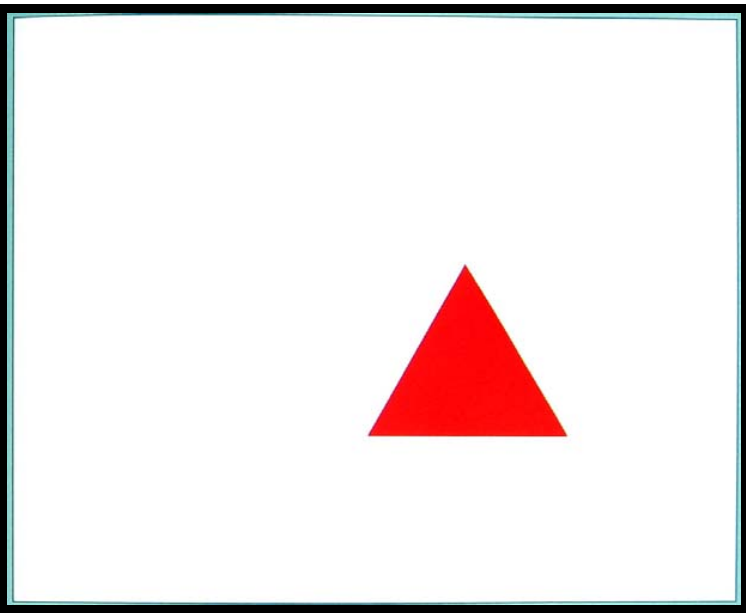
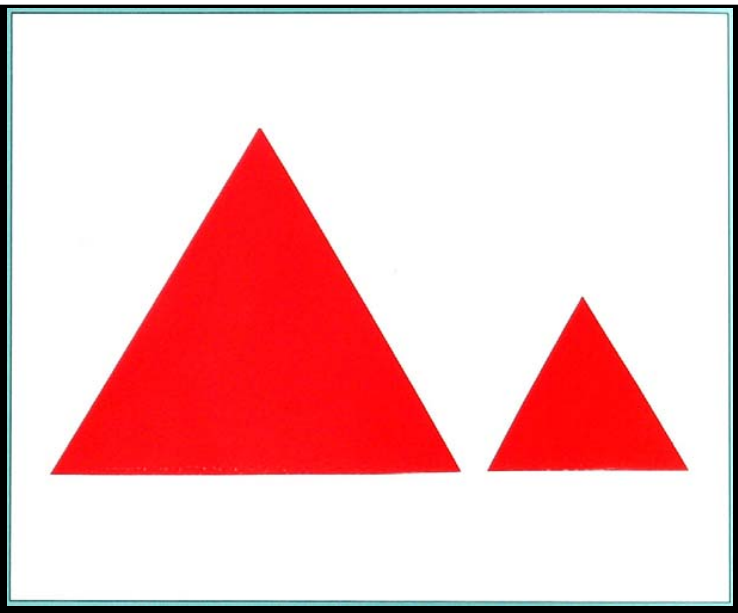
PICTURE THIS

HOW PICTURES WORK

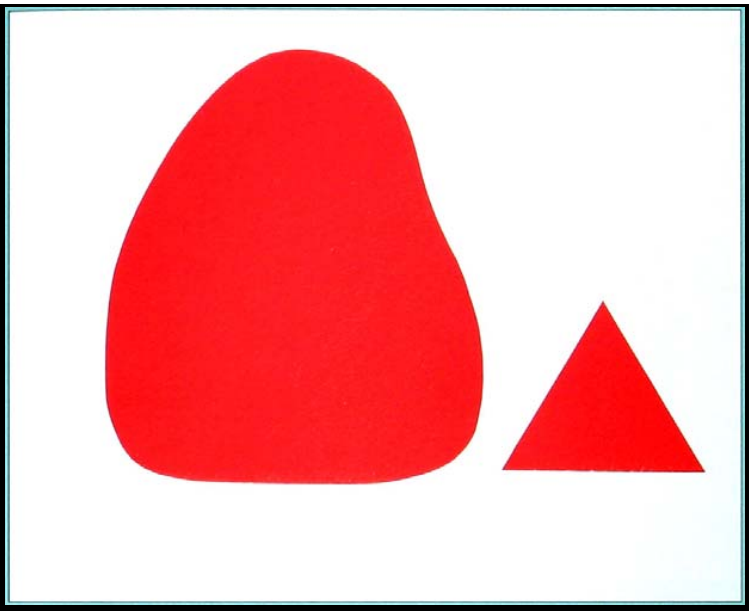
by Molly Bang



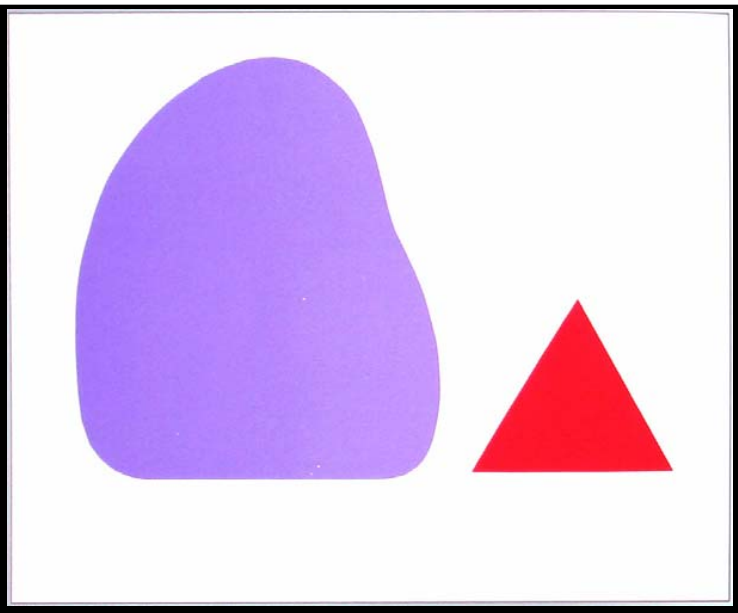
Do I feel anything for this shape?



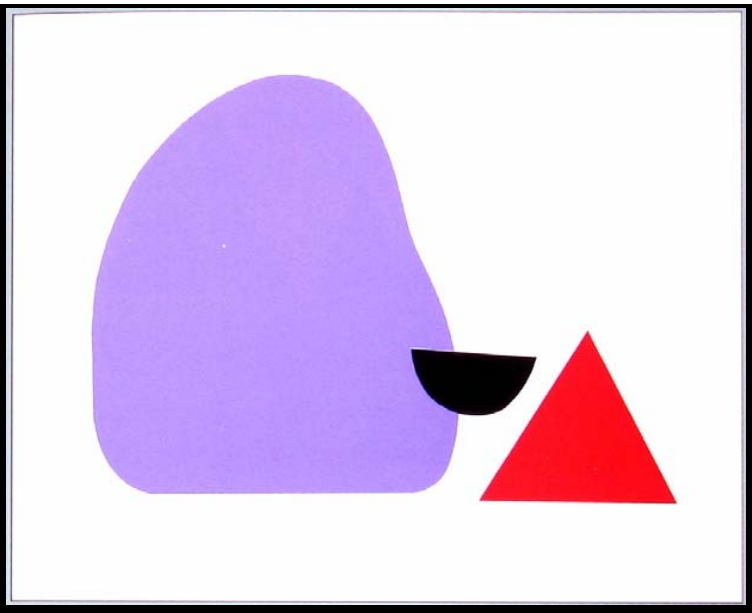
How can I make her feel less overwhelming and more huggable?



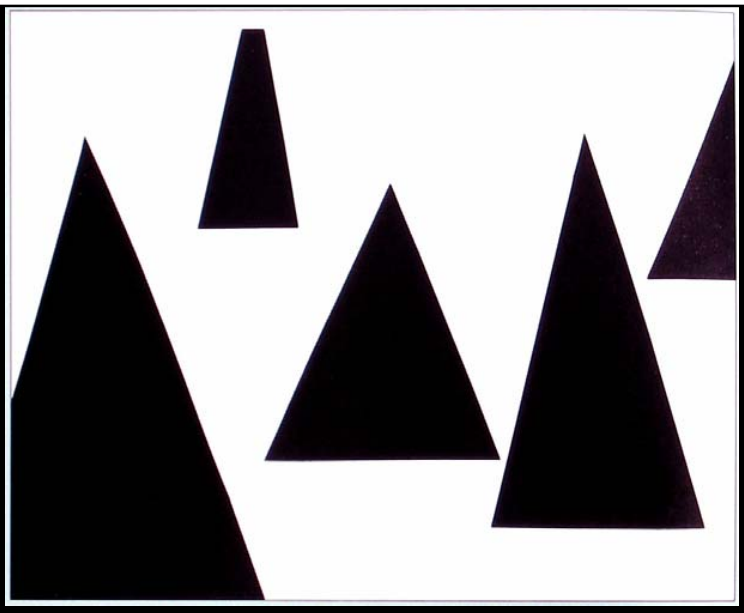
How can I keep her large but give Little Red Riding Hood prominence in the picture?



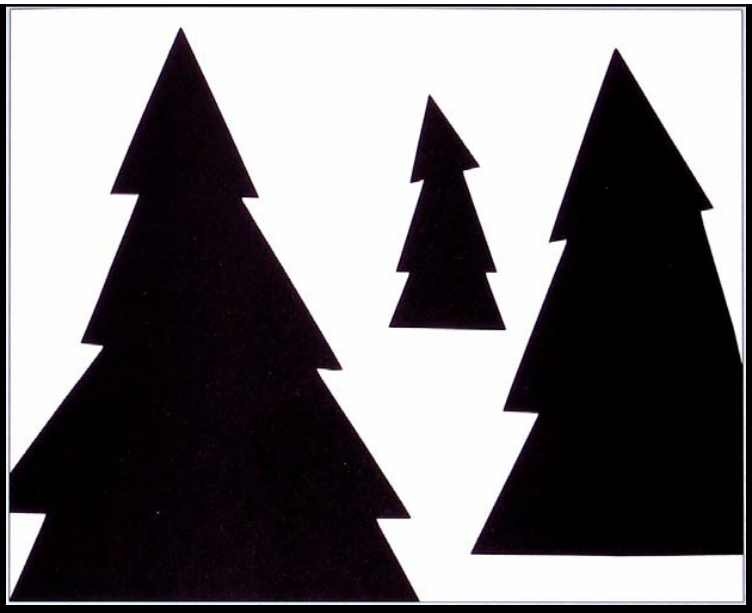
What do I feel about the mother now?



