

COMPOSED STILL LIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

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BY

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CONTENT

	<u>PAGE</u>
1. Introduction	1 - 2
2. Early Beginnings of still life photography	3 - 5
3. Compositional devices	8
3.1 Visual elements	8 - 13
3.2 Elements of design	13 - 14
4. Specialized Fields	15
4.1 Beverage Photography	15 - 16
4.2 Food Photography	19
4.3 Jewelry Photography	22
5. Present Trends	24 -27
6. Author's Work	29 - 30
7. Conclusion	49
8. Bibliography	50

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

		<u>PAGE</u>
Fig 1	Roger Fenton. "Still life with statue" 1860 Taken from: Weaver 1989, plate 109	6
Fig 2	Fox Talbot. "Articles of China" 1844 Taken from: Weaver 1989, plate 3	7
Fig 3	Seith Joel. Beverage - Product Shot Taken from: Joel 1990, p 41	17
Fig 4	Seith Joel. Beverage - Lifestyle shot Taken from: Joel 1990, p 43	18
Fig 5	Seith Joel. Food - Editorial Taken from: Joel 1990, p 49	20
Fig 6	Seith Joel. Food - Advertising Taken from: Joel 1990, p 59	21
Fig 7	Seith Joel. Jewelry Taken from: Joel 1990, p 85	23
Fig 8	Nora Scarlett. A closet and a dress Taken from: O'Connor 1989, p 66	26
Fig 9	Marc David Cohen. Gravity Taken from: O'Connor 1989, p 90	28

AUTHOR'S WORK

	<u>PAGE</u>
Plate 1: "Stasoft"	31 - 32
Plate 2: "Sandals"	33 - 34
Plate 3: "Coloured bottles"	35 - 36
Plate 4: "Watch"	37 - 38
Plate 5: "Stationary"	39 - 40
Plate 6: "Oyster Mushrooms"	41 - 42
Plate 7: "Flowers"	43
Plate 8: "Almost Pasta"	44
Plate 9: "Tickled Pink"	45
Plate 10: "Gingham"	46
Plate 11: "Chocolate Box"	47
Plate 12: "Untitled"	48

"A Still life photographer must not only be technically competent and completely familiar with an enormous variety of shooting approaches, but also adept at solving electric problems, building sets and improvising. In short a still life photographer is an electrician, engineer, carpenter, plumber, magician, stylist, designer, salesperson, negotiator, psychologist and business expert."

Seith Joel (Joel, 1990)

1. INTRODUCTION

Photography is a form of communication which fills the void between the written letter, the message and the visual picture. It is the most powerful image-making system which communicates concepts.

Still life photography is a representation of ideas through the process of photography. It is illustrative photography: an image is produced, originating from a preconceived idea. The preconceived idea, in turn gives birth to the final intriguing, eye catching image. There are two parts to the idea: what you want to say and how you are going to portray it. The challenge is to be interpretive rather than literal about your approach. Introduce the unexpected. Bring fantasies into the realm of reality. Still life photography has always been well equipped to express abstract concepts. Conceptual photographs dramatize objects in an unexpected way and help keep both your mind and eye sharp. In a world saturated with images, the ability to produce inventive photographs is essential and highly marketable. Simple, beautifully illuminated pictures are also necessary when clarity is critical. The aim is to create classically, elegant image and to allow lighting and composition to carry the visual message.

The still life photographer can take his time, and work

carefully. By concentrating on composition and lighting, it can be completely controlled and refined. In its continuous effort to interpret the world, the mind actively examines, explores and draws conclusions from what the eye sees. Through carefully controlling a photographs content, the photographer can influence the conclusion at which the viewer will arrive.

Within the description of a still life photographer lies a plentitude of editorial and advertising assignments. Still life photography is required for product packaging, catalogs, audiovisual presentations, print advertising and editorial work.

The drawback of specialization can be reduced when the photographer shows an ability to function creatively and to master all aspects in these areas. This ability will prove valuable, allowing him a broader choice in markets.

