Reformed Reality: Digital Rehabilitations

By

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Influences	3
Chapter 3: Process Overview	5
Composing and Selecting an Image	6
Structure of Shapes/Forms	6
Structure of Lines	6
Color	7
Mood/Energy	7
Working With an Image	8
Chapter 4: Analysis	10
Greenhouse	10
Grate	11
Under Connecticut Avenue Bridge	12
Stripes	13
Avocados	14
Archways Under Cathedral Avenue	15
Chayotes	15
Fingers	16
Wipe Hands on Pants	16
The Church on 16 th Street	17
The Old Embassy on 16 th Street	17
Tomotillos	18
Meter	19
Row Houses on 16 th Street	20
Scottish Rite Temple	20
Toiletbrush	21
Lamp	21
Sources Consulted	22
Appendix A: Larger Figures	23

List of Figures

Figure 1:	Greenhouse thumbnail	10
Figure 2:	Greenhouse original image	10
Figure 3:	Grate thumbnail	11
Figure 4:	Grate original image	11
Figure 5:	Under Connecticut Avenue Bridge thumbnail	12
Figure 6:	Under Connecticut Avenue Bridge original image	12
Figure 7:	Stripes thumbnail	13
Figure 8:	Stripes original image	13
Figure 9:	Avocados thumbnail	14
Figure 10:	Avocados thumbnail	14
Figure 11:	Archways Under Cathedral Avenue thumbnail	15
Figure 12:	Archways Under Cathedral Avenue original image	15
Figure 13:	Chayotes thumbnail	15
Figure 14:	Chayotes original image	15
Figure 15:	Fingers thumbnail	16
Figure 16:	Wipe Hands on Pants thumbnail	16
Figure 17:	The Church on 16 th Street thumbnail	17
Figure 18:	The Church on 16 th Street original image	17
Figure 19:	The Old Embassy on 16 th Street thumbnail	17
Figure 20:	The Old Embassy on 16 th Street original image	18
Figure 21:	Tomotillos thumbnail	18
Figure 22:	Tomotillos original image	18
Figure 23:	Meter thumbnail	19
Figure 24:	Meter original image	19
Figure 25:	Row Houses on 16 th Street thumbnail	20
Figure 26:	Row Houses on 16 th Street original image	20
Figure 27:	Scottish Rite Temple thumbnail	20
Figure 28:	Scottish Rite Temple original image	20
Figure 29:	Toiletbrush thumbnail	21
Figure 29:	Toiletbrush original image	21
Figure 30:	Lamp thumbnail	21
Figure 31:	Lamp original image	21
Figure 32:	Greenhouse	24
Figure 33:	Grate	25
Figure 34:	Under Connecticut Avenue Bridge	26

Figure 35:	Stripes	27
Figure 36:	Avocados	28
Figure 37:	Archways Under Cathedral Avenue	29
Figure 38:	Chayotes	30
Figure 39:	Fingers	31
Figure 40:	Wipe Hands on Pants	32
Figure 41:	The Church on 16 th Street	33
Figure 42:	The Old Embassy on 16 th Street	34
Figure 43:	Tomotillos	35
Figure 44:	Meter	36
Figure 45:	Row Houses on 16 th Street	37
Figure 46:	Scottish Rite Temple	38
Figure 47:	Toiletbrush	39
Figure 48:	Lamp	40

Chapter 1: Introduction

Freedom granted by new digital processes allows photography to be used as a vehicle to showcase the artist's skills and knowledge in form and color. The purpose of this thesis is to gain an understanding of the artist's process and intent. Through a very specific method of working with an image it is possible to achieve the strongest aesthetic impact in a composition. Focus will be on this process and how it is inextricably intertwined with the formation of the final vision. No underlying messages or statements are consciously present in this portfolio – and in most cases the driving force is trying to make the best image with the afore mentioned skills.

Each piece demonstrates a conscious determination to present a refined interpretation of everyday scenes and objects. Compositions are often simplistic in both the number of elements and the color pallet, but the elements and color work together to create a strong harmony. The combined mediums of photography and the computer are used to produce a final print on archival art paper. All of the works are original photographs that are then manipulated on the computer.

