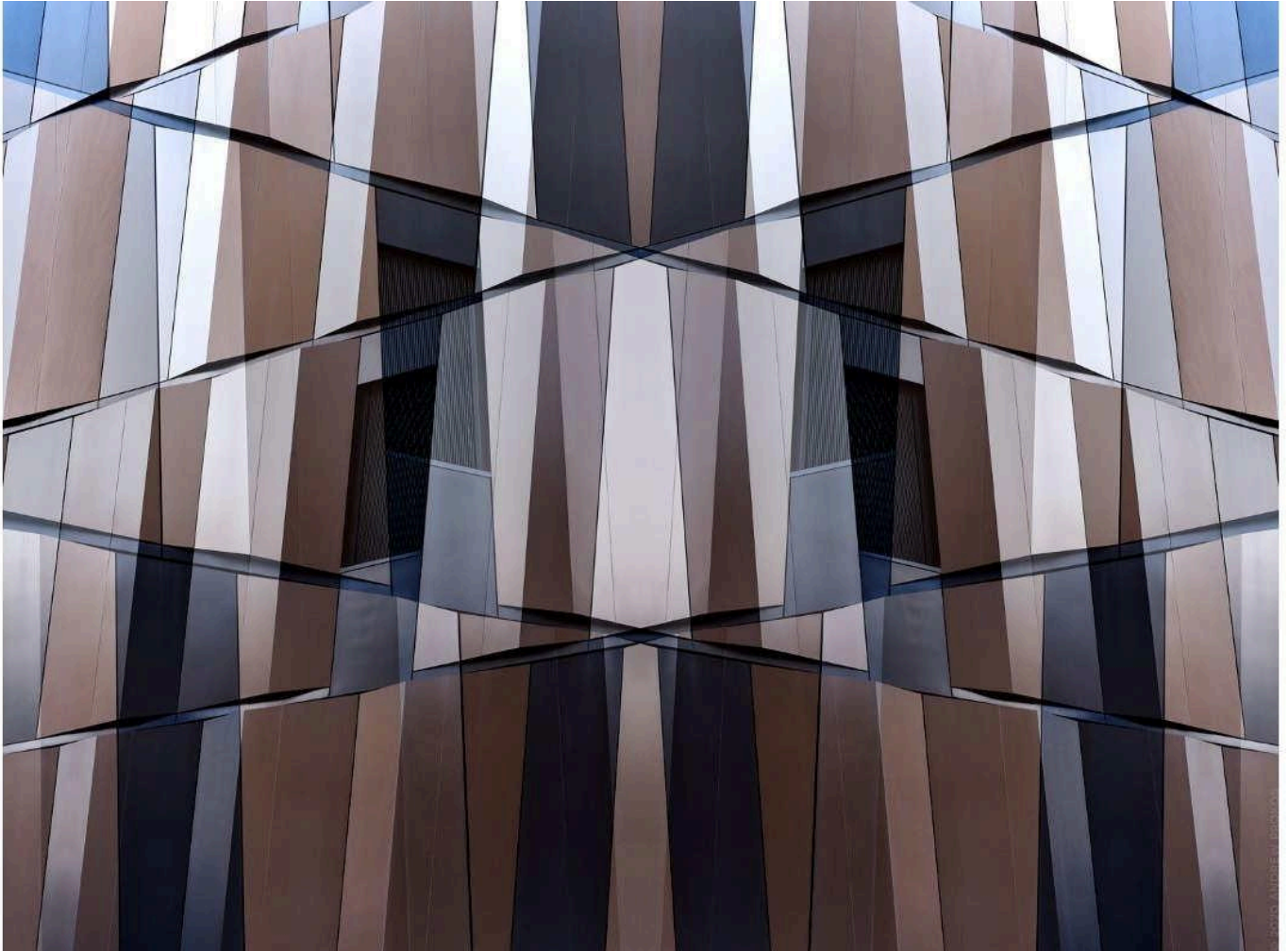


Breaking the Confines of the Medium - Andrew Prokos in an Interview

Artist(s) in Focus, Photography, Interviews



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Soon to open at the **Xposure International Photography Festival** in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, is the solo exhibition of Andrew Prokos. The eminent photographer who marked the world of architectural and fine art photography with his stunning vistas and experiments in abstraction is staging a show revolving around his most recent bodies of work that explore abstraction of architectural elements. Titled *New Abstraction*, the exhibition is set to open on February 9th, 2022.

