

IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay

M.Des. P2 Report

## Faces in Phases | Discerning Design in Portrait Photography

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Project Guide: Prof. Sudesh Balan



## Acknowledgment

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My gratitude to Prof. Sudesh Balan for his guidance and the creative freedom allowed to me during the period.

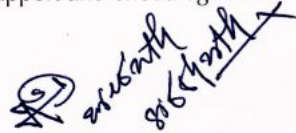
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My gratitude to my family - Achan, Amma and Gautam who have always been a source of support and encouragement.

Aredath Siddharth

A handwritten signature in black ink, written in a cursive style. The signature appears to read 'Aredath Siddharth' and is positioned to the right of the printed name.

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## Ch. 1 Introduction to the Project

The project deals with the study of portraiture from portrait paintings to post digital age portrait photography, its evolution and role with particular emphasis on mapping changes in stylistic approach in photography against art movements of the time, marking out advances in technology and other unique events. It addresses issues of content, paying attention to history, theory, and formal analysis along the way.

Contemporary portrait styles have become more relaxed and less formal in the past decade. What is gained is a level of spontaneity that people seem to like. What is lost is the idyllic, structured way of rendering the human form. There are numerous reasons for the move to a more casual framework. The influence of fashion photography, with its heavily diffused lighting and untraditional posing, is one big reason. A change to modern DSLR and equipments like the electronic flash gives photographers a level of flexibility that lends itself to shooting lots of images and many variations, including more spontaneous poses not just in traditional studio settings.

Digital technology offers the portrait photographer flexibility and speed and, perhaps most importantly, the ultimate in creative control. Additionally, the daunting task of traditional retouching has all but been eliminated by Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Lightroom and its many tools and techniques. The special effects tricks that were once the province of the accomplished dark-room technician are now routinely created quickly and expertly by the photographer using software.

This project attempts to combine some of the time tested disciplines with more contemporary methods in such a way that they will be useful to the modern-day photographer. It is not the intent of this project to impart a series of rules that must be followed without exception. Instead, this report aims to give photographers an understanding of the traditional rules and how they may be broken so they may incorporate what they will into their individual repertoire of techniques.

## Ch. 2 Experiments with light

### 2.1 Field Studies - Initial Work

The initial set of photographs failed to impress me. It was as though I had no connection with the subject and no mastery over the language and craft of photography. I attempted many shots with multiple subjects and settings, yet not one shot was achieved that I felt confident about. I am sharing a few of the initial work here as a marker of time-line. It was clear to me that my skill over the language and craft was much to be desired for.



I have been actively doing photography for the better part of last year and had gained a certain level of skill, at least in my own mind. I assume that is the reason I chose the lofty idea of codifying guidelines. It came naturally to me to assume that there is nothing, or at least very little, else to learn. Been there, got that.

I thought I understood photography. I know how to do what I want to do and like to do. There are, of course, new areas for me to explore and this will always be the case in a field as large and diverse as photography. But regular photography, the kinds of pictures I tend to take whenever I am out taking pictures, I know how to do that. But I did not.. Because I don't know what I don't know, I don't know what I need to know. And because I don't know what I need to know when someone tries to tell me that I do need to know, I don't think I do, so I don't learn.

Here is the most difficult thing I have experienced doing the project - it is very hard to know what I don't know. This makes it particularly hard to learn more and gain mastery. This was the stage I was in and I was not making any progress.

The more you know the more you don't know what you know. So what's a person to do? These meta-cognitive skills (self-learning skills) are hard to acquire and to maintain. One needs some sort of reflector to bounce our inabilities back to realise that I don't know something. That reflector can be a picture I see and I don't know how it is done or a conversation I hear about something I don't understand or an article I read about something I have never tried. The trick is to follow up and fill the gap in my knowledge once I realise the gap exists.

Certainly these learnings and work culture imbibed are the highlights of my project, more so than the photographs itself.

In my case my artist's block was removed by closely studying the works of great photographers. Ansel Adam's zoning, Julia Margaret Cameron's introspective photography, Henri Cartier-Bresson's leading lines, decisive moments and classical approach, Yousuf Karsh's posing and use of hands, Fan Ho's use of available light and Antoine Platon's ability to capture the soul of the subject filled me with wonder and kept me excited about the next shoot.

