

Compelling Photographs: The Elements and Principles of Design

September 6, 2015 by [Alasdair Gillespie](#)

It's probably not the first thing you think about when you're going to make a picture. But an awareness of the Elements and Principles of Design will help improve your work. For some photographers, this article will be a review, for others, it will be new, but regardless, it will sharpen your photographic eye.

The Elements and Principles of Design are the backbone of photography and indeed, for all the visual arts. This article takes a fresh look at what the Elements and Principles of Design are and how they can be used to make your photographs better.



LINES

Lines are the first of these Elements. A line is a point in motion, with only one dimension-length, and the longer its length, the greater the visual importance. There are many different types of lines and

they will have an impact on your photography. Lines, just like colour, can also have an emotional impact as well. Where do the lines take your eyes? In the above photograph, the clothes' lines take your eyes across the image. These lines, because of their length, have importance.



The first type of line is a Leading line. They are usually from the bottom of the photograph. Leading lines invite you in. In this photograph they take you into the heart of it and into the mysterious fog.

Another type of line to keep in mind are the ones that cross a gap. They are called Implied Lines and they take your eye across that gap, often into the subject. Implied lines can also follow a "C" curve or an "S" curve line. More about those types of lines later.



Implied lines in this photo take your eye across the gap in Cobourg harbour past a pair low flying cormorants.

Lines can also be thick, thin, or broken. From this wharf in Twillingate, Newfoundland, thick, thin and broken lines create an abstract featuring colour, line, and shape.



Using a slow shutter speed and camera motion, Gesture lines, as shown in the photo below, uses Christmas lights to capture these quick rapid lines that suggest movement and capture the energy of the objects.



Lines can be thick, showing stability, while thin lines often suggest fragility or they can be soft and shallow, suggesting comfort, or relaxation. Steep curves can suggest rapid movement.

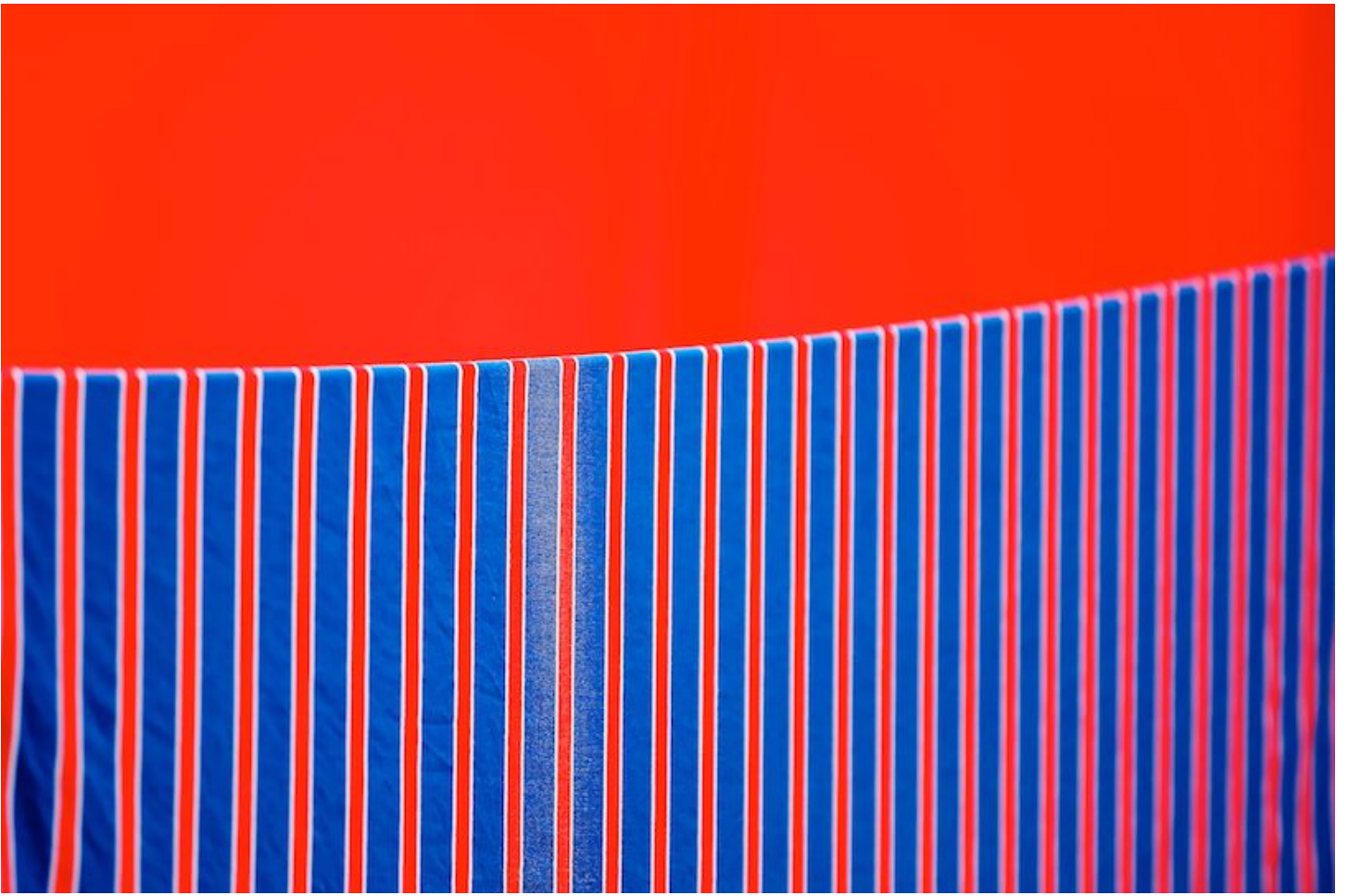
In the photo below, steep curving lines on the Ganaraska River in Port Hope, Ontario show high energy and suggest turbulence. In mountainous or hilly country look for the contour lines.



