

**STILL LIFE OBJECT PHOTOGRAPHY**

**BY**

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## Introduction.

Since 1839 photography has been a vital means of communication and expression, being at once a science and an art, both aspects are inseparably linked. It can only be through the skilled hands of a photographer that photography can rise as an independent art form.

*“Conceptual photography is the photography of ideas - the representation of ideas through photography and the creation of new ideas about photography. It is the realm of the imagination, the territory of fantasy, the province of persuasion. It is images that intrigue the mind, as well as catch the eye.”*

(O'Connor 1989:87).

The most important factor when producing a photograph of an object (studio still life, natural found) is to decide what you wish to say and to whom. The next great step is to decide what mood you wish to express. This is then accomplished by composition, lighting, choice of lens and camera, props and background.

*“Photographers in general, and still life photographers in particular, require a rudimentary working knowledge of chemistry, physics, mathematics, optics, art history, composition, colour and light, psychology, carpentry, plumbing, electronics and house painting. Additionally they should have strong backs.”*

(Pendleton 1982:93)

Keeping in mind that still life photography is the only photographic form in which the photographer has total control over the picture. A bad photograph is the fault of no one but the photographer. For a still life photographer must have a feeling for the position of each object, the character of it and the final overall composition design within the frame.

Advertising photography is a very competitive field, unlike fine art photography, advertising photography is a commercial art and commercial art is public communication. Everyone who sees the advertisements has to understand it, so the product will sell. So a good advertising photograph has to make you want to buy the product.

The opposite of studio photography is nature, or found object photography. The love of nature and photography goes together hand in hand. There are so many things in nature to photograph, the photographer has to have an understanding and see the grand designs of nature. Seeing and understanding, the photographer must use these designs to make even better pictures.

## **1. History: The early beginnings of photography.**

Visual communication through drawing and painting was limited by an artist's skill. Until the invention of photography in the early nineteenth century there was no real accurate way to objectively convey the appearance of any person, thing or scene.

Louis Daguerre invented the photographic process, calling it the daguerreotype process. This consisted of a light sensitive silver plated copper plate, exposed to light and developed by mercury vapour. The result was a detailed whitish image on a silvery background. This process was publicly disclosed in 1839 and created, as could be expected, great excitement.

Shortly after Daguerre made his invention public, a scientist Henry Fox Talbot made a public announcement that he had created images on paper instead of a copper plate. The image that formed on the paper was a negative and when further printed by sunlight onto another sheet of paper, it gave a positive. In 1841, and it was called the calotype.

The greatest advantage of the calotype was that many copies could be made from the same negative, while with the Daguerreotype process each was unique, and not reproducible.

1851 Became the first year in which glass was used as support for a light-sensitive layer. This was done by Fredrich Scott Archer, and became known as the wet collodion process. This process soon replaced both the daguerreotype and the calotype



processes for producing a photographic image.

Later, glass plates began to be replaced by flexi-base films, which were thinner and lighter. Because films could now be wound into rolls, they could take numerous pictures without reloading.(Newhall 1982:13)

From then on, more inventions followed each improving the proceeding ones, resulting in the films and papers we use today.





Plate 1.1 Still life.

