

Wheatcountry

by Don Kirby



Published in *LensWork* #33

Commentary

Generally speaking, I'm not a fan of artistic rules. They are far too constrictive and often result in formulaic work. No doubt one of the biggest offenders is the so-called photographic "rule of thirds." I particularly dislike this one because I have my own ideas that have nothing to do with geometry. I wish I could use the term "rule of three," but I don't dare do so because it would be so misunderstood. Instead, I'll just have to explain the idea.

Some images smack us with an obvious single component; we get the message, and were done. Notice that I said single *component*, not a single *subject*. This image from Don Kirby's wonderful book *Wheatcountry* may have a single item as its primary subject—the abandon school building—but that is only one of three *components* in this photograph. I like to think in terms I call the Rule of Three—a simple idea that every photograph needs to have three interrelated components that support each other. If a photograph has three components, it's a much more solid foundation than if there is only one, or two. I suppose as photographers, we should be entirely comfortable with this tripod-like approach to image making—even if those components are conceptual, not compositional.

In this image, the three *components* are:

1. The abandon school building, a representation of yesteryear, an artifact of nostalgia.

2. The plowed field, a representation of today—clearly this field is still being cared for and cultivated now.
3. The clouds, a representation of the moment, the current weather captured during the instant of exposure.

These three temporal components work together both graphically and metaphorically to tell us something of this small corner of the world. Most importantly, all three components contribute to that cumulative story. As a mental exercise, just imagine this image with any one of these three components removed. The resulting images might be interesting, but I don't think they'd be as interesting as the one Kirby presents us.

Using this idea over the years, I've found that better photographs almost always tend to have three components that foster some kind of conceptual relationship. This has nothing to do with geometry, but rather with depth and layers of meaning.

I'll go even further with Kirby's image: there is a fourth component that doesn't appear in the photograph itself. That component is the one we bring with us from our photographic literacy—in



this case, the legacy of the FSA photographers. Doesn't this image look like it could easily be from Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, or Walker Evans? With that knowledge, we see Kirby as a sort of peer to those FSA photographers—a contemporary photographer carrying forward the tradition begun by a former generation. In fact, that association is so strong that if you are familiar with the work of the FSA photographers, I'll bet you can't see this image in any other way but as an extension of their work.

Photographs are not simply things that show us a subject. If they are done well, photographs present relationships between the components visible in the photograph and perhaps some that viewers bring to the experience. This is precisely why I think of art as a conversation between the photographer and the world they explore, between the photograph and the viewer, and between all the above and history.