

**CREATIVE
MASTERCLASS**

COLOUR ABSTRACTS

BOLD COLOURS AND STRONG SHAPES ARE
THE FOUNDATIONS FOR IMAGES WITH IMPACT.
LEE FROST SHOWS HOW IT'S POSSIBLE TO CREATE
GREAT SHOTS OF ANYTHING, ANYWHERE

WORDS & PICTURES: **LEE FROST**

WE HAD A SPRING CLEAN in the Frost household recently, and while tidying up the kids' playroom I happened upon a pile of paintings that my daughter had done when she was at nursery school. There was no delicate brushwork in pastel hues; no intricate detail. It was all big, brash splotches of primary colour. Reds, yellows, blues, greens – the brighter and bolder the better. Houses were squares with triangles on top. Mum and dad looked like lollipops with sticks for arms and legs, an oversized smile and big, round eyes. Everything was in its simplest form – just bold shapes and strong colours. But despite the lack of detail, they looked fantastic, and we now have several of them framed and hanging on the wall.

This got me thinking about photography, and how in this digital age we've become obsessed with detail. However, there's a lot to be said for taking a step back and trying to see things through a child's eyes, because more often than not it's the colour and form that makes a picture work more than the smaller details, and by stripping things back to these two basic elements, powerful pictures are guaranteed.

Reality check

When we stop to take a picture, it's because we have seen something that appeals to our visual senses. Unfortunately, those senses tend to work on a limited set of values, so we're very selective about what we photograph and what we ignore. You may be naturally drawn to a particular type of building, for example, but pay no attention to another, and what one photographer finds visually appealing you may not even see. Consequently, every minute of your life, potentially great pictures are being missed simply because we didn't even notice they existed in the first place.

The aim of abstract photography is to overcome familiarity so that you begin to see things in a completely different way. To do this you need to tune your senses so that you're more sensitive and responsive to the world around you. Once you're able to do this, it's amazing how fresh and exciting even the most familiar things can be. A car parked by the roadside is no longer just a car, but an object full of graceful curves, graphic reflections and contrasting shapes. An old wall covered in peeling posters is suddenly an eye-catching array of patterns, textures and colours.

Urban locations are the perfect place to take abstract images as there are so many different shapes, colours, textures and patterns jostling for space in a restricted area. The urban landscape is also ever-changing – no street looks the same for more than a few minutes as people and vehicles come and go, so there is always something different to photograph.

You can also create successful abstract images around your own home if you spend time looking and exploring. Red brick captured against a deep blue sky, a colourful sign against a painted door or the play of shadows on a stone wall – chances are you see past these things every day without giving them a second glance, but they all make perfect subject matter for appealing abstract images.

Searching for potential abstract pictures can also have a major influence on your photography in general, as it forces you to become more observant and helps to improve your eye for a picture. ➤



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Use polariser power to boost your colour abstract impact

When it comes to creating bold, abstract images, a polarising filter is indispensable. As well as deepening blue skies, a polariser will cut through the glare caused by polarised light on non-metallic surfaces, so that colour saturation is significantly improved. It will also eliminate reflections in glass and water, which can prove useful, especially when shooting architecture, as it helps to simplify the image. The tinted windows in modern buildings tend to go black, whereas without a polariser they often look grey and hazy.

To control the effect, you rotate the polariser while looking through your camera's viewfinder and stop when you like what you see.

