



THE VISION COLLECTIVE: WEEK SIXTEEN.

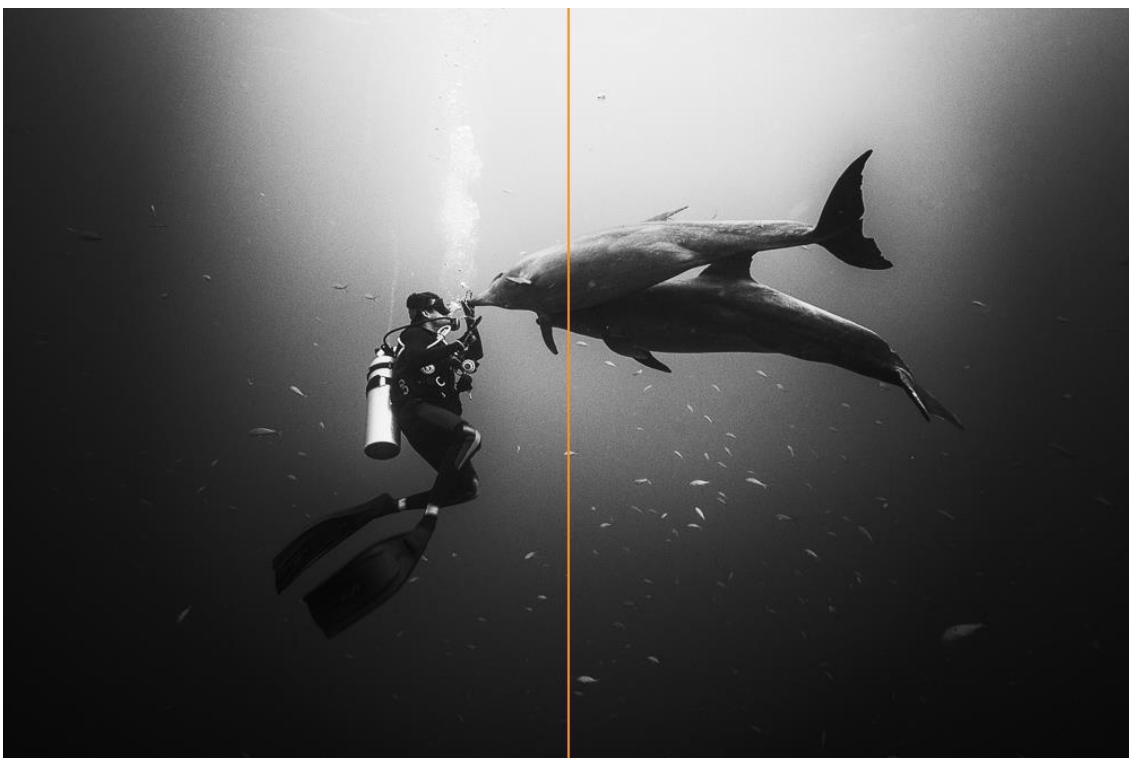
Visual Mass: Balance & Tension

Week Fifteen introduced the idea of visual mass. This is an extension of that conversation, or perhaps more accurately, an application of it. I want to take another crack at teaching about balance and tension, a subject I find hard to be really clear about, mostly because I believe it can't really be measured. But it's so important in making images the feel a certain way.

Last week I told you everything in the frame exerts a certain amount of pull on the eye. Those elements are said to have more or less visual mass. In a metaphorical way, they all weigh something, even the negative space in an image. Balance is

achieved when the elements on one side of the image are offset by elements on the other, almost as if they were physical. With me so far?

So If the elements on both halves of an image were more or less symmetrical, a static balance would be achieved. In the image below, the visual centre of the image is marked by the orange line. Half of the visual mass is on one-half of the frame, half on the other.

