

## COMPOSING WITH VISUAL DEVICES

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The Foundation Programme at NID consists of various analogous courses that along other concerns, predominantly address aspects of visual form and visual language, because design activity primarily focuses on making and deciding upon forms as end products. A course in Elements and Principles of Visual Composition is essentially aimed to develop awareness and perception about structural unity as the order or cohesiveness of component parts in a form. Practicals in this course are aimed to see that the implicit structure results in a clearer whole and presents a potential of desired intentions which can be optimised over with the help of explicit elements. Although the desirability of structural order was questioned time and again over conceptual urgency and priorities in visual arts, the quality of visual form has maintained its significance and centrality in design. Designers want to make use of the prevalent grammar of visual form in order to acquire acceptance and a wider reach of conceptual contents. Preferred designs are those which are conceptually rich as well as structurally appropriate. Concern for structural order has increased in design thinking, since a physical form is considered inclusive of and complimenting the issues at the strategic and systemic level as well.

The course introduces students to the concepts of visual composition at the structural level and virtues of visualising a form as a structure. Structure as a generic layout embeds purposes expected out of a form. As a broad representation, structure insists on an arrangement of implicit, non-characteristic, and mute building blocks as elements which are abstract. Structure participates in a collective activity without much specificity of individual expression. Similarly, it is preferred that these elements have no connotative texture or colour; hence, they have a black and white appearance. What is of utmost importance is an 'intent lead order' showing interrelationship among the elements, elements and space, and particularly in two dimensional design relationships of elements also with the frame. Insistence of expressionally nonspecific elements also asks for handling of themes which are experiential and verb based. Thus, it is expected that the configurations are abstract and non representational, since noun based and concrete intentions can deviate and dilute the purpose of exercising in 'cohesive arrangement of elements' that as a composition, offers an experience.

Abstraction is an indispensable process in rendering the form of a product. There are innumerable examples of designs referring to structures, gestures, and attributes in natural forms. Abstraction is an indispensable tool because it helps bring in minimalism, simplicity, and most importantly it helps exclude direct and literal representation of essential metaphorical references from the environment. As an enriched and academically much sought after process in perception, (as well as in representations) abstraction inculcates the habit of looking for qualitative insights about what is intangible, attributable, and influential in an entity that can be further extracted and translated into design.

Because of its experiential, subjective and tacit nature, and non prescriptive variety of output, this course appears incomprehensive to a few in the beginning. However, the students work on a series of explorations through this course, and eventually begin to show a liking for orderliness; thus, developing an ability to eliminate the disorderly elements in a composition.

Through a series of simple exercises, they are familiarised with the guiding principles of design aesthetics and basic visual elements as materials. They also get to know about a range and applications of compositional devices and variety of approaches through which they learn to modulate visual effects. The course concurrently discusses the perceptual tendencies and mind's preferences over a visual configuration in the form of Gestalt laws. Therefore, working with a two dimensional medium that produces immediate results, avails a lot of scope in undergoing related sensorial enquiry, and in developing a wide variety of explorations that provide the possibility of easy rectifications at different stages of composition. Through this course, students also work on assignments based on three dimensional forms in order to exercise and realise the presence and commonality of aesthetic principles in them. This article is an attempt at unfolding how these multiple objectives are attended in a series of classroom assignments. For the benefit of students, this article will also revisit the definitions of compositional terms which contribute to a larger studio vocabulary.

An act of composition is a process of arrangement of parts that make a design effective. In short, it is an 'effective arrangement of parts'. Effectiveness, here, is basically about wholeness that comprises the function and feel of the form among other criterions that have to be addressed in the design process.

Again, design here is value addition in a form beyond the fulfillment of its basic purpose. Hence this thinking that a good composition, like a living entity does communicate and offers a unique experience of its own.

To begin with, a composition is made with three important basic constituents. These are space, form, and structure. Space is a passive background that supports all elements appearing over it. It appeals to perception as an abstract and experiential entity. There are finite and infinite natures of spaces. A form is a thing that isolates itself from space. It appeals to perception as a concrete and informative entity. Structure means a cohesive relationship among the forms, as well as space and forms. In two dimensional designs, space is marked or edged by the frame and the relationship of forms with the frame is also of equal significance. Structure is analysed on two levels—on the physical level it is supposed to be binding all components together and not letting them disperse or collapse; while, at the conceptual level it is analysed as an intension, a thought, theme, an idea or story that inspires the character of the forms, space, and their interrelationship. In visual communication, compositions are usually two dimensional in nature. And it is this process of composing or laying out of different units in a given frame or format that becomes a core and crucial activity. In Graphic Design, a format is flat and it is the given space generally called 'pictorial space' that is used to overlay text and images as its constituent parts. Often forms such as types and text boxes are also flat and wherever needed, an illusion of third dimension and visual hierarchy is achieved by application of visual devices of depth such as overlap, gradients, and perspective. Pictures and photographs representing spaces objectively and with realistic volume and depth are treated as spaces within the space of a given frame. Let us look into the concept

of ‘frame’ or ‘format’ and its relationship with the ‘form’ and framed space or the ‘field’. Framing helps in selecting or isolating an activity or a form from the rest, just like segregating different thoughts through boxes in a flow chart. Inside a frame, a thing acquires emphasis and it helps viewers to concentrate upon and appreciate it comfortably. In the process of perception, frame supports our selective attention on a thing. It can also happen that otherwise scattered thoughts and commonly overlooked visual gestures become noteworthy and beautiful when positioned properly in a frame. There are certain basic ways with which the relationship among the frame, forms, and field is exploited in Communication Design. These can be broadly categorised as shown—

#### **In painting and graphic arts**

Frame and field are passive (static) and forms are active (movable).