The smooth curves of the human body offer pleasing lines and a sensual quality.



While walking along a back street in Venice, in the above photo, the many curving lines captured my eye along with a triangular like shape in the bottom right corner.



The photo above illustrates a pattern of straight lines topped with a gentle curving laundry line in Burano, Italy.



Gentle curving lines on the textured surface of an iceberg in Illulissat, Greenland are pleasing to the eye.

“C” curves are a classic line. These pleasing lines are found everywhere. Look for them along the shorelines of a bay, in rows of trees or hedges, in long grasses, tree branches, staircases, natural stone arches and in architecture, arches, especially bridges. Keep your eye open for them.



The staircase in Cienfuegos, Cuba, the "C" curve leads your eye downward. Note the presence of other geometric shapes as well; triangles, circles, ovals, and rectangles.



There are two “C” curves in this photograph. The first one, an architectural one, is a portion of the underside of the bridge and is found in the upper left part of the photograph. The bridge “C” curve is very common. The second “C” curve is formed by the back and legs of the bent figure.



On a canal in Venice, a gentle architectural “C” curve and its reflection. The tops of many of the windows also have the curve.



In nature, a “C” curve on the left and a gentle “S” line on the right in Hawaii. A leading line also takes your eye up and into the picture exiting at the top.

“S” curves are also a classic curve. They lead your eye through or across the photo. In nature, “S” curves are found in slow meandering streams and rivers. Roads and streets can also demonstrate the “S” curve. Like the “C” curve, it’s also a pleasing line in any photo.



In Hawaii, from the air looking down at a gentle, pleasing “S” curve on the road, which travels through a lava field. The golf course provides a great colour contrast between the green grass, the black hardened lava and the painted lines of the road.

Diagonal lines are dynamic! They lead your eyes through the photo, and can, in some photos, suggest movement.



Under a pedestrian bridge in Venice, we have dynamic lines.

Line directions have impact. Horizontal lines are stable and secure. We like them because they are peaceful and at rest. They're comfortable and we like what's familiar.



Using a slow shutter speed, I was able to capture the horizontal lines in this red boat in Venice. These lines are tranquil.



Here in Newfoundland, the horizontal lines of the Gros Morne mountains and their reflection offer a peaceful and tranquil feeling.

In the photograph below, the vertical lines of a church ceiling give a feeling of height. Think of medieval cathedrals and how the vertical lines suggest a spirituality. Today huge skyscrapers are equally impressive but perhaps without the spirituality.



In summary, Lines, as illustrated by the various types; the “C” and “S curves”, the implied lines, the thick, broken and thin lines, and their direction are an important element to consider and include in your photography.

SHAPES

Shapes, the second element, are a contained space and can be organic or geometric. Organic shapes are found in nature. Shapes are two dimensional while forms are three dimensional. To recognize the building blocks of design, you must look beyond their name and recognize both the primary and secondary shapes.

Primary shapes are the circle, square, and the triangle. Look for these basic shapes wherever you shoot.