## 2.2 Field Studies - Understanding the Person

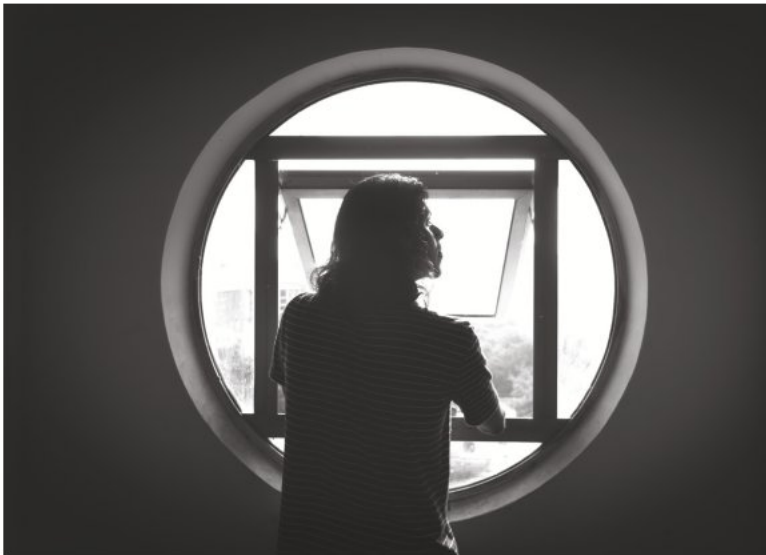
I told myself that the initial failure was a result of not knowing the subjects well enough, that I didn't have a connection with them and they weren't comfortable posing for me. I started shooting my friends and fellow hostellers in the evening light that streams in through a unique circular window that is very iconic of the hostel that I live in.

Now, I had an idea of what I want to say with the photograph and how I wanted my subjects to pose. Finally I could understand and try and create tailored frames depending on the persons character traits. This series came out rather well and gave me a confidence boost to go ahead and continue with the task at hand.

Shared alongside and in the following pages are some of the photographs shot in the corridor. This same window and the experience framing people against it has played an instrumental role in the final leg of my project as well.



The trust and confidence the subject has in you reflects in the photograph



Efforts were made to study the nature of a person and represent it visually



Efforts were made to study the aspirations as well and represent it visually

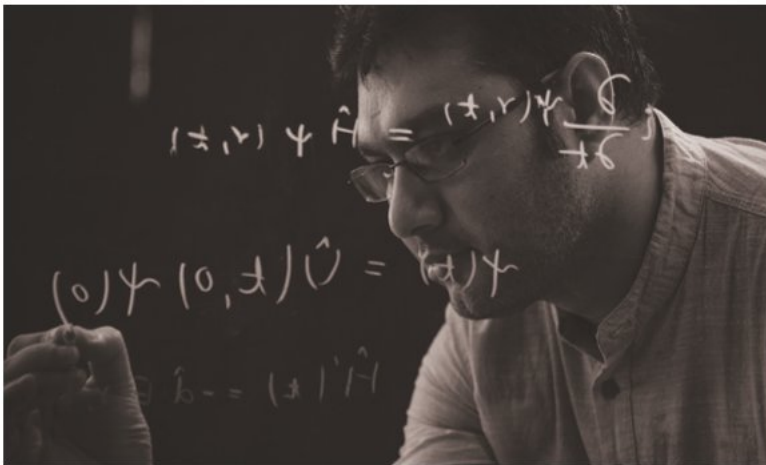
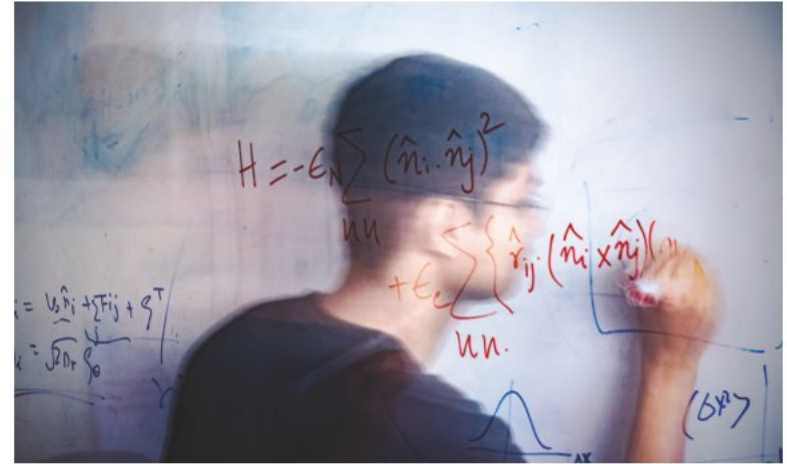
### 2.3 Field Studies -Testing in the Field