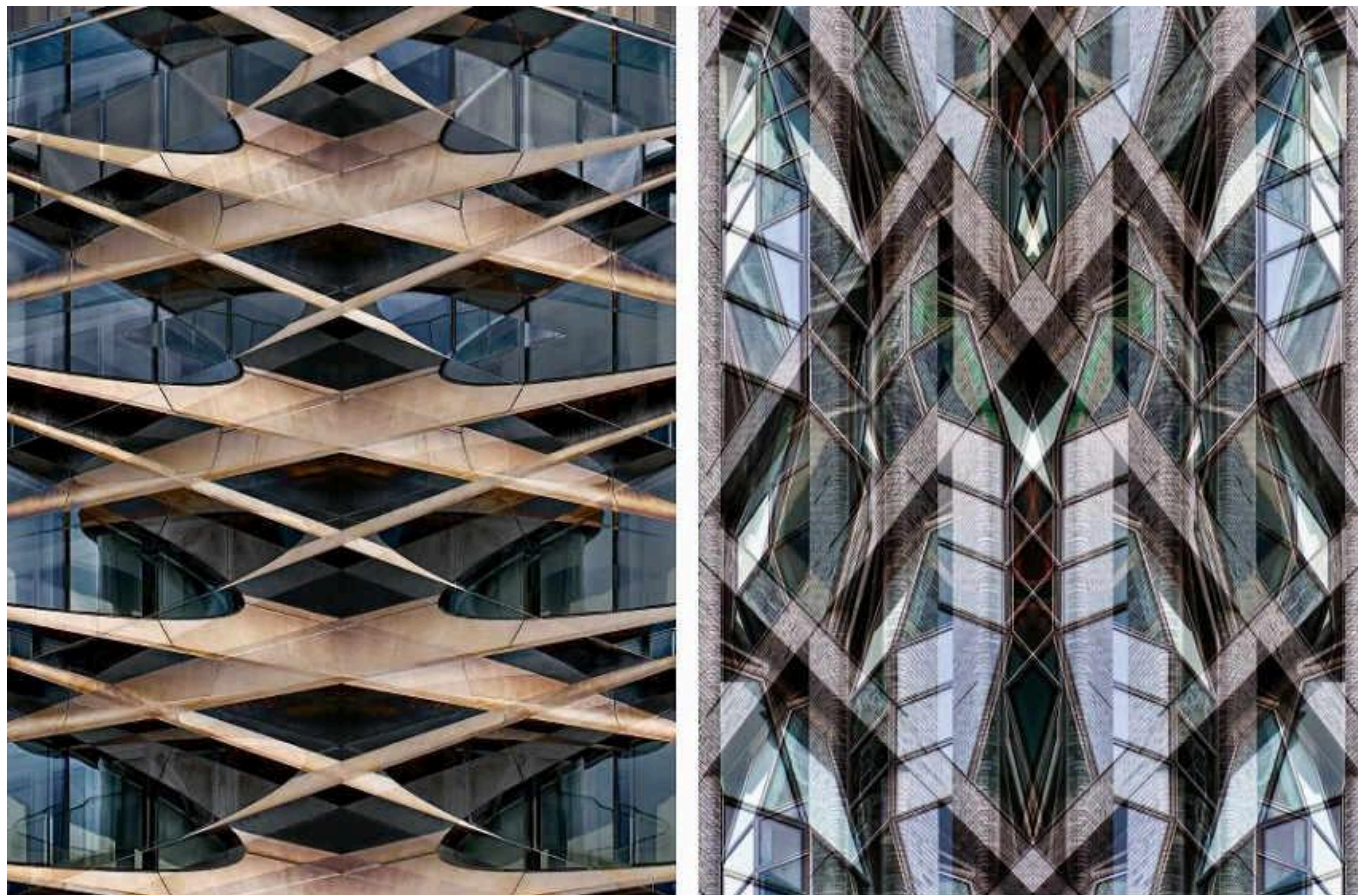
Celebrated for his meticulously-captured and highly-detailed urban and natural views that imbue the subject with an ethereal quality, Prokos arrives at Sharjah with two new series, *Metropolis Abstracted* and *Inverted*. The large-scale pieces break the confines of the medium - they show us the world that is around us but inverted and transformed with a singular artistic vision. Architectural elements grow and multiply, colours are fluid and interspersed, creating a psychological play of recognizable images that still remain challenging to decipher.

