



THE VISION COLLECTIVE. WEEK TWENTY ONE.

Learn to Abstract

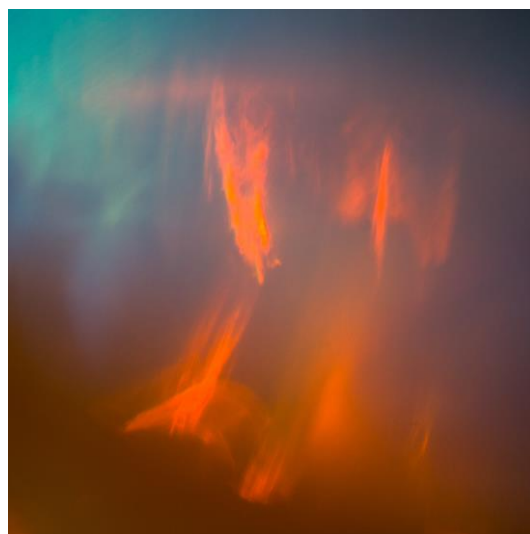
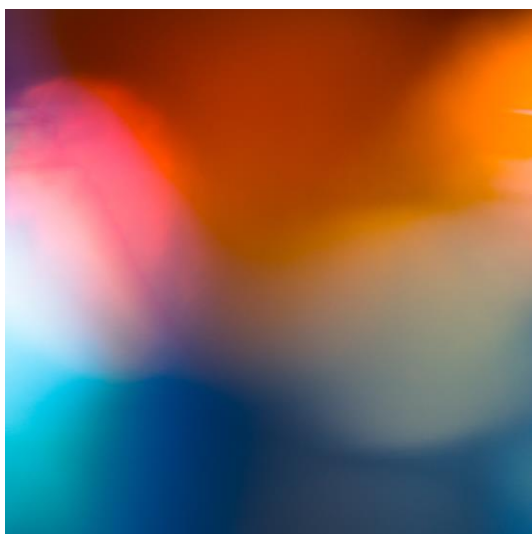
As beginners, photographers can be very literal; the tendency is to focus on getting things in focus, being clear about what the subject is, and telling stories. These are important steps toward the mastery of this craft, but the camera is capable of doing so much more. It doesn't see the way we see, it can freeze time in slivers we can't see ourselves, and it can stretch and blend time, even layering time. It can also blend and layer colours, softening shapes that we can only see as solid. And with all of these capabilities comes the possibility of interpreting the world around us in new ways. So, this is the task I propose to you: abstraction.

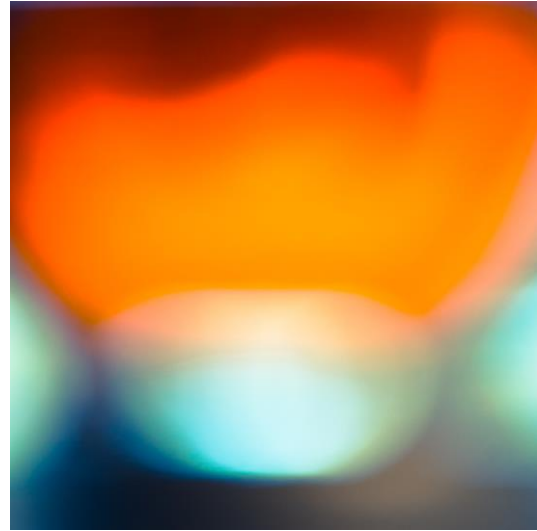
And why abstraction? I'm using the term in the very broad sense of taking the literal world around you and presenting it in less literal ways. Even if you have no intention of adopting it into your more serious work, engaging in this kind of experimentation or play can help you think more creatively, give you a better sense of how the camera sees, and provide you with new visual tools. It's all

deeply pragmatic, but when you get down to doing it, be warned: it's going to feel silly. Trust me. This, if nothing else, will help you see better and understand your tools better.

Contrary to the "my 4-year-old could do that" reactions of some, abstract work is not easy. In fact, it can be much harder than a literal photograph. Without the usual clear subject, context, or ground rules, you have only the graphic elements to work with: colour, tone, line, shape, balance, and tension. These things are all we have. The photograph won't work just because you flail the camera around with the shutter open, whereas a boring, poorly composed, literal photograph of a kitten has at least got the kitten going for it.

