



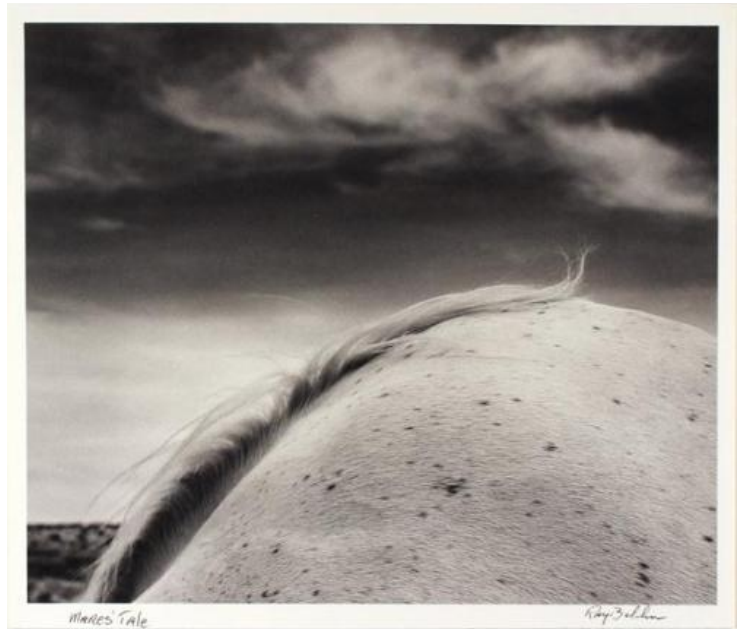
A Dream Half Remembered #JLB-JLB49-7
Ken Rosenthal (American, born 1964)
2005
gelatin silver print, split-toned
Gift of Ken Terry and Denise Betesh, 2011
Object number: 2011.17.3

Photography often has a relationship with the world we experience that is different from other expressive mediums. Most photographs (not all) start with a camera pointed at a subject that can be objectively identified. The photograph may be of something such as a landscape or a person, and we have an expectation that these subjects will be easily identifiable and realistic to some degree. When a photograph steps outside of these expectations, we often call it abstract or non-objective photography. The photograph, while abstract, may have an intended conceptual subject, such as a feeling or idea, or it may be a purely aesthetic work.

Other visual mediums, such as drawing or painting, are not expected to mirror the world we see exactly, and, when they come close, they are often marveled at. Because of this, such mediums lend themselves more readily to creating works that are understood as abstract. Photography, while often rooted in the world in front of a camera, is still very much capable of creating abstract images. One way to approach making an abstract photograph is to think about what is in front of the camera as a starting point or as the raw material to create an image about something else. That something else, or subject, may be something completely intangible such as a feeling, idea, or concept. What does confusion look like? How would you make a photograph that is about color, but not what color something is? Making what is in front of your camera a little less recognizable is one way to help a viewer, and the photographer, think about what else the image may be about. Below are some useful techniques for distancing your final images from what is in front of your camera. Remember, techniques like these will only get you part of the way; it's up to you to give meaning to these abstract images!

Context:

Have you ever walked in on a conversation and been confused? Maybe the sentence someone was saying didn't make any sense to you? Chances are that is because you didn't know what had been said previously. You lacked context for what you heard, so it was hard to understand the conversation. Images can work in a similar way. The context of an image, what is or is not included, can shape the way we understand what is going on. By removing some elements from an image through deliberate framing or cropping, we can change the way that a viewer understands what is happening in an image.



Mare's Tale
Raymond Belcher (American, born 1944)
1985 (printed 2005)
gelatin silver print
Gift of Fred R. Kline, 2013
Object number: 2013.46.1

Movement:

The camera's ability to freeze or blur motion comes from the length of time that is recorded, or length of exposure. The shorter the exposure is, the smaller the slice of time. Because we experience the world around us as a never-ending series of short instances of time, short exposures that freeze motion are easier to understand. What can make an image abstract to us is when a camera uses a long exposure and records time in a way we don't experience. A long exposure could mean an hour, a day, or even years. It can also mean just a second or two. During long exposures, one of two things generally happens, the world moves in front of the camera or the camera moves in relation to the world. Seeing a subject in a range of places all at once or from many viewpoints is well outside of how we usually see the world.

Focus:

Focus, or how sharp or soft an image looks, is a fundamental element in a photographer's toolkit. Focus can be used to direct how a viewer explores an image and how they identify elements within that image. By using a softer focus, a photographer can create an image that is more suggestive rather than literal. Instead of the focus being on the subject, it is allowing elements such as color, shape, tone, and feel to come forward. A forest for example could stop being a collection of individually identifiable trees and become a collection of dark and light shapes that have a dreamlike quality.