2. EARLY BEGINNINGS OF STILL-LIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography has certainly revolutionised the visual arts over the past 153 years. Its impact has been the topic of quite a lot of discussion and debate since 1839 when Daguerre in France and Fox Talbot in Britian first patented their independent inventions almost simultaneously.

The photographic process invented by Louis Daguerre, called the daguerreotype, comprised of a silver-coated copper sheet that had been made sensitive to light, exposed in a camera and developed by mercury vapors. The image that materialized was a positive with high resolution detail and brilliant clarity.

Three weeks after Daguerre announced his process, William Henry Fox Talbot made a public announcement that he had created permanent images on paper instead of on copper plates. It was not until a year and a half later that Talbot devised the calotype; it involved the negative-positive process which formed the basis of photography as we know it today. This process of making salted-paper prints from paper negatives gave a soft definition to detail. Its great advantage was that any amount of prints could be made from a negative in contrast to each daguerreotype being unique and unreproducible. As time progressed more inventions followed which improved upon the preceeding ones, resulting in the films and equipment used

in modern photography.

For hundreds of years, painters have delighted people with richly detailed, almost tangible visions of bowls of fruit, table arrangements and other comforts of civilization. The still life has remained a popular method of artistic expression throughout the ages. Photography's earliest ventures into the realm of still life imitated the inclinations of painting. The photographer consciously made the photograph in the tradition of painting, sharing certain visual characteristics with the painter. One of the earlier examples of a still life photograph was an albumen print titled "Still life with statue" by Roger Fenton in 1860 (fig. 1). Making a still life in 1860, twenty years before electric lamps were available, required knowledge of how to utilize available light, skill and a lot of patience. (Weaver, M., 1989)

When Photography is used mainly to record or describe something, the emphasis is on the subject matter. Details are primarily presented as information. Talbot's photograph, "Articles of China" 1844 (fig 2), presents a visual inventory which takes the shape of a still life, even though it is merely a recording of a collector's display.

The tradition of celebrating inanimate objects has been extended by modern photographers using advanced techniques

and equipment to create works of art. Still life photographers today are their own masters, dealing with a great variety of moods and subject matter.



FIG 1: "Still life with statue"

By Roger Fenton, 1860



FIG 2: "Articles of China"

By Fox Talbot, 1844

3. COMPOSITIONAL DEVICES

Composition must contribute to the expression of the photographer's idea. The photographer must be able to construct and focus his idea clearly in order to convey the message effectively. When he has formulated a specific idea about what he wants to say, he must know which elements to include or exclude. As he plans his still life image, his ultimate goal should be to combine the visual elements with the elements of design in such a way as to successfully express the idea. The compositional decisions the photographer makes, will affect the reaction of the viewer. (Grill, T., 1983)

3.1 VISUAL ELEMENTS:

LIGHT

Photography is the control of light. The photographer should have knowledge of the use of light, in order to make an affective visual statement. Light reveals the essential qualities of an object: its shape, form, texture and colour.

The use of diffused light produces soft shadows which creates an overall light feeling. When bright light is used, prominent shadows appear, creating a more dramatic feeling. The interplay of light and shadows provides

separation between tones, portraying the features of the object.

The term "light quality" is used to acknowledge the many ways in which light can differ. Hard light is bright and directional, producing dark shadows and strong highlights. Soft lighting is even, non directional and does not produce such high tonal contrast. Warm light tends towards the red end of the spectrum, while cool light tends towards blue and green. The quality of light is altered through the choice of the light source. The photographer must recognize that the quality of light he uses to illuminate the scene, is part of the statement made by the photograph.

The relative positioning of the lightsource contributes to the quality of light. A backlit situation, where the lightsource is directly in the front of the camera, results in high contrast. The object will appear silhouetted against the background. A sidelit situation, where the lightsource is put either to the left or to the right of the camera, will add definition and shape to the object. Such scenes are also characterized by high contrast, where the deep shadows can become a useful compositional element and the highlights will produce rich colours. A frontlit situation, where the lightsource lies directly behind the camera, results in flat illumination with no contrast of shadows and highlights.

