

# **IMAGE BASED STUDY**

Rob Brookes - AS. Photography

In the next section of the project I will look at the work of other still life photographers but in particular we will concentrate on the works of Edward Weston and Irving Penn. I want to analyze their photographs looking into their choice of subject matter, the composition and lighting of each piece, how it was taken and then finally see how the decisions and choices they have made can influence the work I am about to undertake.

I want to look at the style of each of the photographers (they are both working in the same genre i.e. still life but their approach to the topic and the subject matter itself vary greatly) comparing them and then developing my ideas.

In the first project I looked at the works of other photographers to see their techniques and understand how they achieved their photographs. In this project I want to look at my influences and look at why they have taken their photographs.

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The Empty Plate, New York, 1947 Irving Penn

I have chosen this photograph as the starting point in my research as it shows how an effective image can be created using very little in the way of subject matter. Penn has used only a few well chosen and composed objects to create a very memorable image (and one that is in its own way very familiar to us all). Penn has used the tablecloth in the image as a canvas on which he has composed his piece, with the dirty plate and crumpled napkin (although of pretty much the same tone) standing out through their look and texture. By including the edge of the table in the shot he has given the picture depth (if he had not done this he would have risked the photograph look flat and uninteresting), it also helps draw the viewer's eye to the main subject in the piece (the plate) by using the dark, almost black tone to (in a way) underline the focal point.

There is also very good use of lighting and shadow in the piece. This is not just in the way the main subjects, for example the napkin, are positioned so that the item is given texture by the use of shadow, but also in the fact that he has included shadow cast by objects outside of the piece. By doing this he has hinted at the world outside of the photograph. It helps give the image context.

I believe this photograph works because the message in the picture is clear through Penn's use of composition. Although composed the image is commonplace and everyone can relate to the feeling of satisfaction given through a meal well enjoyed (this feeling is emphasized by the inclusion of stains/crumbs on the tablecloth around the plate, as if the meal was enjoyed with some gusto).



Toadstool, Edward Weston, 1931

This still life image is the work of my other influence for the project, Edward Weston. Although it is a still life photograph it varies greatly in composition, look and feeling to the work we have just discussed by Irving Penn.

Whereas Penn (in his work the empty plate) has used the surrounding objects to help frame his main subject and give it context, in this photograph Weston has excluded all but the main subject matter, the toadstool. By doing this all of the emphasis in the photograph is given to the subject and as such the subject becomes the meaning (as opposed to Penn's work which hints at a shared experience). The toadstool is also put right in the middle of the photograph to add to its impact as the focal point in the picture (if anything it takes up most of the picture). Weston has used the toadstool as an example of the purity of nature and his very simple composition in this shot helps to express that meaning. He is looking at form and beauty of the natural world and showing how there can be wonder in any subject matter (he could have chosen a more commonplace item to express natural beauty for example a flower but through the selection of a more unusual object it actually adds to the desired effect).

Weston has also used very basic lighting in this picture, illuminating only the toadstool itself (this helps add to the effect of the image by casting shadow onto the concave underside of the toadstool thus emphasizing its form). By using an aperture of f64 he has created a large depth of field keeping everything in focus.

This photograph is based on a shared knowledge (as in everyone knowing the beauty of nature) rather than a shared experience (as with the empty plate photograph) but is still effective in its aims.



Cigarette 17, New York, 1972 Irving Penn

At the start of the seventies Irving Penn did a series of photographs using urban waste found around the streets of New York. He took still life photographs of cigarette butts, waste paper and even chewing gum deposits. This photograph is from that collection.

In this photograph Penn has used a macro lens to enlarge his subject (the cigarette ends). In a similar move to Weston (in his toadstool picture) Penn has excluded everything but his main subject from the picture. In this sense the viewer is forced to look at something that although very common (this was rubbish found on the streets after all) is now given a different perspective. In contrast to Weston's Toadstool though here the message purveyed is very different. Whereas Weston has expressed the inherent beauty in a natural form Penn has taken the seemingly unattractive as his focus.

As the trodden down cigarette ends are enlarged we can clearly see the texture in the subject, the broken down filter, the rips in the paper and even the hairs attached now to the right hand of the butts all add to the final effect.

Again as with his earlier work (the empty plate) Penn has utilized the background in the photograph to add to its impact. The slightly dirty nature of the surface reflects the state of his main subject.

