

Striving for Imperfection

A short essay on my image creation, by Christopher Newberry

There are three concepts that converge on my image creation. As with most of my thinking, all three are part of a dialectic process: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. I'm not a scientist, nor pretend to be. What I have to say is highly speculative. From a purely scientific outlook, it may lack rigour. Nevertheless, I find these three concepts very interesting: **Imperfect Symmetry**, **Imperfect Ideals** and **Imperfect Perception**. I speculate that, at a very fundamental level all three have a big influence on what we know as reality.

Imperfect Symmetry

I'll start with the Big Bang, which is, as far as we know or understand, where everything started. Energy and particles emanated from 'the singularity' in all directions. The distribution of these particles should have been 'even', because all elementary particles were the same – gravity should have acted on each particle with the exact same force in every direction. Had that been the case, the symmetry of energy and matter would have been perfect – an ever expanding perfect sphere. That's not what happened. Within an instant of the big bang, symmetry was broken. For yet unexplained reasons, there were small fluctuations in the distribution and working of these particles, so that when some of them came together, they exercised slightly more gravity than

their neighbours, thus attracting more particles, and as the groups of particles congregated, their collective gravity increased, thus attracting more particles and so on. Eventually these bits of matter became galaxies of stars, planets, moons, comets, etc. If there had been absolutely perfect symmetry, all the Big Bang particles would have simply expanded evenly forever. Even if the fluctuations of the particles had been symmetrically distributed, we would have ended up with a universe which was also in some way symmetrical. Something, perhaps like this (Fig. 1) – though maybe in three, four or more dimensions instead of just these two dimensions:

Whatever shape it might have, flat, spherical or saddle-like, the universe is not symmetrical. Physicists say that shortly after the Big Bang, perfect symmetry was broken (something to do with quantum uncertainty, quarks breaking away from the electroweak force, and hadrons developing different masses from leptons, the electroweak force fragmenting into electromagnetism and the weak force and so on – but don't ask me). So, I sustain that imperfect symmetry is necessary for change and evolution. Imperfect symmetry is not the same as chaos, or total randomness . . . there is order, but there is also change. Imperfect symmetry is the first concept that has a bearing on my image creation.

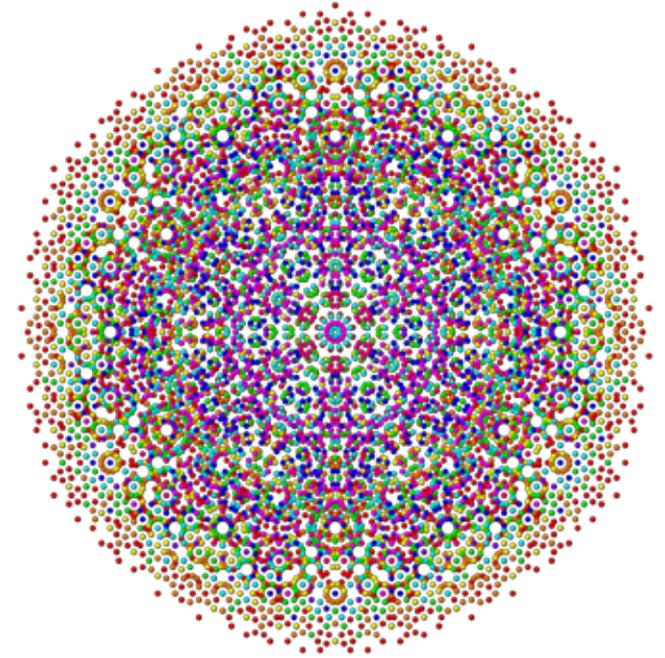


Fig. 1: Two dimensional symmetry. If the Big Bang had not had small fluctuations in its particle, the universe might have had a pattern a bit like this, but in three or more dimensions

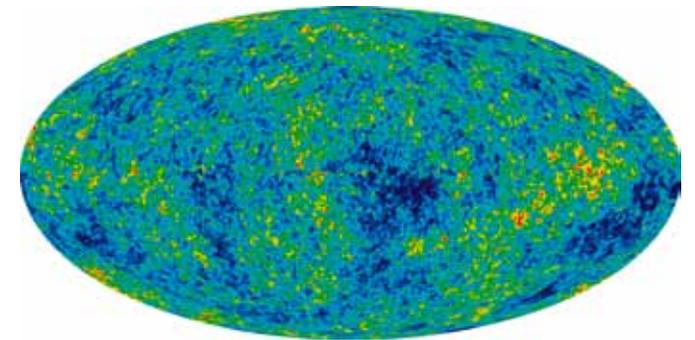


Fig. 2: According to a computer programme which took ages to develop, the universe looked something like this (though not necessarily an ellipse) at about the time galaxies were being created – the red bits. That is to say, the universe was not symmetrical.

