



Exploring Form as Part of the Design Process

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I have noticed over the years that students aren't making as much original imagery—they seem to be relying on stock images. And more importantly they just don't experiment much anymore. This presentation is based on a class assignment that explores process and form giving. Influenced by my time at Cranbrook, by people like Martin Venezky and Sagmeister who love making and experimenting.



Burn. Stick. Scrape. Shred. Twist. Melt. Tear. Freeze.
Paint. Pound. Poke. Press. Draw.
Pound. Bend. Cook. Blend. Squeeze. Stretch.

These activities are the basis for systematic, open-ended explorations of form.

Using a specific object, the students had to generate at least 25 original images per critique.

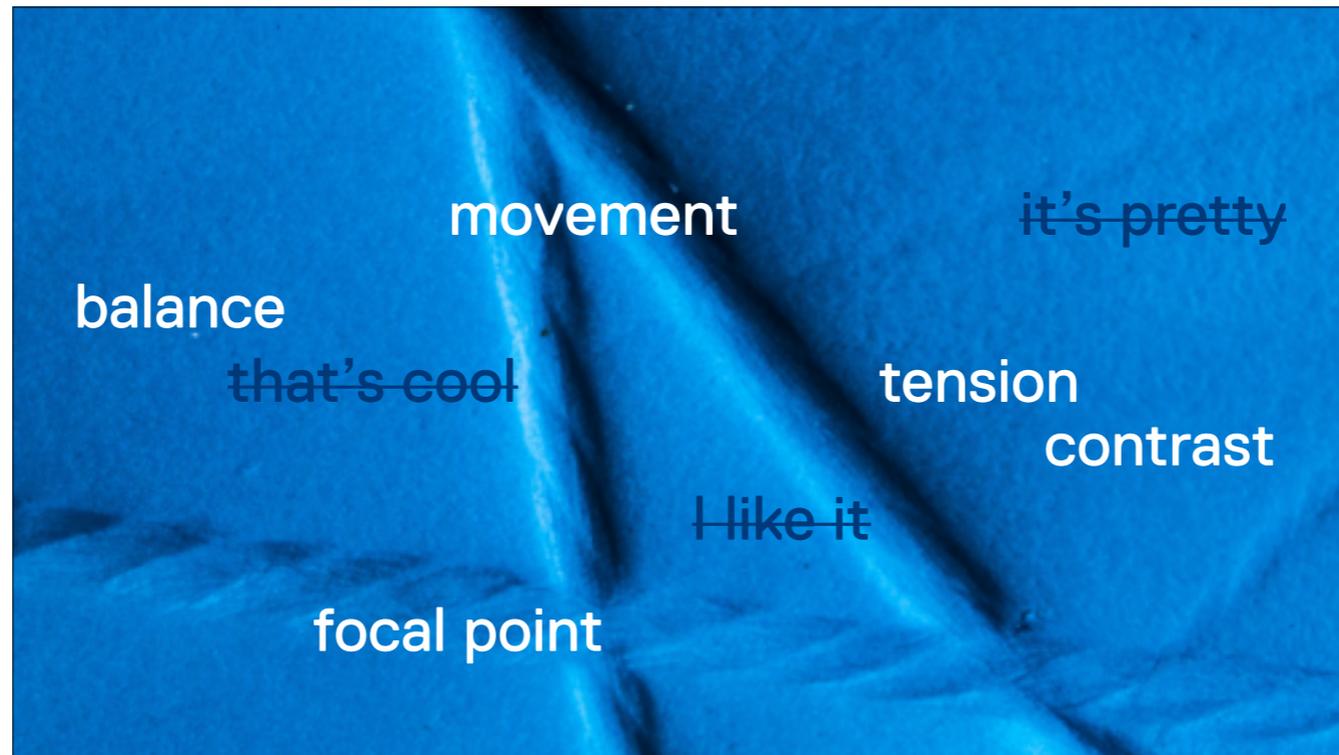
The purpose was to explore the formal potential of this object without the “constraints” of concept and content.