If through this photograph Penn was endeavoring to make the mundane beautiful then I do not think it has been a success, the cigarette ends still look dirty and (although we see more texture in them) give the photograph a gloomy air to it.

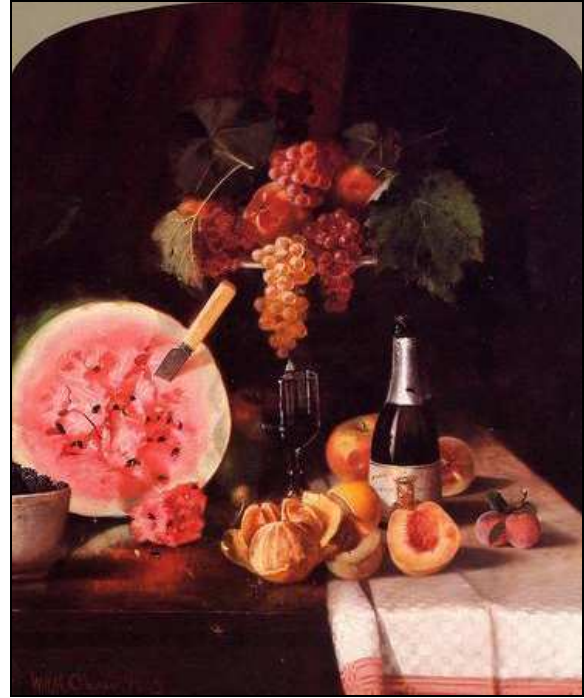


Abandoned Shoes, Alabama Hills, 1937 Edward Weston

Although this image was photographed by Edward Weston I believe it has more in common with the cigarette photograph we have just discussed by Irving Penn. It is similar to Weston's earlier still life pictures in that he has again filled most of the area of the photograph with his main subject but he is now making far more use of the background (and more importantly the texture in the background created by the rock and soil) to frame the subject (and in this case compliment it).

Weston is making much more use of texture in this picture than in his earlier work (the toadstool) and this is shown in both the main subject (the shoes with their crumpled leather, worn soles and tears) and then the background around it (the texture in the rock, soil and grass). The use of this texture adds to the whole feel of the photograph as it gives the viewer a sense of age in the image.

He has included the background in this photo (as opposed to the Toadstool) to add to the message of the picture. In a similar way to Penn in his photograph "the empty plate" the inclusion of the background gives the picture a sense of place. If he had taken the photograph against a neutral background (or in a studio) it would simply be a shot of an old pair of shoes. Although the photograph may look fine against a neutral background the shoes have been discarded and this is shown by the environment in which the picture is set. The shoes are left out in the open like rubbish. Not only does the background help to give the photo a sense of place (which adds to the meaning in the image) but it also reflects the state of the shoes. These are hard wearing workmen's boots used for labour, if he had taken the photograph in a studio setting it would remove the history behind them and look too clinical.

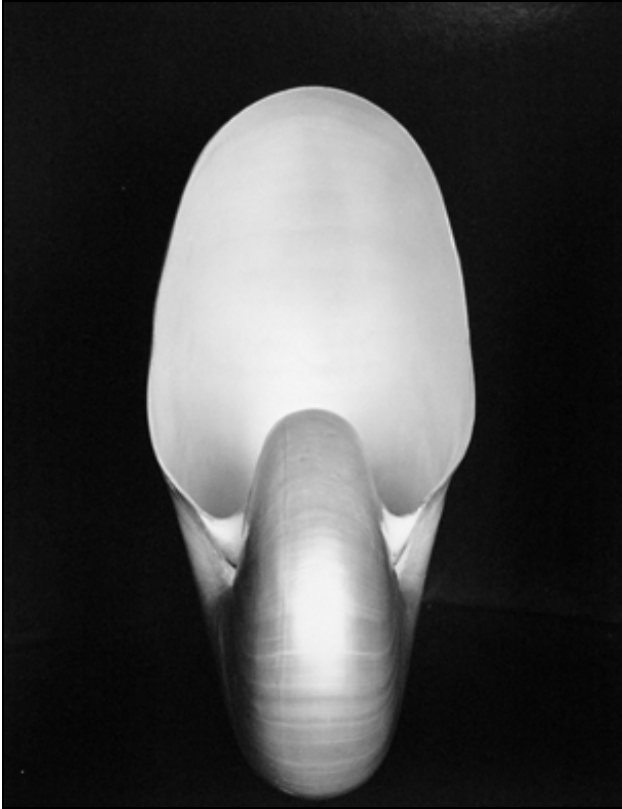


Still Life with Watermelon, New York 1947 Irving Penn  
Still Life with Watermelon, William Merritt Chase, 1869