Imperfect Ideals

The second concept is related to the first in the sense of 'perfection versus imperfection', but here it involves human concepts, rather than physics. The perfect straight line, the perfect circle, perfect square, perfect sphere. These are, of course, human concepts that don't exist in nature, nor even as part of the reality that human beings have created. The only perfectly straight line is in the mind – it's an ideal. The same goes for beauty, morality, knowledge . . . crime! You name it. If there were perfection in reality, in whatever field, there would be stagnation. You can't, by definition, improve on perfection. Development stops. In this Platonic sense, any form we create in reality is only a shadow, an imitation of its counterpart in the world of **Ideals**. After more than two millennia since Plato, we still strive to create these forms, these perfect ideals, without ever being able to do so. Surprisingly, I find myself thinking about Albert Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus is condemned for all eternity by Zeus to roll a boulder to the top of a mountain, but the boulder inevitably rolls back down again before he can ever reach the top. Camus concludes that, like the task of Sisyphus, life is purposeless. What gives life any meaning is the act of 'pushing the boulder' – not reaching the top. Camus says, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy". In the same vein, we pursue ideals, but cannot ever fully reach them. Nonetheless, Plato would have been amazed by how close we are in our present time to creating some forms which are pretty damn close to what he could only imagine. In the Greek world nothing was

straight or smooth, everything was a bit crooked, a bit jagged. But less crooked and jagged than in, say, the Stone Age. Today we can draw a rectangle on a computer screen with edges that are within microns of being perfectly straight. We can polish mirrors and lenses to reflect galaxies that are light centuries away. However, as soon as we print the rectangle onto paper, the line is bent. If we reproduce it on any surface, no matter how firm or smooth, the line will be ever so slightly jagged. And our telescope is so defective that we can't even distinguish a gigantic planet in the nearest solar system. We need to polish some more. Still, Plato would be impressed if he could see how close we are today to what he might have considered perfect.

Imperfect Perception

Now moving into the field of human perception, the third concept is related to Gestalt theory. If we only have a partial view of something (which is what we always have – we never have a total view of anything), we tend to invent the rest of it in accordance to what we think it should or might be, rather than what it actually is (which is something we will never know totally). If I ask, "what is this?" (Fig.3) Most people would say it was a face. But, of course, it's much closer to being a circle and two dots. In people's perception two horizontally placed dots frequently represent eyes. Two dots on a piece of paper are enough to hold a baby's attention, so this Gestalt thing would appear to be innate. What about these other little figures? (Figs. 4, 5, 6 and 7) *What are they?*

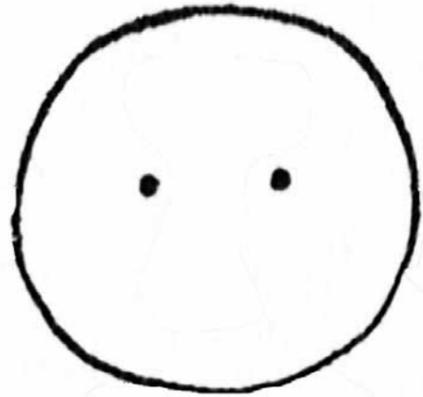


Fig. 3: Two dots and a circle are enough to convey 'face'.

Fig. 3a: Charles Schulz, the author of the comic strip 'Peanuts', was a genius at using a minimum to express a maximum. Note that this picture is the exact same image as Fig. 3 with the addition of a few more lines.