Lighting can be used to turn an ordinary seamless backdrop into an extraordinary one by making use of coloured gels over the lightsource used to illuminate the backdrop. Gels can alter the tones depending on the angle the light shines onto the backdrop. Using snoots and barn doors over lights will enable you to exercise control over its intensity and help you to direct the light. (Markowski, G., 1984)

The shape of an object as seen through the lens is affected by lighting conditions. By simply shifting the lights slightly, you can create an optical illusion as well as control the surface texture, contrast and colour balance.

COLOUR

Because the eye sees colour as a consequence of the presence of light, a change in light results in a change of colour.

Saturation is the term used to describe a colour's intensity. In its saturated state a colour is deep, rich and vibrant. In its unsaturated state, colours appear weak, soft and muted. Colour saturation is affected by the positioning of the lightsource illuminating the scene, weather and exposure.

When making use of natural light for outdoor still lifes, the position of the sun and the weather plays a great role.

Early morning light and late afternoon light generate highly saturated colours on film. Thus the higher the sun climbs, the more saturation decreases. In order to obtain highest saturation, sunlight must strike the colour of the object directly. That is why colours will appear less saturated under overcast or hazy sky, regardless the time of the day or angle of light. Saturation is higher when an object is illuminated from the side or front, than in a backlit set-up. An exposure that gives the best saturation for one colour may not give an equally good result for another colour present in the same scene. It is advisable to bracket exposure, taking at least two extra frames, with one overexposed and another underexposed, in order to get best results where more than one colour is present.

The colour of light vary depending on the lightsource. Where daylight and electronic flash light contain the whole spectrum, both incandescent and fluorescent lightsources lack some wavelengths of light. Colour temperature is a measure of the dominant colour in a particular light source. Each colour film is balanced to accommodate light of a particular colour temperature. Films balanced for daylight (5500K), photolamps (3400K) and tungsten filament bulbs (3200K) are manufactured. When films do not match the lightsource, the following happens: film balanced for 3200K light used with flash or daylight results in an image with an overall blue cast; daylight film used with a tungsten bulb will generate a yellow cast. Mismatching can

be used compositionally. When a photographer wants to create a feeling of warmth, he can use daylight film with a tungsten light source, lending a yellow cast to the image.

The emotional response people feel towards a colour is associated with appearances of that colour in nature. Yellows and reds, which are representative of the colours of the sun, creates feelings of warmth. The opposite applies to blue, the colour of water, and green, the colour of foliage, which induce feelings of coolness and peacefulness. The photographer should aim to coordinate mood and colour in order to get his message across to the viewer. (Grill, T., 1983)

SHAPE

Shape is the simplest visual component, suggesting only vertical and horizontal dimensions. With the use of different lenses held at different angles this two dimensional outline of any object could be altered, much to the advantage of the photographer's interpretation of his subject matter.

TEXTURE

After the shape has been defined, the photographer should consider what textural details it holds. Texture refers to the character of the object's surface. A third dimension

can be added to the flat photographic image, through capturing the finest surface detail of an object. Different lighting techniques can be employed to exploit or even simulate any texture.

FORM

Form is distinguished from shape as the three-dimensional aspect of an object. It describes the way the object occupies space. A third dimension is created through the way shadows are cast, the effects of perspective and through the overlapping of far objects by near ones.

PATTERN

When shapes repeat themselves a pattern is formed. Pattern does not necessarily imply a third dimension, as texture does. Order exist in every pattern. (Time-Life Books, 1974)

3.2 ELEMENTS OF DESIGN

BALANCE

Balance depends on the relative "weight" the viewer assigns to each pictorial element. Each visual element demands varying amounts of the viewer's attention according to its size, colour and position. When balance is achieved, it



creates a feeling of stability and comfort in the viewer.

PROPORTION

Proportion is the ratio between the two parts of a divided line. The ratio is the relationship that can exist between any comparable elements in a picture, such as size or colour.