The artist strives to achieve a visceral reaction when a piece is viewed for the first time. Every effort is put into an image to allow for an initial gestalt in the viewer that things are as they should be. As artists have done in the past, these are idealized works and often vary significantly from the reality in which they are based. Side by side comparisons of the original photograph and final print will reveal in some cases only

color values have been manipulated, but more often the very structure of the composition has been adjusted; objects have been removed or added, forms have been distorted or disparate images are found within the same viewing plane.

Each of the final images exudes its own sense of balance and luminosity that makes these works unique.

Chapter 2: Influences:

"No man is an island¹." Influence of other artists has left a mark, both directly and indirectly. Early influences were paintings by Edward Hopper, Mark Rothko and Thomas McKnight – they thrilled and captivated an impressionable artist. Edward Hopper's fields of color and simplicity of form, evident in paintings such as *Four Lane Road* (oil on canvas, 1956), *Cape Cod Evening* (oil on canvas, 1939), *High Noon* (oil on canvas, 1949) and *Night Windows* (oil on canvas, 1928) are echoed in this catalog work. Mark Rothko's abstract paintings of nothing but color create a very strong visual effect, a process that has been duplicated here. Thomas McKnight's method of fabricating an ideal reality with super-saturated colors is also present in this catalog of work.

Architecture, both old and new, has also had a profound effect, perhaps because it is so prevalent in everyday life. Much of a person's visual plane, in almost everything one sees from day to day, is defined by architecture. I.M Pei's East Wing of the National Gallery in Washington, DC and Haussmann's restructuring of Paris are good examples of the pervasiveness of architecture in daily life.

Computer manufacturer Apple, and it's lead designer, Jonathan Ive, have also, perhaps more subtly affected the artist's process, though. Each week the artist's sole attention for 50 to 60 hours is the work displayed and manipulated by an Apple computer. The aesthetic of these machines, along with the obvious deliberation and attention paid to each detail when interacting with them, has given the artist's process, intent, and final product a unique underlying structure.

Contemporary artists who work along similar themes include those found in the Washington Color School (i.e. Jacob Kainen, Kenneth Noland and Gene Davis) and photographers like Pete Turner and Eliot Porter.

¹ 17 century sermon by English author John Donne. The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy. 3rd Edition. 2003.

Chapter 3: Process Overview

While this thesis deals primarily with conceptual topics, it is important to understand the technical process involved to achieve a finished piece. In very broad terms, with image selection/composition and manipulation to be elaborated even further in the next section, the process starts by scouting for base images, usually through selecting an area (neighborhood, street, room) and examining every aspect thoroughly. When a particular composition is discovered – or created - that meets a set of criteria, a photograph is taken with a digital camera. These criteria center on whether the image lends itself to manipulation on the computer, and, if so, will these manipulations lead to a stronger finished composition?

Once the photographs are taken they are imported into the computer and placed inside an image cataloguing and sorting program. This program (Apple's iPhoto[®]) allows many pictures to be viewed simultaneously at thumbnail size, similar to the experience of looking at photographic contact sheets. This makes it easier to determine which photograph in a series of very similar compositions is the strongest overall image. The image is then brought into Adobe's Photoshop[®] where the digital editing takes place.

Inside Photoshop, each of the distinct elements are individually selected and isolated from the rest of the image by placing them on separate 'layers.' Once the elements are separated, greater control over image manipulation is possible. After all the manipulations are made the image is ready to be printed.

A combination of an Epson brand ink jet printer and Epson paper provides both outstanding quality and value. The printer is capable of printing up to 1,400 dots per square inch. The paper used is archival quality and different surfaces are chosen to match the mood of each composition. After the print is produced, it is then ready to be matted and framed for display.

Composing and Selecting the Image

In considering whether or not an image is workable on the computer, an image has to capture the attention of the artist's eye. Each composition needs to have several (between two and seven) distinct and clearly divisible elements. These elements are usually easily distinguished shapes and/or solid fields of color. For an image to be further considered, there are a combination of factors to be met. Any one of these factors, if exhibited to a strong enough degree, qualifies a scene as a candidate for continued development.

Structure of Shapes/Forms

Does the image have a harmony of form? This type of harmony is perceptually easy to distinguish and involves a level of abstract spatial analysis. Can the scene be divided into balanced shapes and areas? A simple landscape might be divided into a field, a stand of trees, and wide-open sky, visualizing the composition as three basic regions. If these three elements interact well together in the picture plane, the decision may be made to continue with the scene, regardless of the following considerations.