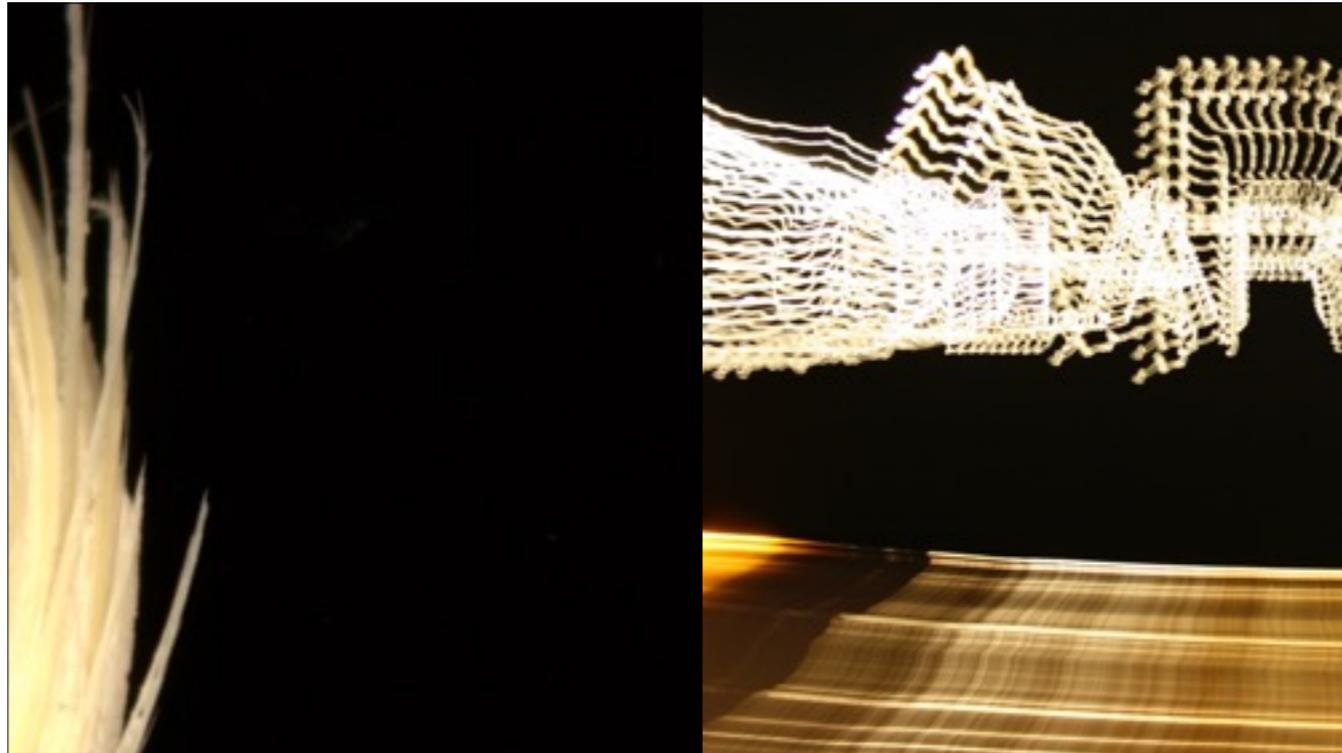
The objects I gave them were fairly banal: string, glue, chocolate easter eggs, metal coil, a bar of ivory soap, plastic tile spacers, a can of WD40, most from the hardware store. At least three students in the class had the same object — so they had someone to commiserate with.



The goals of the project were focused on exploring form and testing new techniques for image making. Students were expected to try new methods each week and, when appropriate, build on previous studies. They also had to work through the inevitable ebb and flow of the creative process.



Each crit students were evaluated on the quality of their studies and the level of engagement and experimentation. In crit it wasn't enough to just say "whoa, awesome or I like it" — they had to give reasons why an image was or was not interesting. Formal design principles and terms are then integrated into everyday critique language.



The expectation is that this type of image making would translate to other studio work. It was also expected that the focus and intensity maintained during the assignment could be directed toward research, ideation and brainstorming for other “real” design problems.