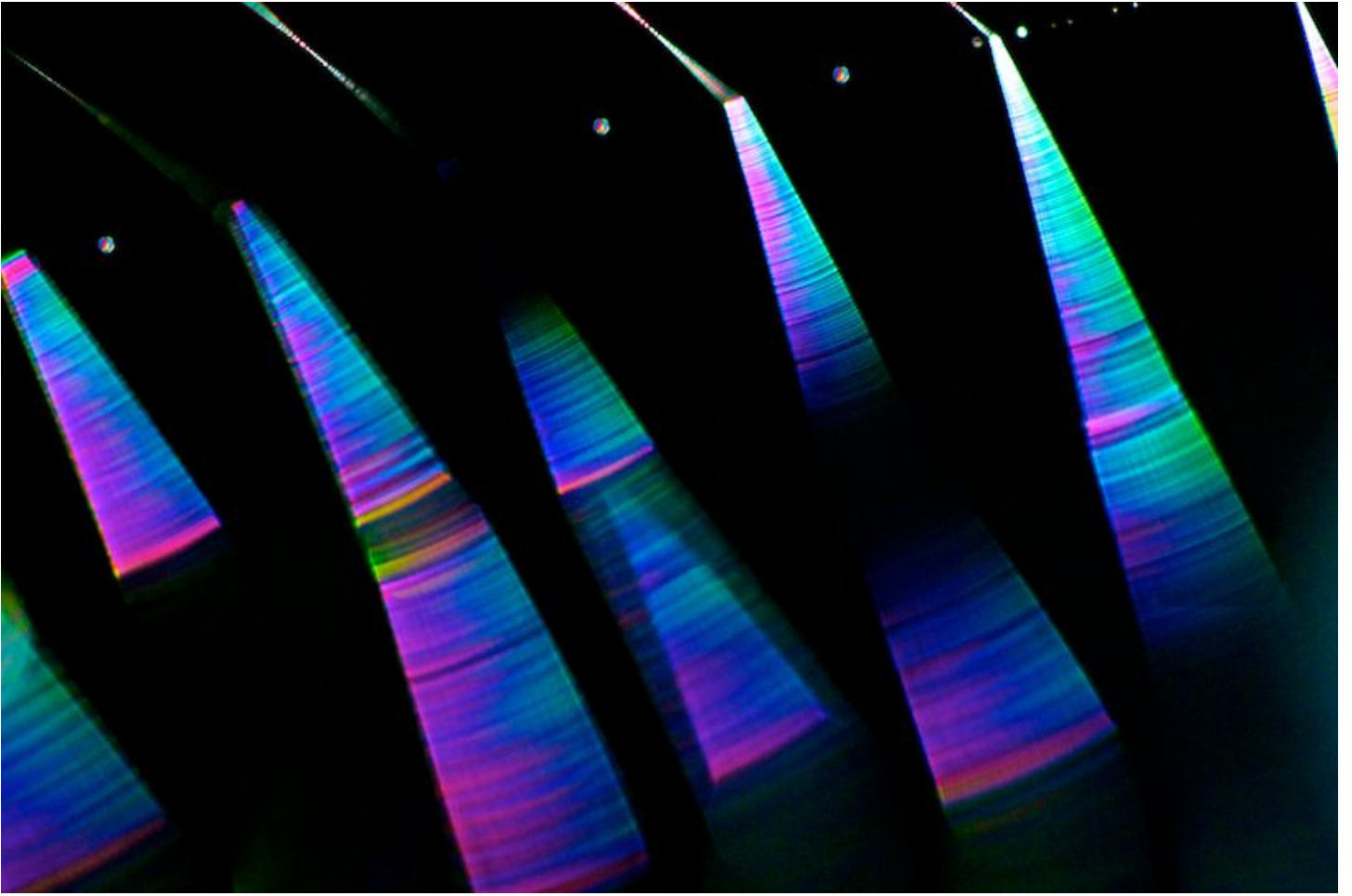
Don't see the zucchinis, see the circle shapes! And then make sure you fill the viewfinder. Circles are every where in nature.



In the photo above, a displaying peacock, and it can also be viewed as many circles and a triangle!



Triangles, rectangles, and squares are found in a yacht's masts moored in Cobourg's harbour.



Slowly vibrating spider silk on a back fence, refracting and reflecting light, create triangles of colour.



The colourful walls in the city of Trinidad, Cuba, where squares and rectangles abound.



Rectangles, two walls and a curtain in Burano, Italy with their eye catching colours.

Secondary shapes are the rectangle and the oval, 'cousins' of the square and circle. It is crucial to improving your photography by looking beyond the names of things and focus on the *shapes* of things you are seeing. The more you pay attention to this, the sooner it will be automatic and the more effective your photography will be. You should see the improvements quickly.



Above, the solid geometric shapes and columns of a building in Havana, Cuba.



An 'udder-ly' oval shot...with a triangle and cylinder shape at the Royal Winter Fair, Toronto, Canada.



A young girl sorts rice or looking at the shapes, we have a primary shape, a circle, and a secondary shape, an oval, in Trinidad, Cuba.

