

The Concept Photograph

ART DIRECTORS ARE MORE AND MORE ASKING FOR CONCEPTS



What is a “Concept” Photograph?

Some subjects can be shot in realistic, representational manner.

A toaster, car, fashion garment. It is a thing, an icon, a subject. We can present that item in many ways... from a realistic “here it is” representation, to a far out “conceptual” piece that brings memes, shared history, cultural norms, and a general “knowledge” of the subject into play.

The shot on the left shows the dress, the shot on the right adds a shared cultural “concept”.



Pure Concept Photographs

Sometimes we have to create a photograph of something that is not a physical thing. It is a process, or an emotion, or something that is inherently without form – like insurance, or financial planning.

These are concepts that we are called on to represent with a photograph. We must use our imaginations to create something that will be readily seen as representational of that subject.

Stray too far, and the concept may be missed by the average viewer. Don't go far enough, and it can be an insulting or cliché image that no one really is moved by.

By calling on cultural touch points and shared histories, a context for creating these concepts can be found.

Pure concept photographs can be made without representation of a subject, but for our concerns, they are created in order to illustrate an idea, process, emotion, or non-physical subject

Conceptual Methodology

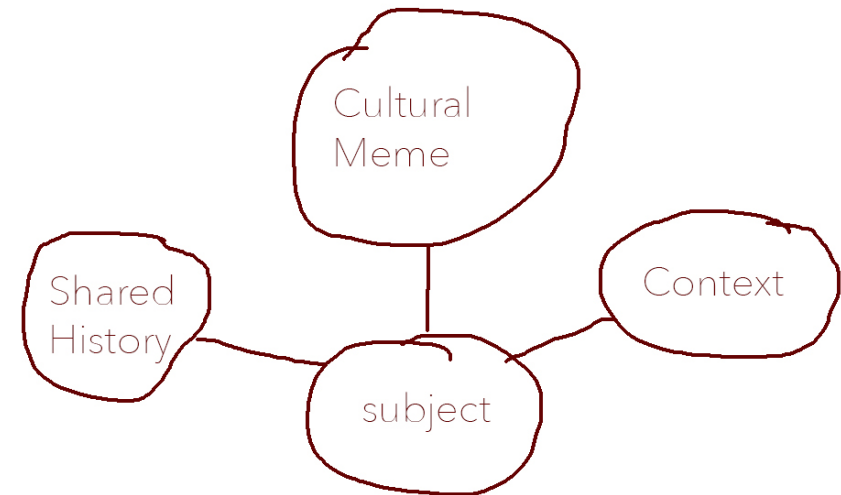
We can call on many forces to help us create the conceptual image.

Shared History

Cultural Meme

Context

Each will be used in order to make the image instantly understood. That is an important goal in advertising photography.



Representational Image shares these different forces to create an easily understood image that communicates the subject

Shared History

These are the things that we have all experienced. Simple things to complex structures, we have seen the aspects of certain ideas represented in front of us for most of our lives.

The concept of coming up with an idea has been shared with us for all of our lives.

One way is for a “light” to be illuminated... a concept in itself. The “light” is the idea in our brain happening quickly.