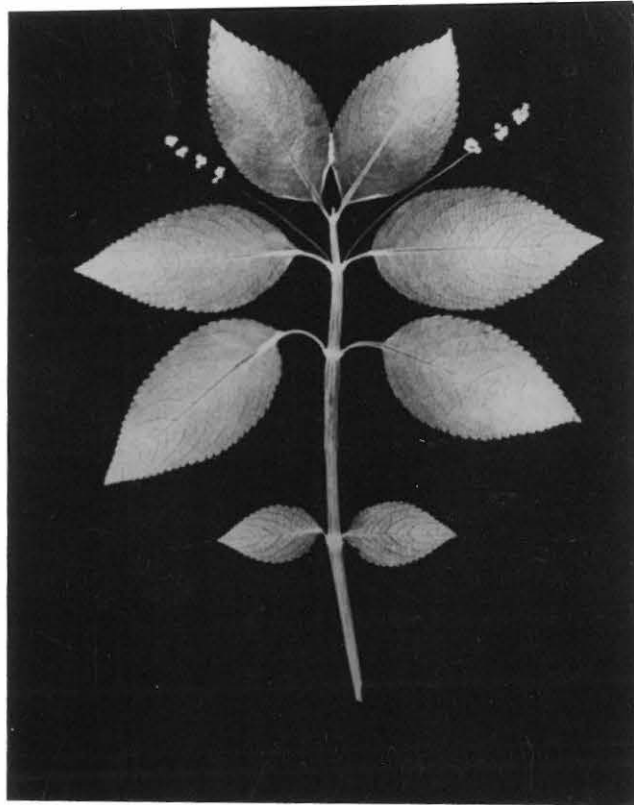


Plate 1.2 Botanical specimen.

## 2. New Frontiers.

Rudolph Arnheim is quoted by Pincard as follows:

*“Light is the most spectacular experience of the senses. It remains for the artist to preserve the access to wisdom that can be gained from the contemplation of light.”*

Lighting can construct mood, towards or against quality, it can also emphasize one element in an image and reduce perception somewhere else. Correct lighting will establish time of day, geographic location, ect. Lighting must be considered the primary craft tool in establishing quality. (Pincard 1982:19)

Outdoors you have little control over the direction of light, except for waiting for the sun to move across the sky, or in some cases by moving the subject. If you set up lights indoors, you have many more options.

## **Outdoors.**

There are two basic lighting problems encountered in outdoor photography. They are excessive contrast and in colour photography, incorrect colour balance.

When photographing in direct sunlight, the lighting ratio can be as high as 7:1. This however should be avoided. The best solution is to move the subject to a location where the lighting conditions are more favourable to the photographer. This, unfortunately is not always possible. There are two basic ways to lower the contrast of outdoor lighting. One is to reduce the luminance or intensity of the highlights, and the other is to increase the luminance or intensity of the shadows.

The following are suggestions for reducing lighting contrast.

**Scrim:** They are usually used to reduce the luminance level of the highlights. Their use can reduce a 7:1 lighting ratio to as little as a 3.5:1.

A scrim is usually a piece of cheesecloth, matte plastic sheeting, tracing paper or even in emergencies a frosted shower curtain, or a white bed sheet. This can be mounted on a frame and are the placed between the subject and the sun.

**Gobo:** A gobo is just a simple piece of cardboard or plywood mounted on a stand. This is also used between the subject and the sun, but now the sun gets completely blocked out.

**Time of day:** One of the first rules you learn as a young photographer is to avoid shooting between ten am and three thirty pm. Midday sun leaves no modelling from overhead sunlight, and shadows are practically straight down.

To raise the luminance level of the shadows follow these suggestions:

**Silver foil reflectors:** The quality of light projected by a silver foil reflector is much harsher and of a more directional nature. These reflectors are better used when you have to redirect light over a fairly long distance. To soften this mirror like projection you can crumple the foil. To redirect light over a big area you can use a space blanket as a reflector.

**White card reflectors:** A white card reflector will give less fill than a foil reflector, but softer, more modulated shadows. As with scrims, a reflector larger in relation to the subject will give greater modelling.  
(Pendleton 1982:93)

## Indoors

One advantage of artificial light is that the photographer has absolute control over every aspect of illumination. Discussed below are the types of lights found in most studios.

**Tungsten lights:** Tungsten lights are light bulbs used in flood lamps. The best are quartz-halogen bulbs, because they remain bright and give consistent colour throughout their lives. Blue photofloods should be avoided, the blue coating is unstable, resulting in unpredictable colour.

**Mini-spots:** These are smaller light units, their output is about 150 watts, that allows the light beam to be controlled from a broad flood to a rather narrow, angled spot. Two or three of these lamps will provide excellent lighting control. To further narrow the angle of the beam, long tubes called snoots can be attached to the front of the mini-spot. Barn doors - adjustable flaps that block off the side spill of light - are also used to alter the shape of the beam.

