

**I**n the two previous exercises, you've begun training your eye to see line and texture.

Both are vital, but relatively simple, compositional elements. The next one, shape, is more complex. To apply it well, you will have to pay particular attention to the relationships between objects within the frame of each photograph.

You've already done a "test run" on this in the framing exercise. The next step is to take the lessons learned in that exercise and translate them effectively and consistently into actual photographs.

As we've mentioned earlier, the photos you produce in the exercise on shape will probably contain line and texture as well. That's precisely what should be happening. While each element can be effective by itself, it's likely to be most effective in combination with others. The goal of this entire section is to provide compositional "building blocks" that you will assemble in new and interesting ways.

## MASS, PROPORTION & RELATION

When we look at something, its shape tells us what it is. There are, of course, other ways of figuring this out—by smell or touch or sound—but shape is the way that is most

familiar. If someone asks you to describe something, you would probably start with its shape.

For a photographer, however, shape is something more than a means of recognition. Shape helps convey the nature of a subject; not just what it *is*, but what it is *like*. Is it heavy, light, big, small, beautiful, ugly, interesting, plain? Shape answers questions like these. It also answers questions about the way an object interacts with its surroundings: Which object is biggest, closest, most important?

So, the functions of space in a photograph can be grouped into three categories: mass, proportion and relation. Mass has to do with the amount of space an object fills up, how big and heavy it is. Proportion has to do with how the mass of one object compares to that of another, and how the various parts of a single object "hang together."

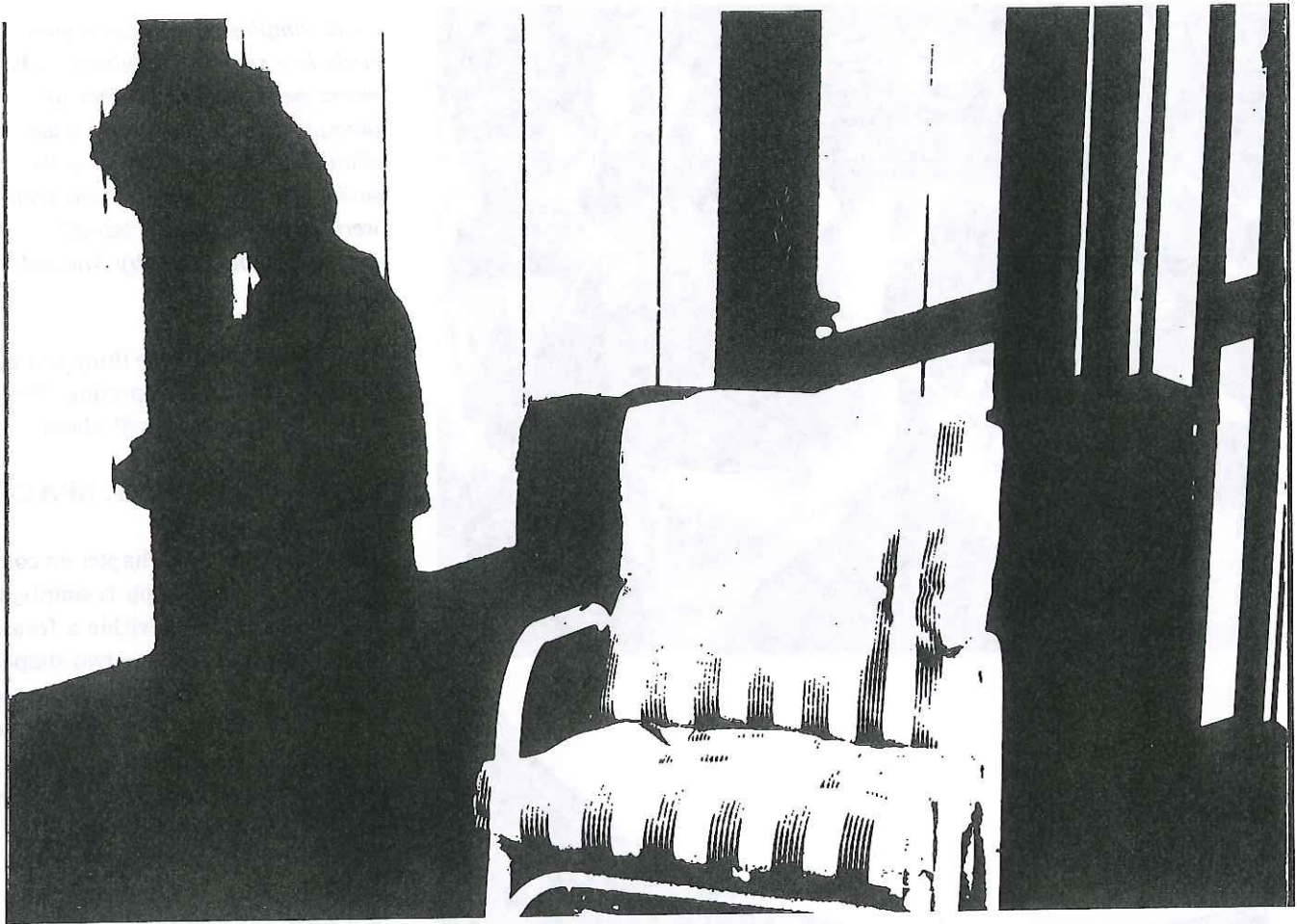
Relation is probably the most complicated aspect of space, and the most important. Relation is primarily concerned with how objects interact. This can mean physical factors, such as whether they are close, touching, far apart, similar, different, etc. Interaction between objects can also be extended to include *interpretive* factors, such as which object is more attractive, which is more important,