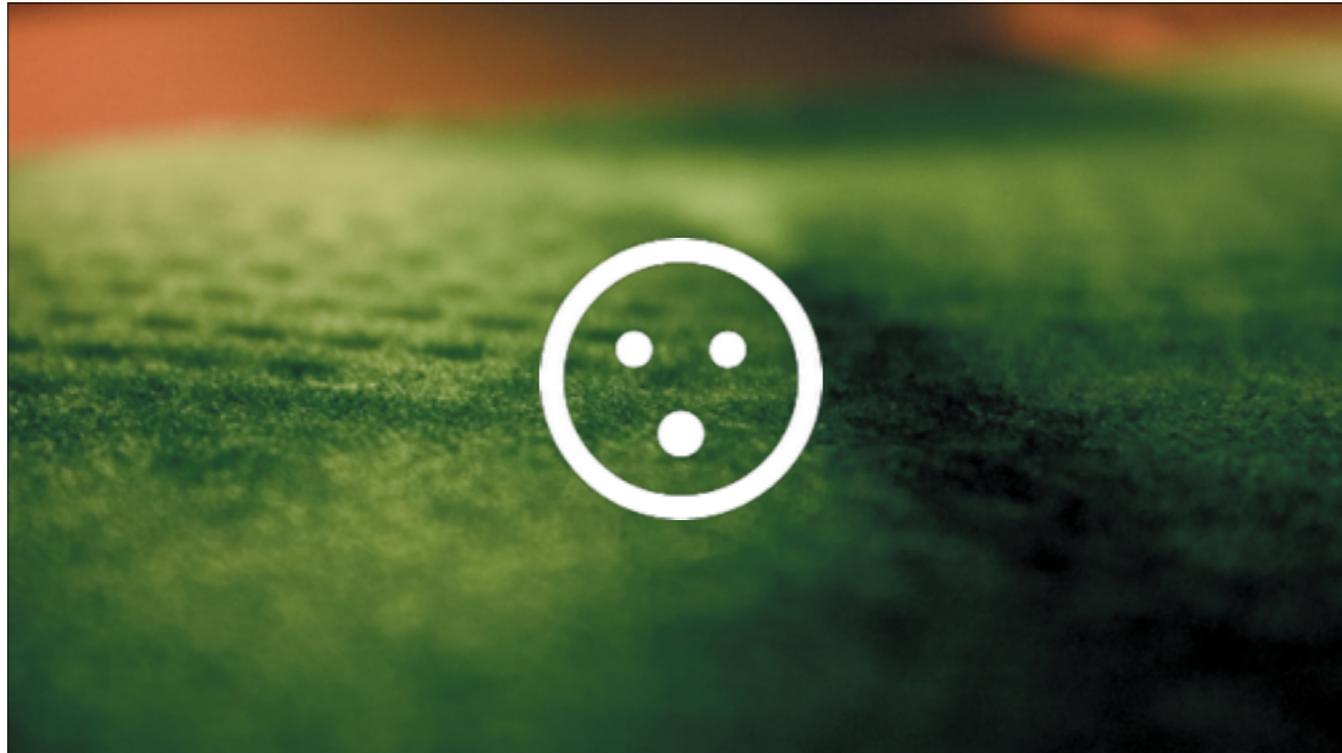
In the case of these images, a student used the assignment as a springboard for her thesis making letterforms by hand.



To start the students were unsure of what to do, and what to expect. So the first crit is typically a mixed bag. We would talk about how the representation of the object is too obvious or just not very interesting. Photo quality is poor. Crops tended to be uninspired. It's often unclear which object we should focus on (ex here: eggs vs string)?



But the next rounds got progressively better. There's an element of the surprise and unpredictability as the students start to loosen up and play—sometimes they get something good, sometimes not. There is freedom from content and meaning. Not how any design project actually functions of course but it does set up a framework for exploration and experimentation.



There is a wow factor (the “ooh” moment) when students see something striking or really interesting. This prompts a discussion on process—how did you do that? The students can share their methods for making images. Lots of activity in the kitchen (cooking, freezing, baking, blending etc). The scanner + copier also useful for experimentation. Fire is a hit too.