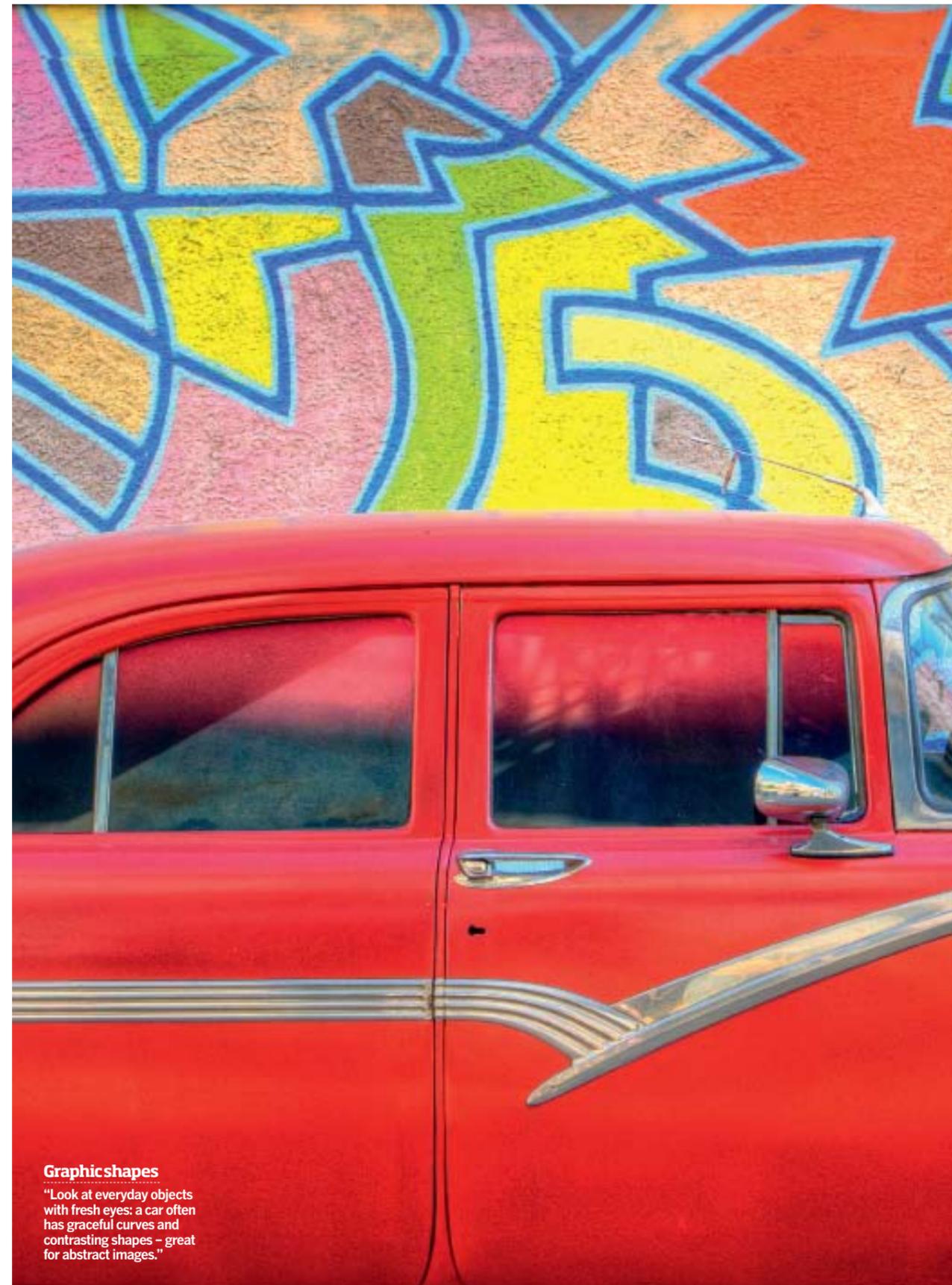
Polarisers work best in bright, sunny weather when there's more polarised light; early morning and late afternoon are prime times as the sun's low in the sky. To get depth from a blue sky you need to keep the sun at a right-angle to the camera so the lens points at

the area of sky where polarisation is at its greatest.

One benefit of deepening blue skies with a polariser is that it makes any lighter tones in the image stand out more prominently, so architectural details or bold shapes such as trees appear to really pop-out.

The only drawback of using a polariser is that you lose two stops of light, which in practise means that you'll end-up shooting at a slower shutter speed so the risk of camera shake is increased. This can be avoided by using a tripod or increasing the ISO.

A lot of digital photographers don't bother using a polariser, on the basis that whatever it does, they can do later during post-processing. Where boosting colour saturation is concerned this is true, but a polariser saves time and does a far better job of improving clarity and eliminating reflections too.



Graphic shapes

“Look at everyday objects with fresh eyes: a car often has graceful curves and contrasting shapes – great for abstract images.”

Light fantastic

Colours and shapes are often defined by the light striking them, so the quality of light and its direction are vitally important when it comes to producing simple, bold images.

The key is to match the lighting to the subject. For instance, you're not going to get a softly-lit landscape at midday, but a building's bold lines and graphic shapes will often be complemented by the harsh, overhead sun. Also, depending on the location of the building, you may have no choice but to shoot near midday, as any other time and it may be obscured by shadows from nearby buildings.

Given the choice, I prefer side-lighting as it reveals texture and form, while the inclusion of long shadows adds interest and in some cases can make the shot. Keeping the sun on one side of the camera will also help you get the best from a polarising filter.

Early morning and late afternoon are prime times to make use of side-lighting because when the sun is low in the sky it casts long, raking shadows and light glances across surfaces, picking out the most subtle of textures. The light is also naturally warm during these periods, so it enhances all that it strikes.

Morning light tends to be much cleaner and crisper than in the evening so it pays to rise with the larks no matter how much you hate getting out of bed. This is because the sun rises over a cold earth and cleaner atmosphere, whereas haze – and in urban areas, pollution – increases as the day moves on, reducing clarity and scattering the light.

Landscapes that are side-lit by a low sun come to life. Delicate ripples in sand dunes are defined by shadows. Rolling hills stand out boldly against the sky. Scenes take on a strong three-dimensional appearance, which is an important consideration as photographs can only record two-dimensions, so you need to give an impression of depth.