which is dominant, whether they seem to belong together, and so on.

Relation tends to require some degree of judgment. For a relation to be clear, somebody usually has to decide what that relation is. You, as the photographer, for example, may make value judgments. You may decide that object "A" is more attractive or interesting or important than object "B," and you may compose a photograph to indicate that relation. Or someone in your photograph may be making the decision, by looking at an object in a certain way, or touching it, or using it. Even the physical relationships of objects in a photograph often depend on how one is looking at them. Two objects photographed from a distance may appear close together. The same objects shot close up may appear far apart.

Like the relation between two people, the relation between two shapes (called a *spatial relation*) tells us more than just that they happen to be together. It asks us to consider *why* they're together.

Imagine two people you've never seen before, walking into a room. What do you notice about them? What do you want to know? You're likely to observe them first as individuals, noticing each of their faces, clothes, mannerisms, etc. Then



*In this high-contrast print, shape is all there is . . . but it's enough. The chair shape is clearly a chair and the person shape is clearly a person's shadow. The spatial relation between the two is also clear. The shapes in the photograph don't just convey information, however, they also convey a mood. This photograph is "about" more than its graphic impact. (Student photograph by Amy Thomas.)*

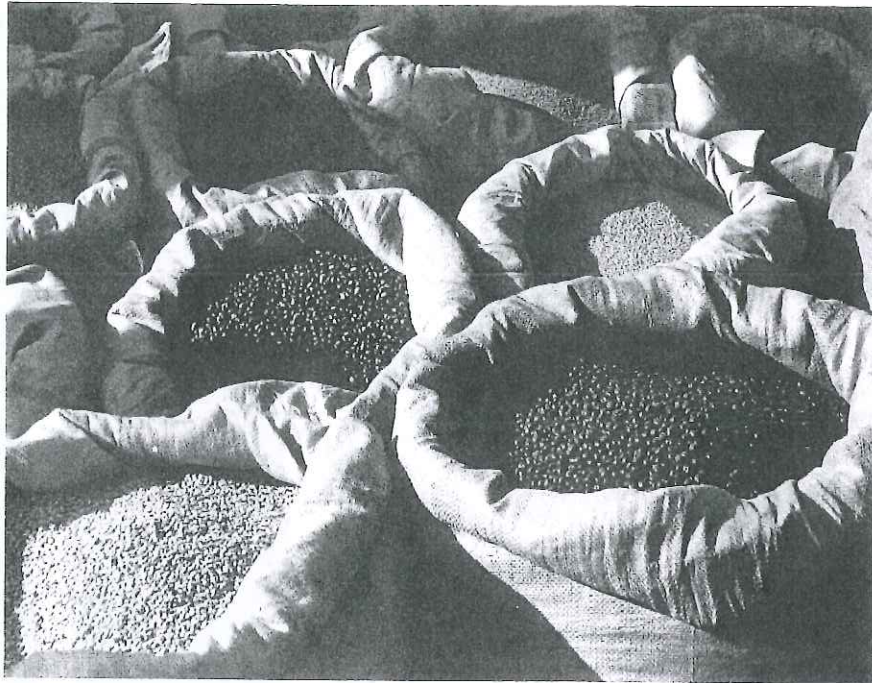
you'll probably start wondering why they're together. If they seem to be an obvious pair, like two businessmen or two athletes, you may not wonder very long. If, on the other hand, you notice something odd about them, you might keep wondering. What if the businessmen were both dressed like circus clowns, or the athletes were singing an opera? Wouldn't your next question be: "What's going on here?"

These are examples of how people tend to respond to seeing odd personal relationships. The same thing

holds true for spatial relationships. If two objects are seen together that don't normally *belong* together, they are likely to catch our attention and interest. In addition, they may tell us something—about themselves, about space, about relation—that we didn't know before.

In the best photographs, spatial relations are used to tap us on the shoulder and say "Look, isn't that interesting!" We may be entertained, amused or saddened, but we will have learned something new about the world.

