

The Doldrums

by Noella Ballenger

There are many times when it seems difficult to find the incentive to work on photography. Nothing seems to suit, nothing seems to interest, and it's too much trouble or too hot or cold to even think about dragging equipment around. What to do?

Grab your imagination, and let's have some fun as we break out of those deadly doldrums. We'll see what we can find around the house. First, to put ourselves in the mood, let's think of the photographic basics we know we could work on. How about design elements like color, line, shape, or texture?

One of my favorite exercises that people always remember is nicknamed the "bathroom terror." Here's how it works: Go into the bathroom and spend one hour photographing everything you see. You're limited to thirty-six exposures--either film or digital (no cheating on this by erasing the ones you don't like). However, everything you shoot must say *bathroom*. Each image must be clear, so we know what it is. Wait a week and then go back to the same room. Again, set the timer for one hour and use only thirty-six exposures. This time, *nothing* can say bathroom. You have to show us the same subjects in a new, different, and possibly abstract way.

The "bathroom terror" exercise no longer holds enough challenge for me, so I think I'll take the design elements of line and shape and see what I can do with them. Let's see if I can invent an assignment and use it to snap me out of my blues.

First I'll set up some rules. I'm going to limit myself to my office. Then I'll limit myself to objects that are in plain sight. No opening files or closets or stuff like that. I could be really nasty and draw a circle on the floor and make myself stay within the circle while I shoot. (A circle is what I use for workshop participants who can't settle down.) But I think my office is already small enough. One of the reasons I want to limit the area I will shoot in is that I'm forced to find subjects where I am. It defeats the "this-is-a-great-waterfall-but-the-next-one-will-be-better" syndrome. As photographers, we need to learn to look carefully and see with the "inner eye"--also occasionally known as the imagination. We also need to learn to manipulate ourselves and what we're shooting, so that our vision will come alive.

I stayed in the office for one hour of shooting time (actually less because I used up all of my thirty-six shots very quickly). However, I began to see so many more possibilities that I probably could have shot five times more film without any trouble. But, alas, I know the rules--one hour and thirty-six exposures.

Shooting in my office was an exercise in discovery for me. First, I decided that my office really, really does need a cleaning. (I'll get to that one of these days.) Then, I discovered that when you're as familiar with an area as I am with my office, it's much more difficult to see design. You tend to look at what an object is or what it does rather than design. Finally, I discovered that I wanted to explore more of my living spaces to see if I can improve my vision. I know that I see well outdoors, but I really need to practice more in areas that I don't see as well.

My office-shooting exercise wasn't the most comfortable way for me to break my doldrums, but it did the job. I had my camera in my hands--no excuses. And the exercise did offer a springboard to some valuable lessons for me to work on in the next few weeks. I would be willing to bet that working with my weaknesses and trying projects that I don't often do or don't like will be of great benefit to me when I return to photographing my favorite nature subjects. Try out my suggestions. Remember, no matter how bad you think your images are, they aren't "failures," because they got you moving and thinking. And thinking is what it takes to improve.

* * * * *

Noella Ballenger teaches photography workshops in a number of western U.S. locations--including Bodie, California. Joining her Bodie/Eastern Sierra workshop this October will allow workshop participants to enter the buildings to photograph artifacts left by the early pioneers and miners--a privilege regular park visitors do not have. Please check her Website www.noellaballenger.com for her workshop schedule. You can also e-mail her for additional information on her workshops.