

MY PHOTO PROJECT

Subtle symmetry

Inspired by pattern and order, Christian Webb has created a series of typologies that explore the minute differences in normal everyday objects.

FINDING AN extraordinary image in the mundanity of everyday life is a challenge for many still life photographers. However, the same familiarity that has the potential to threaten boredom also has the hidden power to open the viewer's eyes and make them see the

objects that surround them in an entirely new light. All of a sudden the dull drudgery of pencil sharpenings transforms into a striking repeating pattern that demands attention.

Christian Webb has been creating typologies for almost 20 years and has mastered the skill of being able to turn an everyday object into the subject of fascination. Finding beauty in the often disregarded isn't easy, but he's the expert...

Factfile

Photographer: Christian Webb

Full-time occupation: Teacher

Aim of project: To compare the subtle differences found in everyday objects

Location: I create the majority of my images at my studio in Bedfordshire

Duration: I started the project in 2010, but only really developed the grid style a year later

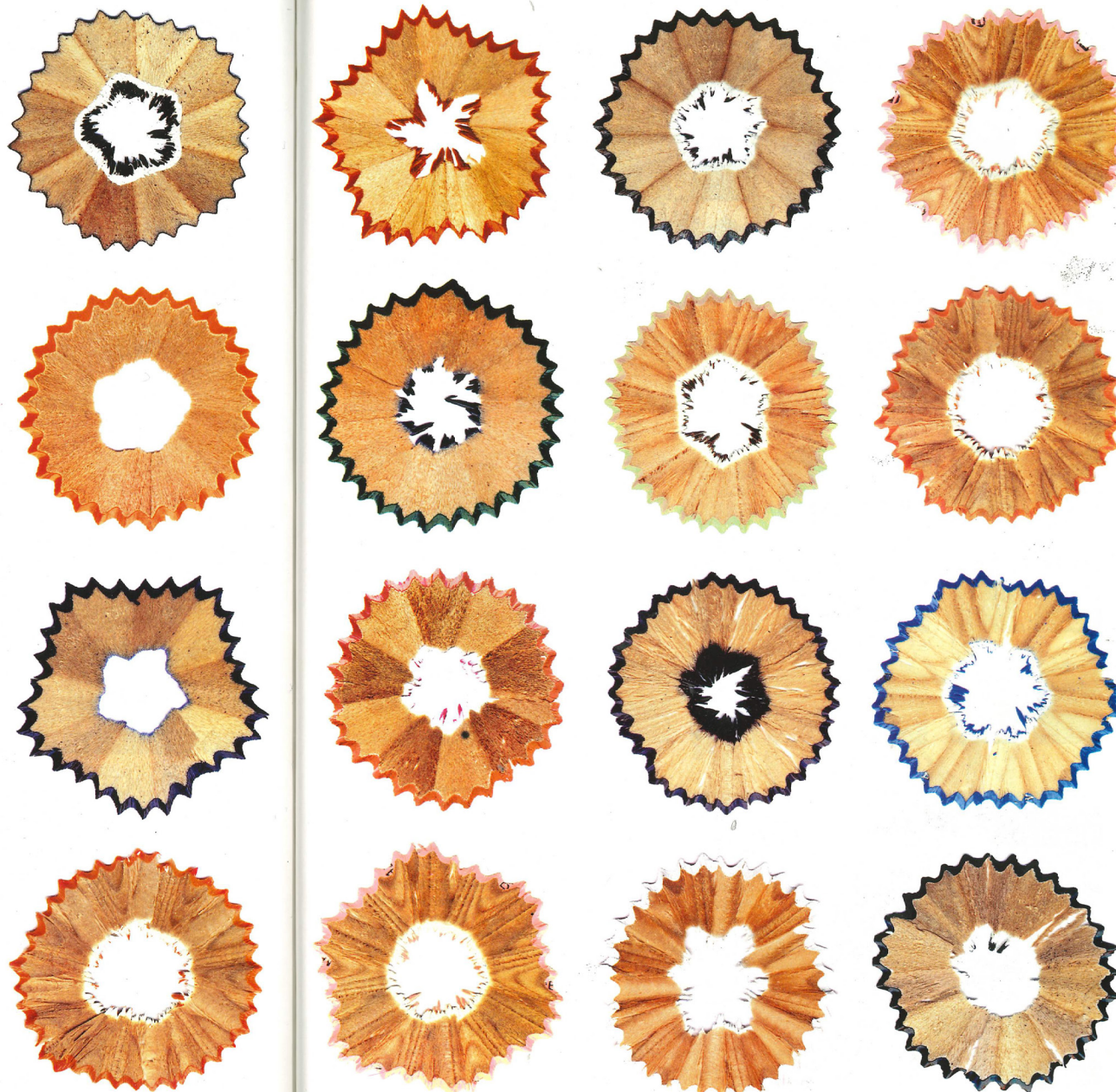
Time spent: For a typology I usually try to shoot over one day and then the majority of my time is spent arranging and editing the



images in post-production so that they're uniform both in tone and spacing

Images taken: I've taken around 40,000 images with my Canon 7D since 2010. I'll shoot about 100 images for each typology

Website: christianwebbphotography.com





What first inspired this project and how long have you been interested in it?