For special effects in still lives, adapters to hold coloured gel filters can also be attached.

**Electronic flash:** They are available in many different forms - it is good to get one with an attached modelling light. This enables the photographer to view the effect of the lighting.

The ideal flash unit is a studio strobe with a light output of between



400 and 1200 watts. An alternative to studio strobe units is two or three portable, battery powered units with slave triggers.

### Studio lighting accessories.

These accessories are mainly to help soften hard light sources, and to help restrict light where it is needed. Some examples are, wide or narrow angled conical reflectors, snoots, honeycomb grids, barndoors and flags, dipover diffusers, soft boxes and umbrellas. (Pendleton 1982:26)



### 3. Design basics

Lines, shapes, rythem, patterns and texture. \

These principles of photographic design are to an extent a lot different from those designs in painting and illustrations. These principles explain why particular ways of organizing the image have predictable effects.

**Lines:** Lines are often the first marks made, in photography it occurs less obviously and usually by implication. Contrast plays the biggest role in defining lines visually. Lines establish location, a static feature, but they also contain the dynamic features of direction and movement along their length. Lines have some capacity for expression. Horizontal lines for example, have a more placid effect than diagonal lines, a zig-zag can be exciting. Strong lines can express boldness, thin curving line's delicacy, and so on. (Freeman 1990:90)

**Shapes:** The strongest way to identify an object is in a bold shape of outline, in the case of a silhouette or shadow, even more dramatically. Having strong shapes invites comparison, one way of repeating shape is by hard, cast shadow. The best way to stress shape is through your viewpoint and lighting. Shallow depth of field will also help disentangle shape from background details. (Langford 1992:135)

**Rhythm:** This element is something that exists in nature and it is comforting to find in a photograph. Where forms of the same contour appear together they will set up a repetitive pattern and this may be most effective in creating emotions. Alternating rhythms may be given variations by overlapping less emphatic forms of different shapes or colour. A whole image can be made structurally strong by interlocking these rhythmic elements into a design plan.

**Patterns:** A pattern is easily developed by extended use of the overlapping technique. A pattern does not encourage the eye to move in a particular way, but rather to roam across the picture surface. The prime quality of a pattern is that it covers an area, thus the photographs that show the strongest pattern are those in which it extends right to the edges of the frame. Patterns tend to be directionless, they often make better backgrounds than the subjects themselves.

**Textures:** Texture is concerned with surface - for example the tight smooth skin of a water lemon, or the rough skin of an orange. The visual appearance of texture suggests the character of particular materials, this reminds you how they would feel to your touch. Texture can also be a symbol for the passage of time, from a fresh apple to a wrinkled bad apple. Textures are best shown by oblique lighting from side or rear. (Freeman 1990:101)

#### 4. Photographers in the field.

As the photographers discussed show in their work, still life photographs no longer simply stand “*still*” - today still life photography radiates “*life*”. Photographers strive to create “*still*” photography that moves.

Commercial still-life photography no longer means an image of a ‘*product*’ evenly lit, pristinely focused, photographed in front of a white seamless paper. Still life photography today means creating photographs brimming with exciting feelings of life, vitality and originality.

The major trend in still life photography is to create a feeling of spontaneity. The photographs appear to be produced without a great deal of premeditation or constraint. Opposed to highly structured, it looks natural. It often happens that the first spontaneous image turns out to be the best one after a second more meditated photograph was taken. There is also a trend towards increased use of shadows. Shadows add an element, a feeling of mystery and ambiguity to the image. Frequently the shadows are cast by objects outside the frame of the photograph.

There has been a big change in lighting, today lighting is frequently used as almost a physical element. Some photographers are using smaller light sources, even tiny spotlights, instead of large diffused light sources.

They even go as far as to using tungsten lights to add an element of blur, of warmth to their images. Lights are positioned very low, or well off to the side.

Jeffrey Wein’s picture of perfume bottles really illustrates the use of light as almost a physical element of a photograph.



