

Using Creative Blur to Abstract Images

by Photographer Raymond Klass

I've had a number of questions recently about explaining the technique behind creating blurred abstract images. The process of blurring the image by moving the camera, or zooming the lens, I call creating a "blur-o-gram", but I'm certainly not the creator of this technique.

I first experienced this technique while at RIT as an undergraduate photo student – my teacher called the technique "shutter-drag". As photographers like Freeman Patterson, Tony Sweet, and Nancy Rotenberg gained recognition for their abstract images, this former studio technique was adapted to suit their unique views of nature. Though I'm not sure who was the first to use this technique for nature – and of course this doesn't really matter, but it was Nancy Rotenberg who first introduced this to me.

The premise is fairly straight forward – during the exposure, you'll want to move the camera and lens to create a blurring effect. Now, I know you're thinking this is the opposite of everything I've ever taught – using a tripod, shutter release, and mirror lockup to get a sharp image. The point here is that we won't be going half way, we'll be definitively blurring the image to abstraction.

First off, you'll need an exposure that is long enough to create some motion. If it's a sunny day out, you've got the ISO turned up, and you're shooting with the lens wide-open, chances are that your shutter speed is going to be too short to get enough blur to abstract the image. For these types of images, I try to use shutter speeds no faster than 1/10 of a second, and typically not longer than 5 seconds.

In order to achieve a shutter speed within this range, you'll likely need to adjust the aperture and or ISO. One easy way to work these variables is to place your camera onto "Aperture Priority" mode, then adjust the aperture settings until the camera's shutter speed falls within the above range.

Once you have your shutter speed and aperture set, you'll need to decide what type of blur to use with your image. This is one of the fun parts of having a digital camera – you'll be able to experiment with plenty of different camera motions, speeds, and exposures, all while you see the results on the back of the camera.





The faster you move the camera, the more abstract the image will be. While I've got a shot setup, I try moving the camera at different speeds and at different angles, as these can create drastically different results. I typically don't place my camera on a tripod while doing this type of image, but opt for hand-holding my camera to allow easy movement in any direction.

This technique can be fun to experiment with – especially on those windy days where your images likely wouldn't be in focus anyway. When I set up a particular scene, I often try a dozen or more exposures before I find the optimal movement speed and direction. If you take this type of image often, you might find yourself using up memory cards faster than usual, so bring extras. Enjoy.