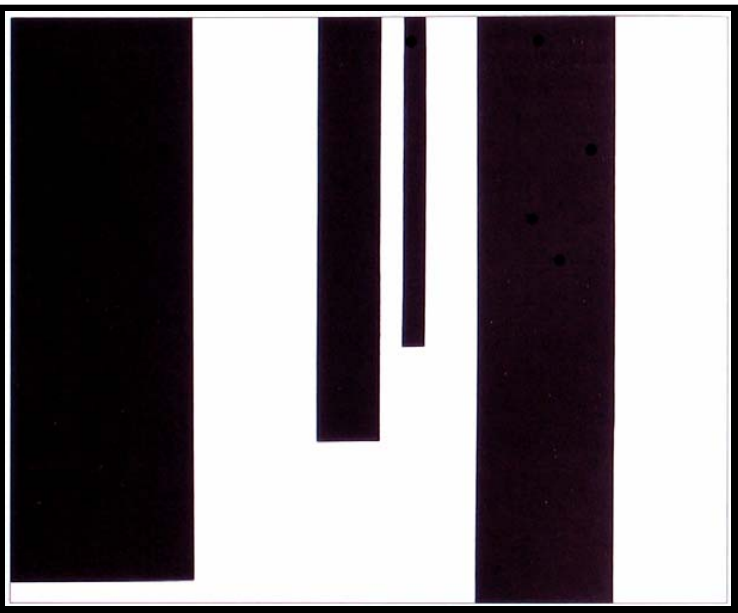
It has shown some of the ways that shapes and colors affect us emotionally.



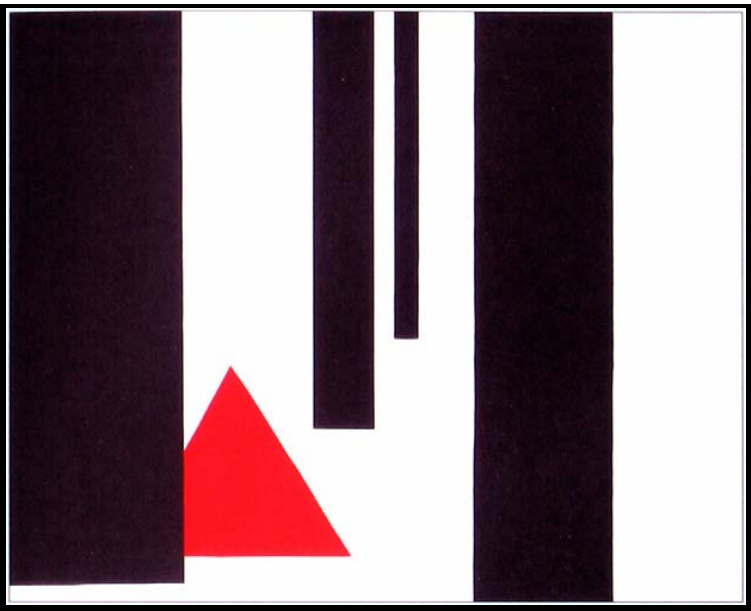
I wanted to stay as simple as possible.



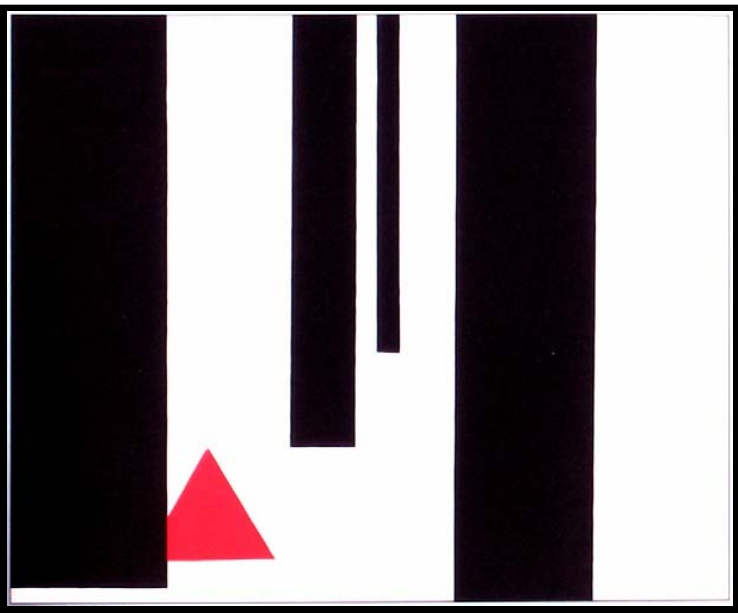
But these are too close to the shapes of
Little Red Riding Hood and her mother.



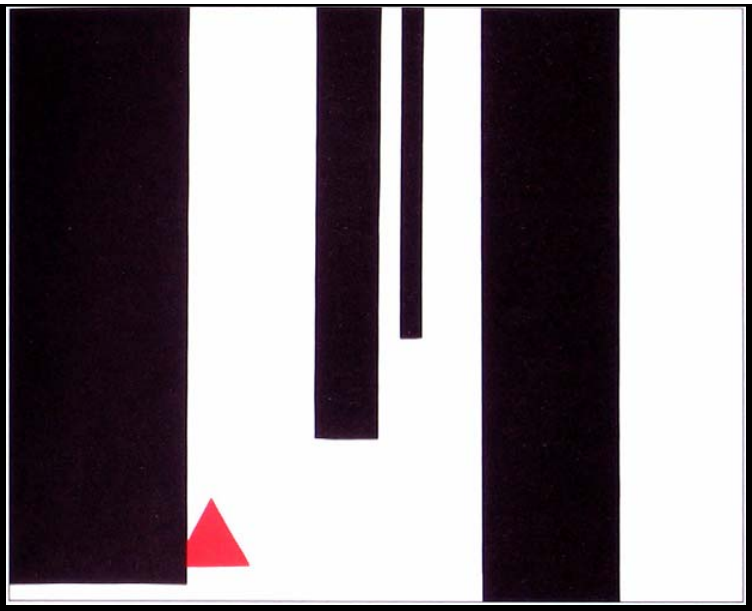
This sense of depth is accomplished simply by arranging the pieces so that the thinner they are, the higher up on the page their bases are placed.



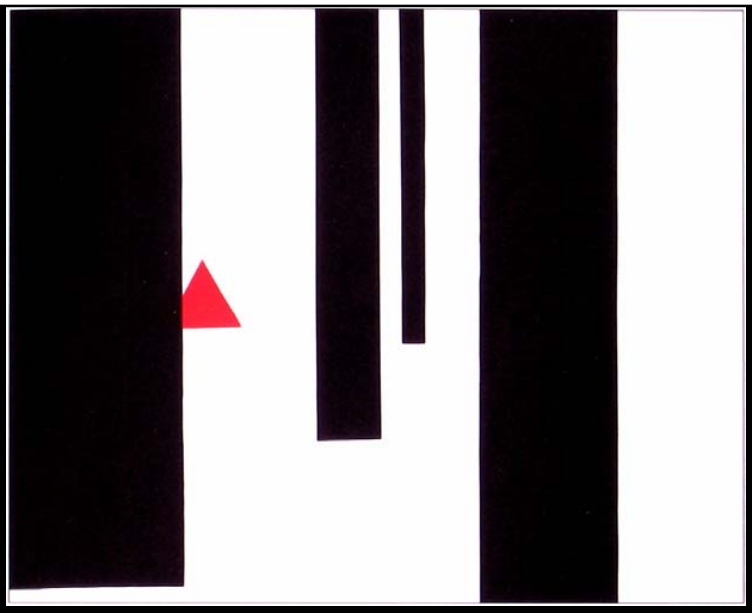
What can I do to Little Red Riding Hood—ONLY to the triangle—to make the picture feel scarier?



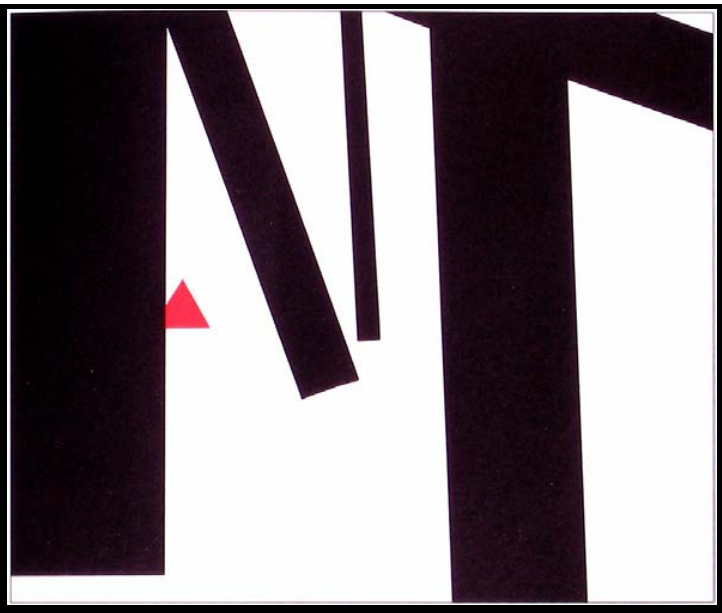
Why does it feel scarier when she is proportionally smaller?



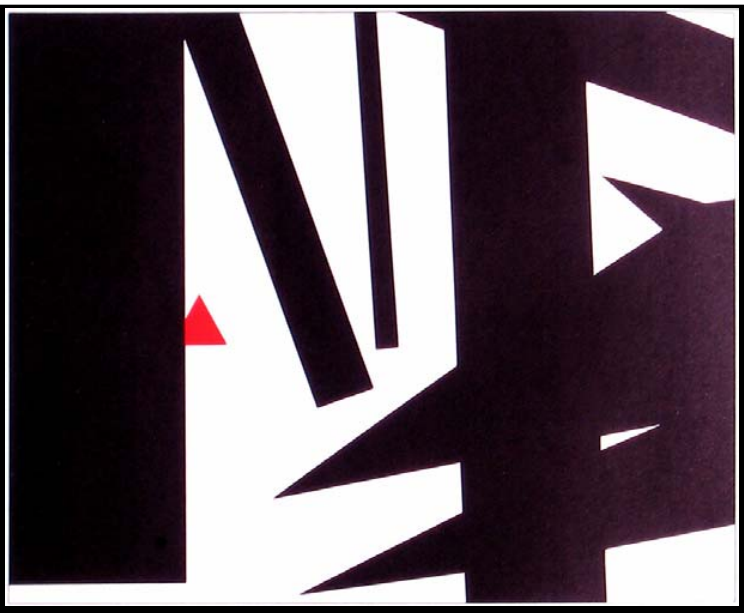
I need to make room for the wolf



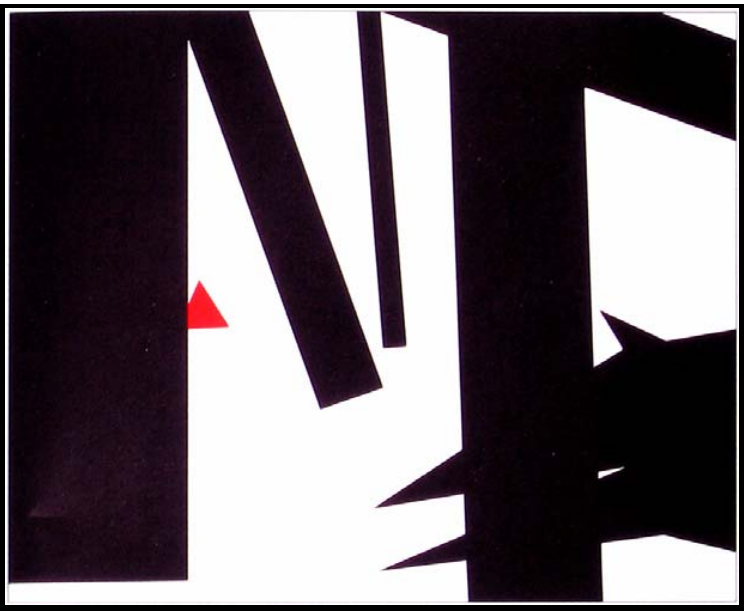
But the picture didn't feel as scary as before. Why not?
How can I make the trees feel more threatening?



