

Below 'Encircled tree, near Grassington, Yorkshire Dales National Park, 2018' by Simon Hill HonFRPS. Genre: Landscape



# FRAMING CREATIVITY

Even the greatest photographers can struggle to define intent and conquer creative block. Simon Hill HonFRPS offers solutions to staying focused

IMAGES AND ILLUSTRATIONS: SIMON HILL HonFRPS

**“To me, photography is an art of observation,”** wrote the late Elliott Erwitt in his 1999 book *Museum Watching*. “It’s about finding something interesting in an ordinary place ... I’ve found it has little to do with the things you see and everything to do with the way you see them.”

The medium of photography offers such a multitude of routes to delivering creative expression that it can often be difficult for us to decide and navigate a fulfilling photographic journey. Whether we are working professionally or toward an RPS Distinction, or simply taking photographs for pleasure, this journey can be made even more difficult by two formidable adversaries – the need to define our ‘creative intent’ and the challenge of overcoming ‘creative block’.

These adversaries can manifest in various ways. It might be the inability to develop ideas in response to a commissioned brief, difficulty in defining our intent for a new project or body of work, a lack of motivation to even pick up a camera, or a deep sense of self-doubt about our photographic ability.

Defining ‘intent’ and defeating ‘creative block’ are skills necessary to delivering almost all creative ambitions – including photography. Without ‘intent’ our photographs lack that special quality that makes them ‘distinctive’ and, for a body of work, ‘cohesive’. It is no coincidence that these keywords appear in the criteria against which RPS assessors consider all work presented for a Distinction. Wherever we are on our journey, creative block can become so overwhelming it can crush our enjoyment of photography to the point we might consider giving it up entirely.

When either or both adversaries appear, we need a strategy that allows the time and provides the skills to build confidence in our ability to overcome them. With the right strategy, we can embrace this opportunity to reset our creative journey.

An effective strategy for managing the creative process might usefully draw on three models that, when used together, allow us to exploit the richness of visual storytelling through our practice and deliver greater depth, impact and success through the work we produce.

The three models are an **approach to photography** – that will help us derive maximum enjoyment from our practice; a **creative process** – that ensures our practice explores its potential intent more widely and deeply and then takes focused action to deliver a unique and creative output; and, finally, **deconstruction** – that can help us to reflect, assess and feedback into our practice the effectiveness of the underlying, the unspoken and the implicit assumptions, ideas and frameworks on which our creative output is framed.

This article provides a brief overview of each of these models so they might be used to support a journey towards gaining an RPS Associate or Fellowship Distinction.

**AN APPROACH TO PHOTOGRAPHY**

In 1956 the psychologist George A Miller demonstrated that most people can retain roughly seven items of information in their short-term memory. Unsurprisingly, an approach to photography that will help us develop our creative intent and overcome any creative block should perhaps contain seven components:

**1. Embrace the break**

Instead of pushing harder take a break. Stepping away from photography – if only for a few days – might provide much-needed respite that will help clear the mind.

**2. Explore new terrain**

Unfamiliar environments can ignite our senses and stimulate fresh perspectives, encouraging us to see familiar subjects in a different light or discover new subjects to photograph.

**3. Study other photographers**

Exploring the work of accomplished photographers and our peers can be a wellspring of inspiration, helping us to gain insights into our own practice.

**4. Limitations as liberation**

Working within constraints can force us to think differently – perhaps shooting only in black-and-white, using a single prime lens or focusing solely on a particular theme or subject.

**Right**  
A model indicating an approach to the practice of photography



**“Online and in-person short courses might lead to new directions for our photographic journey”**

**5. Experiment with techniques**

Learning new practices or techniques can reignite our passion for photography. Online and in-person short courses might lead to new directions for our photographic journey.

**6. Collaborate and seek feedback**

Engaging and sharing our work with other photographers can provide constructive feedback while allowing us to break free from the isolation of creative endeavour.

**7. Document your journey**

Maintaining a journal can be a transformative practice and might help us reflect on our own creative practice as well as that of other photographers and artists.

