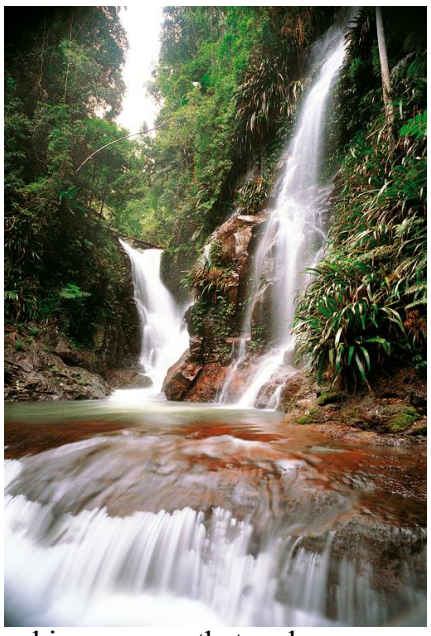
VISUAL BALANCE AND IMPACT

Excitement at the photographic potential we see before us is our initial motivation for taking a photograph. Some aspect of the vast landscape before us has caught our photographic eye and we now call upon all our knowledge of photography to ensure we record it on film as best we can.

To see in this way we need to be relaxed, attentive and attuned to the environment. In this state of awareness, the possibilities simply open up before us. What we see and feel should lead naturally to the means of expression, or at least it will if we feel comfortable and in control of the picture-designing process. It is with this design process that the following discussions on visual composition are involved.

To begin with, there are no absolute rules of design to which the practising photographer must adhere. Rules (perhaps principles is a better term) if they exist at all, are really only helpful suggestions, ideas that have been found by tradition to work and in many cases have produced pleasing results. Pleasant results but perhaps not outstanding ones. Great photographs often achieve a lofty status by actually contradicting these principles. The photographer aiming to produce pictures with great impact must tread the fine line between following tradition on the one hand and flouting these traditional principles when it seems desirable to do so.



What is important is being familiar with convention so that when you deliberately decide to ignore it, you are totally aware of your actions and know why you have chosen to go your own way. In other words, before breaking the rules it is important that you understand them. Otherwise your approach to photography simply becomes a hit or miss affair.

Composing a photograph is a very subjective skill with no two people ever agreeing exactly on a particular arrangement. A discussion of composition is far less objective than the previous discussion of light in photography. The concepts relating to light are accepted by everyone and have their theoretical origins firmly embedded in the scientific discipline of physics. This is not the case with the ideas of composition. These are largely aesthetic issues and it is probably the inherent uncertainty in the decision-making process that makes composing a picture such an intellectual undertaking.

Although it has been proven that a very large number of monkeys at a very large number of keyboards would take an infinite amount of time to randomly type, in one sequence, the complete works of Shakespeare, it is quite conceivable for a single monkey with a high quality camera to produce a prize-winning shot in a finite time. In fact, the theory of probability virtually assures this. What separates this monkey from the informed photographer is that firstly the photographer will usually possess a much higher proportion of good shots amongst his collection, or at least he should. Secondly, and more importantly, the photographer generally knows when he has taken a competent picture. He knows where his photograph fits in or deliberately does not fit in with the theory of composition. It is this knowledge which allows the photographer to continue to take high quality photographs and not merely be a one-shot-wonder.

So what factors go into producing a pleasing picture? Does the arrangement of the subject matter

within a photograph appeal to some inherent trait of our human personality? Is the theory of design based in psychology or are our likes and dislikes simply instilled in us by society and culture? Are we simply inheriting a long tradition of design principles which, over time, have become a convention we all generally accept, or is there something basic in human psychology, something we are born with that makes certain aesthetic forms pleasing to the eye? Probably the answer lies somewhere in the middle ground.

Composition involves arranging the elements within a scene according to two basic criteria. Balance amongst the elements can be considered on a purely physical level with the elements treated as objects devoid of any meaning -- simply areas of varying colour and tone. As well, if the photographer intends the photograph to express a message, and this is usually the case even if it is merely a simple description of the landscape, then this intended message and how the picture elements relate to it, will also influence the arrangement. Whether you follow traditional design principles or not is up to you as art director. There are many examples in modern advertising where traditional balance has been deliberately ignored in order to create a degree of shock and tension in viewers, and hence their attention.

Geometric or visual balance refers to a balance in the components of the landscape irrespective of their meaning or importance. Such attributes as size, position and density of colour all contribute to an element's perceptual visual weight; overall balance within the picture is determined by treating the two lateral halves of the picture as though they were separately placed on either side of a set of scales.

A picture may be a balanced one in that its major elements are evenly distributed but a viewer may not be able to determine the photographer's intention from this arrangement. As an example, a photograph might depict a jumble of boulders with part of a stream running across one corner. Is this a picture of a boulder field or a badly framed picture of a stream with boulders lining its bank? Treating the elements simply as objects with no identifiable meaning, the picture forms a balanced arrangement but when we re-associate meaning with these elements the message remains obscure.

Quite obviously it is possible to have the two factors, geometric balance and the visual message, working in either a discordant or harmonious way. Whether they work together or against each other depends on the photographer's intention but more usually it is desirable to have the message of the photograph expressed by way of a visually or geometrically balanced composition.

The use of conventional composition in art can be found in the works of the great masters. Painters are free to arrange the elements of a picture at will in order to integrate the message within a geometrically balanced picture. Photographers do not have this option. The fact that their tools of trade can very accurately record a scene also means photographers have only limited control over the composition of the picture. Only by shifting viewpoint can the arrangement within a picture be altered and then only in a limited way.

It is not necessary for a composition to be complex in order to be effective. In fact it is desirable to keep the design simple and straightforward. As long as the message is portrayed in a dynamic way, one that maximises impact, the effect will not be boring. It is this balance between simplicity and dynamic impact which results in a competent photograph. Organising the content simply and delivering the message in a powerful way is the essence of effective communication.

In *Elabana Falls*, I have tried to show the wild and dynamic nature of the waterfalls of Lamington

National Park. It is difficult to capture all elements of the scene in a simple two-dimensional photograph and many aspects are lacking -- the tremendous roar as tonnes of water tumble and crash over the rocky strata every second, the spray which quickly drenches you, or the swirling air currents and up-draughts which on a winter's day can chill you to the bone. It is impossible to incorporate these dimensions. Physically, the picture is a simple statement, an accurate portrayal of the falls taken from a point directly in front of them with no attempt to find an unusual angle. This is the place from where most people view the falls and it was my intention that the picture of the cascades be instantly recognisable by those who know them.

As the waterfalls are the dominant visual feature and the subject of the photograph, visual balance was achieved by giving approximately equal weight to the two cascades. Impact was added by instilling some sense of flow in the water by using a long exposure time to soften the flowing water. The effect is to make the water dynamic -- as if it is really tumbling, twisting and cascading down and over the rocks in a never-ending journey. To make any photograph a memorable one, it is necessary in some way to add an element which gives the composition impact, something which catches the eye of the viewer and coaxes that person to linger over the photograph with more intent than might first have been expected.