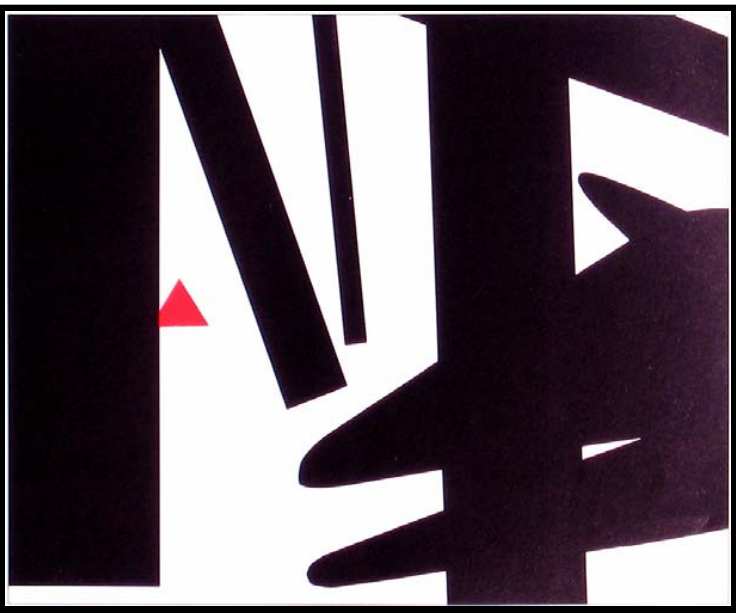
Diagonal lines give a feeling of movement or tension to the picture.



Why do these triangles look so scary?

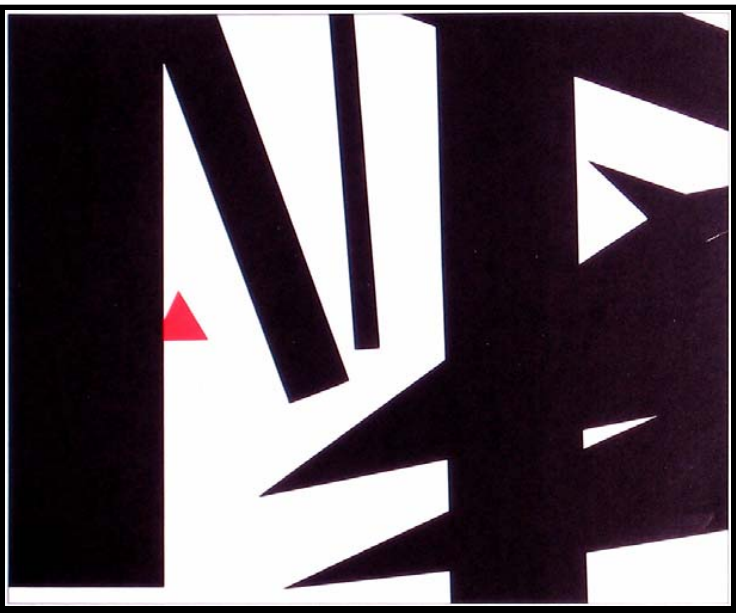


I feel very differently when the wolf is made much smaller,

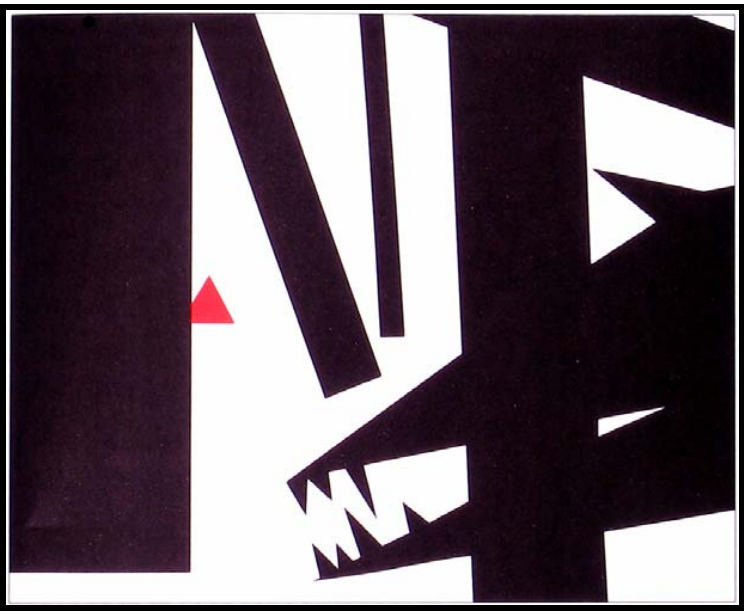


or the points are changed to curves,

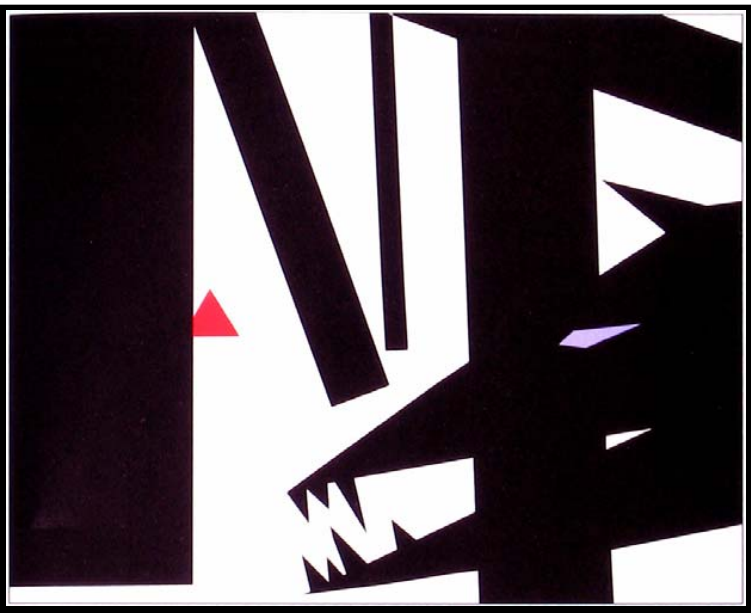
or the wolf is made from a paler color.



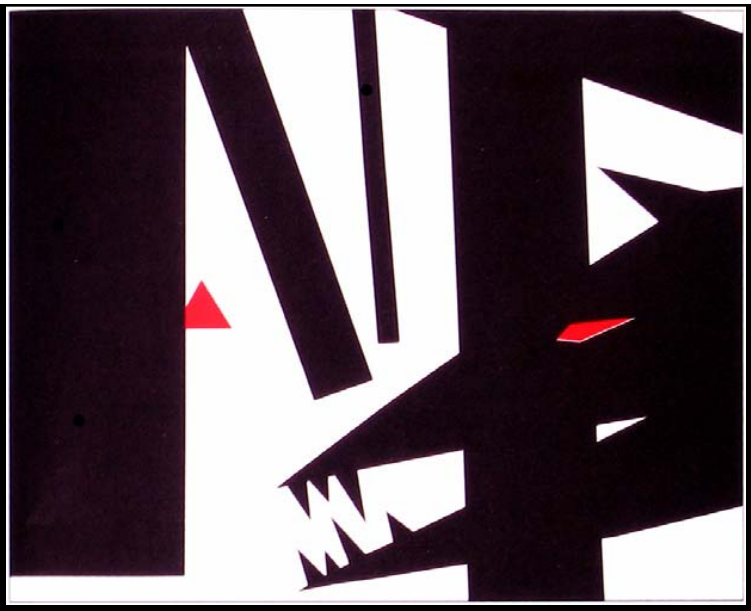
What are the features of wolves that make them so frightening to us?



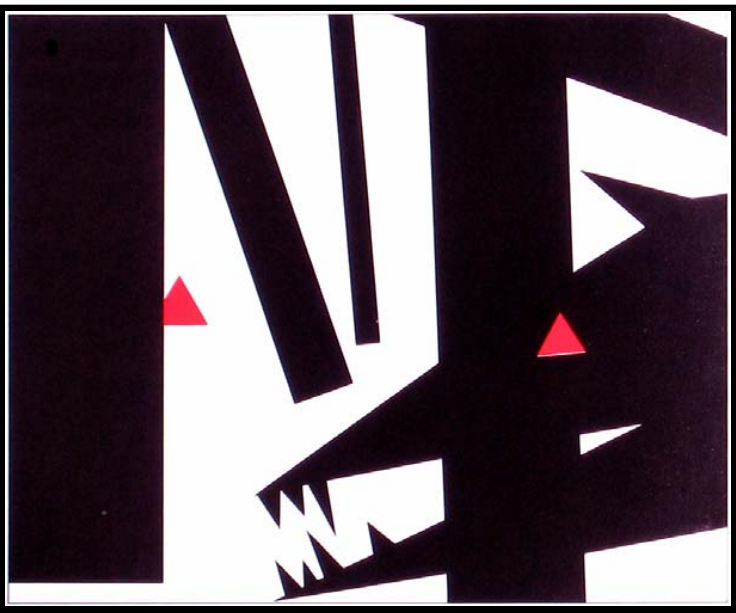
What else does the wolf need in order to look more wolfish?



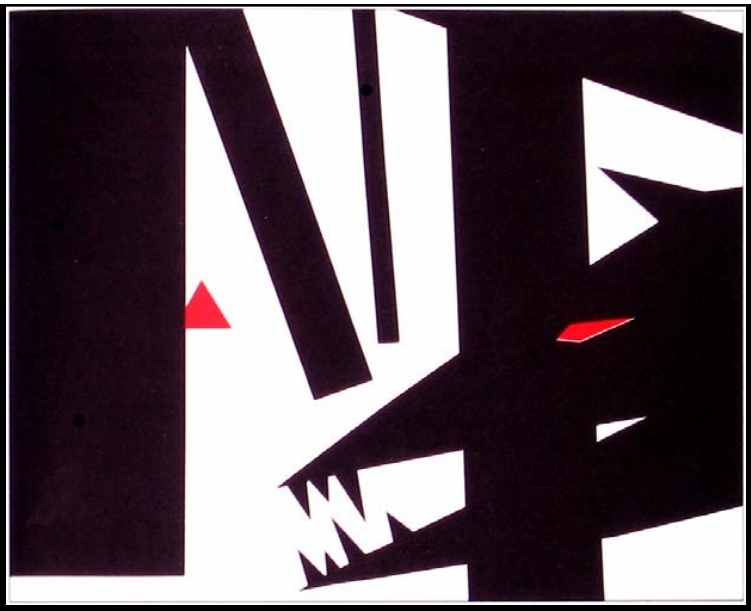
But even though wolves' eyes are often pale blue, it didn't look right.



What happens if the eye is made exactly the same color
and shape as Little Red Riding Hood?