This Photograph by Penn shows a departure in style from his still life work we looked at of the same year. Along with the obvious difference that this has been photographed using colour film, Penn seems to have moved away from the more simplistic composition of his other work and has presented us with a bolder and yet busier image. Here Penn expresses opulence in this photograph using the selection of food laid out before the viewer (this effect is enhanced by the use of colour in the image showing the ripeness of the fruit and the lusciousness of the watermelon. This would be difficult to express using black and white photography) in a display reminiscent of ancient Rome. The background in this photograph is neutral which helps to heighten the impact of the colourful subjects. Also the way the objects are positioned on the background help lead the viewer's eye though the piece from the bread in the foreground upwards to the grapes at the back. As opposed to the works by Weston this piece does not zoom in on a single subject matter (as in the toadstool or the abandoned shoes) but instead draws the viewer into the picture.

He again makes use of form and texture in the picture. The torn piece of bread in the foreground with its sharp broken crust is in contrast to the smoothness of the grapes beyond.

This photograph shows how Penn's still life work was itself influenced by art and I think it no coincidence that it bears a striking similarity to the work of the same name by the American artist William Merritt Chase (also pictured above). The composition is similar (with the watermelon just in front of the bowl of grapes and even the angle of the table on which the subject matter is placed is very similar in both the photograph and the painting. It shows that photographs can be as beautiful as paintings and still convey the same message.



Shell, Edward Weston, 1927

This photograph by Weston shows the purity of his still life photography. In the picture he has placed the subject on a neutral black background (this stops any light being reflected onto the shell and so it is given an even appearance) and has used a solitary light for illumination. Weston also used a very small aperture (in fact modified to f64) to ensure a large depth of field and a sharp image. Although (as with his other image the toadstool) he has extracted all but the main subject in the photograph the image is enhanced by his clever use of composition. Instead of taking the photograph from the side (as would be common with nautilus shells) in this photograph he has decided to photograph the image head on. This has given the shell an almost surreal quality, and has allowed for many different interpretations of the photograph with people seeing the shell as different objects. He has forced us to look at a recognizable object in a new and interesting way.

Weston has been very subtle with this image for instance he has given the photograph a sense of depth through the inclusion of a very faint line in the background of the picture (about a quarter of the way up the picture from the bottom), this was in fact the edge of the oil drum Weston had perched his shell upon. This helps to in turn give the shell a sense of depth.

Again he looks at the beauty of nature in the image (in a similar way to he did in his photograph the toadstool) and the viewer is charmed with shape, texture and form rather than a direct message about the shared experience of life.

