



THE VISION COLLECTIVE: WEEK TWELVE.

Using Contrast

I don't think I'm overstating things by much when I say I think contrast is everything in a photograph. It's how we find focus, it's a huge part of how we determine exposure, it's at the heart of story, and ultimately it's what pulls our eye around the frame. In many ways, it's contrast that makes a photograph interesting to us, and I'm hoping that you'll be much more aware of it and use it more intentionally after this week's lesson.

Like repeated elements (next week's topic), contrast is one of the visual tools graphic designers are very conscious about using. Unlike photographers, however, they do not labour under the delusion that what they do is accidental or merely found out there in life, ready to be squeezed into a composition. They know their compositions are intentional and they use contrast accordingly. Photographers can do so as well. You can't always change your scene, but you can change the way

you photograph it by making your choices in such a way that they either exaggerate or diminish existing contrasts, thereby strengthening the way the photograph expresses your vision.

Contrast pulls attention to things. It points things out. It provides context. Let's say you want to show how small something is, like a mouse. Get on your knees and photograph that mouse, fill the frame, and nail the focus. You have successfully made an image of a mouse that is probably as boring as it is sharp. This, the photograph says, is a mouse. But what if you want to say something more specific about the size of the mouse? Contrast is what gives that information, and how you create that contrast will be what creates the impact that information can give us. Imagine now that you're back on your knees with the mouse and you pull back a little and make it smaller in the frame. You have already changed the sense of size the viewer gets about that mouse. Now imagine you put the mouse beside the legs of a chair, a person, or an elephant; the contrast increases and the mouse seems smaller. This contrast of size is called scale and it's a powerful tool. But there are more ways to use contrast; here are a few of them.

The image below is a good example of scale of contrast of size: the human diver gives a sense of the size of the manta.



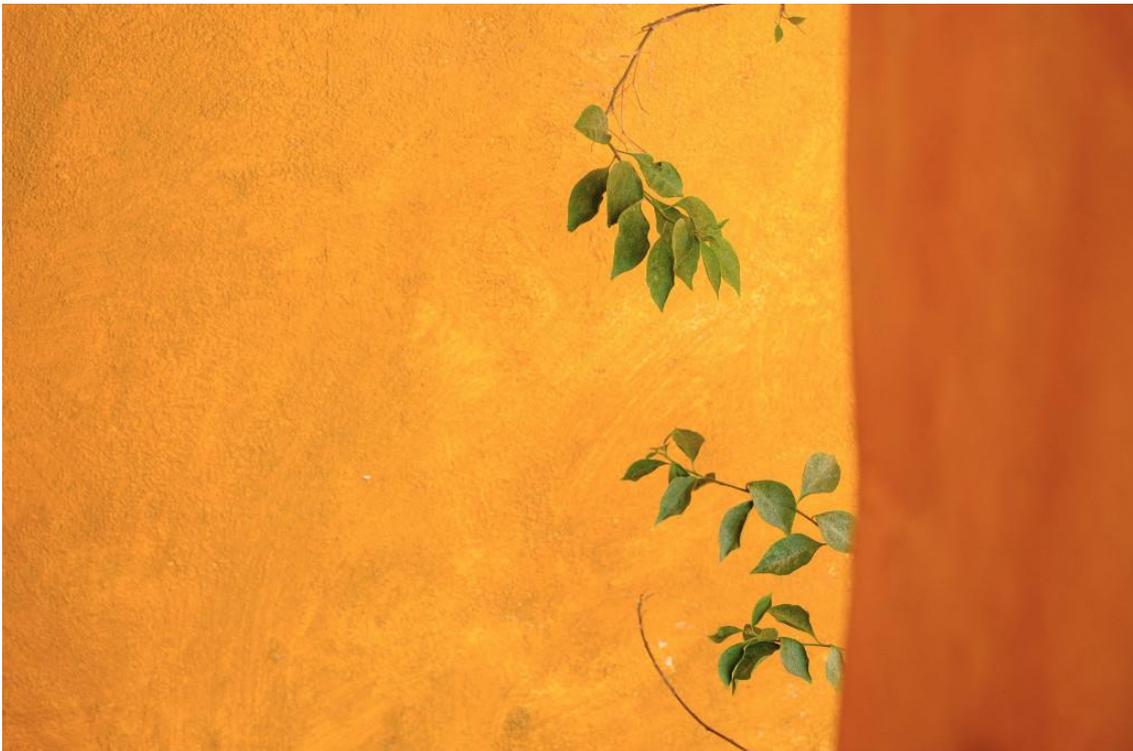
Contrast of Colour

The way we experience one colour depends very much on the other colours around it, and the contrast between those colours pulls the eye. If you were to look at a field of only yellow flowers, you'd see it and move on, the eye having really no place to rest and nothing specific to look at. But if you put a singular flower of a different colour, say blue, into that same field, the eye would be drawn to that flower.