**THE CREATIVE PROCESS**

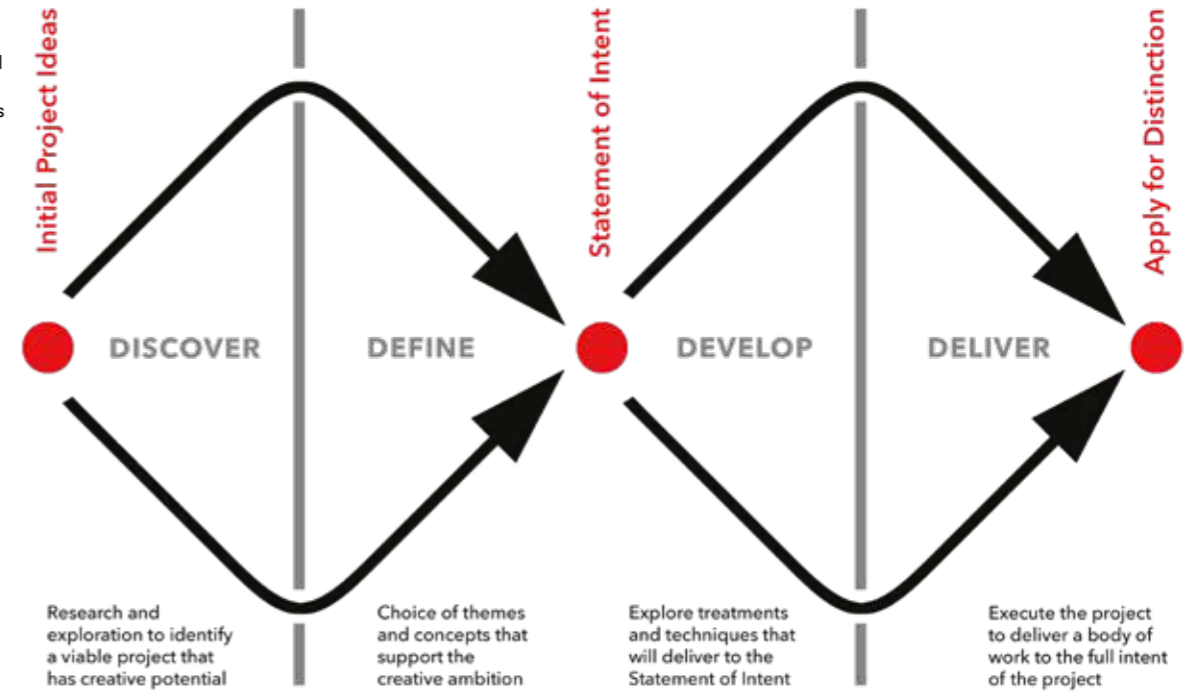
A design process model is a framework used to structure creative thinking. Perhaps the most useful of these is the Double Diamond adapted from the divergence-convergence design process model proposed in 1996 by the American-Hungarian educator and systems scientist Béla Heinrich Bánáthy. Since 2005, the Double Diamond model has been promoted by the UK Design Council as the de facto design process model for many creative industries.

The Double Diamond model takes its name from the four phases that shape almost every design and innovation project, irrespective of methods and tools. For the first diamond – ‘Discover’ (‘divergent thought’) and ‘Define’ (‘convergent thought’), and for the second diamond – ‘Develop’ (‘divergent thought’) and ‘Deliver’ (‘convergent thought’).

**Above**  
“Tourists waiting for their guide, Covent Garden, London, 2011” by Simon Hill HonFRPS. Genre: Applied (Editorial)



**Right**  
The Double  
Diamond model  
applied to the  
RPS Distinctions  
journey



**“Themes or concepts are chosen that resonate with us and which align with our creative ambitions, helping to refine our intent”**

The creative process of photographic practice maps easily to this model, which can help develop a photographic project for an RPS Distinction:

**1. Discover – explore the problem**

An idea can come from anywhere. We can often have many ideas ‘floating’ around in our head and find it difficult to focus in on one particular idea that we might develop into a more substantive project. We must follow a process of research, exploration and enquiry to discover (divergent thought) the potential of each idea to become a viable project that has a breadth and depth of creative potential.

