

	Open College of the Arts
	Tutor report

Student name	<b>Madhvee Deb</b>	Student number	<b>508378</b>
Course/Module	<b>Digital Photographic Practice</b>	Assignment number	<b>5</b>

### Overall Comments

Once again Madhvee the assignment presentation is excellent and detailed. Your rationale for the project is succinctly and accurately explained and your reflective references concerning the two projects that have inspired you have enabled you to form your own 'take' on this photographic essay. I like your thoughts concerning the 'sadness' of the research projects and how you wanted your images to capture your Father in laws spirit.

Overall I really like what you have done here, there are some issues and you acknowledge most of these within your annotations so I hope you take my criticisms in a positive and reflective way.

An appropriate decision to not 'over' Photoshop the images although some images have a different 'look' and slight inconsistency with quality which could have been adjusted in post-production with no loss of artistic integrity (see comments below). You mention using an 'aged look pre-set' and I wonder if it is this that is causing the slight inconsistency? The removal of the towel rail in image 5 was not necessary and is distorting the environment and is an example of 'over Photoshopping'. In documentary and photo essay work it is good practice to limit post-production to colour, contrast and tone correction. This would include black and white conversion if required. Slight tidying up of images and minor retouching but not the removal of key objects within the frame as this presents a false representation. You comment upon this yourself on your blog!

Photographers have always used post-production technique to give images a look and feel, in silver days this may have been cross-processing or darkroom manipulation. My take on this in the digital age is to be wary and to use pre-sets with caution, are they adding something to the image? Are they distracting from the content? Are they within the context? Do they work across the set of images in a coherent way? Why would you want to hide the clutter and dated décor? Surely that is part of the narrative and charm of the images?

Your wish to capture the environment is successfully introduced and your images do convey a strong sense of place and perhaps a bygone time, which is very appealing. I am glad your flash unit failed! As the use of available light makes for atmospheric images that help convey the sense of time and place. Your suggestion of using off camera flash is interesting but I feel inappropriate for the style of images that your essay demands. It is the naturalness of the ambient light that is appealing and that helps with the sense of place. I agree that limitations due to noise are not overbearing on this set of images and image content outweighs the slight technical issues and you demonstrate excellent awareness of these issues. However using a wider aperture with a shallower depth of field would have allowed a lower ISO to be used.

There is an inconsistency between your final digital images and the images used with captions within your PDF, the PDF images lack the atmosphere of your separate digital images and prints.

From your image descriptions you make evident an effective use of technique and learning outcomes from 'Digital Photographic Practice', however some images use techniques that are not best practice and appear to be employed to 'rescue' the situation, such as over sharpening – see individual image comments.

### **Feedback on assignment**

**Image 1.** Your concerns over capturing all the relevant routines your Father in law enjoys are noted and this project would certainly benefit from trying to build on should time and circumstance permit.

As this is the opening image I would have liked to see slightly more of your F-I-L face. I quite like the ambiguity of this however, so not necessarily all his face, look at the opening image from Philip Toledano's work. Effective use of available light. The printed image has retained more atmosphere than the

digital version, do not be over concerned about retaining outside detail as this may lead to a loss of contrast within the main subject. Effective use of depth of field, looking again at Philip Toledano's work he uses an extreme depth of field which adds ambiguity and atmosphere. His images do not always show in detail who is involved in the scene and this lets us form our own interpretation creating a more intimate image that draws us in and affecting our senses. Technically shooting at a much wider aperture would also allow a lower ISO to be used.

**Image 2.** Again the print has retained more atmosphere than the digital version, The empty chair is an effective metaphor for loneliness and change and this image is well seen from that perspective, slight change of viewpoint more to the right may have allowed the vertical and horizontal lines to become less complex. This would also have allowed the edge of the chair to break into the empty space behind the door. The available light is mostly from the front which has the effect of reducing the image to shapes without form and as such the image has a flat 2D quality. Your description of the room and its memories is interesting but the image does not convey that past activity. Looking again at Toledano, his image of the dead brother is so simple – the picture frame, shadow and disposable gloves, very emotive minimal elements that together convey so much information and emotion. The complexity of Image 2 has lots of information but little of it is helping the narrative.

**Image 3.** A great image that has a strong narrative and effective use of natural light. Let down technically as the point of focus seems to be the background rather than the subjects face. Perhaps shooting at a wider aperture would have allowed a lower ISO and less noise. Exposing for the subjects face and allowing the window to burn out more would add atmosphere. Although this digital module emphasises controlling tones sometimes we can allow certain tones to become pure white or black and not hold detail, a decision the photographer must make depending on factors such as the coherent look to all the images, context and narrative – does allowing less detail in through the window alter the narrative or does the increased contrast add ambiguity and atmosphere?

