

Artist Report 5

Ernst Haas Creation Portfolio at UMMA

Assignment Objectives

This assignment is designed to encourage critical thinking and a deeper understanding of visual art by means of evaluating color images of a historically significant color photographer, Ernst Haas. Please consider drawing on the ideas presented during this event to form a command of visual literacy concepts, and then attempt to integrate them into your own workflow. The assignment is evaluated by means of written responses on a provided outline.

The Photographer

Ernst Haas has been called "the father of color photography." In the 1950s Ernst began working with Kodachrome films to create color compositions and a color palette that served to define fine-art color photography. In 1981 Daniel Wolf Press published Ernst's first portfolio called *The Creation*. Eleanor Morris Caponigro of Santa Fe, New Mexico, designed the project. All ten prints were made using the dye-transfer process under Ernst's supervision. When a print met his standards it was mounted, he signed it, and it was placed into a portfolio. Three hundred portfolios were made, and today, only a small number remain on the market. Ernst died in 1986 leaving a legacy of poetic images to inspire future generations of photographers.

The Dye-Transfer Process¹

The dye-transfer process was originally introduced in 1935 as the Eastman Wash-off Relief process, and was replaced by the improved Kodak Dye-Transfer process in 1946. Due to market trends and the rapid ascension of digital imaging technologies, Kodak discontinued the process in 1993. In the dye-transfer process, individual separation negatives are created from an original transparency, onto black-and-white film through red, green, and blue filters. If processed archivally, these negatives could be used to make new prints at a future date, long after the original color image disappeared. These negatives were used to expose special matrix films that would in turn transfer the dyes to paper.

Dyes of any color could be employed, but the subtractive color system (cyan, magenta, and yellow) was used when a normal, full-color print was required. The matrix made from the red separation was dyed cyan, the matrix from the green matrix was dyed magenta, and the matrix from the blue separation was dyed yellow. The print was made on a special receiving paper, which was attached face up on a smooth surface. Each of the matrices was inked with a roller, face down against the paper and allowed to remain until the dye was absorbed. The dyes were transferred in the order of cyan, magenta, and yellow. Accurate pin-registration was necessary to avoid blurred outlines and color fringing when lifting a matrix off and then applying a subsequent matrix. It was a technically demanding process that required careful attention to detail. It provided the photographer with extra control over color, contrast, and density while making the print in full, ambient room light. The dyes used in this process are more stable than those in conventional chromogenic processes, giving the print a lifespan of about 200 years, without showing any measurable amount of color shifting or fading.

Video Documentation About the Dye-Transfer Process

[Atelier Janjac, Paris; filmed late 1980's] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ktz4D13dHtw>

[Charles Cramer; lecture in 2010] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvqGN96Q9WU>

1. Hirsch, Robert *Exploring Color Photography*, 4- Edition (McGraw-Hill, 2004) pg. 340

Until the 1980's, most color work was rejected in the world of high-art because it was perceived as vulgar, gaudy, or too technically unstable for serious work. The use of the dye-transfer process by such photographers as Ernst Haas, Jay Maisel, and Pete Turner, helped legitimize the use of color in all areas of photography. All three lived in New York City, and "...in an effort to promote color photography as fine art..."² they opened *The Space Gallery* there in 1977. These pioneers of color photography, utilized 35mm Kodachrome films in photojournalism, commercial, and fine-art genres during the 1960s, into the early 1990's.

The Creation Portfolio: Artist Statement

The idea of a beginning, of something originating out of nothing, of existence born out of nonexistence, remains beyond human comprehension. The abstract idea of a creation of this world, still lives in all of us, filling us with a longing to understand how it came about and why. In this present age of science, at once so powerfully constructive and destructive, we seek instinctively to defend ourselves by searching for the elemental, the natural. However much we try to rebel against nature we cannot escape being a part of it. The elements that surround us also flow through us and the cycle of human life bears a close relationship to the span of the four seasons. The whole is for man unimaginable. We are forced to search for it in its parts. We can only try to find parts which create a whole. In photography, through an interplay of scales, an entire universe within a universe can be revealed. What I searched for in visual terms was the connection of the real with the wonderful. Pictures are more when they begin to signify not so much natural history, as a vision of nature born from intuition and awareness. We see what we feel. We see what we know until we see what we are.

