True Colours

(Pulling at the heartstrings with the neurons of the mind)

Christopher Cristóbal Newberry

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Images by

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Contents

Preface

The images in this book were created between 2008 and 2020. They started with a series called "Gestalt Blue Skies", then "Platonic Views", "Cornered", and finally "Lockdown".

The running theme is 'perception' in relation to 'truth' – the 'true colours' of people, ideas and information. How humans see and interpret information – including visual information. I'm certainly no expert in the field of perception. Not in any scientific sense. But I have read and thought a lot about it. And I hope to have some small influence on the debate about how we interpret information and why we interpret it in certain ways.

When I started creating these images in 2008 I hadn't really thought the whole thing through, I didn't know exactly where I was going. Things sort of developed from the idea that when people only have some, but not all the information on a subject, idea or image, we make up, we invent the missing information. That's basic Gestalt theory. Then, still regarding Gestalt theory, I started thinking about how we tend to idealise images by thinking of them diagramatically – in terms of geometry, symmetry, straightness: so, for example, sky, sea and land became long rectangles. This led me consider at what point something we interñpret as real or truthful is actually not. When Donald Trump and conspiracy theories became so prevalent on social media I thought there was a clear link between 'post-truth' and my images. Things that seem real but aren't.

2020 brought the Covid 19 pandemic and 'lockdown'. As my partner and I couldn't leave our home except for groceries and one session of exercise a day, that forced me to have a much closer look at my immediate surroundings: my house, my garden and my execise route. Having nothing else to work with, I created images using those surroundings. However, instead of single, coherent images I took whole scenes, such as an unmade bed or a ceiling, and divided them into details and segments and reincorporated them into a whole, which would produce patterns and symmetries.

The book is divided into four image sections which follow the progress of these ideas: "Gestalt Blue Skies", "Platonic Views", "Cornered" and "Lockdown". They all come under the general heading of "True Colours". People's 'true colours' are not always known to us.

Introduction

Stephen Colbert popularised the word 'truthiness' in 2005. (Fig 1)

An example of 'verisimilitude'. It looks like reality … but notice the shape of the island. Is anything in nature so symmetrical? (Fig 2)

In the post-truth world the media and social media is full of fake news. Fake news can only work if it seems real. (Fig 3)

Truth, Truthiness, Verisimilitude, Fake News and Plain Old Lies: What are the True Colours?

Truthiness and Post-Truth

In 2005 the American Dialect Society's word of the year was "truthiness". The American comedian and political satirist, Stephen Colbert, (*Fig 1*) came up with a spoof term for "the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than facts or concepts known to be true". That is 'truthiness'. Fast forward 10 years and The Oxford Dictionary nominated 'post-truth' as its word of the year, defining it as: "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". Both terms refer to modern times.

In essence 'truthiness' and 'post-truth' refer to a strong in-built human tendency to believe what one wants to believe, in accordance to one's feelings, despite evidence to the contrary. In my opinion, some of the results of this tendency are religion, nationalism, racism, elitism and many, many more. Truthiness and post-truth are modern concepts, but they are highlighting something that has long existed.

Truth, Lies and Verisimilitude

The words "truth", "lies" and "verisimilitude" on the other hand, have been around for a very long time.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, "Truth is the actual fact or facts about a matter". In truth there are no "alternative facts", as Kellyanne Conway once put it in a press conference. The opposite is a lie: "something that someone says or writes which they know is untrue in order to deceive someone". It's done on purpose to deceive. And in between truth and lies there is verisimilitude: "the quality of seeming true or of having the appearance of being real". From the Latin, 'veritas' (truth) and 'similitudo' (similar): Similar to truth … but not truth. This concept can apply to art, novels, films and, in my case, images derived from photography. (*Figs 2* and *3*)

Fairyland

The Cottingley fairies story was a lie (*Fig 4*), that is, it was intended to deceive. Perhaps not maliciously, perhaps it all started as a joke, but in 1917 two little girls went to the back of their garden and took pictures of themselves with playful little fairies. The fairies were actually cardboard cutouts. The girls showed the pictures to their parents claiming the fairies were real. Their mother believed them. She took the photos to the Theosophical Society which happily accepted the photos as conclusive proof that there is a spiritual world. These were no nincompoops. Among their members was the creator of the most rational and intelligent of fictional characters, Sherlock Holmes. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (*Fig 5*) took the pictures as evidence that it was possible to communicate with the spiritual world. He even gave public lectures on the photographs. To our modern eyes, they are obviously fake photos, but back in 1917 after more than 3 years of a devastating war where millions had died, many, many people were desperate to believe that their dead loved ones still somehow survived as spirits. Conan Doyle himself had lost his eldest son and only brother to the war. The girls' little white lie led to large numbers of people losing control of the truth. It happens now too.

Blood Moon

In early 2019 there was a Blood Moon, a phenomenon where the full moon appears very large and red during a lunar eclipse. Some people take this phenomenon as a sign that the end of the world is soon to come. I noticed that there were a lot of fake photos being circulated on social media and as a joke, I published one of my own. I used the same basic technique as the girls in Cottingley: one real and one false image superimposed on each other. I used a photo I had taken of Dieppe harbour and a picture of a blood moon downloaded from the Internet. I put the two together (cleverly creating the reflection of the moon on the water) and – voilà – a fake (*Fig 6*). I posted it on Facebook, fully expect-

In 1917 two girls took pictures of themselves with cardboard fairies – people believed it. (Fig 4)

Having lost a son in the Great War, Arthur Conan Doyle was a spiritualist who firmly believed that the Cottingley fairies photo was genuine. (Fig 5)

This image by the author is not meant to be 'verisimilar', but a lie. Its purpose is to deceive while purporting to express reality. (Fig 6)

Starting off with the truth: A rather mundane entrance to a car park with 3 bicycles dangling from the ceiling. (Fig 7)

While conserving a degree of verisimilitude, the image is now almost abstract, missing superfluous objects that hinder. (Fig 8)

Detail – Before and after: Lines have been straightened, colours have been changed and saturated, and superfluous objects such as pipes and straps have been eliminated, creating the illusion that the bicycles float. Illusions like this are to be seen both in the Spotlight and in the Photographer's Gallery upstairs where "True Colours" continues. (Fig 9)

ing people would have a good laugh. To my amazement, a lot of people believed the image to be true. I honestly thought people would see immediately it was fake. Many didn't. I got lots of compliments. I deliberately set out to deceive, so it was a lie – joke or not. However, this image is an exception to my work. My works are verisimilitudes, based on truth with the purpose of exposing 'truthiness' and lies. They are not lies.

The camera doesn't lie??

In the past people used to say, "the camera doesn't lie". The Cottingley girls showed us that the camera certainly can lie. When creating an image, I start off with the truth: objects that in fact exist. When light hits these objects, it bounces off of them and into our eyes. Usually, reflected light warns us of the presence of an object so we don't bump into it. If we can see the object with our eyes and touch it, we know it is real – it is factually there. If the objects are lit, a camera can pick up their reflection on film or image sensors. When viewed we can say that the resulting image is 'truthful'. Depending on the shapes, forms, colours and composition we can think of those truthful images as beautiful, ugly or, perhaps, mundane – uninteresting. Take a car park.

Car parks and verisimilitude

Car parks on the whole are not beautiful objects. This one (*Fig 7*) in Bruges was certainly not a thing of beauty, but it did have bicycles dangling from the ceiling with neon lights as wheels, so I took an interest. I photographed the scene and the resulting image is 'truth'. It is not the object itself, but a truthful reflection of the object. However, then I transformed the image (*Fig 8*): I straightened and made the lines perfectly horizontal and vertical, changed the colours, got rid of superfluous objects such as pipes and straps. (*Fig 9*) Then, the image becomes more and more abstract, but conserving a degree of verisimilitude: There really are 3 bicycles in a room with pipes. That much is true, but bicycles don't usually float in the air, so the image is verisimilar. The image becomes idealised with its almost perfect shapes and saturated colours – many of them complementary.

Verisimilitude: Not truth, but not lies

The difference between the "True Colours" images shown here is that these are not intended to deceive, whereas the Cottingley fairies and my 'blood moon' are lies. Photography used to be regarded as trustworthy compared to other forms of visual communication, such as painting. With digital photography all vestige of trustworthiness is gone. A photograph may or may not tell the truth. Today we are being bombarded constantly with fake news, "alternative facts" and truthiness: all intended to mislead or obfuscate.

Verisimilitude: Post-truth

At the time of writing, we are living in a period where too many falsehoods are used in politics and in mainstream and social media – not necessarily lies. They are statements meant to confuse and obfuscate. Many perceive these falsehoods as 'true'. Facts are no longer the main component in forming opinions and making decisions. Today, opinions and decisions rely more on perceptions, on 'gut feelings'. (*Fig. 10*) Populist ideologies have exploited this. As societies, we are in danger of succumbing to populism. It's happened before – many times (think of Nero, Robespierre, Hitler, Pol Pot, etc.). Populism provides easy answers to complicated questions, answers that large numbers of people want to hear, rather than truthful ones. People want 'truthiness'. To see what they want to see or what they think they should see – not what there is to see, not what is there to be seen.

Make objectivity great again

The images in this book are not real. They are not truthful. They are at the same time, not meant to confuse and obfuscate. In fact they are intended to clarify that indeed, they are not truthful in very much the same way as Magritte's painting, The Treachery of Images (*Fig. 11*). They are images captured from reality, however what is shown is not what there is, but what I wish there to be. The images are platonic views, idealised views. These images say to the viewer that this is not reality. The image has been transformed into what people believe the image is or want it to be rather than what it actually is.

The images are a quasi-reality. They are verisimilar – they look real, but aren't. Novels, for example, are verisimilar. Novelists can shape their stories in any way they see fit, in order to provoke an emotion in the reader. News items are, at least in theory, factual. The news may also provoke an emotion, but it is not designed to do so, news should be designed to inform. The same can apply in other areas: Films are verisimilar, while documentaries are factual; landscape paintings are verisimilar, while landscape photography is factual. Scarily, any of these 'factual' products can be turned into 'verisimilar' ones. And they are . . . all the time.

Descartes, Truth v Trump, Post-truth (Fig. 10)

René Magritte is telling us that this is not a pipe. – and indeed it is not. If he said, "this is a pipe", he would be lying and obfuscating. (Fig. 11)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge invented the term "suspension of disbelief". (Fig. 12)

So what?

I am hoping that my images may contribute to art and society in two ways: First, to remind viewers that what purports to be truth should be questioned and verified. Secondly, to please the eye with bigger than life colour and idealised shapes and forms. The intention is to create interesting and aesthetically pleasing images, but without emotion. Deadpan.

In 1817, referring to the verisimilitude of novels, Coleridge (*Fig. 12*) invented the term: "Suspension of disbelief": To enjoy a novel one must forget it is fiction – at least while being read. I ask the viewer not to suspend disbelief, but enjoy the image while knowing that, whatever it is, it's not truth. I'm pulling at the heartstrings with the neurons of the mind. I hope.

Images

Gestalt Blue Skies

We only ever have a partial view of reality, though the answer to everything is in that blue sky.

Composition GBS 0003
"Post"
Reading, Hampshire
2008

Composition GBS 0032
"Red"
Madrid, Spain
2009

Composition GBS 0031
"No Entry"
Madrid, Spain
2009

Composition GBS 0046
"Tin-Tin"
Antwerp, Belgium
2018

Platonic Views

The ideal, the perfect only exists in our minds
everything is imperfect. Fortunately.