Plate 5.1 Perfume bottles.

Photographers even experiment with placing shards of glass, prisms and mirrors just outside the frame to refract light into the photograph in unique and eye-catching ways. Cutouts are put in front of lights in order to produce pools and streaks and speckles of light.

Another intriguing trend is the changed use of focus. No longer must still life photography have perfect focus from front to back, many photographers are using selective focus in order to emphasize a single plane or single part of the image.

*“Many photographers have shifted from sharp focus - everything in focus - to less in focus. But everyone treats that a little differently.”*

(Maas 1991:8)

Photographers can use his or her own creativity and imagination to create a unique and evocative image from everyday objects. A photographer has the power to take fantastic photographs of almost anything.



## Rita Maas

Looking at the photographs of Rita Maas, the author feels that this photographer definitely has her own style, and manner of producing photographs. Maas's photographs do have a very spontaneous and fluid feeling. Her photographs shows her intriguing use of selective focus. A lot of her photographs are taken with available light. This appeals to the author because she also likes to work with available light. All her photographs are taken with a view camera on four by five inch film. This gives high quality and lots of camera movements to play with.

*“When photographing something, I usually don't begin with a preconceived idea of what the final picture will look like. I do have a direction - a feeling, a notion - about what way I want the photograph to go. At the same time, I find if you can spend too much time on a photograph you can kill it. I try and spend just enough time to get the picture honed - without overworking it and making the picture look too structured and static.”*

(Maas 1991:8)

A new innovative concept Rita Maas has been exploring and developing is a triptych. This consists of an image composed of three separate, but integrated photographs. One can read triptychs from left to right, like you read a book or newspaper. There is a beginning, middle and an end, a story to be told. Visually you are allowed to do many things.



Just to show that personal work can lead to getting an assignment the American Express saw some of Maas's personal triptychs and gave her the assignment. Maas used strobe light for this photograph. Sometimes you have to use studio lights because the right natural light is just not there. When an assignment you have to work fast and get the job done.





Plate 5.2 American Express Tryptych.

Maas creates her triptychs by shooting Polaroids with her four by five-inch camera. Everything from exact camera position, lighting, focus, and other factors for recreating each picture is noted in detail. The Polaroids are assembled, and when she decides the triptych works, she goes back to the notes made, and recreates the images on conventional transparency film.

There are a lot of photographers today that draw some of their ideas and inspiration from painting. Rita Maas is one such photographer. She originally studied painting before switching her effort to full time photography. In the picture on the next page she explains.

*“I was working with colour and space. I like the way the background comes right up at you because it is out of focus. You know where things are - physically - but the perspective flops back and forth.”*

(Maas 1991:8)

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Plate 5.3 Pomegranate.

Again she used natural light, the author finds the use of focus very effective. If the pomegranate in the top right-hand corner were in focus, it would have been too strong in colour in relation to the others. The shadow of the bottle also leads the eye further into the picture.

## Craig Cutler

*“What is most important in a photograph is a little twist. The picture has to have some element which is different. If you can achieve that - make people stop - you are headed in the right direction.”*

Craig Cutler 1991:10

Craig Cutler, like many professional photographers started his career by studying advertising and graphic design. In the end he realised that he liked taking photographs more than sitting at the drafting table. With photography he could take his designs one step further.

He finds his inspiration and ideas for photographs by working in many types of photography, including portraiture, illustration, and personal work, as well as still lives. Cutlers advise to any photographer is to be very versatile, and to do things the way you want to do them, but you have to keep changing your pictures. The author feels that Craig Cutlers photographs do have a definite “*twist*”. He will look at a watch the same way that he looks at a car, he sees the object to be photographed as just that - an object. A shape, he treats it like a shape, and then try to keep things alive in the picture. Sometimes he will add a human element - or a feeling of motion and movement produced through blur.

His picture of spinning tops with a vase has a great feeling of motion and spontaneity. The photograph was created with a combination of tungsten and strobe light. The strobe illuminated the tops and the vase properly, while a longer exposure under tungsten light allowed to capture blur. Thus conveying the feeling of movement - in the spinning tops. The tungsten light also warmed the colour of the tops.





