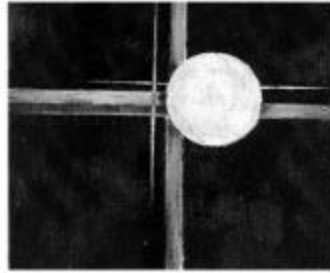


DESIGN PRINCIPLES



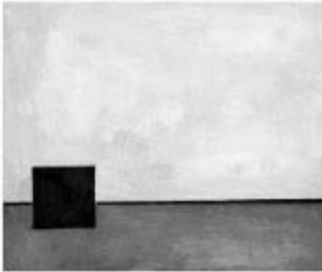
Balance



Emphasis



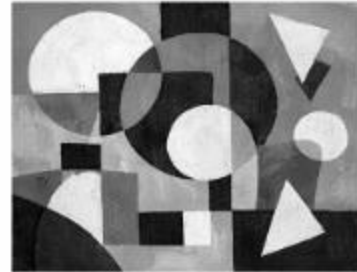
Movement



Proportion



Rhythm



Unity

Balance: Where is the visual weight?

Emphasis: What draws your eye first?

Movement: Do your eyes follow a path through the painting?

Proportion: How are shapes sized and related?

Rhythm: Are shapes or colors repeated?

Unity: Does the whole feel connected even with visual variety?

DESIGN PRINCIPLES



Coming Up for Air, 24x30, cold wax, oil, mixed media on panel, 2017 | Helen Shulman

This painting succeeds as a composition because it feels *intentional without feeling controlled*—a hallmark of strong cold wax work—and because the design principles are quietly doing their job beneath the surface.

Your eye enters naturally through the lighter, open area in the upper left. That space acts like a breath: it offers contrast, relief, and a point of orientation. From there, the eye is gently pulled across the surface by layers of warm rusts, ochres, and umbers, guided by scratched lines, scraped edges, and subtle directional marks. This creates **movement**—not linear or obvious, but wandering and exploratory, the way the eye moves through a lived landscape.

Balance is achieved asymmetrically. The lighter area carries visual weight through value contrast, while the darker, denser passages on the right counterbalance it through saturation, texture, and complexity. Neither side dominates; instead, they rely on different kinds of weight. This keeps the painting dynamic rather than static.

There is a clear sense of **emphasis**, but it's soft rather than singular. The brightest values and highest contrast areas draw attention first, yet no single shape screams for attention. This allows the viewer to linger and discover secondary moments—small flashes of color, energetic scratches, quieter transitions—that reward sustained looking.

Proportion plays an important role here. Larger, loosely defined areas of color are interspersed with smaller, more active marks. The painting breathes because the eye is not overwhelmed with detail everywhere; there are passages that rest and passages that speak more loudly. This variation in scale keeps the composition believable and grounded.

Rhythm emerges through repetition: repeated verticals and blocks of color, recurring scratch marks, and a consistent language of layering. These repetitions create a visual beat that moves across the surface, giving the painting cohesion even as it remains richly varied.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Finally, the piece feels unified. The limited, earthy palette ties everything together, as does the consistent surface quality created by wax—scraped, layered, revealed. Even the most contrasting areas feel like they belong to the same conversation. Nothing feels pasted on or accidental.

Altogether, the painting works because it balances structure and intuition. The design principles are present, but they are embedded—supporting the emotional and tactile experience rather than announcing themselves. That’s exactly what makes it such a strong example for teaching abstract composition in cold wax and oil.

Try this sequence:

1. Show the **original painting**
2. Ask: *“Where does your eye go first?”*
3. Then show the **black/grey/white version**
4. Ask:
 - *What surprised you?*
 - *Where is the real structure?*
 - *Which areas are doing the heavy lifting?*

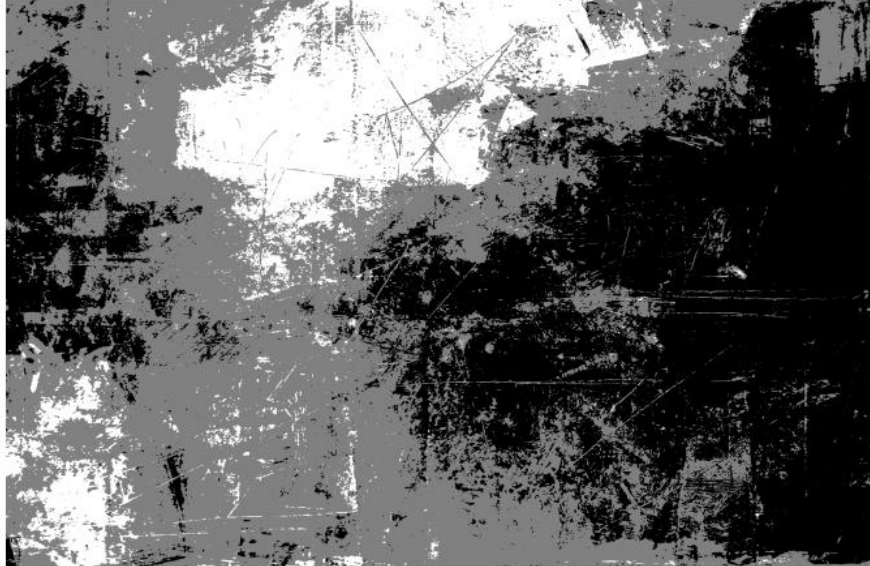
Then have students:

- photograph their own work
- reduce it to 3 values
- repaint or adjust *based on structure, not color*

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Composition Value Study: Black / Grey / White

This simplified value map reveals the underlying composition of the painting. Light areas indicate breathing space and entry points, mid-values create movement and rhythm, and dark areas anchor the composition and provide visual weight.



How to read it:

- **White** = open space, entry points, visual breathing room
- **Grey** = movement, transitions, rhythm, connective tissue
- **Black** = anchoring weight, containment, stability

Students can immediately see:

- where the eye enters
- how it travels
- where it rests

This is gold for cold wax painters who tend to rely heavily on color intuition.