RHYTHM

Rhythm is created whenever similar visual elements, such as colour or shape, are repeated at regular intervals. The viewer's eye follows the path of repetition through the image which results in a sense of order and unity.

PERSPECTIVE

Perspective is the element that creates the illusion of three dimensional space in a photograph by making objects appear to shrink with distance and by making parallel lines seem to converge toward a set point. It serves as an indication of depth.

SPECIALIZED FIELDS

The markets that still life photographers aim for is: editorial, advertising, consumer product packaging and mail catalogues.

"Editorial work generally has the most leeway. When you are working on an advertisement the idea usually is more tight. The concept for the image has probably been already approved by the client and everyone involved - people want to know what they are getting before they pay for it. Often you can do your own thing with the lighting, but when it comes to composition the picture is pretty well set. So first you do exactly what the client asked for. Then, if you think the photograph could be improved, you go out and do it. You provide the client with some variations." - Marc David Cohen (O'Conner, 1989).

4.1 BEVERAGE PHOTOGRAPHY

The most predominant images in advertising photography involves beverages. These images must tickle the viewer's senses. There are basically two approaches: the close-up product shot or the lifestyle shot.

The basic elements of the product shot (fig 3) are the beverage itself and the bottle or container's shape, label and colour. You, as photographer, must show familiar

objects in a fresh way never before seen. The colour and consistency of the liquid should be studied to determine how its specific qualities should be brought out. Because the shape of the container was specially designed to appeal to the consumer, the best way of enhancing the shape and colour should be considered. The label must also be considered in order to make it stand out.

In lifestyle photography (fig 4), the basic requirement is to associate the product with the way of life the target consumer enjoys. The images appear to be spontaneous, although they are completely planned and arranged. You have to prevent the image from looking staged. The shoot involves scouting for a location and casting models.



FIG 3: Beverage - product shot
By Seith Joel



FIG 4: Beverage - lifestyle shot
By Seith Joel

4.2 FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

Food photography should appeal to the viewer's taste buds. Magazines commission still life photographers to create illustrations for recipes and for articles on gift ideas and food trends (fig 5). Food editors sometimes have specific, predetermined ideas and only a vague concept at other times. You must therefore be able to determine the essence of the article and come up with an appropriate illustration. Food shots for advertising (fig 6) are assigned by ad-agencies who usually have a specific concept in mind which focuses on the product.



FIG 5: Food - editorial
By Seith Joel



FIG 6: Food - advertising
By Seith Joel

4.3 JEWELRY PHOTOGRAPHY

This approach applies to catalogue work, editorial assignments and museum documentation. The image should establish a sense of quality whether the piece photographed is expensive or not. The techniques needed to shoot costume jewelry are the same required to capture the shades of a rare, gold museum piece (Fig 7). The photographer's main challenge is to control the unavoidable reflections and highlights. Capturing the beauty of certain stones, such as rubies and turquoise, creates another challenge because they absorb light. Other gems, including diamonds, reflect light. Reflective objects, such as a polished silver brooch, calls for elimination of possible reflections. Jewelry has to be cleaned and handled carefully wearing clean white cotton gloves. Security precautions must always be taken because you are responsible for the safe keeping of sometimes highly valuable pieces.



FIG 7: Jewelry

By Seith Joel

5. PRESENT TRENDS

"I try to make pictures that have interesting things going on in them. Something to look at other than what it is."

- Rita Maas (O,Connor, 1989)

This way of thinking is steering commercial still life photography into a new, exciting direction. Still life photography no longer stands "still" but emits "life." The new photographers try to create still-life images that moves. Conceptual photographs represents abstract ideas or emotions instead of recording physical objects onto film. Today, commercial still life photographs are filled with vitality and originality. Photographs appear natural as though it was not premeditated, almost "accidental."