SIZE

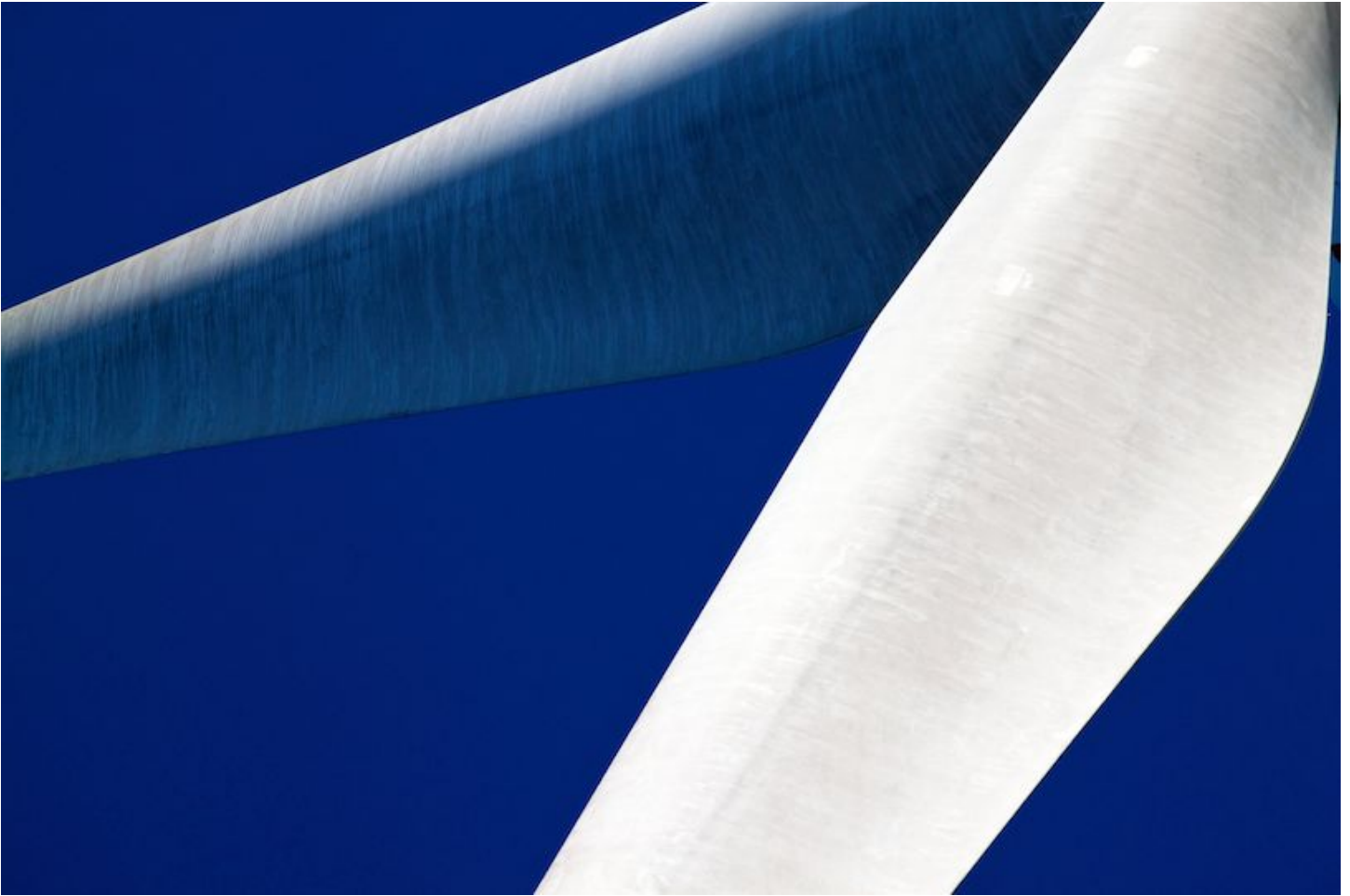
A third element is Size. It is simply the relationship of the area occupied by one shape to that of another. Often, the most important object is the largest.



Observe how shapes occupy a space and are in relationship to one another. Here, it is the pattern of the gulls and the space they occupy above the dominant triangular shape of the iceberg.