Contrast of Tone

The same is true of tonal values, not only in a black and white image but in the scene itself. Imagine an alley where everything is shaded and there is little contrast between the white elements and the dark elements. It would be subtle and the eye would move from dark to light and back again with ease. But imagine now that the sun has risen enough that a beam of light pierces the alley and creates a beam of light that illuminates one specific thing. The contrast now between light elements and dark elements is extreme, and the eye, to say nothing of the camera, can't take it all in, so it's forced to choose. We can use that to our advantage, exposing for the highlights, letting the rest go black to create an image that is dramatic, with specific elements exerting a strong pull on the eye.

The images below show contrast in both colour and tone; the tonal contrast is seen more easily in the B&W conversion. There's also a great contrast of shape as well as conceptual contrast with the natural elements contrasting with man-made elements.





Contrast of Shape

Line and shape are the building blocks of visual design and contrast between them—just as with other forms of contrast—pulls the eye. A nice curvy line or organic shape, for example, is lovely on its own, but if you want to exaggerate the curvy nature of that line or shape, place it in relationship to a line or shape that is the opposite. Even placing it in such a way that the contrast is provided by the hard lines of the photographic frame itself accomplishes this.

Contrast of Concept

Contrast of concept is the inclusion of different ideas that seem to conflict: young and old, wet and dry, hard and soft, etc. These contrasts pull the eye and give the brain something to play with. They are one of the ways in which we say something through our photograph by pointing out these conflicts and asking the reader to consider them. Storytelling photographers do this by showing the relationship between these contrasting elements (e.g., the strong and the weak, the natural and the manmade, or the modern and the ancient).

The images below exhibit excellent tonal contrast as well as contrast of size, shape, and concept: the human in a place he doesn't naturally belong, the opposite of a fish-out-of-water story.



Contrast of Focus

One of the reasons we so favour shallow depth of field is because it increases the contrast between

what's in focus and what is not, making it easier to understand what the photographer wants us to pay attention to, or—as the photographer—making it easier to direct the viewer's eye to elements to which we want them to pay attention.

There are other kinds of contrast as well: contrast of texture springs to mind. Being aware of the contrast means being aware of the heart of the image. As a matter of process, I often ask myself, "Where is the contrast in this scene?" If I get too many answers, it often directs me to make several images, knowing that most people can't possibly take it all in. For now, be aware of the different kinds of contrasting elements in your scene. And if there is something specific you want to direct my eye to, consider making sure you find and include an element that contrasts with that in order to more powerfully point it out.

Creative Exercise

Pull a dozen of your favourite images and study the contrasts: what kind of contrasts can you find and how do they pull your eye or direct your thoughts and emotions? Next time you're photographing, ask yourself, "Where are the contrasts?" If you can't answer it, or the contrasts aren't as strong as you'd like them to be, look for ways to strengthen them. Would a different lens help, or a different POV? Do you need to wait for (or create) better light? Would a stronger moment create a better juxtaposition?



Study the Masters

Hands down, Elliott Erwitt is one of my favourite photographers. His use of contrast and juxtaposition is masterful. He's made me both laugh and cry; his photograph of his wife and child (below) is one of my favourites, but if I showed you all the Erwitt work that touches me deeply, I'd be emailing you a stack of books. [See more on his site](#), or on [Magnum](#) (for what it's worth the Magnum site is easier to navigate). Pay attention to Erwitt's use of juxtaposition, but also how he uses different methods to accomplish it.



Further Study

- This article by Eric Kim: [14 Lessons Elliott Erwitt Taught Me About Street Photography.](#)
- [This great interview](#) with Elliott Erwitt: [You Need More than a Pencil to be a Poet.](#)
- My favourite book of Elliott Erwitt's photographs: [Personal Best.](#)
- [Erwitt's book SNAPS](#) is also excellent.

Final Comments

I've had a few emails lately with people asking me for a Vision Collective email they didn't get; I think many of these missing messages are due to Gmail's way of handling emails like this. If you missed any of them or want to reference them later, [you can find the archives for the Vision Collective here.](#)

If you're looking for me, you can find me on [my blog](#), on [Facebook](#), and on [Instagram](#).

For the love of the photograph,
David duChemin