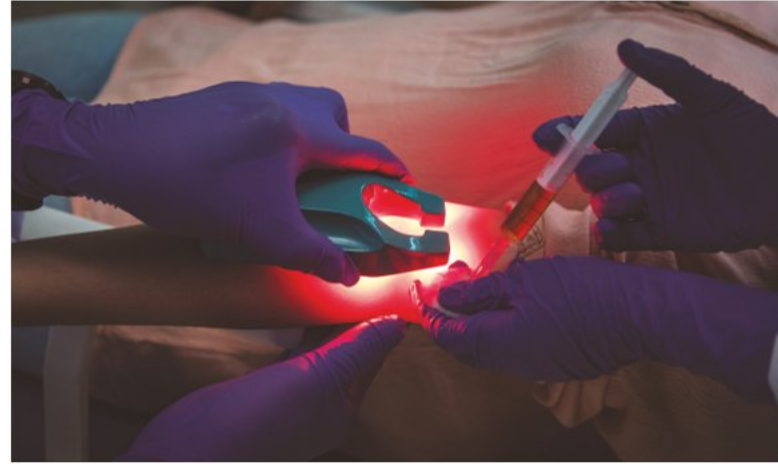
I was lucky to be recruited by IRCC (Industrial Research and Consultancy Centre) of IIT B to shoot photographs for their yearly R&D magazine. The brief was to click aesthetically appealing photographs that were contextually relevant for the articles written by these professors. I was thrilled by this Opportunity. There Were plenty of instances where I got to experiment with lighting, staging and posing.

The assignment was on a tight schedule and I had roughly an hour to converse with the professor, understand the article and shoot for it. This has been a great learning in interacting with and photographing strangers.

The magazine is sub-divided into six categories which required cover images as well. Though I spent a great deal of time for the exercise and shot close to 50 images, I am not sharing all images here as a marker of the time-line.











## Ch. 3 Key Learnings

Learning is best conceived as a process, as against an outcome. In the following pages I have jotted down some of the ideas I have come up with, as a result of my literature reviews and experiential learning.

### 3.1 Composition Elements - Lines

Line is possibly the most basic element of visual composition.

Lines serve many purposes in visual composition. They can divide the composition, they can direct the viewer's eye, they can define shapes and they can make a statement to the feel or interpretation of the image by the viewer.

Vertical (bold), horizontal (stable), diagonal (dynamic), organic (chaotic/soft) and implied lines, all convey different ideas.

In the top picture the face of the subject is the centre of attention as all lines lead towards it.



### 3.2 Composition Elements - Shapes

Shapes are defined by contrast of differing light or colour areas.

Shapes that are abstracted either by blur, shadow, distance or scale begin to have a more dramatic effect and can often create interest and a stronger visual impact.

Cropping, scale, fragmentation, focus, lighting, metaphor and implied shape are various ways one can use shapes to convey or create meaning in a photograph.

The repetition of the basic shapes like triangle, ellipse and cylinder creates a simple imagery in the first photograph.

The appearance of the stark red cube with the cuboidal frame (bang in the centre) is demanding all of the viewer's attention. Furthermore, it is surrounded by organic shapes.



### 3.3 Composition Suggestions - Simplification

Simplification is the technique of reducing a composition to only the most essential elements that support the visual statement.