SPACE

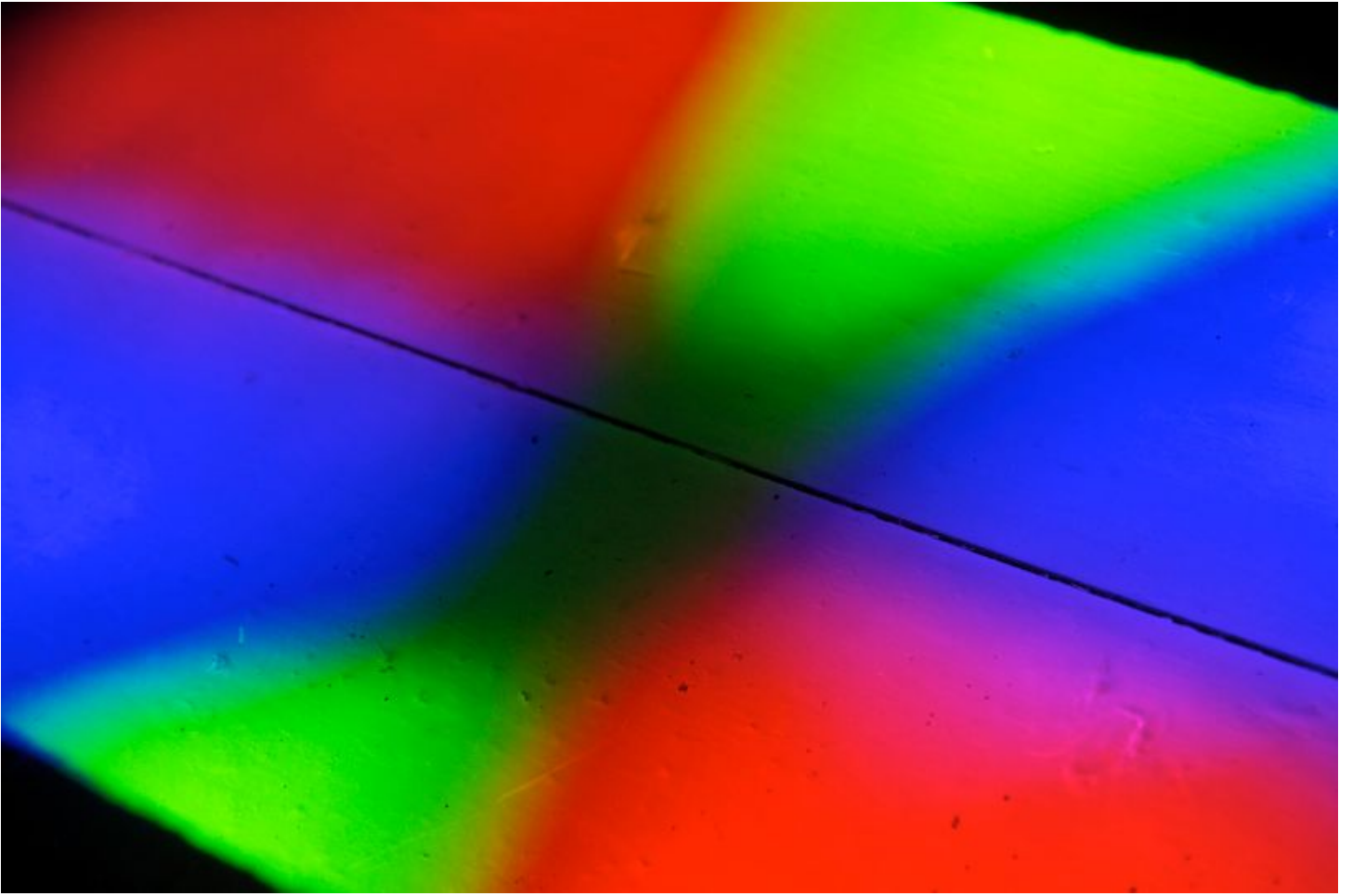
Space, the 4th element, can be positive or negative. Positive space is the object or the space a subject occupies while negative space is created between, around, under, or through the subject matter. Negative space can help highlight an object.



The positive space are the blades, and negative space, is found between the blades of a wind turbine in Pickering, Ontario.