**2. Define – refine the focus**

With the benefit of that research, we can choose an idea on which to work and begin to define (convergent thought) the narrative objectives of a project built around that idea; this defines the intent of the project. Themes or concepts are chosen that resonate with us and which align with our creative ambitions, helping to refine our intent and ensure that further work on the project is directed towards delivering a successful outcome.

**3. Develop – generate ideas**

When we have written a draft statement of our intent, we can develop (divergent thought) a wide range of concepts, themes, compositions, treatments and techniques that will allow us to create a unique and personal visual response to that intent. This phase can often benefit from exploration of a project plan with other photographers (whether our contemporaries and peers, or through an RPS Distinction one2one session), helping us to push the boundaries of our creativity and our ambition, and finalise a Statement of Intent that will form the brief to the fourth phase.

**4. Deliver – execute the vision**

It is only with the benefit of the three earlier phases that we can begin to execute our creative vision and deliver (convergent thought) a project that will meet the narrative objectives, fulfil our creative ambitions and deliver to the full intent of the project. This is the phase where we implement all the techniques and concepts we have developed in the previous stages to capture and present our artistic vision. So many of us leap directly from an initial idea to this final delivery phase, missing out everything in between. Rarely does such a direct leap deliver anything worthwhile.

**Opposite**  
‘Benedict Hollow, Vermont, New England, 2016’ by Simon Hill HonFRPS. Genre: Applied (Editorial)

**DECONSTRUCTION**

**Deconstruction is a methodical process of criticism and analysis presented by the Algerian-French philosopher Jacques Derrida in the 1970s.** Derrida was inspired to a great extent by the theories of the German philosopher, essayist and critic Friedrich Nietzsche, who suggested art is a way to express and affirm the will to power and to create our own values. From this, Derrida asserts that there is not one single intrinsic meaning to be found in a work, but rather many, and often these can be conflicting.

Photographs are complex visual works that communicate ideas, emotions, moods and narratives through a carefully orchestrated interplay of visual elements. Deconstruction helps us critically assess our images – or those of others – allowing us to identify the elements that best convey our artistic intent. We can feed this

knowledge back into our practice so that we may further develop our creative response, deliver our intent and improve the efficacy of our emerging photographic output.

Through the analytical lens of deconstruction we gain a deeper understanding of the narrative and its potential creative, cultural and contextual significance for our photographic output.

The process of deconstruction can be simple or complex, but even a superficial attempt can deliver great insight and provide beneficial feedback. At its most simple, it involves dissecting the various components and characteristics of an image to unravel its composition, context and meaning.

Deconstruction could be a more detailed solus topic, but in its simplest form we should consider seven elements when deconstructing a photograph.

**Below**  
The deconstruction of a photograph can inform further work on a project

**Genre:** Documentary, Folk Dance, Capturing people in a place and activity, historically, politically or socially significant. Straightforward, accurate representation of people/place/subject.

**Mood:** Does the image stand alone or is it a work of narrative essential? Outrage or series of images?

**Intent & Authorship:** Solo creator from series "English Calendar Customs". Both and solution/choice. Builds on work of other photographers. "See a few" "Bauer Sixties".

**Visual Elements:** Does the image stand alone or is it a work of narrative essential? Outrage or series of images?

**Contextual Analysis:** Rows of terraced houses. Unfinished road/made road. Reframed/audience. Both dancers, blacked-up. Costumed/hairage. Dancing/informal/fun. Natural lighting from left.

**Visual Semiotics:** Converged gaze. Reframed on lower right hand. Audience upon left.

**Gestalt:** Similarity and proximity. Continuation. Direction of view covered by group of performers going in opposite direction.

**Other notes:** The dancer and the dancers have found themselves "blacked-up". This has deeply problematic looking. Critics have argued that even if the dancer is not blacked-up, the act of blacking-up carries historical connotations of racism and contributes to the perpetuation of offensive imagery associated with "Whodunnit".



**“Photographs are complex visual works that communicate ideas, emotions, moods and narratives through a carefully orchestrated interplay of visual elements”**

**1. Visual elements**

**Subject:** Identify the central subject or subjects within the photograph. Consider their placement, prominence and significance.  
**Colour palette:** Analyse the use of colour and its impact on mood, symbolism and visual hierarchy.  
**Light and shadow:** Investigate the role of lighting and shadows in creating depth, dimension and atmosphere.