Structure of Lines

The structure of lines is partially tied to the 'structure of shapes/forms' where two shapes meeting form a line. However, when making a decision based on this consideration, it is the lines of the composition that receive attention. Lines need to lead the viewers' eyes through and within the composition, rather than letting the eyes wander out of the image.

Color

Color, though it is often an initial attribute noticed in a scene, is usually less of a deciding factor because it most certainly will be adjusted on the computer. Existing vibrant hues or interesting juxtapositions and harmonies may highlight a particular scene for further consideration, but is usually not a primary selection factor.

Mood/Energy

A more difficult variable to explain is the emotive factors in an image. The mood of a scene may sometimes cause a less structural evaluation. For example, quiet, misty, landscapes may have a strong emotional appeal. Atmospheric elements, overall color casts, strong diagonals, or repetitions of form, all lead to a stimulated emotional responses.

In summary a strong single or combination of the above factors begins the process of creation, leading to the hard work of bringing the piece to completion. When one or more of these factors have strong enough presence, they cause the artist to become engaged. This usually happens at a subconscious level - something vibrates, urging for more consideration to be paid on the scene.

Working With an Image

In many ways, the process of creating a final image is an internal dialog between the 'photographer self' and the 'designer self.' The photographer goes into the field, keeping in mind what types of images the designer has an affinity for, and tries to find as many acceptable photographs as possible. Then the two combine, and the artist, sitting in front of the computer, sorts through all the images presented. Some are set aside for more consideration, and from those a decision is made to work further with a particular image. The final selection of an image is only half way through the entire process. In checklist form decisions include but are not limited to the following:

If the image is a landscape, is the horizon line level? Are the other angles square? How are the contrast levels? Are elements of the composition distracting in a negative way? If so, can they be removed?

After the checklist has been completed and the image is corrected to a "clean state" – one with no visible flaws or distractions with the overall composition, a plan is drawn on how to proceed. Major elements are identified and isolated from the rest of the image so the maximum amount of control may be exerted during manipulation.

Beyond the technical details associated with image manipulation on a computer, this stage of the process is, for the most part, trail and error, informed by an accumulated knowledge base. Starting with the existing strongest element of the composition, the artist tries to make that element even stronger by adjusting variables of contrast, color balance, and overall shape. The next strongest element is then adjusted to make it more complimentary to the first element. Do the colors work together? Does the placement of the two objects create a harmony? If the answer is 'no,' then one or both of the two elements need to be adjusted further until a reasonable balance is achieved. Attention is then widened to include additional elements and the process is repeated until the composition is balanced and complete. Aesthetic questions are considered during the overall balancing such as *will this color pallet actually work?* or *how unconventional can the arrangement of objects be, yet still attain design harmony?*

Chapter 4: Analysis

The work presented in the following plates is different from efforts of past artists in that the use of photography and the computer are simply a means to an end. The combination of these two mediums allows the artist to create the intended image and nothing more. In essence, the process, though admittedly different, is not that far removed from Dutch painters such as Vermeer and Rembrandt. Their medium was a matrix of paint and woven canvas, This artist's medium is matrix of pixels and pigmented inks on paper.

Greenhouse

A constructed composition, *Greenhouse* started as an image of a dilapidated boathouse on a river in Maine. What grabbed the artist's attention in this object was that it was obviously man-made, but over time the structure had begun to warp. There were no longer any right angles or parallel lines.

The original image had several elements that were distracting from the central object of the boathouse, one of them being that part of the house was not in the picture frame. The peak of the roof was 'drawn in' using other parts of the image, then the house itself was separated



Figure 1: Greenhouse, see Figure 32.



Figure 2: *Greenhouse* original photograph.

from the surrounding photograph and gently distorted further. The white trim was isolated in its own layer and intensified to give the eye lines to travel around within the image. The roof was given a greater degree of texture and nudged towards the red spectrum. The walls of the boathouse were shifted so that they were greener, and also were given more texture. These adjustments made the roof and the walls complimentary.

