



THE VISION COLLECTIVE: WEEK SEVENTEEN.

Room To Move: Negative Space

One of the great challenges of photography is what occurs when we trip the shutter and the world of three dimensions is translated into two: I call it the flattening. I mentioned it in regard to perspective, and it can be both a challenge and a tremendous opportunity. Take a photograph of a tree against the sky and, when flat, that sky becomes a block of blue, without depth or dimension. It becomes a graphic element—no longer a sky. As we are making the image in the real world, we might remember the advice to “fill the frame” and in thinking that the subject is the tree, we ought to fill the frame with the tree. That might work. But it might also

result in a cramped image with little room for the eye to move around the frame, little contrast between the green leaves and the blue sky, no chance to see and experience the shape of the tree, and no chance to play with balance and tension. Or you could fill it with both the tree and the sky, allowing the sky to become the negative space, giving you all those wonderful opportunities you might have missed without it.

If we're being loose about our definitions, negative space is the area around the subject that helps define that subject. It's breathing room. It's space against which we balance the primary element(s) and space for the eye and the mind to move around the frame. Like anything, negative space can be used well in different measures. Some use large amounts of negative space to create scale and a sense of vastness like I've done in the image of the diver below. I could have gotten much closer to the diver, but this much negative space is important to the image. The frame is still full. Likewise with the photograph of the rower. That negative space is what creates the balance and the sense of loneliness. It allows room for the light and shadow to play, and for the eye of the viewer to really explore.



The frame is a very real constraint for us, and there's not much we can do about it; it needs to be there. But we can decide where to put it relative to the elements within the frame. Most photographers think of putting the elements within the frame; try thinking about putting the frame around the elements. Your choice of lens and distance from your subject, as well as your point of view (POV), will determine how much distance you place between the frame and those elements. Because we read an image in a nearly physical way—as though we're walking around it with our eyes rather than our feet—we will, unless the photographer is careful, bump into things. And without negative space enough to move, that bumping into things will stop our movement around the image.

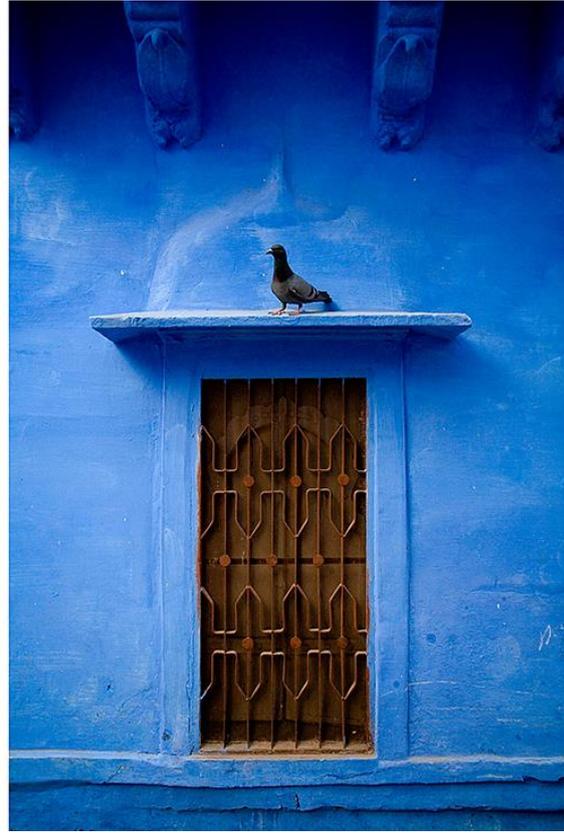
Here are simple questions that might be helpful to consider when you're experimenting with the negative space in your images:

- How do I want the image to feel? Would more or less negative space help me accomplish that?

- Where do I want the eye to move, and would more of less negative space create or allow that movement?
- How do I want to balance the image? Would more or less negative space create that balance?

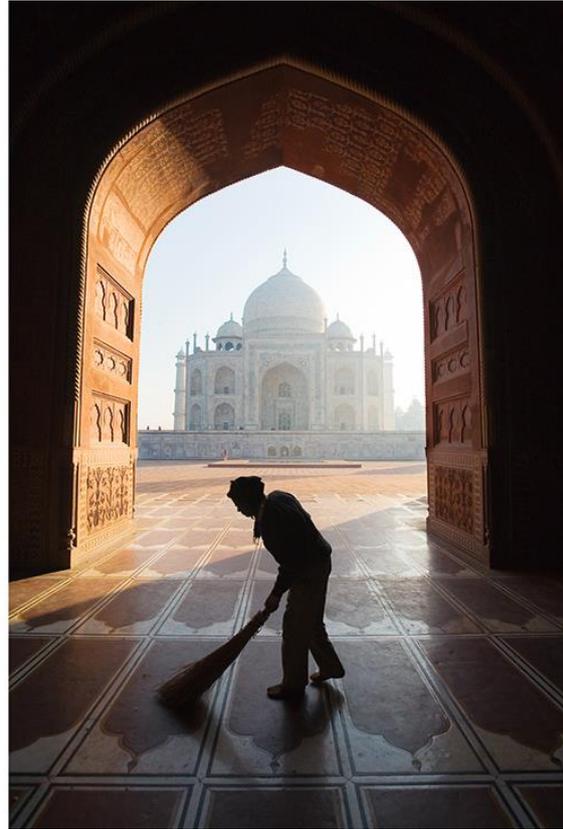


I could have photographed these penguins as close as I wanted to; I had a long lens and the advantage of them not caring how close I got. But the space around them gives context, mood, and tension with which I can create a dynamic (as opposed to static), balance, as I discussed in Week Sixteen.



In these two images (about colour and texture as much as they are about bicycle and bird), the negative space gives the image the necessary amount of colour to be more than just an afterthought, but again gives room for the eye to move and, at least in the case of the bicycle image gives enough space to create the tension that gives this image it's dynamic balance and energy.

Creative Exercise



Where is the negative space in these two images? How does it your eye or give the eye room to breathe? Had I used tighter lenses or gotten in closer they would not be the same images, but what would I have lost in doing so? Can you think of images you've made in the last year that feel too tight, where there might have been an opportunity to pull back a little and create more breathing room?



Study the Masters

Since we're on the topic of negative space, this week's master is **Andrew Zuckerman**. Born in 1977, he's too young to be this good, but his talent and work ethic prove otherwise. Andrew's style is distinct, with lots of negative space, often pure white backgrounds, but that style is not a gimmick: his compositions, colour, and moments are breathtaking. Check out his work on the following project websites and prepare to spend way too much time getting lost in them: ***Bird***; ***Wisdom***; and ***Creature***. Andrew's work is worth studying on its own, but the way he turns each project into something larger is also remarkable. It's extremely well conceived and executed and is a great example of sticking with tight constraints.

Further Study

- [This video from Ted Forbes at Art of Photography, about Simplification and Negative Space](#) is great (If you're in a hurry, skip ahead to 3:50 and watch the final 10 minutes). If you don't follow Ted, you should. He's one of the sanest voices.
- Zuckerman's books: *Bird*, *Creature*, *Wisdom*, and *Flower* are stunning (he's also come out with a new one: *Music*, though I haven't seen it and I won't recommend what I haven't seen). I own *Bird* and *Wisdom* and they're two of my favourites.
- This [interview with Andrew Zuckerman](#).
- [This talk on Behance's 99u](#) by Andrew is required viewing for creative people.

Final Comments

As always, you can find me on [my blog](#), on [Facebook](#), and on [Instagram](#). If you've missed a lesson, you can find them all [here on the Vision Collective Archive](#).

For the love of the photograph,
David duChemin