Another trend is towards increased use of shadows. This use of shadows adds a feeling of mystery which makes you stop and wonder. Large diffused lightsources are being replaced by smaller lightsources. Photographers are using tungsten lights to add warmth and an element of blur, to their photographic image. Prisms, pieces of glass and mirrors are put outside of the frame to refract light, creating sensational streaks of light. The most intriguing trend is the change in the use of focus. Many photographers are using selective focus in order to emphasize a single plane or part of the image.

CASE STUDIES:

NORA SCARLETT

Scarlett's photographs capture the mind as well as the eye. They are beautiful but are at the same time intellectually and emotionally intriguing. She uses vibrant colours. Her photograph of a closet and dress (Fig 8) has a lower than usual viewpoint. You get the feeling that the dress is being seen through the eyes of a child. Her inspiration for the image came from the dress her daughter had worn as a flowergirl. She built the set and painted the background herself. The open door in the foreground was left out of focus to add a feeling of depth to the image. The open door also invites you into the magical closet. She believes photography is more of an intuitive process than a thought process.



FIG 8: A closet and dress
By Nora Scarlett

MARC DAVID COHEN

Cohen was asked to illustrate the cover of a computer magazine. He had to photograph the concept of a software program that could calculate the effect of gravity. (fig 9). He pulled from history, the legend of an apple falling on Newton's head. He went about photographing a man sitting in front of a computer in black and white. He made a print of it and copied the black and white print onto colour film. The apple was shot separately, with the motion effect produced by moving the camera during the exposure. The two photographs were then double exposed in the darkroom resulting in one very effective image.



FIG 9: Gravity
By Marc David Cohen

6. AUTHOR'S WORK

The author's decision to specialize in composed still-lives was motivated by her need to be creative. She enjoys the challenge of photographing something ordinary, transforming it into an aesthetically pleasing image. She would view the given object attentively, considering how to bring out its specific qualities through the use of light, combining other elements with it, the angle view or any other compositional device which could enhance its features

EQUIPMENT USED

The author did her work in a studio equipment with an Elinchrom professional flash system and a Sinar four by five (Sinar 4 x 5) view camera. The Sinar 4 x 5 produces high quality images and allows for camera movements. Through these movements she could accomplish increased depth of field and parallel line correction. It is important to develop a good understanding of lens capabilities. Medium to long focus lenses compress images altering perspective of distance without much distortion. Close-up lenses simply magnify fine detail without any distortion. Wide angle lenses tend to distort the image the closer you come to the subject. Thus, lenses should be chosen discreetly for the specific requirements of the shoot. The author mostly made use of a 240mm or 300mm lens with bellows extensions. The authors choice of film is

Fujichrome Professional 50ASA or 100ASA for transparencies and Fujicolor Professional 160ASA for colour printing, both films balanced for daylight.

DISCUSSION ON AUTHOR'S WORK

PLATE 1: "Stasoft"

This advertising photograph was shot on Fujichrome 50 ASA 4x5 film. The author wanted the Stasoft container to stand out against a light blue sky as background. She accomplished it by placing a blue gel over the light illuminating the white backdrop, lighting the product separately, using a softbox. The lights had to be balanced in order to avoid overexposing the background. The white baby clothing on the lines were added to enhance the overall feeling of "softness."



PLATE 1: "Stasoft"

PLATE 2: "SANDALS"

This photograph was shot on Fujicolor Professional 160ASA film. The author wanted to emphasize both the striking colour and pattern of the soles she decided upon using a background repeating the same type of texture. She splashed water onto the black rubber background in order to create highlights bringing out the design better. She used a softbox to illuminate the scene evenly and with the help of reflectors she created highlights on the water.



PLATE 2: "Sandals"

PLATE 3: "COLOURED BOTTLES"

This still life photograph was shot on Fujicolor Professional 160ASA film. The author used one strong light from the side, directed towards the bottles at an angle. The light going through the coloured glass created coloured shadows which produced a triangular line, leading the viewers eye through the scene.