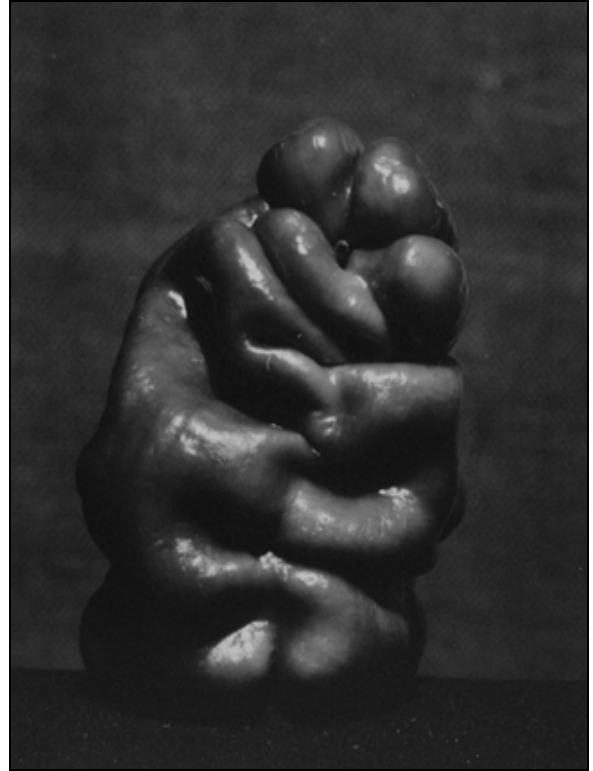




Composition with Skull and Pear, 1979/1981 Irving Penn

This photograph is a perfect example of the use of composition in still life photography and is in a way a departure from Penn's other pieces. As opposed to the work we have seen by Weston (where his subjects are often solitary and the focal point of the photograph is clear) this work is in a way enhanced by the amount of different components that make up the image. The work is a menagerie of contrasts, natural items (for example the skull or the pear) are set along side manmade items (the metal sewing machine or the jug), light objects (the clear white jug or the skull) are placed amongst darker items (the dark pear or the wine bottle for example) and finally smooth textures (such as that on the jug) contrast against the shriveled texture of the pear or the harsh metal body of the sewing machine.

Slightly cluttered it lacks the clarity of his other works (such as the empty plate) and because of this the message given out by the photograph can be misunderstood. Rather than trying to purvey a direct message or feeling (as with the empty plate) here Penn is looking at the texture and changing tones of a collection of different things, he shows metal, glass, ceramics, the slightly rotten pear and even bone. It is the difference between these items and how they look/feel that Penn is trying to express. The composition of the piece adds to this. Firstly he has taken the photograph with the items head on in front of a clear white background. This adds to the effect as the viewer is not distracted by anything and their focus is entirely on the items assembled. The white background also helps highlight the items in the picture by increasing the contrast between the items and itself. Secondly due to the way the items are positioned the viewer's eye is drawn around the piece. White items (for example the jug) are placed next to dark items (for example the bottle), this helps to highlight each one because of their contrasting tones. Items that are not consciously linked (for example the bone skull and the metal sewing machine) are placed together which draws the viewer in to question why?



Pepper 30, Edward Weston, 1930

Pepper, Edward Weston, 1929

This is one of Weston's most famous still life images. It is a photograph of a solitary pepper and is again an example of his simplistic approach to still life photograph. As with his photograph of the shell Weston has used a camera specially designed with a very small aperture (f64) which enables him to capture all of the detail in both the subject matter and the background. With resemblance to his toadstool and shell work Weston has again chosen a natural object as his main subject and has again excluded all but the main subject.

Although Weston has again used a very common item through his photography he has made the viewer look at it in a new and interesting way. Although we see the pepper the shape of it conjures up other images in the mind of the viewer. Through very clever use of lighting and composition Weston has given the shape and form of the pepper a sensuous almost erotic quality (it is no surprise that Weston was well known for his nude photography work). The front of the pepper can be said to resemble the torso of a naked person (though obviously this is in the eye of the beholder). The sumptuous quality of the subject is enhanced by the use of a dark background. If Weston had placed the pepper against a white backdrop it risked being too clinical and stark whereas the darker background means all of the light in the photograph is on the subject enhancing its curves. Even though this is a simply constructed image (in that it is one subject taken simply) it shows how clever still life photography can be. To show this I have also included one of Weston's other pepper images along side this. Although the subject matter is exactly the same the image differs due to the viewer's interpretation of the shape.



Salad Ingredients, New York 1947 Irving Penn

In this photograph (done as an editorial piece for Vogue magazine) Penn again has made use of simple composition in still life. His items are placed against a neutral (almost) white background which helps to enhance his use of colour (if he had used a darker background it would detract from the contrast caused by the white) and bring the work to life. Again Penn has made use of the texture in his subject to enhance the image and make it more appealing to the viewer. The slightly crumpled texture of the lettuce is set in contrast to the straight lines of the spoons and the roundness of the lemon. There is a freshness to this image with its vibrant colours which helps to add to the meaning (the use of colour is evident throughout his work when adding meaning to the pieces whether it be the bright vibrant colours of this piece giving the work impact or the lack of colour in his street trash work for example where shooting in black and white expresses the used and dirty nature of his subject matter) He has even used colour to break up the slightly dull look of the cutlery, the oil and vinegar used to add effect to the neutral colour of the spoons bringing them to life.

Although this image is a common one through his clever use of composition the viewer is drawn into the photograph and has to look at everyday items in a different way.