Continuing the work started with his previous series - *Gehry's Children* and *Audacity of Color* - Prokos delves deeper into the possibilities of the medium, exploring **its confines and boundaries and his personal visions**, in order to present a body of work that is a step further into abstraction and inner expression. The result is a captivating combination of lines and colours, of movement and light, that is difficult to classify within the existing genres.

Abstract and intimate, but also created from the existing and observable elements surrounding us, Prokos' recent series emerges as contemporary experimental art that **combines genres, modern techniques, and technological possibilities** into singular pieces showing personal sentiment.

Andrew Prokos has received many prestigious **photography awards** for his work over the years, including Prix de la Photographie, Paris, the International Photography Awards (Lucies), Latin American Fotografia, American Photography 31, Neutral Density Awards, the Epson International Pano Awards, and many others.

We met with Andrew to talk about his upcoming exhibition in UAE, his shift to abstraction, techniques he uses, future plans and much more.



Left: Andrew Prokos - Metropolis Abstracted #2 - 60"x45" in / 152x114cm / **Right:** Andrew Prokos - Metropolis Abstracted #3 - 60"x45" in / 152x114cm. Images courtesy of the artist

A Radical Departure of New Abstraction

Widewalls: Your work will soon be on view in a solo show at the Xposure International Photography Festival in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. Could you tell us something about the concept of the show?

Andrew Prokos: Xposure is the largest photography event in the Middle East annually, and features extensive solo exhibitions for a number of international photographers who have completed important bodies of work. You have to present the work in order to get a solo show, and those spots are highly coveted, so I feel fortunate to be showing my work this year. I chose to focus on my most recent work, which revolves around the abstraction of architectural elements, hence the title "New Abstraction."

Widewalls: Two bodies of work that will be on view, Metropolis Abstracted and Inverted, comprise large-scale abstract photographs. How much do these works differ from your previous series?

AP: Both series take abstraction of **architectural elements** as the focus, but each series approaches it in a very different way. They are a radical departure from my previous work, and are basically the product of a desire to break out of the genres I was shooting and challenge myself to create something new. 2020, in particular, was a creative watershed for me, simply because the pandemic provided me with a much-needed slowdown, so I was able to concept and shoot a lot of new work.

The images from *Inverted* were shot in 2019 during a trip to the Middle East, and then in 2020 I started to play with the work and push it in a completely different, and much bolder, direction. *Inverted* makes use of very bold negative color imagery and close-up details and patterns. The intent is to shift the viewer's perception of the mundane, and to look at it in a new way. As a concrete example, the close-up facades of the Modernist buildings in Abu Dhabi, Dubai or Sharjah offer a glimpse of the lives of the inhabitants. They are occupied spaces, and that humanizes the series a bit. Often the balconies of these 1970's and 1980's buildings have lots of personal effects on them...laundry hanging out to dry, exercise bicycles, carpets, baby strollers, etc. When looked at in the negative (inverted) realm they take on all kinds of beautiful hues and become enticing and enigmatic objects to behold. This is not me colorizing the scene, but the exact opposite of the positive perception of the scene. It was a risk to invert the images and portray such colors, but ultimately I found what emerged fascinating so I continued developing the series along those lines.

I honestly had no idea it would receive so much press and attention, but the large-scale prints are quite striking in their linear precision and color. That really pushed the series out of the realm of straight photography and into the realm of contemporary art...they could easily be paintings, and painters seem to 'get' the series more than photographers do. Photographers tend to be a bit conservative in how they look at the medium at times and they want photos to look like photos, not paintings. I want the freedom to break out of the confines of the medium and do what I find interesting, even if it's not necessarily immediately identifiable as photography.

With *Metropolis Abstracted*, I started to play with mirroring the close-up architectural details and facades. Each detail is captured with the express intent of forming a much more complex composition in the end. What I did not anticipate so much is that *Metropolis Abstracted* is really about the element of surprise. Looking at the single captured architectural detail, it may seem mundane and not very interesting on its own. But when the image is reflected, an entirely new and inherent structure and visual language emerge. People often comment that the images seem to be revealing a hidden symbolism, and they interpret the images in all kinds of ways. So they do become a sort of Rorschach test for the viewer, which is not something that I can honestly claim to be by design but rather an interesting by-product of the process and its effect on the viewer. *Metropolis Abstracted* is a more psychological series in that sense.