The picture feels very different, and yet all that has changed is the shape of the eye.



What feature could I add to the wolf to make it yet more frightening?

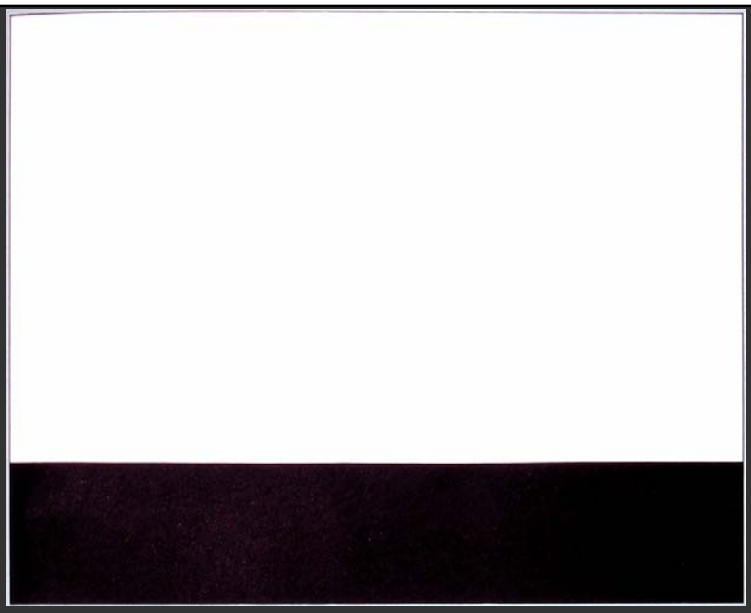
When two or more objects in a picture have the same color,
we associate them with each other.

Why does the picture feel more threatening?

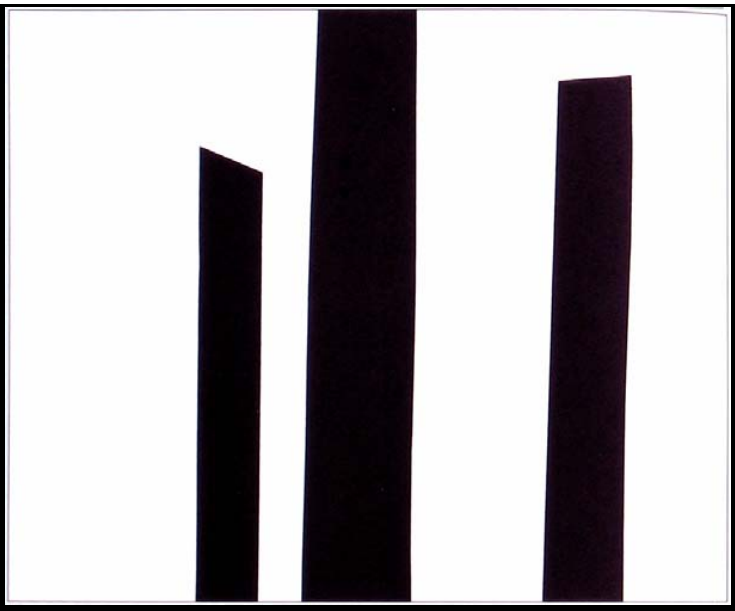
What has happened now that the teeth are white?

THE PRINCIPLES

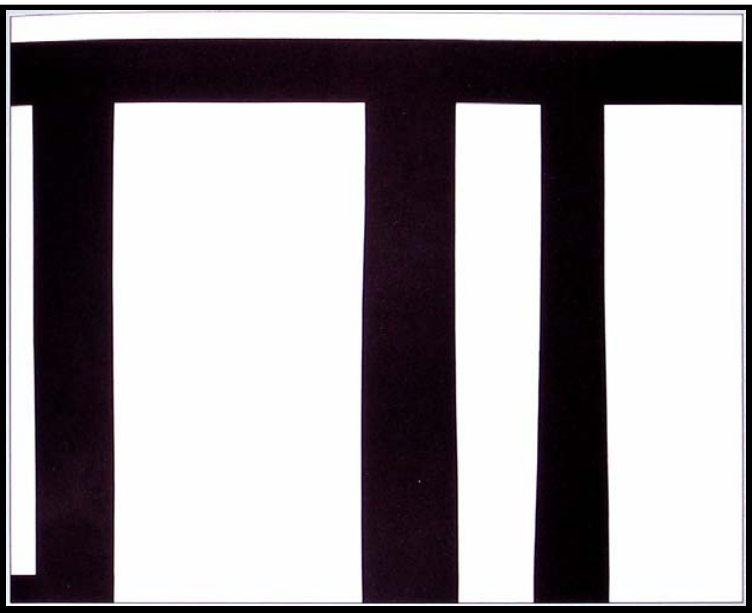
Make note of the principles printed in red.



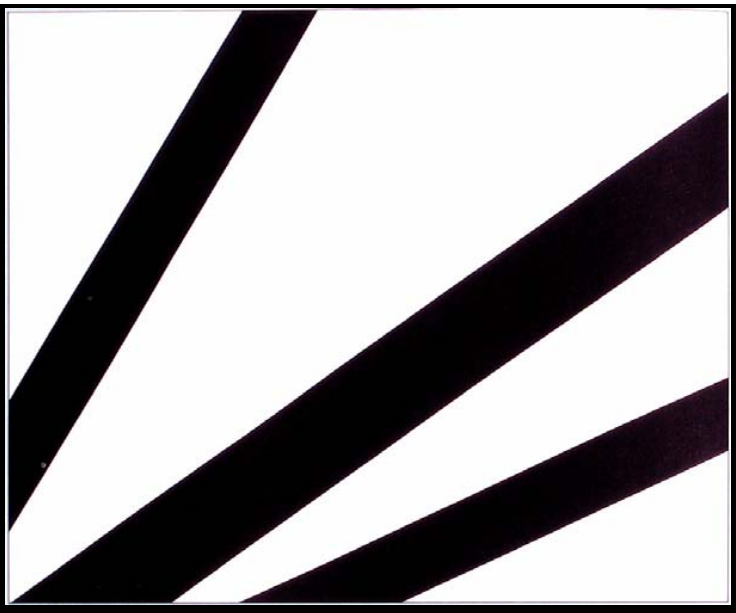
1. Smooth, flat horizontal shapes give us a sense of stability and calm.



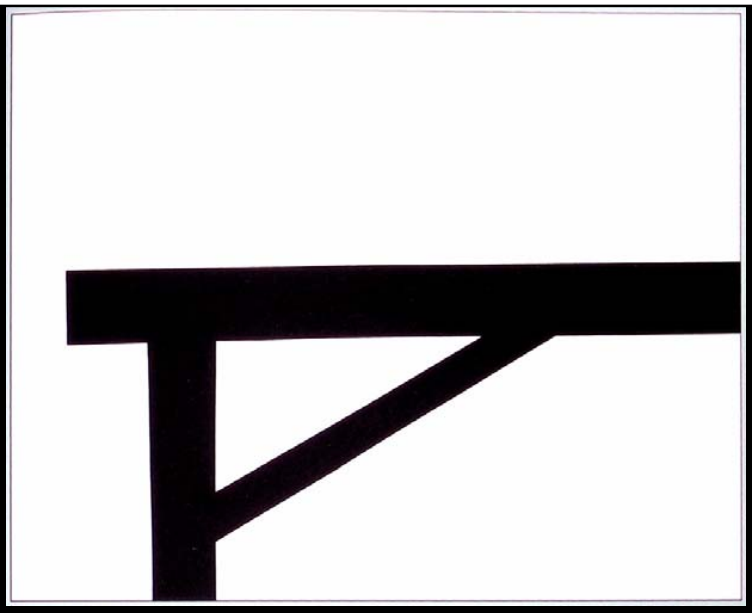
2. Vertical shapes are more exciting and more active.



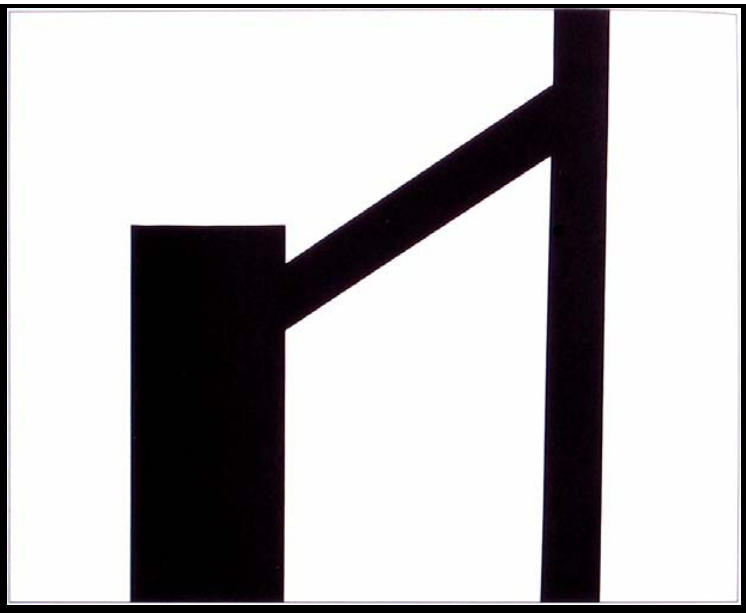
If a horizontal bar is placed across the top of a row of verticals, stability reigns again.



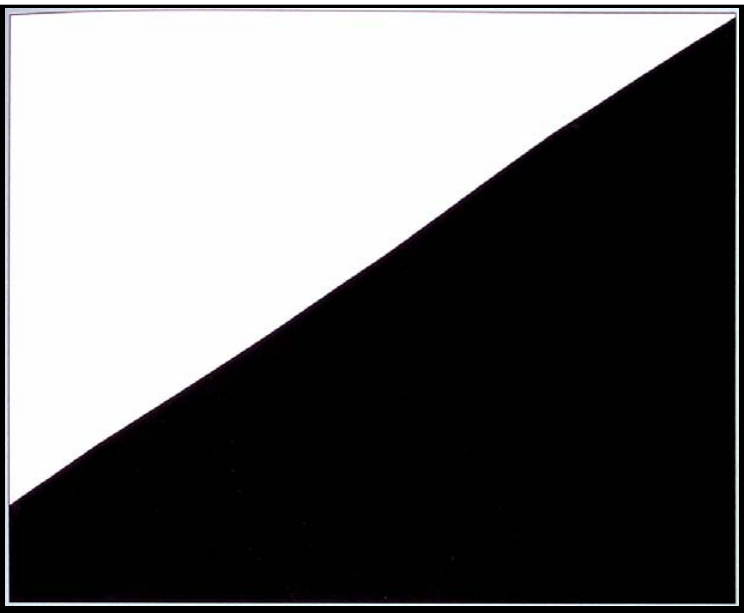
3. Diagonal shapes are dynamic because they imply motion or tension.