Next, a sky was generated and a field was placed in the foreground for the boathouse to rest on, creating a much cleaner image than the original photograph. The field was taken from a photograph of a farm not far from the river the boathouse had been sitting on. Instead of stopping the eye of the viewer with the interior contents of the house, the windows open up into field and sky behind them, lending a touch of surrealism. Finally, a boarded up door with a shade of blue was added to complete the color scheme of RGB (red, green, blue).

Grate

An example of one of the many everyday objects found in the artist's apartment, *Grate* was simply the top of an air conditioning/heating unit. In this case, the form was simplified from three vents down to two. The surface of the vents was then separated from the internal workings of the convector units. The paint strokes were already present on the unit, but the surface was

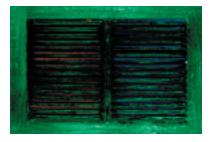


Figure 3: Grate, see Figure 33.

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Figure 4: Grate original photograph.

supersaturated and contrast levels were adjusted to bring out both a very intense green and stronger, more visible brush strokes. To complete the transformation from everyday object to an abstract study in color, fields of red and blue were laid down beneath the surface of the vents fulfilling the Red, Green, Blue pallet.

Under Connecticut Avenue Bridge

Multiple shots of the Connecticut Avenue Bridge, as it crosses the Rock Creek Parkway in Washington, DC, were taken and then examined in more detail on the computer screen. Even though this image encompasses less of the entire bridge than many of the other pictures taken, it has a very strong inherent compositional structure. The eye is immediately drawn to the major arch, bisecting the image plane, and then to the smaller arches above it.

Several defects in the original image stand out. In particular, the picture is not square with the edges of a rectangular surface area and there is some greenery at the left edge that distracts from the overall geometry. Once these problems were addressed, the image was separated into five layers. The top layer contains the horizontal element at the top of the picture, followed by major archway, then the front of the bridge with it's three smaller arches, the depths of the bridge within the smaller arches, and the depths of the bridge within the major arch.



Figure 5: Under Connecticut Avenue Bridge, see Figure 34.



Figure 6: *Under Connecticut Avenue Bridge* original photograph.

Existing strong late afternoon light was then enhanced to make the front of the bridge glow. Color balances and saturations where chosen so that the overwhelming hue for this section was yellow. Continuing with warm colors, the largest arch was shifted to be primarily red. Sandwiching the warm values, the top and bottom of the image were deepened in their values and adjusted into the cool blue ranges. The three smaller arches running through the center of the image were also kept cool, but adjusted into the green range. This color arrangement plays with the geometry of the bridge, highlighting the archways and enhancing the spatial depths.

Stripes

One of the first examples of a forced pallet, *Stripes* offers a glimpse of things to come in terms of a concrete approach to an image. The tree in the original image has been removed, eliminating a distraction form the focus of the apartment building. The sky then becomes one triangular element in the upper left of the composition. Each facet of the building is then 'painted' it's own color creating a series of diagonal strips through the center of the image. The first-story triangular shape formed by the different stone work, and accentuated by it's own coat of red, compliments the blue triangle of the sky. The superimposed colors create a unified



Figure 7: Stripes, see Figure 35.

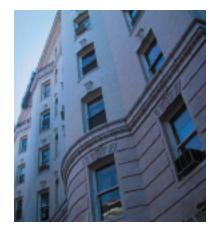


Figure 8: Stripes original photograph.

composition that would not be there otherwise.

Avocados

This picture is one of the more complicated compositions of the plates offered here, and at the same time one the few compositions that were arranged before the camera's shutter snapped, not after. Comparing the original to the final, except for color and contrast, very little has changed. *Avocados* is part of a series that superficially is about placing organic objects in the kitchen, but not where they are expected to be found. However, the series is more about form, color, and in this instance, third dimensionality.

The composition is focused on the two avocados, one in the foreground, one in the background. The plane that these fruits rest on moves from the bottom of the image to a horizon line in the distance -- somewhere towards the top of the image. Instead of being able to expand out and into the distance, this horizon line is bounded and forced back to the viewer by the walls of the kitchen. To enhance this push outwards and back again, the grillwork has been shifted into the red spectrum. The eye starts with the fruit in the foreground, follows the network of grills back to the other avocado, and then is forced back to the front of the image by the kitchen walls.



Figure 9: Avocados, see Figure 36.



Figure 10: Avocados original photograph.