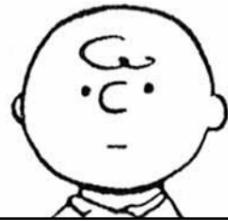


Fig. 4 Clue: 'Meow'

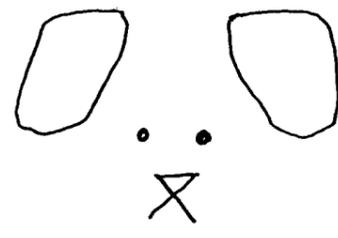


Fig. 5 Clue: 'Ruff'



Fig. 6 Clue: 'Chirp'



Fig. 7 Clue: 'Eeek'

In my totally unmethodical surveys, when I show people these figures, they almost always say "cat, dog, bird and mouse . . . or maybe rat". It doesn't take much information for people to reach a conclusion about what they see, despite having very few details. And, at the level of absolutes, no one will ever see the whole . . . probably. God might – if he, she or it exists.

Gestalt theory (and by the way, the German word 'Gestalt' means 'form' or 'shape') sustains that humans have an innate ability to recognise symbols as representations of reality, of recognising the whole even when details are missing. Children's drawings, for instance, are usually representations, not of what they see, but of what they know, of



Fig. 8: This child's drawing has marks (the undulating line of the kite's string); diagrams (the tree on the left); schemata (the sun and the human), and mandalas (the kites with a cross in the middle). These features are shared with children from all over the world, more or less regardless of what culture or, surprisingly, what time they come from. It would appear that understanding and representing symbols is innate in human beings.

what they think should be. In their drawings, children share a language that is practically universal. Children from Africa, America, Asia, Europe – they all use very similar *marks*, such as lines and dots; *diagrams*, such as circles to represent the top of a tree or a human head; *schemata*, such as suns with 'rays' emanating from their periphery or humans who have practically no forehead, and 'mandalas', which are all-purpose shapes such as circles and squares with a cross in the middle. (See Figs. 8 and 9 which contain very surprising details!)

Recognition of symbols then, is something humans are born with and as they grow, they learn new symbols and how to interpret them. Something

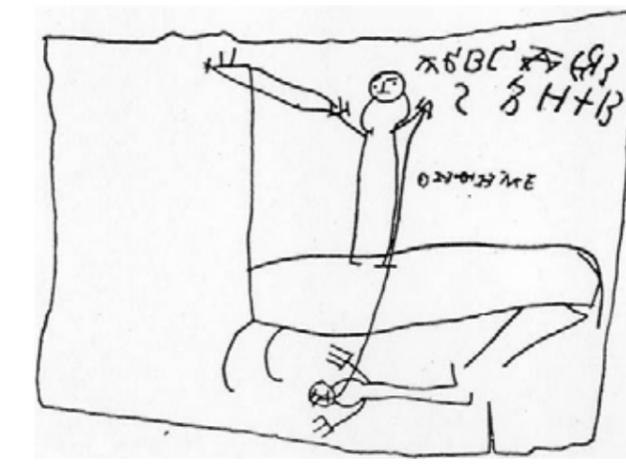


Fig. 9: Culture does play a role regarding subject matter: Fig. 8 is a drawing by a seven year-old in the USA. It is a child flying a kite (another is stuck up a tree). Here in Fig. 9 the child is also 7, but from Russia. He is portraying himself as a medieval warrior, astride a horse, attacking his enemy with a spear. Why medieval? Because this drawing is from the 13th century drawn on a piece of tree bark. The subject is different, but the symbols are very similar.

similar has happened to cultures. With the passing of time cultures acquire new symbols: cave paintings, pottery decoration, hieroglyphics, representational art, use of perspective, abstract art, conceptual art, etc. Once people have started to learn symbols, what they perceive is very much dependent on their culture. People before Classical Greece, for example, would have seen the sea's horizon as a straight line (and probably the limit of a flat earth). We now know that the horizon is not really straight, because the earth is more or less spherical. But, it looks straight. If we could show a photograph of the Earth taken from space to these ancestors, they wouldn't understand what it was. A spherical earth was not conceivable. In the Middle Ages European painters depicted reality as they thought it should be, rather than as we see it. They didn't portray perspective and when they finally started to do so, it was all wrong. The size of people didn't rely so much on where they were in the picture (large in



Fig. 10: Father Ted explains to Father Dougal the difference between cows being 'little' and 'far away': "OK, one last time. These are small, but the ones out there are far away". Father Dougal, like the Medieval mind doesn't understand perspective

the foreground, smaller in the background – see Fig. 10) but on how important they were – big if important, small if not. (Fig. 11)