Excusado, Edward Weston, 1925  
Fountain, Marcel Duchamp, 1917

Although not as famous as his Peppers study this is probably my favourite still life photograph by Weston. In this image Weston forces the viewer to look at a very common and mundane object in a different way (this is reflected in his later photographs for example the shell, where he chose to photograph it face on rather than the more common side shot as we saw earlier). If he had taken the photograph from above he would have simply created a recording shot of a toilet (with all of its mundane functionality) but by choosing a low down angle looking up at the toilet he has forced the viewer to concentrate on its form and its aesthetics. This is also enhanced by the fact that the toilet is the only item in the photograph meaning that the viewer's attention is given solely to his subject and is not distracted by peripheral objects. Weston has excluded all but the ceramic part of his subject matter and this makes the viewer question their original opinions of the subject. The toilet is transformed into an item of beauty (so much so that at first it can be difficult for the viewer to realize exactly what the photograph is of) and looks (rather than an everyday mechanical item seen and used by everyone) almost natural. The very simple use of lighting in the image helps to highlight the subject and emphasis its curves (in a way it is reminiscent of the nude photography by the same artist).

Again as with Penn in his Still life with watermelon we can see the influence of the art world on the artist. Eight years before the photograph was taken Marcel Duchamp had presented his work Fountain to the art world. By placing a urinal in a gallery as an art installation Duchamp to questioned societies perception of the mundane.

This photograph is the perfect example of Weston's aim throughout his still life work, he wants the viewer to questions their own preconceptions of objects and to look at them in new and interesting ways. He shows that there can be beauty in everything.



Lion Skull, 1986 Irving Penn

Although reminiscent of Weston's still life work Penn shows through this photograph how even a simple subject can be transformed through still life photography and be given an almost statuesque appearance. In a similar move to his photographs of urban waste Penn has again taken the disused and slightly morbid as his subject matter and transformed them into art. As with a lot of the work we have seen by Weston (such as the Toadstool or the Pepper) in this still life work he uses the form and structure of his subject. There is clever use of lighting in this photograph with the front of the skull given the majority of the light while the back of it is left in shadow. It also adds to the contrast in the photograph as it helps highlight the cavities in the skull itself by throwing them into shadow. This not only helps give structure to the subject (the viewer sees the skull as three dimensional as opposed to two) but also depth to the picture. It also helps add impact to the photograph in that it helps highlight the once sharp jaws of the long dead subject matter giving it an air of menace and reminding the viewer of what it once was. Again Penn has used a neutral white background for the photograph which means that all of the viewer's attention is focused on his main subject matter and is not distracted. He has taken the photograph from a very close angle which also adds emphasis to his subject.

As with a lot of Weston's still life photography Penn forces the viewer to question their preconceptions of the item. The photograph is essentially of the remains of a dead animal but because of its beauty the viewer is drawn into the image rather than repulsed.



Pharmacy, Damien Hirst, 2009

This installation by the artist Damien Hirst again shows the importance of composition and planning in art. Here Hirst has recreated an entire chemist shop and every effort has been taken in planning to ensure that the installation was exact. In a similar way to Penn and Weston Hirst has taken something ordinary (and of which nearly everyone has had experience) and has used it to evoke memories and feelings from peoples past. It also asks questions of the viewer in a similar way to Penn and Weston in that although the art mimics a pharmacy in every detail it is not a chemist, it makes that viewer ask what exactly it is that makes a room a room and how much is a sense of place defined by its contents.

As with still life photography, Installation art depends on a participation from the viewer. The piece is what it is, it is in the reaction, feelings or questions that it evokes in a person that define it and raise it above the commonplace into a work of art.



My Bed, Tracey Emin, 1999

I have included this (infamous) piece of installation art by the modern artist Tracey Emin as I believe it too is an example of the use of composition in work and is in its own way a still life. Although the piece looks chaotic it is all planned and every item has its place (as opposed to the work by Hirst where the composition relies on it being an exact replica of a pharmacy the composition in this piece relies on the appearance of chaos). The whole installation has had its composition organized to evoke a reaction from the viewer. In a similar way to Penn and Weston Emin in this work makes you look at the familiar in a new and interesting way. Although the image is a common one (everyone is used to seeing a just slept in bed), this is not your bed and in reality you are seeing it for the first time (even though it seems familiar). The piece evokes feelings of confusion but also (as with the still life photographs we have looked at) makes you question your preconceptions on exactly what can be seen as art.

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