The Art of Composition
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It is said with all things that a good, strong foundation is key to success. Houses built on weak foundations succumb to the elements, taking a test without proper study usually supports the base of the grading curves and relationships based on deceptions eventually fail. The same is true with art. No matter how great the skills or how advanced the tools without that solid foundation, the composition, the work will fail to achieve it's desired goal; to captivate the viewer. Let's not shy away from the truth, as artists, we hope too that the viewers will notice our work and enjoy it, but for them to walk away and remember to it, ah, that is bliss. Hopefully, in this chapter, we will turn poor and ordinary compositions into good ones and good ones into great ones…

So what makes a good composition? To answer that, first let's look at what makes a bad one. While hitting the bull's eye might be great for a marksman, it's lousy shot for an artist. Your center of focus on the composition is always better off-center and targeting the thirds marks are best. Known in art history class as "The Golden Means", "The Rule of Three" or "Magic Thirds", this technique dates back to the "old masters" of the Renaissance. What the theory basically says is that the main elements in the composition should be placed one third from the top, bottom or sides of the work. A composition created with this rule will be always more pleasing to the eye. Sounds too easy??? Let's explore an example.

Figure 1

"Surfboard Hercules" (figure 1) is a good example of a complex composition that uses "magic thirds" effectively. Notice how the main character "the Surfer" is positioned on the left third mark. To further lock his position and solidify the composition his arms are crossed on the upper third. To balance the composition, the top and base of the surfboards line themselves with the upper and lower thirds. You'll notice that the tipped surfboard almost points to the right third mark… that's no accident. Equally intentional is the space between the left two sunbathers nearly drawing the lower magic third line

showing that negative space can be used just as effectively as using your characters or objects. The upper and lower right lines are the most important because when viewing a picture your eye usually enters the picture in the lower left corner. The reason for this is that most western cultures are taught to read left to right. Try not to place too many objects on the right thirds—while "magic thirds" are excellent guidelines—there are problems with too much of a good thing. Too many objects may confuse the viewer. Even with such a complex composition as this, notice that the middle right quadrant hosts only one figure.

How that we hopefully have a new congregation of "magic thirds" converts, we'll mix things up a bit and tell you that you can make a bull's eye composition work. There are many inherent risks involved, but with the proper tools and skills, it can be done. Who has pointed a camera taken a bull's eye shot? Though hit and miss on composition some of them work. Why? Well, on the one's that don't work, your eyes don't either. They locked on that bull's eye subject and get bored quickly. The secret is to keep the eyes moving by having an interesting subject matter or subliminal background.

Figure 2

With "The Buffalo Marshall" (Figure 2), you'll notice the figure is about at dead center as we can get. The figure on the horse makes the vertical line and the buffalo herd adds in the horizontal line. So why does it work? Contrast and perspective are the power tools in this image's arsenal. The light colors in the sky raise our eyes upward. The strong textural elements of the grass and rocks bring them back down. Those two white rocks teach us a new way to read, right to left. Although we may start in the lower left corner, we're immediately thrust to the right side to see the rocks then begin a gentle rise to the mounted character.

The "prairie dog" view camera angle not only gives us an interesting view, it invites us into the image. By hugging the ground with our camera we are no longer third party observers on the prairie, we're part of the entourage.

While the rule of three is a great starting point, there are other techniques to make a composition better. A good composition tells a story. Just as with a good novel, a good composition is paced by a storyline. The storyline starts with the introduction of the thematic elements that are brought to a climax. Sound crazy for a still picture? A good example of this is "Annual Summer Picnic" (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Your eye first picks up the surreal landscape… hmmm, not of this world… then the aliens—definitely not of this world. Your eye picks up the items while traveling to the background—picnic baskets, bags—okay we get the picnic element, then a cow—okay the artist's a little weird… more aliens and then the punch line… a cow staring into what's cooking on the barbeque… probably a good thing the aliens didn't abduct any bulls… The composition does tell a story and uses an "S" curve of images trailing into the perspective to tell it. The elegant "S" curve is a favorite among artists and is said to evoke grace, beauty, strength and perfect balance.