#### **In photography and observational drawings**

Frame is active, and field and forms are regarded as passive.

#### **In cinematography and animation**

Frame, field, and forms—all three can be simultaneously active.

Compositions that appeal to most of us contain certain universal principles. These universal principles are present in the natural forms and environment, and they are somehow conditioning our perception and judgements continuously. Principles are those aspects which are implicit and active in the structure and appearance of a composition. All works of art that offer an aesthetic experience are based on these principles. Referring to something that is common in all, a sensitive perceiver can feel and point out an error in the compositions of music, dance, architecture, fine arts, design, and several other fields. Principles are present in all affective art forms though they may vary in their nature and

importance. There are various schools of thought about the number and order of principles in visual composition; however, there it makes an interesting sequence of gradually increasing complexity of experiences observed in an order of principles. For clearer understanding, aesthetic principles can be grouped into two types according to their relative effects. In the first type, they are local, physical, and visible in the composition; and in second, they are sensory, felt, and invisible in a composition. Pattern, rhythm, contrast, and unity have physical and visible presence as principles; whereas, proportion, balance, and harmony are those sensorial, felt, and experiential principles. Reasonably, seven major principles are considered and shown here in an order of growing complexity—pattern, rhythm, contrast, unity, proportion, balance, and harmony wherein—

**Pattern** is repetition without variation.

**Rhythm** is repetition with variation.

**Contrast** is dissimilarity along the rhythm.

**Unity** is complementarity among the contrasting elements.

**Proportion** is the relative magnitude of elements.

**Balance** is the sensed equilibrium of mass and attention.

**Harmony** is an effect of shared qualitative features by all elements.

By these definitions it is clear that the principles are interdependent and not distinct. In every good composition they coexist in different contextual combinations and have varying degrees of significance. These principles, when used in a composition, can regulate their respective influences which are often emphasised or improved with the help of other principles, in order to achieve overall aesthetic unity and desired effects in a composition.

The basic elements of a composition are: dot, line, shape, and form. These are made visible in the

space with the help of explicit or external elements of value, texture, and colour. These elements are essentially structural and implicit; they help build 'concept of structure' and function through the processes of imagination and visualisation of a form. While acknowledging their properties and role in visualisation, these visual elements can be used as units or parts that can help in the creation of interesting compositions. A good arrangement of elements can be communicative and expressive, simply because of its order that reveals an expression through its structure as is seen in compositions made with a pleasing positioning of uniform and neutral dots. No doubt, a purely structural arrangement as a composition is effective, but it is further 'optimised' by means of variables of explicit elements like that of value, texture, colour and those 'specified' by means of relative visual devices of size, numbers, orientation, alignment and the rest. Therefore, an act of structure making can be described as an act of pure composition that can be done without any overlay of explicit elements. Therefore, exercises in nurturing the sense of composition are best started by playing with simple, easy to arrange, neutral, and basic visual elements such as dots, lines, and basic planar shapes.

Visual devices help develop specificity and preciseness of intent in a composition. Devices are variables and one needs to carefully comprehend their functions in a composition so that they are wisely put to use in creating the desired effect. They can be categorised into three types—relative devices, affective devices, and intuitive devices.

Relative devices are used comparatively among the elements to develop adequate contrast in the composition. Some of the most commonly used devices are: size, orientation, position, numbers, spacing, alignment, direction, overlap, density, gradation, cropping, intensity, and weight.

Affective devices are emotive and influence the mind. They include: medium, style, character, centre of interest, view point, emphasis, hierarchy, gestures, expressions, ornamentation, symbols, words, and captions.

Intuitive devices are contextual and relative to the constraints, freedom, creative ability, and interest levels of the visual artist. These devices include: selection, synthesis, variability, connectivity, fluency, economy, modification, and optimisation.

Visual devices help construct and control the impact, effect, and specificity of meaning in a composition. They fine tune and specify interrelation of different parts and help generate unity, order, and hierarchy amidst unavoidable contrasting elements.

Students work on certain exercises that help them sharpen their senses and skills of visual organisation. For this purpose, it is quite convenient that one chooses those basic elements and avoids characteristic figures. Characteristic figures are indeed complex visual signs. At this stage, a fascination for figures with specificity of identity, expression, and character can deviate our primary intention of composition; namely, that of organising the composition in a simple and sensible manner. Otherwise, neutral elements when rendered active and expressive, contribute to a narration. Here, in this case, a mere collaboration is their action. Detailed and specified features pave the way for the inclusion of individual elements into a 'story'; hence, they become suitable aids for fulfilling advanced and contextual purposes of compositions, particularly in visual narratives. In fact, knowledge of the principles of composition is best understood in an inclusive approach that can be accommodated for future visual presentations in any style and technique. Therefore, selection of non-specific elements as well as themes for basic

