

# Content, Form and Feeling

One useful way to comment on images is to discuss three important and related aspects of them—content, form and feeling.

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**Left:** Antarctica. Realistic images emphasize content.

**Left Below:** Namibia. Graphic images emphasize form.

**Opposite above:** Wake. Expressionistic images emphasize feeling.

**Opposite below:** Iceland. Impressionistic images may evoke content, form and/or feeling.

Making verbal statements about visual images can be challenging. But, it's also very useful. Learning to make useful statements about images can help you clarify the type of work you're looking at or making. It can help you identify an artist's intentions, including your own. It can help give you direction. It can help you improve images. It can help you develop projects and predict outcomes. It can help you more effectively communicate with others. Words can be very useful when it comes to appreciating and making images. You don't need to have a degree or be a professional writer to use words well. Sometimes, a few simple words can end up being the most useful—especially if they're the right words.

One useful way to comment on images is to discuss three important and related aspects of them—content, form and feeling. While all images have these dimensions, you can describe the kind of image a work of art is based on how it weights these three concerns.

Here are several types of images that weigh these concerns differently:

**Documentary or journalistic imagery** emphasizes content. Formal devices are kept to a minimum, and emotional appeals are made solely by the subject rather than the author's response or interpretation. Its main aim is to inform, not to aestheticize or interpret. It's realism pure and straight, though often not as simple as



most would like to think. It's intellectual.

**Graphic imagery** emphasizes form—sometimes downplaying content, sometimes even eliminating it, and occasionally downplaying emotion. The elements of images take on a life of their own, at times to the point of abstraction with little or no regard for their original subjects. The image asserts itself as a subject. It's art for art's sake. It's a looking game. Media reigns. It's physical.

**Expressionistic imagery** makes emotional appeals based on the artist's interpretations, which may or may not be accurate but are always highly personal. Distortions may be used to enhance and intensify experiences. Frequently it's gestural, incorporating motion—either subject or camera. It's emotional.

**Impressionistic imagery** could fit into any one of these three categories depending on what's emphasized. If it literally transcribes temporal and atmospheric effects, it's a form of realism. If it enhances form and/or color, it can make an image more graphic. If it evokes a strong emotion, while de-emphasizing content and form, it's a form of expressionism. It can be intellectual, physical, emotional or a combination of all three.

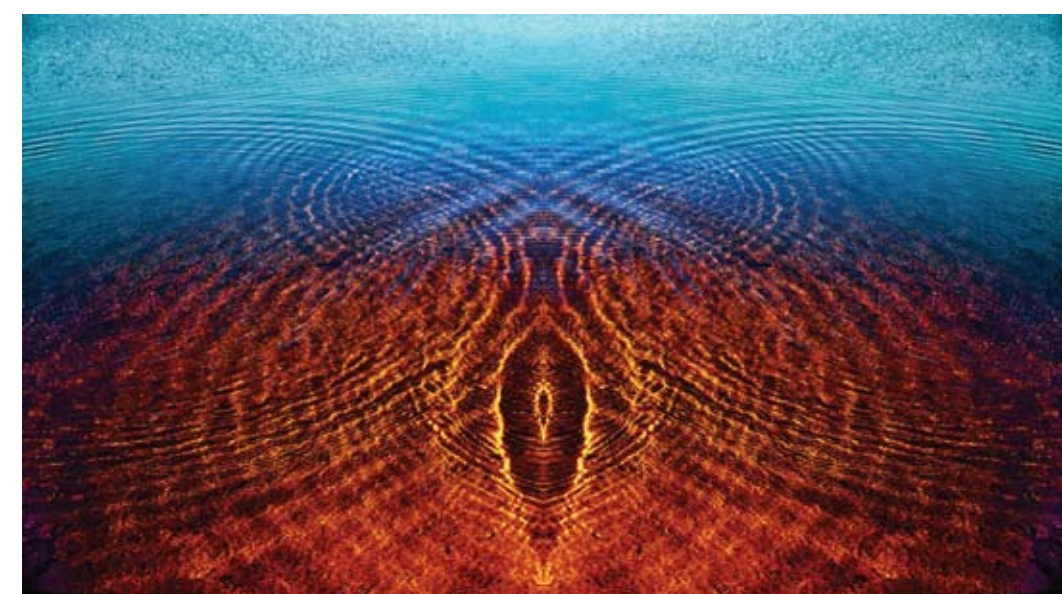
You can look at the trio of content, form and feeling as being an extension of the classic mind, body and emotion trio. They're all parts of a whole that work together and influence one another.

You can take quick stock of an image by rating each one of these aspects (content, form, feeling) on a scale of 1–10 and comparing the numbers. This will quickly identify stronger and weaker tendencies. Once you do this, further appreciating balance, imbalance and tension between these aspects can be revealing too. It may be difficult,

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if not impossible, to classify some images as clearly one type of image and not another, but your understanding of and appreciation for an image or images will increase and deepen.

You can also do this for an entire body



of work, revealing even more. While individuals may deviate from the mean, finding unifying tendencies within a group can

marked, “When I go into a gallery I never ask, ‘Is this good?’ Instead, I ask, ‘Why is this here?’” This is a very useful approach. When you take this stance, you'll almost always learn something. There are many useful ways of approaching, appreciating and understanding art. Comparing the uses of content, form and feeling is one of them.

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reveal the nature and character of fuller visual statements. This may even shed light on the deviations, potentially making them even more meaningful and enriching the entire viewing experience.

An elder colleague of mine once re-

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