Ernst Haas, 1982

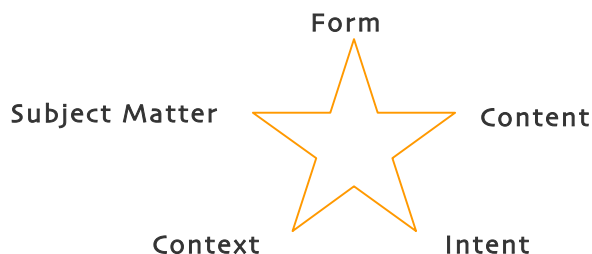
I New England, 1973	VI Nairobi, Kenya, 1970
II Surtsey Volcano, near Iceland, 1965	VII Island of Kyushu, Japan, 1981
III Arizona, 1962	VIII Sicily, 1965
IV Tobago, 1968	IX Kenya, 1970
V Lake Huntington, Kenya, 1970	X Vermont, 1969

2. Turner, Pete. <<http://www.peteturner.com/biolayout.html>> ©Pete Turner.

Procedure

The diagram below illustrates the relationship of some basic ideas of visual literacy and can be used to view any kind of art. Review their meanings and apply them to what you are experiencing with the images viewed in *The Creation* portfolio.

Visual Literacy Star³



Subject Matter — Quite simply, this is what the image is *of*. Most of us shy away from describing subject matter because it appears to be too obvious to discuss, too embarrassing to admit that we don't understand what we are seeing, and/or assume that the person standing next to us, looking at the exact same artwork, is seeing the exact same thing. Subject matter is the figure/ground relationship of the objects, the people, the place, etc., etc. Ask yourself, “what is this artist literally looking at — what is s/he *seeing*?” When describing the subject matter, you must remain simply objective, and descriptive to what you see. Withhold any opinions about the artwork for another part of the process that is to follow. Another person's perception of the artwork can offer you insight that agrees, differs, or enlightens.

Form — Also referred to as *formal properties*. These are the ways that the artist has chosen to interpret the subject matter. The list is infinite, but is inclusive of density, contrast, motion blur, depth-of-field, design elements, color strategy, light quality; and media such as film choice or digital capture, developers, inks, output media, presentation materials, etc. An artist's choice of tools, techniques, and materials are what create an image of subject matter.

Content — In contemporary image making this is determined by the viewer, not the artist: *Subject Matter + Form = Content*. This aspect of the viewing experience makes you a direct participant in the creation of the artwork, potentially giving the work meaning. Expressing an idea, personal point of view, emotion, visceral response, or description of how another sensory experience such as hearing, touching, smelling, or tasting is triggered because of viewing the artwork, are excellent ways to articulate the premise of content. Once these aspects have been considered and fathomed by the viewer, asking evaluative questions about the artwork is integral to their process of critically thinking, and forming opinions about it.

Intent — Why is the artist showing this? What is s/he attempting to/wanting to say? It will behoove you as the viewer to think and speculate about the work, ask questions about it, and perhaps arrive at your own answer. Reading an artist statement can help provide clues from the artist as to what you are looking at, and perhaps, how to engage with the work.

Context — Where is the work being viewed: in a museum, at a presentation in the studio, in a magazine or book, on a Web site at home, or on a cell phone? The possibilities seem to be immeasurable. Where, when, and how the work is being viewed can change its meaning. Being very mindful of the original situations that the work was created are important too.

3. Barrett, Terry. *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images*, 3rd Edition (McGraw-Hill, 2000), All key ideas have been adapted from pages 180-182.

Select one image from *The Creation Portfolio* and respond to the following questions:⁴

1. Image Number & Title:

2. Describe the subject matter that you see:

3. Describe another person's interpretation of this image that agrees, differs, or enlightens:

4. Consider how form relates to subject matter. In regard to this image, what does the equation *subject matter + form = content* yield for you?

4. Barrett, Terry. Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images, 3- Edition (McGraw-Hill, 2000), All questions have been adapted from pages 180-182.

5. Interpret the photograph by stating one [or more] evaluative question it raises for you, and then provide your own answer.

6. What do you think Ernst intended to communicate with this image by including it in this collection of prints?

7. Visit <http://www.ernst-haas.com> to view the *Creation* link. Create a comparative list of **seven formal properties** [minimum] seen in the website viewing context vs. that of the print portfolio viewing context. Cite visual or tactile properties of the images, or of the portfolio as a whole, that are different.

Website

Examples: monitor viewing / transmissive light

Print Portfolio

print viewing / reflected light

8. On the website, find the image that you chose to analyze in questions 1 through 6. What is it titled? What do you think the image intent is by including it in *this* collection of work?

— If you discovered any sort of discrepancy, then what sort of questions come up for you?

9. Imagine for a moment that you didn't see the print portfolio. Now look at your response to question 6. Does Ernst's intent with the image resonate similarly on the website? Is it possible that the meaning of the image changed because of the viewing context? **Explain.**

10. Cite three items that the website [holistically] offers us, that the print portfolio cannot.