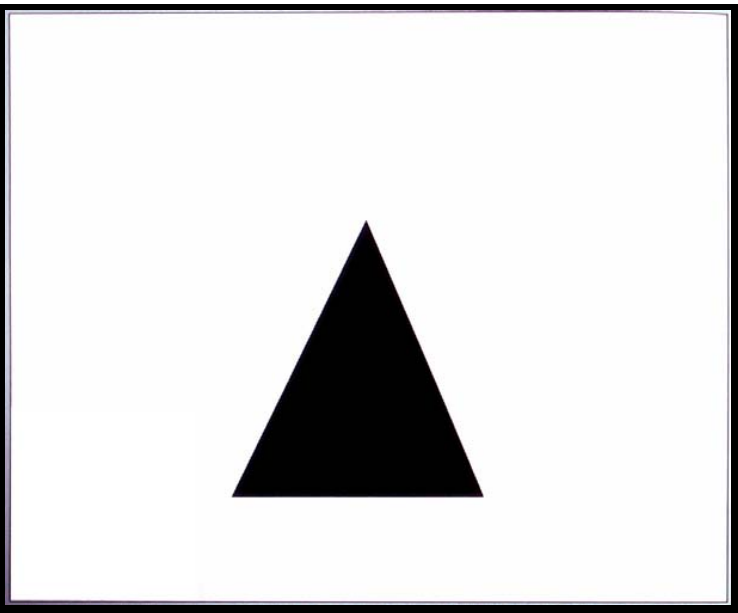
Diagonals in pictures often tie a vertical and horizontal together as a much more stable unit.



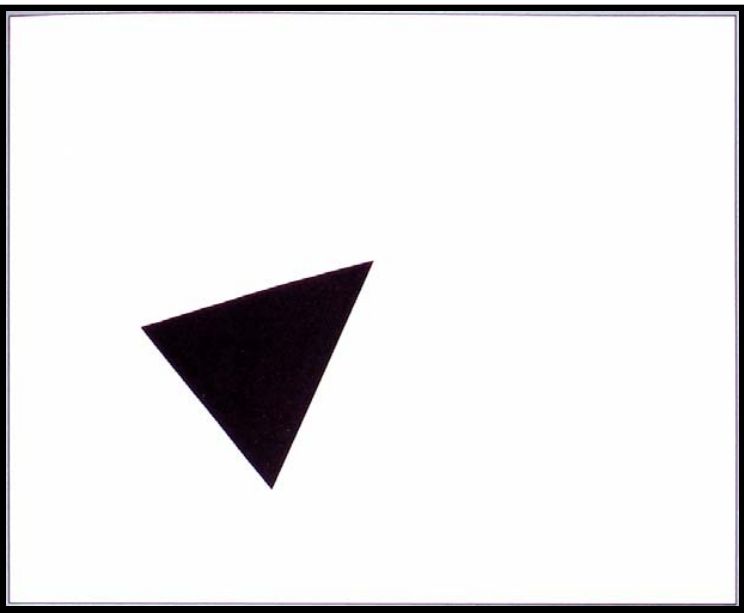
These diagonal buttresses are under great tension.



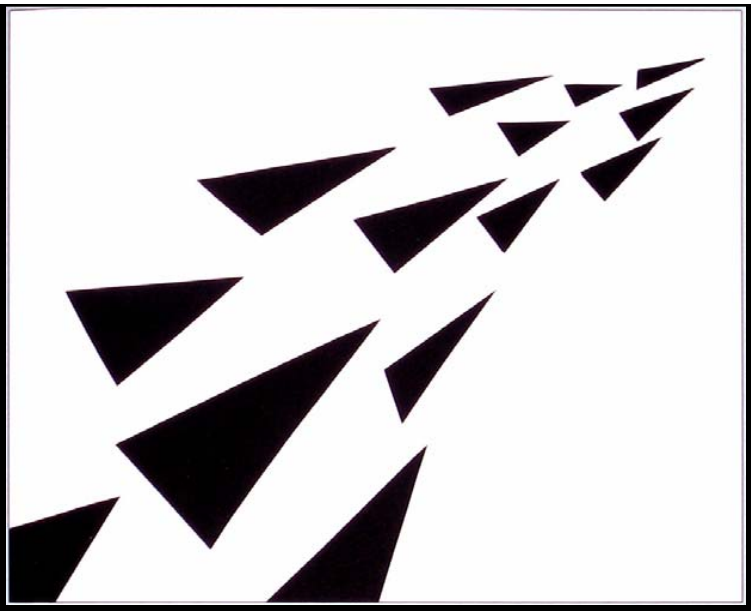
Mountains, slides, waves:
All of these are diagonals in movement or in tension.



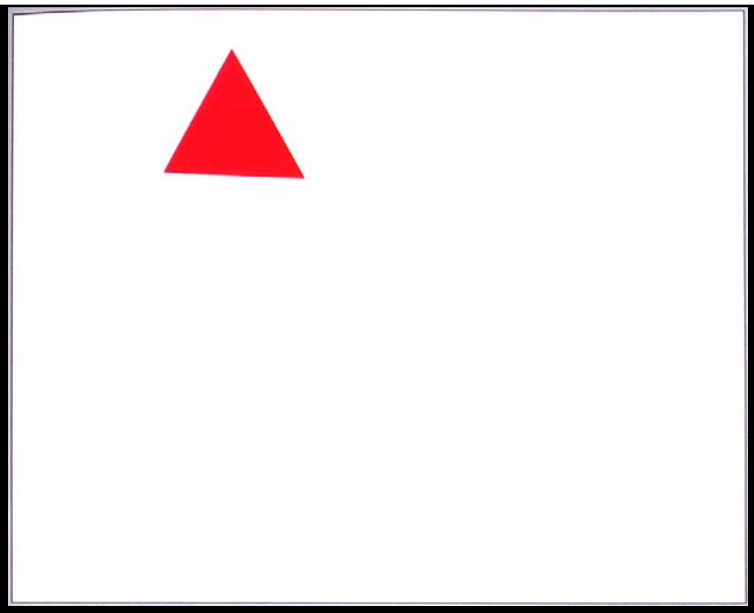
A triangle placed on a flat base gives a feeling of stability.



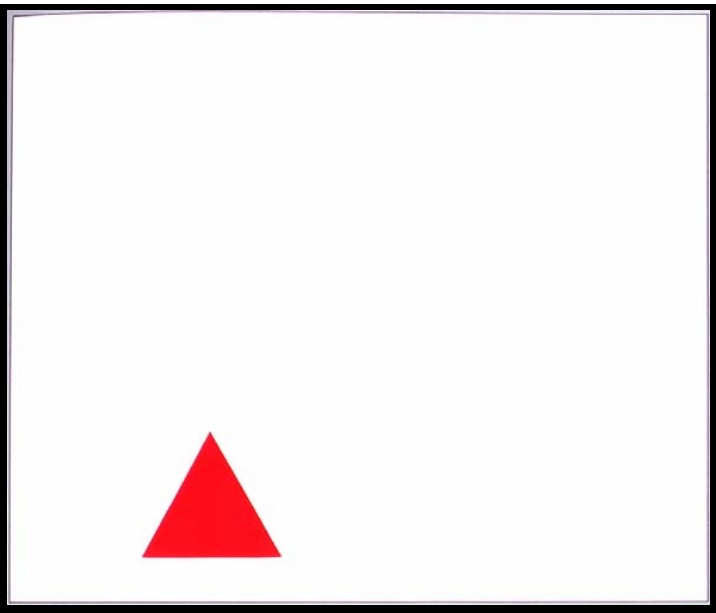
The same triangle placed on a diagonal gives a sense of movement.



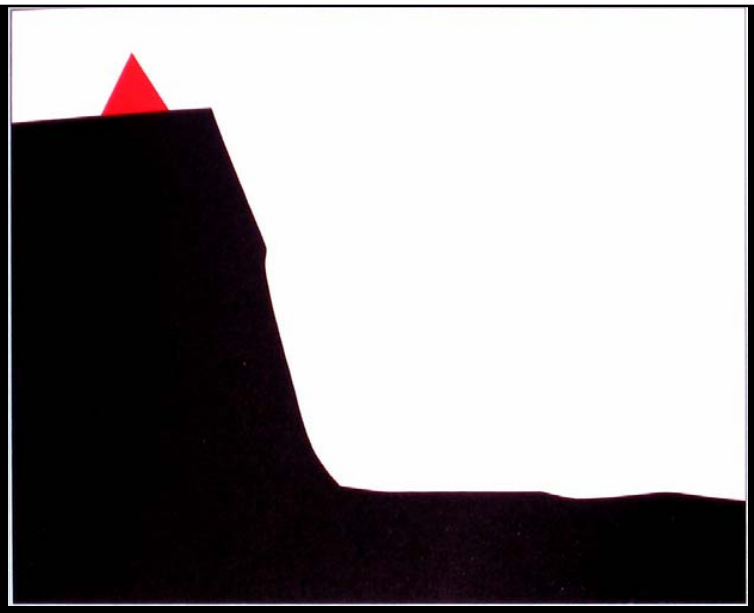
What increases the sense of movement even more in this picture?



4a. The upper half of a picture is a place of freedom, happiness, and triumph; objects placed in the top half often feel more “spiritual.”



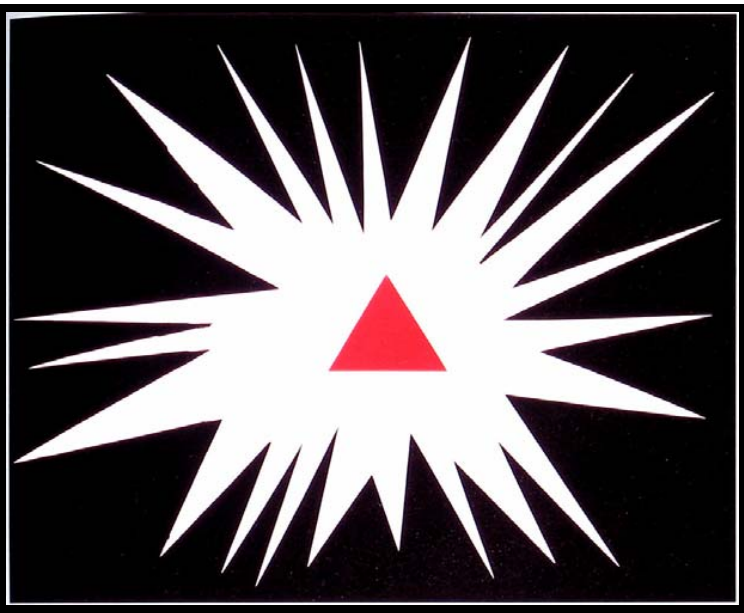
4b. The bottom half of a picture feels more threatened, heavier, sadder, or constrained; objects in the bottom half also feel more grounded.



