We see only what we know: The photograph as a placeholder for an image

Definition of ‘image’: A picture in the mind of how someone or something is (from the Cambridge Dictionary)

In his publication ‘The pencil of Nature’ of 1844, Henry Fox Talbot seems to make the point that a photograph is not an image by stating that ‘It may suffice, then, to say that the plates of this work have been obtained by the mere action of Light upon sensitive paper’ and ‘... they differ in all respects, …, from plates of the ordinary kind, which owe their existence to the united skills of the Artist and the Engraver.’ He is excluding the photographer’s vision and the engraver’s interpretation from the image formation in the audience’s mind, that is triggered by a photograph.
A photograph is, and has always been, the result of an image in the photographer’s mind, its materialization via an apparatus and its generation by postprocessing. It is a placeholder for the image the photographer wants to communicate to the audience.

Image/Memory formation in the brain

Even though the research in perception is an old and well established field, the formation of images in the brain is far from understood. Perception, or low level vision, is purely driven by stimulus input. High level vision, or image formation, is more complex. The brain tries to make sense of a stimulus by using previously stored knowledge of objects and events. In certain circumstances, image formation is in flux. Sometimes people cannot decide whether they have actually seen something or only imagined that they were seeing it. Image formation is not only triggered by an optical stimulus, but the result of the interpretation of a situation. Emotions play a major role. The same situation is ‘seen’ differently depending on the emotional state of people involved and memorized in different images (The main data format of human memory is ‘image’.).
The same holds true for pictures: a) It does not matter how faithful a photograph may be, it always reveals the selection process of what is deemed relevant to the image formed in the photographer’s brain. b) the audience always contributes to the image from the stock of images in their minds. In this sense, photography is a collaborative process, and the photograph is a placeholder for the image that forms in the audience’s minds. Since there is no fixed correlation between the outside world and high level vision, the photographer needs to be aware of all possibilities and take appropriate steps to guide the audience towards her interpretation of the depicted situation.

Case study: The whale at Jibbon head
In August 2025 the carcass of a juvenile whale was washed up near Jibbon Head, Sydney, Australia. I was made aware of it by a local lady when we (my youngest son and I) visited the rock engravings at Jibbon Head. The rock engravings are about 2000 years old and depict whales and sea creatures. We were told how important the site was, and is, for aboriginal people of the Sydney area. Following her directions, we found the whale. It had started decomposing and had lost its skin. The underlying blubber was white, and, despite its melting appearance, firm to the touch. I took a series of digital and analogue photographs. Passersby only recognized the carcass as a whale after they asked me what I was doing. When the digital photos are shown without any explanation, most people will fail to see the whale (see figure 1). It does not conform with any of their memorised images of whales. The

whale blends into the background because it has a similar colour to some of the rocks. Removing the colour, either by turning the photograph into a grayscale image or using an

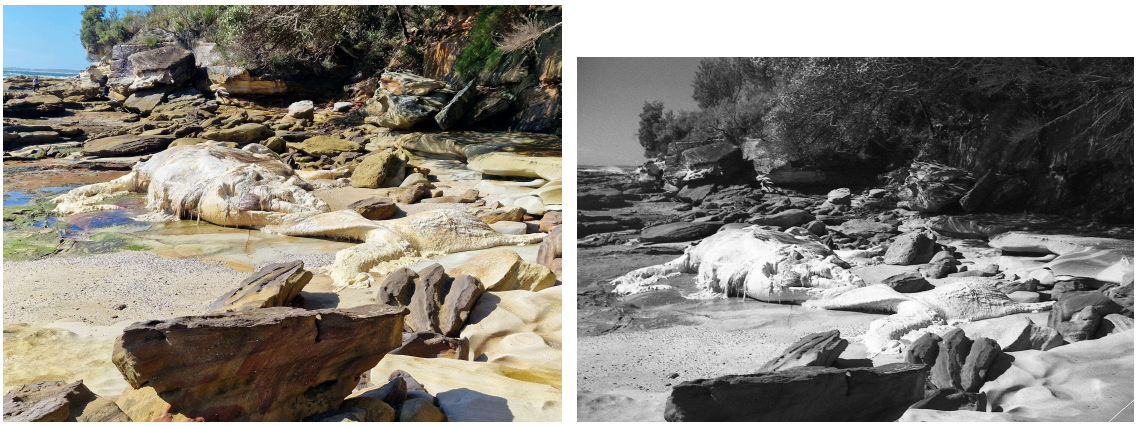

Figure 1: Stranded whale at Jibbon Head, Sydney, Australia. Left: digital photograph, right: analogue photograph.

analogue black and white picture does not help either. The shape is too distorted to register as a ‘whale’. The question is how to make the whale visible without a written explanation and how to incorporate other aspects which formed my memory of this specific whale. To my memory of the carcass belong the rock engravings of Jibbon Head. They show diagrams of whales which are still recognized after several thousand years, and therefore are part of the stock images of human memory. I decided not to employ any photographic manipulation, but use copper engraving, the method Fox Talbot was unhappy with, as my method of image formation. Copper engraving marries the carcass to the rock engravings. I did not want to use a stock image of a whale on a kind of realistic background, but suppress the background in order to enable the audience to see the whale in its melting shape. The rocks and the water are depicted as lines which can be seen as rocks and water when the whale is recognized and the background is then interpreted accordingly. I left it vague to focus the audience’s imagination (see figure 2).

Figure 2: The whale at Jibbon Head, copper engraving, Susanne Klein 2025

After the translation of the photograph into an almost diagrammatic presentation, people recognise the melting shape of the whale. The connection to the rock engravings will only be understood by those who know the area.
It is an example of the drastic manipulation necessary to make the audience see what the artist has intended.

Further reading:
E.H. Gombrich: The image and the eye, Phaidon Press, 1986
S.M. Kosslyn: Image and Brain, MIT Press, 1996

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