**Image 4.** An interesting image that perhaps allows us to glimpse how your F-I-L sees the world. You have taken some risks with this image and used digital technique experimentally, I find the image somewhat jarring in terms of its framework within the essay, I understand the narrative you are trying to

convey but the image tones and look are very different to the other images and it becomes an oddity, a lone image that is not part of the coherence within the rest of the assignment. The written narrative describes the man looking out of the window and distressed and aging posters (relevant to your F-I-L) but due to the technique this is lost.

**Image 5.** I like the spontaneity and interaction you have captured here, technically focus, once again, is on the background, over sharpening technique has been employed on the subjects face which has produced a halo and emphasised noise. If using auto focus then you must ensure that the focus area is positioned not in the centre but on the main subject area, in low light conditions auto focus will struggle as it relies on contrast and reasonable levels of light, manual focus is usually the best option. As mentioned above removing the towel rail in Photoshop was not required, it is a part of the room and adds narrative to the story, if you did not wish it to show then changing your viewpoint to hide it behind the subject or to lessen its impact would have been a more sympathetic route.

**Image 6.** I really like this image, for me it is the strongest in the essay with a 'classic' documentary feel and a very strong sense of place. Great use of line and diagonal that really involves us in the image. The expressions and interaction, or lack of it!, between the three subjects immediately suggests inefficiency and this is reinforced by the timeless and aged décor and office fittings. This works really well with available light. You comment upon the dynamic range being on the limits of the sensor, this is good knowledge to have but why be concerned? In documentary photography it is quite acceptable to record scenes where perhaps some highlights are blown and some shadows are black, too much detail in shadows and highlights may well produce a flat and uninteresting image. The important concerns are that the image conveys what you see in a considered and effective way. So it is good to understand the dynamic range capabilities of your camera this is sound technical knowledge that this module is concerned with but do not always feel that you have to record all the detail in a scene. In this particular image I feel you have got it spot on. I would never consider HDR type techniques for this type of photography, especially where people and movement are involved. In film days colour documentary work was often shot on 35mm transparency film, this had approximately 5 f/stops of dynamic range so the 10 or 12 f/stops from your sensor is a luxury! Remember that once printed the print material

and ink will have a limited dynamic range of approximately 5 or 6 f/stops. The print is very atmospheric, possibly slightly too dark.

**Image 7.** This is an interesting part of the series, you have captured a good decisive moment. Unlike image 6 the sense of place is not as strong here, although the bland and bare office has a strong narrative in itself and makes a good contrast with image 6, I would have liked to have seen more of this if possible? You do mention this in your annotation. You acknowledge the tilted desk is an issue, perhaps we see too much of this although it does add to the blandness of the office. The tilt is due to a slightly tilted camera and not being central to the desk so your camera is pointing slightly left which throws the perspective, this is exaggerated by using a wide angle lens. This can be corrected in Lightroom by using the lens correction tools (distortion, vertical, horizontal and rotation) but at the expense of cropping more into the image but I don't mind this. I have attached an example. The processing of this image appears quite different to the look and feel of the other images and is creating an inconsistency. Subtle changes of contrast and brightness via a curve could have given this a more consistent feel.

**Image 8.** An atmospheric image that captures a moment and is telling a story, this image has a look and feel that is consistent. I read your annotation with interest and can appreciate the difficulties involved, one slight issue is the front stall holder hiding and becoming confused with the stall holder in the background. You mention dynamic range again but this image has coped well with the available light and looks natural. For some reason the print is much too dark.

**Image 9.** My second favourite image, a very personal and intimate scene with strong emotive content. I do like the elegant and simple caption. Your annotation is very revealing and shows you have made all the right decisions in shooting from this angle. Excellent choice to use a tripod with 1/3<sup>rd</sup> second exposure as the blur from the moving figure is just right and adds a strong element and dynamic to the picture. A great sense of place is evoked here. Technically the slightly lower ISO is performing with an improved quality, once again your point of focus is halfway along your subject and not on his face, was this a conscious decision due to overall depth of field? The print is too dark and the digital version looks slightly dark whereas the PDF version slightly light – so some inconsistencies that should be considered. I like the emptiness of the bed as this has a strong emotive content but consider a very

slight darkening from bottom right, similar to a subtle vignette to help lead the eye into the image.