compositional exercises is advisable. It is desired that design students at the foundation level, acknowledge and internalise these principles and elements as a grammar of the relationship between and behaviour of visual elements and visual language at large. It is often seen that without having a firm grounding in these basics, students switch over to other challenges in visual representation of modifications and stylisation of forms. At times, these aspects overpower the composition to such an extent that their presentation comes nowhere close to the intent and are devoid of any appropriate structure. In a good form, attributes are subtly and indirectly present without disturbing finer experiential aspects such as unity, harmony, and the overall mood it offers. Loud, showy, and pretentious projections distract and confuse the very purpose of a form. Attributes are sensed and a sensory experience is essentially an abstraction. A form at the structural level is free from external makeover; it is generic and less specific, just like skeletons. At its very initial stages, composition is an act of organisation of parts; therefore, it is generic. Basic visual elements are like building blocks in a structure. They come together or are put together for a purpose. In the same way, composition is a purposeful organisation of such units or blocks. Principles are not the rules. They are part of that sublime universal order in nature and the experiences individuals get from it. All of individuals are part of it and having grown with it, more or less like and dislike similar features in it. For example, a broken or dismantled object is always disliked. There is an urgency to fix it and view it as a whole as soon as possible. Human beings share certain things so unknowingly, that they often simply ignore those things. Aesthetic principles are among such. It is true that every material manifestation in nature is true to the order of these hidden principles. Likewise, every artificial creation that leaves an enduring impression upon individuals contains these principles. Therefore,

learning about composition is learning to understand and know about the beautiful interrelation, interdependence, and perfectly embedded symbiotic integrity and order in nature.

Compositions made in a systematic manner with basic elements such as dots, lines, and shapes will be discussed now. These compositions simultaneously employ a series of relational devices with increasing numbers that also add to the complexity of the structure. It begins with a dot that is followed by line, plane, and letter forms as the basic elements that make a composition showing themes of 'movement', 'depth' and 'emphasis' in the frame using an entire range of compositional devices. It would be worthwhile to have a glance at a comprehensive chart that follows. It would be wise to consider beforehand the flexible, fluid, and at times the role changing nature and interdependence of these terms in visual design. This is a broad and primary classification prepared with pedagogical objectives and cannot be referred to in order to make mechanical and general discrimination of concepts in design.

**Constituents, Principles, Elements and Devices in a Visual Composition: A Primary Classification****BASIC CONSTITUTENTS**SPACE  
FORM  
STRUCTURE**MODES OF VISUAL INFORMATION**

<b>3D</b>	<b>2D</b>	<b>VIRTUAL</b>
ACTUAL	PICTORIAL	ILLUSORY
<b>Realistic, Simulative, Abstract, Imaginary, Creative</b>		

**VISUAL PRINCIPLES**PATTERN, RHYTHM, CONTRAST, UNITY  
PROPORTION, BALANCE, HARMONY**VISUAL ELEMENTS****IMPLICIT**(CONCEPTUAL,  
STRUCTURAL AND INVISIBLE)POINT/DOT  
LINE  
PLANE - SHAPE  
VOLUME - FORM**EXPLICIT**

(PHYSICAL, FORMAL AND VISIBLE)

VALUE, TONE/TINT-SHADE  
TEXTURE/PATTERN  
COLOUR HUE/CHROMA**DESIGN DEVICES****RELATIVE**

(COMPARATIVE)

POSITION  
SPACING-INTERVAL  
DIRECTION  
ALIGNMENT  
ORIENTATION  
SIZE/PROPORTION  
NUMBERS  
LAYERS/OVERLAPS  
GRADATION  
BRIGHTNESS/INTENSITY  
SATURATION  
MOVEMENT  
WEIGHT/GRAVITY**AFFECTIVE**

(EMOTIVE)

MEDIUM, STYLE  
EMPHASIS / HEIRARCHY  
CENTRE OF INTEREST  
POINT OF VIEW  
FIELD OF VIEW  
GESTURE, CHARACTER  
WORDS/TEXT  
SYMBOLISM  
ORNAMENTATION**INTUITIVE**

(DECISIVE)

SELECTION  
SYNTHESIS,  
CONNECTIVITY  
VARIABILITY  
FLUENCY  
INTERRELATION  
MODIFICATION  
OPTIMISATION  
ECONOMY/SIMPLICITY**References**

