Hedonism in Abstract Art: Minimalist Digital Abstract Photography

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Abstract

In this piece of writing the writer/artist puts forward the view that art can be understood and taken in as sometimes purely hedonistic. By drawing upon the theories pertaining to hedonism, he applies this view to minimalist digital abstract photography and tries to justify his point of view with the help of three abstract photographs.

Science is the one instance of human thought that has got the most explanatory power. Science explains, and that is wherefrom its importance comes. Its explanatory power is not only useful; however, it can also offer great amounts of pleasure for an intelligent being. Yet there are other instances of human effort in which pleasure is the only goal. From the Greek hedonist Democritus to today's hedonist/atheist philosopher Michel Onfray, we can follow a line of pure pleasure in human thought. Hedonism, as a principle, is a philosophy of enjoyment. It is vastly misunderstood, though. It is a common error to say that hedonism simply means doing only and exclusively that which brings the subject intense pleasure. This line of thought falsely accuses and misinterprets the hedonist of taking joy as the only goal in life, sacrificing everything else to the unique goal of achieving greater states of gratification. This is incorrect on many a level.

The designation 'hedonism' comes from the Greek word for 'pleasure', ήδονή. Democritus defined the ultimate goal in life as reaching 'contentment'. Aristippus of Cyrene was yet another philosopher that defined the Socratic maxim of happiness as one of the many goals of moral action, while Epicurus in a similar vein defined the state of *ataraxia* (αταραξία) as the freedom from fear and *aponia* – the absence of bodily pain – as goals to be reached in life. Epicurean hedonism may be the type of hedonism a scientist might embrace, as it finds the ultimate good and ultimate pleasure in knowledge and in living a virtuous life.

Art, thus, is a form that can be understood and taken in as sometimes purely hedonistic, as the subject derives sheer pleasure from the perception of the piece of art in front of him. Hedonistic abstract art is precisely that type of art where nothing needs to be *understood*, it only has to be *felt*. This point of view takes a break from Epicurean hedonism and immerses the subject – the perceiver – into pure pleasure. While Francisco Goya's famous piece *The Third of May 1808* needs the subject to *understand* it as well, to *comprehend* the horrors of war, abstract art is deprived of heavy semantics and concentrates on the purely visual. The very definition of art, after all, is that it is a type of human action in which emotions take the leading role.

Thus, in my minimalist abstract photography (that can barely be even called photography – I use the word simply because the *foundation*, the *canvas* of the image is taken by a digital camera) concentrates solely on three major instances relevant for any visual piece of art: *spatial composition*, *color* and the *light versus dark contrast*. I find the third instance most important, as the very word *photography* literally means 'painting with light'. The foundations of each picture were taken by a digital *Practica*, after which the .jpg format photographs were 'played with', that is, modified towards the achievement of the desired levels of saturation (color), contrast (black versus white) and composition (cropping the image to the desired form). All of that was done in the *Photoshop CS*.
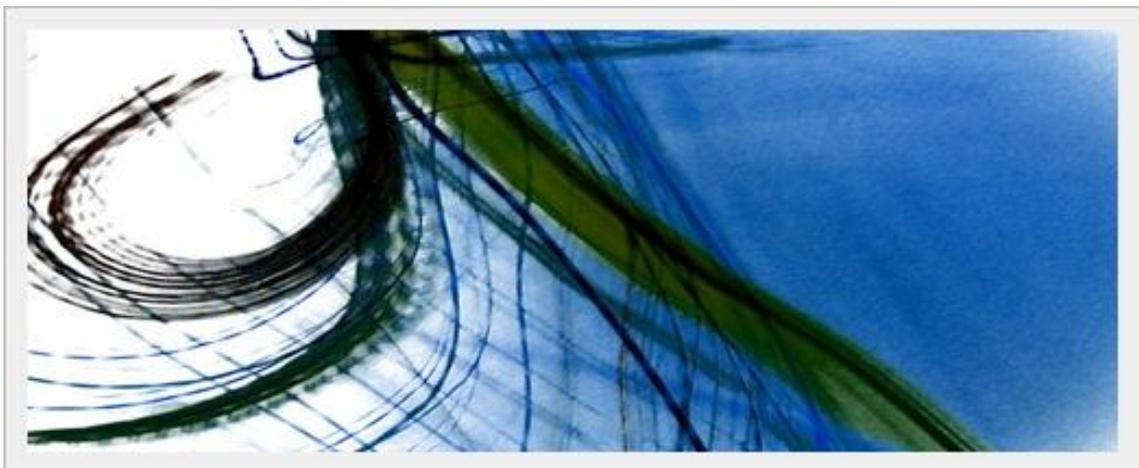
The digital camera came as a much practical and less financially demanding means of taking pictures. Before the *Practica*, I was working with older cameras such as the *Zenit*, *Minolta* and *Yashica*. All the initial black and white photographs I used to develop myself (years ago), while the colored ones had to be taken to be developed. After the development of the *Photoshop* serials, even the film-based old type cameras could have their films developed and

