



Jason Symington (back); Cyril Kopitin (front) © Greg Campbell

Guest Speaker: Jason Symington, MFA “Visual Language and Creative Image Making”

By Fred Rushworth, IACC Member

Forty minutes was not enough time to spend with Jason Symington. This was not an evening of reviewing rules of composition, advancing and receding colours, image flow, formulas or blueprints to the “perfect” image. In fact, his advice was to go out and break the rules. It was about understanding visual language and how we relate to images, about finding our personal influences and about challenging us to find projects to explore ideas.

Jason has been in the photography business for 20 years, has earned a Bachelor of Arts and a Masters of Fine Arts. He runs his own photography business ([Imagen Photography](#)), has lived and worked in Japan and Germany, has been a Director of Photography for a national publishing company, and has taught photography courses at MacEwan University on subjects such as photojournalism, fine art design, and history of photography.

Jason told us about the five elements of Visual Language: Personal, Historical, Technical, Cultural and Critical. *Personal* is the viewer’s initial reaction to the image. *Historical* considers the connection with the viewer’s past. *Technical* refers to how the technical elements work to present

the concept of the photograph. *Cultural* impression depends upon the viewer’s cultural expectations and experiences. *Critical* is assessing what works or doesn’t work for us that we can relate back to the creator in terms of driving the final objective.

Find an Influence

Jason encouraged us to find our influences as photographers and to find our own style too. You need to look at music, photographs, movies and art. Study what appeals to you in those mediums and how it works to interest you. The purpose of that study isn’t to shoot landscapes that look like Ansel Adams or the portrait poses of Yousef Karsh. The path to growth as a photographer/artist is to build from the work of your influences, blend styles, adapt, become inspired and add your own touch. Jason urges us to be inspired and leap from that point rather than copying—authorship by synthesis is the term Jason used.

We could have spent hours considering, in more detail, the list of influential photographers that Jason featured. I have added a list (see far left on this page) to start your exploration.

Influential Photographers

Portraits

Janet Ingram, William Claxton, Sarah Moon, Barbara Morgan, Albert Watson, Eugene Richards, Sally Mann, Jim Marshall, Mary Ellen Mark, Walker Evans, Robert Mapplethorpe, Steve McCurry, Edward Steichen, Richard Avedon, Julie Blackmon, Philippe Halsman, Elliot Erwitt, Alfred Eisentaedt, Brassai, W. Eugene Smith, Jacques Henri Lartigue, William Wegman.

Street Photography

Robert Doisneau, Gordon Parks, Dennis Stock, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank, Martin Parr, Jodi Cobb, Burt Glinn, Bill Brandt, Joel Meyerowitz, Marc Riboud, Peter Funch, Lisette Model, Bruce Davidson, André Kertesz, Berenice Abbott, Nick Waplington, Lee Friedlander, Harry Callahan, László Moholy-Nagy.

Details

Irving Penn, Josef Sudek, Andreas Feininger, Margaret Bourke-White, Paul Strand, Aaron Siskind, Ralph Gibson, Edward Weston, Hiroshi Watanabe, Imogen Cunningham.

Landscape

John Sexton, Dorothea Lange, Hans Bol, Andreas Gursky, Frank Gohlke, Joe Deal, Naoya Hatakeyama, Fay Godwin, Edward Burtynsky, Eugène Atget, Sam Abell, Keith Johnson, Alfred Stieglitz, Ansel Adams, Kathleen McLaughlin, Andy Goldsworthy, Frans Lanting, William Eggleston, Ernst Haas, Robert Adams, Wynn Bullock, Richard Misrach, Gary Wilson.



How Visual Language Works for Me

I'm boldly going to use [Stony Plain Lane Swim](#) (photo to the right), an image that Jason created for the Town of Stony Plain, to talk about how visual language works for me.

From a **personal** aspect, this image appeals to me on an artistic level, and I see the image as saying this community is youthful, active and has recreational amenities (all of which appeal to me as well). I can relate **historically** to the image, as it brings back memories of enjoying time in the pool. As a photographer, the image **technically** works; it is crisp and clean, the colour of the water and warm colours of the swimmers and the lane markers make the image stand out. **Culturally**, it represents my North American ideal of an amenity that I would look for in a community and I assume that I fit the target audience. **Critically** viewed, I find it is a strong image, with a repeating pattern of lane markers and swimmers that it is just slightly off centre so that it isn't static. I might even venture that the swimmers are coming together, pursuing a common goal (metaphorically representing community).

I shared this article with Jason before I sent it to the editor. Jason said in a classroom critique he would challenge me to suggest an element that I thought would improve the image's message, such as shooting a wider angle to show this was an outdoor pool. In this case, I cannot suggest an improvement without disturbing the strong clean look that made me pick this image. This image, combined with the rest of his photographs from this project, creates the message that, "Stony Plain is a lively, vibrant town. Come live here."



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Exploring Ideas

Finally, Jason challenged us to find projects to explore ideas. An example using a photographer from earlier in Jason's presentation is Robert Adams' work, with the New Topographics group of photographers and their exhibit which explored the relationship between nature and man. Within our own Club, consider Sheila Holzer's series of 'Hands.'

Conclusion

Time passes too quickly and I would love to see us invite Jason back for another event—perhaps a full-day workshop to explore more.

“Creative development begins with visual language and never ends.”

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Jason Symington is teaching 2015 Photography and Digital Media and Graphic Winter Outreach/Continuing Education Courses at MacEwan University (Arts and Communication).

Topics include Digital SLR, and Adobe Lightroom. Please visit the MacEwan website ([Photography: Digital Media and Graphic Courses](#)) for specific details.

Jason also offers private lessons and workshops, so if our Club has a topic of interest he would be happy to work with us.