Archways Under Cathedral Avenue

An example using contrast to accentuate the individual elements in the composition, *Archways Under Cathedral Avenue* is a simple study of receding shapes. After examining the image, it was evident that the horizon line was not square with the edges of the picture. This, and some other minor distractions, were fixed before work began on isolating each level of the image into its own layer. The foremost level was manipulated to contain the richest and deepest values, while each receding level has lighter contrast values and warmer reds. This draws the viewer's eye back towards the center of the image, where it rests on the wall with the greenish tint three levels deep. Again, there is a play between red and green.



Figure 11: Archways, see Figure 37.



Figure 12: Archways original photograph.

Chayotes

The purpose of *Chayotes*, as with *Avocados*, is to examine depth within the picture plane. The composition was pieced together until there were several different parallel planes converging towards one point in space. Placed on each of these planes is a chayote. Each of these fruits has a deep crevice of a wrinkle on one end, and it is these wrinkles, along with the fruits themselves, that lead the viewer's eye around the image. Comparing the original to the final image, it becomes evident that the color palate has been adjusted to play off the luscious



Figure 13: Chayotes, see Figure 38.



Figure 14: *Chayotes* original photograph.

green of the chayotes. Contrasts have been increased and shadows heightened to increase the sense of depth.

Fingers

Fingers, along with *Greenhouse*, attempts to create an air of surrealism. Three sets of vertical elements, shaved tree 'things,' hover over the cratered fields of Normandy, France. This composition experiments with Itten's theory that when two complimentary colors are juxtaposed, one of them will appear to vibrate to the viewer's eye. Each edge of the tree things is outlined with an orange/reddish glow, this forces the tree things to push strongly towards the foreground, even when one of them is placed back near the horizon. The horizon line itself is convex instead of the customary straight line. The sky and clouds were generated to balance out the complimentary effects the pockmarked ground and tree things.

Wipe Hands on Pants

The combination of a cactus, a urinal, a brick wall, and the accompanying three colors of yellow, green and orange are the elements that complete the composition of *Wipe Hands on Pants*. They are intended to make the viewer feel uneasy and alarmed. The plumbing on top of the urinal has been removed to further simplify the image, allowing for the eye to focus on the



Figure 15: *Fingers*, see Figure 39.



Figure 16: *Wipe Hands on Pants*, see Figure 40.

complexity of the cactus.

The Church on 16th Street

The purpose of *Church on 16th Street* is to bring to life a structurally sound image that had been lacking in vibrancy. First, the image was divided into layers, from bottom to top -- the door itself, the arch around the door, the rusticated stone block work, and the smooth stonework. Then, each layer had it's color values adjusted. The door was shifted slightly from magenta to red. The archway was saturated with both yellows and oranges, colors that had been absent. The rough stonework was pushed towards the orange and red color ranges, and the smooth stonework was saturated with red.

The new color arrangement plays the red of the door in the bottom right corner off the red of the smooth stonework in the top left corner. Because these two regions have a deeper color value, they push the lighter and brighter archway into the foreground.

The Old Embassy on 16th Street

Embassy is, in some ways, a complex piece. The intricate building with repeating elements, can be, however, broken down simply to sky and building. The image was separated into four layers, from top to bottom: copper elements, stonework, windows, and sky. The copper roof and window trimming had its contrast levels

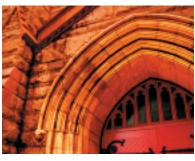


Figure 17: *Church on 16th Street*, see Figure 41.



Figure 18: *Church on 16th Street* original photograph.



Figure 19: Old Embassy on 16th Street, see Figure 42.

increased and the green hues were further saturated. The stonework was brought into a light pink/magenta color range, and the windows were tinted slightly orange. The original overcast sky was replaced with a deep blue gradient.

This arrangement of layers of color creates a warmer and richer final image. The deep greens of the copper serve to lead the eye around the composition and highlight the intricacies of the stonework. The orange windows push out towards the viewer, and the deep blue sky adds to the sense of depth.



Figure 20: Old Embassy on 16th Street original photograph.

