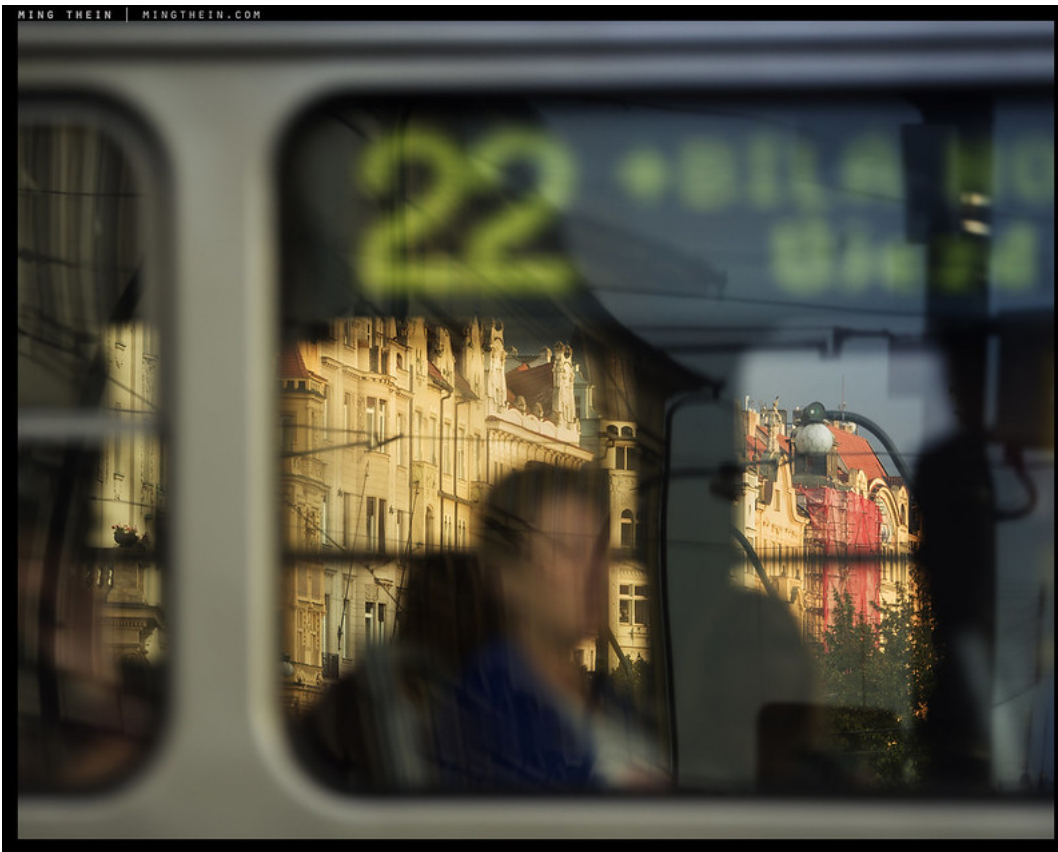
Alienation and transience in Prague, IX

The images in this post have been deliberately chosen and curated to this idea: note that whilst there was a general sense at the time of capture that most of the work would go in this direction, it wasn't a fully defined theme. Part of this is because if you are working in an environment where you do not control all the elements, it isn't always possible to find the kinds of images you are expecting – but at the same time, this doesn't mean one should let other opportunities go. If anything, capture and curation must go hand in hand – I think of it being an iterative cycle where one sharpens the other, and we only stop when we feel there aren't any elements left to add or remove, and the idea has been fully explored to the extent we understand it. The sequence of presentation matters, too: in this case, in order of increasing luminance vis-a-vis clarity and definition if idea. Of course, in practice, this seldom happens because the entire environment is continually changing; practical factors such as time, resources and audience attention span for the final presentation must also factor in. And on that note, I think it would be useful to finish with a quick explanation of how/why the images translate the idea. MT