PLATE 3: "Coloured bottles"

PLATE 4: "WATCH"

This photograph was shot on Fujichrome 100ASA film. The author used only the lines of the background and the slightly off centre position to emphasize the watch. Bellows extensions was added in order to achieve a magnified image.



PLATE 4: "Watch"

PLATE 5: "STATIONARY"

This multitude of coloured objects was captured on Fuji Professional 160ASA film. The author used a 360mm lens with two bellows extensions to achieve the "cropped" image. The success of the composition relies mainly on the repetition of colours and lines.

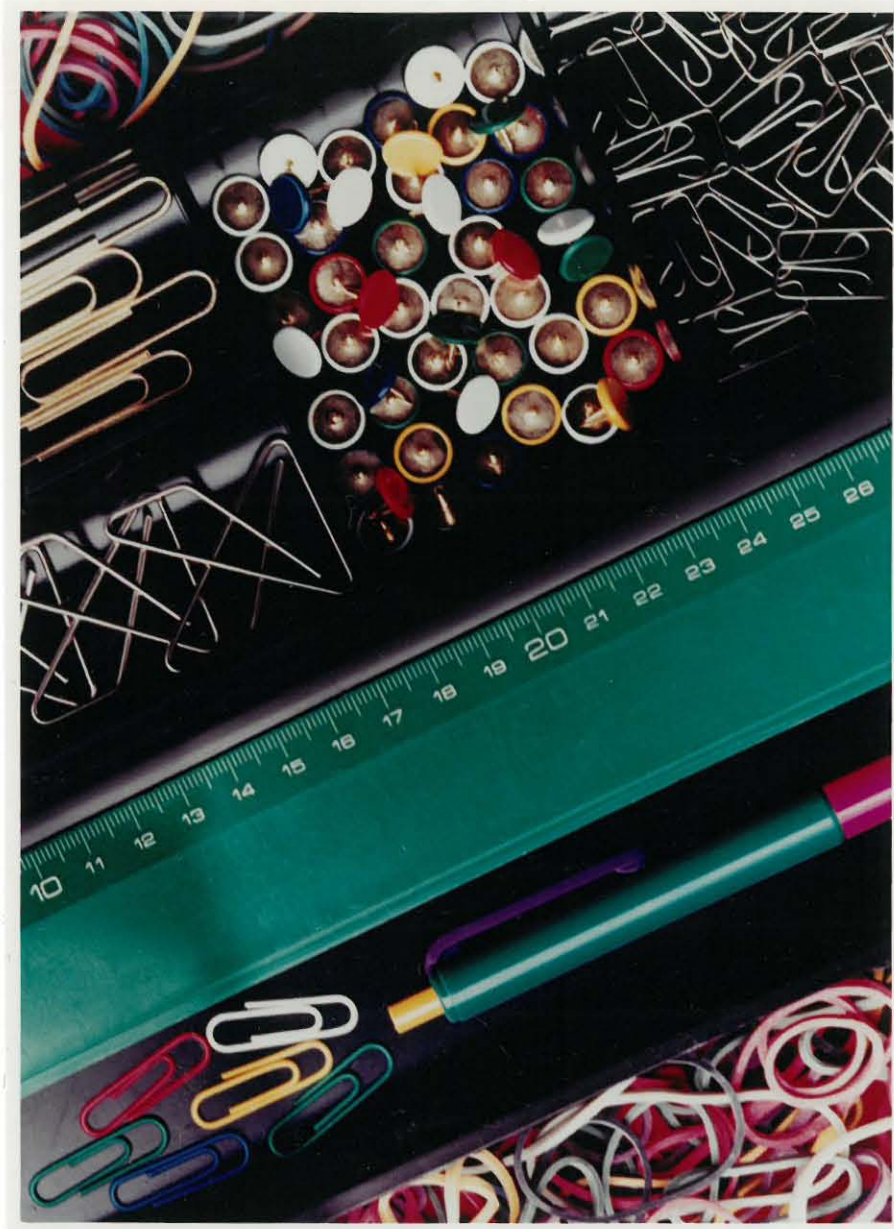


PLATE 5: "Stationary"

PLATE 6: "OYSTER MUSHROOMS"

This food image was shot on Fujicolor Professional 100ASA film. The author wanted to emphasize the special characteristics of the mushrooms. The round shape of the mushrooms is repeated in the other elements. To brighten up the image, the author used red bellpepper slices.