**Image 10.** This is close to being my second favourite! A great scene and moment, the clutter of the room is beautifully recorded and the interaction between the subjects is very telling although I note that you feel that your presence may have limited their animated responses. I would have liked to have seen the unmodified image with the fan and wire as this extra clutter may have added more interesting detail? You have used precision with your camera angle that successfully records this scene without distracting tilted horizontal and verticals, this adds to its simplicity and strength. I note the historical significance of the attire in this shot and that adds a very strong social documentary element. Looking at the histogram the graph is shifted slightly left which is probably accounting for a slightly dark print. Remember though that the histogram is only a guide and it may be fine to have the graph shifted left if that is the mood that you feel is required in the image.

**Image 11.** A poignant image to end the series, effective research that has helped to inform your approach here. The use of the near black background is effective in isolating the subject and reflects your research but does create an inconsistency with the rest of the series. Perhaps some detail in the background, out of focus, and avoid the very dark tones would have helped with the coherent look of your essay and would still have isolated the subject through depth of field rather than tone. The tight crop is also not helping with the consistency, allowing all of the figures arms to be seen and some more background would help with the sense of place achieved in the other images.

### **Learning Logs or Blogs/Critical essays**

Your use of captions is interesting, I find the more succinct ones are most effective. Captioning a photograph brings with it a whole debate! Should the caption be purely factual – Date and a title or simply Date and ‘Untitled’. Does the caption change the significance of the image or even alter its meaning or distort the truth? There is much writing about this subject, you may wish to look into this more and I have included some suggestions in the suggested reading section.

"Captions do tend to override the evidence of our eyes; but no caption can permanently restrict or secure a picture's meaning. What the moralists are demanding from a photograph is that it do what no photograph can ever do--speak. The caption is the missing voice, and it is expected to speak for truth. But even an entirely accurate caption is only one interpretation, necessarily a limiting one, of the photograph to which it is attached. And the caption-glove slips on and off so easily" *Susan Sontag, On Photography, (p108)*.

Excellent web gallery Madhvee, The faces images make a great portfolio for this. Interestingly Wix used to be more Flash based but now it is using HTML 5 and jQuery which makes the sites accessible on Apple devices.

The sharpening exercise is well researched, as you suggest it is good practice to sharpen twice, once on import into Lightroom – a small amount as a global effect (I use a setting of radius 1.1 and 25 as an amount). This is often referred to as capture sharpness as it adds back a small amount of sharpness lost by the demosaicing process (caused by the anti-aliasing filter over the camera sensor). The final amount is then added after retouching and once the digital file is of the correct size and ppi setting for reproduction and or final use (screen, print etc.). This may be global or may be selective or a combination of both, for example on a portrait you may not wish to sharpen the skin texture of the face, only the eye detail etc.

Overall your reflective writing and annotation is excellent, you produce some first class descriptions of process and I note the enthusiastic comments you have from other blog readers. Good practice to reflect on my comments after the feedback.

### **Suggested reading/viewing**

Susan Sontag explores the relationship between the image and its caption in a chapter called 'The Heroism of Vision' from her book:

Sontag, S. (2008) *On Photography* (Reprinted Penguin Modern Classics). London: Penguin Books Ltd.

Further investigation from a book and a website:

Hariman, R & Lucaites, J, L. (2007) *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<http://www.nocaptionneeded.com/>

### **On-going pointers.**

- Do not use paper clips on the precious prints!
- Think about shooting at wider apertures with less depth of field in low light situations. A very shallow depth of field can have strong emotive qualities – Philip Toledano! This will help with ISO settings, Noise and movement.
- Consider your point of focus, especially at wider apertures, be wary of autofocus.
- Carefully consider your viewpoint and camera angle, be precise to try and eliminate tilted angles and complex perspectives, much better to get it right in camera. Obviously you may wish to deliberately tilt the camera on some occasions.
- Look at final image consistency when preparing a set of images, try and get contrast and tone similar to produce a coherent feel. This is best done using curves while adjusting the Raw file or working with a 16 bit Tiff, not an 8 bit Jpeg.
- Use post production with care, avoid over sharpening especially on high ISO images as this will exaggerate noise. Consider selective sharpening and not overall or a combination of both.
- When working on a series of images for an essay then consider the image content consistency – for example image 11 with its very dark / black background and no sense of place.
- You demonstrate an effective digital workflow regime, from editing through to post-production and print and successfully have achieved these learning outcomes from this module.
- You are referencing images and text within your writing which is excellent. For level 2 try and follow the Harvard system more accurately. The OCA student resources website has a PDF with examples in.

## Assessment.

- Look at the video by Jane Horton on the OCA website resources area and download the PDF.
- Check for other videos about presentation and assessment on the OCA website
- Check the guidelines in the back of your handbook for specific photography course guidelines
- Presentation is very important, if supplying prints make sure they are mounted on card
- If supplying only digital images (level 1) make sure they are of a resolution to print to at least 10x8 or A4.

Tutor name:	John Todd
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Next assignment due	N/A