Perhaps the best way to summarize this is to say that spatial relationships (and, therefore, shapes) are rarely without meaning. What that meaning is—and who decides—is an open question. It is perhaps *the* question that photographers are most concerned with answering. You can use your camera to express your own interpretation of objects and events. You can use it simply to explore relationships, without imposing any specific interpretation. You cannot, however, avoid interpretation altogether. As soon as you make the



*At its simplest and deepest level, a circle is a symbol of fullness. That works perfectly in this shot of plump sacks of beans and grain. Would the photograph have the same effect if the beans and grain were stored in square boxes? (Student photograph by Michael Rodgers.)*

decision to include one thing and not another, you are interpreting. That's what photography is all about.

## USING NEGATIVE SPACE

As mentioned in the chapter on composition, a photograph is simply an image of something within a frame. That thing actually has two shapes. The first is the contours (the outer shape) of the thing itself. The second shape is the effect that those contours have on the surrounding space, including the rectangular box of the frame. This kind of shape is called negative space. For a photographer, it is every bit as important as the first kind of shape.

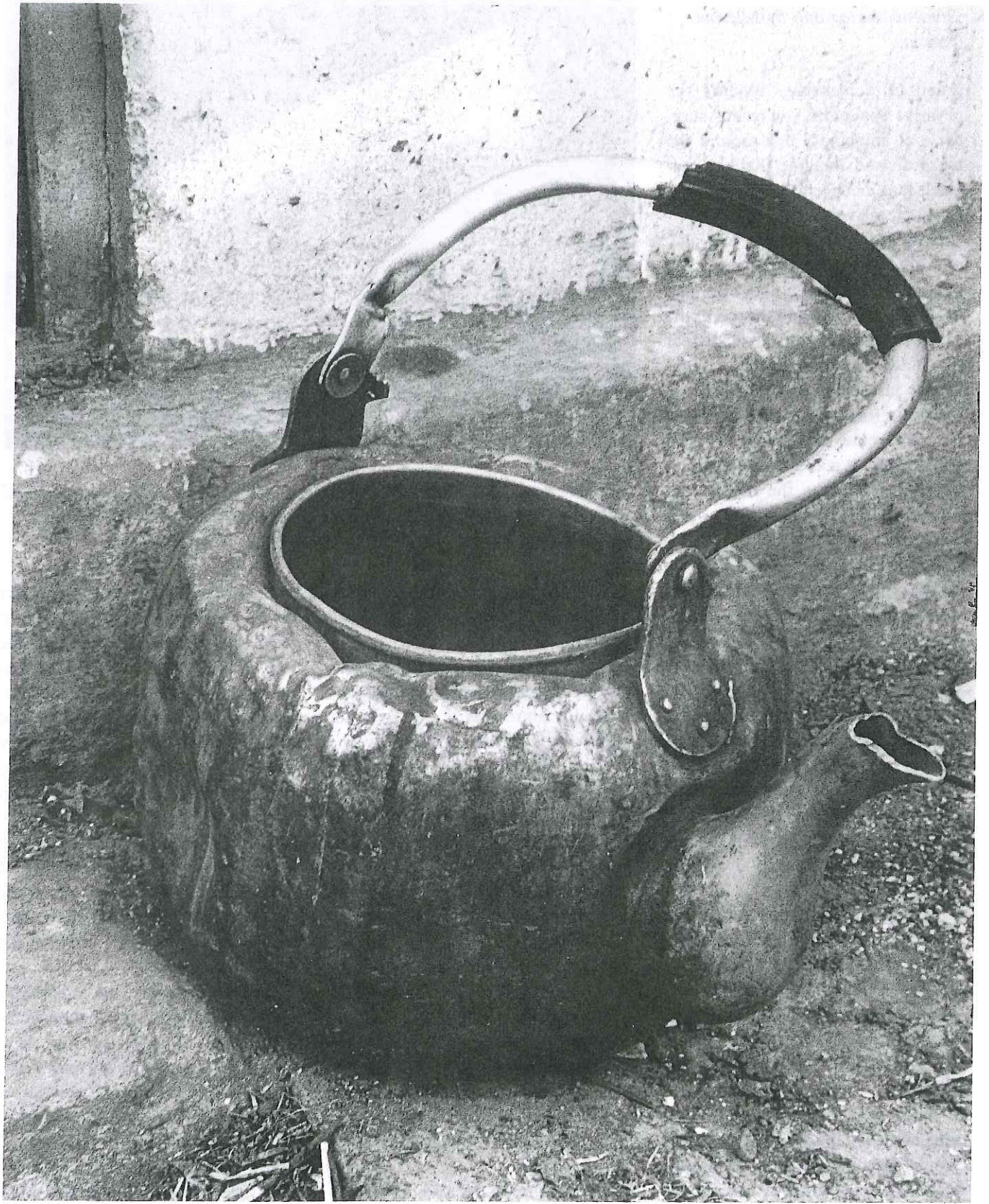
Think of an apple. In your mind's eye, draw a box around it. Then draw a line around the apple, tracing its contours. Finally, erase the apple, leaving the line. Negative space is what you have left. It is everything except the apple.