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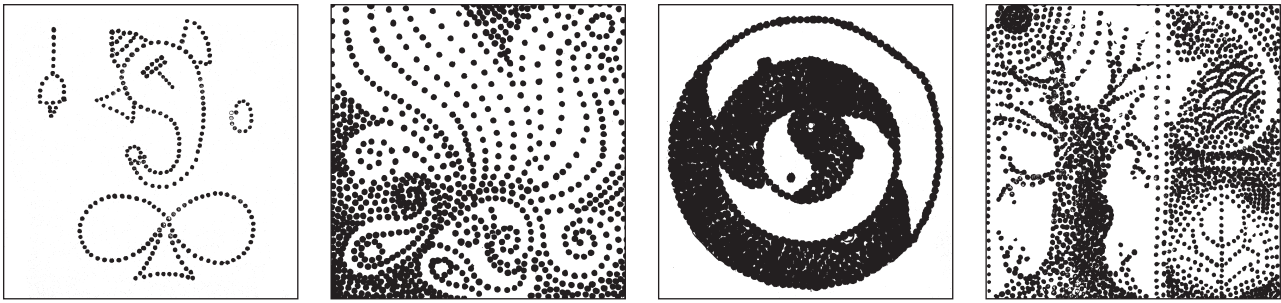
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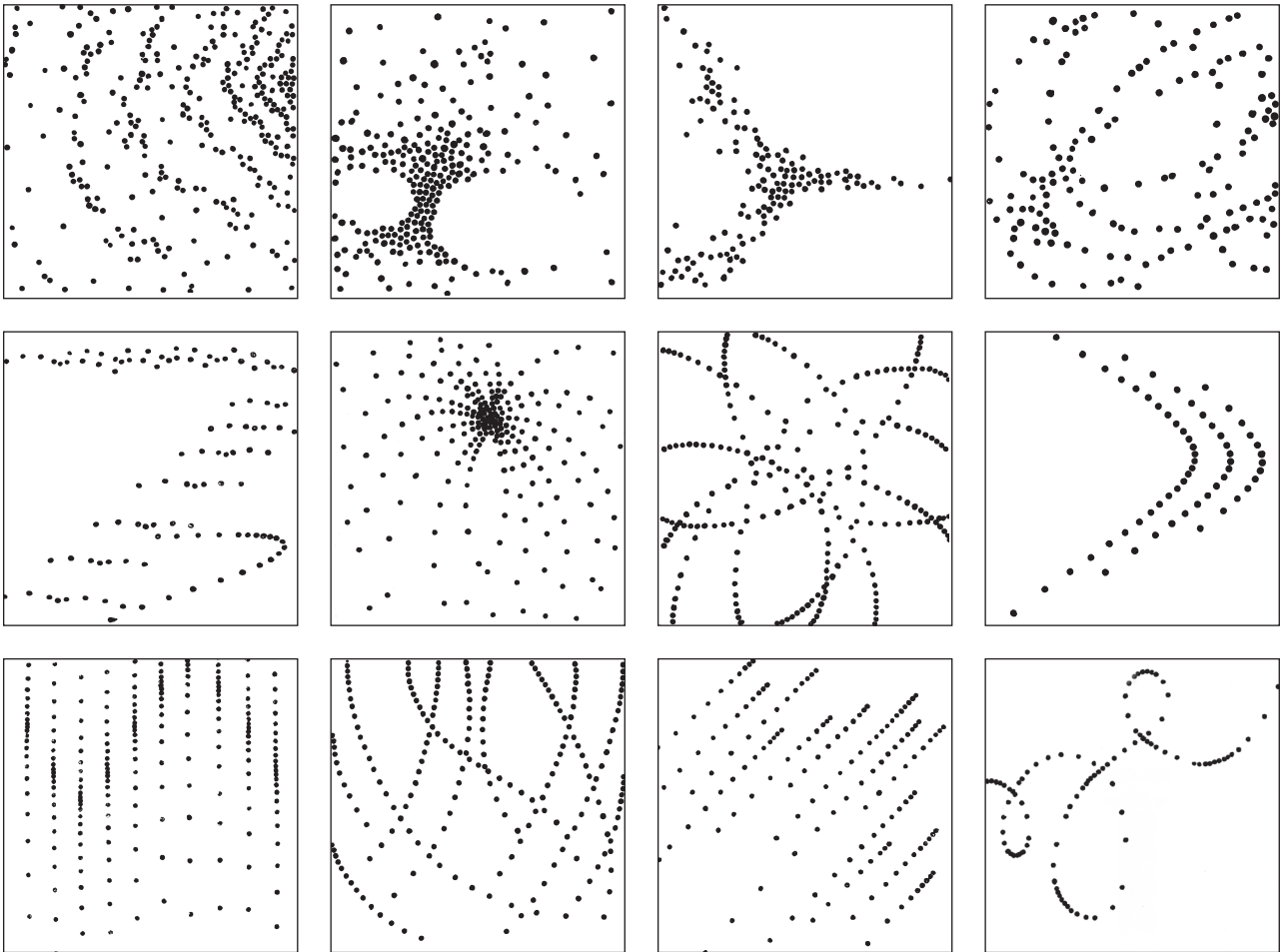
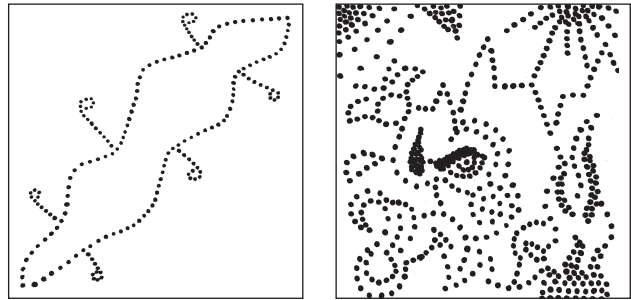
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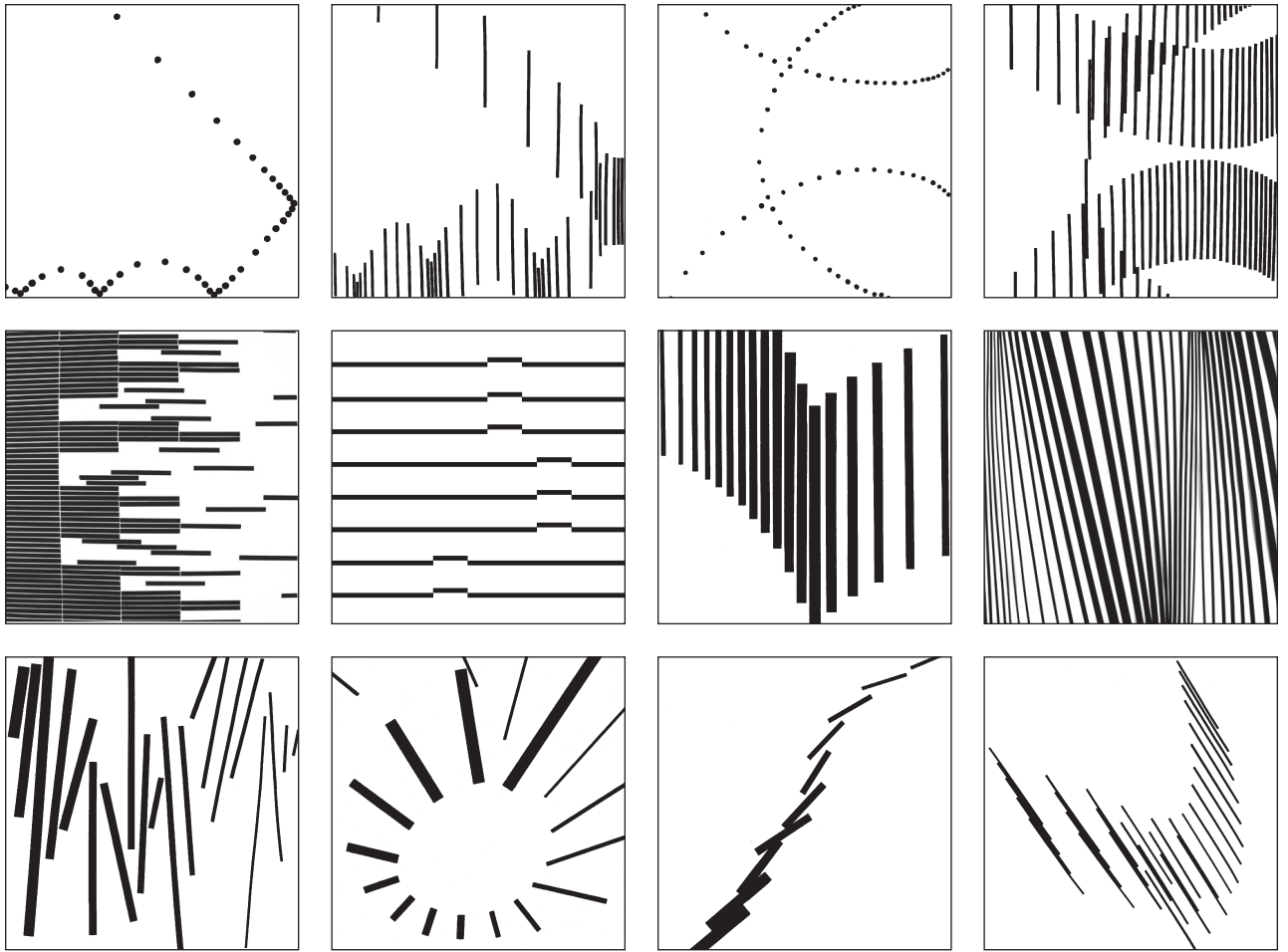