**2. Composition techniques**

**Rules of composition:** Assess whether the photograph employs any ‘rules’ of composition and how these help guide the viewer’s gaze through the image.  
**Visual perception (Gestalt theory):** Examine the arrangement of visual elements such as lines, shapes and forms. Evaluate how these elements

are perceived and organised by the viewer.  
**Balance and symmetry:** Analyse the use of balance and symmetry in the composition, noting their effects on visual harmony and tension.  
**Framing and cropping:** Explore how framing and cropping influence the portrayal or presentation of the subject and contribute to narrative focus.

**3. Visual semiotics**

**Iconic signs:** Identify iconic signs within the photograph, including objects, people or symbols that directly represent something in reality.  
**Indexical signs:** Recognise indexical signs that establish cause-and-effect relationships or provide contextual clues.  
**Symbolic signs:** Decode symbolic signs, which rely on cultural or contextual knowledge to convey meaning.

**Above**  
A simple model to help in the deconstruction of a photograph

**4. Contextual analysis**

**Cultural context:** Consider how cultural norms, values and historical references within the photograph inform its interpretation.

**Historical context:** Investigate any historical events or references within the image that contribute to its significance.

**5. Emotional and psychological Impact**

**Emotional response:** Analyse the emotional impact of the photograph on viewers, exploring how visual elements and their interrelationship evoke specific emotions, moods or reactions.

**Psychological engagement:** Consider how the photograph engages viewers cognitively and prompts them to reflect on its content.

**6. Photographer's intent**

**Authorship:** Investigate the photographer's identity and artistic intent. Consider how

their perspective and purpose shape the narrative of the photograph.

**Genre:** Consider how the image confirms to established conventions for the subject or stylistic criteria of representation.

**7. Form of production and presentation**

**Media and technique:** Consider whether the choice of medium – digital, film or plate – and the printing stock (or form of projection) can influence the delivery of the creative intent and how it might be perceived by the viewer. What elements of the craft of photography have been used and to what effect?

**Presentation:** Is the work intended for consumption in isolation from other works or is it part of a multiple-media installation, a live theatrical event, within a time-based media presentation, or some other form?

**“Creative block is not only frustrating for a photographer but, unless they have a strategy to deal with that block, it might drive them away from the medium”**



**Left**  
‘Sunlight bursting through The Pinewoods, Harrogate, 2017’ by Simon Hill HonFRPS. Genre: Visual Art



**Above**  
‘Something of interest at the cattle market, Newark, Nottinghamshire, 1983’ by Simon Hill HonFRPS. Genre: Documentary

**CONCLUSION**

**Defining ‘intent’ for a body of work – whether the photographer’s intention is to exhibit that work or to submit it for a Distinction or academic assessment – can be a daunting prospect that might prevent many photographers from reaching and delivering to their full potential. Creative block is not only frustrating for a photographer but, unless they have a strategy to deal with that block, it might drive them away from the medium. It is only a temporary hurdle that can be overcome with the right strategy and mindset.**

The strategy suggested in this article draws on three processes that, when used together, can help us define an original and creative intent for our work and avoid any creative block that would be a barrier to delivering that intent. It can, when necessary, help us reset our creative journey.

Instead of succumbing to frustration, we should embrace the challenge of defining an intent and overcoming creative block. By taking breaks,

exploring new environments, studying the work of others, embracing constraints, experimenting with techniques, seeking collaboration and feedback, documenting our journey and reflecting on our output, we can derive greater enjoyment and achieve far more on our photographic journey.

This short feature provides an overview of a strategy that can support a photographer’s journey towards gaining an RPS Distinction. To provide more in-depth guidance, later in 2024 the Distinctions team will offer short online courses to explore this strategy in more detail and show how members can use it to gain a Distinction and a more structured approach to their own creative practice. Details of these courses will be published on the RPS website during early 2024.

**Simon Hill HonFRPS is President of the Society. Develop your storytelling skills with RPS workshops. [rps.org/workshops](https://rps.org/workshops)**