Composition 001
"Principia"
Embleton Bay, Northumberland
2009

Composition 011
"White Cloud"
Embleton Bay, Northumberland
2009

Composition 231
"Heather"
Porlocke, Somerset
2017

Composition 247
"God Rays"
Quettehou, Normandy
2016

Composition 023
"Symmetric Island"
Burgh Island, Devon
2009

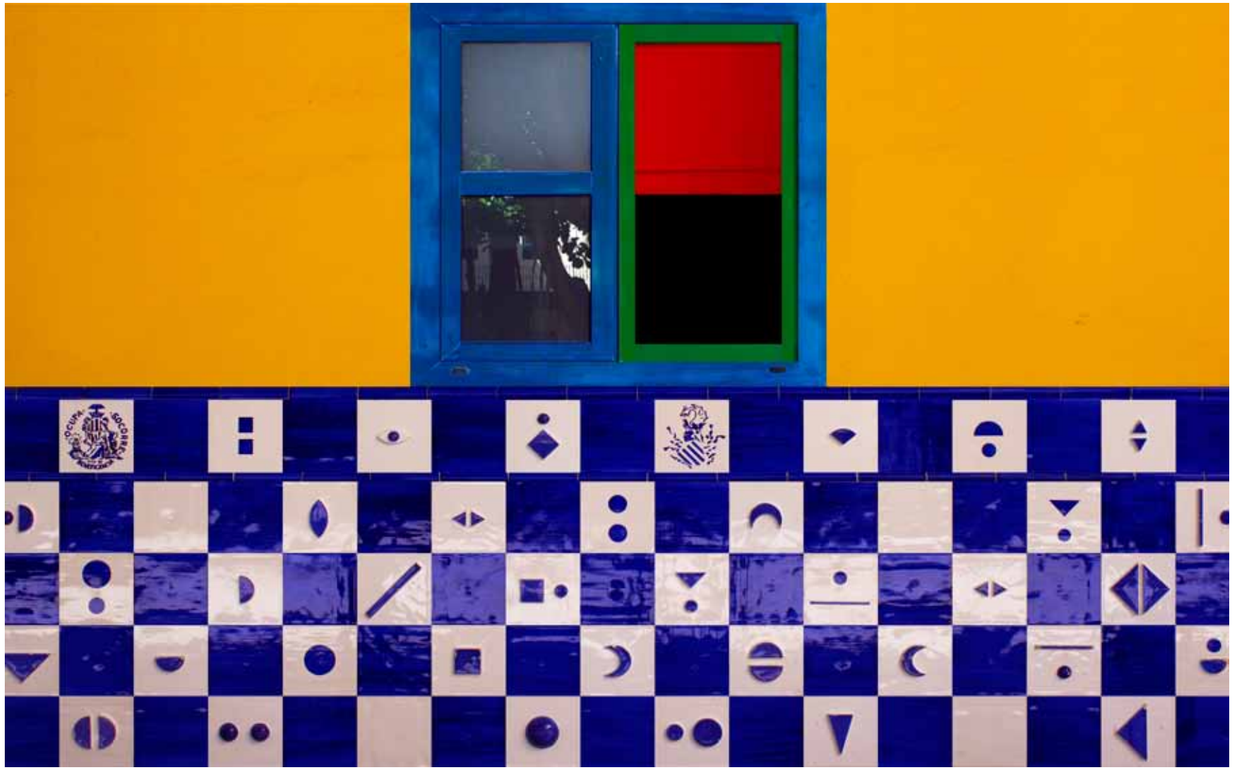
Composition 016
"Twin Sheep"
Embleton Bay, Northumberland
2009

Composition 240
"Lorry in Pink"
River Itchin, Hampshire
2016

Composition 245
"Lorry in Purple"
River Itchin, Hampshire
2016

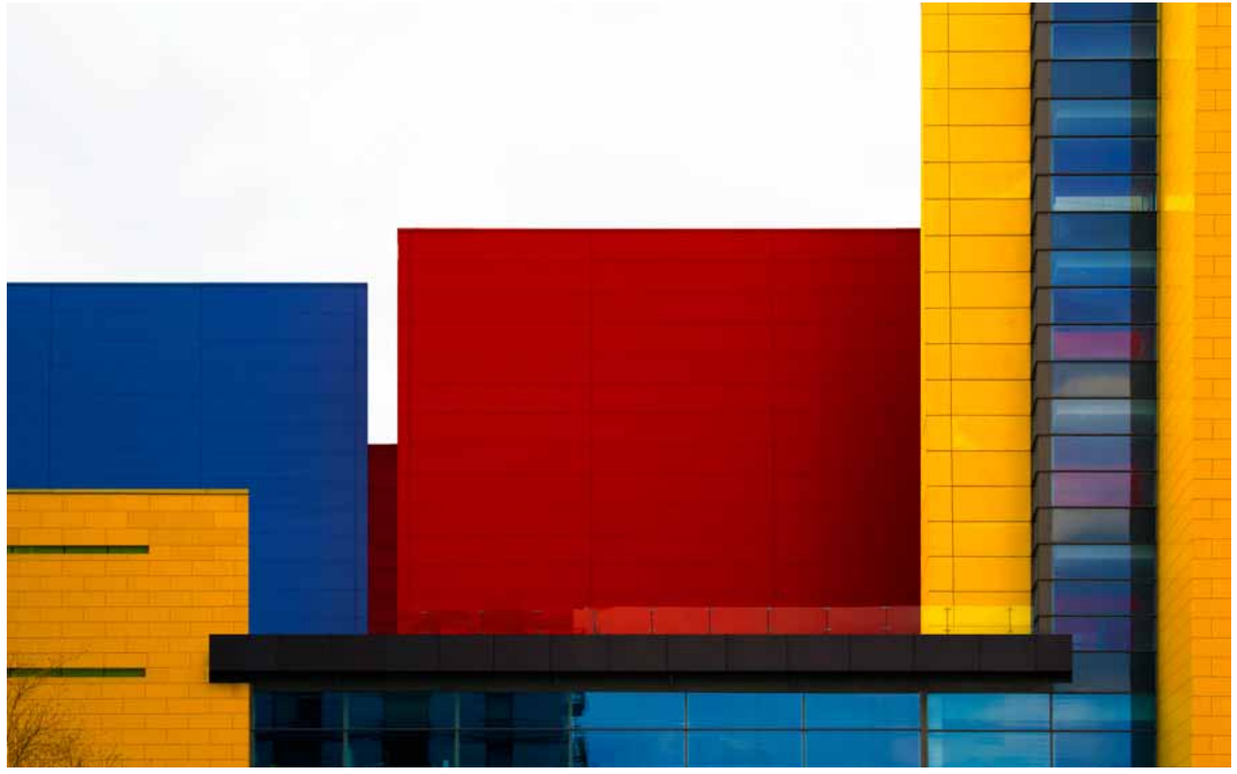
Composition 251
"Parking"
Puerto Vallarta, Mexico
2017

Composition 271
"Dancing Foes"
Winchester, Hampshire
2017



Composition 221
"Tiles"
Valencia, Spain
2016

Composition 222
"Blue on Yellow"
Valencia, Spain
2016



Composition 191
"Primary Media Colours"
Salford, Greater Manchester
2016

Composition 290
"Piazza"
Central London
2017

Composition 208
"Art Lovers"
London, England
2016

Composition 146
"Rich and Poor"
Venice, Italy
2015

Composition 097
"Sorrow"
Berlin, Germany
2014

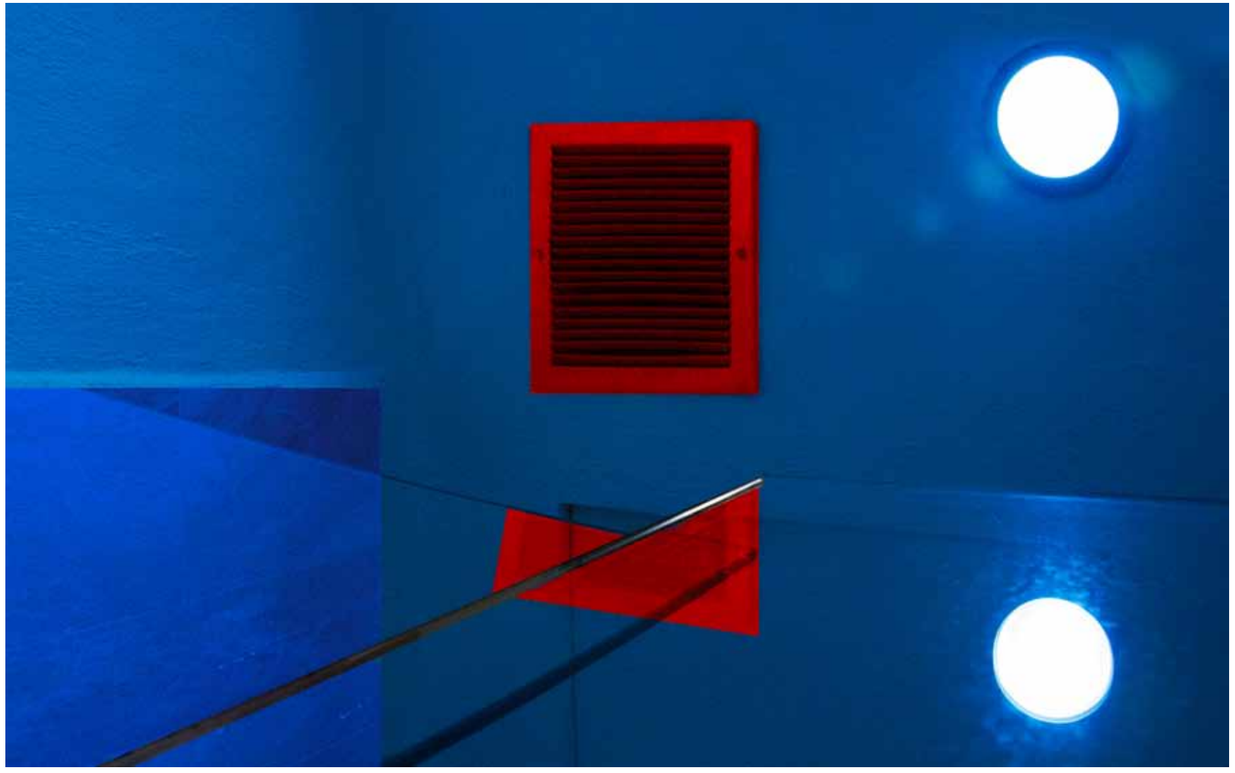
Composition 172
"Efficiency"
Auschwitz, Poland
2015

Cornered

Composition 413
"Courtyard II"
Ajijic, Mexico
2019

Composition 447
"Bike Lights"
Bruges, Belgium
2019

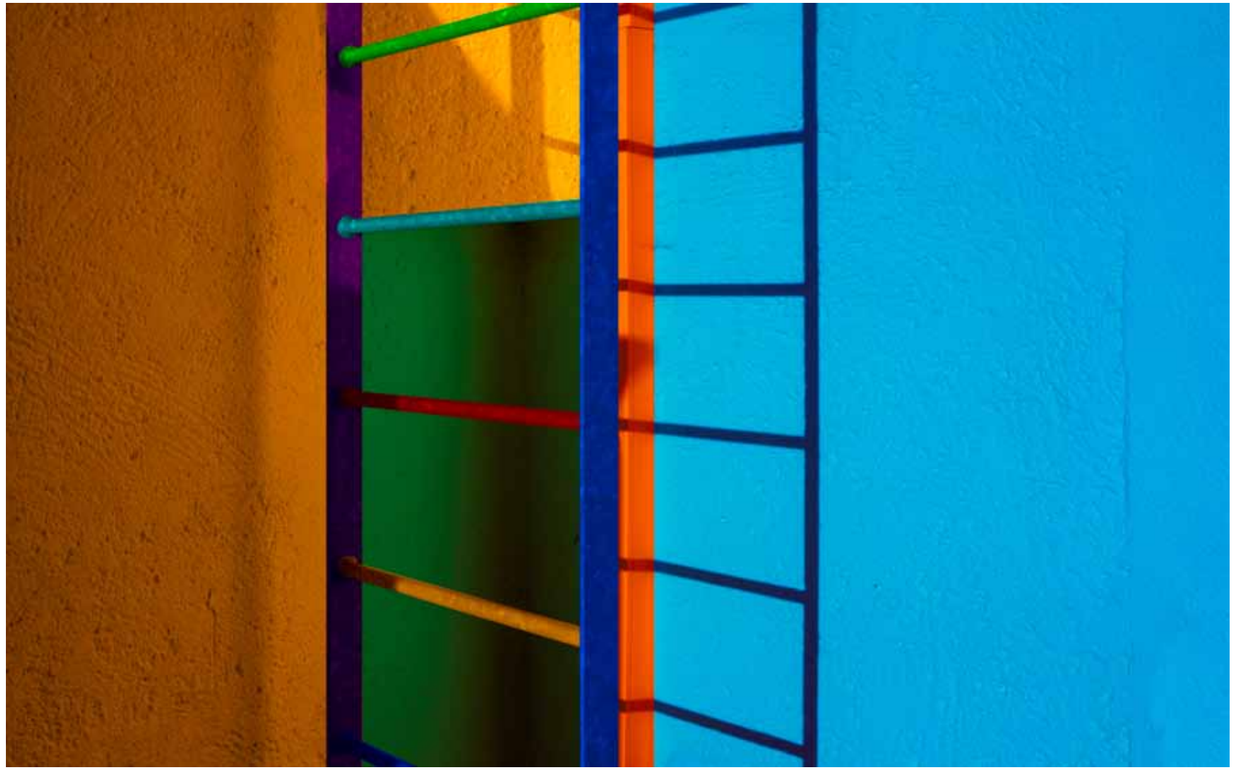
Composition 405
"Lobby"
Guadalajara, Mexico
2018



