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Photography students take a crash course in visual thinking

Bret McCabe / January 1, 2013Posted in *Arts+Culture*Tagged *photography, visual art*[VIEW GALLERY »](#)

Photographic images have become such an omnipresent part of everyday life that it's easy to forget that they're the result of creative human activity. Somebody decided what that image would look like in an advertisement on a Web page or billboard, that photo tagged on a Facebook page or Pinterest board, that snapshot of a pet a friend has in her smartphone.

"Most of the students, except for maybe one or two, come into the class and have never thought about photography as a medium that can express an idea



Charm City Through the Lens. "Sometimes it amazes me that people see photography as a thing that's automatic because everything takes a picture. All you do is push a button."

A photographer herself, López-González started teaching the Intersession class in 2009; the January 2013 installment marks its fifth anniversary, which she hopes to celebrate with an exhibition of student work. It's an intensive, weeklong immersion in understanding the camera and critically discussing images. López-González takes the students out into Baltimore to take photos and then helps them put their work into a narrative portfolio. It's a crash course in visual thinking, the way an introductory writing course is a primer in thinking verbally.

"It's not so much about mastering the medium," she says. "It's more about coming up with an idea and expressing it, and expressing it in a powerful way."

It's a process that López-González enjoys on multiple levels. In addition to being an artist, she's a postdoctoral fellow in the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine's Department of Otolaryngology, where she works with Charles Limb, an associate professor exploring the cognitive neuroscience of creativity. Both Limb and López-González are interested in what's going on in the brain when artists are in the act of creation, which they define as a fundamental act of human information processing. In the January/February 2012 issue of the online journal *Cerebrum*, they co-authored "Musical Creativity and the Brain," a study of jazz musicians' full-brain analyses using functional magnetic resonance imaging while they were improvising.

López-González is particularly interested in how aesthetics can be studied empirically. To her, it's the unknown that lurks immediately behind the "But is it art?" question that pops up in any discussion of interpretive criticism. Definitions of art frequently revolve around discussions of an object's functionality, its ability to elicit a pleasurable experience, its durability and craftsmanship, and perceptions of beauty. "Beauty," of course, is an abstract, subjective term, one that gets broken down into discussions about visual symmetry and order—or color, or composition, or a whole slew of terminology that crops up when talking about how art is perceived. And those notions



López-González is interested in the neurocognitive processes that go into making the accumulations of sounds in music, or colors and lines in visual art, that end up producing the abstract notion in a viewer or listener that gets described as "beautiful." Languages differ across cultures as well, but that doesn't mean that brains that learn and produce different languages and verbal messages are fundamentally different biologically. A similar infinite number of complex processes must be going on in the understanding and creation of art as well.

"Are there underlying principles that guide aesthetic objects?" López-González asks. "Are there empirical rules about what is beautiful or what isn't beautiful? Yes, art has changed over its history, and modern art is supposed to be against the whole concept of beauty, but if we're going to look for universals, the point is that we still put it into the context of art. So that must mean that there is something underlying all this historical change that fits within it. So the question is, What is that thing?"

That's not a question she expects to answer or even explore in her Intersession class, but it's a process she witnesses the students experiencing for themselves. On the last day of class López-González sits with students individually and goes through their portfolios, helping them whittle down the collection of images to about 10 that illustrate how each of them was looking at the city. "When we go through their images together, they realize how consistent they are," she says. "They see how they were looking for all these angles or a certain type of light or color. And they [hadn't realized] they were making these decisions until that time.

"So they leave [the class] thinking that this medium that was never that important to them is something that can change their perspective on politics, on history, on understanding mental states, on understanding the environment. For me, that's been fascinating."

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