- *I: Most of the frame is dark, with only a single row of light bulbs providing illumination (clarity, purpose, idea, warmth etc.) – it suggests that there's more darkness than light, and the light is at risk from the dark. This is further reinforced by a number of the bulbs themselves being blown or missing. The building isn't specifically Prague-esque, but taken in consideration with the rest of the series – there is passive reinforcement that we aren't somewhere else in Europe.*
- *II: Humanoid forms are present, but a longer exposure has rendered them vague and indistinct – and deliberately somewhat like the stereotypical alien. Note how none of the forms overlap, and they exist projected only against the yellow wall. We have more suggestive cues to location, too: cobblestones, a hint of castle, some graffiti.*
- *III: Our humanoid forms are relegated to deep shadows and silhouettes: once again, anonymous and lacking in identity or definition. We have a metaphorical 'cut' happening: a statue with what appears to be a lightsaber (but is actually a backlit contrail at dusk). The bridge can only be Prague.*
- *IV: The discomfort of the individual is reflected in both pose and location: their style of dress and body language is completely at odds with the location; there's a sense of wanting to leave for not fitting in but not really being able to.*
- *V: None of the individuals are looking at what they came to see: they all have bodies facing right and suggesting an overall flow of motion. The environment – St. Vitus Cathedral – stays, but the people do not.*
- *VI: Kafka's head is a large mirrored rotating art installation that continually presents a changing and distorted view of the environment as the individual mirrored segments turn and reflect different portions of its surroundings; the small windows on 'solid' reality presented (again, with cues as to location beyond the statue itself) are warped and isolated from the rest of the statue, which reflects nothing but sky.*
- *VII: The tram – Prague again – contains nine individuals, but only one is identifiable for reasons both photographic and physical (e.g. shadow, occlusion); she looks out and away from the others, whom each also do not appear to have any relationship or contact with each other. There is emotional separation here that's only enhanced by the physical separation.*
- *VIII: History – the landmarks – have been turned into something of a theme park (lower foreground). Nothing lasts forever, and one generation's reverence is another's light entertainment.*

- *IX: The tram and individual are both moving and out of focus, lacking definition; the city stays defined and 'solid'. Even so, the image of the tram and individual itself has a hint of both reflection and transparency, hinting at questioning permanence of the present and immediate moment.*

For further examples of the results of this process, see also the [Verticality](), [Idea of Man](), [Anatomy of the Quotidian](), [Venetian Nights](), [Forest](), [Crucible](), [Over Australia](), [Wimmelbild]() and [Dreamscape]() series.

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Comments

Jim Austin Jimages says:
September 25, 2019 at 7:52 PM

One of your clearest, keenly articulated articles. Hope it moves into a book.

> **Ming Thein** says:
> September 27, 2019 at 8:20 PM
>
> We tried curating a book a while back; it proved to be too much work as most of it would have to be rewritten for congruency. On top of that, demand is probably something like two copies. I lost enough money on the ipad app back in the day as it is 🙂

Craig Soars says:
September 17, 2019 at 10:48 PM

I quite enjoyed "Alienation and transience in Prague, V" – and even before reading your explanation at the bottom, I was struck by the juxtaposition of the massive, static cathedral and the transient crowds below. I was going to use 'ancient' as a descriptor, but it seems St. Vitus Cathedral was only recently built in 1929?

> **Ming Thein** says:
> September 18, 2019 at 8:02 AM
>
> A bit more complex, as it turns out – the first building was erected c.930AD, with the current one dating to 1344. But it was only *consecrated* as a cathedral in 1929. 🙂

Ian Carroll says:

September 15, 2019 at 8:11 AM

Brilliant articulated, and photographically supported, Ming. The movement from reactive to considered, and premeditated is one I am just trying to make. In some ways, I find "reactive me" disappointing now, in critical retrospection, but it has been the preparation for what is to come, so perhaps should be appreciated for such.

Ming Thein says:

September 15, 2019 at 8:13 AM

Thanks Ian – 'reactive you' can still be useful; at some level, your subconscious still saw an idea. The reactive part can be trained, after which hopefully the translation becomes better. I think of it like speaking in another language: you need to start out consciously constructing your sentences, but that eventually goes away into a natural flow. The thinking is still there, it's just that the translation has become muscle memory. I still have to consciously isolate elements for an idea, but the process seems to happen a lot faster and more fluidly now – whether it's down to experience and some repeated history or something else, I'm not sure.

Trackbacks

Philosophy, photography and psychology – marketing business says:

May 8, 2020 at 6:51 AM

[…] noticeable in the right order of prominence relative to their importance in the idea we want to convey. The overall process of making an image is something we discussed at length […]

Photography, philosophy and psychology – Ming Thein | Photographer says:

May 2, 2020 at 12:01 PM

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