PLATE 6: "Oyster Mushrooms"

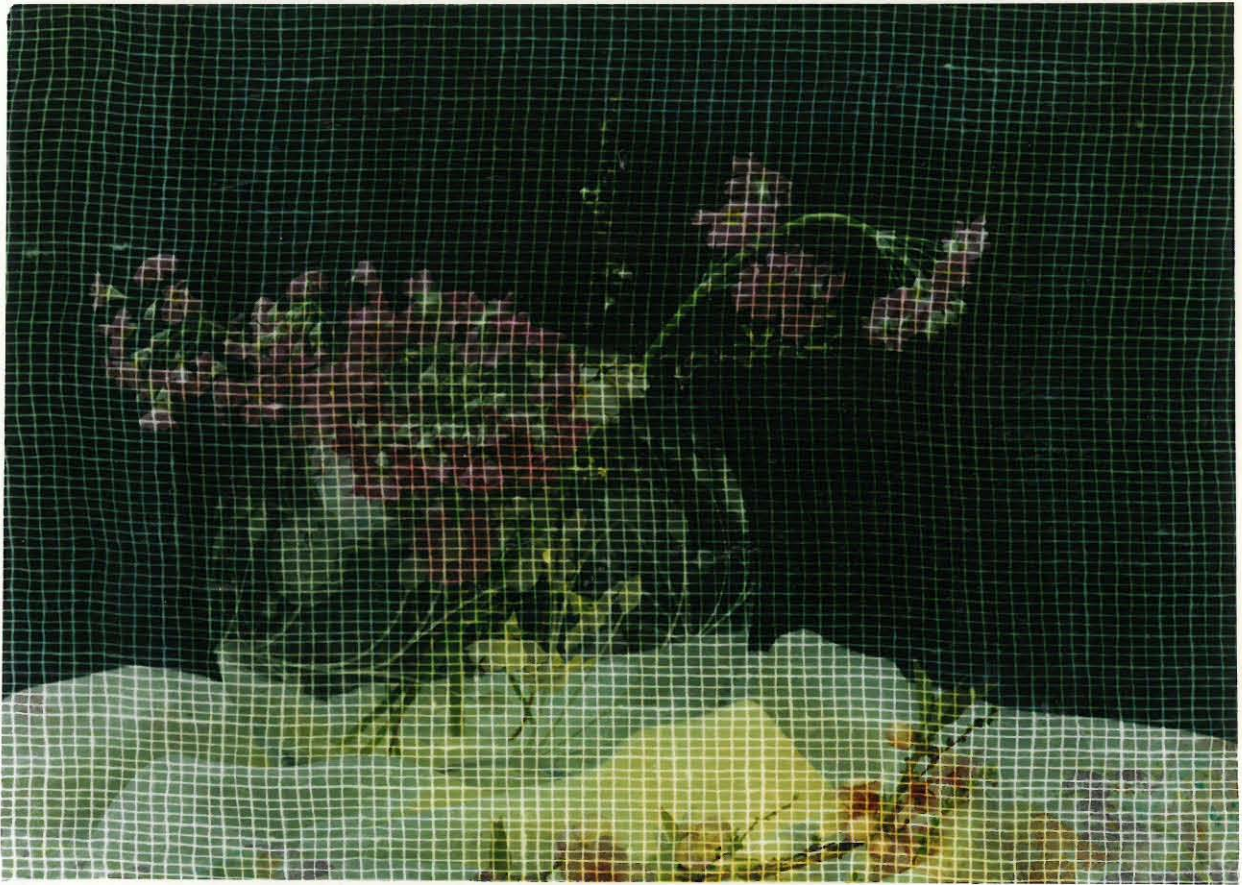


PLATE 7: "Flowers"



