

VAST 230-01: Photography 1

Wednesday & Friday, 1-2:50pm | Millard 2, Studio 13 | Spring 2012

Prof. David M. Gyscek

"The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera."

-Dorothea Lange

Introduction:

With the advent of digital imaging technologies and their ubiquity, some may find it quaint, nostalgic, or even old-fashioned to continue to use, teach, and learn black-and-white, film-based photography. While there are certainly valid arguments for that position, there are other more compelling arguments (in my view anyway) to continue teaching students studying the fine arts, the art of "wet" photography. The main rationale for this assertion has to do with speed and sight. To put it plainly, film-based photography forces its practitioners to slow down.

In many, if not all areas of modern life, we have become accustomed to instant gratification. More than that, we have come to expect it. In digital photography, this expectation is often validated. Whether shooting from a mobile phone, a point-and-shoot, or a more sophisticated DSLR (Digital Single Lens Reflex) camera, the results are available immediately for review. This creates a further expectation that a failed image can quickly be erased and re-shot, which in turn, devalues that proverbial perfect moment when the shutter falls and an image is recorded. It, along with high capacity memory cards, encourages a snap-happy/machine-gun style of shooting in which one is bound to get a decent image at some point.

In so-called wet photography, however, a 35-mm camera will hold a film reel with 36 frames, at most. That is the first "slowing" factor. After 36 frames have been exposed, you have to stop and re-load. The second slowing factor is, of course, the process – the fact that you cannot see what you have just shot until you (1) go back to the studio, (2) develop the film, (3) wait for it to dry, and (4) make a print. The lack of immediacy in this process may be frustrating to you, but hopefully you will develop a trust and faith in the chemical and physical processes that make photography possible—or like me you may become anxious over the mysterious reactions occurring within the developing tanks and finally thrilled when an image appears, seemingly magically, on a sheet of paper in the developing solution. The third, and in my estimation, the most important slowing factor is closely related to the second. That is, when you are shooting, all you have to go by is what you see in the camera's viewfinder – there is no option for immediate review. When you take all of these factors into account, it forces you to be more thoughtful, more present to the moment in which you are shooting; it forces you to carefully (but not cautiously) compose the image in your viewfinder—not just shooting haphazardly hoping to capture something, but rather being deliberative in your compositions. In short, the technical limits of the process offer an unparalleled opportunity to really and truly see. Although our eyes and brains are constantly processing huge amounts of visual data, rarely do we stop to really look carefully and fully—rarely do we "transform looking into seeing." That is a large part of what we will be doing in this class.

Course overview:

There are two main goals of this class; the first is to develop a proficiency in the processes associated with producing a good, solid, black-and-white photograph (known as a *gelatin silver print*). To that end, this class will cover basic 35-mm camera operation, exposure controls, and B+W film and print processing. The first several weeks of class will therefore be primarily focused on technique.

The second goal is, as Dorothea Lange suggests, to learn better how to see (as discussed in the *Introduction*). The primary substance of the course will be derived from your studio practice, discussions about and critiques of your work, as well as reflective writing assignments. Critical and historical reading assignments and writing assignments will help contextualize your study and deepen your practice. (Some readings are assigned herein; others may be distributed as needed.)

Assignments:

Throughout the course of this semester, you will be responsible for completing four, major studio projects (one of which will be ongoing), one oral presentation, and one paper. Students will also be expected to actively participate in discussions and critiques. Finally, you must maintain a journal or blog, which documents what, when, how, and why you are photographing what you are photographing. You should also use your journal/blog to reflect on all readings. Below are the basic parameters of these assignments. More complete instructions and explanations will be distributed as needed.

Assignment 1: **Portraits** (ongoing – due every other Wednesday starting Feb. 15): For this project you will be required to produce two portraits (8x10 or 5x7) every other week: one self-portrait and one of anyone of your choosing. However, choose wisely because you will be shooting that person throughout the course of the semester. You will receive one grade for this project when you submit a final portfolio at the end of the semester (6 self-portraits + 6 portraits = 12 images). You will receive a “progress grade” at midterm so you have an idea of how you are doing. N.B. Throughout the semester, you will (hopefully!) get better at printing. Therefore, you are free to re-print any images for your portfolio submission at the end of the semester. You must, however, use the original negative – in other words, you may not re-shoot.