Widewalls: Could you walk us through the process of creating these large-scale photographs? Why have you decided on this format?

AP: I have been creating large-scale work since the beginning of my career...I used to shoot with a very large panoramic film camera that was huge and bulky and looked more like some sort of weapon than a camera. It all ties into my preoccupation (or obsession) with precise composition and detail. It's one thing to make large photographs...anyone can do that. It's another thing to make large-scale work that retains a high level of detail and clarity. That is much rarer, and frankly, there aren't that many photographers who do it well. It's not that the prints are shown large just because they can be. The entire point of this type of work is precision and detail, and that simply doesn't come across in smaller prints. The work needs to be experienced at a large size to have an impact.

In terms of process - these series are quite process-oriented, and many steps are needed to get from the first capture to the output of the photographs. The most important step is visualizing what you would like to capture and finding the locations. Then there is the aspect of needing the right equipment, lenses, etc., and the technical prowess to capture it correctly. In many cases, I am capturing numerous high-definition 100-megapixel digital images and then merging them in post-production to form an **extremely high-definition image**. That in itself is a daunting process that requires a lot of work to get right, and if you don't get it right, you have to start over. Finally, there is

the post-production process at the computer where the actual composition and tonality emerges, which typically takes far longer than the original production time.

Widewalls: In your work, the world that surrounds us coalesces into kaleidoscopic images where patterns are repeated and new worlds created. What stirred you towards abstract photography and these fragmented visions?

AP: I've always loved abstract art in any form, whether it be painting, sculpture or photography. I was tiptoeing into abstraction with my previous series *Gehry's Children* and *Audacity of Color* but jumped headlong into the process with these series. *Gehry's Children* won numerous awards at international photography competitions and really became internationally known when it was published at DesignBoom, so much so that Gehry Partners requested that the series be included in the Frank Gehry retrospective at 21_21 Design Sight Museum in Tokyo in 2016. That was a high honor and definitely encouraged me to explore my growing interest in abstraction.

Metropolis Abstracted is deceptively simple. Each composition makes use of exactly one image. The compositions are not a montage of different images. It's all one single image reflected on itself. In that sense, the series really works because it reveals something which is hidden to the naked eye until the image is folded and folded again. As I mentioned, 2020 was a great year for me creatively because everything just stopped, so I had time to sit and think about what direction to move in and how to produce it. New York was also quite empty while I was shooting most of *Metropolis Abstracted*, so it was a pleasure to feel like I had the city to myself again.



Andrew Prokos - Metropolis Abstracted #12 - 45"x60" in / 114x152cm. Image courtesy of the artist

Abstracting Architectural Forms

Widewalls: You reveal vistas that are present but also hidden from us as we rush through our daily lives. Shadows, reflections, and unusual angles are building blocks of your abstract art. How challenging is it to capture these?

AP: Capturing anything in a new or impactful way is always a challenge, especially in a world flooded with images. Capturing the work is challenging simply because a certain level of technical proficiency is needed in order to realize your vision, especially if that vision also depends on scale. But for me, the most difficult part is not capturing the work per se but deciding what stays and what goes in the process, so there is a certain uniformity of vision and coherence to the work. There is a certain period where you fumble around in the dark and don't have much clarity. Sometimes you only become convinced about a body of work until long after you have committed a lot of time and effort. You have to be rather ruthless with editing, as anything weak will only draw the entire level of the series down. This is the hard part, trusting your own vision enough to see it through to the end.

Widewalls: Which kind of views draw you the most?

AP: I tend to be drawn to the sweeping wide views and the close-up views and not so much the middle ground. With wide, all-encompassing scenes, you have the opportunity to convey a certain sense of wonder and grandeur. With the extreme close-up, it allows you to isolate exactly what you want to show the viewer and say..."here, look at this...is it what you expected?"

Widewalls: Although photos capture a moment in time, your abstract works seem to change and move as we look at them. Their inherent dynamism reminds us of action paintings, just done in a different medium. How would you situate your practice within a broader field of abstract art?

AP: There is a certain dynamism to *Metropolis Abstracted* in particular that derives from the whole being larger than the parts, and also, I suspect, from the symbolic nature of the geometric shapes revealed in the process. They have a totemic feel which is not typically associated with photographs, especially when viewed at five to six feet tall. They fall into a realm of photography that I haven't personally encountered before, but if compared to painting, it would fall somewhere between surrealism and geometric abstraction.