PLATE 8: "Almost Pasta"



PLATE 9: "Tickled Pink"



PLATE 10: "Gingham"



PLATE 11: "Chocolate Box"

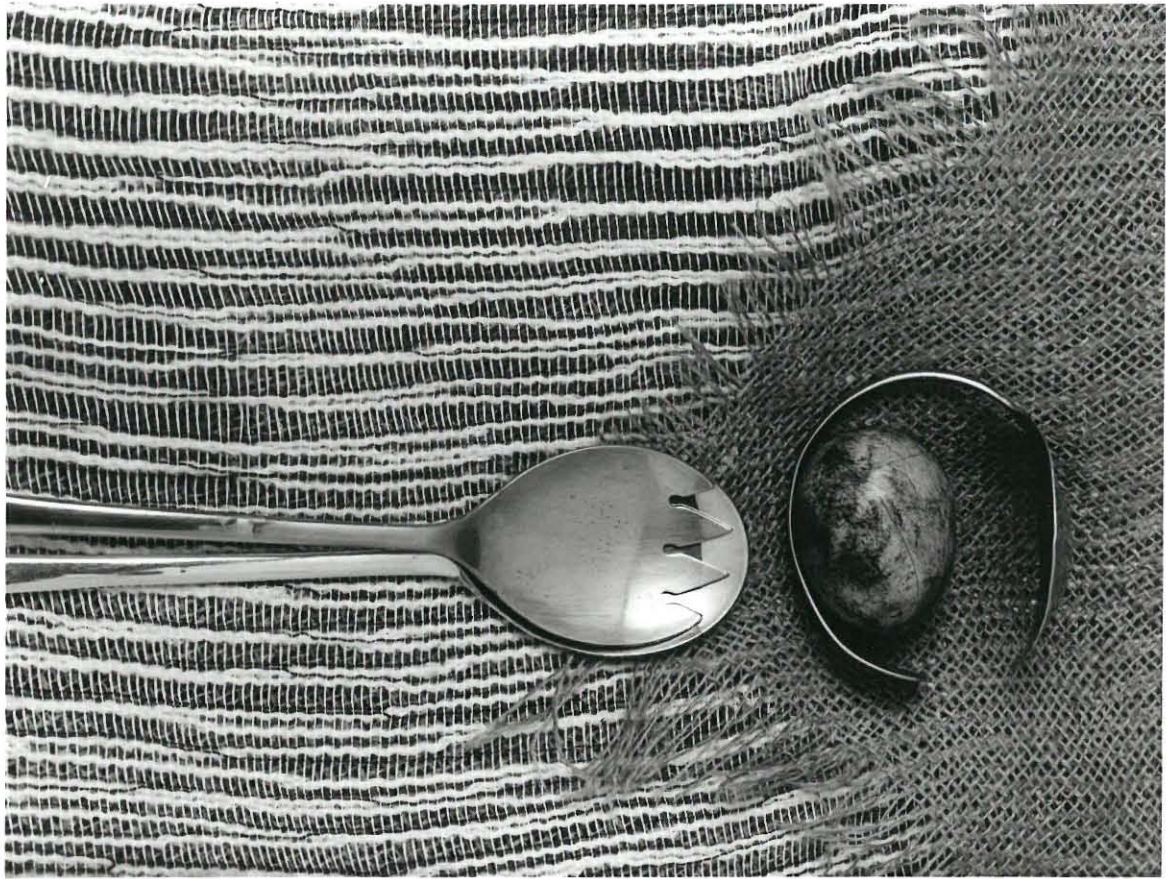


PLATE 12: "Untitled"

7. CONCLUSION

Photography is and will always be tied to the concepts of time and place. Every photograph communicate the meaning of a particular moment. External factors have a continuous influence on the photographer's perception, opinion and technical approach. The compositional goal, however, will always stay the same: to use the camera in order to convey to the viewer, the photographer's interpretation of the given subject matter.

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