I'm approaching this lesson differently and diving straight into three creative exercises because this concept doesn't benefit from a lot of talking. But I did want to give you a bit of context because some of you would roll your eyes at me if I didn't first tell you that the point to this is to see a fuller spectrum of possibilities with the camera as a tool of interpretation and expression.

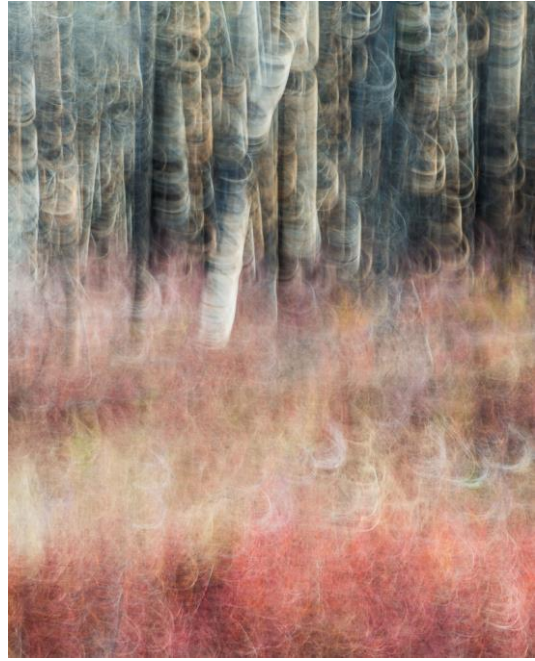




These images are part of my Whisky Shots series, based on my telling people to photograph what they love; I love good whisky. The series was made either with multiple exposures, ultra-close focus (and removal of context), intentional camera movement, or a blend of all of these.

Creative Exercise One: Intentional Camera Movement ("ICM")

When we open the shutter and expose the film or sensor without moving the camera, we get a sharp image. That's usually a good thing. Sometimes, if the subject is moving, we move with it, creating an image that is sharp in place but blurred in others. When done right, this is powerful. But there is no reason you can't move the camera all on its own, turning points of light into brush strokes, blurring edges, and giving your image a look and feel that might best be described as impressionistic.



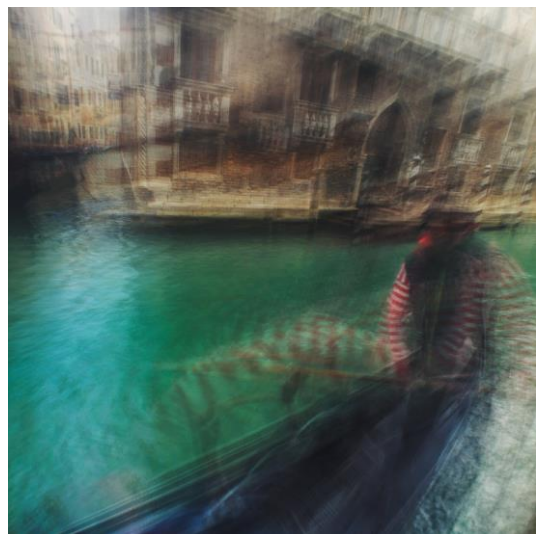
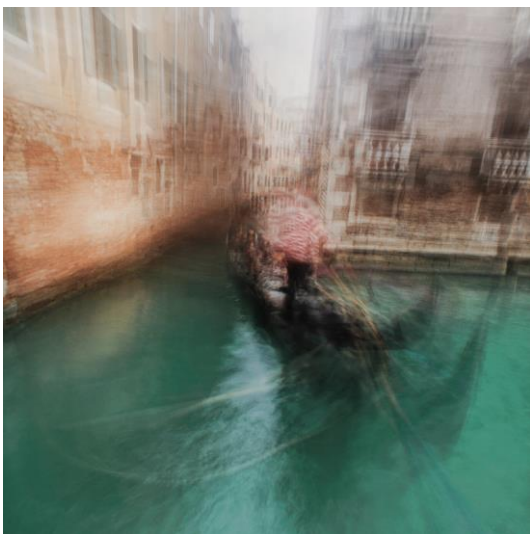
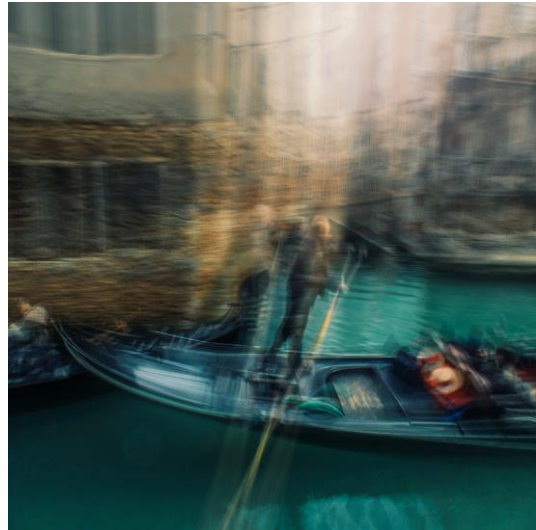
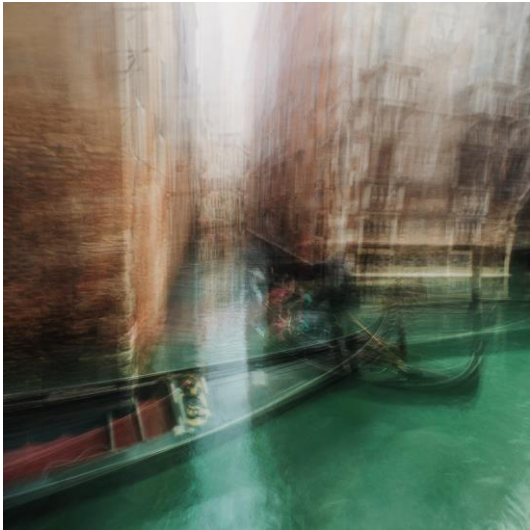
The two images above were made in the Yukon as the leaves began to turn. The intentional camera movement reduced the colours and shapes to something abstract; the images are about colour, not specific trees.