COLOUR

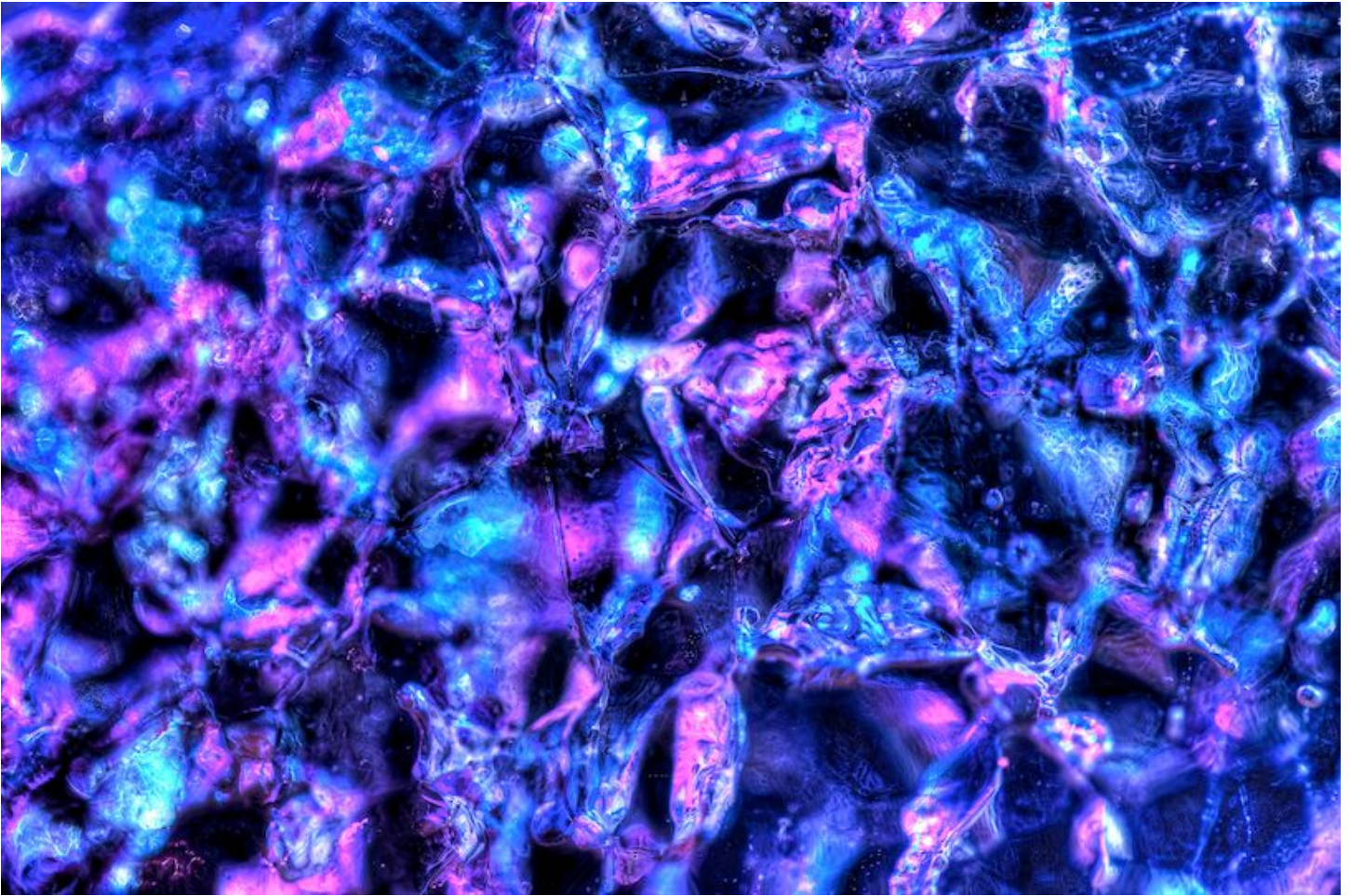
The next element is Colour which naturally attracts our attention. We love colour! We are drawn to contrasts between colours. Colour creates mood. As Freeman Patterson says, "The most important element in a colour photograph is...colour!" And who could disagree!



Light traveling through stain glass windows in a church in Herring Neck, Newfoundland, lands upon the wooden floor. The deep rich colours create a tranquil feeling.



The colourful painted walls in Trinidad, Cuba with three primary colours and a secondary colour, (orange). Two rectangles, a triangle and a quadrilateral. (a four sided geometric shape)



With frozen fingers and frigid toes, on a cold winter's day, a colourful ice abstract from Cobourg, Ontario, Canada.

VALUE

The second last element, is Value. It refers to the relative lightness or darkness of a certain area which can add drama to your photographs.



The value of lightness and darkness on a fence in Fogo, Newfoundland.



A photo of a street musician in Kensington market, Toronto showing a large value range.

TEXTURE

The last element is Texture. Smooth, rough, or sharp, are variations on the surface of an object which are particularly prominent in abstract photography. Textures can be contrasting or curving which can show detail or suggest motion. Often texture will add interest by breaking a pattern.



Here the textured and patterned skin of a snake is shown under an infrared light.



Above is the soft looking textured patterned skin of a giraffe.



Circles, with a rough textured surface, created by the cuts of a chainsaw on a stack of logs.

In summary, the basic Elements of Design are: Line, Shape, Size, Space, Colour, Value and Texture. Thinking about these Elements of Design before you look through the viewfinder will help improve your compositions.

PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

It is the arrangement of the elements of design that are used in the Principles of Design to create artistic, engaging, and uniquely powerful photographs. How are the Elements used in these Principles?

BALANCE

Balance can be symmetrical or asymmetrical. With symmetrical balance, think of a see-saw or a set of scales. Both sides of the photograph are equal or visually balanced. The balance can be horizontal

or on a vertical axis. Viewers like balance whether it's by colour, texture, line, shape etc. In asymmetry, the visual balance isn't equal.



Here, we have two secondary shapes, rectangles, in this case, hanging scatter rugs, as an example of symmetrical balance. Each rug visually 'balances' each other.



Again symmetrical balance is achieved on the left by the “C” curve and balanced on the right by the rectangle.



Symmetrical balance is achieved by the channel marker in the foreground balancing the fishing stage in the background.



The butcher is unbalanced, visually speaking. The left side has a heavier presence than the right. The photograph is unbalanced or in other words, it is an asymmetrical photo.

EMPHASIS

Emphasis or dominance in a photograph can be shown through contrast, isolation, placement or colour. Large objects can dominant smaller ones while warm colours, red, yellow, orange, can dominant cool pale colours like blue, green, etc.



