

## Unit 5.2: Environmental Portraits

### Environmental Portraiture

in 1857, the photographer Robert Howlett made a portrait of the ship designer I. K. Brunel standing in front of the monstrous anchor chains of one of his ships. This interesting photographic precedent for what later came to be called environmental portraiture bore imitators, partly because the photographer could make more sittings if the subjects came to the studio, and perhaps partly because most people really didn't want to be identified with what they did.

Howlett's idea depended on a conceptual approach; the idea was derived first and executed afterward.

"Some of the best environmental portraits today are the ones that are well planned and creatively art-directed. The direction may come from the magazine or from the photographer, or it may be a collaborative effort. A large portion of my work is doing environmental portraits. I am asked to photograph someone (or a group of individuals) for a magazine article. The text is usually about the person or their projects, or it may be an interview.

I really enjoy doing this kind of work for many reasons:

It is always fun, the people you meet are typically fascinating, and every day is different.

I can schedule my own hours since the appointment is made by the subject and me.

I usually have creative control since people from the magazines are too busy to attend each shoot, and they trust my judgment.

The subject(s) are usually happy to cooperate since the articles are mainly positive and the publicity is free.

You have to shoot fast and think on your feet since people are busy and they need to return to work.

Since you have limited time with each group, the time involved is never too extended.

Of all of the things I have learned from photographing environmental portraits, the most important word of advice I can offer is to always shoot a person, or people, in two separate scenarios. No matter how little time I have, I always set up two shots. I will make a move even if it means I am only moving the camera and light forty-five degrees to change the viewpoint.

This has two benefits. It gives the magazine art director more choices and it will inevitably help avoid mistakes. You may find that one shot does not work at all (it could be unflattering, or you may have something distracting in the background, or you could have lens flare), and then you always have the option of not including it with the final film you send to the client."

Evoking emotion with your photography is one of the more difficult things to achieve. The more skilled a technician and director you become, the easier it will be to get the emotional responses in your photographs that you desire.

Emotional response can be obtained by the choices you make in the subject matter, the location, film and in your lighting. The subject matter may evoke an immediate emotional response in the viewer, such as a child's first day of school as he or she stands outside the yellow school bus, lunch in hand, looking excited and frightened. The location may be bright and clear, as on a beach, making the viewer smile. Or you may choose a dark room with peeling wallpaper that will evoke an eerie feeling.

The results you get by changing film stock may be subtle, but there are grainy films that will give you a soft creamy result, and there are high contrast films that translate into a bright, sharp image. Lighting is an obvious way to develop a mood. It is as simple as choosing to shoot in the daytime or in the evening, outside or inside, with available light, diffused or with flash. Each type of lighting will evoke its own response.



### Isomorphic Correspondence

“Isomorphic correspondence” simply means that we respond to meaning. When we see an image such as a painting or a photo, we interpret its meaning based upon our experiences and memories.

Baby animals are cuddly. Many of us are apt to go “Ahh” when we see

pictures of a baby rabbit. We can imagine the soft fur and the warmth of the animal in our arms. But, for many of us, the rabbit is also a tasty meal. We may be reminded of a time at Grandma’s when she served fried rabbit for Sunday dinner.

How many of us say, “Yikes!” when we see an image of a snake? Many of us have an inherent fear of snakes, based upon primal fear and a culture that uses the snake as a symbol of evil.

And sex sells. Nubile bodies are used to sell everything from exotic vacations to beer. Most people respond to such images on a visceral level. By associating these images with a product or a sales message, an advertiser hopes to use our memories, experiences, and fantasies to give his/her product or sales message more meaning than it really has.

How does this concept affect your photography? First of all, unless you take photographs strictly for yourself, you prob



ably like to share your images with others. The thing that makes that dreaded slideshow your uncle pulls out every time you visit so boring is that while it has tons of associations for him and your aunt, it has none for you. After all, it was their trip to Borneo, not yours. You didn't share the experience of buying food from a street vendor or smell the smells of the urban neighborhoods. So, pictures of them don't mean much to you.