Widewalls: What does the use of architectural forms bring to the field?

AP: As you said before, architectural details are the building blocks in these series. I use details from contemporary architecture in particular because it provides the clean lines and minimalist shapes that work best for the types of compositions I am producing.



Left: Andrew Prokos - Metropolis Abstracted #4 - 60"x45" in / 152x114cm / **Right:** Andrew Prokos - Metropolis Abstracted #5 - 60"x45" in / 152x114cm. Images courtesy of the artist

Testing the Boundaries of the Medium

Widewalls: *You also use long exposures, sometimes of up to ten minutes. How do these technical aspects combine with your artistic vision? Which kind of aesthetic quality does this prolonged exposure bring to your work?*

AP: Long-exposure is a genre unto itself, and for me, it's a distinct, separate body of work. LE (for short) is almost a way of life for photographers, and it requires a significant commitment of time and effort. It's also an exhausting type of work since you are required to wait a long period of time to capture anything, and you basically have to work blind. You cannot see what you are shooting due to the dark filters over the camera lens, so it's a return to a much older manual type of photography, and that requires a certain level of patience and determination. However, all the hardship with this genre aside, I love the ethereal nature of the images the long-exposure times produce. Water is blurred out and becomes misty. Clouds blur and merge together, forming sinuous ribbons. People are recorded coming and going through the scene in a fascinating beehive of motion and activity. It's a way of capturing what may be common subject matter like urban landscape and architecture but elevating it into the realm of art. In my case, I am continuously testing the boundaries of each genre and combining them. For example, I will capture multiple 5-10 minute long-exposures into a sweeping panoramic view which captures an expanse of people in motion (an example is here: <https://andrewprokos.com/photo/sunday-in-sheep-meadow-long-exposure-4410/>). This could be a common view of Central Park, but the sweeping format and the long-exposure time transform this into a completely different animal. So if I had to say what is a hallmark of my work, it's a certain level of curiosity and a combining of techniques and genres.

Widewalls: *How much have technical advances changed and enhanced your art?*

AP: I employ techniques that have been around a very long time...so in terms of technique, perhaps not so much. But what has changed is that digital finally advanced to the point where it was able to supplant film in my process completely, and digital has its own aesthetic, which I love. I don't

generally grab on to the latest technological advances that quickly, but I don't believe in clinging to the past either. The medium format digital images are superior, as is the digital printing process. You also have to consider the environmental impact. Film and paper processing used a lot of toxic chemicals. I did so much darkroom time as an amateur that I'm sure all those powdered chemicals had an impact on my lungs, and when it was used, it went down the toilet and into the environment. I even used to maintain a library of powdered chemicals such as copper sulfate, potassium ferricyanide, selenium, and hydrochloric acid for making my own custom toning solutions for darkroom prints. When I think about it now, I realize how toxic it all was...but that was the process back then. So yes, technical advances have definitely enhanced my process and added a certain level of clarity to my work.

Widewalls: What are your favourite tools when working?

AP: I'm very simple...camera, lenses, tripod, phone. I don't really need anything other than that since I don't do studio work, fashion, etc. I do use a fairly heavy-duty set of filters which make long exposure times possible. They aren't so much a favorite as a necessity. They block the light passing through the lens so that much longer times are required to capture the image. At these extreme durations, you have to manually operate the camera shutter with a cable and manually time the exposure. For that, I use the stopwatch on my phone. In the old days, I used an actual stopwatch, and when the film was exposed, I had to change film rolls after four exposures. Back then, we didn't know what we had until we got the film back from the lab.

Widewalls: Moving forward, what are your next plans? Can we expect more abstract photography from you in the future?

AP: In the near future, I will be back in the Middle East in Sharjah / UAE for the exhibition, and I intend to stay on a bit to shoot more there if possible. I am also continuing a series of **black and white architectural** work of facades of **New York City's grand landmark buildings**, which I have been planning for a while, and which just debuted this month at Gallery Estella in New Orleans. I definitely plan to continue the abstract work, and to push it towards pure abstraction...so not necessarily focused on architectural elements at all. That prospect excites me, and it will require quite a bit of experimentation. I do plan to rest a bit too. I have been up at 4:30 am working ungodly hours for months to get this solo show ready...time for a rest!