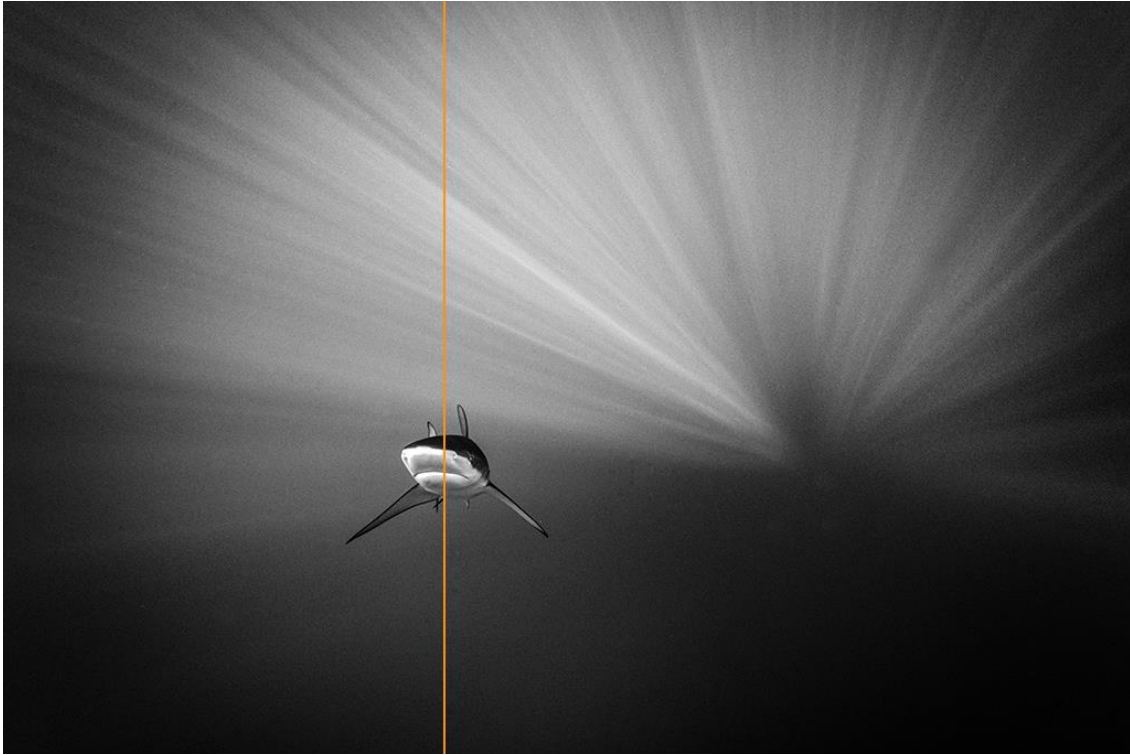


But in a non-symmetrical image, it's tension between different elements that creates that tension. Emotional tension can be created by introducing conflicting elements in a frame, but that's not really what I'm talking about here. I'm referring to spatial tension. It's one of the reasons we've been unable to shake this nonsense about the rule of thirds because when understood well, it's really helpful in reminding us to be more intentional about how we balance our images; the rule of thirds can push us to create tension and a more dynamic balance. How? In a symmetrical image, one-half balances the other. In an asymmetrical image (e.g., with a strong element on a vertical third of the frame), it's the tension created by the other two-thirds of the frame that brings the balance. See? It's

hard to talk about. Let me use a couple images instead in hopes of bringing some clarity.



The visual centre of the image above is between the flare of the sun, the man, and the motorcycle. That centre of visual mass is not in the centre of the image, but the dark shadows and the form of the rim-lit woman in the two-thirds of the right side of the image are in tension against the left third, creating a dynamic balance.



This Silky Shark is clearly the primary element; it pulls the eye first. But the sunbeams filtering into the depths of the ocean also have mass, though less. Placing the shark where I did, in tension with the sunbeam, creates balance. Tension is what creates dynamic balance.



This is a bolder composition for me and it's full of tension. Without the strong pull of the woman in the background, I find this image would feel more static, though still balanced. It's the tension she creates with the shepherds, your eyes pulled in two directions, that creates that balance.

Creative Exercise

Get a red Sharpie marker. An easy way to wrap your head around balance and tension is to either print some images or pull them from a magazine and draw a red line down the middle. Do the halves feel balanced against each other? It's most likely symmetry that gives that static balance. If they don't, where do you feel the visual centre is? What is it balanced against on the other side of the frame? Another element? The negative space? Figure out these details and you're on your way to being able to use this to make images feel more dynamic, or possibly, more serene and calm. Static balance and dynamic balance are two options; neither is right or wrong except as they serve the expression of your vision.



Study The Masters

Born in 1921 in Austria, Ernst Haas (1921–1986) became known for his early work with Kodachrome (much like Saul Leiter, born two years later). His photography was strongly graphic, emphasizing colour as a compositional element and often using motion and reflections. Haas was a member of Magnum and a colleague of contemporaries Robert Capa and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

You can see his work and find out more on [the website of the Ernst Haas Estate](#). Take some time to look through his work. Study the composition, and as it's the subject of this lesson, pay particular attention to how he balances his images. Which ones are static; which ones dynamic? In the dynamic images, how is the tension created? I love his *America series*, particularly [the images from New York](#). If you like black and white, [study his monochrome work](#). There are also some [great short pieces to read by Haas himself](#).

A few great quotes from Haas

“There is only you and your camera. The limitations in your photography are in yourself, for what we see is what we are.”

“I am not interested in shooting new things – I am interested to see things new.”

“You don't take pictures; the good ones happen to you.”

Further Study

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

- This [great profile of Ernst Haas](#) on Faded & Blurred.
- Books of Haas' work are hard to come by but you can still get [Ernst Haas: Color Correction: 1952-1986](#) on Amazon.

- I dug up two great articles if you want to go deeper on the topic of visual mass, balance, and tension: **19 Factors that Impact Compositional Balance** and **How to Create Visual Tension in Your Designs**. The author, Steven Bradley, is writing specifically to designers and he goes a little deeper than I'm willing to, but I think you should check them both out.

Thanks for joining me in the Vision Collective. There are ten lessons left. I hope you're finding value in these emails and gaining momentum on your personal project (you *are* doing your personal project, right?). 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