You should keep this exclusivity in mind when editing your own pictures. Ask yourself, "Do I like my images because they have a certain emotional appeal to me alone?" A special vacation shot or a picture of your children might be an example. Or, do your images convey a more universal meaning that will inspire emotional response in others? It helps to gather feedback from a trusted friend. Remember, that beloved sunset you have, so excellently captured, so expertly printed and framed, may be just another sunset to someone else.

Learn how composition can affect meaning. Placement of the subject within the viewfinder can have profound effects on the meaning. Placing the subject low and surrounded by a large amount of negative space sends a different message than cropping it close. The former may send the message of hopelessness or depression, the latter a message of intimacy or friendship.

It's a challenge to create images with meaning. It's what separates a good photographer from a mediocre one. In judging contests and exhibits, I've seen many prints that are technically well done, but lack depth of meaning. These may be processed to resist aging in preparation for archival preservation, but they won't stand the test of time on anyone's wall, except, perhaps, the photographer's own.

For, without an emotional connection to the image, we'll grow weary of it. It will remain on exhibition for a few months and then be taken down or simply ignored as part of the background blur of our lives. Our ability to connect with an image emotionally entices us to keep coming back to an image over and over again in order to repeat the emotion. Or, what's even more exciting, we may find new meaning in the image as we grow emotionally and experience it in a fresh, new way.

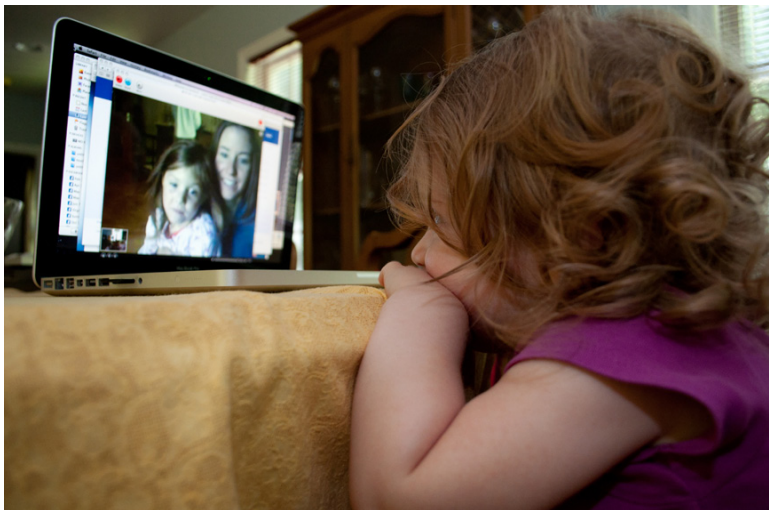


Cropping the subject closely shot from below.



The subject is surrounded by a large amount of negative space.

## Unit 5.3: Environmental Portrait Assignment



**For this assignment you will be taking an environmental portrait.**

1. Go out into the world and find someone to photograph in their own environment. Set out the capture the personality of the person through the environment itself, what the environment says, the lighting and the body language of the person.

If the person is being photographed at work, and they are not happy about being at work, you shouldn't show a smiling McDonald's employee. Try to have the background be just as much of a storyteller as the expressions and body language of the model.

Take RISKS!!! Go out into town and try to photograph strangers in their own natural environment. People at work can be good models since they have to be there for a specific amount of time and normally aren't too busy (depending on the type of job)

### Assessment:

Your image portrays a distinct personality through the expression and body language of the model.

5    4    3    2    1

Your image portrays a distinct personality through the environment of the model.

5    4    3    2    1

You took a wide variety of portraits and not just the ONE you are handing in!

yes    no

The images are edited in photoshop to show their best aesthetic

5    4    3    2    1

*The images are both 300 dpi, CMYK, and fit on a printable canvas. The images are color corrected, cropped, and removed of distractions.*