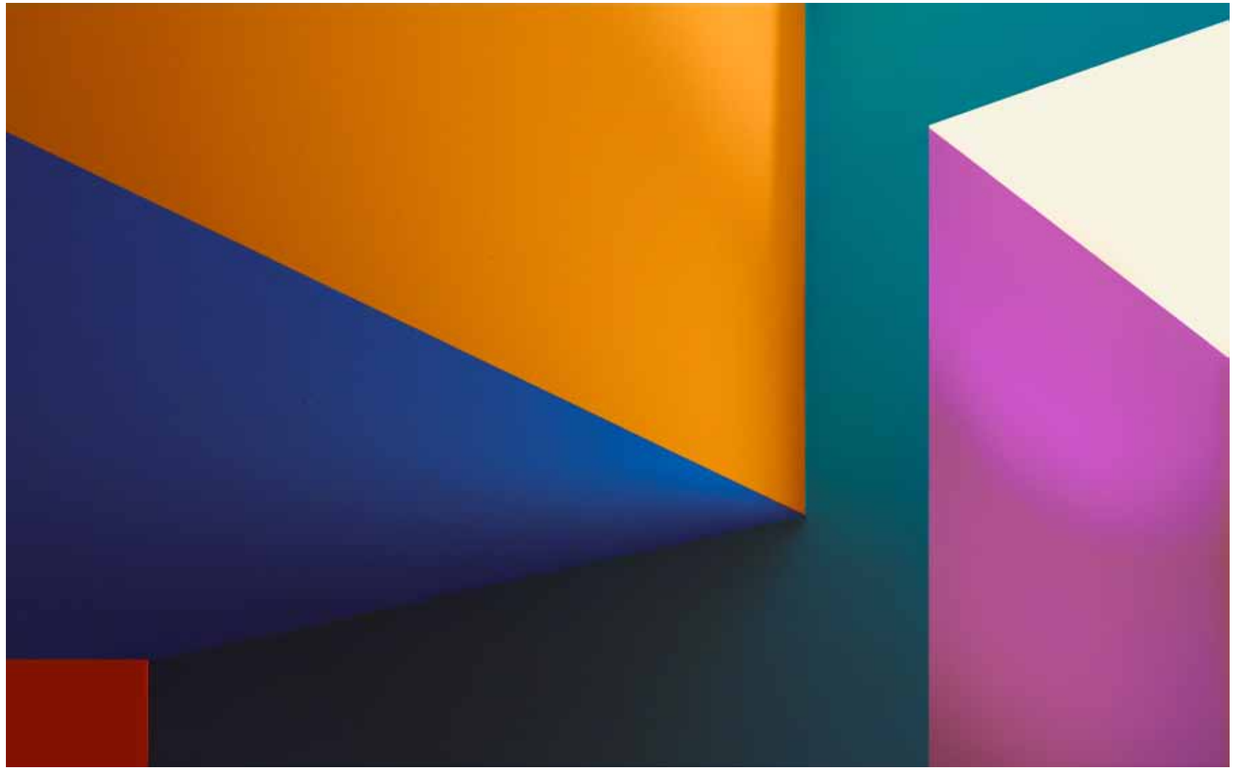
Composition 407
"Air Vent"
London, England
2019

Composition 446
"Bars"
Bruges, Belgium
2019

Composition 103
"Berlin Building I"
Berlin, Germany
2019



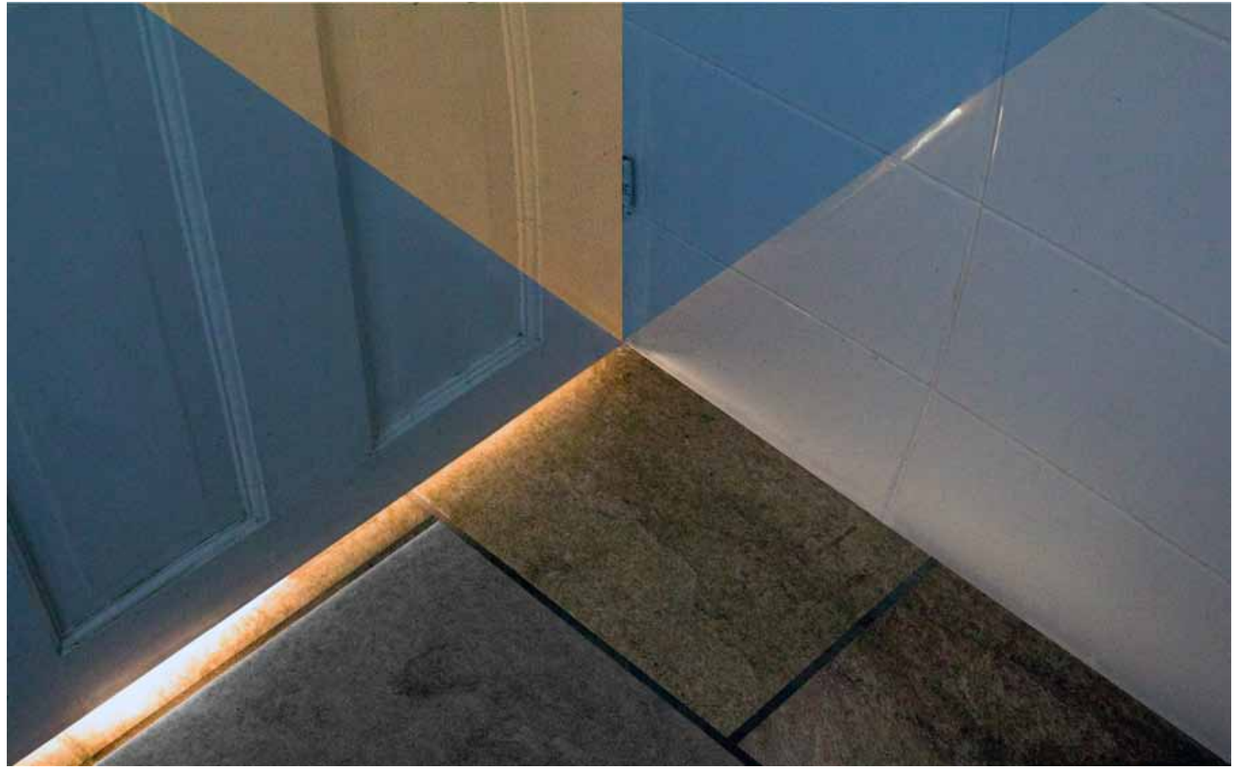
Composition 448
"Escape"
Bruges, Belgium
2019



Composition 438
"Window"
Constanta, Romania
2019

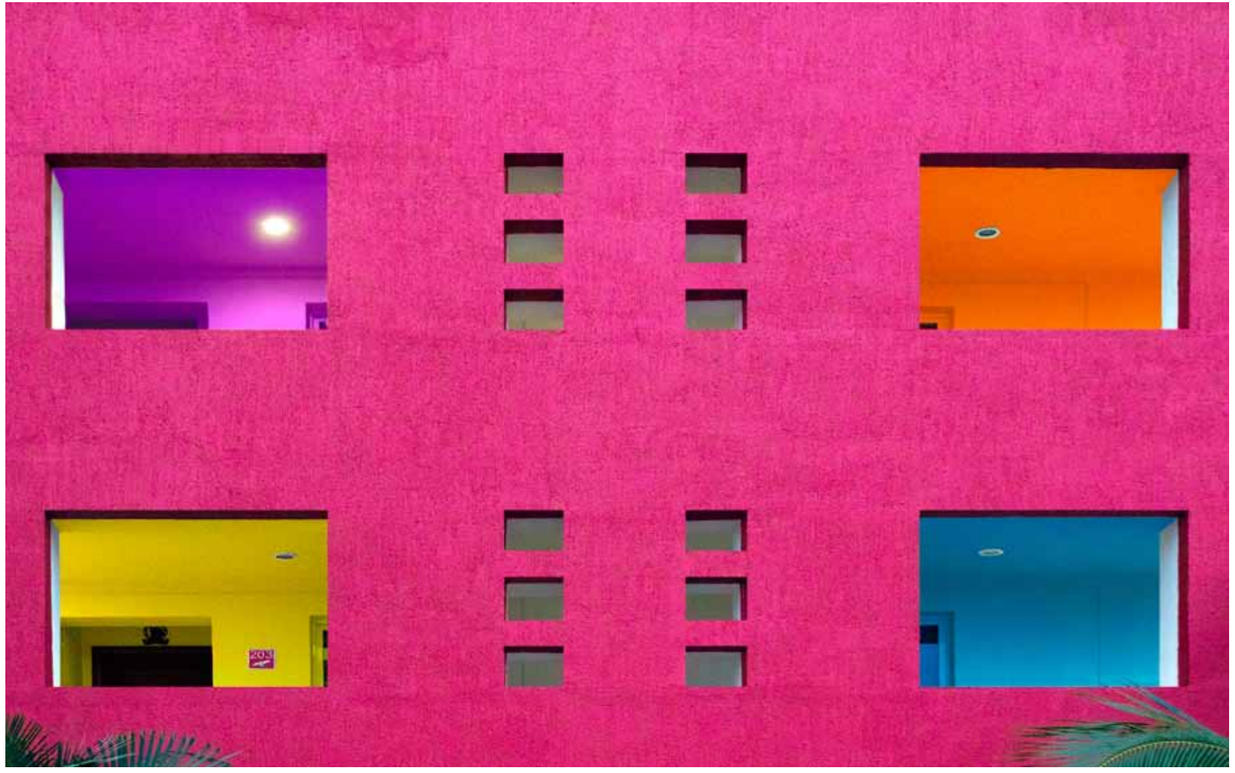
Composition 342
"Am, do, seen"
London, England
2018