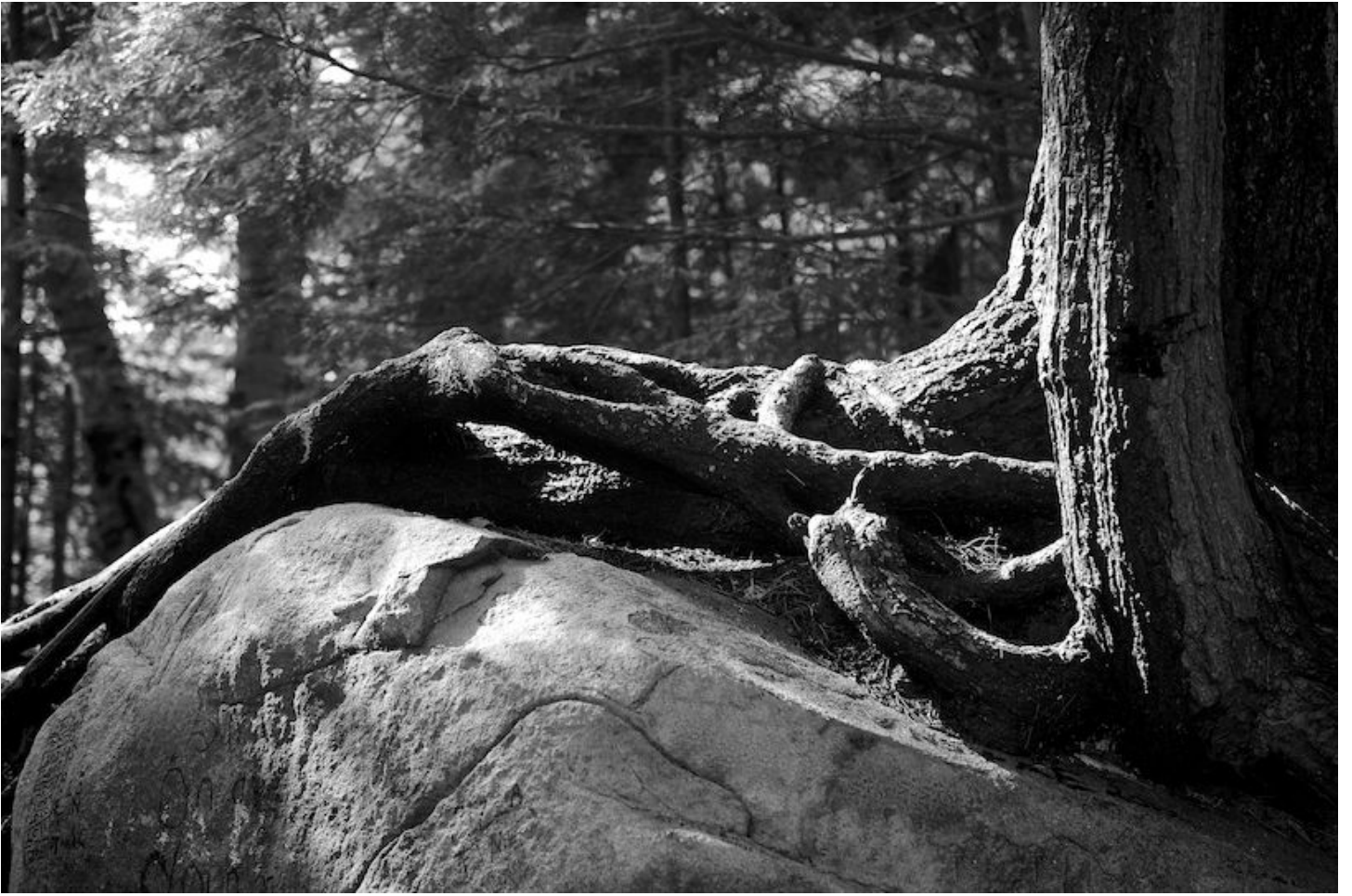
Here we have an example of emphasis through colour with the white milkweed seed landing on the red dahlias.