In this case, because there's nothing but the apple in the picture, the negative space is everything between the apple and the frame. If there were other objects in the picture, like a banana, the negative space would be everything between the apple and the banana *and* everything between them and the frame.

To make things a little clearer, let's look at an actual picture, the photo-



*Notice how the large expanse of negative space in this photograph of a stadium establishes the visual "theme" of semi-circles (semi-ellipses to be precise). How many times is that theme re-stated in the photograph? (Student photograph by Michael Rodgers.)*



*Student photograph by Michael Grassia.*

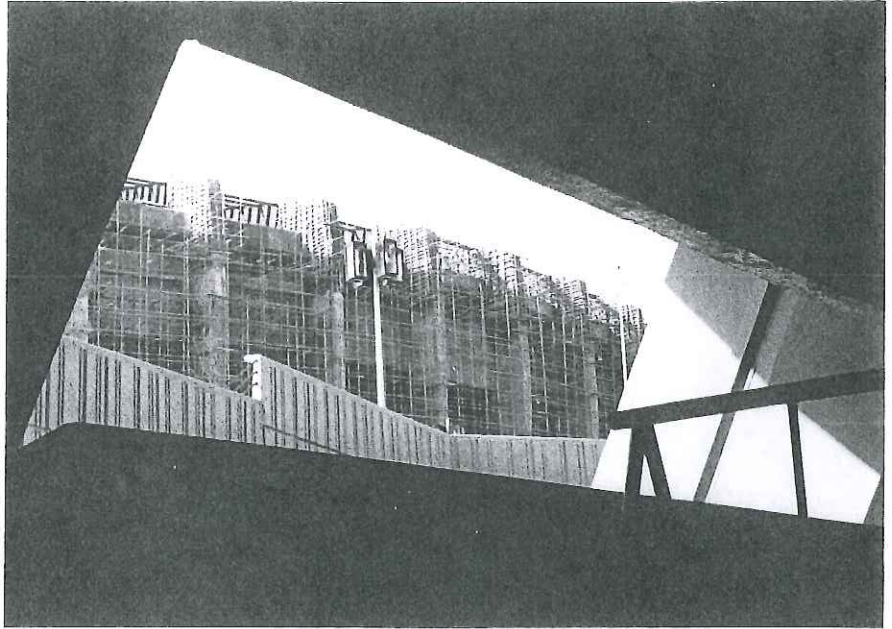
graph of a teakettle. Where's the negative space? If you're not sure, draw an imaginary line around the teakettle and imagine that the teakettle has been erased. Everything else is negative space.

Now, look more closely and pick out areas where the negative space is interesting. You might notice the area between the handle and the top of the kettle. It creates a circular shape that resembles the opening in the teakettle, just below it. This kind of recurring (repeating) shape is often used to create *visual harmony* in a photograph. It makes the photograph interesting because the human eye automatically looks for such similarities.

As you continue to look for shapes and to point them out in critique sessions, you will become increasingly aware of these visual harmonies. Your brain will decide that they are worthy of notice and, as a result, you'll begin to see them directly. Most people only sense visual harmonies vaguely, because they don't need to do more than that. As a photographer, however, your job is to use these and other composition tools, so you must learn to recognize them.

At first you may need to make an effort to train your brain to take note of visual harmonies. The way to do this is to ask yourself questions. For example, how many circular shapes do you see in the photograph? There are at least five. Can you pick out all of them?

What other areas of negative space are interesting in the teakettle photograph? Look at the tip of the spout. Notice how it almost touches the



*Negative space can be black (or gray) as well as white. This photograph of a construction site would be very bland without the dramatic angular frame of black space. (Student photograph by Mina Murphy.)*

frame of the photograph. Like visual harmonies, this also generates visual interest. Anytime an object comes near another or comes near the frame of a photograph, it creates visual tension. It's almost as if the object is pressing against the space between. Oddly enough, the tension is strongest when objects almost, but don't quite, touch. Michelangelo's painting of the hand of God reaching out to the hand of Adam is a famous example of this effect. The effect would be weakened if their fingertips actually met.

Where else in the teakettle photograph is a similar effect achieved?