Having learned that the Earth is a spinning sphere whizzing around a star at the edge of a galaxy in a big universe does not mean we're very much closer to 'The Truth'. We know from past experience that the human race has come to know things it could not conceive of three centuries ago: motor engines, microbes, nuclear weapons, the Internet, etc. If we were able to bring medieval people into our time, put them in a car and travel at 80 miles an hour on a motorway, they would not know how to interpret this experience. They cannot conceive that speed, nor the car's technology, nor the engineering that is a motorway, nor the rules that govern its use. It's all gobbledegook. An example I always think of is the fly. A fly flies into a room, finds nothing interesting, tries to fly back out, sees light, flies in that direction and straight into a closed window. In the fly's perception a transparent window pane is not conceivable, so it keeps flying into it time after time and dies on the sill, not realising that all it had to do was go around the window. We people of this modern age and of technologically advanced cultures must have equivalents to 'a window pane' – to paraphrase American politician, Donald Rumsfeld (Fig. 13)–, something "we don't know that we don't know". If an alien popped out of nowhere into our living room and showed us a picture of the 'worm hole' he or she used to get there, we would be nonplussed. Just as our ancestors would

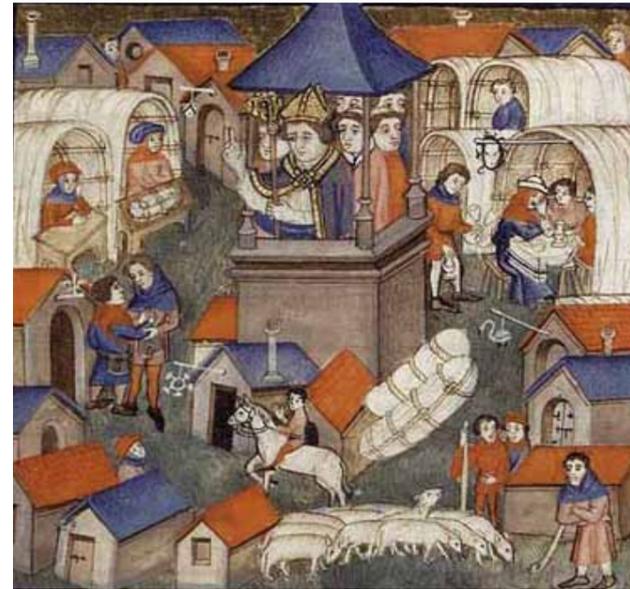


Fig. 11: The Medieval artist did not try to create an illusion of what is real, but rather a representation of what he knew: Important people were large, unimportant people were small, regardless of the position they occupy in the picture.



Fig. 12: This painting and Fig. 11 are more or less contemporaneous from about 1482, however, this one by Pietro Perugino in the Sistine Chapel has developed the concept of perspective. It is the start of the Renaissance.



Fig. 13: According to Donald Rumsfeld, "there are known knows; there are things that we know that we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know". At the time he was lambasted and mocked for this statement, but it's true – though there's probably nothing else we would agree on.

be when showing them the picture of Earth from space. Perhaps a better example is that we may be surrounded by 'dark matter', that is, matter we cannot perceive, in much the same way that flies can't perceive window panes. Until very recently dark matter was "an unknown unknown". All we can interpret is what we do know or what we know that we don't know. There will always be "unknown unknowns". We will never have the full picture, never have the full explanation.

One clear example where we only have a partial picture of the truth or totality is creation itself. We can't understand how our world, our universe came into being. Our response? We invent an explanation, we make up a story: God (or gods) did it. We need an explanation and that story is more easily grasped than reasoned explanations such as, say, quantum mechanics or string theory. Having said that, the Big Bang might explain what happened, but not how nor why it happened in the first place. The explanation offered is that there was 'a singularity', an