It should be noted here that simplification implies minimalism. While this is a major part of minimalism, its not limited to that visual style only. It just means your pairing down to only the essential elements.

Re-framing, changing apparent proportion, shifting focus as in depth of field, changing locations to avoid unwanted details or elements, are all effective methods of simplifying ones frame and bringing attention to subject.

The photograph alongside has undergone many stages of simplification. Initially the model was negated using lighting to bring attention to the trophy. Later or the picture further cropped to bring more importance to the trophy.



### 3.4 Composition Suggestions - Negative Space

Negative Space is the technique of using elements of low impact to contrast your subject in a picture. Negative Space isn't always a flat colour, its a contrast to the high impact nature of the subject. This could be a flat colour, but could also be an area of low contrast, low texture, subtle gradient, etc.

This concept in making images is similar to how we exist as human beings. If we don't get a balance of space and activity we can feel claustrophobic. This concept works in visual composition in much the same way. Having a balance of high and low impact activity can emphasise the subject in the photograph as well as give a natural and calming desire to the viewer.

The picture alongside shows the lightning and buildings set against near emptiness. This was achieved in post by cropping the unnecessary.



### 3.5 Composition Guidelines - Rule of Odds

The Rule of Odds states that framing your subject with 2 surrounding objects (thus creating an odd number of 3) suggests balance and harmony visually. We tend to prefer balance and feel comfortable with these groupings of 3. This is a very subjective rule, but it does create balance.

Objects of 5 or more create more density than the viewer will perceive and the effect is null at that point. Larger numbers of objects, however can be divided visually into groupings of 3, thus bringing more cohesion to the composition.

In this image we see that the composition is with three people and that makes the professor in the centre stand out. It is as though the girls to the sides are framing him.



### 3.6 Composition Guidelines - Rule of Thirds

The Rule of Thirds is a common technique for achieving balance in your composition. If you subdivide your photo into thirds both vertically and again horizontally, you'll wind up with an evenly spaced grid. The sections where lines cross are points of interest.

These points are where you want to place your subject, parts of the image where you want attention to be drawn or show points of activity. Rarely will you use all four points – many times one or two – but this is what creates balance in your composition.

In this image the two points of interest are placed near the one-third reference line. The fact that they do not exactly fall on the points create a sense of dynamism as in modern days the Rule of thirds is often used and we being overly exposed to it, relate it to a sense of stability and static appeal.

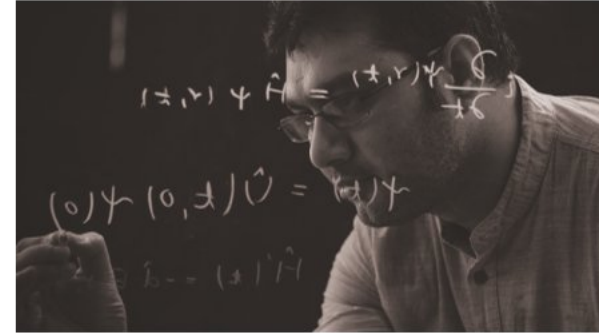


### 3.7 Composition Guidelines - Rule of Space

The Rule of Space is simply a technique that creates a sense of motion, activity or conclusion in your composition. It simply involves creating negative space that relates to your subject.

For example, if you place negative space outside your subjects head in a portrait, you imply maybe there is thought going on – particularly if you direct your subject's eyes toward the negative space.

If we look closely at the image we can see how the equation is completed; yet a sense of motion is felt as a result of the negative space that has been left for the viewer to perceive and read.

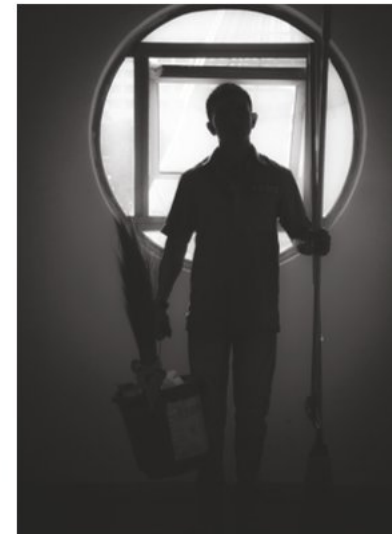


### 3.8 Composition Guidelines - Sub-framing

Sub-framing is simply taking an object or subject in your image and framing it with lines within the composition, thus having a picture in a picture.

