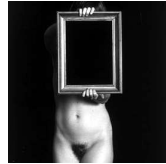


On Simple Ground:

Figure and Background

There is a fair bit of talk about figure/ground relationships in art. And there is a fair bit of talk about the environment in which you find the figure. And all of this is valid in its way. But especially in the latter case, the person becomes somewhat diminished in favor of the relationship of the "object" to the environment. It is of course a matter of what you mean to accomplish. In those instances where my intention and focus is entirely upon the person, I find that I prefer the less distracting environment of the plain field. The background is just one more level of stuff to keep track of. It is the old "tree out of the head" problem writ large. If I'm concentrating on that, I'm not focused on the subject. There is a large group of my photographs which can be said to be almost entirely foreground.



Laura, 1990

This has always been one of my favorites. The background was a white sheet lit from behind. The figure was lit solely by a reflector. The exposure, based on the reflected light, completely wiped out the texture of the background. What was left, then, was the figure, the plain field, and the direct gaze. Here I think it's the eyes that make the image, and I'm not certain that they would have had quite the impact if they'd had to be sorted out from a highly detailed background.



Nancy, 1985

One of the terms for this non-subject area in an image is "negative space". I've never like that phrase. It seems to say that there is an area which plays no role in the composition-an area which could simply be eliminated, or perhaps used better. I'd like to think that isn't true of my photographs. I'm certainly hoping I didn't waste the right half of this image.



Helga, 1997

There is nothing quite like a plain field to emphasize a boundary. Here that boundary is the long sweep of the back. Curve, shadow, and the texture of flesh are all that remain.



Linda, 1992



Texture-especially subtle texture- is more apparent against a plain field.

Nancy, 1985

With an almost entirely flat background, what remains are the effects of muscle tension and gravity. The eye and mind have nothing else to sort out—no other competing visual cues.



Linda, 1992

Years ago a reviewer observed that I was comfortable in the flattened space of 2-dimensional media. He was certainly right. A high proportion of these images make use of a very limited number of planes. This is perhaps one of the more extreme examples. The figure itself exists at a single visual level. By the nature of the lighting, the depth within the figure has been severely reduced. The composition relies on the background-filled "holes" to provide a contrast to the figure and to contribute to the sense that it may in fact be a cardboard cutout.



Linda, 1992

It is always tempting to define the field as the absence of subject. But this is far too simplistic. Even when the field has no texture, no depth, and no form, it can be a presence in its own right. Under the right circumstances- such as here- the background can be a weight, a downward pressure on the figure holding it to the bottom of the frame.



Linda, 1992

This image reverses the usual relationship between the figure and the field. Here, a section of the plain field has become foreground—even to the point of being the focus of the photograph. This is helped in part by its very near dead center placement. It is reasonable to say that this image is entirely about the field.

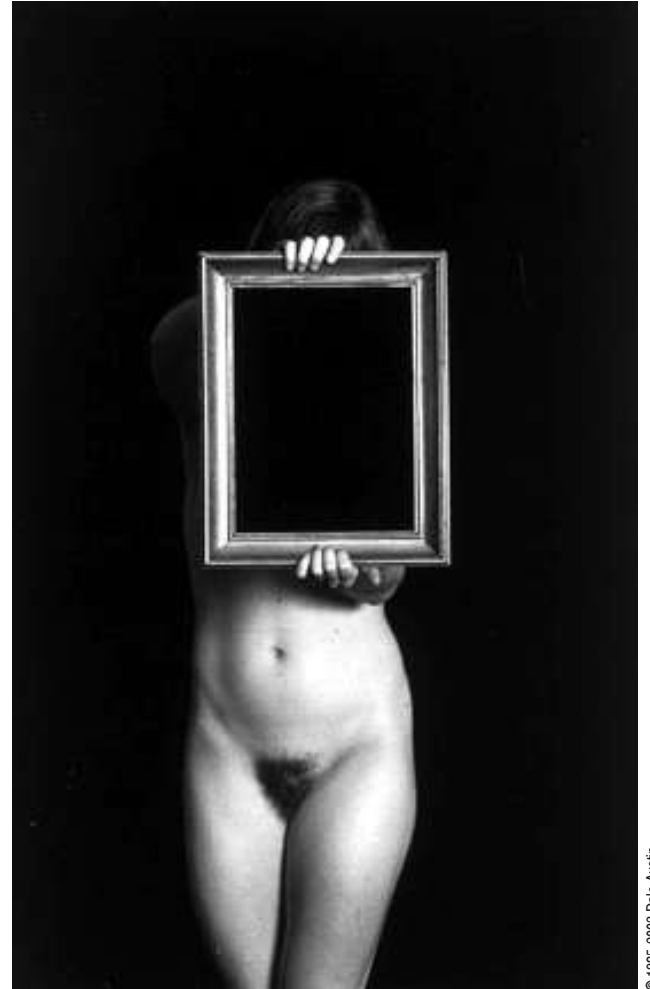


Photo Notes is a series of short essays on various photographic topics illustrated with examples from my own work. I'm not claiming any great insight into art, photography, perception, or even my own goals and motivations as a photographer. Rather, in the course of reviewing some 25 years of photographs, I noticed some trends in my work and I thought I'd write down a few observations. Recognize that all these observations are strictly post-hoc. I can't claim to having thought them out before making the photograph or noticed them at the time I was working. It's only with the luxury of time and distance that I find patterns emerging.

Photo Notes can be found on the web at:
www-personal.umich.edu/~mrwizard

The Photo Notes Series

Sunlight Through the Window:

Natural Light and the Figure

On Simple Ground:

Figure and Background

The World is Flat:

Geometry and Abstraction

All text and photography is ©1975-2003, Dale Austin