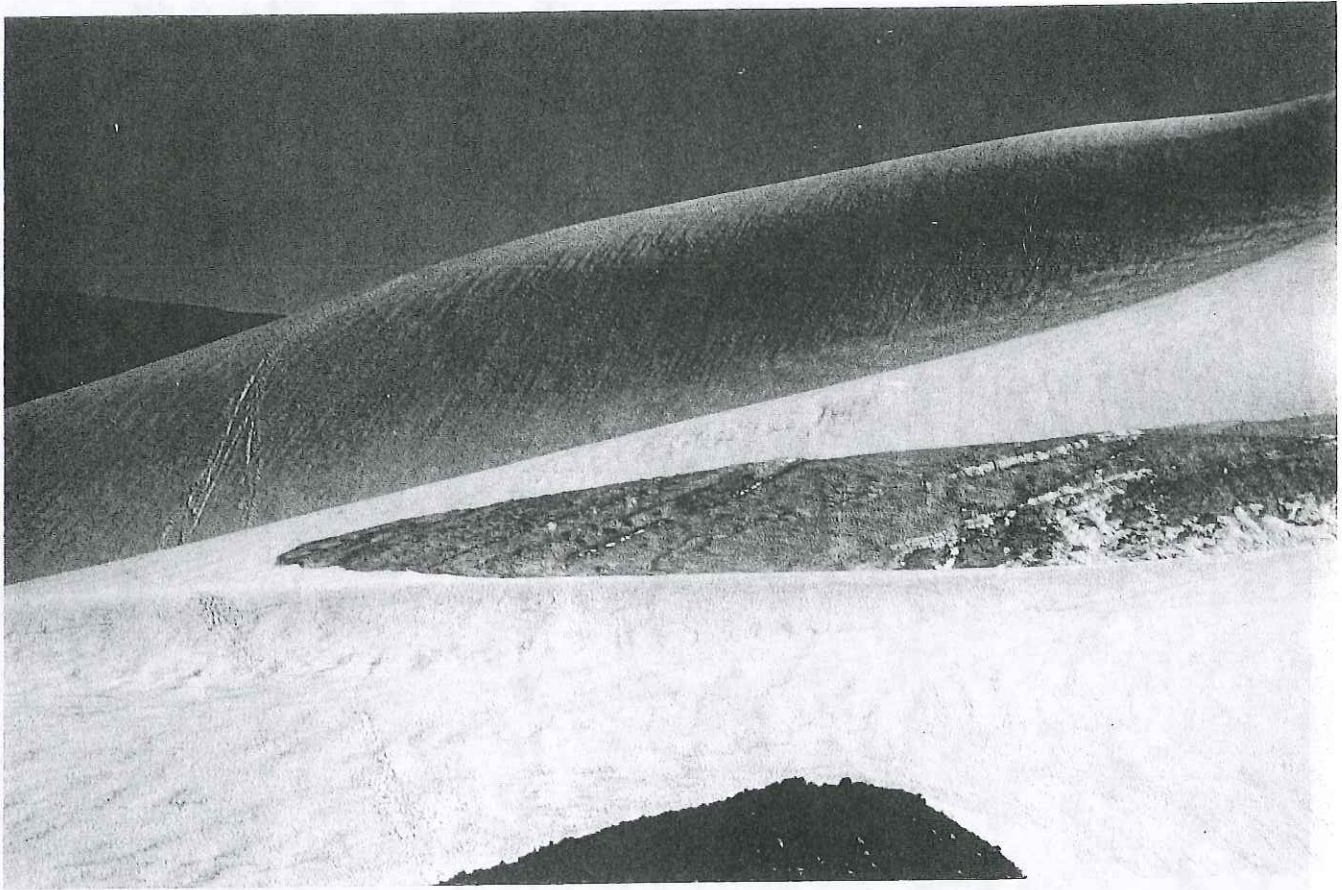
Now, what about the rest of the negative space? You may notice that the sides and bottom of the teakettle (not counting the spout) are all just about the same distance from the edge of the frame. What effect does this produce?

If you're not sure, take a moment

to study it. Compare it to the effect of the protruding spout. The spout creates tension. The placement of the teakettle within the frame has the opposite effect. It centers the teakettle. This conveys a static sensation. The teakettle "feels" like it is sitting very solidly on the ground. It appears to be firmly placed, or grounded, within the frame.

If you've been looking closely, you might have observed that the top of the handle is also about the same distance from the frame as the bottom and sides are. This increases the sense of stability.

The main part of the teakettle is closer to the bottom of the photograph than it is to the top. It is weighted toward the bottom. Once again, this reinforces the sense of stability. If it were weighted toward the top, it would appear "top heavy," and would tend to convey the impression that it might roll right out of the



*As with line and texture, a photograph can simply be “about” shape. Here, a nicely balanced series of irregular shapes creates a satisfying landscape. (Student photograph by Mark Pry.)*

frame. In this case, weighting toward the bottom helps to promote the impression of realism. The teakettle looks like it “should” look, and the tension produced by the spout adds vitality and, therefore, interest.

Welcome to the world of negative space. Learn to use it effectively and you’ll be well on your way to mastering photography.

One more thing should be said at this point. In order to explain compositional elements like shape and negative space, we are discussing them as if a photographer must be *objectively* (consciously) aware of them before taking a photograph. Photography may seem like some kind of visual mathematics. You may

suspect that a photographer goes around measuring everything and making all sorts of mental diagrams before taking any pictures. In practice, most photographers work far more *subjectively* (relying on intuition). Once they understand the various elements of composition, they stop thinking about them. They see a subject and intuitively arrange the elements into an effective image.