This is a nice way to place emphasis on something in the composition and is particularly effective when an object is small and surrounded by detail.

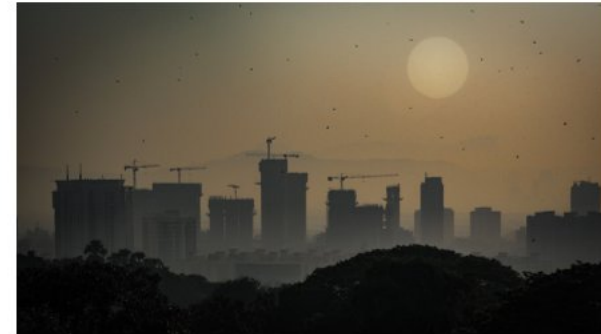
In this photograph the silhouette of the subject is framed against the light that pours in from the window. The basic shapes, a circle and square sub-frames the head of the model, restricting our vision and interest from wandering elsewhere. One might also use the vignette (darkened areas near the corners) around the photograph to strictly bind the onlooker's attention to the centre of the image. This is a technique I have often used in this series of images created for the R&D magazine.



### 3.9 Composition Guidelines - Rule of Odds

Rhythm is a very important part of visual composition. Unlike the “rule” series of thinking, rhythm simply exists. Its in every composition to some degree. What’s important is learning to control the rhythm elements of visual composition. Most obvious visual rhythms occur through repetition. Sometimes there is symmetry to this repetition and sometimes objects can be syncopated against other like symmetrical objects. Chaos adds complexity and simplicity adds tranquillity.

In this image, the effect caused by the rhythmic rise and fall of the skyline and the cranes set atop them, brings in interest as well as the gradual reduction of visibility due to fog.



### 3.10 Composition Elements - Tempo

Tempo is another metaphor to music as in with Rhythm. Much like using Rhythm, Tempo can give you a nice variety in the pacing of your images and thus create more interest. In music, tempo indicates the pace of the music and how fast or slow it moves over time. This is a challenge to represent this in a still photograph and your own personal interpretation is essential. It has to deal with showing a moment in still image giving a sense of time and speed.

This image was shot in-camera with long exposures up-to one second. While the subject remained motionless, the animated crowd along the corridor created this effect.



#### Ch. 4 Towards Meaning - Final stage before Studio work

Meanwhile other exercises were progressing, I was making progress in knowing and capturing images of a worker from my campus.

Ravindher Jadhav is a young Maratha, who works as a sweeper in my hostel. His confidence and outgoing nature has definitely helped me get closer to him, but, it is our shared interests in maintaining unique personal appearances helped me break the ice.

He is first and foremost a husband and a father. It is for the education of his little girl that he left his job as a driver and became a sweeper. It is obvious to me his pride is hurt at the step down in social rungs, but he is sensitive enough to place the needs of his family above his ego.

Over the span of two months, I have associated with and accompanied my friend and subject, Ravi in various activities of his. Some of the photographs I shot are in the following pages.





Ch. 5 Studio Photography









## **Ch. 6 Conclusion**

What is common to all the images with which this report is concerned, of course, is the presence of a subject—a person or a group of people on the other side of the lens. But there is something else of equal importance, something that is not literally visible in the image. It is something quite apart from the manifest subject. It is what finally makes a picture come alive. It is the presence of the photographer's thoughtful regard.

While attempts were made to codify a set of guidelines and suggestions it can only take an image so far in terms of visual appeal. The success of a visual is also in its narration. This takes a careful study and understanding of the person to be photographed and his set and setting.

A well thought out photograph will make the viewer think. In this age of mobile photography when everyone is an image maker we must pause and think about the relevance of our subject and the object of our actions. Not only do photographs affect personal lives; they can affect the public as well.

That is the kind of image making I want to deal with in future.

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