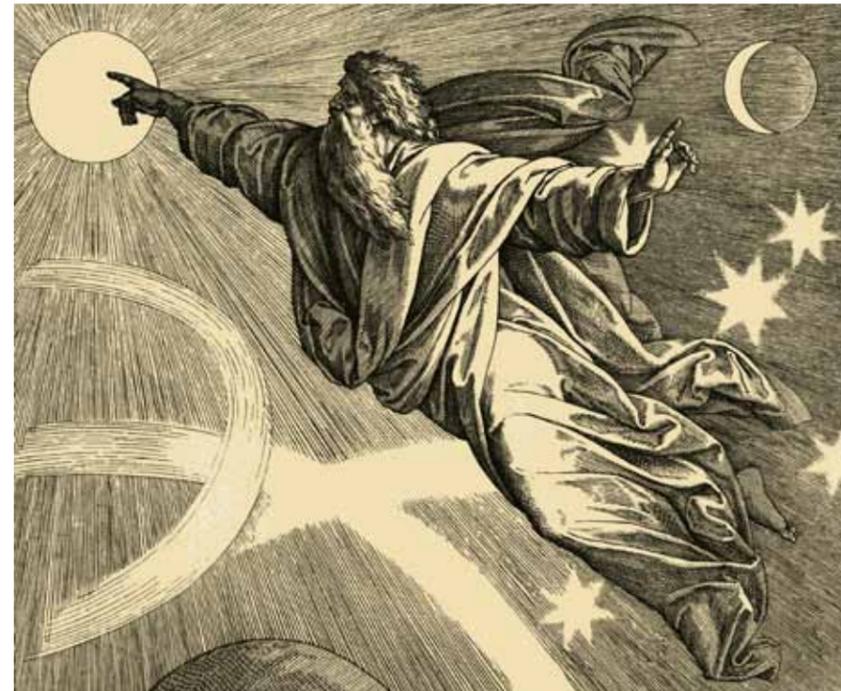


Fig. 14: Rather than trying to understand how it is that our universe came about (despite the fact that it is a never-ending task), most of us have chosen variations on "Let there be light"! The human race seems to have need for answers – even if the answers are mere inventions and become myth with the passing of time.

infinitely dense point with no volume, no space and no time, but with infinite mass and heat. That singularity exploded. Why not just say, "let there be light"? There's a window out there that we can't see. (Even now there's a new theory which may take over from Big Bang, called the Big Bounce where the universe expands and contracts, but not to the point of a singularity).

To illustrate my point Fig. 15 is a partial drawing of something. What is it? The answer is on the next page.

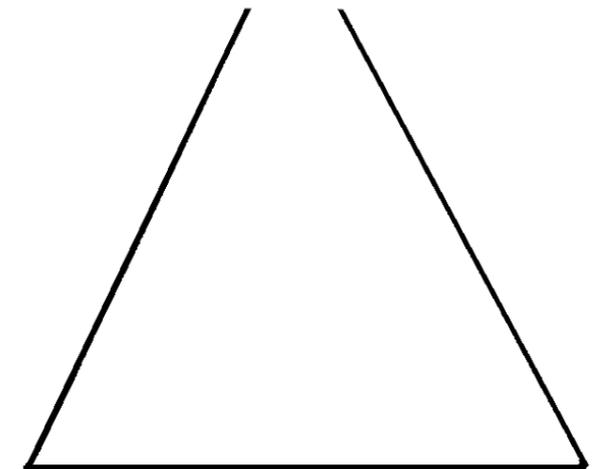


Fig. 15: This picture is incomplete. What is it? Most would say it's a triangle, but, of course if you have read the preceding pages you will have a strong suspicion that it is a trick question. So it's probably not a triangle – or is it? Answer is on the next page.