Assignment 2: **Taxonomy of Images** (due Wednesday, March 14)

“...the history of photography seems to consist of photographers doing personalized versions of a repertoire of scenes, tropes, subjects or motifs.”
(from *The Ongoing Moment* by Geoff Dyer, p. 212)

Choose two image categories and submit five, 8x10 photographs of different subjects for each category (i.e. ten prints total).

Categories (20, in no particular order): hands, waiting, bed (empty or occupied), clouds, door (open or closed), a stranger, keyhole, running/moving water, still water, solitary tree, chair, fruit or vegetable, mouth/lips, lit candle, neon sign, smoke, computer cables/wires, city or town at night, car (at least 10 years old), dinner, fence.

Assignment 3: **On Beauty and Ugliness** (due Friday, March 30)

“Pictorial Art is man’s expression by means of pictures of that which he considers beautiful in nature.”

(from Peter Henry Emerson's "Photography, a Pictorial Art," 1886)

Pictorialism in photography peaked in the late 19th century as a way of validating photography as a fine art. It compared itself explicitly to painting using many of the motifs and compositional strategies of that medium to elevate itself from what some considered a purely mechanical process. (More on this later.)

For this project, you must create three 11x14-inch prints: the first should attract the viewer—it should seduce us with its beauty; the second should be ugly (although the quality of the print should be equal to that of the first)—it should repulse us; the third should combine the previous two—it should exhibit a repulsive beauty, like a car crash from which you cannot look away.

Assignment 4: **Narrative x2** (due Wednesday, May 2): In this project, you will choose a story and depict that story photographically using two opposing approaches. The story you choose can be from just about anywhere—from a nursery rhyme to a Biblical parable, from current events to an original work. You will deal with that story in two ways; first, you will illustrate it. In other words, you will tell the story as a linear narrative using images. (You can use text or not. If you do, do so thoughtfully!) The final product from this first approach should be a series of prints (you determine the size of the prints and the number of prints needed to tell the story). For the second part of the assignment you are to distill, refine, and abstract the story so that you can express its essence metaphorically in a single image, which should be printed 11x14 or 16x20-inches.

Final Portfolio: In addition to your portrait portfolio, you must submit a final portfolio of ten of your strongest images taken from any/all previous projects and/or photographs you have taken independently (over the course of this semester). These should all be printed on 8x10 paper (even if the image does not require the full sheet). You may repeat images from the other projects if necessary, but I urge you to show the breadth and depth of your abilities here. You are therefore strongly encouraged to include prints that you created independently—that is, prints that were not for any other particular assignment.

Oral presentation: (due February 22/24) Give a ten-minute presentation on an assigned photographer. Your presentation should include some biographical information in addition to an overview of his/her work and process. Your interpretations and impressions of the artist's work should be prominently featured in your presentation. Your presentation should include a Powerpoint-type visual component with high quality images. You must also submit a written copy of your presentation with all appropriate scholarly apparatus (i.e. footnotes and bibliography).

Because many of the artists you will choose from are contemporary, there may or may not be much published, printed material available for your research. Be careful and thorough in vetting any online sources you use (as you always should). It is always preferable to use material from known, reputable sources.

Paper: (due April 18): Contemporary photography can be broken into several types or genres, which include documentary, fashion/commercial, fine art, and snapshot photography, among others. Write a 5-7 page research paper exploring the connections between two of those categories. For example, how has snapshot photography affected the practice and display of fine art photography? (A more detailed description of this assignment will be distributed at a later date.)

You must submit a one-page proposal/abstract along at mid-term. Your proposal should include a hypothesis or argument that you would like to pursue (and not simply "I want to explore the connection between fashion and fine art photography") as well as a working bibliography with at least four sources, two of which should be non-Internet in origin.