Of course there are fits and starts much like the design process. Sometimes they have a lot of ideas, other times they are stuck and don't see how they can go any further. Each week they have new images due so they have to figure out how to push through the inevitable creative blocks that come with any project.

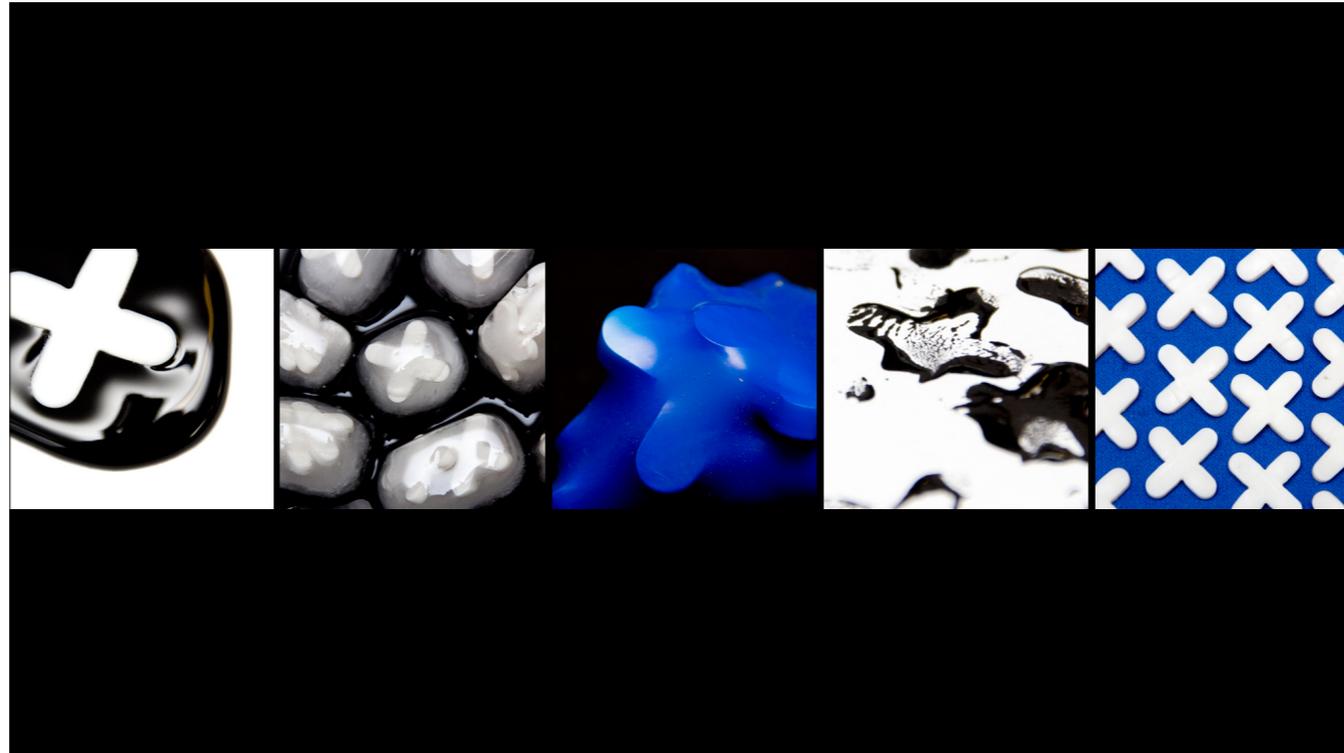


In class we talk about options and methods they can try if they are stuck.
The power of the CROP—isolating moments to get something more interesting.