Plate 5.4 Tops.





Plate 5.5 Watch.

For this photograph, a watch from Seiko, Cultler first photographed the face of the watch with a thirty-five-millimetre camera. He then made a high-contrast print to use as background. The final image was photographed with an eight by ten-inch camera and an extreme close-up lens. This is the reason for the extreme high quality. The author feels that this image is highly successful.



Plate 5.6 Stern watches.

For this photograph - done for H. Stern watches - Cutler tried to make it as open as possible. He used “*hot*” lights (rather than strobe) and even though the image looks simple no one would ever guess it involves some 32 small reflector cards. They were placed at points in order to produce the proper highlights on the many facets of the watch. Still Life Photography. 1992:98;25)

## 6. Authors work.

The equipment the author used was her Pentax Z1, thirty five-millimetre camera with a 28 - 80 millimetre zoom lens. The thirty-five-millimetre camera was also always handy because it is so compact, lightweight - as opposed to the Sinar four by five camera. It has also got a built-in flash that came in very handy.

In the medium format category, the author used a Mamiya six by seven centimetre camera. This was often hand held, or put on a Manfrotto tripod. The six by seven centimetre was by far the favourite camera to use, because of the interchangeable backs, small enough to be hand held, and the quality of the negative. The Sinar four by five inch was mainly used for studio still lifes. With these cameras, camera movements are certainly the greatest advantage.

A photographer must certainly have a basic direction to work to, or a definite feeling or mood that has to be captured. A photographer must always be reasonably open minded, open to suggestions and new ideas.

Some questions that are very important to ask before shooting begins, is what mood the photographer wish to express, and what message should the photograph bring to the viewing public. When these questions are answered, it will make the decisions of what format to use, type of lighting, type of film, weather to use black and white or colour, all very easy.

All the authors' work was done with available natural light. Sometimes when a photograph lacks just that little bit of "*punch*" a white reflector was brought in. The sun can sometimes be too harsh, so the contrast on the picture will be too great, the author found the use of a scrim (a framed piece of cheesecloth) very useful in reducing the contrast. The scrim is placed between the sun and the subject too soften the light.

The film that was mostly used by the author, when using colour film, was Fuji's Reala. This film can up a colour and saturation when you really need it - in inclement weather for instance. The black and white film used was Ilford XP2 400 ASA, which can be C41 processed. It is very important to decide whether your image will be produced on colour or black and white.

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## PLATE 6.1 “AUTUMN LEAVES”

It was just at the beginning of autumn, when the leaves started to turn brown, red and orange, when the author came up with the idea for a photograph of autumn leaves.

- The idea was to show off the rich warm colours, since it rained the previous evening and everything was covered with little drops of water. The leaves were put onto a table and carefully arranged so that the yellow leaf would form the focus point of the photograph.

- The morning was only slightly overcast now, and most of the water had evaporated, so with the help of a hair spray bottle filled with water, fresh “dew” drops were created on the leaves. A Mamiya six by seven centimetre, medium format camera, a 65 millimetre lens, 11f-stop was used with Fuji Reala 100 ASA colour film.



## PLATE 6.2 “ESP.”

The objective for this photograph was to create an advertisement for cosmetics.

- The author decided on Yardley’s ESP eye make up, because of the texture in the logo on the eye make up. She used a Mamiya six by seven centimetre medium format camera, and moved in really close. The camera was not fixed of a tripod, but hand held, because of the minimum depth of field, the author had to hold her breath to get just the middle “S” in focus. Natural lighting was used, and the image was captured on Fuji Reala 100 ASA.



### **PLATE 6.3 “BLUSH”**

The idea came to the author to photograph a type of cosmetic picture. She used a black backdrop, and scattered blusher on it. A brush was placed at an angle, and photographed with a thirty-five millimetre camera was used, with stacked close-up filters. This enabled the photographer to move in real close and to capture the feeling of warmth. Again natural sun light was used and the subject was placed at such an angle that no shadow's would be visible. There is not a great depth of field - so just the tip of the brush and a little of the blusher on the backdrop is in focus.