I began creating grids in 1997 by photocopying various drain covers and sticking them onto large pieces of card. I was studying the minimalist art of Donald Judd and my main themes were symmetry and order. I drew a lot of inspiration from shop displays and the commercial themes expressed in Andy Warhol's work.

How did this project evolve?

I really started to develop my style when I began using Photoshop. At first I created large canvases of between 100 and 200

images that were joined together. Later I started to reduce the number of images and separate them into grids. During this time I really started to take inspiration from Andreas Gursky – I loved the fact that when looking at his work you can't be sure whether the image is real or digitally created.

What is it about repetition that you found attractive as a project?

I find that repetition shows our interest in a subject. By examining multiple examples of the same object we can see the unique differences that make everyday items more complex than we initially assume. I think that repetition can also make for an ultimately more powerful image with greater impact,

through the use of order and pattern.

What do you think makes a good subject for a typology?

A good typology can work in different ways, but it's usually most important to keep yourself open to unexpected opportunities. I once went to Hove to photograph a wedding and had a spare hour so I went to the beach, which is where I came across some huts. It was totally unplanned and quite spontaneous. I did have a couple of people watching me shoot the huts – they were clearly wondering why I needed so many photos of the same thing! These beach huts had a uniform shape, but a vast array of colours. Their reduced size on a plain white



background gave no clues to the scale of the objects, which made them slightly harder to identify. I enjoy this aspect, as it draws in the viewer and holds their attention.

Do you ever modify the objects you're shooting, or do you just shoot them as they are?

When shooting a typology I aim to get each shot as uniform as possible, so a tripod and consistent lighting is key. Most of the objects I shoot require no alteration, like the huts or the pill packaging. I just shoot them in their current state. I feel that if I alter the objects

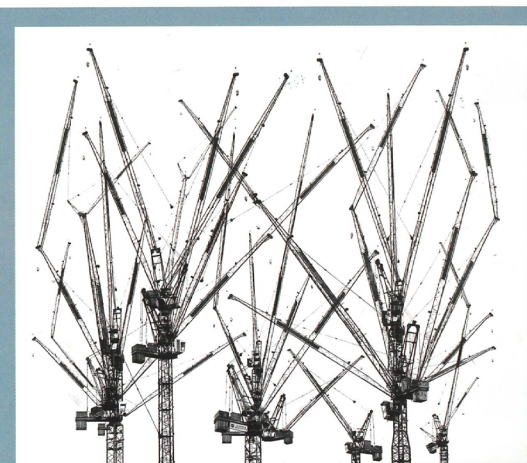
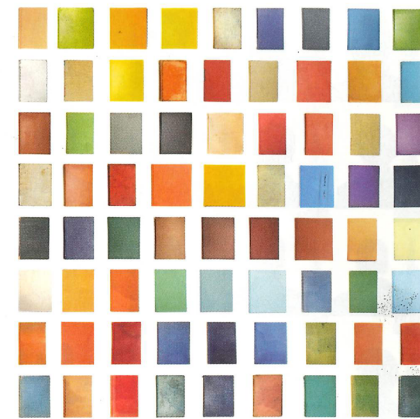
"I saw that inside each and every object was a hidden individuality"

before the shoot then I'm manipulating them, and in a way I feel like this is cheating. It's best to capture objects in whatever state you find them. Occasionally though, I do have to create the typology myself. I did this with the pencil shavings, which I carefully did to make them form circles. My rule here is keep it as you found it, unless you think of an idea that requires creation.

Do you want the objects you've shot to be instantly recognisable or a little bit more abstract?

I do want my work to be identifiable, but I hope that it wouldn't always be immediately so. I want my work to be partly about

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Create digital constructions

"The idea to create digital constructions out of photographs came from an image created in my school studio. I shot a stool on a white background from multiple angles and then layered it up in Photoshop to create an image that resembled a kind of chaotic scaffolding.

"One of my most recent constructions is of cranes on a building site. On an overcast day (which gave a plain white sky) I took the train to London and photographed cranes from multiple angles and distances to ensure that I had enough

variation. My constructions aren't designed in grids – the images interact and often overlap. I don't have a fixed image of how they will look in the end, so it's hard to know when to stop. I don't aim for these constructions to look realistic, but I want them to be identifiable.

"Editing usually takes longer than my typologies. The crane image required 16 different crane shots, with some parts repeated to make a total of 50 Layers on Photoshop. I spent three weeks editing the image until I was finally happy with the result."



discovery and I want it to be something that requires further analysis. Removing context and changing scale alters our perception and I play on this to engage the viewer. The level of complexity of the image needs to be accessible, yet still busy enough to cause sufficient repetition and pattern.

Is there ever a deeper meaning behind your typologies?

Each typology deals with an image that I think has a sufficient amount of complexities to warrant such close attention. I try to keep it based on universal themes, as I want to show that this visual complexity is something we should all embrace. I think we should enjoy variation and move away from the idea

of endless duplication. My work offers an opportunity to look closer and see what we miss when we simply glance at an object.