In essence, the purpose of discussing these elements objectively is to train your intuition. Once that is accomplished, you will be free to shoot what you see without a lot of calculation. The math will become automatic. You won’t have to think too much about it, because you’ll feel it.

Developing that inner sense of proportion and relation is one of the keys to learning to see as a photographer. Don’t worry if it takes awhile. It will come to you if you just keep at it.

Before we leave the teakettle photograph behind, take a minute to notice how line and texture work in it. As indicated above, elements can be combined to produce an effect that is greater than the sum of its parts. For line, look at the step behind the teakettle. Notice the corner of the doorway above it and the subtle lines of the bricks below. For texture, look at the surface of the teakettle, the step, the ground, the wall, the grip of the handle. What effects do these elements have on the



whole image? What do they tell you about the objects? How do they work together?

Now let's get back to the usual meaning of shape—the contours of objects. In the discussion of the teakettle photograph you may have noticed that circles kept showing up. As you probably know, a circle is one

of several basic shapes. Others include squares and triangles, plus a variety of polygons (which literally means “many sided shapes”). Then there are the less regular shapes, from oblongs to “blobs.” Creative use of any of these can enhance your photographs — if you remember to look for them.

*In certain cases, the negative space can be larger than the subject of a photo without losing its impact. While the wall behind this woman has some texture to it, it functions essentially as negative space, surrounding her and providing a dramatic setting that seems fully appropriate. (Student photograph.)*

## EXERCISE

### *Circles & Ovals*

Use at least one roll of film to shoot *only* circles and ovals. You may have other shapes in the photographs as well, but be sure that each frame is dominated by one or more circular shapes. You may want to set up some of the shots (try experimenting with a cup and saucer, with spoons, plates or bowls), but at least half of your shots should be of “found” circles or ellipses (i.e. ones that you just happen to see in your yard, neighborhood or town).

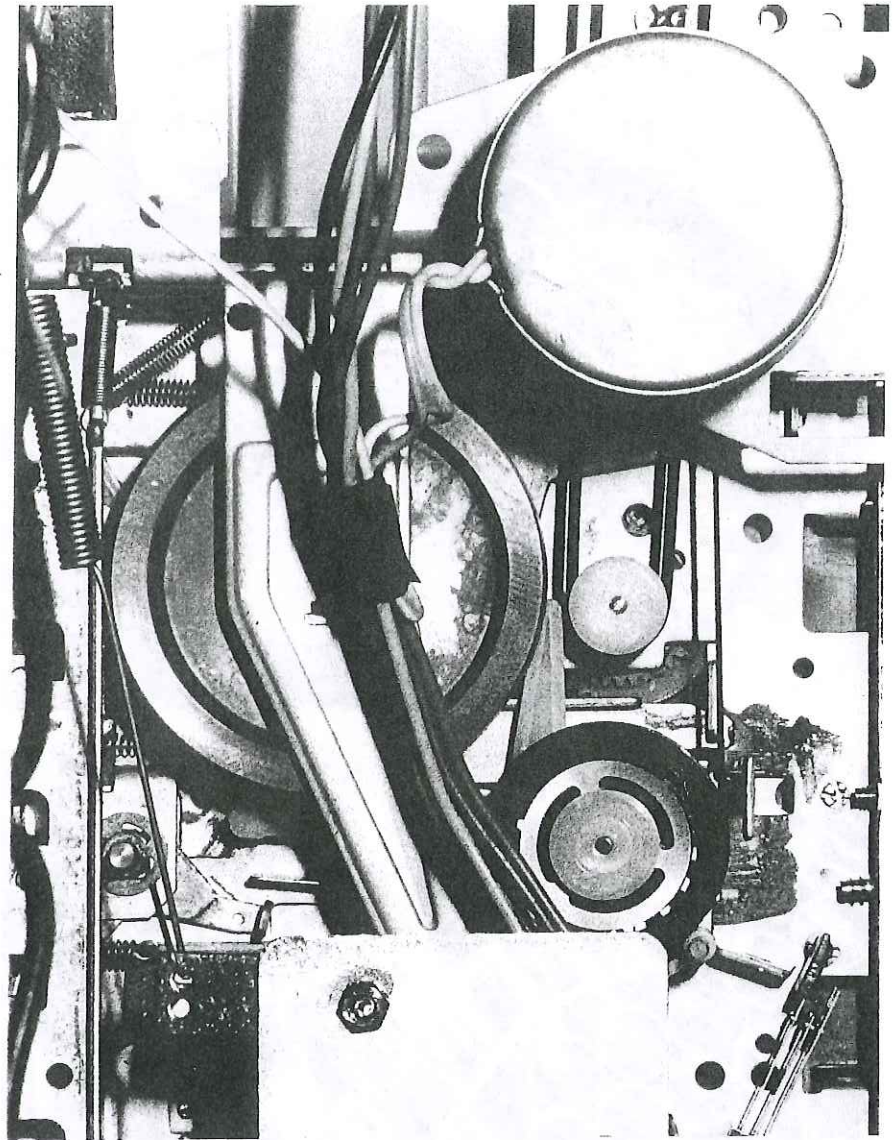
Try to find a variety of compositions using circles or ovals. Try some with just one circular shape, some with lots and some with a few. Try some shots in which one or more circular shapes interact with squares or other shapes. Shoot in bright sunlight at the point of departure setting.