For this exercise, it'll probably be easier if you have a standard lens on your camera, but your choice of optics isn't really important. Pick a subject, whether a tree in the backyard, your cat, or a vase of flowers. Set the shutter speed to something slow, like 1/5 of a second, 1/2 second, or a full second. Trip the shutter and as you do, move the camera. Move it in a circle. Move it up and down. Move it back and forth. Notice how different shutter speeds will create different effects, how some are more appropriate to the shape or colour of what you are photographing. Notice how the blended colours and shapes work together (or don't). Are there some images that you find visually pleasing? Why? Don't move on until you can answer that last question. Is it the colour, the balance, the movement? And if none of the images work for you, why not?

Creative Exercise Two: Multiple Exposures

Check the manual for your camera and figure out how to do double or multiple exposure. The possibilities here are infinite and me giving you specific instruction on where to go from here would be counterproductive. Play with it. See what the layering of forms and colours does; see what stirs

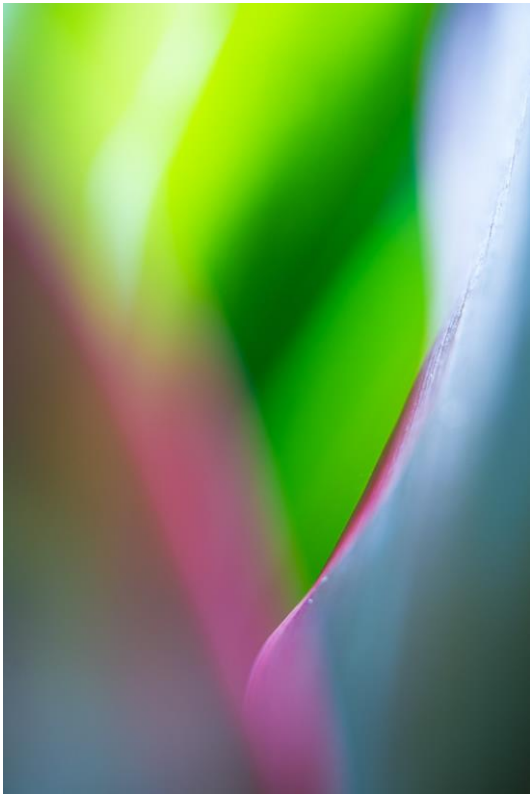
your imagination. If you'd rather, see what kind of great multiple exposure programs are available for your iPhone or Android and play around with them. It's knowing the possibilities that will give you a sense whether this is a form of abstraction that you enjoy using.