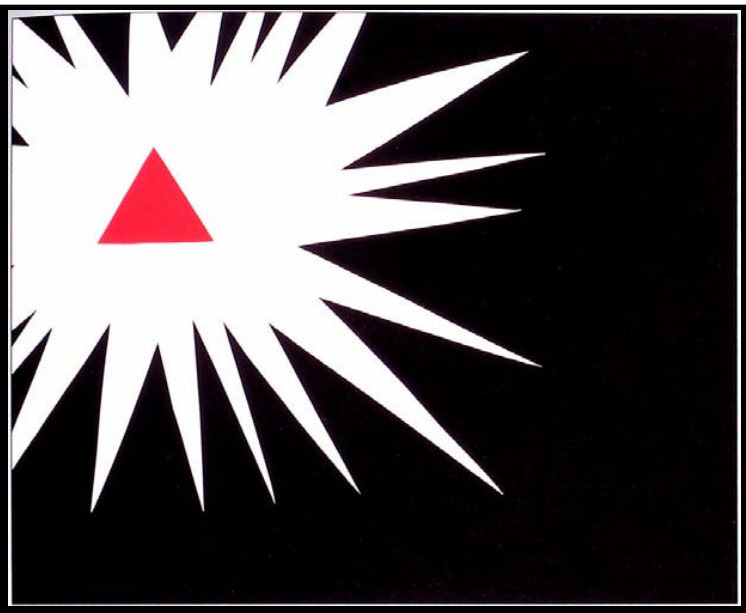
The addition of each new element can modify the effect of the other elements or even change them completely.

The principles described so far result from gravity's effect upon us and the world and the pictures we look at.

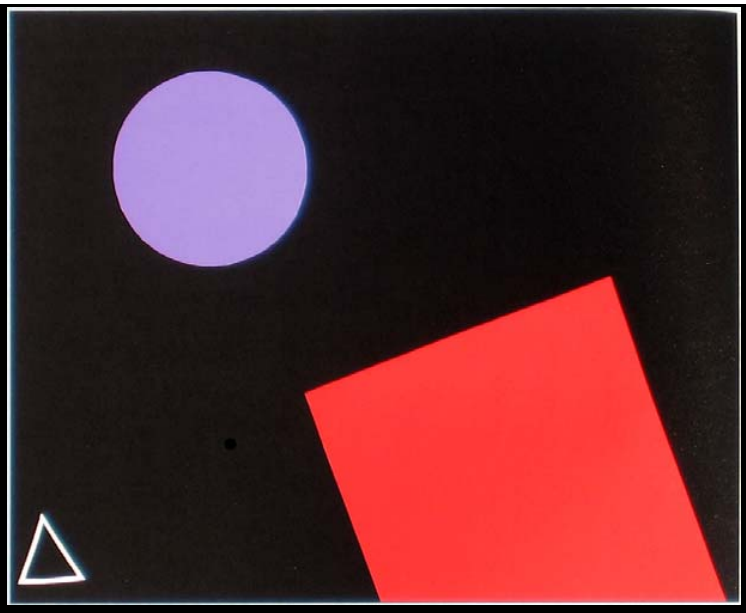
The next principles have to do with the picture as a world of its own.



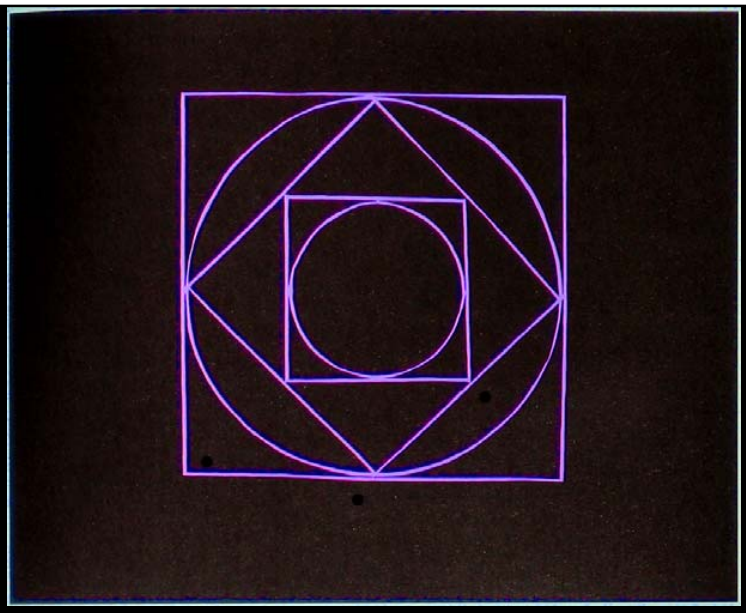
5. The center of the page is the most effective “center of attention.”
It is the point of greatest attraction.



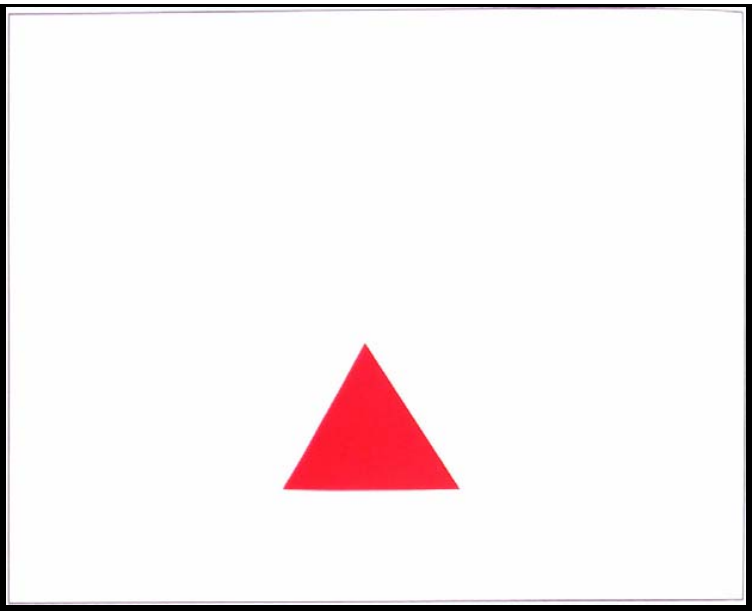
What happens when the focus of attention is shifted
away from the center of the page?



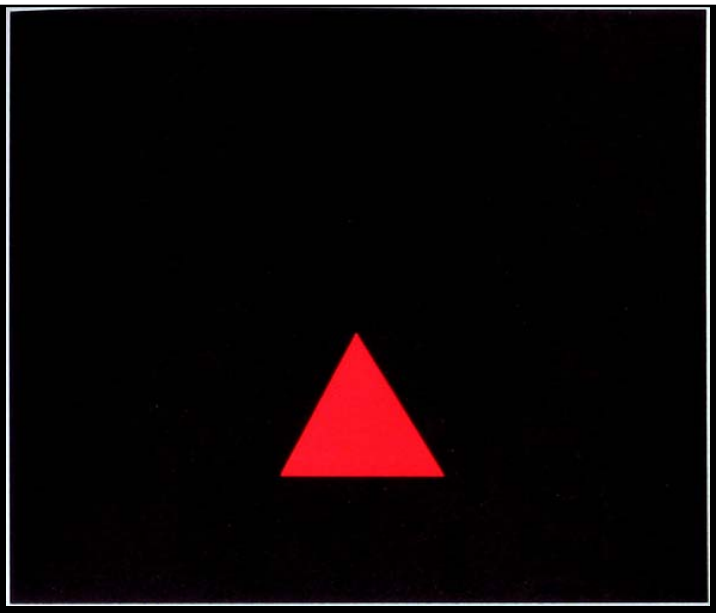
The edges and corners of the picture are
the edges and corners of the picture-world.



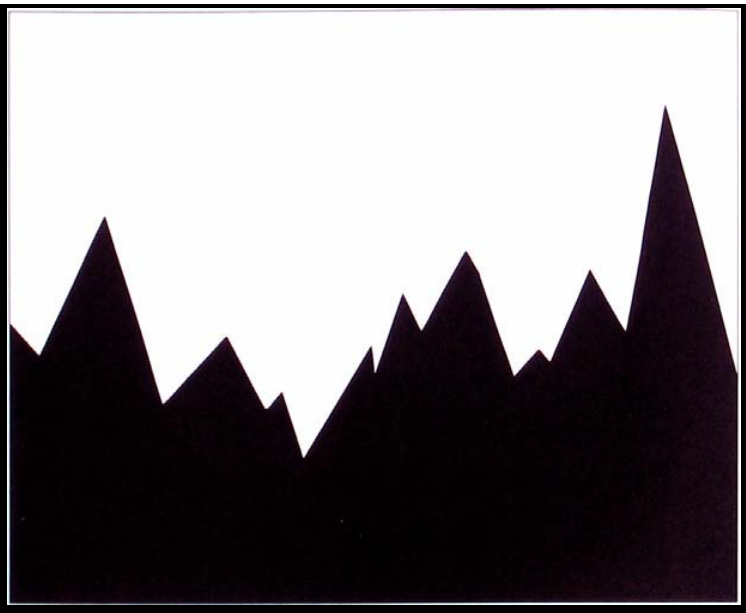
With an object or a hole centered in the middle of the page,
it is difficult to move away from the center.



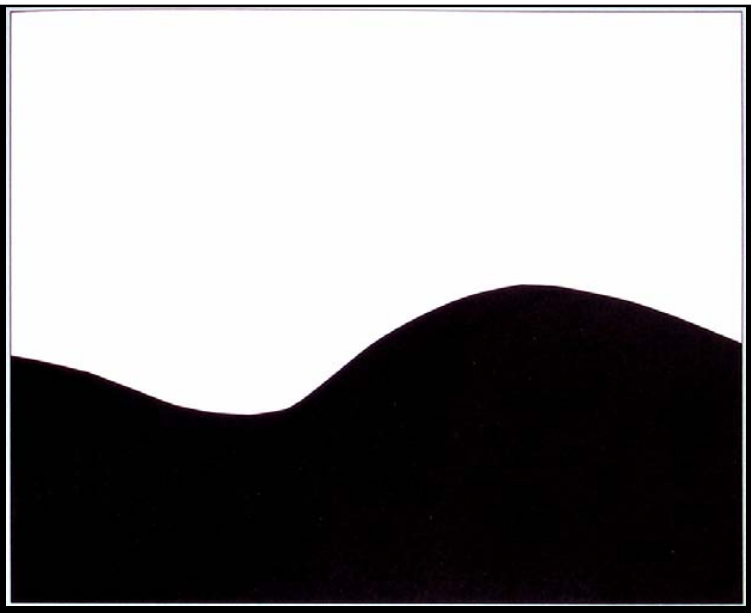
6. White or light backgrounds feel safer to us than dark backgrounds because
we can see well during the day and only poorly at night.



We associate red with blood and fire.
What things in nature are either black or white?