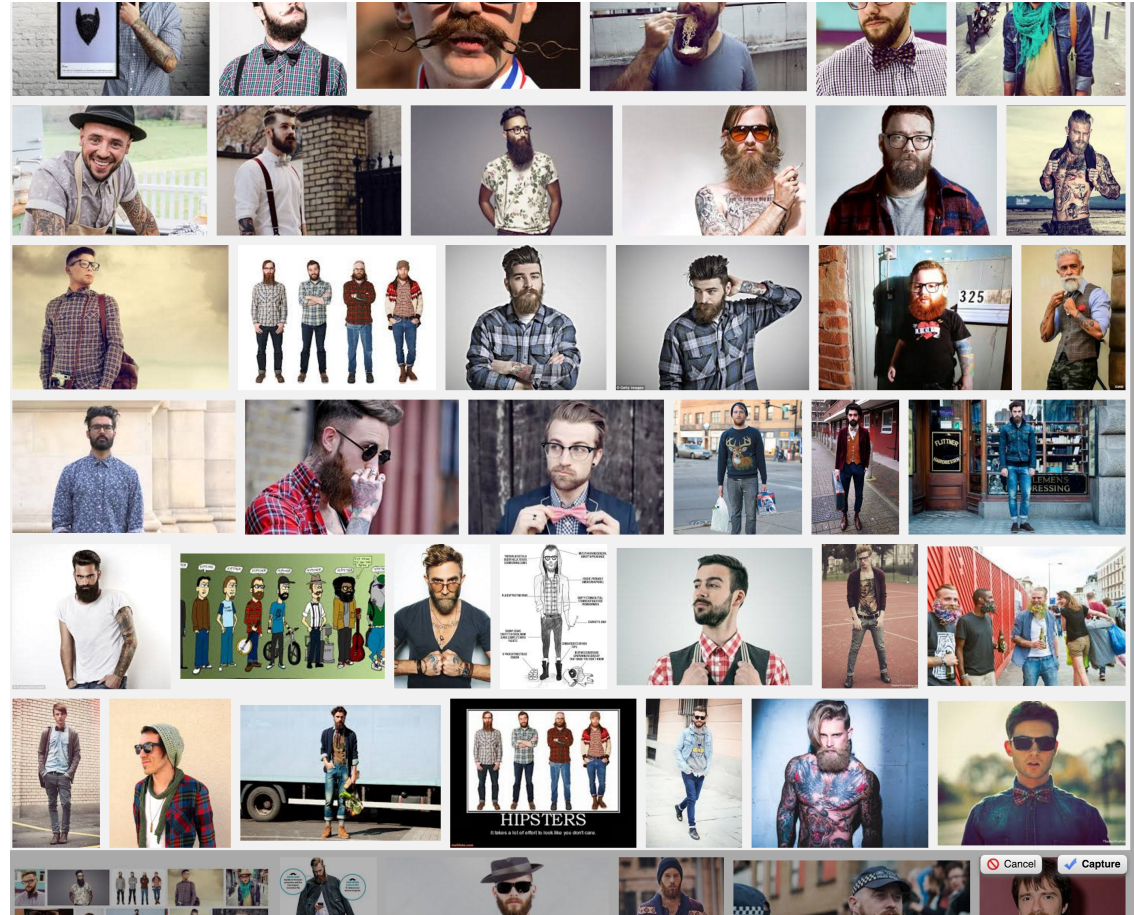


Cultural Meme

This is something that is happening within the culture that we can all identify with. Let's take "Hipsters" for example.

I am not really sure what a "hipster" is, but I kind of know some characteristics that hipsters seem to share, and those characteristics are built into the culture.

Using a cultural meme will help to sell the image more quickly, although you may have to be aware of whether the culture you are shooting for will recognize the meme.



Context

Context is something we readily notice. This is part of the shared history, and the cultural meme. Blending them together we have a contextual expectation of the subject matter.

For instance, the context of these two school rooms is decidedly different. And we all know it.



Using Context Congruity

Using the context as appropriate, these two rum ads harken to a different era, and a more ‘reality’ based environment to sell the concept of the quality of rum.



Using Contextual Incongruity

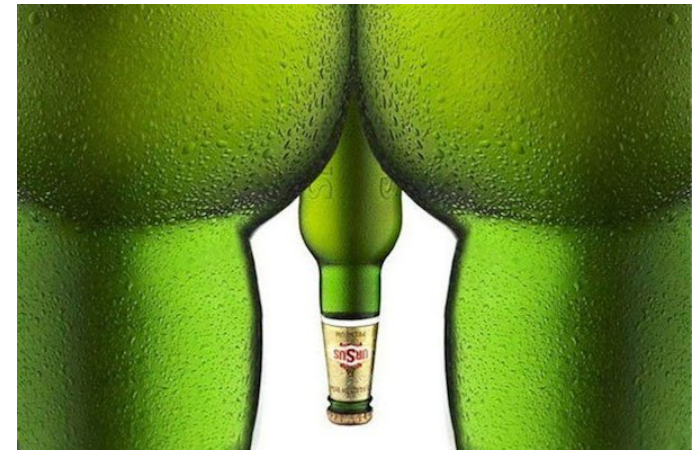
These two ads use contexts that are not real to sell the idea of rum.



Fantasy as a Meme

The fantastical world can also be used to tell a story, or add a bit of whimsical mystery to an image. Since fantasy is a shared history, and a cultural meme, it is readily understood in an image. The fantasy can then be used to illustrate the subject. These are beer ads.





Methodology

First create a complete description of the goal of the image. What is the image to illustrate. In most cases it can only illustrate one, possibly two, ideas. It is nearly impossible to show a wide variety of aspects in a single image.

Let's use the subject to generate a lot of visual ideas... and write them down. This list is only a list of visual expressions of the subject, we will narrow them later – and do not edit at this point.

Subject: Speed of a flash card to write the file.

Wind blowing flash card.

Flash card in space.

Flash card being struck by lightning.

Flash card with giant tubes coming into it.

A 'flash' across the page with minimal copy.

A Star Trek analogy for warp drive.

Methodology II

Once we have some ideas down, we can begin to make some decisions about the production of the image, and how we can further build the concept.

What is the shared history we all have with speed? Especially speed when it comes to digital, or writing itself? How about the shared history with slow writing cards, or waiting forever for something like a coffee, or in line at the post office? How about what we feel when we are stuck in traffic and an open lane appears in front of us? What about freeways? What about space travel? What about the hottest hotrod, or coolest motorcycle? How do we understand the need for speed in simple things?

Cultural memes weigh in as well – and many are included above – but now we can focus on the cultural of digital. The obsession with speed, from processors to microchips. How about the missed photographs created by slow writing cards? How about a missed Pulitzer? Or that once in a lifetime photo of the Loch Ness Monster? Or... you get the idea.

Art Directors are Asking for Your Input

In the past days, the creative departments brewed the idea within their own house. From ideas to marker comps, client approvals to market research, the shots were carefully crafted and layed out for the production with little input from the photographer.

And to be certain this still goes on a great deal.

However, shops are also now asking for the photographers input. What would YOU do if you had to illustrate speed of flash cards? How would you approach that assignment?

They may give you a bit of their own research and idea basics, but then ask how you would approach the production? What can you bring to the table here?

Exercising the conceptual visual muscle is a great thing to work on as you begin to build your advertising portfolio.

And there is no better way than to just do it - (a conceptual tag line if there ever was one...)