

Conceptual Photography

Conceptual photography is often very imaginative. It seems unreal. Often reality in the photos is distorted, and what you know as normal, is completely changed. Then there are also some people who are doing things that aren't as imaginative. They are changing some things, or exaggerating reality to a lesser degree.

Conceptual photography is about work that starts with a concept or an idea. In many instances, photography normally starts with an image or a place. You go out somewhere that you think will be interesting and take photos. Once you get home you put the photos on your computer, and for a lot of people, that is all besides some basic post-processing. There is nothing wrong with working that way, but conceptual photography starts out differently.



In conceptual photography you start with an idea, or the concept, of what you want to do. At this stage you start working out what you want your final image to be about. You are working in the dark so to speak, as you won't know the final result until you have processed it. A lot of modern conceptual photography artists make use of Photoshop and use many processing and layering techniques to sell the story of their ideas.

That does not mean conceptual images necessarily are only made with Photoshop, in fact many well prepared scenes of superbly composed images can be conceptual, but they are not merely happenstance, they are images that have been thought about, crafted and often use models or actors to ensure the artist produces exactly what they had thought about in their storyboarding of the idea; a preconceived notion.



Artists working conceptually

Other artists (who aren't photographers) often work this way. Sculptors have an idea of what they want to sculpt, but it isn't until it is completed that they know if it will be any good. Many painters work the same way, especially abstract artists. The way they work can be fluid, but they have an idea of what they are trying to achieve. Again, it isn't until the painting is finished, that the artist can judge whether it was successful.

There is no reason why photographers cannot work the same way. Many photographers do, and if you like that kind of work, you can as well.

It is about using your imagination, and seeing what you can envision.

If you search **Conceptual Photography** you will find many examples. There are some inspirational photos there as well. They are often clever, and usually highly processed. That does not mean you have to be really good at photo processing, but you do need to have a good imagination.

Adobe Photoshop used to say, "If you can dream it you can create it with the software". I don't know how true that is, but you can do a lot in Photoshop, and if you can imagine it, then you should try to create it.

It's all about imagination

That is a big part of this type of photography. It is about imagination and ideas, planning and getting what you need to create the image, and finally the creation of the image.

Most conceptual work you see is created around portraits. There are many photographers in the world who specialize in fine art portraiture. They would also be considered conceptual artists. You can't take a person out and simply take their portrait, you need to plan the whole session. Long before you have your model, you need to have an idea of what you want to do;



what costumes you may need, and where you want to take the photos. That is how it starts.

Not all conceptual work is portraiture though. There are many photographers working in landscape or architecture who are creating their own realities.

You might want to put your cat on top of a large building, so it looks like King Kong. You may have seen images where there is a house floating in the air, or someone is put inside a glass jar. These all started with the artist thinking about "what if".

Some specific conceptual photographic artists

There are some incredible conceptual photographers and artists who are working now.

Rick Amor is an Australian painter. He often paints his environment around him, but not as we see it. He visits places and takes lots of photos. When he gets back to his studio, he goes through those photos to work out which ones he can paint. He will take a little from one image, and something from another, to create a new scene or a new reality. They aren't straight copies, and he often distorts the sizes and views as well. A statue that is normally six feet tall might appear to be 30 feet tall in one of his paintings.

Brooke Shaden is a fine art photographer whose work also fits into the category of conceptual art. She does portrait style images, but they are all more than a portrait of a person sitting in front of the camera. Before she starts, she plans what she wants first. She works out: what the colour scheme will be, what props she will need, if any, and then the location. The model is also important and has to be someone that will fit the mood of the image she wants to create. Finally, she finishes the image by using Photoshop to give it her unique look.

Another popular artist, known for his incredible conceptual images, is **Erik Johansson**.



He has an amazing ability to turn the world around him upside down. He manages to turn the ordinary into something extraordinary, to make you see the world in a new way. His imagination is amazing. The ideas he comes up really show how talented he is.

All these artists work differently. You may identify with one of them. You may want to find your own conceptual artists that work in a way that you admire, who you can gain inspiration from. It is important to find other photographers that give you motivation, to work and try new things. You shouldn't copy them, except to learn, but look at the work and see if you can find your own style.

How can you do conceptual photography?

You need to start thinking conceptually. If you want to create images like the ones mentioned and shown here, then you need to start using your imagination. Think about how you can twist the world around you, or finding some interesting things you can do with it.

Think about how you are going to achieve the final result that you are after. Do you have to take specific photos for it? You need to make sure when you are taking the photos that everything will work together. It should look like it really is possible.

For most images you have to **know how to composite**. How to take something from one scene, then place it into another. As you put everything together, you start to see whether or not it has worked.



Flinders Street in Melbourne Flooded. A process done on the computer to make a place look like water is everywhere.

Working conceptually

Making conceptual images can be a rewarding way of working. It can help you stand out from many other photographers. It is not easy to do, and patience and time are often needed to learn it. However, if you have the drive, then a whole new world could be there for you.



Mikael Aldo's "The Beginning of Ashes" explores the inevitable and fatal effects of deforestation on all living things.