**Fig.1:** Concrete and Abstract: There is a liking towards depicting figurative and concrete themes. However, the aim of these exercises is also to take into consideration the inherent properties of a chosen element. For instance, a dot depicts position which leads us to opt for themes of spatial activities rather than the figurative, decorative, or symbolic themes. All the above compositions show concrete figures, since all dots bond or have uniform spacing with neighbouring ones that form a chain or mass and mimic roles of a line, plane, or volume. Whereas in the compositions shown below, dots are separate; representation is abstract and gives an experience of well organised and synchronised ongoing movements.

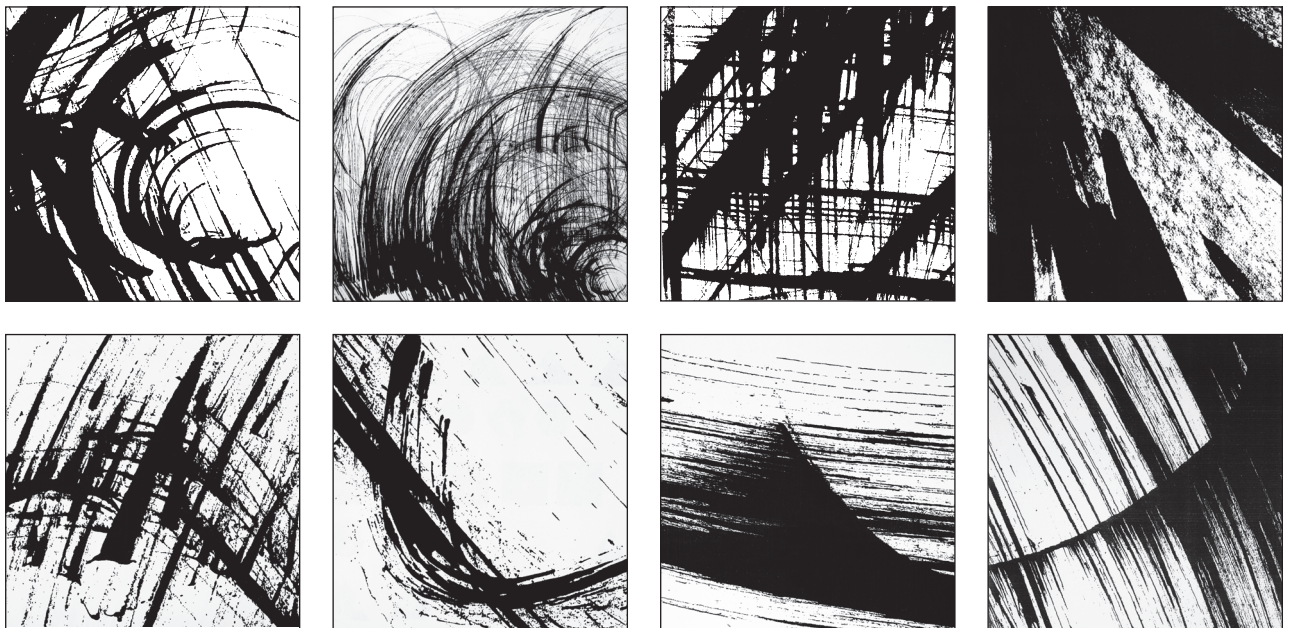


**Fig.2:** Repetition with variation produces rhythm. Note the repetition of uniform dots with a gradual variation in compositional devices of position, direction, spacing, and alignment in all. It is easy to learn composition with basic, non-characteristic elements and on nonfigurative, abstract and experiential themes. Shown here are examples of compositions with dots depicting 'movement' wherein the first row shows a dispersive and voluminous quality of movement, and in the second it is getting more synchronised and linear.



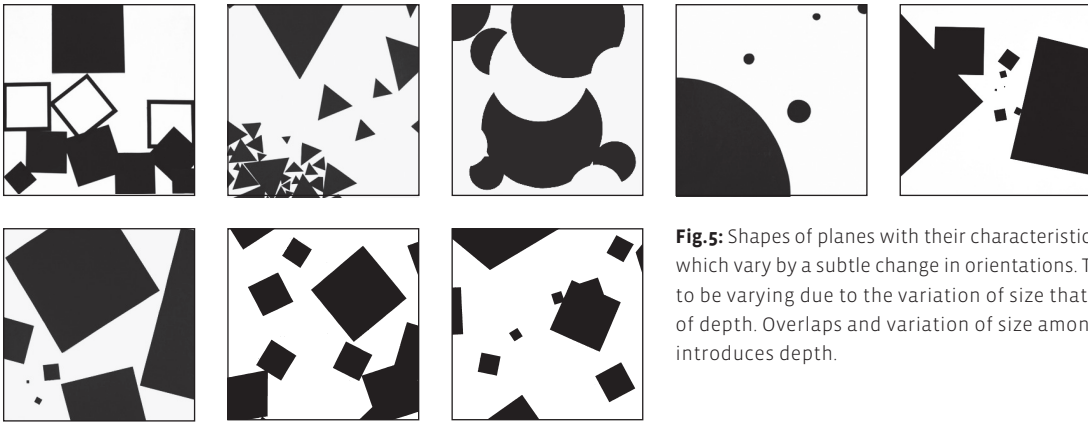


**Fig.3:** From position to directionality: The element of lines introduces 'directionality' as its inherent property. Direction comes along with the device of orientation, and both bring in the principle of contrast. Note the repetition of uniform lines with a gradual variation in compositional devices of 'orientation' and 'size'. These compositions with straight lines depict 'movement and depth'.

