



In this exercise you will be working with your group to act out one of the following paragraphs: you have 5-10 minutes to determine how you will act it out and about 30 seconds to “perform” for the other groups. All members of your group must be engaged. You may have a “Narrator.”

Notan: Design in Light and Dark by Sharon Himes

What is dark is not light and what is light is not dark. This is the basis of all design and an important guiding principle of art. It seems so simple but an artist can spend a lifetime exploring the possibilities of light and dark.

"Notan" is the term used by the Japanese to express "light-dark" as an element of design. In the west we use separate terms such as positive space and negative space, dividing the idea of light-dark into separate components. On paper it is easy to see that dark shapes cannot exist without a surrounding area of white. White shapes cannot exist without dark to define it. The two elements are really one. This is an eastern concept of yin-yang that each is what the other is not.

It is usually the dark aspects of a design that we see first and we are intrigued by optical illusions that seem to switch from one picture to another in our minds. We speak of negative space and mean the white holes in a dark design. In using the term "negative" we are giving it a connotation of null-ness or even sinister aspects. A dark pattern is considered "positive" and therefore dominant when that is not always the case. Sometimes the primary subject is light against an area of dark and thus a positive element.

How does the artist use this concept of notan? We usually draw with dark pen or pencil on light paper and tend to think in terms of the dark aspects of our work. Sometimes it is useful to draw with white chalk or pastel on dark paper or use scratchboard or other dark media to help see that the dominant areas of a design can be the light ones.

All art is based on light and dark even when color is involved. In a low-light situation we can only see the values, or light and dark of a painting. Hang a painting in a dim room and only the strongest contrasts of light and dark can be identified. These abstract forms of light and dark tell us a lot about the art, even when we are not immediately aware of a specific subject or scene. It is the design of the art that we see when color, texture and representation are set aside.

Simple elements of light and dark can be expressive. When limited to the basic characteristics of black and white on a two dimensional plane, design still can express tension, movement and balance. Edges between light and dark catch our attention and we unconsciously follow them with our eyes. A gently curving edge is followed slowly by our eyes and a more sharply curved edge is passed over quickly, giving a subconscious sense of movement. Convolutioned edges can suggest texture or just be confusing.

[Notan Design Instruction Video](#)

The Art of Negative Space