Tomotillos

Tomotillos explores the perception of depth through deliberate placement of the subject matter in relation to the lines present in the structure of their environment – the oven. The fruits descend backwards in space, but instead of dwindling smaller due to perspective, each fruit is approximately the same size on the flat picture plane. This is achieved by placing the largest tomotillo in the middle of the formation, the second largest in the back, and the smallest in the front. The fruits themselves, though the subject of the composition, sit off to the left of the image, lending towards an initial impression in the viewer that the entire composition is off-balance. However, the slight arch of the grilling rack at the top of the picture frame directs



Figure 21: Tomotillos, see Figure 43.



Figure 22: *Tomotillos* original photograph.

the eye away from the fruit towards the right side of the image. The diagonal line of the gap between the floor of the oven and the oven door leads the eye directly back to the tomotillos, completing the circle.

Since the composition was staged, nothing was done to its arrangement when work began on the computer. The elements were however isolated into separate layers. The speckled surface of the oven was darkened and shifted towards the blue color ranges. The rack was given an overall red tint, which is echoed in warmth by the gap, which had its colors deepened and given a magenta tint. Finally, the tomotillos themselves are sharpened, brightened, and made a more vibrant green – this gives the overall composition a more subtle color palate of red (and magenta), green and blue.

Meter

Meter is a celebration of color and texture. Little was done to touch up the image – some spots on the sidewalk were removed. The brick wall was first isolated and then the texture was heightened. The wall was washed in a vivid deep red. To complement the brick, the sidewalk had its values enriched and shifted towards purple. The two sides of the meter box were treated as swatches of green and blue against a red field. Details were picked up in bright yellow to help lead the eye around the composition.



Figure 23: Meter, see Figure 44.



Figure 24: Meter original photograph.

Row Houses on 16th Street

Row Houses is a means of placing swatches of color next to each other, and the architecture serves as the backbone for this process. Each brick face from the row houses has its texture first enhanced through contrast and level adjustments, then they are saturated in the colors red, orange and yellow. The diagonal of the roof line bisects the composition alternating purple, green, and purple before reaching the deep blue of the sky.

Scottish Rite Temple

The composition in *Scottish Rite Temple* was framed to capture a portion of stairs proceeding diagonally and upwards to the right. The wall in the midground occludes most of the stairway, leaving just a hint of a doorway in the upper right corner. The railing and its square mounting points lead the viewer's eye back down to the bottom left of the composition, completing a closed loop.

Coloring in *Scottish Rite Temple* is a balance between an overwhelming warm color palate with a few touches of cooler greens and blues found in the shadows and the leaves on the steps. A more neutral yellow garners the most attention from the viewer.



Figure 25: Row Houses, see Figure 45.



Figure 26: *Row Houses* original photograph.



Figure 27: *Scottish Rite Temple*, see Figure 46.



Figure 28: *Scottish Rite Temple* original photograph.

Toiletbrush

The collage of *Toiletbrush* places a toothbrush holder where it is not expected, mounted onto a toilet. The two elements are both usually found in a bathroom, but not in such close proximity. The image containing the toilet was simplified and the colors were manipulated to form a field of yellow encompassing blue, which in turn surrounds the red/silver of the toothbrush holder. The position of the two brushes causes the eye to circle around the center of the composition.



Figure 28: *Toiletbrush*, see Figure 47.



Figure 30: *Toiletbrush* original photograph.

Lamp

Lamp is one of the earliest and simplest of the compositions presented here. Just three elements, a brick wall, lamp post, and lamp globe, exemplify the underlying values in how an image is arranged. The brick wall was slightly shifted to a warmer color range, causing the pole (now bluer) to stand out more from the background. The pinkish red of the globe, with it's very light values, pops out against all three. The direction of the bricks, with lines formed by the corner, converge on the globe as well, strengthening the integrity of the image. This minimalist approach serves as the basis for most of the other work here.



Figure 31: Lamp, see Figure 48.



Figure 32: Lamp original photograph.

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Appendix A: Larger Figures



Figure 32. *Greenhouse*, Spring 2001, ink jet print, 18" x 11.5".