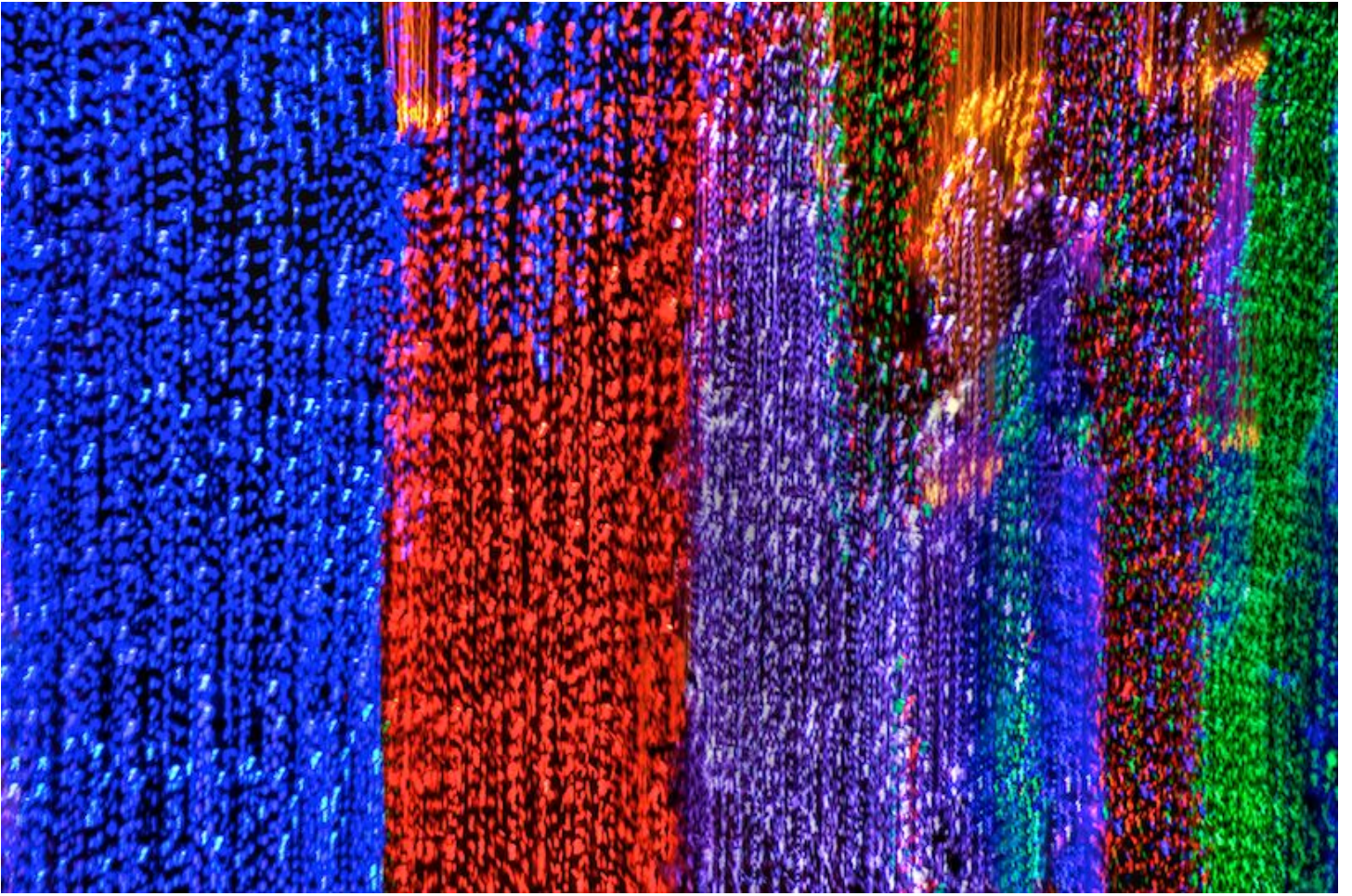
With a repetition of line, the effect of the red bars of colour contrast with the blue bars.

PROPORTION

Proportion in photography is usually comparing size of objects, or the amount of one thing to the whole. We generally think of comparing size when talking about proportion. By comparing the size of one object to another, it can give more or less importance to it. Colour, as an Element, is also important in Proportion. An equal distribution of colour is uninteresting to see.



By comparing the size of the boulder to the size of the tree root gives both importance.



The distribution of these Christmas light represents a good proportion of colour.



Comparing the size of the person, who is dwarfed by the tall silos, give more importance to their height. It is also an example of asymmetrical balance.

PATTERN

Pattern in photography is created by repetition of an Element such as line, shape, colour, etc.



Icicles hang from rocks or a repetition of triangular shapes in Cobourg, Ontario.



The shadows from the steps of an exterior fire escape ladder create a pattern through a repetition of line and shape.



This field of sunflowers illustrates a pattern of a primary shape, the circle, in fact a field of circles and the repetition of the colour yellow.

GRADATION

The gradation of size and direction produce linear perspective. The gradation from dark to light will cause the eye to move along a shape.



In a forest path, using slow shutter speed and motion, the gradation from dark to light moves our eye to the opening.

CONTRAST

Often there are considered two types of contrast, tonal and colour. Tonal contrast refers to the difference from the lightest to the dark tone. Think of travelling from white to grey to black. Colour contrast describes how the colours interact with each other. Think of opposites on the colour wheel; yellow-blue, red-yellow etc.

Tonal contrast in the early morning in Algonquin Park, Ontario.



A gradation of tone created by the shadows on cement silos in Bowmanville, Ontario.



The rectangular shapes of the walls provide colour contrast.



Not only do the walls show colour contrast, so do the woman's clothing and her placement in the photo adds contrast.



Primary colours, yellow and blue, provide a contrast in this photo of sunflower petals.

To review, the Principles of Design are Balance, Emphasis, Proportion, Pattern, Contrast, and Gradation.

And now, with your knowledge of the Elements and Principles of Design, you have the main ingredients in making, not just a good photo, but a great photo! And remember, the best place to make a picture is wherever you are!