## PLATE 6.4 “IVORY AND RICE”

When walking through the kitchen one day, the author saw rice in a bottle on the shelf. The idea to photograph something with the rice then came to mind. It had to be something simple and natural, so she decided on an ivory and silver necklace. The author decided to shoot this photograph in black and white, and used Ilford XP 400 ASA film. Lighting was achieved with by two tungsten lights, directly from above. It was photographed with a thirty-five-millimetre camera also positioned directly from the top. The rice has got a very rough texture, and makes the ivory stand out. When it was printed, the author decided to give it a rough border to ad to the texture.



## **PLATE 6.5 “UNTITLED”**

This photograph was taken on Fuji 100 colour film. The author tried to capture a very natural feeling by using a oatmeal colour through the picture. The lighting was natural and a reflector was used to reflect the sun and bring out the highlights. The background also gives the photograph a natural feeling because of the texture of the dried seeds and the background. The image was captured with a thirty-five-millimetre camera at f11.



## PLATE 6.6 “BLUE BOTTLE”

This photograph was first set up in direct sunlight which was too bright, so the author had to use a scrim (wax-paper put between the sun and the subject) to diffuse the light. A white reflector was put to the right of the lens to reflect on the bottle. It was shot on Fuji SGR 100 ASA film, with a Mamiya six by seven medium format camera. The author played around with the focus, and decided to focus on the “Cape Town” part and let the rest of the bottle be out of focus. The blue wood shreds accentuate the blue of the bottle.





## Plate 6.7 “GEL”

This photograph was taken very early in the morning. The author saw the bright sunshine and just had to capture it. The gel was placed on a piece of wood so the sun would shine on it. The author used her thirty-five millimetre camera, with a 80 millimetre lens on a 8 f-stop. The camera was hand held so different angles could be tried and tested. The dewdrops was created with a spray bottle, the effect of the early morning was therefore repeated. The author feels the warm colour of the sunshine is repeated in the warm tones of the wood. This photograph will work in a cosmetic magazine, to advertise a product.



## **PLATE 6.8 “UNTITLED.”**

The picture of the shoe with detail on the buckle, was taken with a thirty-five millimetre camera. The film used was Fuji 100. The photograph was taken outdoors with natural light. a 80 millimetre lens was used to frame the picture real close so the detail would catch the eye and sell the shoe. This type of photograph will certainly be use in a advertisement pamphlet together with a full view of the shoe. F8 was used to get sharp focus on the most important part of the subject.