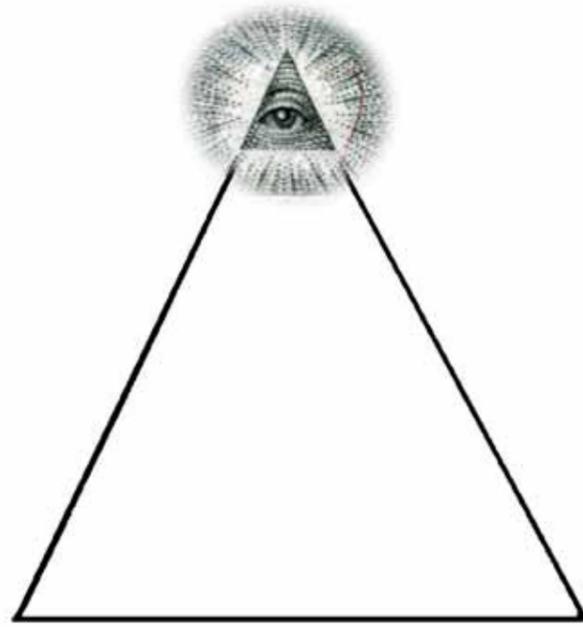


Fig. 16: When trying to come up with a clever drawing of the complete picture which was not a triangle, I thought, "why not a triangle". At first I was going to complete the picture as an exploding volcano, but then I remembered an image found on the American one dollar bill, it is an incomplete pyramid topped by this Freemason symbol of the all-seeing grand architect of the universe. Going back to the theme of Fig. 14, this one is a sort of "Let there be light", whereas the exploding volcano would have been a sort of Big Bang.

Much of my photographic work tries to convey these three concepts, **imperfect symmetry**, **imperfect ideals** and **imperfect perception** – though not always at the same time.

In photography, perfect symmetry is easily achievable (By 'perfect' I mean within the parameters of the naked eye). In architecture symmetry has always played a very important role. Say Gothic architecture. Take Whitby Abbey in North Yorkshire. The construction is certainly striving for perfect symmetry, but in those days they didn't have the tools nor materials to replicate precisely enough to achieve full symmetry. With digital photography and software, perfect symmetry is quite simple: Cut the image in half vertically, duplicate that half, flip it horizontally, carefully put it back together so that the pixels meet with their identical mirror image counterparts and, Bob's your uncle. Repeat the process this time cutting in half horizontally and



Fig. 19: The original photo of Whitby Abbey, where the architect strove for symmetry.



Fig. 18: Perfect two-way symmetry, mirroring the left side of the original image.

flipping vertically and we have four-way symmetry. Then multiply it by 9 and we still have perfect symmetry (Figs. 17 to 20). That's it. There's no sense that something else is going to happen in the picture. The image is stagnant. Nothing more can happen, other than more of the same. Maybe good for wallpaper, but not good enough for art.

Perfect symmetry is not what I'm looking for. I look for a symmetry which is not perfect, which has small fluctuations, which means it is a dynamic image – it is **Imperfect symmetry**.

Equally, I'm not looking for perfect ideals – those exist only in the mind. So I try to represent some of the shapes of things as they might have appeared in the mind of the engineer who built the road, the designer who designed the tram, the farmer who rolled the hay . . . or the architect who built the building (getting rid of as much perspective as I can,



Fig. 19: Perfect four-way symmetry mirroring the left and top of the original image.



Fig. 20: Still perfect symmetry. Nice picture, but nothing else can happen, except more of the same.

so the façades are similar to the blueprints). I try to find geometric shapes and reproduce them as perfectly as I can, as close to the ideal as I possibly can: perfectly straight lines, perfect circles, perfect squares, etc. This means we are approaching perfection (the Ideal), but will never reach it, because once the Ideal is reproduced in reality, it is subject to the laws of reality. So, for instance, the ideal straight line is one-dimensional – length –, but as soon as we reproduce a line in reality, no matter how thin the line is, it will have three dimensions, length, width and thickness (the ink on the page) – it is an **Imperfect Ideal**.

Finally, **Imperfect Perception**. Here I try to limit the amount of information, by giving a partial view of what might be a whole (of course all views are partial, but our mind separates elements of those partial views and turns them into independent



Fig. 21: Imperfect Perception. A partial view: To a British culture, this is a postbox. To others it may be a flying saucer. Who knows? But in the blue sky beyond the object lie all the answers, because that's where everything is, including, perhaps an image of myself taking a photo of the postbox.

wholes: a building, a car, a person, a face, an eye, an eye-lash, etc.). I try to provide as little information as possible but enough so the viewers can form an idea as to what it is they're looking at.