Composition 309
"Beam Markers"
Twyford, Hampshire
2018

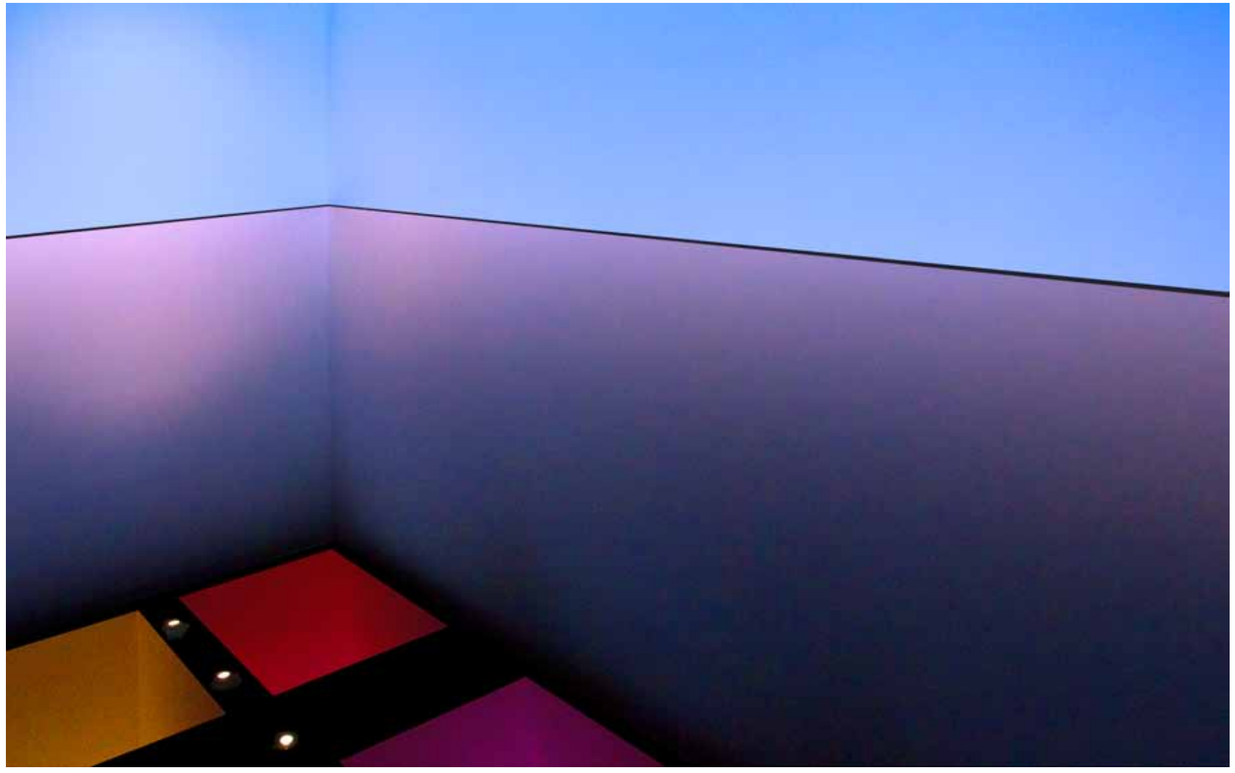


Composition 303
"Doorway I"
Twyford, Hampshire
2018

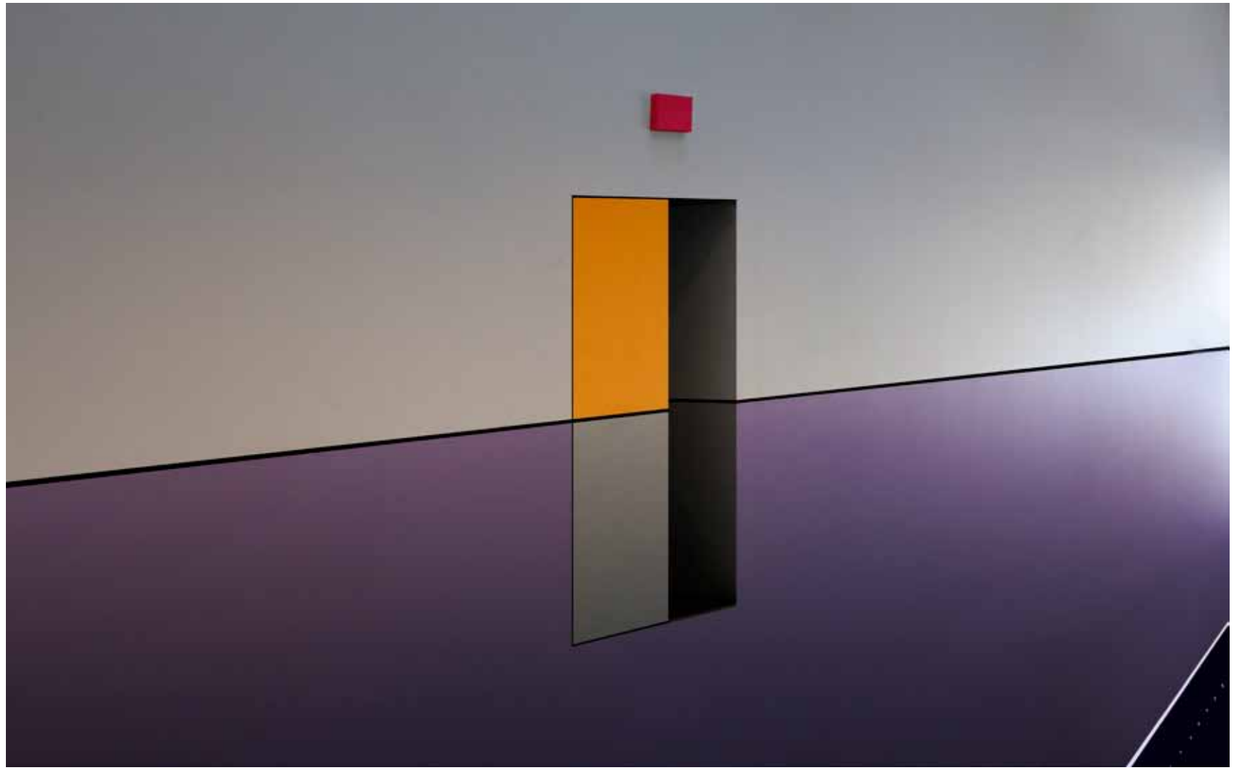
Composition 307
"Wall and Window"
Twyford, Hampshire
2018



Composition 412
"Condo"
Puerto Vallarta, México
2019

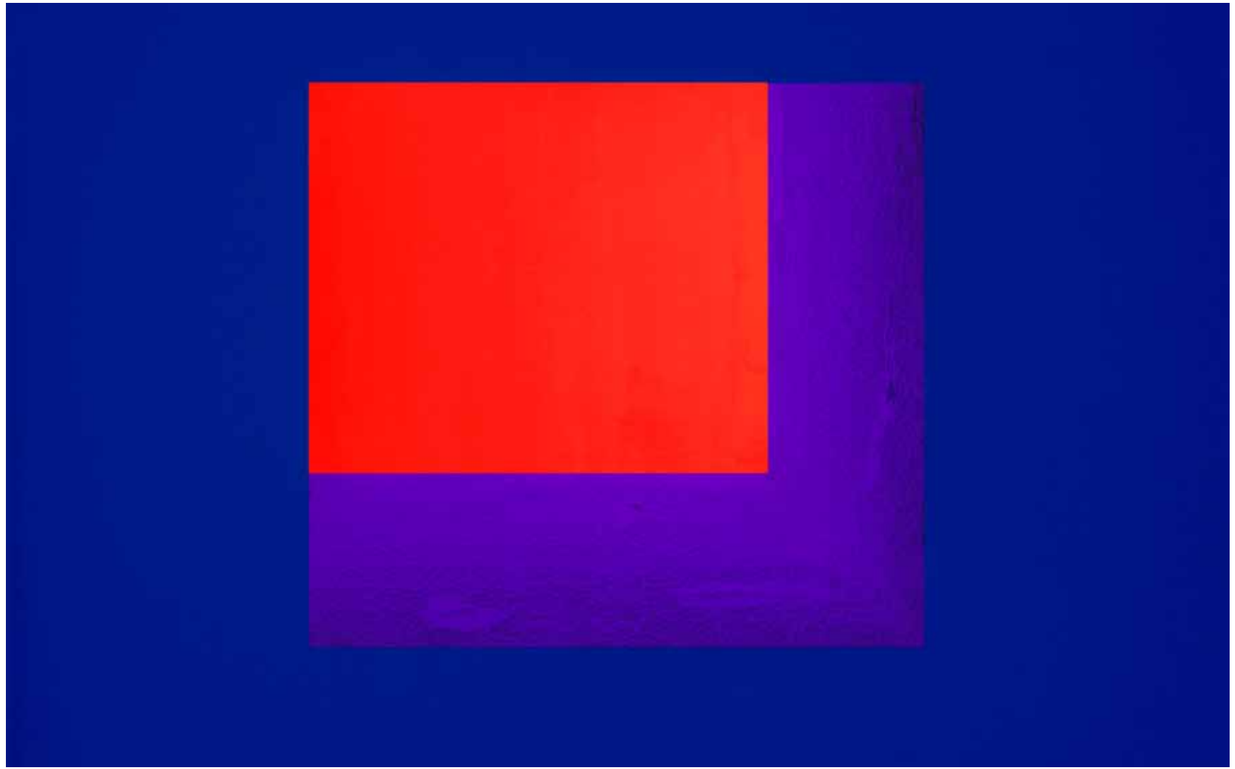


Composition 340
"Reflection I"
London
2018



Composition 341
"Reflection II"
London, England
2018

Composition 349
"Courtyard I"
Ajijic, Mexico
2018



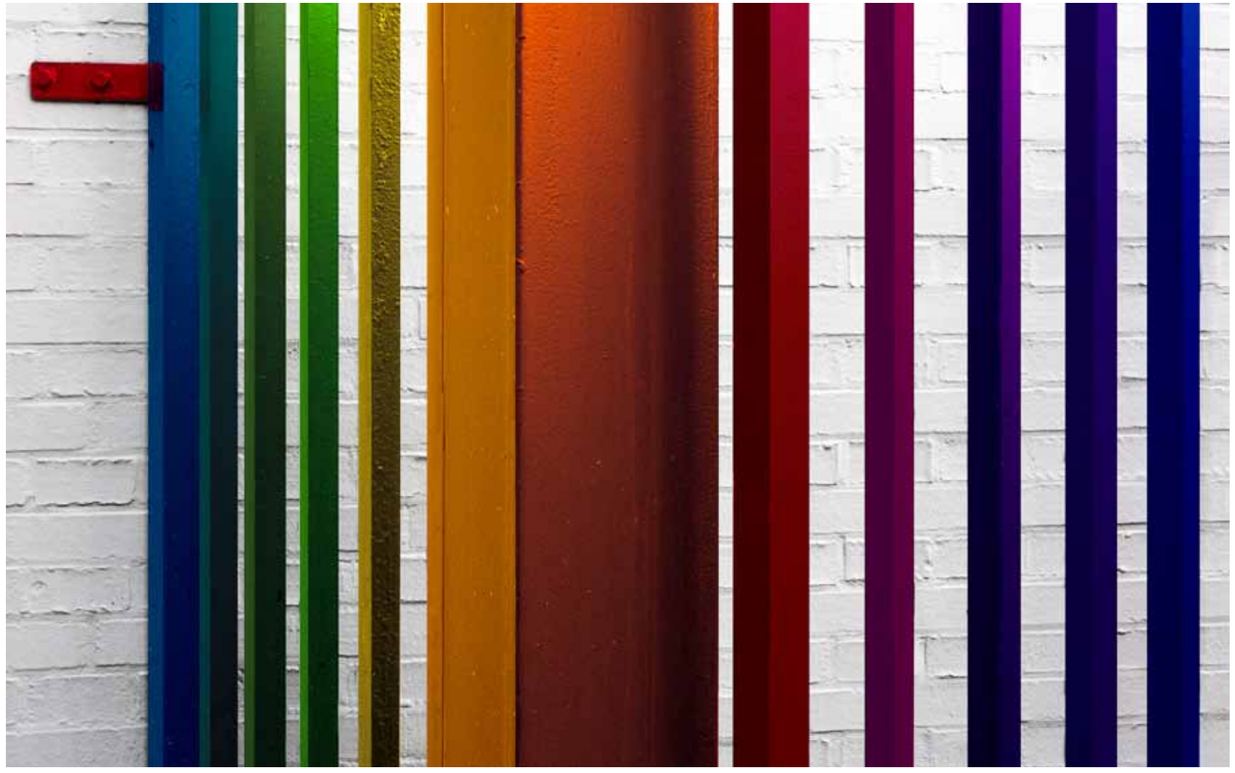
Composition 351
"Red Rectangle"
Guadalajara, Mexico
2018

Composition 348
"Blinds"
Guadalajara, Mexico
2018

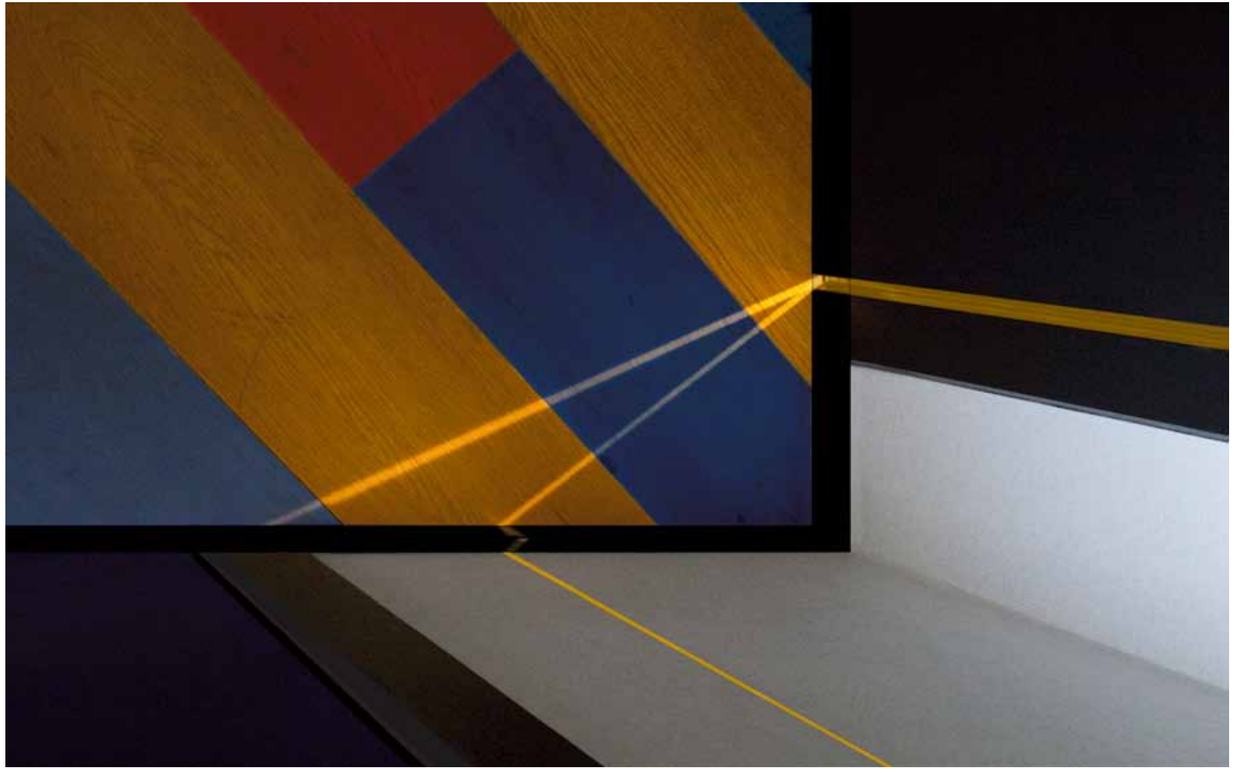
Composition 018
"Shed"
Devon, England
2009