While an "S" curve is a safer form of composition, a straight-line approach can work if properly balanced with the right elements. By adding the element of camera angle and perspective, one can make a simple straight-line composition elegant. This composition form does not necessarily have to be multiple figures.

Figure 4

In "Straggler" (Figure 4), a simple composition is used. Perspective can be a power tool. Using this element your eye is immediately drawn to the cheetah, which is up close and personal. A line of shrubs and grasses is drawn to its intended victim: the buck. While in the distance, and not immediately noticeable, the surprised buck is still clearly the punch line of the story. You'll note the clear use of "magic thirds". The movement of the composition from left to right—very easy on the eyes. Here's a good example of how to make a good composition better. The same image could have easily been created without the perspective, the entire cheetah at one third and at equal size buck at the other. By dropping the camera view to the characters point of view and panning in on him, we now are in the hunt, too. Also with the use of the diagonal story line, we give the composition a sense of force and energy to the viewer. The cheetah is given the feeling of readying to pounce. This feeling isn't just caused by the pose; the diagonal composition adds the edge. Even, the buck has the appearance of heighten alert. If the image were in a horizontal line composition, the energy would be lost and we would have a much calmer scene as we do in "Savannah" (Figure 5)

Figure 5

The most common pitfalls of artists trying to avoid the bull's eye composition, is to jump to the "bookends" form of composition. Since dead center doesn't work and off center looks funny, they choose to balance the composition with two equal weights positioned each side of the image. This is also known as compositional symmetry. While balance is often safe, it is also boring. Instead try something asymmetrical. In "Savannah", we have the two bookends with totally different weights. The left side is simple, weighted by a large, solid piece of negative space (the sky) and a stationary animal. The center two trees frame the apex. On the right side, we have trees and active animals with darker tone. The reason for the darker, more active right side to help us as viewers flow with the natural left to right reading of an image. Your eye tends to go the brightest area first, the large section of negative space on the left. It then moves right, eventually hitting the punch line of this story, the giraffe in the middle side, checking us out. So here we find that colors and shapes can be used as tools just as effectively as the characters in compositions. Also, that horizontal and vertical line compositions tend to promote calmer, more balanced compositions. This brings up an interesting point. The type of composition you select may help or hinder the message you're trying to portray in your image.

In "Stampede" (Figure 6), we break some composition rules and take a leap of faith. This again is a horizontal line composition, but this time the main characters do not bookend.

Figure 6

We in fact throw caution to the wind and heavily weight the left side. There is no vast negative space sky or dark foliage/shapes to save us. In this case, two things make the composition work. The poses of the characters are filled with action. Even the tree shadows charge with them. Our eyes wanted to stampede right with them to balance that right side. That motion is aided by the second composition tool, mentioned several times before, the natural left to right eye movement. This composition would not work as well reversed as seen in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Interestingly, the image still reads left to right, not with the herd as you might have expected. And now, your eye is confused, charging into the upcoming herd and wanting to swing back to the left, then bouncing right back into the herd.

Now that, we have our crash course in composition and been stampeded through some theories, let's try to create an award winning composition in Poser.

Composition and Poser

My creative process is a strange one. Most of my images in Poser come from simply playing around with characters. Sometimes, when I have a creative block, I'll force myself to try lesser-used models in my Poser arsenal. This allows my thought process to be a bit more inventive and work through different approaches to solve that age-old question: How to fill the canvas, or in our case, screen.

In this case, since I wanted to stay within Curious Lab's Poser for the entire process. I chose a background model of a sagebrush desert. The model had a built in sky and ground plane so I wouldn't have to export my image to a 3D terrain program such as Vue D'espirit or Bryce. The model also had some portable shrubs included to add to the atmosphere. I then loaded the Michael model (from DAZ 3D), dressed him in old western clothes and began to play with possible poses. When a pose was struck that I liked, I then refined it. During this process, I accidentally posed the left hand in a contorted position. There was the germ of inspiration I was waiting for. I envisioned my character playing a fiddle in the middle of that sagebrush prairie. As he played, his horse longingly looked at him and creatures from the desert gathered around to hear the "Prairie Dog Serenade"… So there was my game plan for the image. Our list of characters would include the fiddling cowboy, his horse, maybe a jack rabbit, a bison or two and of course some prairie dogs. First, let's start by positioning the main character and his horse (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Moving characters around can be pretty tricky, especially when conforming clothes are attached, so I suggest rename the figures to a real name tag rather than "Figure 2" or "Figure 5". To do this, select the figure, then go to the body part selection menu and choose "BODY". Now, press CTRL+I (Character Properties) and rename the "Figure 3" to "Horse" for example.