Funnily enough, my thoughts on these concepts relating to images came in reverse order to that which I've stated it here. First came imperfect perception. I started this line of thinking with a collection called "Gestalt Blue Skies". These images are partial views of objects set on the background of a blue sky: a postbox (Fig. 21), a gas-works, a banana plant, curtains, scaffolding, etc. They illustrate our power to complete the picture without having all the details of the individual object. At the same time, I was trying to show that all the details actually are there to explain literally everything, – not just the object. Literally, everything. The details are all in the Blue Skies: that's where all the planets,



Fig. 22: Imperfect Ideals. The natural lines of nature become straight lines imitating their ideal. The separations of air from water, water from land and one colour of sand from another are perfectly straight lines, forming rectangles.

moons, stars and galaxies are. Dark matter and dark energy are probably also there. Unfortunately, my photographic lens hasn't got enough resolution and amplification to make all this apparent to us with the naked eye, but the universe is there. Each blue pixel in the photograph may contain whole galaxies. If the theory of multiverses is correct, all the other parallel universes are in the picture too. If we had perfect perception, we'd be able to see everything in each picture.

This train of thought took me onto another collection called "Platonic Views". Usually these are landscapes where I transformed real shapes into ideal shapes – again, within the parameters of the naked eye. The horizon becomes a straight line (Fig. 22), a roll of hay is perfectly circular, an island is totally symmetrical . . . These are shapes that only exist in the mind. They are ideals. What I try to do



Fig. 23: Imperfect Symmetry. At first glance the picture is completely symmetrical. It's not. The building itself was reasonably symmetrical. I added to that symmetry, but left enough asymmetry to make it 'imperfect': the door handle, the shadows, the condition of the wall.

is reflect those ideals in an imperfect way, but a lot closer to the shape in the mind than would have been possible even thirty years ago. It's what we strive for and will never achieve . . . the boulder we must push up the hill. These are imperfect ideals. This is what got me thinking about symmetry. I tried to make pictures as symmetrical as possible, not by splitting the image into two and then flipping it, but by starting with a reasonably symmetrical image and then altering parts of the picture to increase symmetry, but never completely, leaving bits that break the symmetry. In Fig. 23, for instance the door-handle is only on the left of the door; part of the wall surface is damaged; the shadows are asymmetric, but the lines are perfectly straight. The question of symmetry got me to thinking about people. We, like most animals, are symmetrical. In fact many sustain that one of the characteristics of human beauty is their symmetry. There are whole books written on the subject. While symmetry is



Fig. 24: This woman, despite a rather asymmetrical face is attractive, not at all weird. Once I made her face completely symmetrical, she becomes a rather strange and unsettling image.

attractive, perfect symmetry is just plain weird. I did portraits of people and made their faces perfectly symmetrical (not the rest of their bodies) hoping to represent two aspects of their personalities. Because they are done as portraits, rather than as studies in symmetry, the results are a bit unsettling. In fact one woman I photographed is quite attractive despite having an asymmetrical face. (Fig.24)

In the end, I am trying to express the essence of things. That may be awfully pretentious. Nevertheless, I am looking to find what makes an image, object or being what it is, and that is its 'essence'. Graphically it is sometimes reasonably easy to portray the essence of things. A few shapes, a few lines and the essence is expressed. (Fig. 25) This is basketball, this is archery, hockey, gymnastics, and so on. With very simple symbols you can also tell which is the gents' and which is the ladies', that there are roadworks being done (though sometimes that sign is interpreted as 'man opening brollie', Fig. 25a), that there is a speed limit, that something is poisonous, etc. Reducing the visible reality to its bare essentials is more complicated, because we're no longer dealing with signposts, but with people's character, social basics, cultural icons, aesthetics, emotions, perceptual abilities and so forth. Richard Avedon was a fashion photographer, but he is now more remembered as a portrait photographer. Wherever he went, he always carried a roll of white paper, which he used



Fig. 25a Roadworks or 'man opening umbrella??'



Fig. 25: The first time I remember being aware of very simple signs and symbols telling me what I needed to know was during the Mexico City Olympics in 1968. These were the symbols used for the sporting events.

as a backdrop for his portraits. He would stand his subject in front of this backdrop, talk about something which made the subject feel uncomfortable and snap. Usually the photos were full frontal, plain with nothing to distract from the face of his subjects. He portrayed people in their essence, taking away the usual mask and presenting them starkly. (Fig. 26)

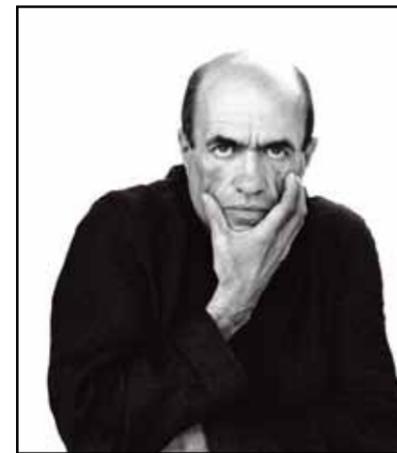


Fig. 26 Richard Avedon's portraits were stark, with no background or colour to distract from the essence of his subject.