Composition 425
"Door II"
Portsmouth, England
2019

Composition 382
"Bus Parking"
Winchester, England
2019



Composition 445
"Bars II"
Bruges, Belgium
2019



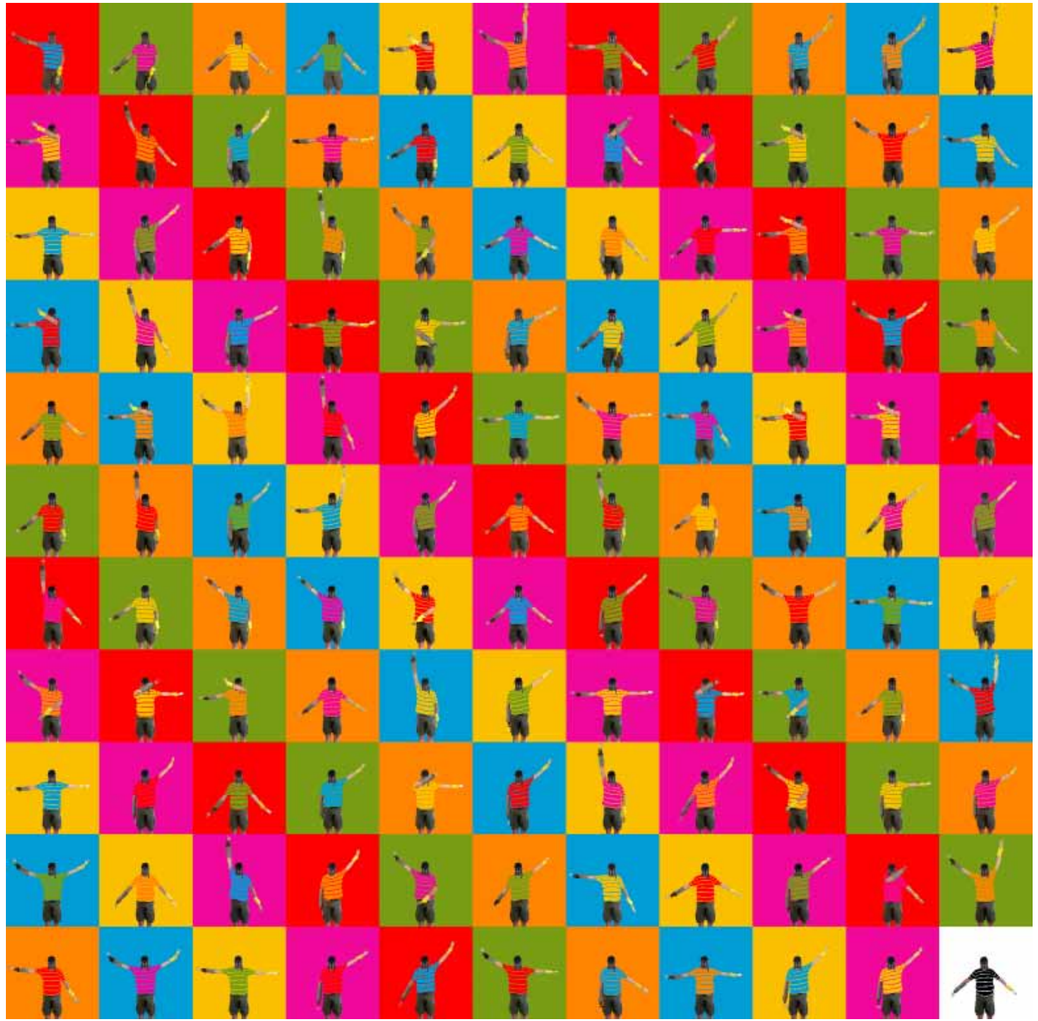
Composition 323
"Doorway II"
Antwerp, Belgium
2018

Composition 326
"Three Light Bulbs"
Antwerp, Belgium
2018

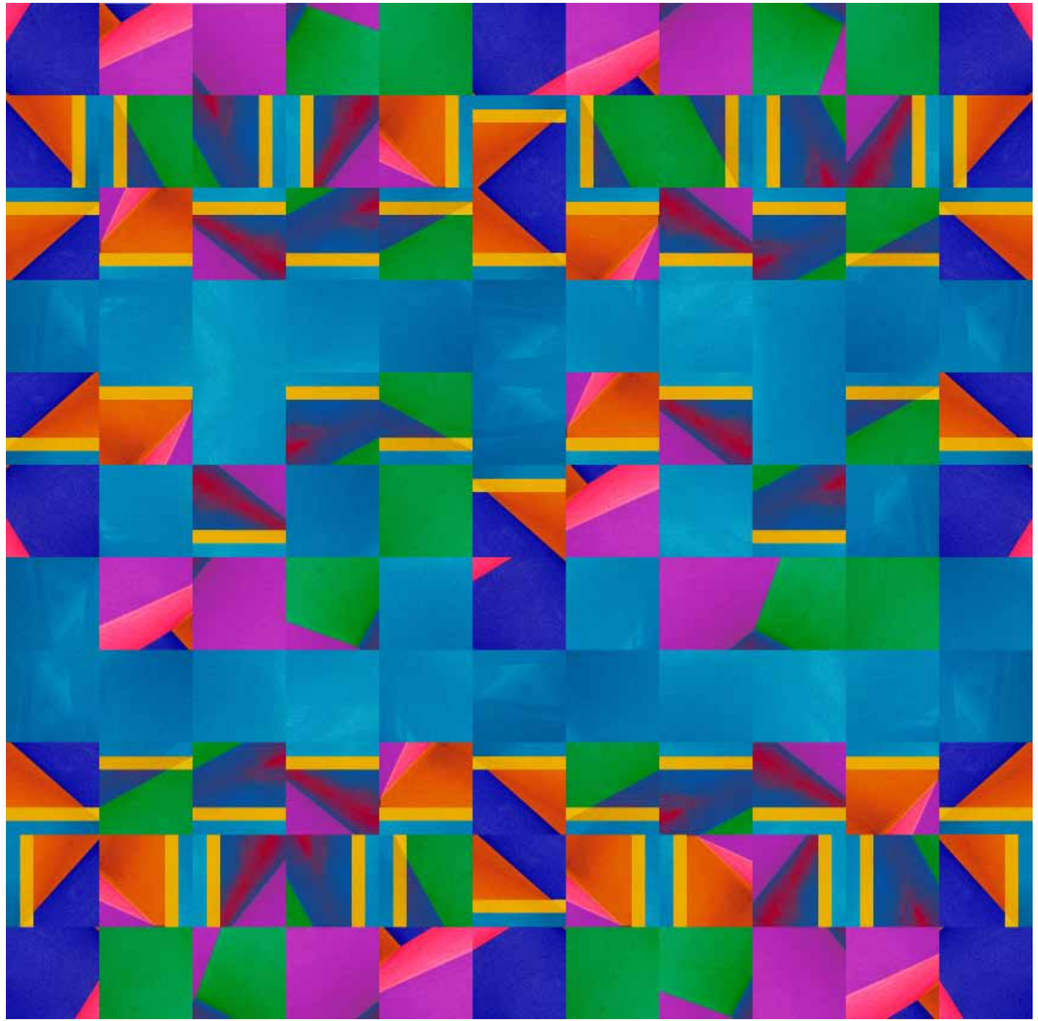
Composition 258
"Beetle"
Puerto Vallarta, Mexico
2017