## PLATE 6.9 “PAPILLON.”

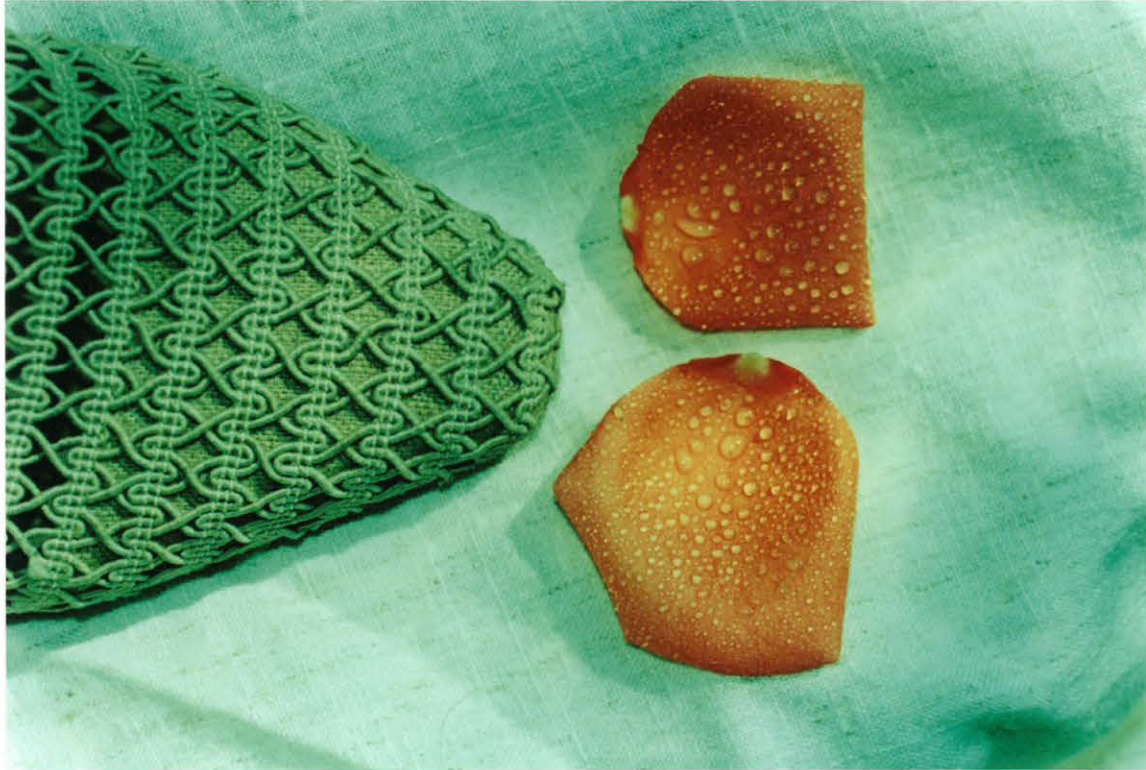
The author tried to create a soft feminine feeling for this photograph. The bottle was angled so that the focus fades in to the background. The flower and the string of pearls adds to the soft feeling. Even though the photograph was taken in natural light, the shadows are soft and not harsh. The camera was hand held, and the photo was taken on Fuji 100 film, with a 80 millimetre lens on a thirty-five millimetre camera. Again the author played around with the focus so that just half of the bottle stays in focus and the rest adds to the soft focus look.





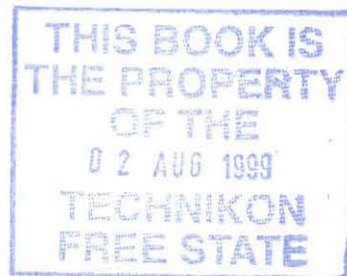
**PLATE 6.10 “UNTITLED.”**

This type of photograph is somewhat unusual. The author used slide film and used normal colour developer to develop the film. This creates a effect that makes anyone look twice, the author feels the photograph will go well with a article on fashion and beauty. The colours are saturated and a strange new look is created. Fuji 100 slide film was used, a thirty-five millimetre camera with a 80 millimetre lens.



## PLATE 6.11 "POTPOURRI."

The author felt the photograph would work well at this angle. a thirty-five millimetre camera was used to try various angles. a 80 millimetre lens was used to go closer to the subject. Natural sun light was used to illuminate the subject, and to bring out the bright colours in the potpourri.





**PLATE 6.12 “UNTITLED.”**

To get this close to the subject the author used a close-up filter on a 50 millimetre lens. Again a thirty-five millimetre camera was used, for this photograph however the camera was fixed on a tripod to keep it steady. a high f-number was used to get just the front part of the subject in focus. Small flowers was scattered around the subject to give it a more natural feeling.







## CONCLUSION

More and more people are turning to photography as a medium of expression as well as of communication. The leavening of aesthetic approaches that we have noted continues. While it is too soon to define the characteristics of the photographic style of today, one common denominator, rooted in tradition, seems in the ascendancy: the direct use of the camera for what it can do best, and that is the revelation, interpretation, and discovery of the world man and nature. The present challenge to the photographer is to express inner significance through outward form.

(Newhall 1982:294)

The author found researching this area of photography very interesting, and exciting. There is definitely a great demand for still life photographers in the working Ares today. They can be employed as advertising photographers, or just creating “*still photography that moves*”.

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