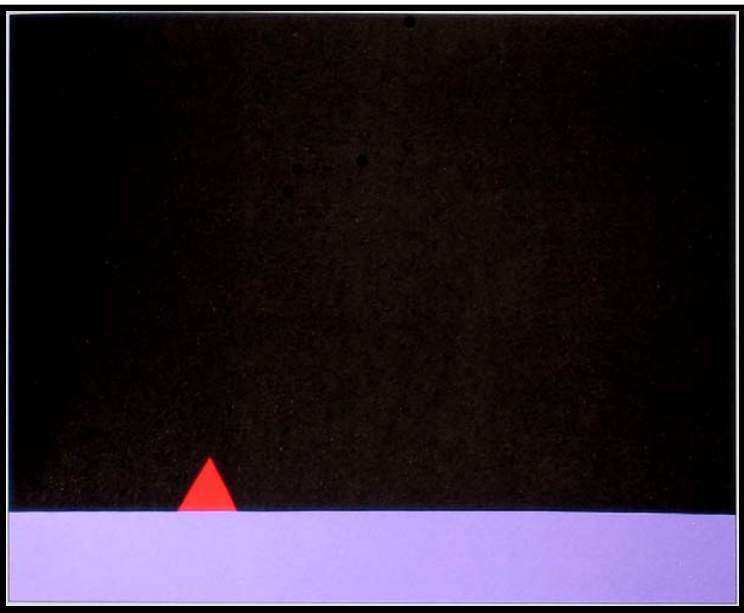


7. We feel more scared looking at pointed shapes;
we feel more secure or comforted looking at rounded shapes or curves.

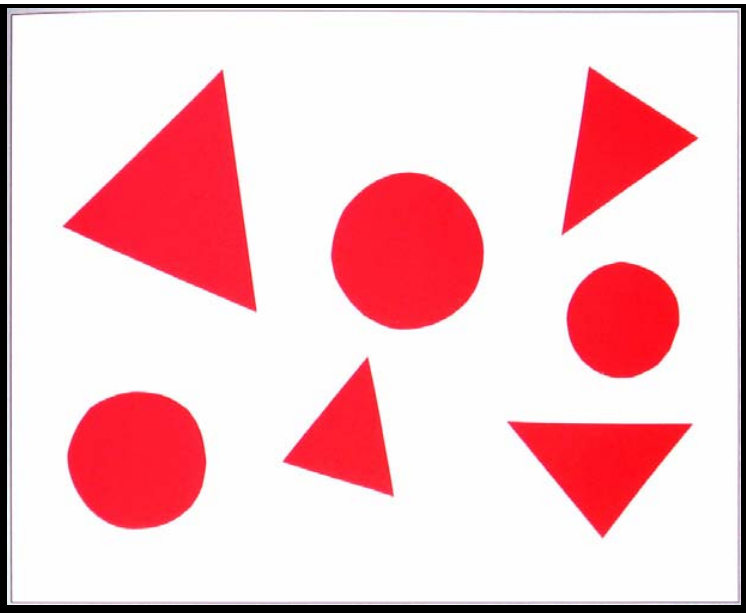


Curved shapes embrace us and protect us.

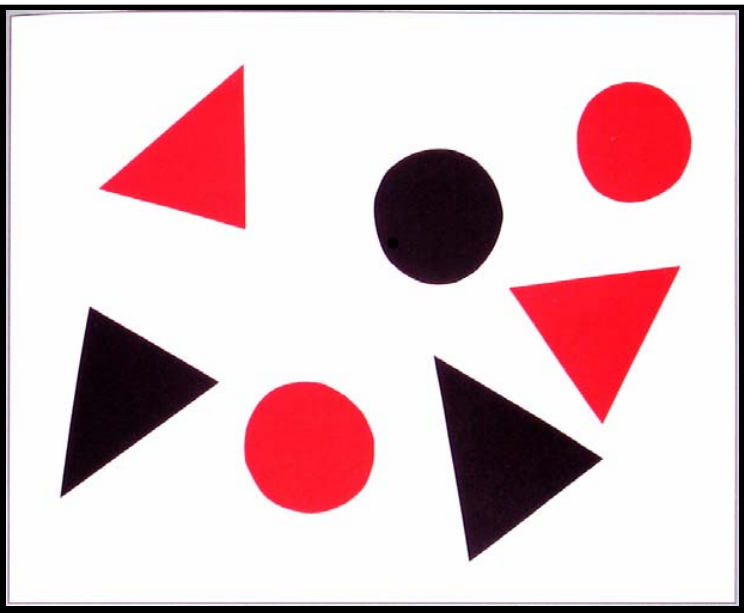
8. The larger an object is in a picture, the stronger it feels.



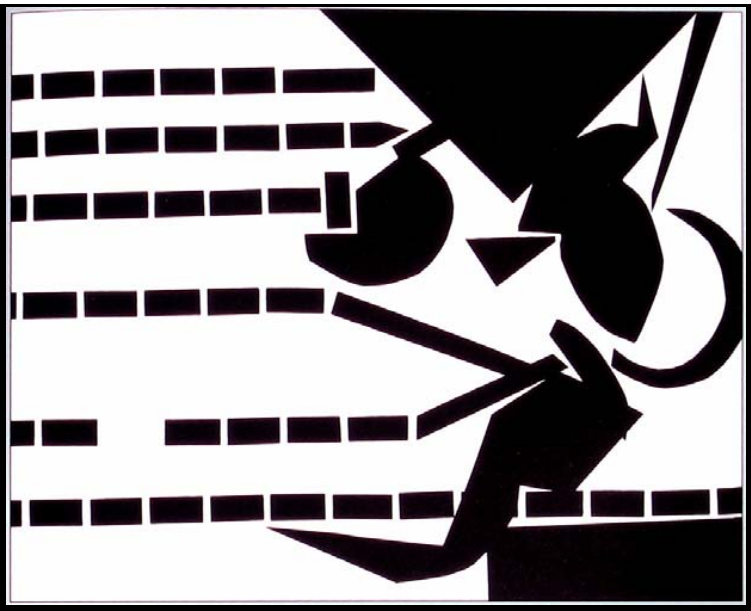
The same figure appears much more vulnerable if it is made very small.



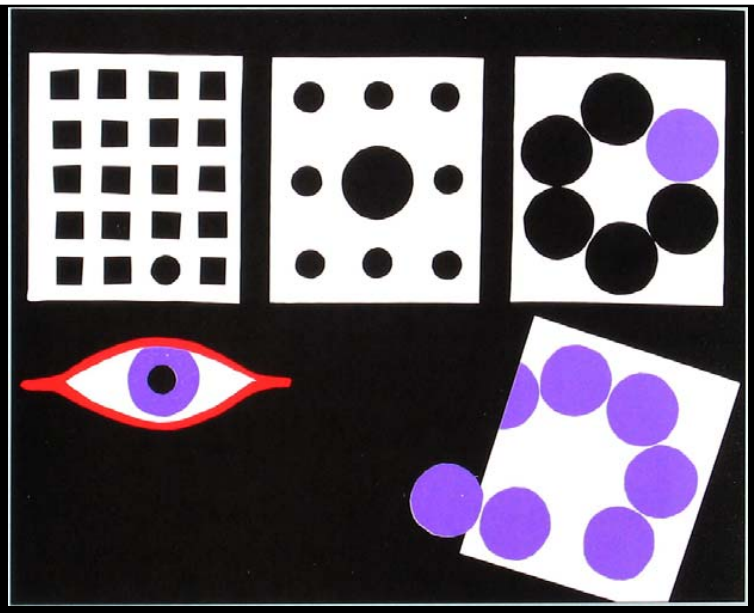
The teacher asks you to separate all of these shapes into two groups of similar elements. How do you divide them?



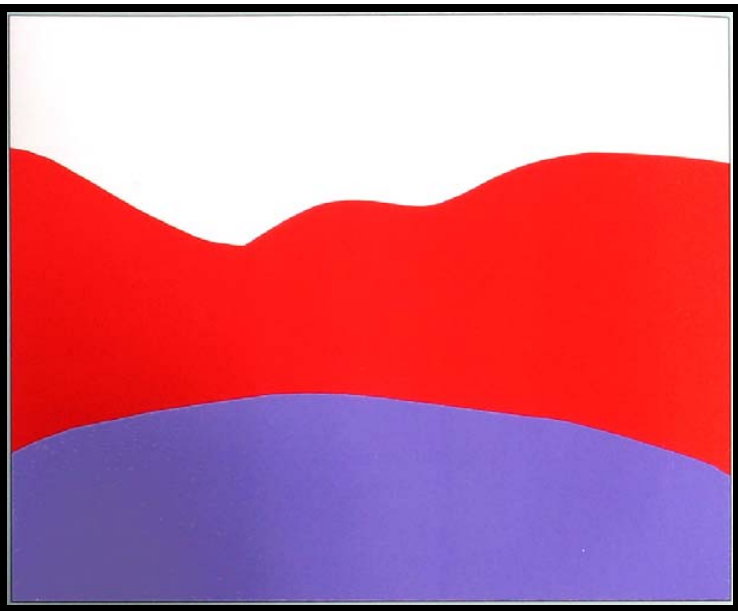
9. We associate the same or similar colors much more strongly than we associate the same or similar shapes.



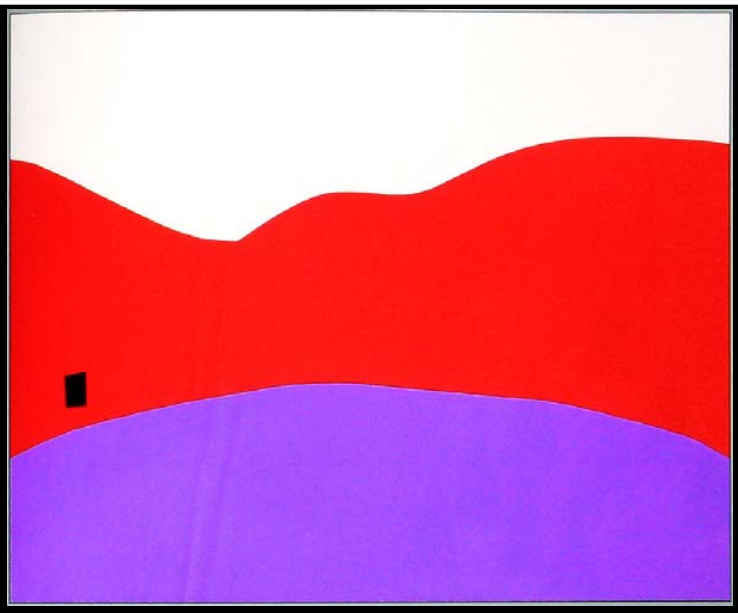
How do these two sorts of patterns make us feel?



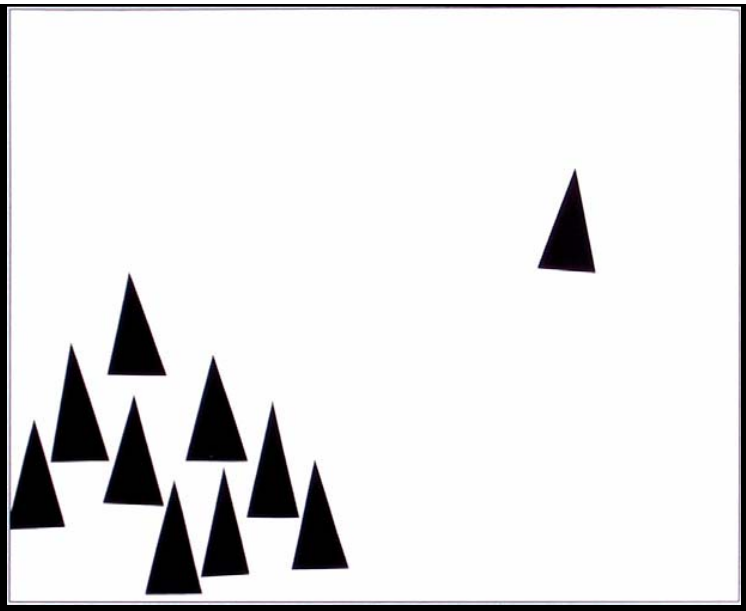
10. We notice contrasts, or, put another way, contrast enables us to see.