Now that we have the naming process set, let's look at the basic composition. What message do we want to convey? With a humorous piece, the vertical and diagonal are out—they create tension. I'd suggest a horizontal line, or better an "S" curve composition. A "S" curve could start with some of our small animals, come up to the cowboy, then end in the magic third right side slot with the horse. I also think the camera angle is all wrong in Figure 8. I think a prairie dog perspective is in order. So let's load in couple of the small animals and shape the composition.

As you can see here in Figure 9 we now have a stretched out "S" curve and a new camera position. The camera position was achieved by using the rotation trackball and camera plane controls. I also change the focal range slightly with the camera to give a little depth.

Figure 9

Looking at the image, some items leave me a little uncomfortable. The rabbit and front prairie dog are both the same size and height. They do line up with the lower third, which is good, but it's too much of the same thing. One of the two should be dominant otherwise they both fight for control of the start of the "S" curve. I think the rabbit could be moved back and the prairie dog forward and a little left. The second issue is the horse;

although proportionally it's correct to our cowboy, the perspective and camera angle make the horse appear smaller than it is. We'll fix this by scaling the horse a less little to mimic the correct size. This technique was also used on the front left prairie dog to give the illusion of being right behind him. False perspective can be a powerful compositional tool when used wisely. There are inherent dangers with this technique as well. The loss of depth in false perspectives may need to be compensated for. In a program such as Vue or Bryce, adjusting haze slightly will do the trick. With Poser, the solution is a bit more complex and time consuming. Reducing Poser's Camera Focal parameters from the default 38 percent down to the low 30 may work. The other way would be to alter the focus of the background in post, which can be very tedious. Another issue is the background plane. By changing the focal range in Poser our big sky doesn't fill the top of the screen any more. I could scale the backdrop, but I think drawing in the rest of the sky in post is a better option. Changing the scale may give us pixilated texture map problems later. So let's move the models and do a test render for lighting problems.

Figure 10

With the test render (figure 10), we see the changes have helped. The repositioned rabbit starts our "S" curve nicely. The curve does break down a little bit with the middle prairie dogs but this can be corrected in post by adding foliage and rocks to break-up the very plain looking foreground. Scaling the horse has helped too. The horse fits comfortably the magic third slot and now looks like he can be taken off the pony ride circuit. Lighting is unfortunately a problem. Lighting can be as important a compositional element as one of the characters if done correctly. I think spotlights added to the cowboy's chest and the horse's head, set without shadows, would give those characters the punch they need. The lighting needs to be subtle though as we don't want to give the appearance that we're

using spot lights. Setting the light color to pastel shade to reflect twilight will also help to make the spotlight less noticeable. In post, I think a bedroll add to the horse might be a nice enhancement as well.

Figure 11

With the final version (Figure 11), in post, I added the some drawn fur and sharpened the highlights on the front prairie dog and rabbit's eyes. These added details will again draw our eyes to the forefront characters. In addition, wild grasses using Corel's Painter "Image Hose" were sprayed into place, masking the areas with the "freeform selection" tool to avoid over spraying and to layer the grass elements to build perspective. The perspective was also enhanced by building opacity in the layers as they came to the foreground. The tall grasses in the right portion of the foreground help to strengthen that weak part of the "S" curve so now it flows freely completing our composition. The only thing left is the signature and allowing the public to view it and hopefully remember it.

The rules of composition provide important tools in creating images, however, nothing written here is gospel. Explore and stray from the path. Art is an individual process and should provide you with a unique voice. Remember, as an artist you are allowed to color out of the lines…