transferred to a digital media (jpg to cd), but it all took both money and effort. The era of digital photography open up new doors to practicality and abstract art.
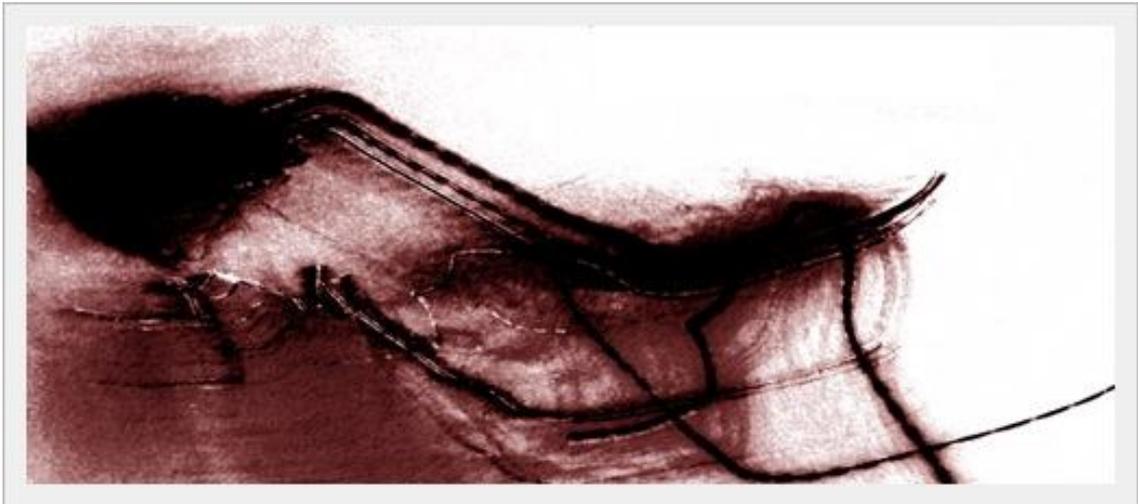
When it comes to using a digital camera versus an old one, there is much controversy. Some feel that technical development has 'made everything easier' and that 'true photographers' only use old cameras and develop their films themselves. I must accent that this is a vast misunderstanding. It would be the same if we said that writers today are not what they used to be because they do not use ink and goose feathers any more, but *Microsoft Word* instead. The artist has got to keep up pace with the society. It is not the type of camera that defines a photograph – it is his competence to make a composition, use the contrast between colors and between the light and the dark.

In the vein of Edgar Allan Poe's known essay 'The Philosophy of Composition' (1846) in which he describes in detail how he created probably one of the most beautiful poems ever written in the English language, I shall proceed to show how my works of art have come to pass, giving a brief overview for each of the three pieces I am going to present here.

The *So Above, So Below* (picture below) composition, for instance, is based – as many of my pieces are – on a diagonally-held composition, where a tangible diagonal line of division intersects visibly the main frame, separating the white area from the blue, thus creating a visible contrast. The lines add to the dynamics of the composition, perhaps asking the viewer to wonder what they actually represent. The texture of the right-based sky-blue part reminds on the texture and outlook of a watercolor work and the representation of the sky, for me, a personal reminder of my earlier watercolor days.

The *Let It Be* composition is a monochrome one. The contrast, so pleasing to the eye, is here based exclusively on the difference between white – the lack of color – and black/dark – all the colors mixed together. The blotch in the middle gives the impression of chalk and charcoal, ever so often used in every artist's early education. The diagonal, this time, is not a clear cut one – it is but a difference in shade between the upper-right and lower-left corner of the piece.

The Tower of Despair is one of the pieces in which I used the night – the bane of many a photographer – to my advantage. With a low exposition value and a highly opened shutter, I twisted the camera while taking a picture in almost utter darkness, so that the soft glow of the streetlights visible in the distance would leave a trail in form of whitish lines, after which a negative was made, re-saturated and turned upside-down, thus making the fence-like structure that serves as the grounding for the picture. The misty tower in the distance might just have been a pillar of lighter background, or the remnants of the form of a building, carefully rubber-stamped towards the achievement of the desired form.

The *framing* of the pieces presented here is a different story. I prefer to manually frame all of my pieces and to select every frame and/or mat myself. The choice of the frame heavily depends on the composition itself. The *So Above, So Below* composition should be put on a wide white background behind a glass cover, so that the whiteness of the mat should strengthen the blue color in the piece. *Let it be*, however, due to its sepia-like saturation, deserves a simple wooden frame, with no glass, allowing the woodenness to be strengthened by the frame.

The pictures themselves are to be viewed in large formats, with the mat even up to 15 inches wide.

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