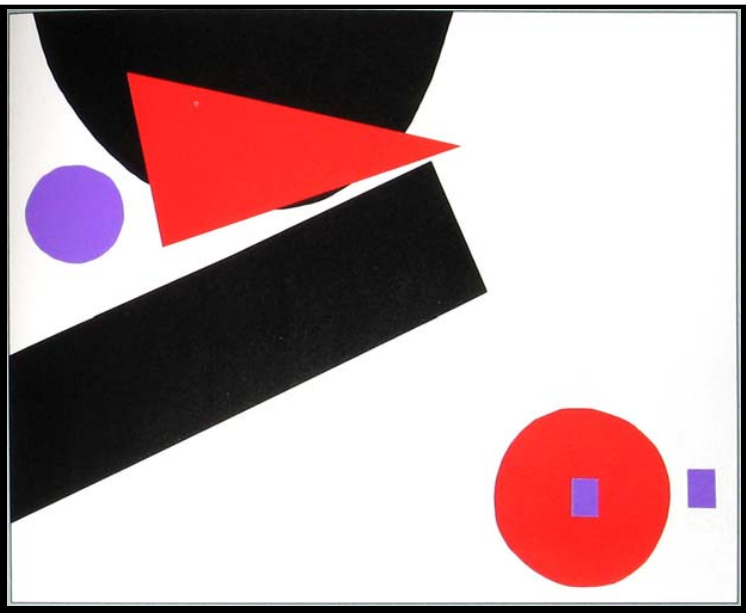
The picture contains a space all its own.
We exist outside the picture until



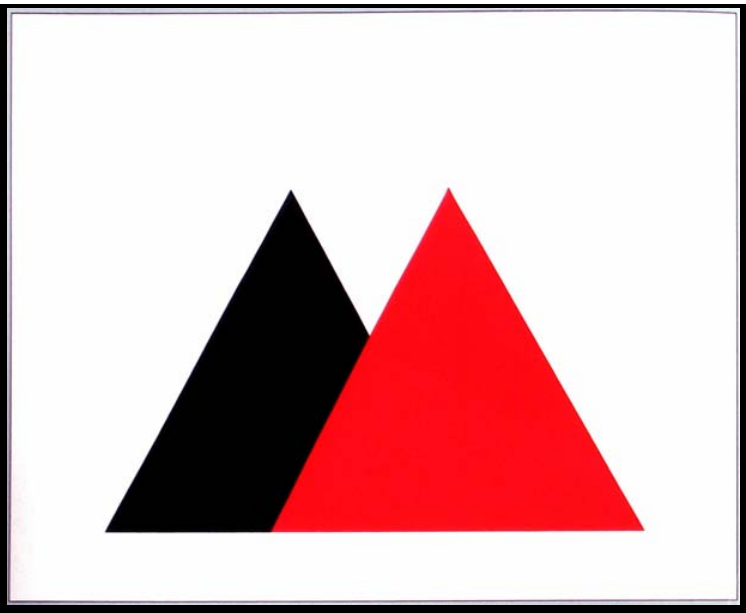
our eyes fix on and “capture” an object inside it like a prey—
but the prey in turn draws us to itself inside the picture space.



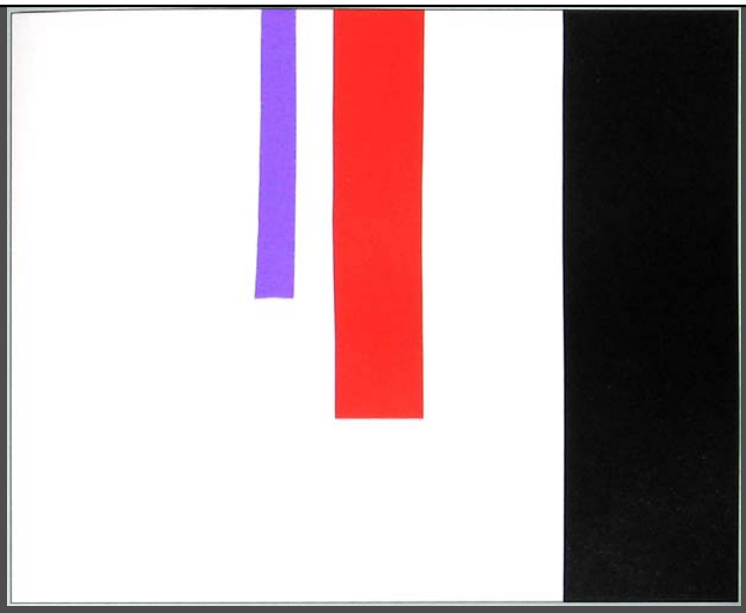
Space isolates a figure, makes that figure alone, free, and vulnerable.



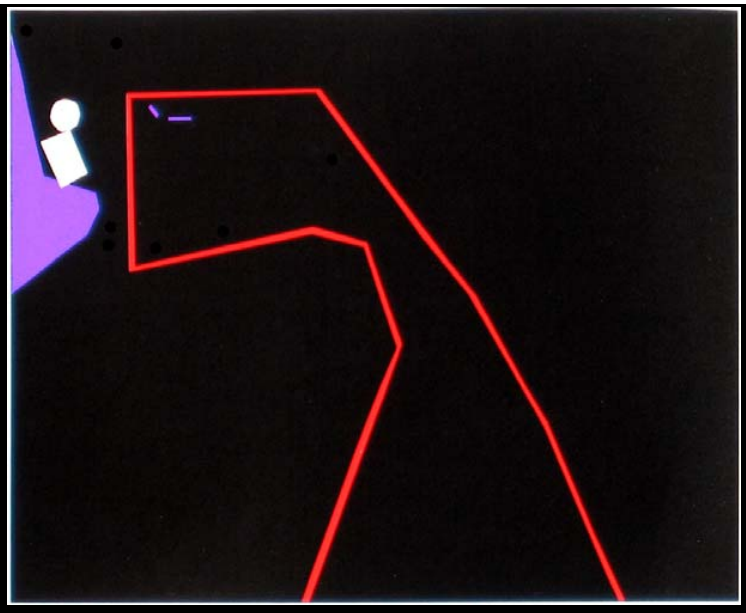
The movement of the picture is determined as much by the spaces *between* the shapes as by the shapes themselves.



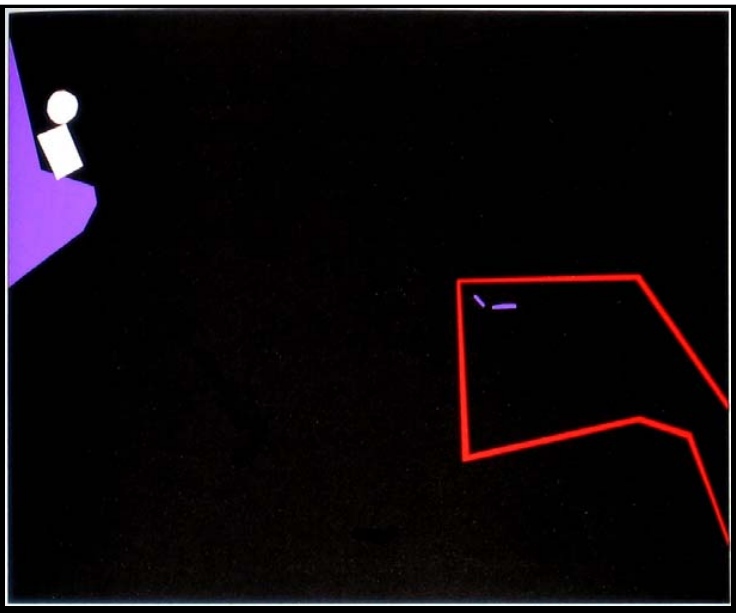
The overlapping object “pierces” or “violates” the space of the other, but this also joins them together into a single unit.



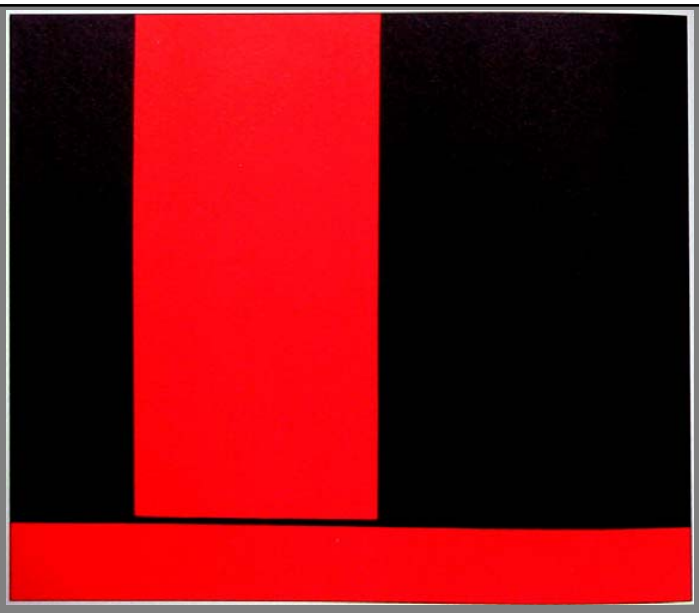
A sense of depth in space is created by placing the bases of progressively smaller/thinner/lighter objects gradually higher on the page.



Space implies time.



Wide space can create tension between the divided objects...



but so can a sliver of space.

The picture is extremely simple, and extremely effective.

Open-Notes Quiz

1. Smooth, flat, horizontal shapes give us a sense of _____ and _____.
2. Vertical shapes are more _____ and more _____.
3. Diagonal shapes are _____ because they imply _____ or _____.
4. The upper half of a picture is a place of _____, _____, and _____; objects placed in the top half often feel more _____.

   The bottom half of a picture feels more _____, _____, _____, or _____; objects in the bottom half also feel more _____.
5. The center of the page is the most effective _____. It is the point of greatest _____.

   The edges and corners of the _____ are the edges and corners of the _____.
6. White or light backgrounds feel _____ to us than dark backgrounds because we can see _____ during the _____ and only _____ at _____.
7. We feel more _____ looking at pointed shapes; we feel more _____ or _____ looking at rounded shapes or curves.
8. The larger an object is in a picture, the _____ it feels.
9. We associate the same or similar colors much more _____ than we associate the same or similar shapes.
10. We _____ contrasts, or, put another way, contrast enables us to _____.

Assignment #1

Image: a bird or birds attacking a victim

- Groups of three or four
- Each student creates an separate image
- The group uses three colors plus white
- Scissors and colored paper only (no pencils!)
- Keep the shapes as simple as possible
- Avoid a realistic representation of body parts

Before you begin, ask yourself two sets of questions:

1. SUBJECT AT HAND
   What is the *essence* of the person/creature/thing I want to represent?
   What specific elements in this situation evoke strong feelings in me?
   How can I accentuate these?
2. EMOTIONS and PRINCIPLES
   What feeling do I want to evoke with this picture?
   What principles might I use to do this?

Keep returning to these questions when your picture doesn't seem to be working.

Do not glue down the pieces until the whole picture really works.

"Okay" is not good enough.