What's the strangest thing you've ever photographed?

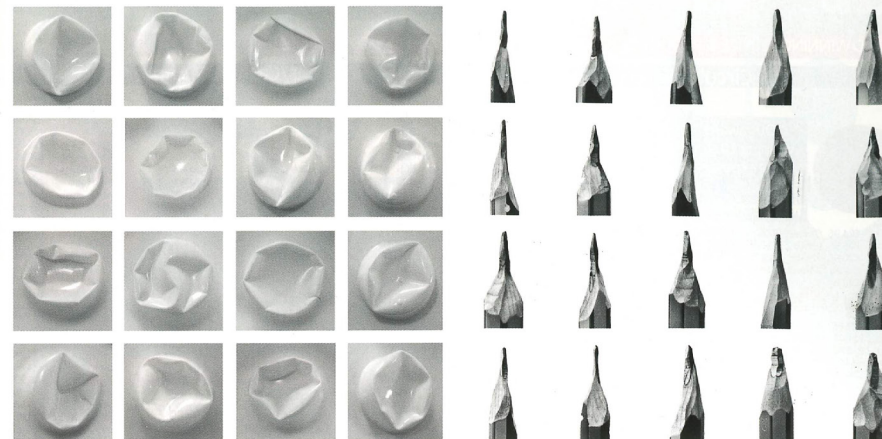
A few years ago I decided to photograph every single one of the numerous potholes on the road I lived on. I put on a high-vis jacket and photographed over 200 holes. While I was doing this, I did get patted on the back and encouraged by a few locals who believed I was working for the council and preparing the road for repair. I thought it was best to go along with this! I stitched the images together in Photoshop into a 1.5m long print to make a point about the state of the road. It

eventually turned out that all that hard work was in vain, as the road was resurfaced shortly before I finished the project!

How much does post-production impact your work?

Most of my decisions happen at the post-production stage. I need to ensure that the scale, order, tone and colour are correct. I also need to ensure that the number of images and the spacing is right. Occasionally I'll need to break my own rules, which I did with the coloured book covers, as they didn't form a perfectly aligned grid. The post-production stage is the most time-consuming part of the process, but it's where the image starts to reveal itself to me.

Christian Webb My Photo Project



How do you fit this project in around your day job?

As a teacher of graphic design and photography, I find that both disciplines help me with inspiration for my photography work. I feel like it's really important to show students that you don't need a qualification or a financial incentive to take photos – your motivation can be entirely personal. Photography is an incredibly broad discipline and I use my work as a guide to show just one of the many styles and genres that you can pursue. I occasionally use the students to help me out, whether it's by lending me the back of their head or simply their shoes. On the day that I did the shoe typology I was on lunch duty at school. I carried a large piece of paper with me and asked random students to take off their shoes so that I could photograph them on the paper. I managed to get all 96 pairs of shoes done without a single student asking why I wanted to shoot their shoes!

Why should readers start a personal project?

Creating a personal project gives you boundaries. I firmly believe that by limiting yourself to a theme or style you'll force yourself to become more creative within it. Responding to a title, a theme or a technique can also allow you to interpret it in your very own style. Try working on a project with friends – it's fun to see how you all respond differently to the same theme. Personal projects can also encourage you to look at things you wouldn't normally tend to, which can really help to broaden your creative horizons.

What's next for you and this project?

I'm going to continue with my typologies, but my more recent work is based on creating linear overlapping images that I call 'constructions'. I'm also developing a style where I break away from the grid format – the grid breaks down the interaction of the images by having white

space between them. My new development enables me to take sections of the images and place them on other photos with different colours, creating brand new shapes and patterns. I enjoy that these projects evolve and sometimes return to older ideas. They're never fixed, as the creative process is truly a journey – and often one that has no fixed destination.

Christian's 5-step guide to shooting better personal projects

1 This may seem strange, but don't be afraid to limit yourself. You may feel like rules will stifle your imagination, but they can actually help to guide it. It's sometimes fun to begin with an image you like and then write a brief from it. Set yourself some strict boundaries and your ideas will soon start to flow.

2 Don't just settle for the first response to a project. I always save multiple outcomes, then view them together on screen so I can see which interpretation works best. If you have two ideas try both, then decide which you prefer.

3 Think big – if you want to photograph a topic then try shooting it many times and in a variety of different ways. You'll find that the bigger the project gets, the more interesting and complex it becomes. Approaching your shoot from multiple directions will stretch your creative muscles and you may even eventually stumble across unexpected results.

4 Inspiration can come from anywhere. I encourage my students to look at the work of established photographers in their work, but graphic designers and painters

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often inspire me as well. Each artistic discipline overlaps and they shouldn't be seen as separate entities.

5 When you're experimenting with your photography it's vitally important to take risks, play and enjoy. When things go a little wrong then stop and think 'Can I use this?' Having complete control isn't necessary for an exciting creative journey – in fact, it can often inhibit it. ▶▶