Composition 279
"Closed for Winter"
West Wittering, Hampshire
2017

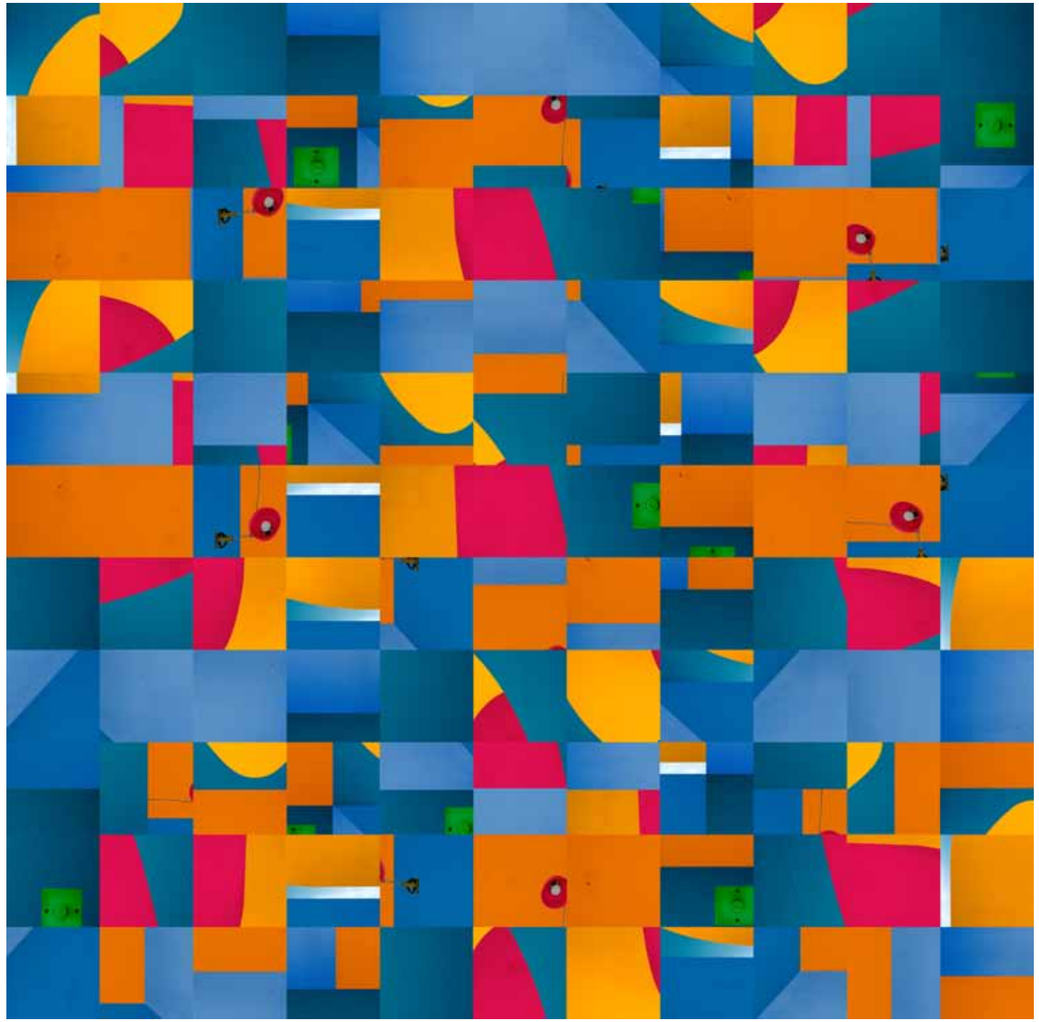
Lockdown



Composition 462
"Coronavirus"
Winchester, England
2020

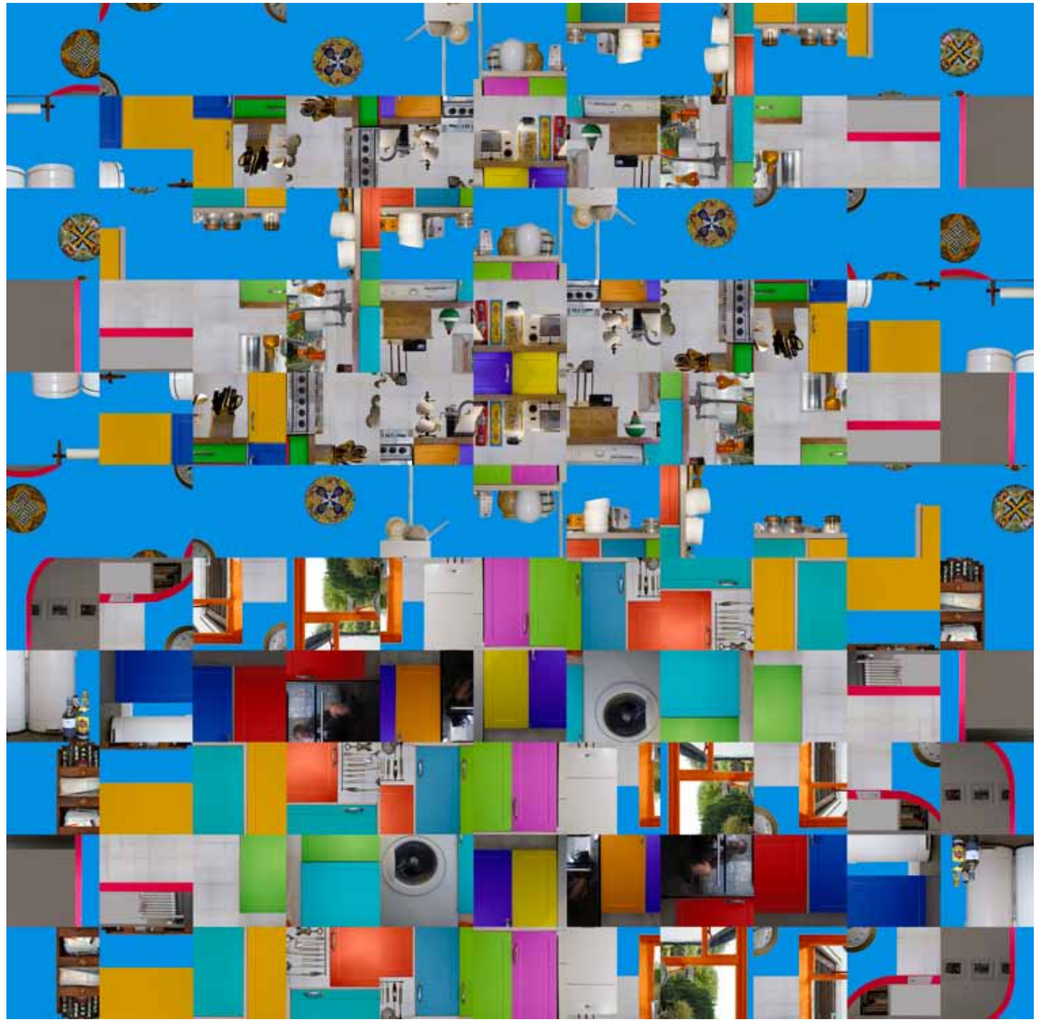


Composition 454
"Bedroom Fungus"
Winchester, England
2020

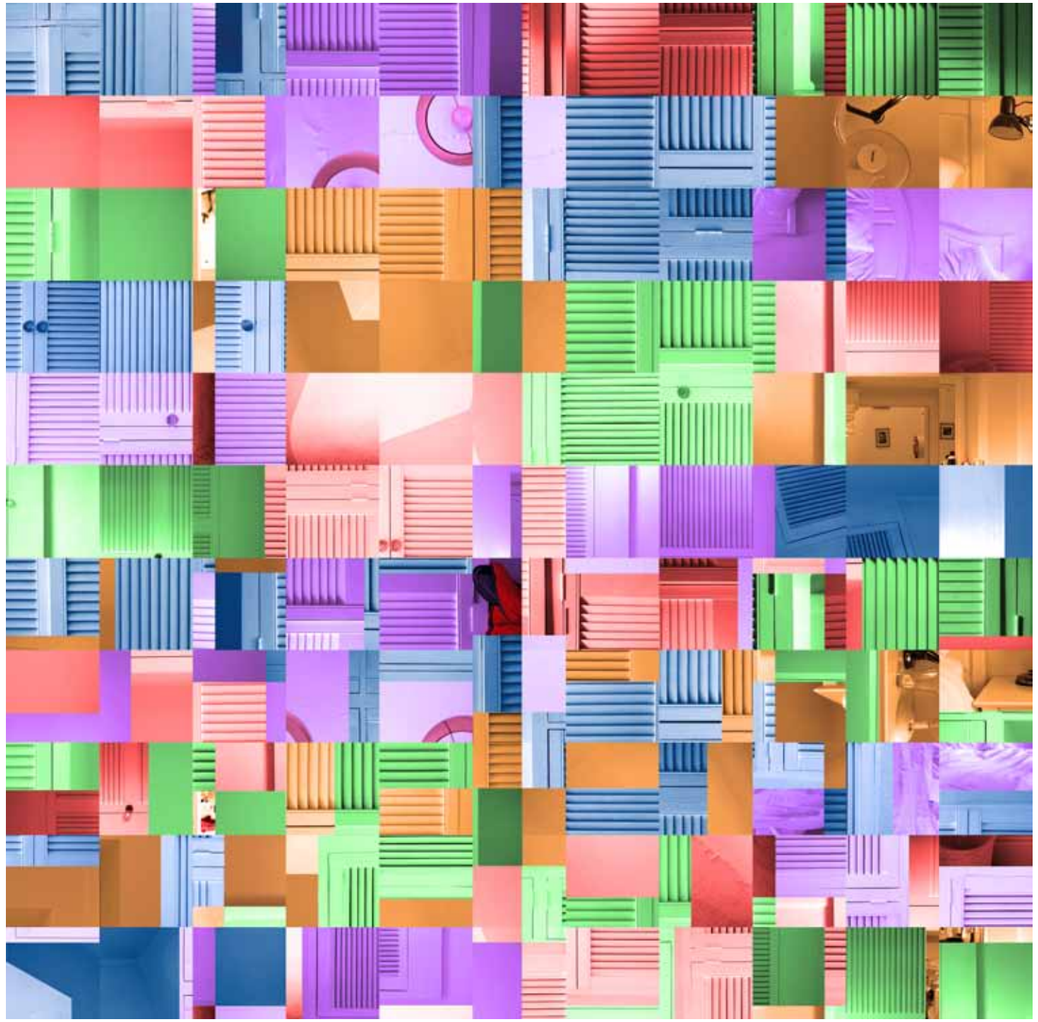


Composition 456
"Dining Room Walls"
Winchester, England
2020

Composition 457
"Amphitheatre"
Winchester, England
2020



Composition 459
"Kitchen, self & dog"
Winchester, England
2020

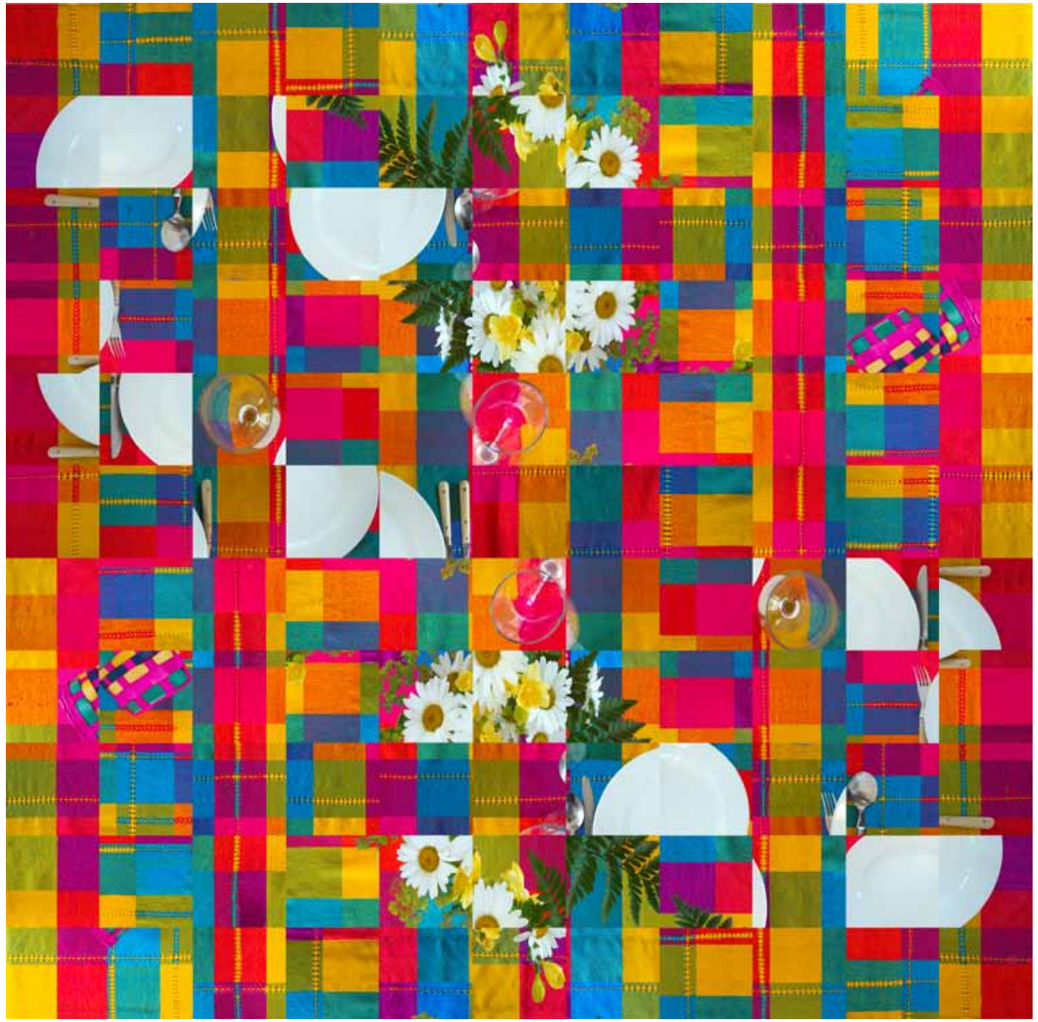


Composition 471
"B&B"
Winchester, England
2020

Composition 469
"Sony"
Berlin, Germany
2020

Composition 468
"Home and Garden"
Winchester, England
2020

Composition 466
"Atelier"
Winchester, England
2020



Composition 467
"Table for Two"
Winchester, England
2020

Composition 463
"Unmade Bed"
Winchester, England
2020

Composition 198
"Time and Space "
Leyden, Holland
2014

Afterword

The images in the preceding pages were not all originally created in order to expose 'post-truth' (many were created long before the existence of that concept), but they do reflect our times.

Certain aspects of human psychology help to explain why there can be such a thing as a 'post-truth' culture – Gestalt Theory is particularly relevant.

The fundamental principle of Gestalt Theory is the Principle of Prägnanz (pithiness in German), sometimes known as 'Law of Good Gestalt' or 'Law of Simplicity', which states that we tend to order our experience in a manner that is regular, orderly, symmetrical and simple. This law implies that when people perceive the world, they eliminate complexity and unfamiliarity so they can observe a reality in its simplest form. Eliminating extraneous stimuli helps the mind create meaning. However, reality is never regular, orderly, symmetrical or simple. These are platonic concepts that only exist in the mind – not in reality. In Gestalt theory this principle of 'simplicity' is broken down into several laws which refine it: Law of Proximity (where things that are close together are bunched as a group – in social terms that could be 'community'); Law of Similarity (where things that look alike are bunched together as a group – in social terms that could be 'race' or 'nationality'); Law of Closure (where things that are incomplete are completed by the mind – in social terms that could be 'religion', which explains the inexplicable simply: God made everything); Law of Symmetry (where things are perceived as being symmetrical with a central focal point – in social terms that could be seen as, for example, 'balanced news reporting'); Law of Common Fate (where things appear to move upon a path – in social terms that could be some form of 'determinism'); Law of Past Experience (where things are categorised according to what has been perceived in the past – in social terms that could be 'history'). For the purpose of this introduction, we won't go into the detail of all these laws. For the present purpose, we are illustrating and focussing on the Principle of Simplicity or Good Gestalt, Law of Closure and Law of Symmetry.