Distortions:

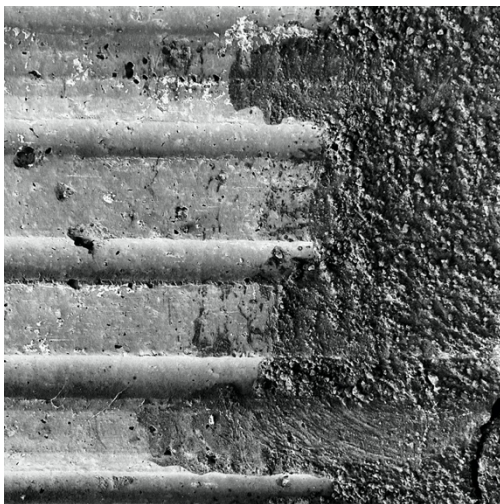
Photography has a number of ways to distort or change what is front of the camera when the image is made. Reflective surfaces, for example, can be used to create multiple versions of a subject or to place things where we wouldn't expect to see them. Different objects or filters can be placed over or around the lens to create different kinds of effects. For example, a piece of cellophane can soften an image, and shooting through a plastic bottle that has had the top and bottom removed can create a tunnel effect.

Activity:

Photographers use a wide range of cameras that come in all sorts of shapes, sizes, and capabilities. For this activity, you will need a digital camera. A camera phone will work great. One way to approach taking abstract photographs is to think of it as making an image that is **about** something rather than **of** something. Keep in mind that what the image is about may or may not be related to what is in front of the camera. Think about what else a scene can be about. With this in mind, here are some ways to use each of the above techniques to abstract an image. These only a few of many ways of creating an abstract photograph, and we hope that they will inspire you to create your own approach!

Context/Cropping

Can you make a photograph that's subject is not recognizable? By being selective about what is included in the image, try to make an image that is in focus but can't be identified as a particular object. Try reframing your image to include or eliminate different elements and see how the image changes. Look at your subject from different points of view. If you view something from overhead that you always see at eye level, does it change your understanding of it? What if you move in much closer than you normally would?

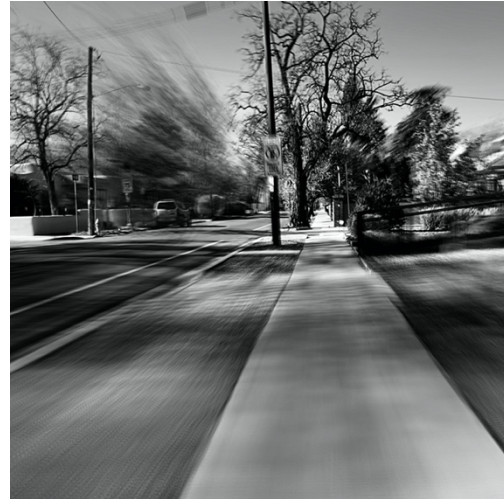


Movement

Recording movement with a long exposure can be accomplished with a camera phone in numerous ways. Many camera apps will either make the shortest possible exposure, or record a few seconds so you can select the perfect moment later. There are also numerous long exposure apps to try out. An example of one way to use the built-in functions on many camera apps is the Live View function on iPhones mixed with the long exposure option. In this example, tap the shutter button with Live View turned on. This will record a short video clip. Open this image and swipe up to access the Effects options and select Long Exposure. Many camera phones have some version of this process.

Once you have the how-to of long exposures on your camera worked out, it's time to try two different kinds of long exposures. First, begin with a photograph where your camera is stationary, but there is movement around it. You can think of moving cars as a paint brushes or how the wind blowing the leaves of a tree creates shapes and tones. Then make a photograph where your camera is what is moving. Try making an image from a moving car, as a

passenger of course, or while walking or riding on a swing. Each of these kinds of long exposures will require some experimentation, so have some fun with them!



Focus

Try to create an image with an intentionally soft focus that lets the objects in the frame become something else. Camera phones tend to want to select something in the frame to be sharply in focus, but there are ways around this. On iPhones you can select what you want to focus on by tapping the screen. If you tap and hold on the screen, the camera app will lock in that focus and exposure. If you lock the focus on something much closer or farther away than what you want to put in your scene, it will create a soft focus look. Just recompose your scene once you have the different focus locked in.



Distortions

Everyday objects you can find around the house can be used to change and distort what your camera sees, abstracting your subject. Two examples are tissue paper and a plastic bottle. Create a soft, hazy look for an image by placing tissue paper over your lens. Thinner paper will likely work better and allow for more shapes, colors and tones to come through. If you have tissue paper, see if what you pull from the box is made of more than one layer. If so, peel them apart and try using just one. A plastic water bottle can be used in many ways. By shooting through its side, a soft, fun-house mirror like look can be created, or it can be shot through with

the top or bottom cut off (or both) to create a tunnel-like effect. If you want even more distortion, try crumpling the bottle!



Once you have tried out some or all of these techniques, try combining some of them to create images that are not only abstract, but that have meaning for you!

New Mexico Museum of Art