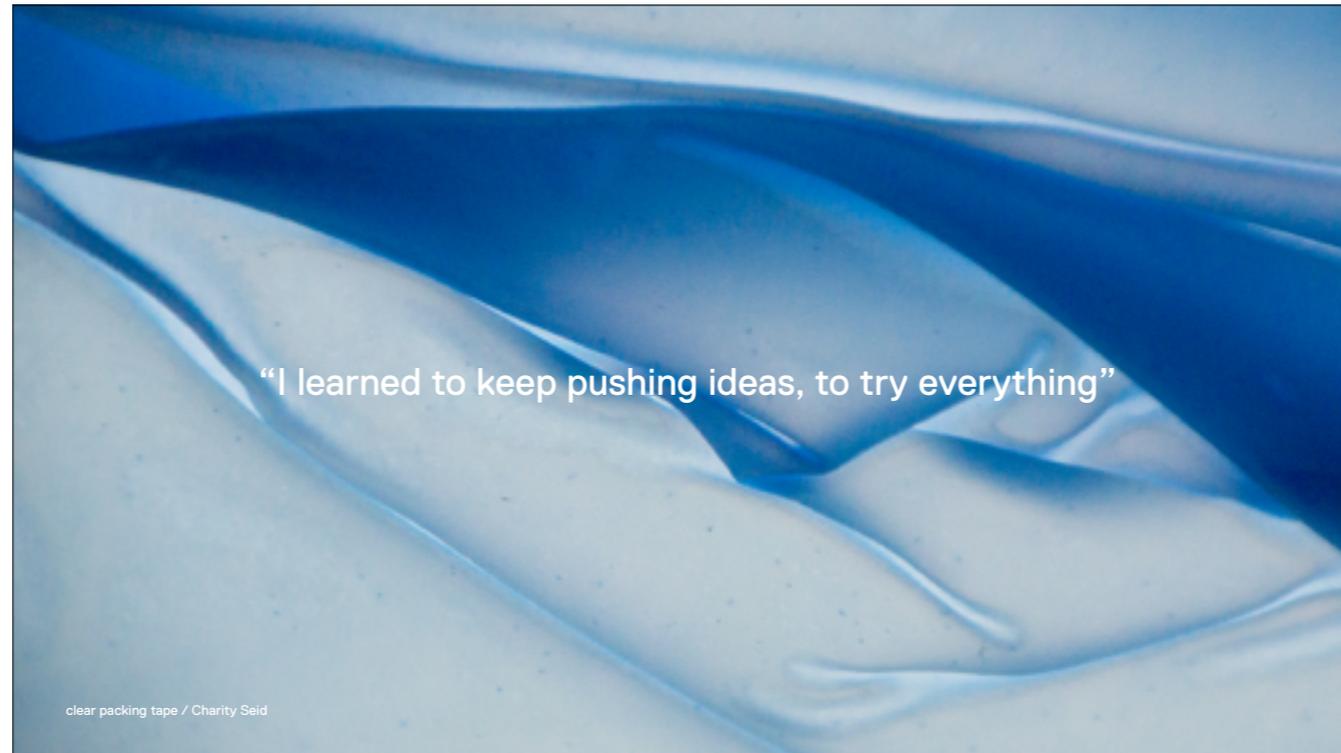
We talk about using the object to make marks. Don't just document the actual image, document the evidence that the image was there — as a painting tool for example.



As students get into a groove they come up with some wonderful and surprising images. For me, it is interesting to see how students respond to the prompt. There are the ones who aren't necessarily at the top of their class who really shine. This often results in a much needed confidence boost. And they learn from each other and that's exciting.



What they do with the images at the end? They make books, videos, tumblr sites, and posters displaying a selection of their best images. Design challenges here include how to edit down their 100+ images to find the strongest group/combination of images. And they have to consider image relationships and how certain combinations will make a cohesive engaging layout. Form, pacing and color all work together.



I was in a huge creative block before this assignment. For once, I wasn't staring at a screen for copious amounts of time. I felt like I was learning how to be creative again. And if anything felt like a really weird idea... I did it anyway.