Keep in mind the various functions of shape and spatial relation as you do this assignment. Without losing sight of your primary theme (circles and ovals), see if you can use shape to indicate mass, such as the “bigness” of a pumpkin or a boulder. Try to produce interesting examples of proportion and compelling spatial relations. In addition, try to come up with a few shots that express what you think or feel about a subject.

All these shapes are available to you as a photographer, just as they are available to any artist. You just have to find them.

This is not as hard as it may sound. Once you begin keeping an eye out for interesting shapes, you’ll probably be amazed at how many are out there, just waiting for you to capture them on film.

Start by looking for individual shapes. Then pay attention to how



*Student photograph by Scott Olson.*

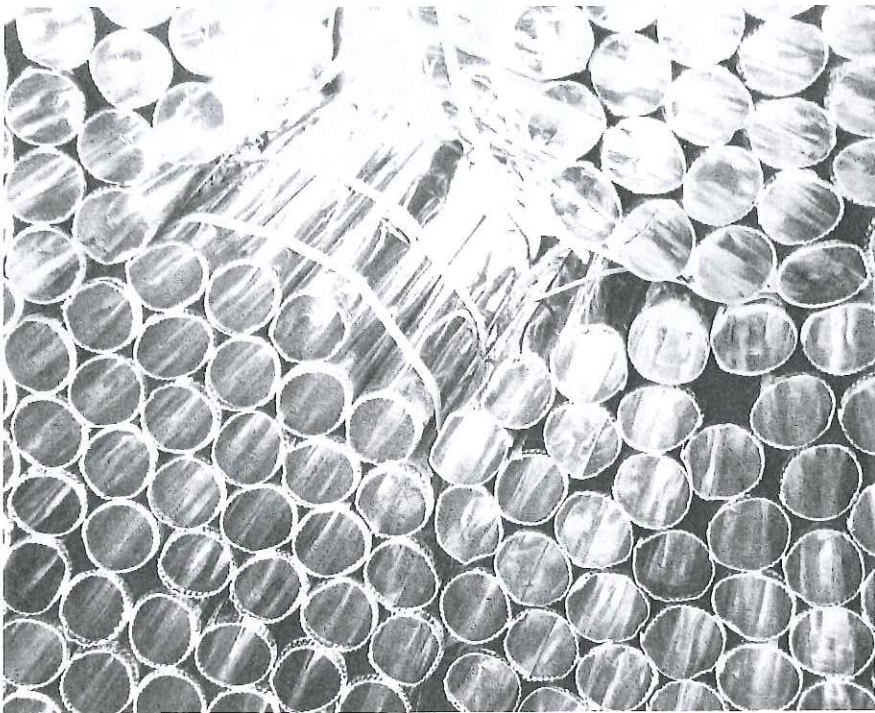
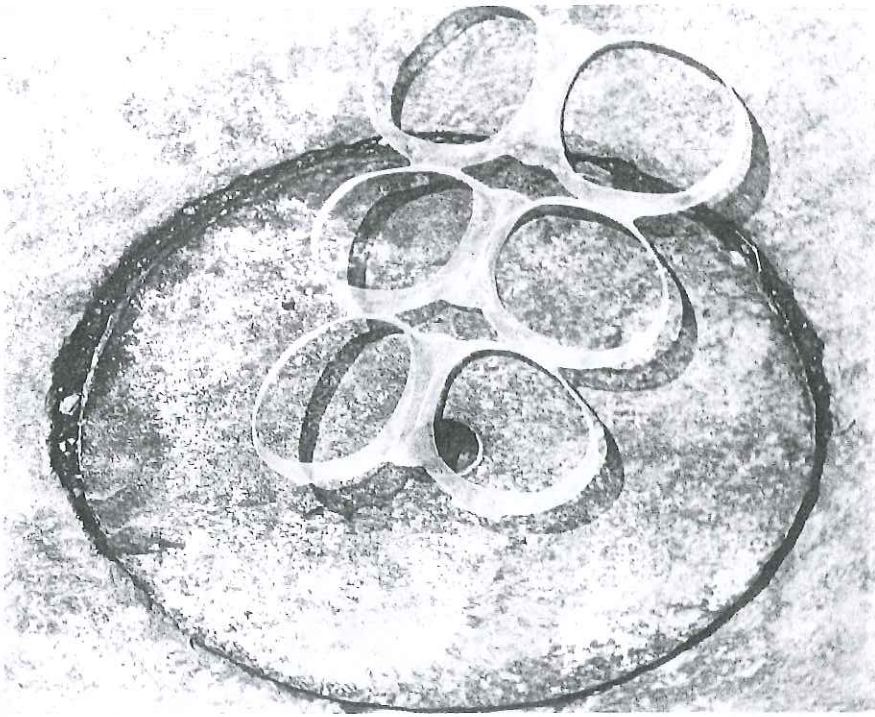
those shapes may repeat themselves and establish visual harmonies. Finally, allow interpretations to emerge as you experiment with different compositions, different combinations of objects, different viewing angles. Allow space and spatial relation to tell you something about your subjects . . . and then try to pass that “something” on to others through your photographs.