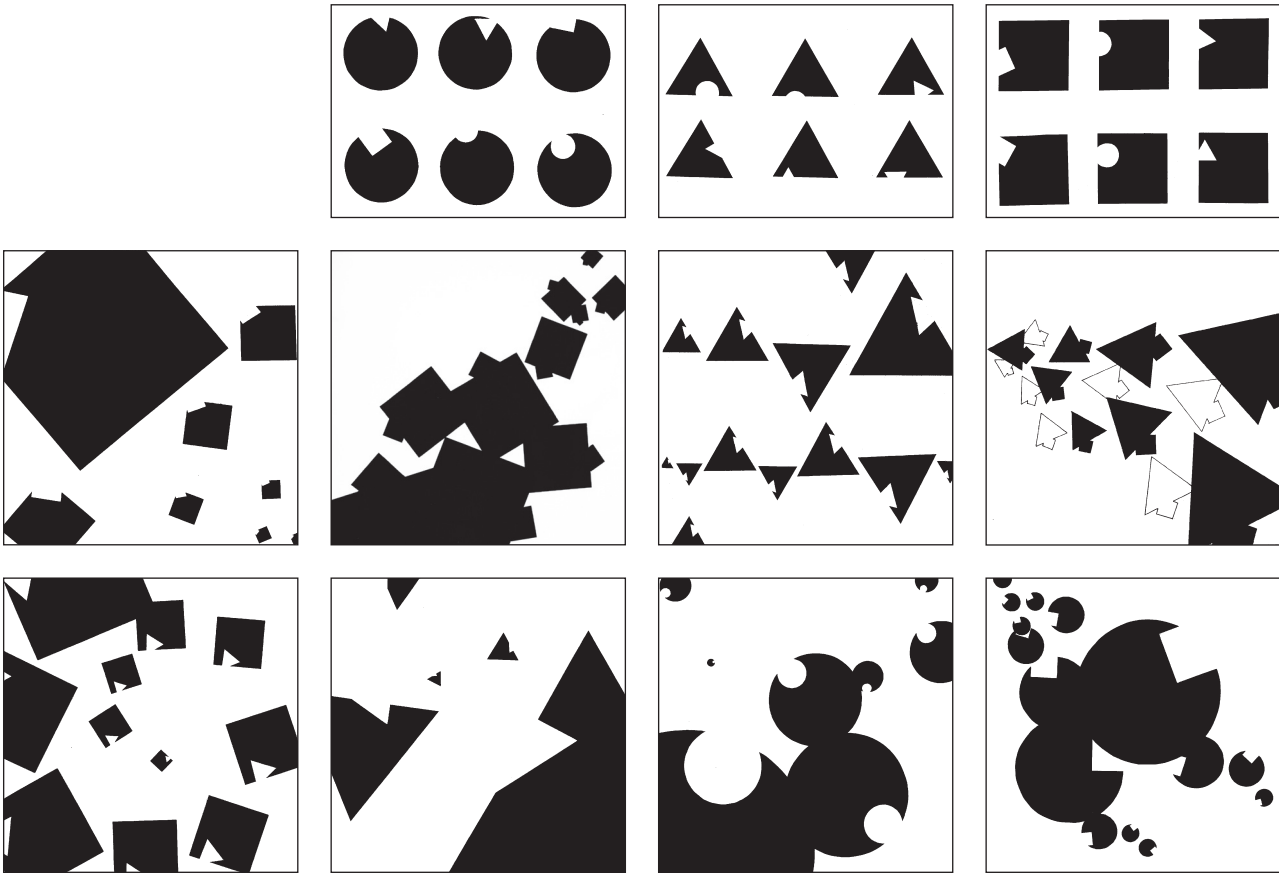


**Fig.4:** Lines carry our attention along their path. Lines can depict expressive movements. From a sheet of such rhythmic strokes one can select a part as a composition that represents the whole. This is another practice of making a composition, in which a well composed and isolated 'centre of interest' stands as a complete composition. This processes somewhat resembles composition in photography, where the frame adjusts itself to accommodate and compose a passive content.

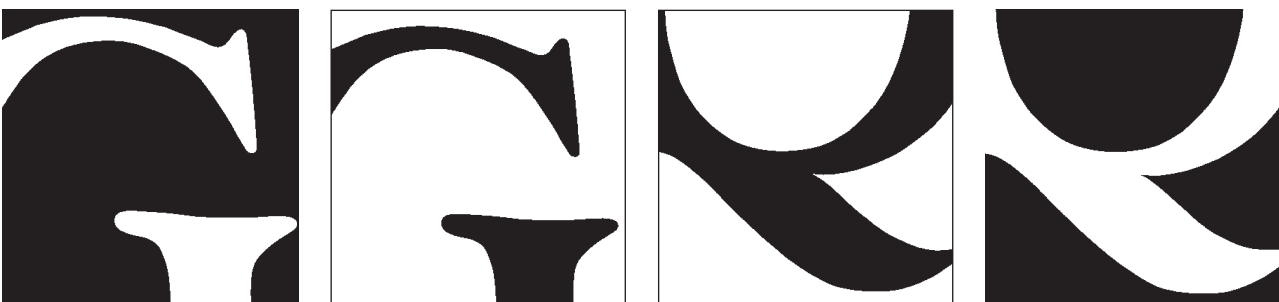




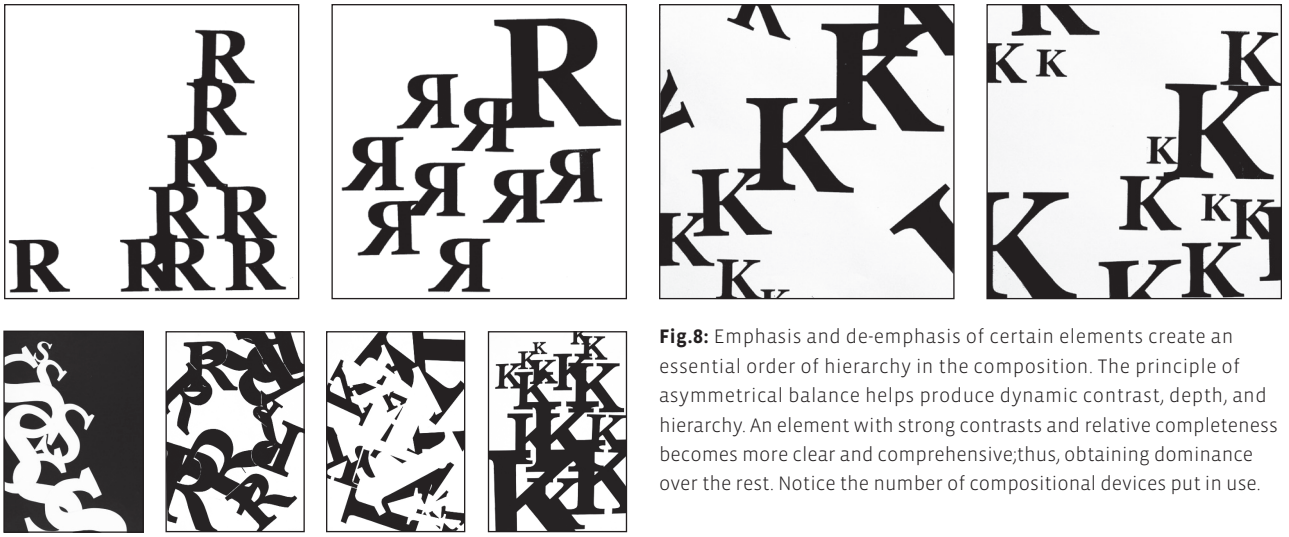
**Fig.5:** Shapes of planes with their characteristic edges show gestures which vary by a subtle change in orientations. Their location appears to be varying due to the variation of size that leads to the illusion of depth. Overlaps and variation of size among similar elements introduces depth.