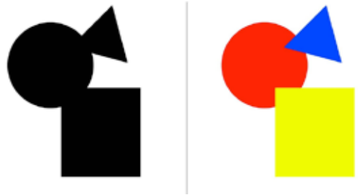


Fig 13

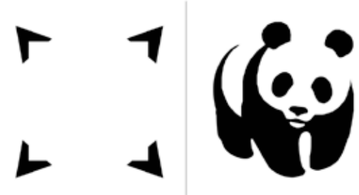


Fig 14

Fig 15

Law of Simplicity

People will perceive and interpret complex images or information in the simplest possible form.

When looking at *Fig 13*, our eyes see the black shape, but our brain separates it into three basic shapes, illustrated by the colour version on the right.

Law of Closure

When looking at an incomplete image or set of information we tend to look for a single recognisable pattern.

In *Fig 14* most people will see a square on the left and a panda on the right. Whereas, if viewed as individual elements, the figure on the left is composed of 4 chevrons, while the one on the right is a group of splodges. Although none of the elements are complete, our brains find a recognisable pattern between the shapes, which is easier than making sense of the individual shapes. We see the whole, rather than the individual components.

Law of Symmetry

People tend to perceive objects as symmetrical shapes that form around their centre.

People will usually perceive three sets of eyes in *Fig 15*. Our minds recognise the symmetry in each set and groups the objects together regardless of proximity. This allows us to see three sets of eyes instead of six individual eyes.

How is Gestalt Theory relevant to the images in this book?

Three of the Gestalt Theory laws (symmetry, simplicity and closure) are directly linked to the three main concepts that inspire the creation of the images in this book: Imperfect Symmetry, Imperfect Ideals and Imperfect Perception. First, why 'imperfect'? When humans perceive something, the mind follows the laws of Gestalt. What people perceive is in the mind and, as an idea, is perfect – not so in reality. When trying to reproduce in reality what has been perceived in the mind, the product can only be imperfect because that perception, that idea, has been returned to reality where nothing is perfect. For example, when walking by a fruit stall in a market, one sees the fruit arranged in certain patterns, with certain colours, in certain shapes (*Fig 15*). What the mind sees is not the actual fruit, but a perfect arrangement in a simple pattern, simple colours, simple shapes (*Fig 16*). When we try to reproduce that fruit stall using the image in the mind and elements of what is actually there, it is impossible to produce a 'real' image because the reproduction of the image returns it to reality, where nothing is perfect (Fig 17). In the case of the images in this book, they are trying to be something as close as possible to the way humans perceive images, however it is impossible to portray the 'perfection' of what our minds create, compared to what is possible in reality. Thus the concepts can only be 'imperfect' when portrayed in reality. The reality of the law of symmetry can only be Imperfect Symmetry. The reality of the law of simplicity in its purest form can only be Imperfect Ideals. And the reality of the law of closure when expressed physically can only be Imperfect Perception. At a very fundamental level, one can speculate that all that the laws of Gestalt have a big bearing on what we know as reality. So, although none of the three figures here are 'real', the image closest to what is actually there is Fig 16; the closest to what we immediately perceive is Fig 17, and what is closest to a 'post-truth' image is Fig 18 – looks like it could be real, but it is an impossible image in the same way as Magritte's pipe.

Fig 16: This is a representation of a fruit stall in Ethiopia, captured by a camera as a close rendition of a three dimensional object in two dimentions. It reflects what is actually there.

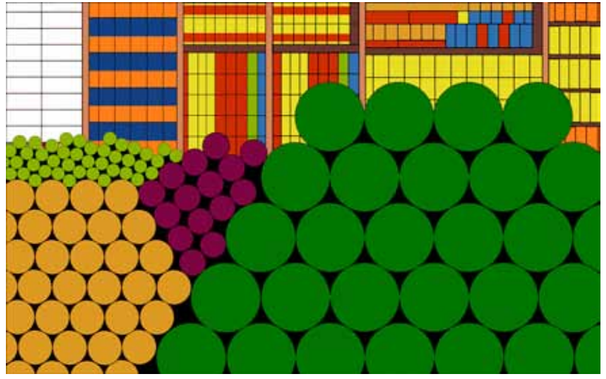


Fig 17: This image is a representation approximating what the mind first perceives. Simple shapes, colours and patterns. It is an 'approximation of the ideal' – an illustration of how the mind transforms things into their simplest forms.

Fig 18: This is a 'post-truth' image. It oversimplifies reality, while at first sight seeming to be truthful, it is not – it is verisimilar. To paraphrase Magritte, "Ceci n'est pas un etalage de fruits". This is not a fruit stall.

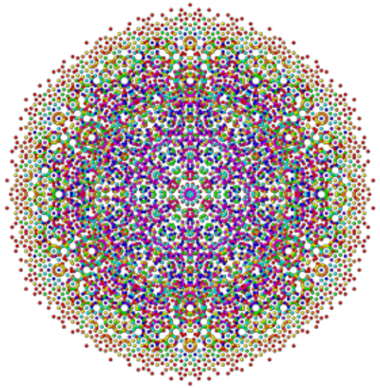


Fig 19: Two dimensional symmetry. If the Big Bang had not had small fluctuations in its particle, the universe might have had a pattern a bit like this, but in three or more dimensions

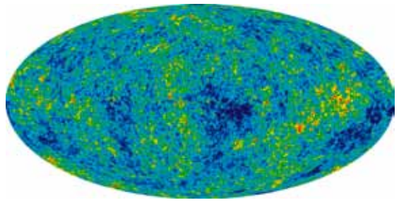


Fig 20: According to a computer programme which took ages to develop, the universe looked something like this (though not necessarily an ellipse) at about the time galaxies were being created – the red bits. That is to say, the universe was not symmetrical.

Imperfect Symmetry

Under the Gestalt Law of Symmetry, people tend to perceive things as symmetrical and in our mind that symmetry is perfect. But what would happen if reality actually were perfectly symmetrical? The answer to that question starts with the Big Bang, which is, as far as we know or understand, where everything started. Energy and particles exploded into being from 'the singularity' – a point with infinite density and no volume – and speeded out in all directions. The distribution of these particles should have been 'uniform', because all elementary particles were the same – gravity should have acted on each particle with the exact same force in every direction. Had that been the case, the symmetry of energy and matter would have been perfect – an ever expanding perfect sphere. That's not what happened. Within an instant of the big bang, symmetry was broken. For yet unexplained reasons, there were small fluctuations in the distribution and working of these particles, so that when some of them came together, they exercised slightly more gravity than their neighbours, thus attracting more particles, and as the groups of particles congregated, their collective gravity increased, thus attracting more particles and so on. Eventually these bits of matter became galaxies of stars, planets, moons, comets, etc. If there had been absolute perfect symmetry, all the Big Bang particles would have simply expanded evenly forever. Even if the fluctuations of the particles had been symmetrically distributed, we would have ended up with a universe which was also in some way symmetrical. Something, perhaps like *Fig 19* – though maybe in three, four or more dimensions instead of just two:

Whatever shape it might have – flat, spherical or saddle-like (*Fig 20*) –, the universe is not symmetrical. Physicists say that shortly after the Big Bang, perfect symmetry was broken (perhaps to do with quantum uncertainty, quarks breaking away from the electroweak force, and hadrons developing different masses from leptons, the electroweak force fragmenting into electromagnetism and the weak force and so on). So, imperfect symmetry is necessary for change and evolution. Imperfect symmetry is not the same as chaos, or total randomness . . . there is order, but there is also change. Imperfect symmetry is the first concept that has a bearing on the creation of the images in this book.

Imperfect Ideals

The second concept is related to the first in the sense of 'perfection versus imperfection', but here it involves human concepts, rather than physics. The perfect straight line, the perfect circle, perfect square, perfect sphere. These are the simplest forms and they are, of course, human concepts that don't exist in nature, nor even in any part of the reality that human beings have created. The only perfectly straight line is in the mind – it's an ideal. The same goes for beauty, morality, knowledge . . . crime! The perfect crime! If there were perfection in reality, in whatever field, there would be stagnation. By definition, perfection cannot be improved. And so, development stops. In this Platonic sense, any form created in the real world is only a shadow, an imitation of its counterpart in the world of Ideals. After more than two millennia since the time of Plato, we still strive to create these forms, these perfect ideals, without ever being able to do so. Surprisingly, Albert Camus' Myth of Sisyphus comes to mind. Sisyphus is condemned for all eternity by Zeus to push a boulder to the top of a mountain, but the boulder inevitably rolls back down again before he can ever reach the top. Camus concludes that, like the task of Sisyphus, life is purposeless. What gives life any meaning is the act of 'pushing the boulder' – not reaching the top. Camus says, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy". In the same vein, people pursue ideals, but cannot ever fully reach them. Nonetheless, Plato would have been amazed by how close we are in our present time to creating some forms which are very close to what he could only imagine. In the Greek world nothing was straight or smooth, everything was a bit crooked, a bit jagged. But less crooked and jagged than in, say, the Stone Age. Today people can draw a rectangle on a computer screen with edges that are within microns of being perfectly straight. Humans can polish mirrors and lenses to focus on galaxies that are light centuries away. However, as soon as a rectangle is printed, the line is bent, it will be ever so slightly jagged. Even the most sophisticated telescope's most polished mirror is too defective to detect a gigantic planet in the nearest solar system. There is always more polishing to be done. Still, Plato would be impressed if he could see how close humans are today to producing in reality what he might have considered perfect. The 'perfection bar' will always be raised.

Imperfect Perception

In the field of human perception, this third concept is related to Gestalt's Law of Closure. If people only have a partial view of something (which is what we always have – we never have a total view of anything), we tend to invent the rest of it in accordance to what we think it should or might be, rather than what it actually is (which is something we will never know totally). If I ask, "what is this?" (*Fig 21*) Most would say it was a face. But, of course, it's much closer to being a circle and two dots. In people's perception two horizontally placed dots frequently represent eyes. Two dots on a piece of paper are enough to hold a baby's attention, so this Gestalt thing would appear to be innate. What about

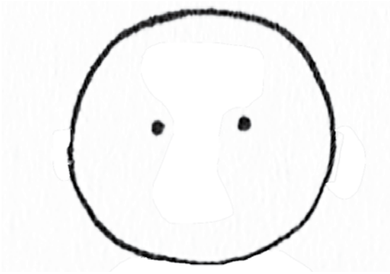


Fig 21: Two dots and a circle are enough to convey 'face'.

Fig 21a: Charles Schulz, the author of the comic strip 'Peanuts', was a genius at using a minimum to express a maximum. Note that this picture is the exact same image as Fig 20 with the addition of a few more lines.

Fig 22 Clue: 'Meow'

Fig 23 Clue: 'Ruff'

Fig 24 Clue: 'Chirp'

Fig 25 Clue: 'Eeek'

Fig 26: This child's drawing has marks (the undulating line of the kite's string); diagrams (the tree on the left); schemata (the sun and the human), and mandalas (the kites with a cross in the middle). These features are shared with children from all over the world, more or less regardless of what culture or, surprisingly, what time they come from. It would appear that understanding and representing symbols is innate in human beings. Culture does play a role regarding subject matter: This is a drawing by a seven year-old in the USA. It is a child flying a kite (another is stuck up a tree). Now look at Fig 27.

Fig. 27: As in Fig 26, this child is also seven years old, but from Russia. He is portraying himself as a medieval warrior, astride a horse, attacking his enemy with a spear. Why medieval? Because this drawing is from the 13th century drawn on a piece of tree bark. The subject is different, but the symbols are very similar.

these other little figures? (*Figs 22- 25*) Most would say "cat, dog, bird and mouse . . . or maybe rat". It doesn't take much information for people to reach a conclusion about what they see, despite having very few details. And, at the level of absolutes, no one will ever see the whole . . . probably. God might – if he, she or it exists.

Gestalt theory (the German word 'Gestalt' means 'form' or 'shape') sustains that humans have an innate ability to recognise symbols as representations of reality, of recognising the whole even when details are missing. Children's drawings, for instance, are usually representations of what they think they know or of what they think should be – not what they see. In their drawings, children share a language that is practically universal. Children from Africa, America, Asia, Europe – they all use very similar marks, such as lines and dots; diagrams, such as circles to represent a treetop or a human head; schemata, such as suns with 'rays' emanating from their periphery and 'mandalas', which are all-purpose shapes such as circles and squares with a cross in the middle. (See *Figs 26* and *27* which contain very surprising details!)