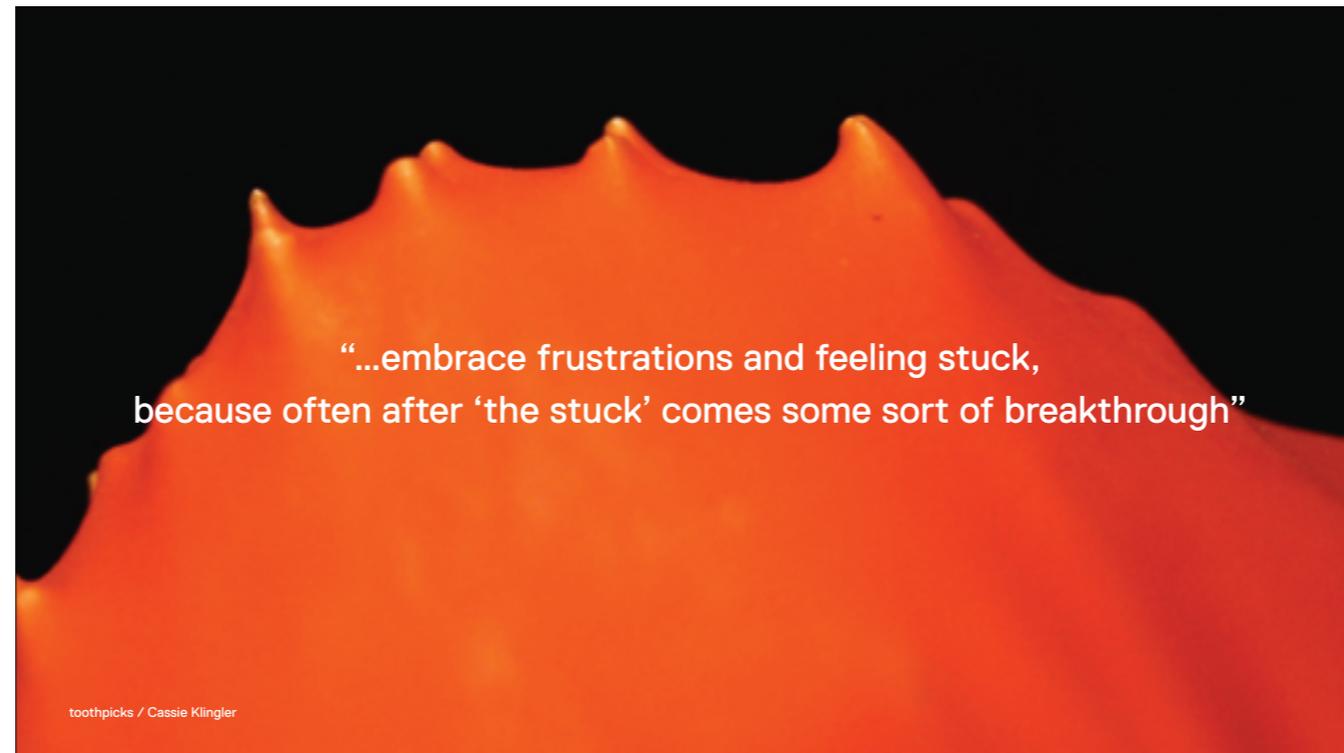
Initially, after the first crit, I thought my object was mundane and uninteresting. It looked the same in every photograph I took. Over time however, I realized that interesting forms can be found no matter where the object first starts. I learned to persevere during uninspired times. This exploration was definitely a challenge, but completely rewarding.



I used the form studies as a way to bring chance and exploration back into my process. I discovered that chance was only a part of the equation; I still had to be conscious of framing and lighting. That balance is where I see the most impact. There is still great merit to methodical, meticulous process and craft, but that doesn't mean there can't be exploration and experimentation at the same time.



This project reminded me to keep trying 100 approaches to a problem because your first three ideas are probably not that exciting or original. It was an eye opening approach to creating interesting forms. Even a simple object can be explored and depicted in endless ways.



The main takeaways have been the ability to quickly ideate beyond the cliché and use alternative methods of visualizing concepts. Now there is the added a layer of materiality and tactile experimentation that directly translates into working in spacial environments and 3d design.



This project gave me time to experience real excitement, deep frustration, and eventually look at the material I was working with in a totally new way. It was lovely to have the opportunity to dig this deep, create iterations that were not at first obvious, and witness what my object could become.



I have used this assignment in a 60 person sophomore design studio, a five person graduate studio and most recently with juniors in the VCD program at UW. The time allotment has varied from three weeks to one quarter. Most successful for juniors as a lead in to their main project.