Shooting with the sun to your back is less favourable as shadows fall away from the camera and the landscape looks flat. But if you're picking out architectural details or shooting abstracts this factor becomes less important and the colours and shapes in the composition take priority.



Composability

While light defines colour saturation: shapes define the strength of the composition. And it's vital to keep things simple; to look for and identify strong elements in a scene then pull them out. This could be a single tree in the middle of a field of bright yellow oil seed rape, a window on the side of a building, the shapes formed by flower beds in a garden or the patterns formed by columns and shadows. Sometimes these things will hit you straight between the eye, while at other times you'll have to spend time searching for it.

Lenses will help you to do this. Wide-angles are great for stretching the truth. They exaggerate perspective so things in the foreground appear big and bold in relation to more distant elements. Lines are strong compositional tools, and a wide-angle lens will help you make the most of them – use a wall, fence or road to carry the eye through the scene, or emphasise the natural lines created by the repetition of features such as avenues of trees, or rows of colourful beach huts. Move in close to a building then shoot up towards the

sky so the sides converge dramatically – it's an old trick but it never fails, especially with modern architecture.

Look for shapes in a scene; converging lines created by crops, railway tracks or furrows in a ploughed field form a triangle that takes the viewer on a journey to the horizon. Architecture is full of strong shapes: windows, doors, exterior lifts, the design of the roof.

A telephoto zoom will help you to isolate interesting details in a landscape or on a building and exclude everything else from the frame. The way these lenses compress perspective can also be used to emphasise the pattern of repeated shapes and features. The use of colour can have a dramatic impact on the feel on a picture too. Red is the boldest and will dominate a composition even in small amounts – a single red poppy in a field of corn stands out like a sore thumb. Yellow and blue together create the strongest contrast and powerful images. But any warm colour juxtaposed against a cool one will produce a strong visual effect, and if you keep your eyes peeled you will find them all over the place.



Strong lines

"Look for lines that lead the viewer's eye through the frame and side-lit scenes that cast shadows for added interest and depth."

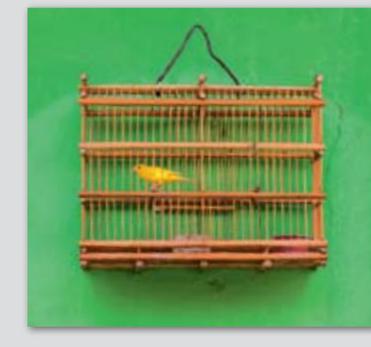
Increase impact with HDR

Last month's *Creative Masterclass* was all about using HDR software to create fantastic character portraits. Well, I often use the same software – Photomatix Pro 3.0 (www.hdrsoft.com) – to make abstract shots more striking.

There are two ways to go about this. The first is to shoot a sequence of three or five images of the same scene, each at a different exposure for example, -1 stop, correct and +1 stop, then run the Raw files through Photomatix. The second is to take a single Raw file, process it three times with the exposure slider at -1, 0 and +1 stop respectively, then run the three images through Photomatix as normal.

Both methods work well, increasing the level of detail and the depth of colour, and if you don't go over-the-top with the Tone Mapping controls, the final image will still look realistic, but bags bolder.

There's also an HDR option in the CS3 and CS4 version of Photoshop (*File>Automate>Merge to HDR*), but I don't find it as effective as Photomatix Pro.



NEXT ISSUE
WE REVEAL THE TRICKS
TO SHOOTING BLACK &
WHITE LANDSCAPES

Colour: Top tips for better abstracts



1) MOVE CLOSER

If you really want to go down the abstract route, exclude all signs of reality and scale so it's not obvious what the subject matter is. Colour and shape should take centre stage.



2) EXPERIMENT WITH ANGLES

Shooting from unusual angles will add impact to your images. Get down low to capture objects against the sky or shoot with the camera off-level to jar the viewers' senses.



3) KEEP IT SIMPLE

Cluttered compositions give the viewer too much to take in, so avoid too many objects in your images. Instead, lean towards bold shapes and strong colours.



4) USE A POLARISER

As already discussed, a polarising filter will give your abstracts a welcome boost by increasing colour saturation and deepening blue sky. It also helps to minimise reflections.



5) LOOK FOR COLOUR CONTRAST

Blue and yellow and red and green are contrasting colour combinations, so look for them and use them as much as you can to create pictures that pack a punch.



6) EXPLOIT THE SKY

A blue sky makes a great 'receding' background when set against warmer 'advancing' colours such as reds and yellows. Remember though, red will dominate a scene.



7) CROP IT

If the composition doesn't quite work, once you come to processing the file, use an unusual crop or make it tighter to remove any distractions for a stronger end result.



8) BOOST SATURATION

The Hue/Saturation slider in Photoshop is invaluable for making colours richer. Use it, but don't abuse it. The Vibrance control in the Raw file processor also works well.