Recognition of symbols then, is something humans are born with and as they grow, they learn new symbols and how to interpret them. Something similar has happened to cultures. With the passing of time cultures acquire new symbols: cave paintings, pottery decoration, hieroglyphics, representational art, use of perspective, abstract art, conceptual art, etc. Once people have started to learn symbols, what they perceive is very much dependent on their culture. People before Classical Greece, for example, would have seen the sea's horizon as a straight line (and probably the limit of a flat earth). We now know that the horizon is not really straight, because the earth is more or less spherical – but, it looks straight. If we could show a photograph of the Earth taken from space to these ancestors, they wouldn't understand what it was. A spherical earth was not conceivable. In the Middle Ages European painters depicted reality as they thought it should be, rather than as they saw it. They didn't portray perspective and when they finally started to do so, it was all wrong. The size of people didn't rely so much on where they were in the picture (large in the foreground, smaller in the background – see *Fig 28*) but on how important they were – big if important, small if not. (*Fig 29*)

Fig 28: Father Ted explains to Father Dougal the difference between cows being 'little' and 'far away'`: "OK, one last time. These are small, but the ones out there are far away". Father Dougal, like the Medieval mind doesn't understand perspective

Having learned that the Earth is a spinning sphere whizzing around a star at the edge of a galaxy in a big universe does not mean we're very much closer to 'The Truth'. We know from past experience that the human race has come to know things it could not conceive of three centuries ago: motor engines, microbes, nuclear weapons, the Internet, etc. If we were able to bring medieval people into our time, put them in a car and travel at 80 miles an hour on a motorway, they would not know how to interpret this experience. They cannot conceive that speed, nor the car's technology, nor the engineering that is a motorway, nor the rules that govern its use. It's all gobbledegook. A good example is the fly: A fly flies into a room, finds nothing interesting, tries to fly back out, sees light, flies in that direction and straight into a closed window. In the fly's perception, a transparent window pane is not conceivable, so it keeps flying into it time after time and dies on the sill, not realising that all it had to do was fly around the window and out the open door. We people of this modern age and of technologically advanced cultures must have equivalents to 'a window pane' – to paraphrase American politician, Donald Rumsfeld (*Fig 30*)–, something "we don't know that we don't know". If an alien popped out of nowhere into our living room and showed us a picture of the 'worm hole' he or she used to get there, we would be nonplussed. Just as our ancestors would be when showing them the picture of Earth from space. Perhaps a better example is that we may be surrounded by 'dark matter', that is, matter we cannot perceive, in much the same way that flies can't perceive window panes. Until very recently dark matter was "an unknown unknown". All we can interpret is what we do know or what we know that we don't know. There will always be "unknown unknowns". We will never have the full picture, never have the full explanation.

Fig 29: The Medieval artist did not try to create an illusion of what is real, but rather a representation of what he knew: Important people were large, unimportant people were small, regardless of the position they occupy in the picture.

One clear example where we only have a partial picture of the truth or totality is creation itself. We can't understand how our world, our universe came into being. Our response? We invent an explanation, we make up a story: God (or gods) did it. We need an explanation and that story is more easily grasped than reasoned explanations such as, say, quantum mechanics or string theory. Having said that, the Big Bang might explain what happened, but not how nor why it happened in the first place. The explanation offered is that there was 'a singularity', an infinitely dense point with no volume, no space and no time, but with infinite mass and heat. That singularity exploded. Why not just say, "let there be light"? There's a windowpane out there that we can't see. (Even now there's a new theory which may take over from Big Bang, called the Big Bounce where the universe expands and contracts, but not to the point of a singularity).

Much of the work in this book tries to convey these three concepts, imperfect symmetry, imperfect ideals and imperfect perception – though not always at the same time.

Fig 30: According to Donald Rumsfeld, "there are known knowns; there are things that we know that we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know". At the time he was lambasted and mocked for this statement, but it's true – though there's probably nothing else with which one would agree.

Fig. 31 Rather than trying to understand how it is that our universe came about (despite the fact that it is a never-ending task), most of us have chosen variations on "Let there be light"! The human race seems to have need for answers – even if the answers are mere inventions which with time become myth or 'belief' or 'faith'.

In photography, perfect symmetry is easily achievable (In this context 'perfect' means within the parameters of the naked eye). In architecture symmetry has always played a very important role. Gothic architecture, for example. Take Whitby Abbey in North Yorkshire. The construction is certainly striving for perfect symmetry, but in those days they didn't have the tools or the materials to build precisely enough to achieve full symmetry. With digital photography and software, perfect symmetry is quite simple: Cut the image in half vertically, duplicate that half, flip it horizontally, carefully put it back together so that the pixels meet with their identical mirror image counterparts and, Bob's your uncle. Repeat the process this time cutting in half horizontally and flipping vertically and we have four-way symmetry. Then multiply it by 9 and we still have perfect symmetry (*Figs 32 - 35*). That's it. There's no sense that further progress will be made. The image is stagnant. Nothing more can happen, other than more of the same. Good for wallpaper, but not art.

Perfect symmetry is static. A symmetry which is not perfect, which has small fluctuations, is a dynamic image – that is Imperfect Symmetry. Although imperfect, it looks very symmetrical and there is fascination in finding the asymmetries.

Fig 32: The original photo of Whitby Abbey, where the architect strove for symmetry.

Fig 33: Perfect two-way symmetry, mirroring the left side of the original image.

Fig 34: Perfect four-way symmetry mirroring the left and top of the original image.

Fig 35: Still perfect symmetry, but nothing else can happen, except more of the same.

Perfect ideals exist only in the mind and can only be represented in the real world as approximations, as Imperfect Ideals. The objective is try to represent some of the shapes of things as they might have appeared in the mind of the engineer who built the road, the designer who designed the tram, the farmer who rolled the hay . . . or the architect who built the building. Trying to find geometric shapes and reproduce them as perfectly as possible, as close to the ideal as possible: perfectly straight lines, perfect circles, perfect squares, etc. But, again, as soon as the ideals are represented in the real world, they become imperfect. We can approach perfection – the Ideal –, but never reach it. So, for instance, the ideal straight line is one-dimensional – length –, but as soon as we reproduce a line in reality, no matter how thin the line is, it will have three dimensions, length, width and thickness (the ink on the page) – it is an Imperfect Ideal. This is the case with 'post-truth': If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.

Finally, Imperfect Perception. The purpose is to limit the amount of information, by giving a partial and minimal view of what might be a whole (of course all views are partial, but our mind separates elements of those partial views and turns them into independent wholes: a building, a car, a person, a face, an eye . . . a postbox, *Fig 36*). The intention of the images here are to provide a minimum of information but enough for viewers to form an idea of what they are looking at and then knowing that the images are impossible.

This train of thought lead first to *Gestalt Blue Skies* and then to *Platonic Views* – usually images where 'real' shapes are transformed into simple, 'ideal' shapes (within the parameters of the naked eye). The horizon becomes a straight line (*Fig 37*), a roll of hay is perfectly circular, an island is totally symmetrical . . . These are shapes that only exist in the mind. They are ideals. The intention is to reflect those ideals in an imperfect way, but closer to the shapes formed in the mind. They are ideals we strive for, but, like Sysiphus, will never reach . . . the boulder we must push up the hill. These are imperfect ideals. One part of these ideals is the question of symmetry – trying to make pictures as symmetrical as possible, not by splitting the image into two and then flipping it, but by starting with a reasonably symmetrical image and then altering parts of the picture to increase symmetry, but never completely, leaving bits that break the symmetry. In *Fig 38*, for instance the door-handle is only on the left of the door; the wall surface is damaged; the shadows are asymmetric, but the lines are perfectly straight. This question of symmetry leads on to people. We, like most animals, are more or less symmetrical. In fact many sustain that one of the characteristics of human beauty is facial symmetry. While symmetry is attractive, perfect symmetry in a face is just plain weird. One example is *Fig 39*. This is a woman

Fig 36: Imperfect Perception. A partial view: To British culture, this is a postbox. To others it may be a flying saucer. Who knows? But in the blue sky beyond the object lie all the answers – that's where everything is, including, perhaps an infinite number of postboxes.

Fig 37: Imperfect Ideals. The natural lines of nature become straight lines imitating their ideal. The separations of air from water, water from land and one colour of sand from another are perfectly straight lines, forming long rectangles in the image.

Fig 38: Imperfect Symmetry. At first glance the picture is completely symmetrical. It's not. There's enough asymmetry to make it 'imperfect': the door handle, the shadows. the condition of the wall.

Fig 39: Sometimes the two sides of a face reflect two sides of a personality – not a dual personality, just a complicated one. Here one face is rather child-like and innocent, whereas the other shows a grittier, more experienced person.

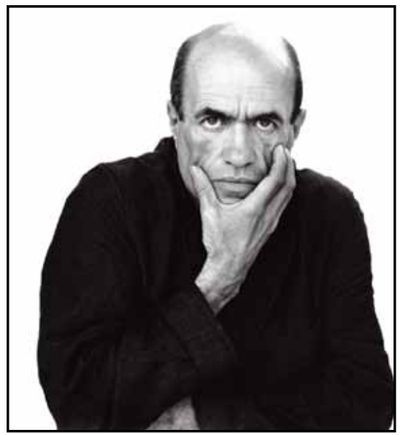


Fig 41: Richard Avedon's portraits were stark, with no background or colour to distract from the essence of his subject. He only took one shot – that's it. Done.

whose face is rather asymmetrical, nevertheless, she is very pleasant looking. However, in this image she is portrayed twice with a perfectly symmetrical face, one her left, the other her right. Beauty or unsettling?

In the end, the purpose of this book is to reduce the objects of the images to their essence, their simplest form. – what makes an image, object or being what it is – while knowing that it is impossible. Graphically it is sometimes reasonably easy to portray the essence of things. A few shapes, a few lines and the essence is expressed (*Fig 40*).

Fig. 40: These are some of the symbols that were used to identify sporting events at the Mexico City Olympics in 1968.

This is basketball, this is archery, hockey, gymnastics, and so on. With very simple symbols one can also tell which is the gents' and which is the ladies', that there are roadworks being done (though sometimes that sign is interpreted as 'man opening umbrella', *Fig 39a*), that there is a speed limit, that something is poisonous, etc. Reducing the visible reality to its bare essentials is more complicated, because we're no longer dealing with signposts, but with people's character, social backgrounds, cultural icons, emotions and so forth.

Fig 40a: Roadworks or 'man opening umbrella'??

Richard Avedon was a fashion photographer, but today he is more remembered as a portrait photographer. Wherever he went, he carried a big roll of white paper, which he used as a backdrop for his portraits. He would stand his subject in front of this white background, talk about something which made the subject feel uncomfortable and snap – only once. Usually the photos were full frontal, plain with nothing to distract from the face and posture. He portrayed people in their essence, taking away the mask, presenting them starkly (*Fig 41*). That is similar to one of the objectives of the images in this book: present the essence of visible reality with the bare minimum elements. As it is. Without emotion: Deadpan, but pulling at the heartstrings with the neurons of the mind.

Conclusion

When putting these three concepts into practice, there are overlaps, which graphically look something like *Fig 42:*

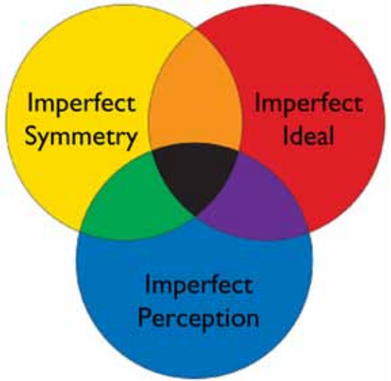


Fig 42: As in Set Theory, elements of one set can also be elements of another

Fig 44: Imperfect Ideal: Every fruit and vegetable is very close to being a perfect circle, every box a rectangle, every line straight.

Fig 47: Imperfect symmetry and ideals. Although the actual windows are symmetric, their reflections are not. There is no perspective and every window is exactly the same size.

Fig 45: Imperfect perception. The viewer only has a partial view of the whole of the object, but an almost total view of the universe and everything that is knowable

Fig 48: Imperfect perception and ideals. Each 'block' has straight lines and the image is only partial, but here there is an added element: isolation.

Fig 43: Imperfect Symmetry: The faces are perfectly symmetrical, but not the picture itself. Note the position of the hands.

Fig 46: Imperfect symmetry and perception. There is symmetry, but it's only a partial view of a larger whole.

Fig 49: All three concepts are incorporated here: Imperfect symmetry, ideal and perception.