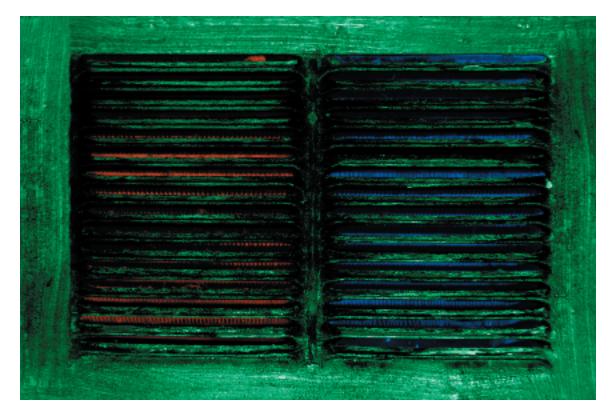


Figure 33. Grate, Fall 2002, ink jet print, 15" x 10".



Figure 34. Under Connecticut Avenue Bridge, Summer 2003, ink jet print, 13.75" x 10.25".

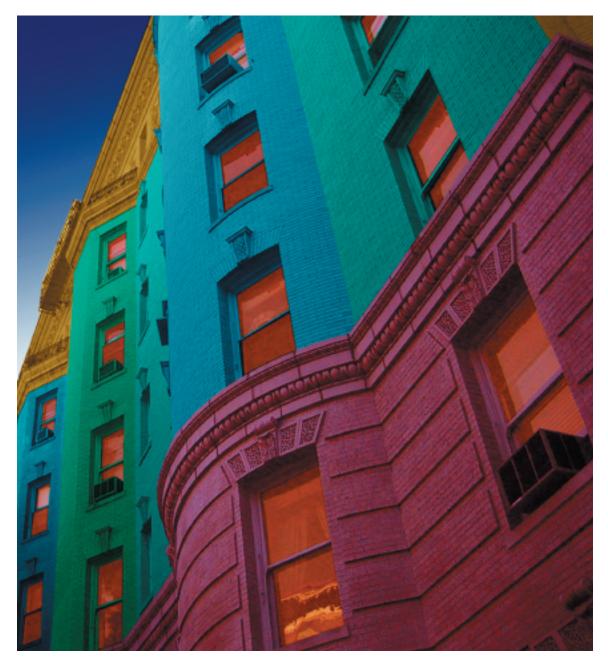


Figure 35. *Stripes*, Fall 2001, ink jet print, 11" x 13.1".



Figure 36. *Avocados*, Fall 2003, ink jet print, 13" x 10".



Figure 37. Archways Under Cathedral Avenue, Summer 2003, ink jet print, 13.75" x 10.25".



Figure 38. *Chayotes*, Fall 2003, ink jet print, 13" x 10".



Figure 39. Fingers, Spring 2001, ink jet print, 10" x 15".





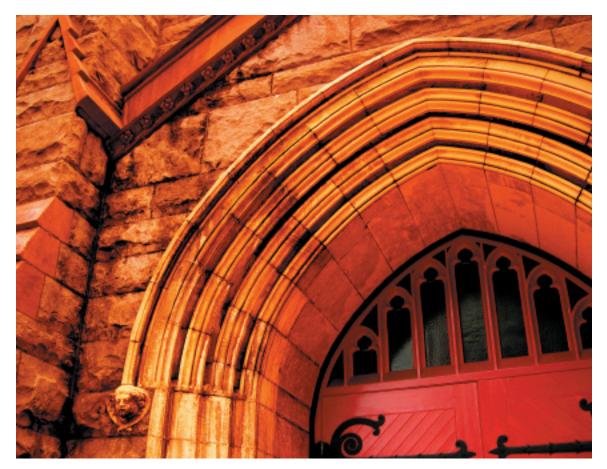


Figure 41. *Church on 16th Street*, Fall 2003, ink jet print, 13" x 10".

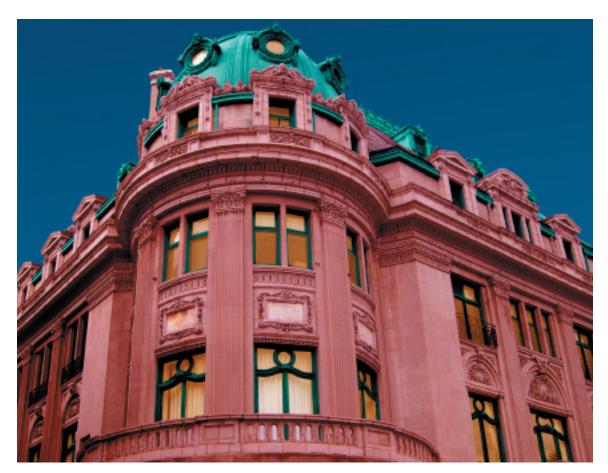


Figure 42. Old Embassy on 16th Street, Fall 2003, ink jet print, 13" x 10".



