



THE VISION COLLECTIVE: WEEK FIFTEEN.

Visual Mass: An Introduction

In every photograph, each element pulls the eye more or less than other elements. On the most basic level, the elements that exert the most amount of pull upon the eye are those that we consider the most important. We assume that if you—the photographer—chose to make that one element as powerful as you have, that there's a reason for it. So we'll look to that element first and then to other elements that pull our eye. That's one way the photographer can control the path of the eye: by controlling which elements have greater visual mass (or exert greater pull) than others. Knowing which elements have the greatest pull in an image is important not only so you can create images with an intentional path for the eye, but also so you

can tend to issues of balance and tension, which I'll discuss in Week Sixteen's lesson. For now, I want to introduce the idea to you and let you get your head around it.

An element is said to have visual mass because it exerts pull on the eye. It's a metaphor, of course, because in the image these things have no weight at all, but also because it's not always the biggest thing that pulls the eye. Think for a moment about what grabs your attention in a photograph. It'll be different for every image; sometimes it'll be the sharpest face in the crowd, sometimes the most dynamic gesture, the brightest object in a darker context, or the warmest colour in a cooler context. It might be a large, out-of-focus element in the foreground or a small, in-focus one in the background. There are few rules except that we generally are drawn to warm before cool, bright before dark, large before small, sharp before out of focus, human elements before inorganic elements, or dynamic lines before strictly horizontal or vertical ones. The problem is that some lines are not just horizontal but also warm, sharp, and bright, and some diagonal lines are blurry and dark and small. So rather than learning a list of what we are attracted to, it's probably better that you develop an ability to know where your own eye is drawn and why.

The two images below lead your eye differently. In each of them, where does your eye go first? Does it stay there? How is the visual mass different? Don't worry about coming up with the right answer; just be aware of your own answers. We are all drawn to different things in different ways. There are commonalities, to be sure, but it's your own sense of visual mass that's important. How does the size of the looming man in the top image make you feel relative to the smaller woman? Does the man in the red sweater pull your eye just as much but for different reasons?



If you were looking for a good starting point, it's contrast. The warm circle in the sea of cool might draw your eye quickly, leading you to believe that we indeed see

warmth first. But what of the cool circle in the sea of warmth? You might then find it's the opposite. What we are certainly drawn to is contrast. Our eyes seek out the difference. The list in the paragraph above is a good start, but only if you understand that there are hundreds of combinations and exceptions and that it's most often the contrast (between sharp and out of focus, big and small, warm and cool, etc.) to which we are drawn.

Once you have this sense and can combine it with attentiveness and receptivity as you photograph, you can compose in such a way that you either exaggerate or downplay the quality of the elements in a scene that will give them visual mass when the shutter is tripped. Remember, it's not so much that the thing itself is large or warm or close, it's how you make it look in the final image. You can give an element more visual mass by getting closer to it, by changing your angle, or by using depth of field intentionally. You can also diminish the mass of an element with the same techniques, or exclude it altogether.

In the images below, how strongly is your eye drawn to repeated elements like the stairs or the arches? What about warmer over cooler colours? Do the human elements draw your eye? The whole of this lesson comes down to being aware of—and beginning to be open to the possibilities of—manipulating this.





And though I've yet to really acknowledge the role of post-production, it's also good to remember that the darkroom (whether digital or traditional) provides additional opportunities to tweak or rearrange the visual mass, and therefore the way the image is read. The two images below are a good example. Notice how the two images are read differently because of the switch to black and white and the use of dodging and burning.





Creative Exercise

If you suspect I'm going to ask you to dig up a dozen photographs, you're right. Study them and ask yourself where your eye is drawn and why. If you were not the photographer, ask yourself what you think the photographer was saying by giving visual mass to the specific elements they chose. The goal here is simple: become aware of how you read an image and how visual mass can be used to direct the attention and emotion of a viewer. Once you've done that, you'll be able to more intentionally translate that into your photographs when the camera is to your eye.



Study the Masters

I don't think **Annie Leibovitz** (1949 -) gets the credit she deserves. I know some idolize her, but I think too few see her as the serious photographer she is; she's spent far more time working on her chops than many of us will ever have. She's been cranking out brilliantly conceived work since her days at *Rolling Stone*, and while she now has large teams and big lights, she's probably more able to work without them than many of us. She's got a vast body of editorial and portrait work and is a master at directing the eye with light and colour and shape. Her eye for detail (while still keeping her work alive and free of that contrived feeling evident in so much in-studio work) is exhilarating.

Further Study

Here are a few resources to follow up on as you have time.

- Here's **a great interview with Annie Leibovitz in *Fast Company* magazine.**
- ***Annie Leibovitz's A Photographer's Life, 1990–2005*** is one of my all-time favourite photography books/biographies. A close second is ***Annie Leibovitz at Work***. She's a fascinating person with intriguing thoughts and creative work.

- If the idea of going deeper into visual mass appeals to you, my eBook, *Drawing the Eye: Creating Stronger Images Through Visual Mass* will help, especially the insights on dodging and burning in the digital darkroom, and it's just \$5.

Final Comments

If you're looking for me, you can find me on [my blog](#), on [Facebook](#), and on [Instagram](#). If you haven't visited my blog yet, there are close to a thousand articles and posts about vision, creativity, and the tools of the visual language. I'd love to see you there.

If you missed any issues of the Visual Collective, [you can get them here in the archive](#).

For the love of the photograph,
David duChemin