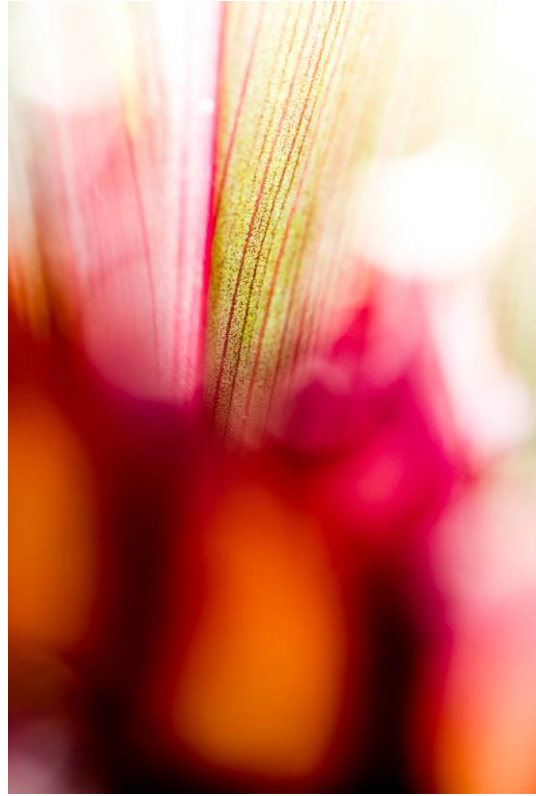
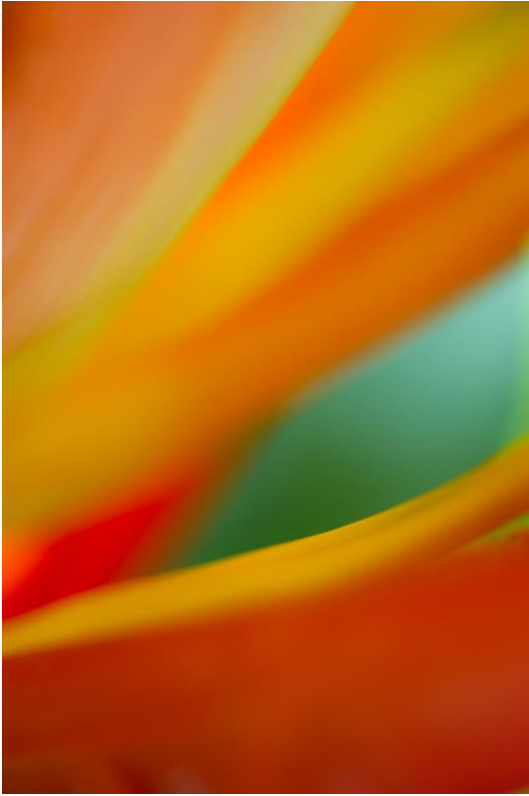


These four images were made in Venice, all on my iPhone with an app called Slow Shutter, which allows me to do both ICM and multiple exposures. For this series, all images were made using the multiple exposure feature.

Creative Exercise Three: Removal of Context

You can abstract a subject without spinning your camera around or layering exposures. One way to do this is the simple removal of context. Get so close there are no clues about what the subject matter is and you'll eliminate the need for your viewer to know what it is, reducing the scene to colour, shape, and texture. Go tight, reduce the depth of field, focus in on one element. And then, because there are no rules, see what a complete lack of focus does. Or introduce intentional movement or multiple exposures.





These four images were made using a removal of context + ultra-close focus and limited depth of field to help reduce recognizable forms to shape and colour.



Study The Masters

I can't think of anyone's abstract photographic work that I love more than [Valda Bailey's](#). Valda is a contemporary artist and would push back against the idea of mastery, so forget that and look at her work. There's nothing literal about it, but it's powerful, sensual, and compelling. Spend 30 minutes in the galleries [on her website](#). I get so taken by her work that it never occurs to me to ask how she does it, but she employs the same techniques I'm encouraging you to play with in this week's Creative Exercises.

Further Study

If I were to give you one further idea to pursue, it's to look beyond photography and see what other visual artists have done with abstraction in the broadest sense. Here are four that come to mind:

- [Mark Rothko](#) - God, I love this man's bold and emotional use of colour.

- [JMW Turner](#) - I could stare at his paintings for hours.
- [Gustav Klimt](#) - Beautiful, visually rich.
- [Gerhard Richter](#) - His landscapes are especially touching and have a photographic quality to them.

Final Comments

As always, 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 Vision Collective, [you can get them here in the archive](#).

For the love of the photograph,
David duChemin