

PHOTOGRAPHING THE SPACE BETWEEN THREE PEOPLE

Ever go into a movie theater and have others plop down right behind you even though almost all of the other seats are empty? That's annoying, right? They kick your chair and crunch popcorn and talk nonsense when they could have sat almost anywhere else.

Well, long before "Social Distancing" became a buzz phrase, I developed a fascination for watching people and how they set up space between and among themselves. It became a visual exercise when walking or driving or just waiting. And because so much of photojournalism is about observation and timing, I began to make this study a personal project that would coincide with my teaching tips and at the same time produce constantly updated and new images to keep my own photography fresh. I don't want to be a dinosaur in class!

To limit the scope of shooting, I further decided to limit myself to scenes that featured only three people, and that meant no little bodies in the background. No out-of-focus people blurred but sort of there. Just three people, and ideally, there should all pop out – be quickly visible and not blend together. It's a great exercise to use in class: I'll bring in 10 three-people images all shot within a short time frame and discuss with the students: "Which is best and why?" It also adds credibility because the teacher is laying it all out on the table – the good, the bad and the ugly. Some of the more artistic images have been posted to Instagram.

Is there anything special about the number three? In religious circles, we are reminded of The Trinity and that God is three in one: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the study of numerology, the website thesecretofthetarot.com says the number three resembles the mind-body-soul triad, the birth-life-death cycle, and many other combinations of three which exemplify an important life journey." For me, I know it's easier to pose a group shot with an odd number of subjects as opposed to even-numbered groups (disclaimer: none of my photos are posed). And writers always list three examples of something. My favorite pizza is a combination of three toppings: sausage, green pepper and onion.

I've used a variety of cameras to capture images including the same Canon Rebel T7i that our beginning students check out each semester. But of course, the iPhone records pretty darn well, too, and IT'S ALWAYS WITH ME. Channeling the spirit of Henri Cartier-Bresson, I'm trying to catch the decisive moments of three people in coffee shops, shopping malls or school.

At a time when horrifying news dominates all news sites, this creative project tries to provide a brief reprieve from the complexities of the big bad world with some clarity and even humor. See: empty chairs without three people, three silhouettes painted on a fence and three statues sitting on a wall. My study of photographing the space between three people when that randomness occurs helps keep me actively looking and seeing, and being an engaged professor.