That is similar to what I'm trying to do: present the essence of visible reality with the bare minimum elements, as it is, without emotion: Deadpan.

When putting these three concepts into practice, I've found that there are overlaps, which graphically look something like this: (Fig.27)

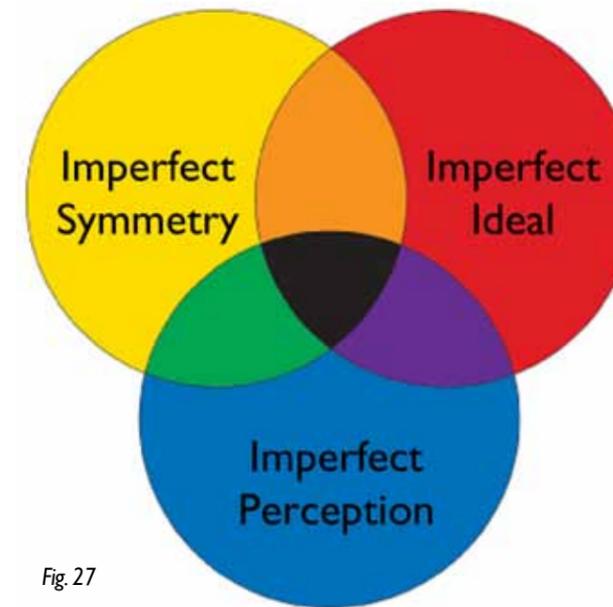


Fig. 27

Fig. 28: Imperfect Symmetry: The faces are perfectly symmetrical, but not the picture itself. Note the position of the hands.



Fig. 29: Imperfect Ideal: Every fruit and vegetable is very close to being a perfect circle, every box a rectangle, every line straight.



Fig. 30: Imperfect perception. The viewer only has a partial view of the whole of the object, but an almost total view of the universe and everything that is knowable



Fig. 31: Imperfect symmetry and perception. There is symmetry, but it's only a partial view of a larger whole.

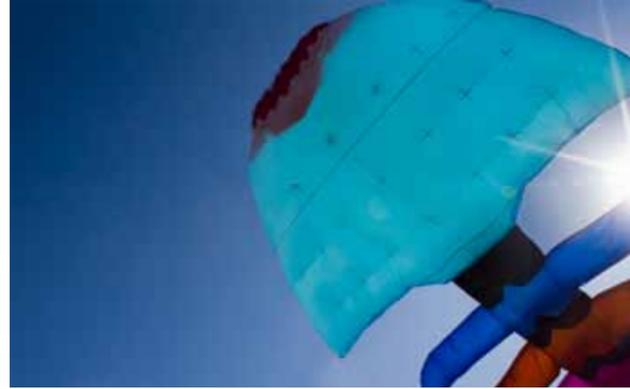


Fig. 32: Imperfect symmetry and ideals. Although the actual windows are symmetric, their reflections are not. There is no perspective and every window is exactly the same size.



Fig. 33: Imperfect perception and ideals. Each 'block' has straight lines and the image is only partial, but here there is an added element: isolation.



Fig. 34: All three concepts are incorporated here: Imperfect symmetry, ideal and perception.

Here are a few more examples of my images which incorporate some or all of the three concepts, plus isolation.





An English street, a staircase and the Berlin Wall Memorial with tourist . . .All three pictures are composites of several dozen images. The same place at different times.





On Leiden canal, the same background is repeated over and over while the foreground changes through the day. The image should be at least 10 metres long by 40 cms. Below are some larger details of the whole.





Self portrait with my dog in my kitchen. This image, like all my photos in this publication, is meant to be big in order to appreciate the ideas expressed here. This one in particular should be 3.65 X 1 metre.