Don’t be at all surprised if the

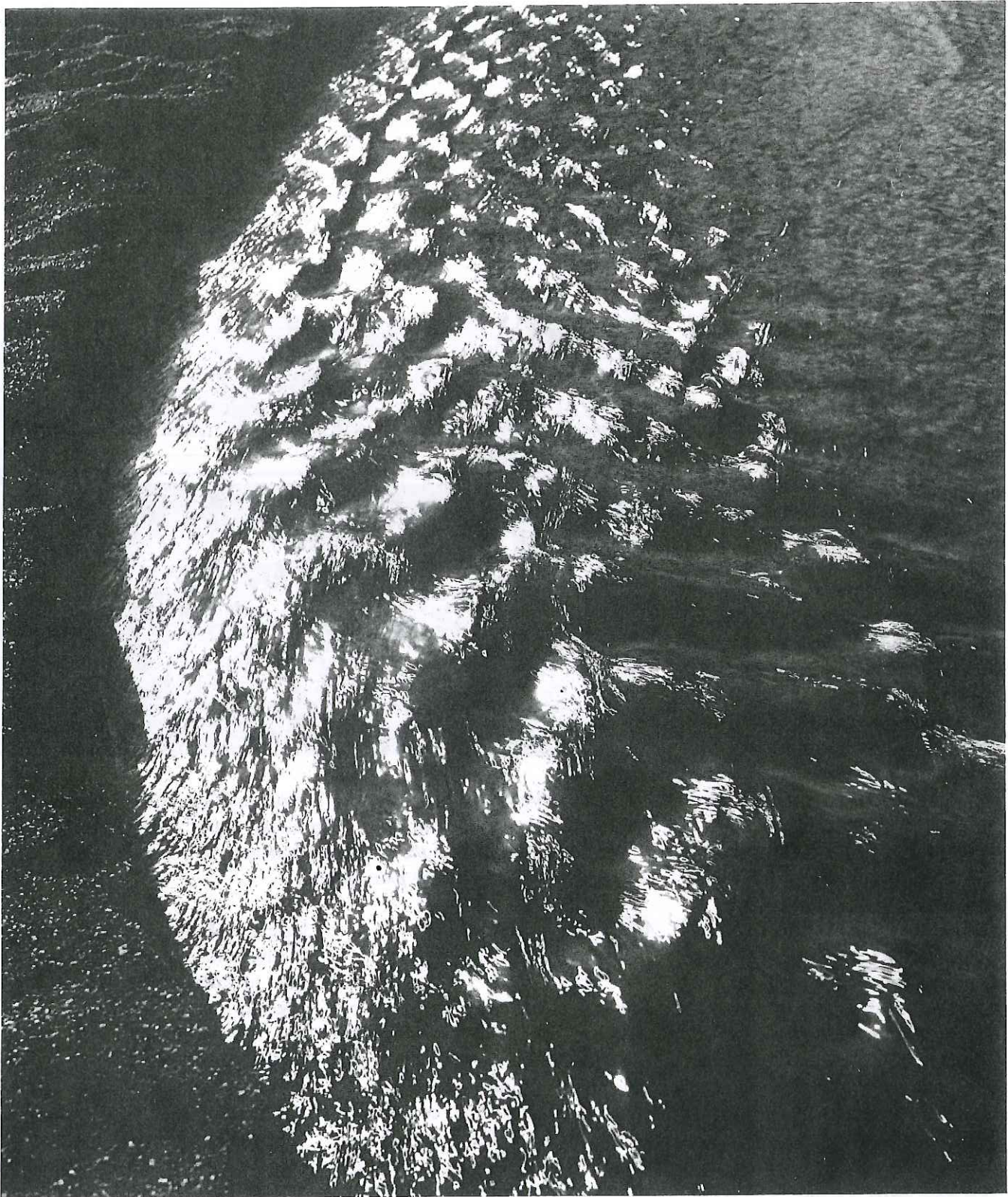
“something” that you learn and want to pass on can’t be expressed in words. If it could be, you could just say it or write about it, and you wouldn’t need to photograph it. The best photographs present an image or idea or feeling in a way that only a photograph can. Strive to notice those things that *need* to be photographed, rather than spending time on those that simply *can* be.



*Student photograph by Charles Gibbs.*



*(Student photograph by John Pang.)*



*Student photograph by Bruce Cakebread.*