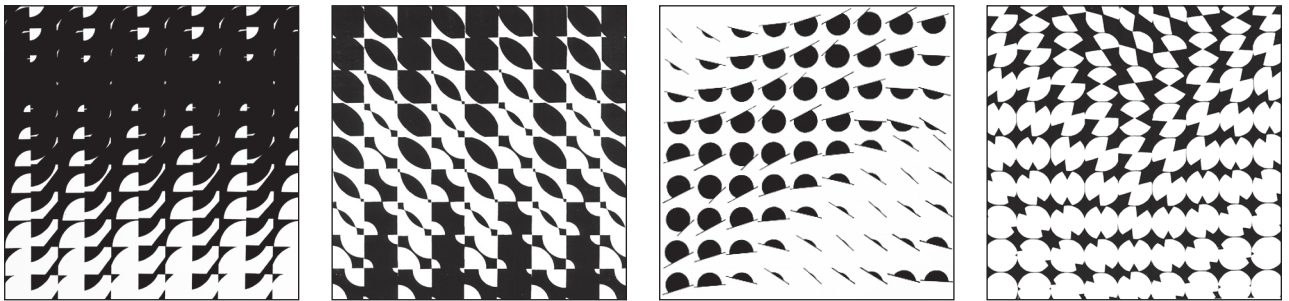
**Fig.6:** Selection as Composition: Other than orientation, a minimal modification in the contours introduces expressions and interactive potential in a shape. In an interactive shape, the mind always looks at the discrimination of the head and body, and the front and back portions to read the expression. Along with other concerns, an engaging interaction among the involved elements is of equal importance in a composition since it helps retain the attention of viewers within the frame.



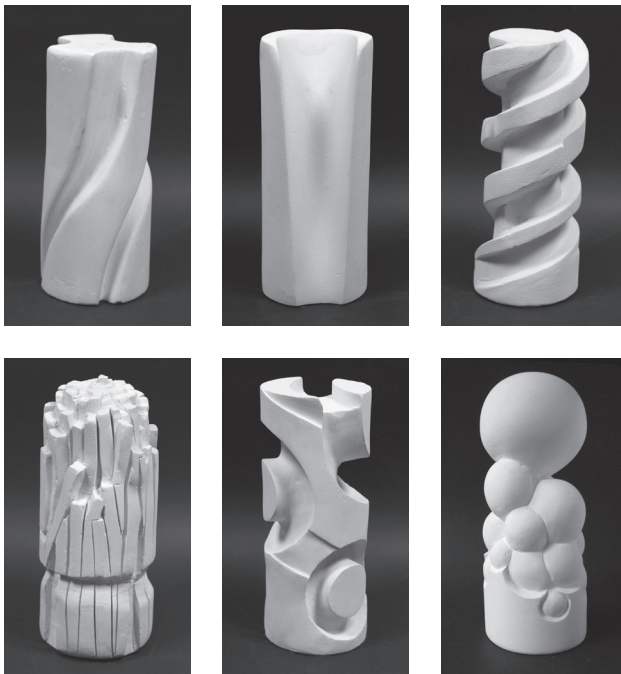
**Fig.7** A form is a form and a space a space: Following the same process as in the previous example of Selection as Composition, here one notices the distinguishing characters of form and space and the relationship between the two. Due to certain qualities, they retain their roles and identity even after reversal of colour in figure and ground areas.



**Fig. 8:** Emphasis and de-emphasis of certain elements create an essential order of hierarchy in the composition. The principle of asymmetrical balance helps produce dynamic contrast, depth, and hierarchy. An element with strong contrasts and relative completeness becomes more clear and comprehensive; thus, obtaining dominance over the rest. Notice the number of compositional devices put in use.



**Fig. 9:** Relationship of part to part and parts to whole: A register of rhythmic interaction and transition of more than one shapes, leaves a fine transformation in a strip; however, it asks for a visual judgment over the calculated and geometrical shapes while handling changing shapes, spaces, position, and interval. A variety of visual effects can be created by repeating a single strip of transition as shifting and forming a progressive relationship with the surrounding units. It also can be worked on as a progressive but asymmetrical distribution of mass. In an effective whole, every cell synchronises successfully with the rest.



**Fig. 10:** A number of principles and devices are present and applicable over three dimensional forms. Choice of cohesive elements, and a careful maneuvering of transformation of contours produces principles of unity and harmony. Examples of this are shown in this exercise of carving the POP cylinders to show the theme of growth.

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