Figure 43. *Tomotillos*, Fall 2003, ink jet print, 13" x 10".

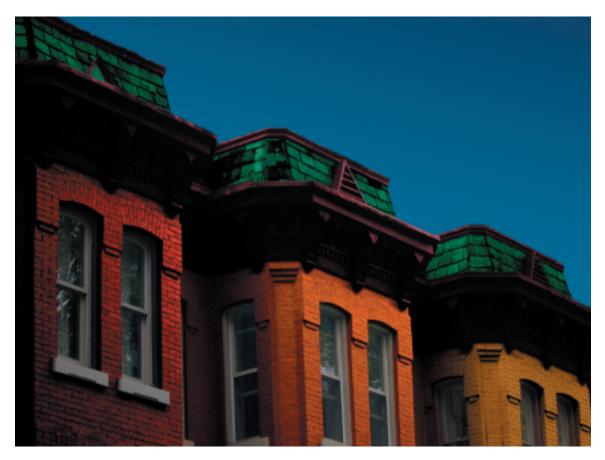


Figure 44. *Rowhouses*, Fall 2003, ink jet print, 13" x 10".

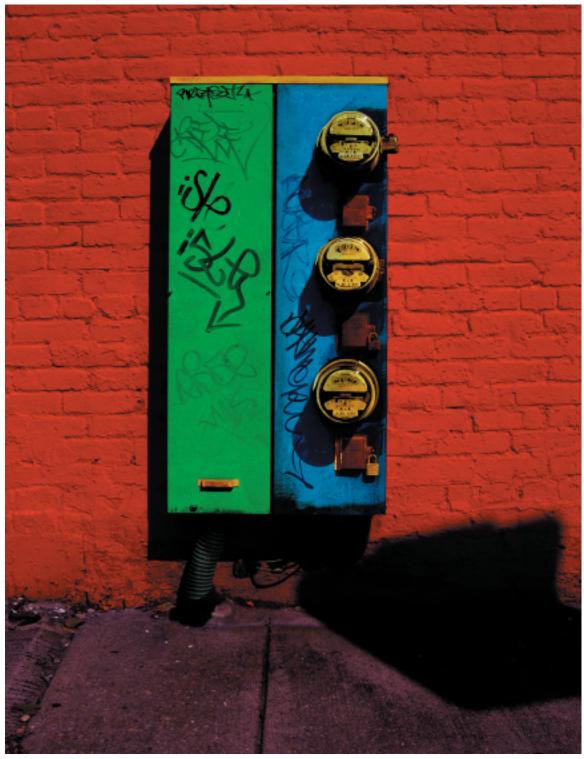


Figure 45. *Meter*, Fall 2003, ink jet print, 10" x 13".

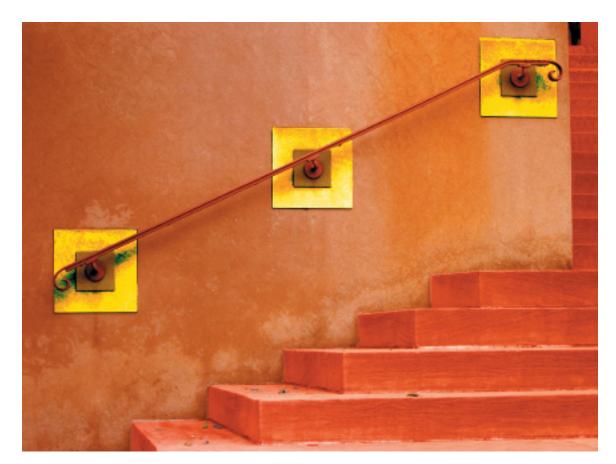


Figure 46. *Scottish Rite Temple*, Fall 2003, ink jet print, 13" x 10".



Figure 47. *Toiletbrush*, Spring 2001, ink jet print, 16" x 10.37".



Figure 48. *Lamp*, Spring 2002, ink jet print, 13.78" x 12".